
Bishop Paul Bird's Homily on New Year's Eve St Mary's Church, Colac – 31st December 2013

Last July, Pope Francis visited the island of Lampedusa, off the coast of Italy. For the past ten years or so, this island has been one of the main gateways to Europe for refugees, especially refugees from Africa. Pope Francis visited Lampedusa in order to offer prayerful support to the refugees on the island and to the people of the island who were doing what they could to care for the refugees while they waited to see whether they might be given asylum somewhere. The Pope also visited Lampedusa to pray for the asylum seekers who had perished at sea, trying to get to Italy. He celebrated Mass at the sports ground in Lampedusa and he began his homily by reflecting on the tragedy of those who had died at sea. These were his opening words:

“Immigrants dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death. That is how the headlines put it. When I first heard of this tragedy a few weeks ago, and realized that it happens all too frequently, it has constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart. So I felt that I had to come here today, to pray and to offer a sign of my closeness, but also to challenge our consciences lest this tragedy be repeated. Please, let it not be repeated!”

Then Pope Francis turned his attention to the refugees who had made it to Lampedusa and to the people who were attending to their needs. He expressed his concern for those who had suffered much in their homelands and were now seeking a new life in a new land. He expressed his gratitude to the people of Lampedusa who were making valiant efforts to look after thousands of refugees. Here this evening I would like to echo those words of the Pope, expressing my concern for those who have come to the Colac area from Iran or the Sudan or other places looking to make a new start. I would also like to express my appreciation to all those who have done so much to make these new arrivals welcome.

During his homily in Lampedusa the Pope reflected on the danger that we all face of becoming indifferent to the suffering of others. He spoke of a trend throughout the world to emphasise one's own comfort and give little thought to the needs of our neighbours. I'd like to quote a few more lines from Pope Francis:

“The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference. In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn't affect me; it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business!”

The really Christian response, of course, is not indifference but concern for our neighbour. Indeed, this is not just the Christian response. We could say that it is the truly human response, to recognise that we are all members of one family of humanity, that my neighbour is my brother or sister in this worldwide human family. This is a great vision. It is also a great challenge. It calls us to show concern for our neighbour and offer them whatever help we can in any trouble they might face.

This evening we are celebrating Mass as one year closes and a new year begins. It is a good time to look back on the year that has passed and look ahead to the year to come. As we look back, we might recall some times of blessing and some times of trouble in the course of 2013. We can give thanks to God for the blessings. We can give thanks to God for bringing us through the times of trouble. We might also see times when we have failed to live as we should. For these times we can ask forgiveness.

As we look forward, we can pray for the blessings that we need as we move into 2014. I suggest that we pray for the grace of a tender heart, a heart that cares for our brothers and sisters, and shares their joys

and sorrows and pray too for the gift of practical charity that we might do what we can to help one another along the road.

In our Mass this evening we are honouring Mary, the Mother of Christ. May Mary pray for us all as we move into a new year, that 2014 will be blessed for those who have been here in Colac for many years and for those who have come in more recent times. May the blessing of God be with us all, now and all through the year ahead.

+ Bishop Paul Bird