

Fr Andy's latest Reflection in preparation for Good Shepherd Sunday tomorrow. It takes him a long time but I know he is pleased with his Reflections and your feedback.

### GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY – AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, I was constantly tuning into the news keen to see the latest developments about what the government was doing concerning lockdowns, the number of people with coronavirus and how many had died. But after five weeks of continuous shocking news, I became less fervent in my viewing.

With so much emphasis on the devastating global spread of the coronavirus, any other news is relegated to either passing reference or not reported at all. I have however become, much more alert to what is going on in our world today and how different countries have responded to the threat of the coronavirus.

Around the world, authoritarian leaders are exploiting, exacerbating or grossly mishandling the response to the pandemic, placing self-interest ahead of public good. They are mostly male. Their behaviour and attitude is often atrocious, resembling T S Eliot's "hollow men". However, this cannot be said of their counterparts, the world's female leaders are proving to be women of inspiration. Take, for example, Germany's Angela Merkel, New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen, and Scotland's Nicola Sturgeon, who are among the most competent and compassionate women, who have been or ought to have been singled out for worthy praise.

I've noticed that during this present crisis that male leaders have taken to using war metaphors when describing how to deal with the spread of the virus, such as "blitz spirit", "fighting the invisible enemy", "wartime president". There also seems to be a lack of empathy demonstrated especially in countries where illiberal leaders who run authoritarian regimes, refuse democratic and legal constraints, abuse civil and women's rights, reject media scrutiny, tolerate corruption, and believe that they personally know best. These are the places where male leaders are seen to be the least effective pandemic performers.

At the top of the Covid list must be Donald Trump, claiming the other week that injecting disinfectant into the body would be a protective agent against the virus, just beggar's belief. But there are others such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's "strongman" president, whose initial response to the virus was to put the economy before lives. Rushed curfews and protective measures have caused confusion and panic buying. And Erdogan fumbled a chance to foster unity when releasing prisoners, he failed to include political prisoners, human rights activist and journalists, and banned pandemic fundraising efforts by opposition-led councils. Meanwhile in the Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte after an initial playing down of the virus threat, overreacted and ordered police to kill those who did not comply, insisting they "Shoot them dead." Similar "hard" crackdowns occurred with India's Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russia's Vladimir Putin, Hungary's Viktor Orban, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, China's leader Xi Jinping, as well as others who have acted dismally during the pandemic, including our own Boris Johnson!

The Catholic Church has had an authoritative male presence in its long history. Every Pope, every Bishop, and probably every priest and deacon have been male and have consciously or unconsciously contributed to the inflexible measures that have been laid down in the pastoral administration of doctrine and morals in the Teaching of the Church. This has been expressed in the "hard" directives the Church has given on birth control, giving Holy Communion to the divorced and remarried; the constant rebuff to discuss openly celibate and married priesthood; its negative stance towards women and to the gay and transgender community.

Yet, in my experience as a priest in a parish, I have witnessed powerful, authoritative and humbling service given by the women of our parish that has touched the lives of so many people. During this present lockdown, I have been overwhelmed by what amazing initiatives have been undertaken by the women of the parish. One woman has created a

parish WhatsApp and she coordinates and communicates information that reaches to over 80 people. Another keeps everyone involved with her updates and video recordings of Masses that are streamed and distributed around the parish. Another coordinates and shares the weekly bulletin to keep everyone up to date with what is happening in the parish. Most of the work is done by females and it is carried out with sensitivity and compassion, yet there is a strong sense of authority in terms of service. Without ever rescinding to their own opinions, they use their resourceful and inventive talents to feed and empower the community to which they serve. I have found this a wonderful service to see and experience and I thank God for it daily. And I thank God for Pope Francis, whose feminine theological insights have helped to move the ministry of women in the Church a little further forward, even though ever so slowly!

We have to understand the patriarchal system that the Catholic Church has been built upon, which is that clerical men dominate laymen and all women. The “clerics” believe that they have the “highest” vocation. Highest, in the sense of being closest to God. Priesthood is the “highest” of vocations, they tell us. But, why is it or how can it be that men can make so many varieties of it for men but not for women? And how is it that only males can enter into the fullness of ministry on the basis of maleness alone – this defies the very theology of baptism. Even though we are told that priesthood is celibate in the Roman Catholic Rite, except that in 7 or the 8 major Rites of the Church this is not so. Married priests abound in every ethnic dimension of the church except the Roman Rite. But then, in some other Rites only Bishops must be celibate and priests may be married before ordination, but not after. This “highest” of all vocations is clearly a moveable feast where being best is concerned.

The second of the vocations we are told is the “religious life”, communal lifestyles approved by the Church, but with different spiritual disciplines. These can be male or female, but never the twain should meet! The third and lowest of the vocations, they say, are the rest of us and the Church says basically nothing – nothing at all! Except that these are the unmarried “laypeople who stayed single” – unmarried all their lives. No mention of vows. No mention of purpose. No mention of spiritual disciplines. No mention of whether they were a “high” vocation or not! Only married couples were in the list, possibly because it has a “sacrament” attached to it. But the dismissal of the lay vocation in the world is a terrible loss, even though the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Laity which has powerful implications has still to be fully realised.

It still seems that the laity and women in particular are still overlooked and often ignored, even as the male priesthood is getting smaller and smaller each day. The laity, especially women are the ones who are taking the church to the centre of the church and to the centre of the world. If the Church is going to flourish, especially after this long and heart-rending lockdown due to the coronavirus, it will certainly and should be accredited to the notable service of the laity, especially women. As we stand at the moment, the world is a safer and healthier place to live due to many women leaders in numerous countries. Isn’t it time that the Church acknowledged the leadership qualities of women as being wise and good shepherds?

PS A policeman is in the witness box in court giving evidence. “This woman came up to me in the street when I was in plain clothes,” says the policeman, “and she tried to pass off this fake £20 note.” “Counterfeit?” asks the judge. “Yes,” says the policeman consulting his note book. “She had two.”

Can you translate the following?  
YYURYYUB, ICURYY4ME

Too wise you are, too wise you be, I see you are too wise for me!