



# TOUCHSTONE

VOLUME 25, NUMBER 2

## President's message

Dear brothers and friends,

Welcome to Volume 25 Issue Two of *Touchstone*.

This edition of *Touchstone* contains two presentations from NFPC's April 2016 Convocation in Indianapolis, Indiana. The first is an adapted version of Father Thomas Rosica, CSB's talk on **Mercy: the Cornerstone of Francis' Petrine Ministry**. His insights flow from Pope Francis' words and life: Mercy is the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

The second are remarks by Jesuit Father Thomas Gaunt, who received NFPC's *Mandatum* Award for the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. His insights focus on the changes and challenges that priests encounter as we enter the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – the Church's geography, mobility, and diversity.

It's not too early to place NFPC's 2017 Convocation on your calendar. We've already chosen a theme: **"Forging a Future with Pope Francis."** The annual gathering will take place **April 24-27** at the Majestic Garden Hotel in Anaheim, California. The Diocese of Orange in California will be our host. We are grateful to Father Jack Sewell who is representing the Orange Presbyteral Council in planning events related to the Convocation.

We have already confirmed two of our main speakers. Joining us will be San Diego **Bishop Robert McElroy** and **J. Kevin Appleby**. Kevin is Senior Director of International Migration Policy for the Center for Migration Policy and the Scalabrini International Migration Network.

Why should you consider traveling to California for the NFPC Convocation? NFPC's mission serves the communion, brotherhood, and solidarity of bishops, presbyterates, and priests. On a national level there aren't many priests' organizations that provide a time and space for priests from across the US to rest, share common concerns, renew friendships, make new friends, hear good speakers, and pray together.

As I travel across the country one of the main themes I hear over and over is that many priests feel isolated, overworked, and at times disconnected from the larger presbyterate. So take us up on our invitation to join NFPC in Anaheim next April.

As I have said before, there is really no substitute for getting together to really talk and share experiences and encourage each other's ministries. Watch our website – [nfpc.org](http://nfpc.org) – as more information becomes available.

As always, your brother, in Christ,

**Fr. Tony Cutcher, President**

No time to keep up with the latest Catholic news? Let us do it for you – Absolutely free!

**NFPC This Week**

Delivered to your inbox each Sunday - We do the research - You stay informed

Sign up in the footer at [nfpc.org](http://nfpc.org)



## Mercy: The Cornerstone of Francis' Petrine Ministry

*Rev. Thomas Rosica, CSB*



Thank you for your introduction and your warm welcome. I am delighted to part of this conference that has as its overall theme: *Mercy, Compassion, Accompaniment: Key to Bringing Pope Francis' Message to Parish Life*. What is the story within the story of mercy? What does it mean for us priests? What does it mean for our people?

What is the historical backdrop against which this Jubilee Year of Mercy has been called? Pope Francis has told us that there is only one antidote to the darkness, suffering, evil and pain of the world in which we live and that antidote is mercy.

For Pope Francis, mercy is not just a pastoral attitude; it's not a project. It's not another thing on the agenda; it's the substance of the Gospel. Scripture presents God as infinite mercy, but also as perfect justice. How can these two be reconciled? This of course is the big question with the release his apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*: how do we reconcile these two points? How can the Church put this mercy into practice in the midst of so many challenges and crises assailing us each day? In the Pope's own words, "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. Mercy is the fundamental law that dwells inside the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy is the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

If we proclaim to be followers of Christ and to be his priests and ministers, we have to go where Jesus went. We have to take upon ourselves, like the good Samaritan, the man we encounter along the road, the one we encounter in seeking the lost sheep. To be like Jesus we have to be close to people. Francis invites us to eat with tax collectors and with sinners. He wants us to forgive the woman caught in adultery, while admonishing her at the same time to sin no more. He wants us to welcome and respect foreigners and refugees, even those who are enemies or potential threats. The Pope has spoken simply, powerfully, and beautifully about returning to a lost unity, a desire to achieve a missing fullness, a desire to witness to the beauty and the love of Christ.

Pope Francis has invited all of us this year to take seriously those lessons of the corporal works of mercy that many of us memorized as children. We know them and may have memorized them during our school years. to feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, clothe the naked, heal the sick, shelter the homeless, give drink to the thirsty, bury the dead, and welcome in the stranger. What do they mean practically for us today? How do we activate them? Feeding the hungry: see to the proper nutrition of loved ones; support and volunteer in food pantries, soup kitchens, and agencies in our parish communities and cities that feed the hungry.

What does it mean to shelter the homeless? Help neighbors care for their homes and do repairs, especially when there are elderly people whose home might not be cared for as we would wish. Support or volunteer at homeless shelters. Advocate for public policies and legislation that provide housing for low-income people. What does it mean to visit the sick? Spend quality time with those that are sick and homebound. Take time to call or send a card or email people that are sick, or text them. Volunteer to drive people to doctor's appointments. Volunteer at hospitals or nursing homes.

What does it mean to visit the imprisoned? Support and participate in ministries to the incarcerated. Support agencies that advocate on behalf of those that are unjustly imprisoned. Support efforts, such as Sr. Helen Prejean's heroic efforts to abolish the death penalty, work with victims, and take a stand for those who are falsely accused and imprisoned.

What does it mean to give to the poor? Take small bills or loose change with you wherever you go and be ready to give it out and not judge that person who's incapable of having a job. Make regular monetary donations to legitimate charities.

Bury the dead. Be faithful to attending wakes and visitations, especially of those people who are not going to have a big crowd or loved ones at their funeral. Volunteer at hospices for the dying. Spend time with widows and widowers and let them grieve aloud after the funeral is over.

We see mercy in action in *Amoris Laetitia*—a very clear snapshot of the two-year synodal process that we have just experienced. It reflects the questionnaires, the discussions, and the heated debates and most especially the consensus that has emerged from two important Synods of Bishops for the Universal Church. The exhortation states, "General rules set forth a good, which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation, they cannot provide absolutely for every particular situation. At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment, in particular circumstances, cannot be elevated to the level of a rule." These are wise reflections. Some people are alarmed that Francis' suggestions mean that even the best rules have exceptions, while others are very disappointed with his refusal to turn the exception into the basis for new rules. But rigor or laxity of the rules themselves was never, and is never the purpose of the Pope to call these Synods because rules were never the main concern of the Synod. Right at the beginning of *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope rebukes those who reduce the Gospel message to a set of rigid disciplines. He said they're nothing but stones to be hurled at people. And he wants to remind us that what Christ said of the Sabbath is also true of the sacraments and the rules surrounding them: they were made for us, not we for them. The rules exist not to protect the sacraments from being soiled by contact from sinners, but to protect us, the children of God, for whom the sacraments were instituted in the first place.

*Amoris Laetitia* draws on the long history of Church teaching and reflects a very intense Synodal experience that extended over two and a half years. It draws from both the new and the old. What's new about it is the idea of accompaniment; we must never deprive anyone of our accompaniment along the way. Francis, like his predecessors, recognizes the complexity of modern family life. We can no longer speak of the ideal family or the perfect family. The exhortation puts an added emphasis on the Church and her ministers to be close to people no matter what their situations may be and in no way is this exhortation a theoretical text with no connection to real problems. It addresses just about everything. The very title suggests the positive thrust that despite all of these challenges, despite the failures, there is a joy of love, and a beauty of marriage. If we want to talk about a future for humanity, we must talk about families. And the question of vocations is directly related to that.

A word that runs throughout the exhortation and one very common in Francis' mind and heart is the word discernment. We want a quick response, a quick solution to every problem. We must acknowledge, first of all, that people coming to us to seek our advice and counsel are searching. We must presume goodness and enter into the stories, experiences and hearts of those seekers who come to us in need. We detect the infirmity and weakness. From what are they suffering at present? Is not our role to teach the truth in charity and to remind people that God loves them as they are but doesn't want them to remain there. God always leads them and us to something greater. The Lord invites us to change our lives in order to live a healthier, holier life.

Discernment is a constant effort to be open to the Word of God that can illuminate the concrete reality of everyday life. One of the issues that emerged at the 2015 Synod is the proper formation of conscience. A very important paragraph of *Amoris Laetitia* speaks to the Synod's great respect for the consciences of the faithful as well as the necessity of formation of consciences:

*“We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.”*  
(AL #37)

The Church does not exist to take over people's conscience but to stand in humility and before faithful men and who have discerned prayerfully and often painfully before God the reality of their lives and situations. Discernment can never be separated from the Gospel demands of truth and the search for charity and truth, and the tradition of the Church. The fifth point in the minds of many regards the many Catholics who are divorced and civilly remarried who are struggling to do things right in bringing up their children in the Church. What does *Amoris Laetitia* offer to them? It offers them the guarantee that the Church and its ministers care about them and their concrete situations. It wants them to feel and to know that they're part of the Church. They're not excommunicated. They're not thrown out. What is the mission of the Church? It is one of reaching out to reinstate people. The key concept of the exhortation is integration. Do everything possible to help people, to be included in the life of the community.

The Church makes her own the attitude of Jesus, who offers boundless mercy to all, and the exhortation offers this mercy to every person without exception. *Amoris Laetitia* also speaks to countless people who are not married; this includes single parents, widows and widowers, celibate men and woman, every one of who has family ties.

One of the biggest concerns of couples in our day and age is the spacing of births. Yet this is not a major subject in *Amoris Laetitia*. Some may wrongly ask why the Pope is not following the same direction of his predecessors in this regard. The topic of contraception and spacing of births and responsible parenthood is addressed in numbers 42, 68, 82, and 222. While noting that greater emphasis has to be given to the fact that children are truly a gift from God, *Humanae Vitae* is referenced several times. But there's an important stress on that the fact that spouses be aware of obligations concerning responsible parenthood. The exhortation encourages natural methods of regulating births since they respect bodies and the whole person. It lays out new pastoral proposals and strategies for the Church, and invites us to change our focus regarding the family: to accompany, to integrate, to remain close to anyone who has suffered the effects of wounded love.

Above all it challenges us to be understanding in the face of complex and painful situations. Francis would have us approach the weak with compassion and not judgment, and to enter into the reality of other people's lives and most especially, to understand the power of tenderness.

*Father Thomas Rosica, CSB*, a Basilian priest since 1986, is the founding CEO of Canada's Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation. He also serves as English language attaché to the Holy See Press Office.

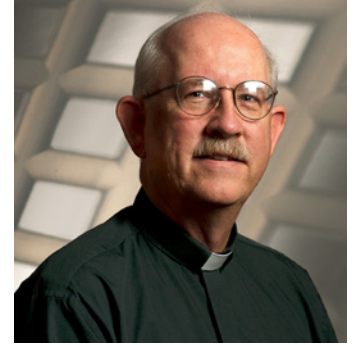


**SAVE THE DATE!**  
**Mark your calendars now and plan to attend:**  
 The National Federation of Priests' Councils 49th Annual  
 Convocation "Forging a Future with Pope Francis"  
**April 24 – 27, 2017**  
**Majestic Garden Hotel**  
**Anaheim, California**  
**ALL PRIESTS WELCOME!**



## The Challenge of the Church's Geography, Mobility, and Diversity

*Rev. Thomas P. Gaunt, SJ*



As the Executive Director of CARA [Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate] I am delighted to be here to accept the *Mandatum* Award on behalf of the Center's research team.

Over the years CARA has collaborated with the National Federation of Priests' Councils on a number of projects focused on the life and ministry of priests serving the people of God in the United States.

About eight years ago CARA collaborated with NFPC on a national study of priests that was the continuation of a series of studies begun by Father Andrew Greeley in 1970. That was the fifth in a series and it resulted in the book *Same Call, Different Men: The Evolution of the Priesthood since Vatican II* published in 2012. CARA is looking forward to continuing the collaboration with NFPC in the near future for a sixth survey of priests.

And what might we expect to be the major changes and challenges for priests in this second decade of the second millennium? Two things in particular come to mind...

First, the continuing challenge of geography and mobility for the Catholic population in the United States. We often think of dioceses and parishes as stable entities providing enduring structures and institutions to support and serve Catholics. Yet the past few decades have been a time of great mobility as younger Catholics pursue jobs and opportunities moving from ethnic neighborhood parishes of the Northeast and Midwest to booming, more suburban, mega-parishes in the South and West. It is the challenge that people move but the buildings and infrastructure stay put. Depending on your geography, as a pastor you may be confronted with rows of empty pews and mounting maintenance costs, or managing the logistics of each Sunday Mass having 1,000 plus worshipers and buying land for ever expanding parking lots!

Second, the Catholic community of the United States is increasing in its cultural diversity and is constantly being enriched by an immigrant population unmatched in over a century. The majority of Catholic families today are Hispanic, Asian, or African-American in contrast to the Catholic community of our youth. In 1980 about one in ten Catholic adults were immigrants, by 2015 over one-quarter of all Catholic adults were immigrants. Cultural diversity and immigration bring new devotions and religious practices into our parishes to enliven them, but they can also confound us and frustrate us as we try to minister in new languages so as to animate and lead such a universal Church. All of this is further accentuated as the priesthood itself becomes more culturally diverse and more priests are themselves immigrants and missionaries.

If we take a longer historical view, we see that the present cultural diversity and immigration in the US Catholic Church is only matched by the waves of European immigrants that came to the US in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. At that time, the Church in the US was pulled apart, experiencing serious divisions and in some cases, schism. A century ago the waves of immigrants (primarily from Europe) found a US Church often polarized by its differences. The untold and unrecognized story of our own day is how successful the US Church is in welcoming and accepting the recent waves of immigrants who are coming from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. There are still many problems and tensions, but these are like night and day compared to 100 years ago. Pastors, parish leaders, and bishops have risen to the challenge of cultural diversity in recent years in a manner that often goes unrecognized.

The CARA research team, in collaboration with Chuck Zech at the Villanova University Center for Church Management and Business Ethics, has just finished writing a book on the Catholic parish of the 21<sup>st</sup>



National Federation of Priests' Councils

333 N. Michigan, Suite 1114  
Chicago, IL 60601



## TOUCHSTONE – National Federation of Priests' Councils - 6

Century. It should be published by the end of the year. In writing the book we documented the extent and variety of changes that have occurred in American parishes over the past 25 years. The NFPC, individual presbyteral councils, and the thousands of pastors across the country should take great pride in how they have creatively and successfully engaged and managed the change, the diversity, and increasing complexity of parish life today.

CARA is grateful for the repeated invitations from NFPC to collaborate in efforts to better understand American priests and parish life in America. We are honored to assist you in being a voice and resource for the Church in the United States as you engage these changes, proclaim God's Word, and build up the Body of Christ.

On behalf of the CARA research team, thank you for this award.

*Jesuit Father Thomas P. Gaunt* is Executive Director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University