

# Compassion for the world

*An interview with Jesuit Fr Frédéric Fornos  
Pope's Prayer Network International Director*

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Recognising Christ in each one of our sisters and brothers and turning their own physical, moral and spiritual restraint into a reason for prayer – this is the inspiration of the Apostolate of the *Worldwide Prayer Network*, to which Pope Francis has entrusted, as every year, his intentions for 2021. We have been talking to the PWPNI international director, Jesuit Father Frédéric Fornos, who *explained* to the “Osservatore Romano” the motivation and content of the themes chosen this year.

*What is new in the intentions for next year?*

On 28<sup>th</sup> June 2019, when we celebrated the 175 years of the *Apostolate of Prayer* (now the Pope's *Worldwide Prayer Network*) the Holy Father restated the basis of our mission: “it is a mission of compassion for the world; we could say a ‘journey of the heart’, that is, a prayerful itinerary that transforms people's lives”. The Pope's prayer intentions spring from this compassion for the world, and thus express the challenges facing both humanity and the Church's mission. When Francis entrusts us with his prayer intentions, he helps us come nearer to the Heart of Jesus, and contemplate the world through His eyes: “Jesus' Heart is so great that He wishes to welcome all of us into a revolution of tenderness. Closeness to the Heart of the Lord urges our heart to lovingly draw near a brother or sister, and helps us assume this compassion for the world”. This is the source of human fraternity, which is so fundamental for Pope Francis. It is also the departure point for the Pope's intentions for 2021: “the grace to live in full fraternity with brothers and sisters of other religions”. We are reminded of this in the *Document on Human Fraternity for world peace and living together*, signed by the Holy Father and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. This issue is more urgent than ever before, all we have to do is look at the world around us. As the Pope says: “There is no alternative: either we build the future together or there will not be a future. Religions, in particular, cannot forsake their own urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures”. This urgent need for fraternity is not new, but is the basis for understanding the Pope's prayer intentions. It is no coincidence that the intentions for 2021 begin in this way. Fraternity, which respects and values diversity, is a hallmark of the Kingdom of God.

*Are there any special priorities?*

There are challenges for humanity which had never appeared in the Pope's prayer intentions before. However the priority is to recognise Christ in every sister and every brother, with the help of these prayer intentions. The Lord is offering us a pathway to “see him or her”: every brother and sister is “the permanent prolongation of the Incarnation for each of us” as we read in *Evangelii gaudium* 179. Fraternity is the protocol of the last Judgment, it makes us consider the other as our brother or sister: “as you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me”. Who are these others? They include : women who are victims of violence, “So that they may be protected by society and have their own sufferings considered and heeded;” people suffering from depression or burn-out, the illness of our times, so that they may find support from everyone; those who risk their lives fighting for fundamental rights under dictatorships, authoritarian regimes and even in democracies in crisis. Evangelisation is always a priority. We are invited, in the service of the mission of Christ's compassion, to the peripheries of human existence, where men and women suffer injustice, to contribute to supporting and healing those whose hearts are broken. We are invited to look at

humanity as He does and act with the same feelings of the heart of Jesus. For this reason the prayer intentions for 2021 underline once again the importance of being available for mission, as missionary disciples, “witnesses of a life that has the flavour of the Gospel”. The intentions emphasise the importance of experiencing the sacraments with a renewed depth “to taste the infinite mercy of God”. Families are undergoing a profound cultural crisis, therefore we have the Pope’s prayer intention celebrating the beauty of marriage and invoking “the support of a Christian community”. Worth of note is also the importance of catechists summoned to announce the Word of God, “may they be its witnesses, with courage and creativity in the strength of the Holy Spirit”,

*Is there also mention of such issues as protecting Creation, life and human dignity?*

The prayer intentions mainly regard issues in which we Catholics are less involved. Respect for human life from its beginning to its end is essential and this is a challenge for humanity for which we Catholics have been mobilised on a large scale. This issue is also intimately linked to the defence of every human right, since every human being is sacred. This does not mean that we must not pray for these challenges, but I think that in our prayer the Pope has emphasized some situations and people we sometimes forget. There are so many challenges for the Church’s mission! As well as the issues I have already mentioned, the Pope exhorts us “in social, economic and political situations of conflict, to be courageous and passionate architects of dialogue and friendship”. Pope Francis has often spoken of the importance of constructing social friendship with everyone, even those who think things differently. In the times we are living in, with so many tensions and confrontation, we need to recover social friendship. In the context of these social challenges, which cause suffering for so many people, the Pope asks once again those in charge of finance “to work with governments to regulate the financial sphere and protect citizens from its dangers”. This reminds us of his call in the encyclical *Laudato si’*: “economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment”. Therefore he invites us to pray so that “we can all make courageous choices for a sober and eco-sustainable lifestyle, inspired by young people committing themselves resolutely”. These are strong words that cannot leave us indifferent. For this Francis asks us to pray, because we cannot change our lives solely by our own will. If we can only count on our own strengths, we risk being dragged along by the style of the world. Prayer is a way of opening our hearts to the Lord, so that He can act in us and transform us, because we need his strength in order to change and live according to the style of the Kingdom of God.

*How did the intentions for 2021 take form?*

The prayer intentions involve a long process of discernment, with suggestions sent in from all members of the *Worldwide Prayer Network* throughout the world, including our Eucharistic Youth Movement. We receive dozens of suggestions from different ministries and congregations as well as from other offices of the Holy See. All the topics received are taken into consideration and a group of about twenty people from different countries and continents, in prayer, make a selection of the most significant of them.

There is also a vote on which topics to present to the Holy Father. This research is consequently helpful for Pope Francis in his prayerful discernment. Usually two months later, following a meeting with the *WPN* international director, Francis issues his official list of prayer intentions.

*Did you make any special choices? Which guidelines did you follow?*

We usually take into account those challenges facing both Humanity and the Mission of the Church, which come to us from many different parts of the world; but there are also those which find the greatest echo in our personal prayer and in community discernment. It is important that they are not only the result of our thoughts, but that we can truly embrace them in our prayer. This first list assists the Pope in his discernment. His universal vision of the mission of the Church in the world and his heedfulness of so many individuals and institutions help him also in his prayer. I believe the compass, which guides us in this discernment, is contemplating the world through the eyes of the Lord and recognising the intentions of the heart of Christ, where He is calling his Church to today. This is grace and this is why the key issues of human fraternity and compassion are so important. I have no doubt the prayer intentions of the Pope, who is a man of prayer, are in complete harmony with the heart of the Lord. We could underline a significant prayer intention for the Church, which may “receive from the Holy Spirit the grace and strength to reform in the light of the Gospel”. We know that only the Spirit can help us in this process of conversion.

*Are there any projects underway regarding the Prayer Network?*

We are in the third phase of re-creation in this pontifical work, the deepest and most important phase, since it touches the spiritual foundation of our mission: “the journey of the heart”. This spiritual path, which is pedagogically organized in nine steps, helps us enter a mission of compassion for the world, offering up our own lives to the challenges for humanity and for the Church’s mission. In May we will officially launch all the teaching materials, which in the light of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* allow us to see in the other a brother or a sister to support and love. Without this concrete dimension, our prayer is void.

by Nicola Gori