

KNIGHTS OF THE SOUTHERN CROSS FORMATION PROGRAMME FOR 2021

Introduction.

"As I was writing this letter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality.

It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. Fraternity between all men and women. "Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together". [6] Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all." (*Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis, 2020)

On 3rd October 2020 the Holy Father Pope Francis, from the tomb of St. Francis in Assisi, gave us his latest Encyclical Letter "*Fratelli Tutti*". While traditionally the words of the Popes' Encyclicals are named after the opening words of the document, on this occasion they are actually words the Holy Father is quoting from St. Francis of Assisi. They are taken from one of the early writings of the Saint addressed to his community of brothers and sisters in which he admonishes and encourages them to adopt a very respectful and encompassing approach to each other and to all those and everything around them.

Over the past year (2020) everyone has been experiencing significant challenges to our community life. The global pandemic of COVID-19 has threatened our spiritual, family, social, economic and fraternal cohesion. Sadly the term 'social distancing' has become almost a mantra when what was really being called for was 'physical distancing'. This distancing has been felt globally and locally and has threatened our sense of community at every level.

With the closure of our Churches, initially completely, and then limiting numbers being allowed to be present, attending to our spiritual life has demanded that we review our normal practices and compensate for the lack of opportunities we normally rely on to reinforce our experience of community. Tremendous opportunities have been presented by the means of technology for us to find new ways to pray together. When I reflect that even 20 years ago mobile telephones were only just starting to become more common, now we can not only hear but also see each other on a variety of platforms. For most it is almost as if we have a TV set in our pocket! Now we can participate "virtually" in our religious community practices. I was somewhat amused to read a notice that Bishop Robert Rabbat (the Melkite Bishop of Australia) sent to his faithful in the early days of 2020 to advise his community of the fact that Sunday Mass would be "livestreamed" and to encourage them to 'tune in' so that they could, at least in part, not feel so isolated from the worshipping community. The good Bishop suggested that while it would be probably normal practice for families to gather in front of the TV to watch a programme and sometimes that was accompanied by cups of tea or coffee and cake and biscuits. He strongly suggested that it might not be entirely appropriate to sit and watch Mass in the same way! But it did give an early sign that we can use this technology in a different way to assist us. And so we now have the opportunity for many to 'participate virtually' in livestreamed (and recorded) Masses, Benedictions, Rosaries and prayer services and from a variety of sources. So called 'zoom meetings' have also taken on a new strength and we can meet together, albeit in a different way, and continue on the work of prayer and work in spite of physical restrictions.

Movement restrictions have severely limited family get togethers also – particularly where members of the family are scattered across different areas and jurisdictions. We have all experienced in our own circumstances the sadness of not being able to be with our loved ones particularly on those

occasions of joy or sadness when so much more can be communicated by a good hug, kiss, a meaningful glance, or a handshake, than by mere words. There is also the element of concern that, because of our love for each other, it might be better to stay away in case we might bring infection with us. I recall being told by a young man that, while he understood the reasons, he was devastated that he should not go to visit his widowed grandmother. At the other end of the same thought is that of an elderly lady who was telling me that – for no other reason – she would not let her family (and grandchildren) come to visit (or she to visit them) for fear of putting them at risk; and yet she felt so miserable and isolated. In that case there was also the added factor that she depended upon one of her grandchildren particularly to establish and set her up technologically (mobile phone, iPad, etc) – it was beyond her capacity. Our children and their teachers have had to cope with significant changes to the way their education is provided.

The continuing judgements about the need for border restrictions, movement, gatherings, wearing facemasks, periods of isolation and/or quarantine, testing, being alert to symptoms, etc, have also required us to reassess what social activities we are able to participate in. Many find themselves questioning what the value of freedom really means and what must we do to protect it. How much ‘power’ is enough to entrust to our social leaders? Because we do not always have all the underlying data and facts at our disposal it is hard to discern sometimes whether our trust has been well placed. The decision about who – or rather when and how – can come into the country, or leave it, is a very important one. Already the much longed for and planned Plenary Council for Australia has been affected. A decision was made to postpone it for a year and then – at least for the First Session – further modifications about the process have had to be made.

Many herald the government intervention to provide measures to assist the economic survival of many in our society. Despite this many businesses have gone to the wall. Many are unemployed and the number of those receiving economic support has increased. Trade regimes – both national and international – have significantly changed bringing more pressure on the economy than was previously the case. We are told by many the need for a balance between the health and the economy is hard to maintain. All this brings some uncertainty and loss of a positive outlook for many. We see signs of many who are struggling to make ends meet. For the first time in many years I have seen people looking in garbage bins in my street to recover what might be of some use to them.

One of the most impressive aspects has been to see how our sense of fraternity has developed. There seems to me to be an increased awareness of each other’s needs. More and more is being done by those who have as their mission providing assistance to those in need. We seem to be more alert to the needs of others in different ways – health care, loneliness, mental health, etc. Like other Church-based agencies our own Order has been challenged to adapt to new ways to provide care and assistance and have done it with great enthusiasm and confidence in God’s help.

Into this scenario the Holy Father has injected the Encyclical ‘Sisters and brothers all together’. This is a very comprehensive document that encourages us all to reflect on and participate in bringing the message of Jesus Christ into the situation in which we find ourselves immersed. It seemed to me that we could benefit from the encouragement and practical insights the Holy Father offers in our Formation Programme this year. It provides us with an opportunity for us to reflect on our circumstances, consider what might be done, and finally to determine what we can do.

I have in mind especially that – unless circumstances change and I pray they do – this year we will probably still be meeting virtually or even not meeting at all and so the Formation Programme is designed principally to be of use as individuals.

May the Holy Spirit accompany us with insight, wisdom, understanding, strength and perseverance.