

The Invisible Ministry of Pope Francis

Jesuit Frédéric Fornos leads the Pope's Worldwide Network of Prayer.



How many times did you hear Pope Francis ask 'Please, pray for me!?' Those words were never a mere courtesy. They expressed a deep conviction: Francis believed wholeheartedly in the fruitfulness of prayer.

For Pope Francis, prayer was not simply one practice among many. It was at the very heart of his and the Church's mission. In a world that pushes toward fragmentation, conflict and division, he never tired of reminding us of the urgency of prayer. Prayer draws us out of the 'globalisation of indifference' and leads us into a 'cul-

ture of encounter'.

This is why he wished to establish a pontifical work to express, in his own words, that 'prayer is the heart of the Church's mission.'

This conviction is rooted in a long history. In 2010, Fr Adolfo Nicolás SJ, then superior general of the Society of Jesus, had initiated a process of re-creation of the Apostleship of Prayer. In 2014, Pope Francis formally approved it. Then, seeing the fruitfulness of this prayer network, he committed himself to supporting it actively.

As early as 2017, during an Ange-

lus address, he invited the faithful to ‘join the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, which spreads the prayer intentions I propose for the Church each month. In this way, the Apostleship of Prayer moves forward and communion grows.’

Pope Francis made the point forcefully in 2016, during the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. In 2019, he put the same conviction more simply: ‘The heart of the Church’s mission is prayer. ... We can do so many things, but without prayer it does not work.’

It was as if, each month, he opened a window so that we might see, hear and feel the challenges of the world – so that we might place ourselves at the service of Christ’s mission, a mission of compassion, through prayer and action.

In January 2019, as young Catholics were preparing to gather in Panama for World Youth Day, Pope Francis launched his personal profile on Click To Pray, the official prayer platform of the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network.

Prayer is an invisible dimension of our lives. It can easily be overlooked because its fruits are not immediately visible. Like a seed planted in the ground, it needs time, but its fruitfulness is immense. As the Gospel tells us: it yields thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold (Mk 4:20).

One cannot truly understand Pope Francis – the consistency of his life, the strength of his ministry – without prayer. We only see the tip of the iceberg; the submerged part, the hidden part, is the most important.

Francis prayed the Liturgy of the Hours and the Rosary and spent time in adoration. But he also meditat-

There is a particular kind of writing that does not belong to publication, conversation, or even resolution. It belongs instead to discernment.

ed deeply on the Word of God. To prepare his homilies at Santa Marta, he would begin the evening before, listening to the Word and letting it resonate in his heart throughout the following day, like a quiet melody playing in the background. The Word of God shaped and permeated his entire life.

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius give a central place to the Word of God – to see, hear, love and follow Jesus, and to grow each day in docility to the Holy Spirit. This Word resonates with the realities of daily life; it opens us to the world and to one another. To pray is always to seek union with Jesus Christ, and to choose him and walk with him in the service of his mission.

The Holy Father’s prayer intentions in the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, call to mind each month the great challenges facing humanity and the Church’s mission.

Over the eleven years during which I had the joy of working with Francis, I came to discover in him a true spiritual father: a free man, deeply attentive to others, full of warmth and kindness – and above all, a man with a wonderful sense of humour. In his apostolic exhortation on holiness, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, he noted that humour is indeed one of the hallmarks of sanctity.

Resilience in Syria

Michael Zammit SJ is Middle East regional director of the Jesuit Refugee Service.

'It is astounding to see the resilience people have built up in very difficult situations.' So says Michael Zammit SJ, just returned from Aleppo in Syria. He tells of how the people there cope with bombings when even their hospitals are directly targeted. He says that as soon as the bombings start, the locals go to shelters and stay there until the shelling ends. They then emerge and go about their daily lives with great dignity and composure. Aleppo was once a city of five million people, now only two million remain – mostly the ones who were too sick, too feeble or could not afford to leave. When the fighting erupts, they go to ground. Sometimes the only open road in and out of the city is closed by one or other faction and their food supplies are cut off for anything up to a month. But as far as possible, the residents of the city try to get on with their everyday lives. The Jesuits there provide a place where students can come to study, and they do so like any normal group of students would do. 'It is amazing to see ordinary life continue like this in the midst of the chaos of war.'

The Jesuit Refugee Service employs 350 people in Syria and in Aleppo, some of those workers help out with



emergency relief. 'Everyone needs help in Aleppo so JRS staff have a kitchen where they cook meals for eight thousand people every single day. The food is given to over thirty five aid agencies who distribute it.' He says only two of these agencies are Christian, and he believes it is very important to have a Church presence there showing solidarity and support.

JRS also provides a clinic where people with chronic illnesses like high blood pressure or diabetes can go. This is an important service given the targeted bombings of the hospitals in the city and the shortage of medical staff.

At this stage most of Syria has been