

Discernment Paper #4

This document is an abridged version of one of the six thematic Discernment Papers from the communal discernment process leading to the Plenary Council. As such, it is only a “taste” of the original document, albeit a close reflection of its approach, spirit and content. To read the full text from the original Discernment Paper, go to the Plenary Council website:

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/continuing-the-journey-of-discernment/>

Key Question

How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is **Humble, Healing and Merciful?**

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 one who reveals the merciful heart of God. When the Church, through its members, manifests itself as proud, arrogant, damaging, hierarchical and hypocritical, the distress caused is far-reaching and antithetical to its true identity.

To be confronted by the pain of those who suffer is challenging and uncomfortable, but it can also be a privilege and blessing. Faith and grace allow us to connect with pain through the reality of the Paschal Mystery.

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.” Perhaps the Holy Spirit is speaking to the Church in a way most clearly heard when we connect with the faces of pain in our midst: the sexually abused, the Aboriginal Australian, the woman, the homosexual, the divorcee, the drought-ravaged land, the refugee and many more who experience alienation, dispossession and suffering.

I. Theme and Data Reflection

A Humble Church

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (Jn 13:14).

Pope Francis gave a powerful witness when, in Rome, on Holy Thursday 2018, he washed the feet of twelve prison inmates from different cultural and faith backgrounds.

“Humble” comes from the word *humus*, meaning soil or earth. God is asking the Church to be “down to earth”, to start afresh from a place of humility and service, using the power of love, not might.

A Healing Church

“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.” (Pope Francis, General Audience, 9.8.17)

Pope Francis has described the Church as a field hospital after battle, where its members go 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, tending to the wounded, journeying together towards healing, and able to suffer with the other.

A Merciful Church

The Year of Mercy (2015/16) placed mercy at the centre of the Church’s heart and mission. Mercy “constitutes her very existence... Everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father” (Pope Francis, MM,1).

Pope Francis describes the Church as a caravan of solidarity (EG, 87). Like the walking caravan, the Church can only go as far and as fast as the weakest and the slowest. God is asking us to be a Church that walks together and does not leave anyone behind; a Church where everyone is welcomed, loved and forgiven. Such a way can be untidy and chaotic, but it can usher forth a “revolution of tenderness” (EG, 88).

The Humble, Healing and Merciful *Sensus Fidei*

The stories emerging from the Listening and Dialogue phase 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”. There is need for a deeper understanding of our shared baptismal vocation.

In the emerging stories there is a strong echoing of the call of Pope Francis for a humble servant Church, close to the people, responsive to the marginalised, open to all. The sexual abuse scandal has eroded trust in the Church’s leadership. It took a five-year Royal Commission to expose the extent of the Church’s failings. We are still coming to terms with the hurt and trauma inflicted. The path of healing must begin, through the Paschal Mystery.

In trying to understand the abuse crisis, the problem of clericalism comes to the fore. That some clergy and laity reinforce the separation between the clerical and lay states contributes to abuses of power. The baptismal dignity and common priesthood of all the faithful, lived in harmony with the ministerial priesthood, provide a health counterbalance.

Other criticisms voiced include:

1. governance structures that present the Church as hierarchical, dogmatic, judgmental and lacking in love;
2. unjust structures of power;
3. limited opportunities for the participation of women;

4. an inadequate transactional approach to the sacraments.

Among the faithful there is a desire for:

5. fuller expression of the Church's feminine nature;
6. sacraments embedded in grassroots, flourishing communities;
7. effective pastoral care for the marginalised;
8. mercy shown to the earth;
9. appreciation of works of mercy: education, health, social services, aged care and foreign aid.

II. Pastoral Reality

A Church in Trauma

The Church in Australia carries in its history and identity disturbing stories of trauma, from its beginnings in a penal colony, the subsequent subjugation of our First Nations peoples, and most recently having lived through the searing shame of revelations of the destruction and betrayal caused by the crimes and cover-ups relating to sexual abuse.

The very beginnings of the Christian Church are also rooted in profound trauma: Jesus' crucifixion and death. How deeply shocked and traumatised these events must have been for Mary, John and other women followers who gathered at the foot of the cross.

A Land and a People in Trauma

The call to healing includes an "ecological conversion"; we need to heal our planet. Pope Francis urges us to recognise that the sin that wounds our hearts is reflected in the symptoms of sickness in the soil, water, earth. He has called all people to care for our common home and identified a complex human ecology deeply connected to creation. Saint Francis is the example *par excellence* of a humble, merciful way of relating to people and to the environment. Indigenous Australians also have a unique contribution to make to our sense of connectivity between land, the environment and humanity.

III. Theological Vision

The Church Needs Healing

As with the early followers of Christ, hiding behind "locked doors" (Jn 20:19) out of self-preservation, Jesus wants to break through the locked doors and hearts of our Church today, standing with us in our pain.

Like Thomas who doubted the resurrection, the Church is asked to "reach out your hand and put it into my side" (Jn 19:27) by listening to the wounded and caring for those who suffer. We remember that Christ bore evidence of his wounds, yet stood before his disciples fully restored and fully alive.

The Church is Healed through Community

After calling Lazarus out of his tomb, Jesus says to the bystanders, “Unbind him, let him go free” (Jn 11:44). It is not only God, but the loving response of the community that aids the healing process and restoration to life. Today, God is asking all the faithful to play a role in healing and restoring the wounded to the family of God.

The Church Needs a Mother

Like a child in distress who can only be calmed by their mother, the Church needs Mary as a maternal presence. We are called to follow her example of strength and solidarity at the foot of the cross. As Mary witnessed the death of Jesus, so we as Church are called to witness the “death of Jesus” in survivors of abuse, in the pain of First Nations peoples, in the lives of all who suffer. We cannot separate Christ from the wounded (Mt 25:40).

IV. Major Challenges

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. Like the disciples to whom Jesus came in the midst of an unfruitful night of fishing, we must be willing to trust him and throw our nets on the “right side of the boat” (Jn 21:1-6), as God shows us a new and more fruitful way.

As long as the Church denies the trauma of our times and takes an approach of self-preservation and “business as usual”, we will continue to experience “night” under the shadow of the sexual abuse scandal and other challenges.

Pope Francis calls for a “revolution of tenderness” (EG, 88). Who will lead the charge? Tenderness may become a new and happy contagion that spreads through the community, becoming viral.

V. Questions and Proposals

Question: 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, but DO sorry?

Proposals for change:

1. In addition to financial compensation for survivors of sexual abuse, prioritise provision for their spiritual and religious care.
2. The perpetrators of abuse should also be considered.
3. Establish a National Research Institute for Trauma and Healing.
4. Establish Trauma Response and Healing Teams.
5. Animate a national apology or pledge that would place victims and survivors of abuse at the heart of our community.

6. Established a dedicated Mass for the healing of all hurt by sexual abuse.

Question: 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?

Proposals for change:

1. Foster a renewed culture of listening by embracing regular listening and discernment opportunities, including Listening Groups, Pastoral Councils, Diocesan Synods, more regular National Synods or Plenary Councils.
2. Adopt a humble disposition: a Church that is accessible to the faithful.
3. Utilise online means to open up new opportunities for connection and unity.

Question: How can we support the marginalised, so that those on the peripheries of the Church and society are welcome in our communities?

Proposals for change:

1. As a Church, recognise the wisdom of the Aboriginal people for the health of our nation. From an ecological point of view, we can learn so much from Indigenous culture and knowledge.

Question: 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?

Proposals for change:

1. Develop a robust plan and structure for the growth of pastoral care in every diocese that is informed about trauma, that is professional, well-resourced, integrated and readily available.
2. Mandate all parishes and dioceses to have a Pastoral Council, Leadership Team or equivalent that is inclusive, consultative, that models lay-clerical partnership and is ready to respond to the needs of a hurting Church.

Question: 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?

Proposals for change:

1. Develop a culture of appraisal and review at all levels of activity in the Church. 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?

2. Encourage a culture of corporate discernment, using the Cardijn principle of “See, Judge, Act”. Such a process of discernment must be taught and embedded in daily practice, becoming habitual.

Question: 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?

Proposals for change:

1. Foster a renewed focus on growing humble, healing and merciful servant-based leadership.
2. Foster an openness to new models of formation.
3. Hold a significant review of the training and ongoing formation of clergy.

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

Proposals for change:

1. Prioritise a review and concerted effort to embrace the gift of women; provide opportunities for women in leadership; create a culture where women are truly part of the consultative and decision-making processes at all levels of leadership.

Conclusion

“If we demanded complete clarity all the time, we would never move” (Fr Timothy Radcliffe). Courage is required to move with grace in our time.

There are no short cuts to a humble, healing and merciful Church. Our journey cannot bypass the cross or the tomb, to encounter the resurrection. For new life to emerge, we must acknowledge that we are a broken, hurt and traumatised Church.

The pain of in the community is real, yet reliance on God’s grace makes us humble and leads to renewal.

Abbreviations

EG. Pope Francis. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World. *Evangelii Gaudium*. 24 November 2013.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

MM. Pope Francis. Apostolic Letter. *Misericordia et Misera*. 20 November 2016.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20161120_misericordia-et-misera.html.