



Abbot Hugh Allan, o.praem.

Apostolic Administrator of the Falkland Islands, Ecclesial Superior of the Mission sui juris to St Helena, Tristan da Cunha and Ascension Island

**Pastoral Letter for the 11th/12th March 2017
Second Sunday of Lent**

Dear Friends in Christ,

The health professionals used to say that we should eat at least five pieces of fruit a day. I covered this quite adequately by eating a bar of Cadbury's Fruit and Nut each day – plenty of fruit in that! Recently I heard they now recommend ten pieces of fruit a day. This does not worry me too much. It simply means two bars of fruit and nut each day. In writing to you, it strikes me that the good doctors have not pondered the difficulties of getting fresh fruit on the Falkland Islands.

At Mass last Sunday we heard how fruit can be pretty dangerous. In the first reading at Mass last week we heard that Adam and Eve eat of the “fruit of the tree” and that is when it all went wrong. So maybe fruit is not that good for us after all.

To be fair, it was not the fruit (as much as I would like to blame it). It was the tempting serpent and then our weakness that led to sin; this first act of disobedience against the command of God.

Every day we are tempted to think we know better than God. We think we know what is best, we know what to do, and we know it all! The trouble is, we really do not. We need God to help us to do what is best, we need God to help us know what to do and really only God knows it all.

The whole purpose of Lent is coming back to God. It is a return to a fruitful relationship with the Lord. The commands of God are there to help us, not to trip us up and ruin everything. The serpent in the story of the garden of Eden says "don't worry, its fine, do what you like....." He lies to them. God's commands might be difficult, they might be hard to follow at times, but they are there to help us and it is the truth.

One of the greatest ways our world is tempted to disobey God is within the sacred ground of marriage and family life. It is something Pope Francis tried to address last year when he published a document called *Amoris Laetitia*. It is about love, Christian marriage and family life. It is a breath-taking document in its scope and it offers a fresh presentation of Catholic doctrine with many indications for pastoral practice.

Amoris Laetitia is one of the longest ever papal documents. It has nine chapters covering everything from the nature of love, engagement and marriage preparation, to Christian family life and the upbringing of children. Chapter Four is a beautiful reflection on the famous passage on love from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, a reading that couples often choose for their wedding liturgy. Chapter Seven focuses on bringing up children. Time and again, the Holy Father repeats the traditional teaching of the Church on chastity, marriage, sexuality and family life, but he does so in a fresh way. He acknowledges with sympathy and compassion the difficulties and challenges many face today. Like Jesus with the woman caught in adultery (John 8: 1-11), Pope Francis urges us, whilst acknowledging the reality of sin, to shew care and concern for sinners, not condemnation.

The Pope's pastoral intention, with all its balance and nuances, is especially evident in Chapter Eight on the care of Catholics in irregular situations, such as the divorced and civilly remarried. The Holy Father wants us to reach out to all those Catholics who have drifted away from the practice of their faith because they find themselves in marital situations and patterns of behaviour which the Church deems to be inauthentic. Jesus wants to offer them Good News. They are still very much members of His Church, with a part to play. The Pope asks clergy and laity to accompany them, helping them to review their circumstances and to grow in faith. With a wise and good spiritual director, it ought to be possible to help them discern how to live better lives and whether something can be done to regularise their situation.

To me, the Gospel story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35), with its themes of the presence of Jesus, grace, conversion and truth, is a good image for the kind of 'accompaniment' the Holy Father is speaking of. Cardinal Collins, the Archbishop of Toronto recently reflected on this:

"First, Jesus drew near, and accompanied his downcast disciples as they walked in the wrong direction, into the night. He started by asking questions about their present disposition and by listening to them, but he did not stop

there. Instead, he challenged them with the Word of God: ‘Ob, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!’ (Luke 24:25) His presentation of the objective vision of Scripture broke through their subjective self-absorption and, along with his loving presence, brought them to conversion. The disciples of Emmaus accepted the Word of God that challenged them, and ... they changed direction and, with burning hearts, raced through the night to Jerusalem to bear joyful witness to the community gathered there.”

Cardinal Collins takes us through it well. Jesus drew near. He accompanied them with His loving presence. He asked them about their situation. He listened to their experience. He gently rebuked them for their mistakes. He taught them about the truth of the Scriptures. He revealed Himself in the Eucharist. He thus restored their hope and led them to conversion.

Sadly, the media have not always given an accurate presentation of what this document from the Pope is about. Has the Church’s teaching changed with *Amoris Laetitia*? No. It is important to read this, and all papal documents, with a ‘hermeneutic of continuity and reform’ not a ‘hermeneutic of rupture.’ *Amoris Laetitia* is has to be read in line with Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae*, with *Familiaris Consortio* of St. John Paul II and with the teaching of emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, and Francis frequently cites them. There has been no change in canon law. What is new is the Pope’s direct consideration of messy situations. The Holy Father wants the Church, where necessary, to adopt a new and more compassionate pastoral approach, one that acknowledges the Truth yet more vigorously reaches out with God’s mercy to those who are struggling. This can be a delicate balance, especially for pastors. A pastor’s role is not to be a strict sheriff, nor an indulgent ‘fairy-godmother’ – nor, for that matter, to adopt an attitude of ‘Don’t ask, Don’t tell’ – but to be a good shepherd, a wise mentor, a prudent spiritual guide, helping people discern their growth and development towards the ideal.

Does the Pope leave a lot of matters to individual conscience, as some media commentators have suggested? No, he doesn’t, if by conscience they mean ‘What I feel.’ Christians always see themselves first and foremost as belonging to Christ, as members of His Body, the Church. They live ‘under’ the Word of God. So a Christian’s conscience is never ‘What I feel’ or ‘What I think’ but a conscience informed by Catholic teaching, which seeks to apply authentically the teaching and principles of Jesus to daily life and concrete situations.

Always keep in your hearts that there is nothing we can do that God can not forgive, if we return with a humble and contrite heart and are willing to change.

Lent is a time for us to reflect clearly on our obedience to God and to seek his mercy, especially in the sacrament of confession. I hope you will all make good use of this beautiful sacrament during Lent and through out the year.

Going back to my original thought, maybe for Lent I might take up eating more fruit (yes, and pigs might fly, I hear you say) but for sure the greatest thing we can do in Lent is to return to God, to listen to His commands and keep them. We should all take to heart the important phrase we say in the “Our Father” everyday – lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Graciously hear our prayers. Amen

With the assurance of my prayers for you and with every blessing,

Yours in Christ and St Norbert,

+ Abbot Hugh