

I hope you have enjoyed the conference so far, and it is my joy to tie things together in some way and help send us renewed in our commitment to continue the great work of AOS wherever that call may take us.

We have heard of the work done by the folk in head office, we have heard from the ports of what is going on there. And of the work of AOS in the provision of care on our shores and internationally.

We have prayed together, and contemplated the theology of ministry that drives us on. As Noel said yesterday “An understanding of this theology is vital, for we must see our good deeds, not as something in isolation, valuable though they may be, but in the context of the mission of the church in which we have a vital role”.

Over 43 years as priest, and indeed in the years as a member of the priesthood of the laity before that, I have felt privileged to be a part of that mission. I have been excited and sometimes surprised, by the variety of all I have been asked to do. I have served for thirty years in traditional parish ministry, working in many chaplaincy situations, schools, hospitals, prisons but in the last 13 years of my work with AOS I found a new and dynamic ways to serve the Lord in the call to mission to the people of the sea.

More recently my role has changed and I now find myself passing on my experience to chaplains, anywhere in the world, to church groups which share our concerns and to anyone who will listen to the story of the wonderful mission of AOS. Give retreats and days of renewal in Port communities, to teachers and governors.

But whatever I do, I do it in the context of a church agency bringing the joy of the gospel into a world that cries out in pain for the many injustices perpetrated against its people.

Along the way I have been inspired by the words and actions of many wonderful people.

Kirkby example. Good Friday needed to take place where crucifixion was happening in the area. Story of Good Friday service held at the locked factory gates. 1000 had lost their jobs
Going to where the hurt is.

Field Hospital. Where the pope asks us to go. This is his description of the church he wants to see.

The field hospital is not bothered about a loss of its status and privileges. It is not concerned with targets or best practice indicators.

Instead, it goes out of itself to respond to the needs of those whose lives are at risk. It goes to where people hurt.

It engages with the world rather than withdraws into safe places. In fact, time and again, Pope Francis challenges the church to not be concerned with its own prerogatives. “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security”. (The Joy of the Gospel 49)

In his book “The name of God is Mercy”

“I often say that in order for this to happen, it is necessary to go out: to go out from the churches and the parishes, to go outside and look for people where they live, where they suffer, and where they hope. I like to use the image of a field hospital to describe this ‘Church that goes forth’. It exists where there is combat. It is not a solid structure with all the equipment where people go to receive treatment for both small and large infirmities. It is a mobile structure that offers first aid and immediate care, so that its soldiers do not die.

“It is a place for urgent care, not a place to see a specialist.

I hope that the Jubilee [The Holy Year of Mercy] will serve to reveal the Church’s deeply maternal and merciful side, a Church that goes forth toward those who are ‘wounded’, who are in need of an attentive ear, understanding, forgiveness and love.”

And surely this idea of field hospital is very much a model for our ministry. We go to where the hurt is. To where people are wounded, vulnerable or exploited. We do it all the time and don’t wait until the time is right. Don’t wait until specialist help is available. We get on with it in whatever way we can.

MERCY

Being merciful is at the heart of Catholic identity. It is not simply a matter of acting with mercy and compassion to those in need with our position of power and privilege intact.

Our giving, our service of others will have consequences to ourselves. It is a radical discipleship of vulnerability and powerlessness in the footsteps of the humble servant of God.

Our mission is a stance in favour of the weak and the vulnerable. It is where we are sent

Pope Francis uses a rather unconventional term to describe the church. He famously says that pastors need to carry the scent of the sheep.

“The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity”.

That is his vision of the ideal church.
Not a perfect society, nor a haven for the privileged but
a refuge for the poor,
an oasis for the weary and
a hospital for the wounded.

And this is the call to all of us.

If we Chaplains and volunteers are to now see ourselves as workers in a field hospital, what kind of mindset do we need?

We must be concerned with real hope and care.

We must be ready to meet others where they are, even before we know what they need.

We need to be with them enough to become one of them, not set ourselves up as an elitist force. In this way we will be able to truly care for them, to prescribe not some arbitrary medicine but to focus on their real needs.

Today, in the midst of many situations of seeming hopelessness, it is easy for us to be overwhelmed and numbed. As I hear chaplains and volunteers tell their stories of the unstinting efforts they make in their care for seafarers, I am so proud to have a share in that mission.

And there is no doubt in your commitment and service following the example of the Lord.

But I also realise that there are times when we need to find strength, and I would hope that we would never be afraid to acknowledge that.

During the conference it has been a great joy to hear from the chaplains about all the wonderful things they do.

However, I have yet to hear from someone who says that actually they are tired and sometimes feel overburdened and need to step aside to take a breather. Do we not feel comfortable about our vulnerability, or maybe in denial.

Do we feel overburdened and sometimes unable to meet the challenge of delivering new life on behalf of those who feel hopeless and on the margins.

When we are on the side of the poor, the vulnerable, the suffering people and when we stand in solidarity with those without hope and act together, we can be channels of hope. In opening our eyes and hearts to the sufferings of our world, hope can be awakened, a hope that allows us to see things from the perspective of God.

In acting out of a strong passion for the Kingdom and compassion for the suffering, we **CAN** bring about a fresh hope for others.

We are called to be channels of hope and to meet the challenges of our times.

In what ways can we grasp that vision and apply it to our context?
Who are the people without hope and how can we help change the harsh realities that they experience into a hopeful future.

And isn't thatOur very call to the people of the sea.

If we Chaplains and volunteers are to now see ourselves as workers in a field hospital, what kind of mindset do we need?

We must be driven with real hope and care.

What can deflect us or make us downhearted.?

We are Not asked to solve all the world's problems.
So many terrible things happen every day that we start wondering whether the few things we do ourselves make any sense, DO THEY MAKE THE SLIGHTEST DIFFERENCE.

When people are starving only a few thousand miles away, when wars are raging close to our borders, when vast numbers of people in our cities have no homes to live in
our own actions can look futile.

But we are not called to save the world, solve all problems, help all people.
(the person who cannot watch the news without thinking it is their fault.)

But each of us has our own unique call, in our families, in our work, in our world.

And it is a unique call. What God has asked each one of us to do, he has asked nobody else.

The vocation of each one of us is to become the person God has intended us to be. We become that person by living out his call to us in the very real and present context of our day to day lives.

Do we really get that. What do we find difficult in this vision?

The teachings of Jesus like the parable of the Good Samaritan challenge us to think in a different way, outside the usual norms and conventions. Jesus teaches us some home truths that are truly confronting and incisive. Samaritans were considered outsiders and outcasts by ordinary Jews. Yet in the parable, it was the Samaritan who was the unlikely hero. For he showed love and compassion to the person in need. On the contrary, the priest and the Levite, who were considered the respected class of society and the custodians of tradition, were found wanting.

They put tradition and law in the way of basic human love.

The holders of tradition failed the test of good neighbour while the outcast proved himself an unlikely champion of basic human decency, mercy and compassion. Their excuse had something to do with upholding conventions. They were temple folk who couldn't allow themselves to be contaminated. Or was that not just an excuse? A convenient get out.

We can no longer understand the parable just in terms of being kind to those in need. This parable is a lesson that cuts our prejudices to the core. The lawyer who posed the question to Jesus "who is my neighbour" went away with much more than he had bargained for. He was challenged to be the neighbour and to be one like the Samaritan.

Victim Mindset.

Who was the victim in the parable. The man robbed? Of course but maybe he wasn't the only victim. The priest and levite were victims too. Victims to their own prejudices. Obsessed but their narrow understanding of the Law and so unable to act in love to the plight of the stranger.

And isn't playing the victim is another way to deal with pain indirectly.

You blame someone else, and your pain becomes your personal ticket to power because it gives you a false sense of moral superiority and outrage.

You don't have to grow up, let go, forgive, or surrender—you just have to accuse someone else of being worse than you are.

Why is it always left to me ?

If I don't do it, it won't get done.

Why am I always busy? Being busy is fine but the curse of Busyness can become very destructive. We can, if we aren't careful use it as an excuse to avoid something we know we really should be doing.

Finally Assumptions.

How often have you heard the cry about the Good Old Days, when our churches were full, when there were loads of priests, where everyone knew their place. I don't believe they were good days

Days of judgemental attitudes, of exclusion of those who were not of type.

Harsh days. Abusive exercise of power.

I believe that these will be looked back upon as the good days.

I believe that we are living in a watershed and a privileged moment in the history of the Church. Just as the biblical exile brought about the most transforming experience that profoundly shaped the faith of Israel, this transition time can potentially launch the Church into a new era of hope, engagement and solidarity that the Second Vatican Council called us with great foresight.

From where I stand, the arrival of Pope Francis and his emphasis on servant leadership have unambiguously signalled this new era.

Chaplains, volunteers, all who serve AOS in any way. A closing message to you.

It is not that long ago that it would have been impossible for you to carry the title of Chaplain.

Now there is a greater realisation of your share in the priesthood of Christ through your Baptism. We have the example of Pope Francis to guide us and inspire us in our call to serve.

In him we have a Pope who sees Church:

Less in terms of power, dominance and privilege but more a position of vulnerability and powerlessness;

No longer an enclosure for the virtuous but more an oasis for the weary and downtrodden;

Not about exclusion and elitism but more an encounter of radical love, and inclusiveness

Less an attitude of 'we are right and you are wrong' and more of an attitude of openness to truth wherever and whoever it is to be found;

He wants a church with less leadership of control and clericalism but more a humble servant exemplified by Christ at the Last Supper.

Francis talks of a church that can no longer stand on the sidelines finger wagging.

He asks that we drop the language of condemnation but asks for more of a language of affirmation and compassion

THIS IS CHURCH

YOU ARE CHURCH

Lord Jesus,

Give us **courage** to accompany others, for walking at their side we find you there present with us.

Give us **joy** that we might serve others, for in tending wounds of those who suffer, we sense your healing grace at work in us.

Give us **wisdom** as we advocate for others, for in defending the downtrodden we hear your voice speak up for us.

Grant that in all we do, we may give you glory Lord; we return all we have in love to you, for you have given everything to us.

So go back to your workplaces filled with

Joy

Wisdom

Courage

And may all your encounters be enriching for yourselves and for those you serve.