

In today's first reading as well as in the gospel, people are confronted with the challenge to embrace a vocation that will radically change their lives.

Isaiah describes a vision he had in the temple of Jerusalem, a vision of such power, beauty and holiness that it leaves him feeling overwhelmed. "Woe is me," he laments. "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." He feels unworthy of the experience he is undergoing and of all that it implies. Once, however, he is reassured by the touch of a seraph, his attitude changes. When God asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us," Isaiah answers, "Here am I; send me."

The Gospel contains the well known account of the calling of the first disciples of Jesus. Before inviting them to leave behind their previous lives as fishers, he urges them to put out into the deep water and to let down their nets. Although initially hesitant, they do what he says and are amazed and somewhat frightened by the size of their catch.

Although Jesus clearly intended their unexpected success as a promise of the success they would have in the far more challenging life to which he was calling them, Peter, like Isaiah, initially is overcome by a sense of his unworthiness. "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man," he says. "Do not be afraid," Jesus responds, "From now on you will be catching people."

Pope John Paul II had a real affection for this Gospel story and appealed to Jesus' instruction "to put out into the deep" on a number of occasions. It was a key to a talk he gave to young people in England. With it, the Pope challenged them not to be afraid but to embrace life and to contribute to it in ways that would really make a difference. God, he assured them, would be with them.

He quoted the same text in his apostolic letter marking the beginning of the new millennium. "These words, 'Put out into the deep,'" he said, "ring out for us today; they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm, and to look forward to the future with confidence."

I thought of the challenge implicit in the phrase "Put out into the deep," as I read about Pope Francis's recent visit to the United Arab Emirates. They are in a part of the world where there are relatively few Christians and great deal of tension and conflict. It could easily have been one of his most difficult journeys of his pontificate, and yet it turned out to be in many ways a real success.

The Pope met, spoke to, and celebrated the Eucharist with, Catholics working in the region. He also met with various Muslim religious and political leaders and published, together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azar mosque and university in Cairo, a document entitled "Human Fraternity: For World Peace and Living Together."

The text's message, if acted upon, would make an enormous difference to our world and to some of the more intractable problems it faces. The introduction to the document reveals the shared religious conviction at its heart. "Faith," the document begins, "leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved ... Believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and the most in need." The document invites those who have faith in God and in human fraternity to work together ... in order to advance a culture of mutual respect, in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters."

The document affirms a commitment of Catholics and Muslims to foster a culture of dialogue, mutual cooperation and reciprocal understanding. There is an emphasis throughout the document on the need to overcome religious and national extremism as well as intolerance in all its forms.

The document is positive and hopeful as well as courageous and challenging. It comes out of and reflects years of dialogue and discussion between Catholics and Muslims. It is available on the Vatican website. I would encourage you to read it. It has a great deal to say to us as Catholics and as Canadians. As both, we should be in the forefront of those who foster peace and understanding among people of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.