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Dear Sisters and Brothers,

This is the time of year when we would normally be gathering at Nazareth House for the Annual Mass and Lunch with Religious. In view of the coronavirus health concerns, our diocesan Council of Religious decided that it would be better not to hold such a gathering this year. However, the council also thought it would be good to keep in touch with religious at least with a letter and I am very happy to greet you in this way.

I was looking back on some photos from twelve months ago, showing people gathered outside a church after Mass. They were crowded together. There wasn't a face mask in sight. It was such a contrast to our experience over recent months, when gatherings have been so restricted and masks have been everywhere. We have shared this experience with the general community, with everyone wearing masks in the street and keeping their distance at the checkout in the supermarket. We have also felt the restrictions in our religious communities, with many of the usual gatherings cancelled or replaced with meetings online. In our ministries, we have felt with the people we serve in the burdens they have known. This was brought home to me in a few lines from Sr Ana about the adjustments at Nazareth House.

“My heartfelt thanks to residents, staff and their families for their support and understanding in following the restrictions to ensure all our residents are safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been blessed during this time to stay free from COVID-19. We are very grateful to the residents for their resilience and willingness to learn new ways of staying connected with their loved ones. Our wellbeing staff are very busy facilitating Zoom sessions for residents who wish to connect with their families on the computer. Some residents use the glass window and a mobile phone to speak with families. Others who are able to go outside are able to have a conversation over the fence. The school students have sent letters as well.

“On Friday 11th September we had a Beach Party day whereby staff dressed up according to the theme and residents were provided with paper wrapped fish and chips. It was a great day and a topic for conversation for the rest of the week. Unfortunately a lot of the residents are missing the Mass and Holy Communion but we hope and pray that soon we will be able to return to the new normal.”

As I write to all the religious in our diocese, I offer my thanks to each one of you for your part in the response to the pandemic. I commend you for your patience and your resilience and I look forward to the time when we will be able to gather again in person, when we will be able to celebrate the liturgy with a full assembly, when we will be able to come together to support one another in the struggles and share the joys.

Last month, Pope Francis launched a new encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*. The title is from a message of St Francis of Assisi to the members of his religious community. In the opening lines of the encyclical, Pope Francis acknowledged the inspiration he had drawn from St Francis.

“Fratelli tutti”. With these words, Saint Francis of Assisi addressed his brothers and sisters and proposed to them a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel. This saint of fraternal love, simplicity and joy, who inspired me to write the encyclical “Laudato Si’”, prompts me once more to devote this new encyclical to fraternity and social friendship. Francis felt himself a brother to the sun, the sea and the wind, yet he knew that he was even closer to those of his own flesh. Wherever he went, he sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters. (par 1-2)

In 2015, the Pope began his encyclical on the care of creation with the words of a hymn by St Francis calling on all creatures to be united in praise to God. In 2020, he began his new encyclical with a greeting of St Francis that highlights the special bond we share with our sisters and brothers in our human family. Pope Francis encourages us to nurture the links we have as members of one human community throughout the world. In typical fashion, he puts the message in the form of a contrast: *Isolation, no; closeness, yes. (par 30)*

Pope Francis started writing this encyclical before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world. However, the pandemic has highlighted some of the key messages he wished to share. The common suffering has reminded us that we are members of a global community. As we recognise that we share a common problem, we might also recognise that we need to work together to find a common solution. *A worldwide tragedy like the COVID-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all. (par 32)*

Towards the end of the encyclical, Pope Francis recalls a meeting he had in Abu Dhabi last year. He met with the Moslem leader, the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. They signed a declaration expressing their shared conviction that “God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters”. The Pope compared his journey to Abu Dhabi to the journey of St Francis to meet with Sultan Malik-el-Kamil in Egypt. In both cases, they were meetings across languages and cultures and religions to express a common faith in God as the Creator of all and a common desire for peace among all the members of God’s family.

The final part of the encyclical echoes the invitation made in the opening paragraphs, an invitation to dream together so that we might live together as one family. *Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all. (par 8)*

Pope Francis’ words remind us of the bond we share with all our brothers and sisters in the human family. They might remind us too of the special bond we share with our brothers and sisters who are members of our own religious congregation, our own religious family.

When I made my profession as a Redemptorist, I was conscious of making my vows to God. At the same time, I was conscious of the support of the Redemptorist community who were gathered around me. The profession included this commitment: “Eternal God . . . I resolve to dedicate myself entirely to you, by following closely Christ, the Saviour of the world. For this purpose I now freely choose the Christian life sealed by the evangelical councils, by making the vows of chastity, of poverty, and of obedience, according to the spirit and way of life proper to the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. And so I bind myself to live faithfully a life of brotherly love, imbued with apostolic charity in the same Congregation . . . May your grace, the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the whole Church, and the co-operation of my confreres be constantly with me.”

May the grace of God, the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the whole Church, and the co-operation of our sisters and brothers in our congregations be with us all as we live out our commitment as religious and as we encourage everyone to live out a commitment to our brothers and sisters throughout the whole human family.

At the Mass with Religious that we usually celebrate each year, we remember those religious who are celebrating jubilees and those who have died in the past twelve months.

I invite you to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for those celebrating jubilees. These include Brigidine Sisters who will celebrate diamond jubilees on December 10 this year: Sr Loretta Brennan, Sr Margaret Cassidy, Sr Veronica Joyce, Sr Rosemary Kerlin, Sr Deidre Malone, Sr Alexia Riddington and Sr John Spurr. Two other Brigidine Sisters who served in our diocese and would have been in this jubilee group but have died are Sr Barbara May and Sr Aileen Vear. There were also golden jubilees on October 1 for two Sisters of Nazareth, Sr Mary Anne Monaghan and Sr Margaret Anne Hill.

I also invite you to remember those who have died over the past twelve months. These include Sr Tirsa Bale, a Baptistine Sister who served in the Horsham Parish, forming a community of two with Sr Manuela Cabigas. Sr Tirsa returned to the Philippines in January this year for medical treatment. Sadly, her health deteriorated further and she died in September. We also remember two Loreto Sisters, Sr Caroline Deutscher and Sr Bernadette Greene, as well as a Sister of Mercy, Sr Kate McGrath, and two Sisters of Nazareth, Sr Bernard Mary Murray and Sr Mary Lawrence Gibson. We give thanks for their service through so many years and we pray that they will rejoice forever in eternal life with God.

Thank you for the gifts you bring to our diocese, particularly the witness to Christ and the joy of the gospel. May that joy be yours in abundance as we look forward to celebrating Christmas and a fresh start in the new year.

God bless you all.



Paul Bird CSsR

Bishop of Ballarat