

HOW IS GOD CALLING US TO BE A CHRIST-CENTRED CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA THAT IS

Humble, Healing & Merciful?



*Continuing the journey of Discernment
toward the Plenary Council*

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of this great South land upon which we live, pray and work. We honour Elders past, present and future, and thank them for their sacrifice and stewardship.

We commit ourselves to the ongoing work of reconciliation and healing with all communities.

We acknowledge the lifelong trauma of abuse victims, survivors and their families, the failure of the Catholic Church to protect, believe and respond justly to children and vulnerable adults, and the consequent breaches of community trust.

We commit ourselves to fostering a culture of safety and care for children and vulnerable adults.



For more information on the Fifth Plenary Council in Australia please visit www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au

For more information on the Catholic Church in Australia please visit www.catholic.org.au

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See more information online at: <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/themes/humble/>

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Please note: The discernment papers are the fruits of communal discernment, which does not necessarily reflect the individual perspectives of each of the the group members. The Plenary Council team sincerely thanks all contributors.

Foreword

The commitment of time, faith and giftedness which has been so willingly given by the Chairs and Members of the Discernment and Writing groups over the past months is a witness to the work of the Spirit alive in our Church. As President of the Plenary Council, I wholeheartedly thank Sharon, Renee, Peter G, Peter H, Catherine and Selina for their leadership of the communal discernment process which has produced the fruits that can be found in these six thematic Discernment Papers. I also thank all the members, in particular the writers, of the Discernment and Writing groups, too many to name here individually. Thank you for responding to the call of the Spirit in this way. Your contribution has been a great blessing for the Church in Australia. Finally, thank you to the many individual people, families and groups who gave advice, shared wisdom and testimony, answered questions and provided support and guidance to the Discernment and Writing process.

The starting point for the Discernment and Writing groups was to reflect on our people's responses to the question: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* These responses were gathered during the first stage of discernment: Listening and Dialogue. The 17,500 written responses gave rise to six further questions for discernment, asking all of us to reflect upon how we are called by God to live and minister as the Catholic Church in Australia:

How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church that is missionary and evangelising; humble, healing and merciful; prayerful and Eucharistic; inclusive, participatory and synodal; a joyful, hope-filled servant community; open to conversion, renewal and reform?

The six Discernment papers are an important contribution to the Church in Australia's ongoing discernment toward the Plenary Council. They are the fruits of discernment themselves, and help all the faithful as we work together to listen to God, praying, listening, talking and writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each paper provides a reflection of some elements of the relevant pastoral reality, articulates a theological vision, outlines a number of challenges to be overcome, suggests prioritised questions to be answered and develops some proposals for change.

The papers themselves, of course, now become an important contribution to the challenge and privilege of discernment in which we are all engaged. While not in any sense the final word on the six thematic areas which emerged from the Listening and Dialogue process, I encourage you to receive them in the spirit of faith and discernment with which they have been written. They both invite and challenge us to continue to "listen to what the Spirit is saying".

Yours sincerely in the Lord,

Most Reverend Timothy Costelloe SDB

Archbishop of Perth,

President of the fifth Plenary Council for the Church in Australia.

Executive summary

The call for the Church in Australia to be *humble, healing and merciful* is a cry from deep within the heart of the people of God. It is a call to be like Jesus Christ, the humble man from Galilee, the gentle healer who touched the wounded and the one who reveals the merciful heart of God the Father to the world. The distress caused when the Church, through the failings of some members, manifests itself as proud, arrogant, damaging, hierarchical, hypocritical and irrelevant, is far-reaching and antithetical to its true identity.

The *humble, healing and merciful* theme of the Plenary Council encompasses much of the pain experienced in the body of the Church in Australia. This pain has many faces: the sexually abused, the Aboriginal Australian, the woman, the homosexual, the divorcee, the drought-ravaged land, the displaced refugee and many more who experience alienation, dispossession and suffering.

To contemplate these faces and sit in the uncomfortable place of our pain is challenging and burdensome, but it can also be a great privilege and blessing. Faith and grace allow us to connect with pain through the reality of the Paschal Mystery. The suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus allow us to confront the horror of trauma, loss and grief, with the promise of hope, redemption and new life.

C.S. Lewis spoke of the power of pain to bring clarity of focus. “We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹ Perhaps the answer to the question, “What is the Holy Spirit saying to the Church in Australia?” might be most clearly heard when we connect with the pain in our midst, stand with the people who are hurting and bend our ear to listen to their stories.

Jesus Christ models for us the humble, healing and merciful path to redemption. There is no other way. It would be of benefit for the Church in Australia to discern every attitude, discussion, reorientation and future planning through the questions: Is this healing? Is this humble? Is this merciful? The Plenary Council is an opportunity for the Spirit to rouse the Church in Australia to a new awakening of its ever-urgent mission to witness Jesus Christ to a hurting world.

¹ CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.



A Humble Church

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (John 13:14-17)

On Holy Thursday 2018, Pope Francis celebrated the Mass of the Last Supper in the Regina Coeli Prison in Rome. During the Mass, the Holy Father washed the feet of 12 prison inmates from different cultural and faith backgrounds.

Pope Francis was not concerned with their crimes, their religion, their race or their sexual orientation. After kneeling before each one, washing and kissing their feet, Pope Francis said to them, “I am a sinner like you. But I represent Jesus today...This is service. This is Jesus. Before giving us himself in his body and blood, Jesus risked himself for each one of us – risked himself in service – because he loves us so much.”

‘Humble’, coming from the word *humus*, meaning soil or earth, speaks of the call to be ‘down to earth’. Born of a lowly maid to a poor family, Jesus was comfortable with the lowest and the least. The profound humility of Jesus was his strength.

² Pope Francis, General Audience of August 9, 2017

God is asking the Church in Australia today to start afresh from the place of humility, to reflect and reveal God by being servants, using the power not of might or authority, but of love.

A Healing Church

“Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, “I do choose. Be made clean.” Immediately the leprosy left him. (Luke 5:12-13)

Pope Francis has described the Church as a field hospital after battle.

The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds...And you have to start from the ground up.²

A field hospital is established in a time of urgency and in response to a crisis. When normal procedures are inadequate, a field hospital is set up amongst the broken, the injured, the dying, to bring healing to the wounded on the battlefield, in the midst of their

immediate need. The best medical care is useless if the wounded cannot access it. A field hospital is an image of a Church that goes out to be with the people in the context of their daily lives, hurts and travail.

The field hospital Church is a community of compassion, open and tending to the wounded, journeying together toward healing, and able to suffer with the other.

God is asking the Church in Australia to be a healing church, go where it hurts, be moved with pity, touch the brokenness of humanity, and be a healing balm for the world.

A Merciful Church

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:78-79)

In 2015/16, Pope Francis proclaimed a Year of Mercy in which he placed mercy at the centre of the Church's heart and mission. He said mercy "constitutes her very existence, through which the profound truths of the Gospel are made manifest and tangible. Everything is revealed in mercy; everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father."³

Pope Francis provides a vision of the Church as a caravan of solidarity⁴, with multitudes of people journeying together, protecting each other, supporting and caring for the weakest and most vulnerable in their midst.

The walking caravan is a vision of a synodal church — breathing together, journeying together. Like the walking caravan, the Church can only go as far and as fast as the weakest and the slowest. The caravan is guided by God's tender mercy to the way of peace — the way of Jesus. A truly Christ-centred church knows

God's mercy is not a reprieve from punishment but active presence in accompanying his children to wholeness and flourishing.

God is asking us to refrain from putting barriers and obstacles in the way of God's mercy reaching the least, the lost and those who feel excluded, especially those who do not yet know the love of God.

God is asking us to be a Church that walks together and does not leave anyone behind. To "let the Church always be a place of mercy and hope, where everyone is welcomed, loved and forgiven."⁵ Such a way can be untidy and chaotic, but is the way of love and mercy that can usher forth a revolution of tenderness.⁶

The Humble, Healing and Merciful *Sensus Fidei*

The *sensus fidei* that has emerged from the Listening and Dialogue phase calls for a humble, healing and merciful Church, centred on the person of Jesus Christ. The faithful speak of hurt, brokenness and suffering within individuals, communities and of the Church institution. They also speak of hope and express a deep desire to belong, to be connected and accepted within a Church that they clearly love.

The stories of the faithful reveal an unreconciled dilemma — that of faith and relationship with God out of alignment with current expressions and perceptions of the Catholic Church in Australia. Further, criticisms from the faithful are sometimes aimed at the "Church", without a sense that "we are the Church", eliciting a prophetic call for a deeper understanding of our shared baptismal vocation.

Recognising their individual and collective weakness and brokenness, the faithful desire a more authentic, relevant, Christ-like and healing Church. There is a strong sense of echoing the call of Pope Francis for a humble servant Church, close to the people,

responsive to the needs of the poor and marginalised, and open to all.⁷

Central to this theme is the painful experience of the sexual abuse scandal, which has caused unimaginable damage and eroded trust in the leadership of the Church. It took a five-year government Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse⁸ to begin to expose the extent of the Church's failings: the horror of abusive clergy; governance frameworks of power and control that allowed and enabled crimes to continue; Church authorities and laity denying the abuse; blame being placed on the victim; silencing of victims coming forward; and minimisation of the life-long effects of abuse, including grave spiritual harm. These revelations are a source of great distress, deep hurt, betrayal and anger amongst people of faith.

There is a sense that we are still coming to terms with the depth of the hurt and trauma of the victims and survivors, along with the distressing shock that ripples throughout the whole Church. There is a great demand to acknowledge this pain and trauma, own the consequences of this dark chapter in our story and respond with courage, humility and tenderness. The healing journey must begin, and the path to healing is through the Paschal Mystery.

In trying to understand the abuse crisis, the problem named as clericalism comes to the fore. Clericalism is described as elitism, power structures, control, egoism and a lack of real-life understanding by the clergy. Some clergy and laity are to blame; those who reinforce the separation between the clerical and lay states of life and find security in these structures. This contributes to abuses of power and dysfunction. The baptismal dignity and common priesthood of all the faithful lived in harmony with the ministerial priesthood provides a healthy counterbalance.⁹

Criticisms are raised about governance structures that obscure the face of Christ and present a Church to the world that is hierarchical, dogmatic, judgemental and lacking in love. Unjust structures of power that place heavy burdens on the faithful obfuscate the true Magisterium and hinder its power to bring the truths of the Church to an ever-changing world. There is a call for transparency and accountability that acknowledges that the Spirit speaks through all in the Church. The honesty of the criticisms reflects a desire for a new way of being Church — humbler, Christ-and-people-centred, rather than defensive of older structures that no longer serve current needs.

There is dissatisfaction expressed about limited opportunities for the participation of women. It is acknowledged that women do much of the humble work in our parishes (whether by choice or by default), and are often the ones to bear the face of Christ to their communities. Despite the service-focused women who make up the majority of the active members of the Church in Australia, there is a lack of balance of leadership in all areas of Church life, resulting in a diminished faith and expression of ecclesia. There is a cry for the feminine nature of the Church to be more fully expressed, for the voices and talent of women to be included in decision-making and governance, for the flourishing of all.

The importance of the sacramental life of the Church is recognised, for healing and to lead us deeper into the Paschal Mystery. Many acknowledge that a transactional approach to the sacraments is inadequate and the sacraments need a deep and rich pastoral context in which to live. Sacraments should be embedded in grassroots, flourishing communities. Loving acceptance and relationships of belonging are necessary for the full power of the sacraments to be manifest in people's lives. Effective pastoral care services are essential to this outcome.

3 Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, 1

4 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 87

5 Pope Francis, Twitter, 16 June, 2013.

6 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 88

7 Mark 10:42-45

8 <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/>

9 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1591

A multiplicity of voices advocate on behalf of the marginalised and disenfranchised groups in our community (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, LGBTQI community, divorced and remarried, single unmarried mothers, unmarried couples raising children, people suffering from addictions, the mentally ill, the homeless, and more). There are deep wounds in our brothers and sisters who are excluded in the Church through a lack of mercy by some. The Church is often seen as placing a heavy yoke of guilt on people. The challenge to meet those in pain is to be a Church that is able to dialogue and listen without judgement, to hear the voice of Christ in their stories.

It is the challenge of our age that the delicate ecology of the earth is suffering at the hand of human power and control. Without being mindful of humility (our

closeness to the earth) or mercy (the right of all, including future generations, to the fruits of the earth), the vulnerable natural world in which we live is easily traumatised and damaged.

Amidst the challenges, there is hope and a recognition of a great deal of goodness. There is a strong appreciation of the tremendous good work of the Church across many sectors in this country. There is a call to acknowledge the good works of mercy the Church does in education, health, social services, aged care and foreign aid, and to continue this work. These are the places where the love of God for all people shines strongly.

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A Church in Trauma

There are many traumatic pages to the story of the Church in Australia. The present-day reality is that we have lived through the searing shame of a Royal Commission that revealed, to both the world and ourselves, the crimes and cover-ups committed by our members and leaders. The revelations during this time were shocking and appalling. As the truth emerged and the horror was laid bare, to be publicly Catholic was at best embarrassing and at worst deeply traumatising.

The epicentre of the trauma is situated firstly with the victims and survivors whose lives have been so deeply damaged, and like the seismic waves of a quake, it impacts the whole Church community. For the families and friends of the abused, who suffer vicariously; for the committed lay faithful, whose trust has been broken; for leaders and clergy who grapple with coming to terms with the evil in our midst and bear the responsibility of dealing with the hurt and pain; the trauma is real and the effects devastating.

The first roots of our contemporary country Australia were founded in trauma. The double trauma of a penal colony of confinement and punishment meeting the subsequent subjugation of our First Nations peoples

has been written into our identity as a nation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are one of the most traumatised and disenfranchised peoples of the world.¹⁰ Our Church was present from these earliest times, and therefore carries these disturbing storylines in its history and identity.

The very beginnings of the Christian Church are also rooted in profound trauma. The Paschal Mystery of Christ, upon which we base our faith, includes the horrific experience of Jesus' crucifixion and death, witnessed firsthand by the followers of Jesus gathered at the foot of the Cross. For those who loved him — Mary his mother, John the beloved disciple and other women followers — the capture, torture and public death of their beloved Jesus would have left them deeply shocked and traumatised.

A Land and a People in Trauma

At the time of writing, the world is in the grip of a global pandemic, threatening lives and livelihoods and affecting the way we live in a way unforeseen by this generation. The outcomes are not yet conclusive, but it is worth reflecting on the call to action of Pope Francis to work together to heal our planet and to have “a culture of caring that permeates all of society.”¹¹ In the context of an “ecological conversion”¹², it asks us to

¹⁰ The Closing the Gap framework outlines seven targets that need improvement amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, literacy and numeracy, Yr 12 attainment, school attendance, and employment outcomes. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Closing_the_Gap

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 231

¹² *Ibid.*, 5

“nurture a passion for caring for the world.”¹³

Furthermore, we must be aware that, “the violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.”¹⁴ Some are looking at these issues holistically and asking helpful questions:

*We have become over confident in our ability to conquer but we have lost sense of who we are within the wider world of nature. Lack of self-knowledge, Bonaventure wrote, makes for faulty knowledge in all other matters. Maybe it is time to take a good hard look at ourselves and ask, do we have a part to play in the emergence of deadly viruses?*¹⁵

Pope Francis urged all people to care for our common home and identified a complex human ecology deeply connected to creation.¹⁶ A humble and merciful approach to caring for our environment cannot be separated from the way we care for each other, and the outcome of both is healing and restoration for our land and our people.

The Church gives us the tradition of the saints as exemplars for modern challenges. St Francis, radical in his love for creatures and creation, was known for his humility and mercy in the way he treated people and the environment. Pope Francis says, “St Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.”¹⁷

Our Aboriginal brothers and sisters see the connectivity between the land, the environment and humanity in a way that the rest of Australia is yet to fully grasp. The Church has a responsibility to recognise that Indigenous Australians have a unique contribution to make. A rereading of Pope John Paul II’s speech in 1986 resonates just as true today as then:

*You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.*¹⁸

The *Uluru Statement from the Heart*¹⁹ continues to echo these sentiments and a deep cry for healing. Humble listening will bring healing for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The principle of subsidiarity is key – the days of others deciding for them must be over. A new and real engagement, standing together in solidarity, is a merciful and humble way to a new pathway of healing.



The Church Needs Healing

After the resurrection, the followers of Christ were still afraid:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. (John 20:19-20)

There is a temptation in our Church to give in to fear, and hide behind “locked doors” to try to protect ourselves from further damage and hope our challenges simply go away. Consequently, there may be minimal response or pastoral support at crucial times when the people of God need action. Jesus breaks through the locked doors where the disciples are hiding in fear and stands among them, bringing peace. Jesus once again wants to break through the locked doors and hearts of our Church today, reaching in to our experience of trauma, standing with us in our pain.

Jesus does so bearing his wounds. He bears them for us, to let us know he suffers in solidarity with us.²⁰

We are invited to witness the wounds of Jesus in those who have been wounded by the Church. Jesus identifies with each person who is “temple of God”

(1Cor 3:16) and who like St Paul, “bears on their body the marks of Christ” (Gal 6:17).

The Church in Australia is in need of healing. It bears a great wound and must not act as if it were not wounded. Jesus invited Thomas, who doubted Christ’s resurrection, to “put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. top doubting and believe” (John 19:27). Jane N. Dowling, survivor of clerical sexual abuse and author of *Child, Arise! The Courage to Stand: A Spiritual Handbook for Survivors of Sexual Abuse* proposes a vision for a healing Church and a Church in need of healing:

*Perhaps ‘Thomas’ represents our Church today. A Church struggling to hold on to faith, hope and love. A Church that wants to believe and move forward but needs to witness first-hand Jesus in his Paschal glory through the witness of persons who have been wounded, yet through faith and life in the Spirit, have been transformed and healed and are on a journey of restoration.*²¹

God is inviting the Church to “reach out your hand and put it into my side” by listening to the stories of those who have been wounded, by standing alongside and caring for those suffering. Christ bore the evidence of his wounds yet stood before his disciples fully restored and fully alive. God asks us not to overlook the wounds but to understand their effects on the lives of those

13 *Ibid.*, 216

14 *Ibid.*, 2

15 Ilia Delia OSF, Dear God, Omega Center, 16 March 2020 <https://omegacenter.info/dear-god/>

16 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*

17 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 10

18 http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia.html

19 https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru_Statement_From_The_Heart_0.PDF

20 2 Corinthians 5:21

21 Jane Dowling, Presentation to the Plenary Council DWG meeting, 1 February, 2020

living a life-long journey of healing and to make substantial changes to ensure further harm is never again inflicted on the Body of Christ, our sisters and brothers.

The Church is healed through Community

The gospels are rich with accounts of Jesus healing. Jesus was not only concerned with people's physical healing but also their restoration to the community, and their thriving. One of the most dramatic healing accounts is not from sickness, but death itself. The image of Lazarus raised from the dead reflects to us the power of God to restore and to bring to life all that is dead in our midst. After calling Lazarus out of his death chamber, "Lazarus, come out!" Jesus says to the bystanders, "unbind him, let him go free" (John 11:44). It is not only the miraculous command of God, but also the loving response of the community that aids the healing process.

The healing hands and support offered by a humble and merciful community are at the heart of a response to trauma and woundedness. Many need and yearn for full integration into the life of a loving community, where one is known and belongs. God is asking us to

"God is asking us to recognise it is restoration to the family of God that brings true wholeness, and that all the faithful have a role to play in the healing of the wounded."

recognise it is restoration to the family of God that brings true wholeness, and that all the faithful have a role to play in the healing of the wounded.

The Church Needs a Mother

Like a child in distress who can only be calmed by their mother, the Church in Australia needs Mary our Mother as a soothing and calming presence. The Church also needs Mary to show us how to face our trauma. We are called to follow her example by not running from the foot of the cross, but standing in solidarity and compassion with each other, particularly the wounded, the poor and the traumatised. Jane Dowling says "the challenge for our Church today is engaging with trauma: the victim's/survivor's trauma, the trauma of their families, friends, the trauma of bishops and priests, and all the lay faithful."²²

As Mary witnessed the death of Jesus so we as a Church are called to witness the "death of Jesus" in the many survivors of clerical sexual abuse, in the pain our First Nations peoples, in the lives of all who suffer. We cannot separate Christ from the wounded: "just as you did it to one of the least of my family, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).



An Alternative to Business as Usual

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19)

For the sake of survival, self-preservation and carrying on with "business as usual", trauma is easily denied. It has perhaps been easier to deny our trauma as a Church and continue with business as usual, hoping the pain and distress will simply go away. Overlooking and blocking out trauma, however, does not result in healing but leads to more pain, paralysis and, ultimately, death.

After the risen Jesus had appeared to the disciples, they went out fishing at night, but "they caught nothing" (John 21:1-3). The disciples went back to their old ways, doing business as usual. To some degree, they were in denial, or unable to comprehend what had happened to them in recent days—the traumatic experience of Jesus' death, the extraordinary reality of his resurrection.

As long as the Church takes a "business as usual" approach, we will continue to experience "night" under the shadow of the sexual abuse scandal and other challenges. No matter how much energy we invest in "fishing", i.e., apostolic activities in an attempt to draw people back to the pews, we will struggle to flourish.

Jesus comes into this unfruitful night and says, "'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some'. So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish" (John 21:6).

Responding to the dark night of the Church's experience involves changing our attitude toward "business as usual". Throwing our nets on the "right side of the boat" may involve a reprioritising of our agendas. It may involve dealing with the pain and trauma of the Church in a significant, unprecedented way.

Leaders of the Church would err if they thought there would come a time when we could put the abuse crisis behind us and carry on with business as usual. Survivors do not have this privilege. They carry the scars of the abuse with them their whole life. This does not mean they cannot be healed. This does not mean their scars cannot become fountains of life and healing for themselves and others.

The abuse crisis has changed us. The Church carries the scars of this terrible time in our story. We must find a new way of doing business — a way that holds the wounded close to our heart and bears our scars with dignity and hope for the future. God will not abandon us. God will not hold our sins against us, nor leave us forsaken. God shows us a new and more fruitful way.

A Revolution of Tenderness

Pope Francis calls for a revolution of tenderness.²³ This is an extraordinary challenge and call. A revolution requires a radical and marked change, often sudden and urgent, to overthrow a system of prevailing oppression.

Why is there call for such a revolution? What will the revolutionaries look like? And importantly, who will lead the charge? Tenderness may become a new and happy contagion that spreads through the community, becoming 'viral'.

“Tenderness may become a new and happy contagion that spreads through the community, becoming ‘viral’.”

A revolution of tenderness is for all, but might first touch the hearts of priests and bishops who can often give in to bitterness and hardness of heart. Burdened by the demands of a troubled Church, leaders can easily become removed from the first things of the faith and given over to despair. The light of the Gospel can grow dim and hope can be lost. A revolution of tenderness opens them to the tender mercy of God, reminding them of God's promise, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26).



How can the Church heal from the sexual abuse crisis and rebuild trust? How can we adequately respond to, and offer support to, victims of trauma and abuse? How can we convincingly and sincerely not just SAY sorry to the wounded, but DO sorry?

It is proposed that in addition to the necessary financial compensation for survivors of sexual abuse, **priority be given to the provision of their spiritual and religious care.** For those who have been wounded, there should be recognition of the importance of restoring their place in the community and welcoming them into the heart of the Church.

Programs are needed where the survivors of trauma can come together to make sense of their experiences as the scriptures are broken open with them and faith is made accessible. Survivors should be asked what they need from the Church; how the institution can best aid their healing. This may include assistance with finding a Church community where they are safe and can experience the love of God. They should meet a humble Church that believes them and seeks to serve them. It is proposed that spiritual and religious programs are provided for clergy, religious and the lay faithful to process and make meaning of their trauma.

The **perpetrators of abuse should also be considered.** Before, during and after any legal processes, those accused of abuse should be assisted in their own healing and supported to live spiritually, psychologically, emotionally and physically healthy lives.

It is proposed to establish a **National Research Institute for Trauma and Healing.** Based on the principle that our greatest wound can become the greatest source of healing, establish an institute in one of the epicentres of abuse, for example, the Diocese of Ballarat, thereby transforming a source of pain and hurt into a place of restoration and healing. Affiliation with an established religious educational institution (e.g., ACU, University of Divinity or Notre Dame) undertaking research to understand trauma and recovery could draw on learnings from international networks. Partnerships could be established with external and independent agencies to bring professional and pastoral expertise that is trauma-informed and professional.

It is proposed to establish **Trauma Response and Healing Teams** of skilled professionals (pastoral care practitioners, retreat leaders and spiritual directors) who could be available to parishes or dioceses to run retreats and workshops focused on healing for those who seek healing within a faith community, responding to and accompanying those affected by abuse and trauma. The teams could work on a 'train the trainer' model to then establish a robust structure

of ongoing local support groups and programs with a psycho-social/spiritual-religious framework.²⁴

It is proposed that some form of *national apology or pledge* is animated by the Church, potentially at the proceedings of the Plenary Council. Far from being tokenistic, this could be a moment in the journey of the Church that acknowledges our commitment to honour the place of victims and survivors at the heart of our community. In addition, some kind of acknowledgement through the liturgy, such as a *dedicated Mass for the healing of all those hurt by sexual abuse in the Church*, could be a powerful means of ongoing healing.

How do we usher in the revolution of tenderness called for by Pope Francis? What in our structures and culture is inimical to humility, and how can we change this? How can the Church become truly humble in heart and perceived as such? How can the Church become a truly listening church?

It is proposed to foster a *renewed culture of listening* by embracing regular listening and discernment opportunities, including: Listening Groups, Pastoral Council meetings, Diocesan Synods, more regular National Synods or Plenary Councils. A model for Listening Groups could be developed at a grass roots level, which is accessible to those who are wounded and in need of a place to be heard.²⁵ Parishes or communities could host Listening Groups facilitated by skilled persons, creating a compassionate and safe environment for people to share their stories. Such opportunities would provide avenues for healing and

restoration to the faith community. Creative platforms could be utilised as means for people to tell their stories and for others to hear them, such as a dedicated podcast and careful use of other social media.

It is proposed the Church strives to adopt *a humble disposition by being accessible to the faithful*, particularly in an ever-developing digital world context. As has been demonstrated during social distancing imposed during a pandemic, the Church has the capacity to adapt with agility to maintain the spiritual closeness of God's people by utilising online means. It is proposed that an innovative approach is applied to developing an online apostolate, opening opportunities for connection and unity.

How can we support the marginalised, making those on the peripheries of the Church and society welcome in our communities? How can the Church embrace a heart of ecological conversion? How do we embrace the First Nations peoples at the heart of our Church?

Our first responsibility as the Church in Australia is to our Indigenous brothers and sisters. It is proposed the Church recognise *the wisdom of the Aboriginal people is needed for the health of our nation*; that from an ecological point of view, we can learn so much from Indigenous culture and knowledge; that Church leaders call forth this wisdom and create spaces for it to be heard. It is proposed that Listening Groups particularly cater to the needs of Aboriginal Australians for genuine engagement and sharing of wisdom.

How can the Church foster the charism of pastoral care for all and honestly assess the effectiveness of our pastoral ministries? How can the Church be more merciful towards under-represented groups within the Church? How can the Church nurture healthy relationships between laity and clergy?

It is proposed to develop *a robust plan and structure for the growth of pastoral care* in every diocese that is trauma-informed, professional, well-resourced, integrated and readily available²⁶; to mandate that all parishes and dioceses have a Pastoral Council, Leadership Team or equivalent that is inclusive, reflective of the demographics and truly consultative; and use this to model to nurture healthy relationships between laity and clergy, and be ready to respond to the needs of a hurting Church.

Such grassroots pastoral care is a means to engage people in the sacramental life. Non-practising Catholics will not necessarily come back to the Church for the sacraments alone. A robust framework of pastoral care that is relevant to people's needs and attentive to their human flourishing can be a bridge for people to engage in the life of the Church.

"A robust framework of pastoral care that is relevant to people's needs and attentive to their human flourishing can be a bridge for people to engage in the life of the Church."

How can our leaders at all levels wholeheartedly commit themselves to Vatican II's vision of transparency, collegiality, and accountability? How can we set up adequate review systems?

It is proposed to develop *a culture of appraisal and review* at all levels of activity in the Church, for example, having regular independent audits and accreditation inbuilt to assure accountability. This review system should apply to all our works, including formation programs, leadership training, parishes, schools, hospitals, aged care and social service institutions. Operations are often reviewed; however, spiritual effectiveness is rarely reviewed. How often do the institutions ask those they serve if they experience the love of Jesus Christ in the service they receive?

It is proposed to encourage *a culture of corporate discernment*, using the Cardijn Principles of 'See, Judge, Act', ensuring collegiality, co-responsibility, examination of conscience, constant review and transparent accountability are evident in all we do. Such a process of reflection and discernment needs to be taught and embedded into daily practice and decision-making, becoming habitual and 'normal'.

²⁴ Jane N. Dowling is currently working on a research project developing such a program. She proposes "Spiritual support should be provided by and is appropriate to the Catholic Church as part of its mission and also its basic duty of care to survivors...by providing spiritual support in the form of spiritual retreats or support groups for survivors the Catholic Church would be acknowledging the spiritual harm that has been done and taking responsibility to respond to their need for spiritual healing". *Child, Arise! The Courage to Stand: A Spiritual Handbook for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, p.4.

²⁵ Some parishes are using listening models that have proven useful. For example <https://healingcirclesglobal.org/>, and https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316911006_The_Listening_Circle_A_Simple_Tool_to_Enhance_Listening_and_Reduce_Extremism_Among_Employees

²⁶

Accessibility in a digital context should be considered, with the possibility of offering online pastoral care to those who are isolated.

How do we ensure adequate training and ongoing formation of those in leadership in the Church with the aim of encouraging humble, healing and merciful servants?

It is proposed to foster a renewed focus on growing humble, healing and merciful servant-based leadership, with an emphasis on collaboration and consultation; *an openness to new models of formation*; along with a significant review of the training and ongoing formation of clergy, with a view to their enhanced wellbeing and support.²⁷

How can we ensure that women are truly consulted and included at all levels of leadership in the Church, and are able to share their gifts for the flourishing of all?

It is proposed that a genuine review and concerted effort to embrace the gift of women in all areas of Church life is prioritised; to provide adequate opportunities for women in leadership; and create a culture where women are truly part of the consultative process and decision-making at all levels of leadership in the Church.

Conclusion

In a large institution with competing priorities and many cultures at work, it is tempting to hesitate on the brink of change. Fr Timothy Radcliffe said, “If we demand complete clarity all the time, we would never move”²⁸. Courage is required to make the necessary moves at this moment of grace in our time.

The path to a humble, healing and merciful Church is our journey through the Paschal Mystery. There can be no short cuts, no bypassing the cross or the tomb, to encounter the resurrection. For new life and new hope to emerge, we need to acknowledge that we are a broken, hurt and traumatised Church, but we continue to orient ourselves towards the risen Christ.

The pain of many of our members is real and the scourge of sexual abuse will remain as a dark and distressing chapter of our story. However, reliance on God’s grace to make us humble and merciful can lead us to become a renewed, Christ-centred field hospital of healing. The Church in Australia is called to be a Spirit-filled, wounded-healer, whose wounds, like Christ’s, become a font of life for the whole world.²⁹

²⁷ For example, using pastoral supervision, mentoring, regular appraisals etc.

²⁸ Fr Timothy Radcliffe, *Alive in God*, p297.

²⁹ St Faustina brought the Divine Mercy devotion to the world, which has as its focus, an image of Christ with red and white rays of coloured light emanating from the wound in his side, indicating blood and water that brings life and healing to souls. (Sr Faustina, Notebook 1, item 299)