

ALLOCUTIO, SENATUS OF MELBOURNE, 6 DECEMBER 2015

This Tuesday, 8th December, Pope Francis will open the Holy Door in Rome and inaugurate the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. Over the course of the Jubilee, there will be many opportunities to reflect on this great theme of mercy.

As Legionaries and servants of Our Lady we rejoice that the Holy Father – who has a great devotion to Mary – has chosen to open the Year of Mercy on the Solemnity of her Immaculate Conception. He writes, ‘This liturgical feast day recalls God’s action from the very beginning of the history of mankind. After the sin of Adam and Eve, God did not wish to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil. So he turned his gaze to Mary, holy and immaculate in love, choosing her to be the Mother of man’s Redeemer. When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.’ (Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy *Misericordiae Vultus* 3)

Ever since the beginning God’s mercy had been in action, but especially with the merciful gift of preserving Our Lady free from original sin, we see the immediate preparations for the final manifestation of mercy in Christ. It was in view of the foreseen merits of Christ that Mary was preserved from the stain of Adam’s sin and given sanctifying grace from the first moment of her existence. God’s merciful initiative in regard to Mary is a sign of the mercy he wants to show to every human being through Christ.

The other great event of this Tuesday which Pope Francis is also commemorating in his inauguration of the Jubilee Year is the fiftieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council. Again, the words of the Pope: ‘The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive. With the Council, the Church entered a new phase of her history. The Council Fathers strongly perceived, as a true breath of the Holy Spirit, a need to talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way. The walls which too long had made the Church a kind of fortress were torn down and the time had come to proclaim the Gospel in a new way. It was a new phase of the same evangelization that had existed from the beginning. It was a fresh undertaking for all Christians to bear witness to their faith with greater enthusiasm and conviction.’ (*Misericordiae Vultus* 4)

We’re aware as Legionaries how the whole spirit of the Legion was endorsed by the Council, with its extensive teaching on Our Lady in the ‘Dogmatic Constitution on the Church’ *Lumen Gentium*; all the teachings on the role and apostolate of the laity, and on the universal call to holiness; and the missionary perspective of the whole Council.

The words of Pope Francis emphasise that missionary aspect: ‘[Vatican II] was a *new* phase of the *same* evangelization that had existed from the beginning.’ This reminds us of a great theme from the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI – how the project of Vatican II was *reform in continuity*. The new and the old in harmony.

It reminds us also of the words of Pope St John XXIII as he opened the Council: ‘The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more effectively...The Council...wishes to transmit Catholic doctrine, whole and entire, without alteration or deviation...The

deposit of faith itself, or the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; another thing is the way in which they are expressed, with however the same meaning...'

So: the same faith coming from the Apostles, but explained and expressed in new ways. The Council didn't just repeat old teaching – it would have been pointless to have a Council just to say exactly the same thing over again. But obviously, neither did it reverse any previous infallible teachings of the Church. If it had, it would have undermined its own authority – if the Holy Spirit couldn't be trusted to protect supposedly 'infallible' declarations of times past from error, why trust that Vatican II itself had divine guidance?

In truth, all the essential teachings and practices of the one Church of Christ are in continuity before and after Vatican II, but (in Pope Benedict's terms) as at any Council, within the *continuity* there is *reform* (not *rupture*): more detailed explanation and understanding, and purification on the level of non-essentials so that the Gospel shines through more clearly.

New Church teaching doesn't normally change even non-infallible teaching (as this also has the overall guidance of the Holy Spirit) but explains the faith more deeply and decides on points previously disputed. So this was also the achievement of Vatican II, in the great tradition of Councils: continuing the harmonious *development* of Catholic doctrine down the ages.

Extreme 'traditionalists' still want to drop Vatican II, extreme 'progressives' speak as though Vatican II somehow nullified all that went before! Both are impossible positions, and represent neither true tradition nor true progress. If we can't trust Vatican II as being guided by the Holy Spirit, as the extreme traditionalists would have it, why trust the older teachings either? And *contra* the extreme progressives, the Council itself had neither the power nor the intention to 'cancel' past dogmas, but actually reaffirmed them on point after point.

Sometimes one still hears people speak of a vague 'Spirit of Vatican II' that means almost whatever someone wants it to mean – pretending to derive authority from the Council, while neglecting or even contradicting the real Council texts agreed on by the Bishops, which were carefully composed to be accurate, balanced and faithful to the Gospel as handed on in Catholic Tradition.

Pope Benedict repeatedly emphasised that there is no 'pre-conciliar Church' or 'post-conciliar Church' (understood as two separate entities). There is one Church of all ages, always being led by the Holy Spirit deeper 'into the complete truth' as Jesus promised (Jn 16:13).

As we enter the Year of Mercy, and celebrate fifty years since Vatican II, we again thank God for the new perspectives on ancient truth that God has given his People in our time.