

THE LOVING Gaze of God



Eddy Bermingham SJ challenges us to consider how Pope Francis' intentions for the coming months invite us to pray for change in our hearts, as well as 'out there' in the world.

I am told that in twelve-step recovery programmes, one important step is to be able to look at yourself in the mirror and not be ashamed of yourself. This is not easily achieved. In the coming months the pope invites us in prayer to 'gaze steadily into our mirror', attending to specific issues we might find there. This is not a comfortable experience but it is a necessary one on the road to recovery.

I have worked in some parishes where daily Mass attendance is very high. In fact in some parishes it felt like 'any excuse to have a Mass'. There was always one exception: whenever we set aside a special Mass to pray for the victims of abuse in the Church. This Mass was always poorly attended. I suspect my experience in these parishes is not unique. I certainly find it hard to gaze steadily in the mirror and acknowledge that I/we belong to a body of people that has caused so much pain. We shy away from the feelings of discomfort and shame that looking in a mirror in this way gives rise to. But this is precisely what the Holy Father invites us to do for the whole month of March: to gaze steadily into that mirror, recognising the hurt and damage caused in our Church. To experience the shame and discomfort, not to evoke feelings of guilt, but rather, to motivate us to caring action, holding both ourselves individually and our leadership accountable for creating a concrete response to those who have been harmed and have suffered.

In April and June, the pope invites us to continue to gaze into a mirror that may create unease and cause us to

want to avert our gaze. For example, we might not immediately see ourselves in the mirror that shows us the shooting that took place this January at St Aloysius, Euston. That was a terrible event, but one that happened 'out there'. However, the mirror might lead us to recognise how we fail to live peacefully, how we can adopt far from non-violent means to get what we want. It's not easy to admit these traits in ourselves and harder still to intercede with God to empower us to change.

We remain constantly in the loving gaze of our God.

But prompted by the Holy Father's intentions for the coming months I find myself asking this question: is it possible that the normalisation of a degree of 'abuse', 'violence' and 'torture' in our own behaviour makes us increasingly insensitive to the abuse and violence and torture that goes on around us? I suppose there is no guarantee that if we come to understand how we violate the image of God in others, we will be moved to resist it when it takes place on a larger, systemic scale. However, maybe it's not a bad place to start, all the time remembering that no matter how uncomfortable it is for us to maintain this steady gaze in the mirror, we remain constantly in the loving gaze of our God.

In March, as we pray for the Church, that it may offer concrete support to victims of abuse, let us also pray that we resist all forms of abusive behaviour.

INTENTIONS FOR THIS PERIOD

MARCH

For victims of abuse

We pray for those who have suffered harm from members of the Church; may they find within the Church herself a concrete response to their pain and suffering.

APRIL

For a culture of peace and non-violence

We pray for the spread of peace and non-violence, by decreasing the use of weapons by States and citizens.

MAY

For church movements and groups

We pray that church movements and groups may rediscover their mission of evangelisation each day, placing their own charisms at the service of needs in the world.

JUNE

For the abolition of torture

We pray that the international community may commit in a concrete way to ensuring the abolition of torture and guarantee support to victims and their families.

In April, as we pray for a diminishment in the use of all weapons, let us also pray that we may make peace with those we need to and overcome any violent habits we may have.

In May, as we pray for ecclesial groups worldwide, let us pray especially for those groups in our own parish.

In June, as we pray for the abolition of torture, let us pray also about the ways we can 'torture' one another, e.g., through persistent teasing, cyber bullying, 'sending people to Coventry', etc. ●