Down the years I have tried on several occasions to have a letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*—usually fruitless. My most recent effort, also fruitless, was a response to the following letter of February 28:

In view of the ongoing scandals enveloping the Catholic Church worldwide, my admiration for its loyal followers knows no bounds (“Conclave may come early under shadow of Cardinal’s departure”, February 27). Against all odds, they continue to display two character traits that alas, of late, this unbelieving outsider is sorely lacking: patience and tolerance. —Max Fletcher, Scarborough.

My (unpublished) response read:

It is not patience and tolerance, Max Fletcher (Letters, February 28), that keeps us ‘Churched’ people hanging in there in the face of the scandals enveloping the Catholic Church. God help us, we can be as lacking in those virtues as anyone. It is faith in the institutional Church founded on Peter, the ‘Rock’, against which the forces of Hades will not prevail (Matthew 16.18). —Dr Barry Brundell MSC

The editors, quite understandably, do not give reasons for not publishing readers’ letters, so I am left to draw my own conclusions. I suspect that they consider theology to be too challenging for their readers—a patronising attitude that we at *Compass* do not have towards our readers!

At a time like this, when our Church is having a very rough ride. We are feeling damaged by the sexual abuse crisis, we are feeling devastated by the suffering of those who have been abused, and mortified by what has been done by some of our own members, and the Catho-phobes are in full cry. We are feeling the force of the power of evil at work within the Church as well as without.

Thank God, as I tried to affirm in my letter to the editor, we are not asked to rely on ourselves and our own resources, be they resources of patience and tolerance, or whatever other resources we may have, to keep us hanging in there. We are asked to rely on the power of God. It is God who builds God’s Church. We note what Jesus said: ‘on this Rock I will build my Church’. And it is God who makes it strong against all the forces of evil. Hence the sound advice of St Paul: ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’ (1Cor. 1.31.)

The experience will teach us just how much we have to rely on God and not on ourselves—a valuable lesson, humbling and therefore good for us. As the NSW bishops wrote in their Lenten pastoral letter, *Sowing in Tears*: ‘Though the Church in Australia may weep through the course of the Royal Commission, it is our prayer that she will emerge humbler and holier’.

Learning humility is a painful experience. If it is Christian humility that is being learnt, and not just a loss of face that is being endured, it is a form of dying in order to rise to fuller life, it is our following of Christ who humbled himself, taking on the form of a slave, in order to rescue us and open up the way for us to come to the Father. Hence there is much talk of hope in the present crisis.

One of the symbols of the Church in early Church art is the Barque of Peter. The Church as the Barque of Peter rides over the rough waters, is buffeted by strong winds but does not sink. The very fact that this was a popular image of the Church in the early centuries reminds us that the Church has passed through many turbulent times down the years and has, by the grace and power of God, survived them all.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor.
IT IS A WEEK since Prime Minister Gillard announced the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse, and some people have seen it as the worst week the Catholic Church in Australia has ever had.

So much of the talk has been about the Church’s slow and inadequate response to allegations of abuse over a long period. In all honesty, though, I’ve been feeling quite positive and relieved ever since the announcement.

Here is the occasion when the nation as a whole can come to grips with one of its greatest issues. It is the beginning of a most important, purifying process.

I am delighted for those victims of abuse who have struggled so hard to get their story told. It may be that there are those for whom the Commission will again bring up things that they would rather not have to relive, and I hope they will be considered and helped through it all.

But for many, this is a chance to have their pain acknowledged and understood by society generally. Stories that were kept hidden for decades, stories that they thought would never be believed, will be accepted as part of a national story of shame and neglect. I hope that for many who suffered abuse this will be a validating and, ultimately, healing time.

Secondly, I think the Royal Commission will be healing for the Church. Yes, there will be a lot of pain involved, a lot of facing up to be done, a lot of exposure of past wrongs.

That’s good. It’s healthy to have to face up to what you have done, to confess the wrong, to stiffen up your resolve that these things must not happen again. There can be no great change while we hide the truth, and especially when we choose to hide it from ourselves. That’s true for individuals, and it’s true for institutions.

I am glad, though, that the Royal Commission will not only be considering abuse perpetrated by clergy and Church workers. We all know that the problem of child abuse is spread much more widely than that. If it turns out that the Church has indeed been responsible for a disproportionate amount of abuse, let that be shown and our particular issues addressed. But it is good that the Commission will look further. What I hope is that we will see the need for a whole-of-society response to child abuse.

In this diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, the Church actually has an agency that tries to assist survivors of abuse, and there are survivors’ groups and workshops for communities affected. I think this could go much further.

I’d like to think that local government bodies and the boards of licensed clubs, and so on, would begin to think, ‘We must have people here who are caught up in this. What can we do for them?’

There need to be more ‘spaces’ in society generally where abuse victims can go to talk and be accepted, much like there are cancer support groups or local meetings about the problems of youth suicide and the like. It’s not enough that survivors of abuse can talk to police, lawyers, the Church and, sometimes, other survivors. They need their story and their ongoing problems recognised and supported by
the community at large. And we need the community at large alert to preventing and exposing abuse.

Great social changes have happened in my lifetime. Racial discrimination, at least in blatant forms, has been abolished, and when it is detected in subtler forms it is roundly condemned. So it is with sexism and, increasingly, with ageism. The awful stigma around unmarried mothers, illegitimacy and divorce have largely gone. The lid was lifted on the ‘Stolen Generations’ and on child migrant schemes.

My hope is that after the Royal Commission there will be no more conspiracy of silence around child abuse, no more blaming the victim, no more resigned acceptance that it’s going to happen. These would be great outcomes. If the Church has to take a battering along the way, so be it. In the meantime, we in the Church must strive to the uttermost to help the Royal Commission do its job.

(Tuesday, 20 November 2012)

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Lent words are ‘re’ words: re-pent, re-turn, re-cover, re-pair, re-new. All are called to repentance, not just the great sinners, because all are affected when any member is sinful or suffering. The Body of Christ is wounded.

Yet for all the bruised purple, Lent is a season of hope. It ends not with death but with rising from the dead. As the Holy Father reminds us this Lent, our faith means we can look beyond present ills with joyful hope to the fullness of Christ’s victory, won by His perfect obedience (Pope Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2013, n. 4).

Against the backdrop of this Lenten paradox—of tears and joy, Cross and Resurrection—the Church in Australia has been rocked by child sexual abuse. As one prominent lay commentator observed: ‘Like every community, the Catholic Church is a Church of sinners. Its spiritual rhythms repeat the ancient biblical cycle of failure, repentance, penance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet even in a Church that knows a lot about sin, some acts of wickedness still retain their capacity to shock. The sexual abuse of minors by priests—men traditionally called ‘Father’—is one such kind of wickedness. So is the failure of bishops—shepherds, in the ancient image—to guard the flock against predators, especially predators from within the household of faith.’ (George Weigel, The Courage to be Catholic, pp1-2)

—Sowing in Tears, Lenten Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of New South Wales.
COVENANTAL ETHICS

The Church and the Royal Commission into Sexual Abuse

TOM RYAN

THE RECENT announcement in Australia of a Royal Commission into sexual abuse in all government and non-government institutions reflects an international pattern of high-level government investigations. The sexual abuse phenomenon is a major crisis facing the Catholic Church.

It raises many questions. I would like to consider one. Amongst the various approaches in Christian Ethics, is there one best suited to understanding and addressing the sexual abuse issue and its impact on victims and the Australian Church? Broadly speaking, in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, two approaches to Theological Ethics seem to dominate: the Sapiential with Hellenistic roots and focus on the individual, rationality, wise judgment and virtue; the Covenantal from the Hebraic context and centred on the community, relationship, love and intimacy.1 Jesus embodies both: the wise teacher and the loving, compassionate Victim, in solidarity with all victims.

The wisdom approach is consonant with recent emphases in Catholic ethics on the person, conscience and the virtues. But could we retrieve something from our Jewish roots through ‘Covenantal Ethics’? Perhaps, in our current circumstances, the Sapiential tradition is best filtered through the lens of a Covenant community striving, humbly and hesitantly, to respond to God and others within the framework of right relationships.

I am suggesting, then, that ‘Covenant’ can act as a ‘core’ metaphor, employed as both a hermeneutic lens and investigative tool for the Church’s self-understanding and the ethical tasks confronting it with the sexual abuse crisis.2 I approach this in three stages: first, to outline the general and, second, the specific characteristics of ‘Covenant’ noting the place of justice and of victims; third, to examine how Covenant can act as a hermeneutical lens concerning the sexual abuse crisis facing the Church in Australia, leading to final comments.

Covenantal Ethics: A General Framework

It is increasingly appreciated that the foundational moral experience is being confronted by the ‘other’ (whether God, the person or creation as centres of value) who calls us ‘out of ourselves, and calls for recognition, respect and response.’3 The dynamic of the moral life is of gift-call-response. In the Christian experience, it is the initiative of God’s love reaching out to us. This is embodied in the person of Jesus. To answer his invitation is not a solitary task. It is to become part of a community of faithful disciples.

There are many metaphors used to describe Jesus and his moral quest. Relevant here is the metaphor of Jesus as the ‘New Covenant’ — in the Eucharist, the Church, as mediator between God and humanity. By looking back to the Hebrew view of Covenant, how can we enrich our understanding of our faith community’s identity and its associated attitudes and dispositions to the world around us? We do so around four ideas: relationship, gift, inclusive scope and identity.

First, the biblical account of Genesis affirms the Scriptural view that creation and human beings are inherently relational. God’s call is always one towards life and into relationship. God’s desire to be involved in our world, close to us, for our well-being and happiness, is expressed in the call into a Covenant relationship. Its use drew on the cultural ex-
perience of the Ancient Near East. Covenants expressed the need to work together effectively in order to ensure peace. The union created by them generated outcomes that take on a richer significance in the Israelite covenant, namely, ‘loyalty, service and solidarity.’

Israel’s faith conviction was of union, through a covenant, with the one true God as the object of God’s special love. This was unique in two ways. First, nowhere else in the ancient Near East is there found ‘the concept of a covenant between divine and human partners.’ Second, this covenant’s foundation is not an agreement but divine gift. This makes the moral universe of Israel radically different from other cultures. Morality is secondary and subsequent to God’s founding initiative of a privileged intimate relationship between human beings and God. The covenant is solely the revelation of God’s purpose and of divine gift. Consent is the free decision to accept the offer, to enter the Covenant.

The Torah (Law), then, as integral to that gift, is not a juridical but a theological concept expressed as the way (derek), a journey entered to remain ‘in state of covenant.’ This revealed moral path continues the primordial and defining experience for God’s people in the Exodus, namely, the process of liberation (interior and exterior). This is fulfilled and personified in Jesus. He shows us the way to share in his Paschal mystery, foreshadowed by the Exodus of old Israel. The journey of salvation and deliverance is progressive, involving constant conversion.

Again, the primordial event of the Exodus/covenant, the foundation of the nation’s identity, is a hermeneutical concept used to interpret its past (e.g., Abraham, Noah). The Covenant with Abraham represents God’s gracious, dependable presence and unconditional love in ‘I will be your God. You will be my people’ (Lev. 26:12). The Mosaic Covenant reveals God’s faithful love through the prophet hearing God’s call to be an ‘agent for liberation and justice.’ Ben Sirach ‘acclaims Israel’s unique heritage’ and insists ‘on the call for God’s people to participate in a unique way in the wisdom of God, because they have at their disposal a special source of wisdom: the Torah.’

Loving-kindness (hesed) distinguishes the call to the covenant relationship. It signifies God’s faithfulness and the divine concern for the welfare of people, especially God’s predilection for the poor and vulnerable. Importantly, its basic self-understanding, to which Israel must always return when this is forgotten, is of a people who are poor and needy and hence the object of God’s special love.

Third, while hesed cannot be understood outside a context of relationship, its inclusive scope extends beyond one’s family, acquaintances and community of faith. As the God whose peace is a gift in right relationships, entering the Covenant means a call to be just, especially by sharing in God’s special concern for the oppressed, the poor and the most disadvantaged, represented in the orphan, widow and stranger (Deut. 14:28-9). Social justice is Israel’s ‘response in faith to the gift of God.’ Consistently, the prophets do not see the poor as closer to God because of their poverty. Schaub notes that ‘[T]he prophets see the poor as victims. Their fellow Israelites victimized them by violating the most fundamental stipulations of the covenant.’ When the community’s eyes were blinded or ears closed to social inequality and to those in need, the call of the Prophet was to bring people back to the Covenant. Hence, for the Israelite faithful, religion and ethics were inseparable. The Sabbath was truly made for man and not man for the Sabbath.
Fourth, the Covenant and its God-given demands was the source of the community’s self-understanding and identity (‘You will be my people and I will be your God’). Further, the Qahal Yahweh was not a community turned in on itself. Its faithfulness was measured against the criteria of mercy and justice (widow, orphan and stranger). Again, the election of Israel was not to a privilege to be ‘different’ but to be ‘for the rest’ (the others) as John Thornhill reminds us.14

The newness and developmental nature of Israel’s Covenant (relative to other covenants) is captured in the prophecy of a ‘new covenant’ in Jeremiah (31: 31-4). That the teaching of Yahweh ‘will be written on their hearts’ meant that, in the deepest core of the self, ‘all people will know God and be able to hear God’s call.’15 In this capacity for discernment we find the sapiential aspect emerging within the Covenantal framework. In the global and concrete anthropology of the Bible, the heart is the principle of morality, the centre of one’s freedom. It embraces the whole person.

The summons to be God’s community present in and for the world was meant, then, to have cognitive, affective and behavioural consequences. The identity of the community was to be one in which its members could perceive and appreciate with God’s eyes. Their dispositions were to be those which could be affected by events and people and move to responsible and accountable action.

So far, what has emerged is the central place of relationship in the biblical notion of Covenant that grounds it as an inherently ethical reality. Covenantal Ethics, then, is an apt description. Its more specific character is evident in three ways.

**Covenantal Ethics: Three Specific Features**

The specific nature of Covenantal Ethics (and its moral consciousness) is suggested, first, through forms of language. Verbs built on the five senses offer a more concrete sense engaging with human experience and its ethical claims in terms of the Covenant. Being attentive and positively responsive is expressed when the ‘Lord hears the cry of the poor’ (Ps 34:6) and Jesus, stretching out his hand, touched the leper (Mark 1: 41). The negative response as a moral indicator to the ‘true’ Covenant is captured when mercy is preferred to the scent of sacrifice normally pleasing to the Lord God (Lev. 1:9). Similarly, salt losing its taste (Mt. 5:13) is an image used of those whose moral discernment has failed to ‘taste and see the goodness of the Lord’ (Ps. 34.8). Loss of taste characterises those who are not faithful to the Torah and neglect the burdens of ‘afflicted humanity.’16

Perhaps Covenantal ethics’ most telling expression is the image of seeing/not seeing as in Matt. 25: 31-46 and the Great Judgement. Seeing, being affected and responding constellate around works of mercy. This offers both a criterion of judgement and a recovery of authentic Covenantal ethics, but in a fresh and original manner. By his identification with the disadvantaged of the world (‘the least’), Jesus brings together the two commandments into the ‘greatest commandment of the Torah’ and gives it new depth in his person.17

Second, in Jesus, the ethical claims of the Covenant and the prophetic hope for the ‘new covenant’ in Jeremiah 31 (noted above) find their realisation in one person and in the realm of interiority. In his person, Jesus embodies the kingdom of God, Covenant and the Law.18 This specification also highlights the limitations of the Covenant as an ethical framework before the coming of Jesus. The core of morality now shifts from allegiance to a group gifted by God to one based on personal commitment, albeit anchored in relationships. This is linked with later appeals post-Enlightenment to general concepts of humanity (‘the brotherhood of man’) as an ethical benchmark. Tillar notes that such can be ambiguous and need ‘a critical point of reference.’ Hence, Jesus’ identification ‘with outcasts, the poor, sinners, and the disabled’ provides the criterion that is
needed; Jesus’ compassion embodies the principle of “universality through a historically particular intermediary.” Or, as William Spohn suggests elsewhere, Jesus is the concrete universal of Christian Ethics.

Sight and moral perception take paradigmatic form in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10: 29-37). This provides an instance of how Covenant Ethics is anchored not only in a person but also in concrete experience though the third specifying factor—narratives. The parable unfolds in the interplay of authentic and distorted understandings of Covenantal Ethics.

This is a story about attention that leads (or does not lead) to recognition. The priest and Levite are privileged members of society. They also represent the “religious fundamentalism of their times” seeing faithfulness to the Covenant as fulfilled in conformity to rituals that were relatively unimportant. This focus led them, and others, to neglect the Hebrew tradition of showing compassion to the poor and marginalised. They see the wounded man and pass by. Blinded by ethnic and religious prejudice, they do not ‘recognise’ what is individual and particular about him. He is a non-person rather than a human being who needs help.

Again, this is compounded by their fear of attack by bandits if they stop to help together with their unwillingness to be ‘defiled’ by touching the victim. The same lack of recognition extends to the Samaritan himself. For the Jews, he is culturally and religiously inferior, excluded, even hated. He is further marginalized by his ‘shady’ profession, a trader in oil. Finally, it must not be forgotten that the inn in the story is a ‘den of thieves’ and the innkeeper is the head thief. The Samaritan, as with the ‘unjust’ steward, knew the ways of the world. He bribed the innkeeper but clearly indicated ‘I’ll be back!’

How specifically does this story instantiate Covenantal Ethics? By exploring distorted understandings of the Covenant and its ethical demands it uncovers what is authentic in the Hebrew tradition. In this, it uses two types of subversion. One is through the contrast of inside/outside. The story offers a model of true faithfulness and an authentic Covenant ethic embodied in a person—the Samaritan—who is perceived by the Israelite community to be an outsider: He is culturally, religiously and occupationally inferior and unclean—yet is the one who truly ‘belongs.’ This raises the question of the true Covenant together with the nature of the Covenant community and its membership, anticipated in Jer. 31:31-4.

Subversion takes another form when Jesus, in answering ‘who is my neighbour’, inverts and re-frames the question. The original question refers to ‘neighbour’ in the objective sense, namely, who counts, who belongs to God’s people and, hence, qualifies to be an object of neighbourly love. At the end of the parable, Jesus’ responds by turning the original question back on itself. ‘Which of these proved himself a neighbour…?’ Here, ‘neighbour’ is seen in the subjective sense. What matters is the attitude and heart that is neighbourly and, inevitably, has a scope of concern that is universal. The Good Samaritan embodies the identity, right perceptions and appropriate dispositions of authentic Covenant Ethics. He is a faithful Israelite, a true disciple, This brings us to the next stage in the article.

Learning from Covenantal Ethics: The Royal Commission in Australia

The northern hemisphere experience indicates that what is ahead in Australia is potentially, almost certainly, much bigger and more disturbing than we can imagine. There have been detailed research projects in the United States and Ireland. These have generated commentaries to add to the wave of studies done from the 1990s by social scientists and theologians. While contexts are different, the titles of this small selection of those studies give some pointers to what may be ahead for the Church and community in this country.

Investigations into sexual abuse across in-
stitions have occurred or are currently in process in Australia. Recently, Neil Ormerod has done a very fine overview and theological reflection on sexual abuse and the Catholic Church in Australia.27 Again, recognising the need for a ‘new era of co-operation, transparency and honesty’, the Church has set up a Truth, Justice and Healing Commission to advise its bishops, to run its dealings with the forthcoming Royal Commission and also to work with victims of clergy sex abuse.

The sexual abuse revelations involve a range of issues—the theology of sexuality, clerical celibacy, cover-up by episcopal authorities, ecclesial structure and systemic dysfunction etc. Here, the focus is specific.

We noted earlier two ethical traditions—Sapiential and Covenantal. The Sapiential or wisdom approach has its roots in the person as individual and rational, searching for happiness. Wisdom expressed in discernment and the practice of virtues can provide a bridge with a more relational and community based ethics. We have noted how, in Ben Sirach, God’s people can, through the Torah, participate in the wisdom of God.

I would like to propose that Covenantal Ethics is more consonant with the present situation (as it is for issues of suffering, poverty and solidarity facing the global community in general) than is the sapiential tradition. As we have seen, the community ‘is a fundamental datum of moral life according to the Bible.’28 Covenantal Ethics is grounded in the gift of God, embraces various dimensions of relationship and gives special preference to those who suffer injustice, here the victims of sexual abuse. Again, in current circumstances, any appeal to the Church itself in its tradition or in its Episcopal representatives as repositories of wisdom risks being, at the least, foolish and, at the most, offensive. Its wisdom must be a silent presence amongst broader company.

In using Covenantal Ethics as a hermeneutical lens to understand and respond to this crisis for the Church, five signposts suggest themselves: covenant identity as gift; recognition of, and solidarity with victims; listening to learn; the transpersonal power of evil as demonic; the functional analogy with the destruction of the Temple.

Commentators agree that the sexual abuse crisis touches the very identity of the Church. Arbuckle reminds us that any culture in crisis, needing change, must return to its founding story and values.29 The first lesson from our Hebrew roots, then, is to engrave on our memories that the Covenant (and the community’s identity) is a gift from God. Human history and the biblical narratives tell the story of humans who do not do justice to the gift of God—wickedness, weakness and failure. As a Church, we are part of that story. This is who we are. We must own and reclaim this as part of our identity. We cannot rely on ourselves. We can only beg for forgiveness and for the original gift to be renewed, appreciating what the Bible attests—that ‘God’s ‘giving’ is followed by his ‘forgiving.’”30

The second lesson is, with the Lord God, to hear the cry of the poor—to be affected by victims—in the perspective of the Prophets. Hearing is remembering—another way of describing faithfulness to the Covenant—‘I will never forget you my people’. This is fully realised in God’s response in Jesus, in his sacrificial death, which, as Ormerod points out ‘carries the weight of a religious and moral imperative to put an end to sacrificial violence and the creation of victims.’31 In the Hebrew Scriptures, another word for sin is ‘to forget.’ To forget who we are is to be unfaithful to what is revealed in Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is an erosion of the Church’s very identity. Just as Jesus is the risen Victim identified with all victims, so too must be his Church.

In the light of past failures, the most basic task is for the Church, in its authorities and communities, to learn ‘to identify with the victim.’32 This is about recognition. In the language of the virtues, being true to our identity entails a set of perceptions and dispositions that lead us to understand, to respond and to act as people who have put on ‘the mind of
Christ.’ As Ormerod implies, solidarity will require a much wider range of people listening to, and being ‘with’, victims in their pain beyond members of the Church appointed Commission. Such a consideration cannot be separated from an agonising possibility: namely, the responsibility of bishops, clergy and laity ‘who colluded, whether actively or passively, with a system that allowed the rape and abuse of children.’

It is also a call to theologians to be part of this process during and not just after the Royal Commission. The tools are there, as in tapping the work of Edward Schillebeeckx or Dorothy Soelle on theology and suffering. These writers remind us that it is particularly in times of crisis, in negative contrast experiences, that hope is the antidote to suffering. ‘It is those contrast experiences which make hope real, since hope then becomes so necessary.’ There is also suffering’s subversive aspect as the ‘dangerous memory’ in that, as Robert Gascoigne reminds us, ‘although it is suffering that most confounds our search for ethical intelligibility, it is likewise suffering that is the most profound source of insight and conversion.’ For all that, Australian Archbishop Mark Coleridge reminds us in an interview in 2010 ‘…the challenge for me was to see their faces and to hear their voices and that was not easy.’

This brings us to a third guidepost for the Australian Church—to listen and learn. This is captured by Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa. He made headlines in suggesting that ‘church leadership, instead of giving an impression of power, privilege and prestige, should rather be experienced as a humble, searching ministry together with its people.’

Such an approach could reveal the face of wisdom. Like Solomon, this entails the quest for a discerning and responsive heart. The Church will need to change radically ‘if such a humble, searching ministry is to be its hallmark’ concludes Linda Hogan. It means embracing vulnerability and a sense of powerlessness that shares the powerlessness of the victims. Hogan cites McDonagh’s conclusion (confirming what is implied in Ormerod’s comment), that ‘bishops and the wider Church must first be evangelised by the abused, brought to some deeper and fuller meaning of the gospel by the abused before they presume to lead in the evangelising of others.’

Again, the past decade has confirmed the extent of the crisis and its devastating effects worldwide. While the figure of 5% for sexual abuse amongst clergy is no greater than its occurrence in other groups within the community, it is still commonly described as ‘staggering’, ‘horrendous’ ‘incomprehensible’, particularly in the light of betrayal of the trust placed in priests and in the Church. Relevant here are the comments made about Benedict XVI’s Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland. While Bernard Treacey, O.P. acknowledges his appreciation, with others, of the tone and ‘register’ of the Pope’s words, he notes that ‘there is a sense…of a writer overwhelmed by the enormity of what he has had to confront, both in the horror of abuse and in the dereliction of duty among church leaders to whom it was reported.’

In Australia, Archbishop Mark Coleridge is of similar mind. When asked by interviewer Margaret Coffey how he sees the situation here in Australia, he offers an extended reflection, even if ‘a work in progress.’ About the ‘enormity’ of the sexual abuse question he observes:

The Church may also have underestimated the power and subtlety of evil. This may seem strange to say of the Church which is often regarded as taking evil and sin more seriously than do other Churches and Christian communities. But it is evil we are dealing with in the case of sexual abuse of the young; and it is an evil which is not just personal.

It is a power which reaches beyond the individual; it seems more metaphysical than moral. A supra-personal power seems to take hold of human beings who are not in themselves wholly evil. But they are in the grip of a power which they can, it seems, do little to understand or
control; and it is a power which is hugely destructive in the lives of those they have abused and in their own lives.  

This brings us to the fourth benchmark from our Jewish heritage. What Coleridge is trying to articulate may find an analogical equivalent with the world-view prior to, and in, Jesus’ time and is expressed, in striking form, in Mark’s Gospel. There, the transpersonal power of evil is the realm of the demonic. This sits uneasily with the modern sensibility. More importantly, it must be carefully understood in the present discussion of sexual abuse. Coleridge’s description of the present is paralleled by that of fellow scripture scholar Brendan Byrne looking into the past.

In both the ancient and biblical worlds, people spoke of ‘demonic possession.’ This described ‘when they felt themselves held captive from within by forces and compulsions over which they had no control.’ These were ‘transpersonal forces that robbed them of freedom of choice, stunted their human growth, and alienated them from God, from life in community, and from their own individual humanity.’ Byrne suggests that, in today’s world, the manifestations of the demonic are in the many ‘captivities’ whether personal, social or economic, under which people labour. It is also manifested in the ‘multiple forms of addiction that burden us as individuals and as societies—huge, transpersonal forces that control us and make us their slaves.’

I noted above how this is an analogy. The destructive evil in abuse of the young (a criminal act) cannot simply be reduced to Byrne’s ‘captivities’ and ‘multiple forms of addiction’ (often about self-harm that is not criminal). Again, Coleridge is not attempting to address any correlation between the recidivist rate and the compulsive nature of sexually abusive behaviour nor trying to minimize personal or institutional responsibility. He is wondering aloud (tentatively): how can evil be so powerful that it can almost take on a life of its own and shape an individual’s attitudes and actions?

But this reminds us that social systems and Church communities are cultures. As such, they subtly shape, often without our conscious awareness, how we think, feel and act. So we must consider the possibility that unseen, unnameable, evil can so infiltrate ecclesial cultures that abusive behaviour is made easier for a perpetrator. Further, the Church must recognize the empirically grounded research that has verified corruption of Catholic institutional culture in various parts of the world (e.g., some seminaries and chanceries). Whether unseen or observable, such processes can also influence how the abuse, once revealed, is subsequently handled by church or secular authorities. It can involve what may be tantamount to silent, even if unwitting, collusion, as noted earlier.

Like a massive tsunami that engulfs all in its path and, as it recedes, leaves everything (and everyone) stained, both innocent and guilty can be caught up in something so much bigger than themselves. Ultimately, what the Jewish story anticipated was embodied in personal form in Jesus—He alone has the power to set us free from such ‘demonic’ forces and from our own weakness or unwillingness to acknowledge any collusion with them.

As a Church, then, we must throw ourselves at the feet of the crucified Lord, again captured well by Archbishop Mark Coleridge in response to the announcement of the Royal Commission.

We can forget that evil is an awesome power…we can forget that the only power greater than evil is the love of God which raised Jesus from the dead…denial is long behind us and defensiveness is futile…the only way forward now is to face the full horror of what has happened, and to do so humbly and courageously as men of faith who have entrusted our lives to Jesus crucified and risen.

The enormity of the crisis brings us to the fifth and final lesson from the Jewish tradition. It concerns ‘crisis’ understood in terms of public disasters that befell Israel, such as the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians. This offers a functional analogy. The language used...
here offers a striking parallel with what is happening for the Church today. Walter Brueggemann says that, for Israel, ‘the temple had come to be the point of reference for all life. Its destruction thus meant the loss of a center; a profound public disorientation, in which public meanings and values are nullified or at least severely placed in jeopardy.’

The language used here encapsulates something of the situation today for the Church locally and internationally. Brueggemann notes how public energy in Israel’s prayer focused on the destruction of the Temple - the collapse of their ‘known world.’ They resorted to the psalms of communal lament. Nevertheless, we are reminded that ‘after the trauma of the collapse of the monarchy and the exile, God’s power renews the religious community of Israel.’ For us, such a process requires, as Brueggemann suggests, ‘an imaginative identification of a ‘dynamic analogy’, for the points of contact with our own experience.’

As Catholics, what is happening with sexual abuse involves a public sense of ‘loss, hurt and rage that we have in common’ yet is something in which ‘we have an immediate, direct, and personal stake.’ Like the loss of the Temple, it almost certainly will involve the end of the world we have known concerning the Church.

In the light of this, are we perhaps prone to ‘loss of public awareness and public imagination?’ While transparency and accountability are central, we need to think about this crisis theologically as with other public events and disasters. Further, we have to find ways of praying publicly about it—to grieve, repent and lament together. Somehow, we need to ritualise forgiveness—asked from and received from victims. We need specifically designed liturgical gatherings, beyond the Eucharist or Ash Wednesday, to engage the sense of loss, hurt, guilt, shame, disorientation and even rage. As Brueggemann points out ‘it is stunning to think that prayer of this kind might indeed be the point of entry into the larger world of faith, where the Lord of the nations governs.’ Or as Tiggar has observed, ‘it is those contrast experiences which make hope real.’

**Conclusion**

It would be difficult not to have some sympathy for the Australian Bishops today as they confront the sexual abuse crisis and the future. So often, as public leaders, they provide the public lightning rod for victims’ pain and anger as, too, for the public’s outrage.

Often the Church’s public face shows a dominant concern for credibility. What is being asked now, and the benchmark against which all is measured, is authenticity. The language used in the *Truth, Justice and Healing Commission* is a good start. There is needed a deepened and more realistic reclaiming of our identity. As noted earlier, any culture in crisis or needing change must return to its founding story and values. This could well be achieved by drawing on our Jewish heritage. Further, Desmond Tutu reminds us that healing and forgiveness will be possible ‘only if the depth of the damage and the awfulness of the abuse are acknowledged, and if we are prepared to deal with the real situation.’

We must start at the feet of the victims. At times, this may involve lying beside the victim traveller abused by the robbers before we can be the Good Samaritan. Again, as in the parable, the ‘true’ Israelite was an outsider, so too with the sexual abuse issue, prophetic voices from outside the Churches accompany, even enable, the cry of victims. Most importantly, before even thinking about evangelising, even if under the rubric of the ‘New Evangelisation’, we must first be evangelised.

Our tradition speaks of the four marks of the Church—one, holy, catholic, apostolic. As one theologian has remarked, through this experience, we are learning about the fifth mark—sinful.

I had finished drafting these thoughts when I received from a friend this story from a paper given by a West Australian author. It is an apt closing…
The story is told of a Rabbi who was missing from the Synagogue on the evening of the Day of Atonement. The Synagogue was filled with all the Jewish people of the Town, waiting to commence the service on this most holy day. They sent a messenger to search for the Rabbi and he was found rocking the cradle of a crying child. The parents had left it behind to go to the Synagogue. To attend to the little crying Child has priority before the needs of the Community; the balance in Judaism is weighed in favour of the individual soul.51

NOTES

1 I suggest these categories adapting the approach of John Lakers who contrasts the metaphor of intimacy (relationship) with that of power and judgment (rationality). He argues, using the work of Walter Ong, SJ, that with oral cultures, in which memory was the repository of the past, tradition and community were central. This formed the context for the emergence of the Covenantal ethical tradition and its biblical literary expression. With literary cultures came the gradual formation of languages of human interiority, agency, freedom and purpose which enabled the text (replacing memory as the repository of the past) to be engaged and interrogated. This forms the background to the sapiential tradition. The interplay of these two approaches can be found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures but this is beyond the scope of this article. See John J. Lakers, OFM, Christian Ethics: An Ethics of Intimacy (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1996), xiii-xxvii and 62-86. (My thanks to Professor Robert Gascoigne for his comments on an earlier draft).

2 The expression ‘core metaphor’ is used by Ormond Rush. The core metaphor of ‘reception’, for example, uses ‘reception’ as both a hermeneutic lens, and an investigative principle to uncover ‘reception’ as an integrating principle and, through this, to open up new ways of understanding reception.’ See Ormond Rush, The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 5-7. See infra for how the Pontifical Biblical Commission acknowledges the biblical use of Exodus/covenant as a hermeneutical lens concerning Israel’s history.


4 ‘Today, everyone acknowledges that the prophetic theme of the covenant was elaborated according to the model and the literary form of the bilateral pacts of the ancient Near East. But the biblical Covenant is new in two ways: first, the parties entering into it are no longer two sovereign powers, but God and man. Second, the provisions of this covenant are of a new kind: the law will be written in men’s hearts (Jer 31:31),’ Ignace de la Potterie, ‘Biblical Exegesis: A Science of Faith,’ in José Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sánchez-Navarro, Opening up the Scriptures (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 30-64 at 36-37.


7 The Bible and Morality, 31.

8 The Bible and Morality, 33.

9 The Bible and Morality, 30.

10 Lamoureux & Wadell, Christian Moral Life, 5

11 The Bible and Morality, 6

12 The Bible and Morality, 51.


16 Brendan Byrne, Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today, (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2004), 57.

17 Byrne, Lifting the Burden, 193.

18 The Bible and Morality, 68.


20 William C. Spohn, Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics (New York: Continuum, 1999), 2.

21 There has been an explosion across disciplines about the structure of personal and group identities based on the notion of ‘intersubjective recognition.’ This has bearing on Benedict XVI’s remarks in Caritas in Veritate about global interdependence, a ‘felt’ concern for others and the possibility of solidarity.

23 Arbuckle, Humanizing Healthcare Reforms, 79. While ‘fundamentalism’ may be a term more relevant to modern religious phenomena, Arbuckle’s usage is analogically appropriate.


27 Neil Ormerod, ‘Clergy Sexual Abuse: What Difference Did Vatican II Make?’ in Neil Ormerod et al. (eds), Vatican II: Reception and Implementation in the Australian Church (Mulgrave, Vic: Garratt Publishing, 2012), 213-225. Ormerod itemizes previous studies into sexual abuse but also into trust and professional standards concerning health professionals and clergy. He also notes theological commentaries such as that of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008).

28 The Bible and Morality, 187.

29 Arbuckle, Humanizing Healthcare Reforms, 161.

30 The Bible and Morality, 111.

31 Ormerod, ‘Clergy Sexual Abuse, 225.

32 Ormerod, ‘Clergy Sexual Abuse, 225.

33 Hogan, ‘Clerical and Religious Child Abuse’, 186.

34 Tillar, ‘Critical Remembrance’, 27.


36 ‘Where is the fire of Pentecost? Sexual abuse, the Catholic Church, and culture’, Interview by Margaret Coffey with Archbishop Mark Coleridge, Professor James Ogloff, Brendan Callaghan, SJ, Professor Karen Terry, Professor William Marshall, Professor George Rousseau and Dr. Alistair Blashard, on ABC Radio National, Encounter, 23.5.2010.


38 Hogan, ‘Clerical and Religious Child Abuse’, 186.


41 ‘Where is the fire of Pentecost’, Encounter (toward end of the transcript available on the ABC website).

42 Brendan Byrne, SJ, A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark’s Gospel (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls, 2008), xi-xii.

43 See note 33.

44 Archbishop Mark Coleridge, Letter to the Clergy of the Archdiocese of Brisbane, Nov. 19, 2012.


46 The Bible and Morality, 176.

47 Brueggmann, The Message of the Psalms, 68.

48 Brueggmann, The Message of the Psalms, 68.

49 See above note 34.


Forgiveness is surely one of the most abused concepts in Christianity; with all too much frequency people are told they should, even must, forgive those who have hurt them. What does this mean for the abused child, the survivor of a concentration camp, or even those who were tortured both in their home countries and when seeking refuge in Australia? Yet forgiveness forms one of the central concepts within Christianity, and indeed, the understanding that humans can be and are forgiven and hence reconciled to God is one of the key differences between Christianity and other religions.

In spite of the centrality of forgiveness, virtually nothing has been written linking forgiveness to hope. A search of major databases uses the key words of ‘hope’ and ‘forgiveness’ revealed no relevant writing linking these concepts. Even though Jürgen Moltmann writes a little about forgiveness, he does so with a very different emphasis to the reflections of those who advocate on behalf of the victims of sin. It is the nuances in these reflections and their connection to hope that will be explored in this article.

A Brief Methodology

A re-examination of suffering and hope arose in theology out of the Second World War in the writings of authors such as Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle. Since the 1970s little has been written on the topic. Given the time since suffering and hope has been comprehensively explored, the question arose for me as to whether in the light of the rapidly changing world this past theology continues to be a meaningful way of talking about suffering and hope. Would the reflections of contemporary Christians who have supported others in the depths of suffering have anything to add to how theologians explore suffering and hope? In order to answer this, I interviewed Australian Christians who had supported asylum seekers in the immigration detention centres. The conditions in these centres were designed to systematically dehumanise the asylum seekers and to exacerbate the trauma already experienced. Drawing on phenomenology, a social research methodology that seeks to explore the meaning made out of experiences, I systematically reviewed the themes that arose from the reflections of the advocates and used these to compare this to the theology of Moltmann. One discrepancy that arose in this comparison is the place of forgiveness and it is this theme that I will explore in this article.

Forgiveness in Moltmann

Forgiveness is about creating a new beginning for those involved and therefore it is somewhat surprising, in the light of Moltmann’s emphasis on eschatology, that he rarely writes about the meaning of forgiveness. Indeed, he does so only in relation to God forgiving humanity. Perhaps this is because of his context, that of being identified amongst various oppressive systems—not only as a German living in the generation who fought in the Second World War, but also as a white, male from the first world. Yet at the same time, Moltmann experienced the sense of forgiveness in the aftermath of the Second World War which it has been suggested gave him a special sensitivity to suffering. Indeed, as a prisoner of war in England, he was gifted with an education which enabled him to return home to eventually study for his doctorate.

Moltmann suggests that forgiveness is not so much about the guilt itself, but rather ‘the new life to which [God] desires to awaken the guilty.’ At the same time, this freedom from guilt is only one side of forgiveness. Moltmann asks, ‘how can we be free, not only of the evil we have committed, but of the evil we have
suffered, and cannot forget because it has left traces in body and soul?’ In many ways, this freedom from the effects of experiencing evil is what is gained for those who need to forgive the perpetrator, instead of being bound up in hatred, anger, or bitterness about what has been. Forgiveness frees the individuals from their past in order to build a new future.

For those who perpetrate evil, Moltmann sees a need for atonement, although he acknowledges that this is often insufficient for the sin that has been committed. Connected to this need for atonement is the concept of repentance or conversion. Moltmann argues that ‘in the Bible... repentance means ‘con-version’, an ‘about turn’. And this turn is a turn to the future.’ Repentance also needs to look towards the future, although it acknowledges the past hurts. Thus new beginnings are needed not only for those who have been the victims of violence, but also for those who have instigated that violence; both groups need liberation from their situations in order to create a new and just existence.

Forgiveness from Those who are Hurt

Whilst only a small number of the advocates spoke of forgiveness, those who did had been challenged in their understandings of the concept by the actions of the refugees and asylum seekers. With advocates and refugees negotiating relationships across languages, cultures and religions, forgiveness was frequently needed because mistakes were made, some of which had the potential to offend each other. Frances related:

One of the good things about all these people is how forgiving they are when people like me make mistakes which can be quite embarrassing. I can’t give any examples now, but they’re just so forgiving. And because, I think, they can see that there’s mutual trust, and that you’re doing your best for them. It’s quite amazing.

Over time, small blunders can accumulate and threaten to destroy relationships, yet the willingness with which the advocates and refugees forgave each other for these difficulties enabled trust and relationships to develop.

However, the concept of forgiveness was challenged on an interfaith level. Another advocate reflected on the differences in understanding of forgiveness between Christianity and Islam, particularly with what this meant for humanity’s relationship with God. Some of the Muslim refugees and asylum seekers had an understanding of Islam which meant that they could not be forgiven, even for accidental transgressions. Rev’d Kathleen, reflecting on what she had learnt from Mahmud’s understanding of Islam, said:

There is no forgiveness in Islam, or not the Islam that he believed in. For instance, one Christmas time someone cooked well made rum-balls, put them in the fridge, didn’t label them and he accidentally took a bite. And a good Muslim, a clean person would not have anything to do with alcohol. ‘Well God knows it’s not your fault.’ ‘Well I’ll just have to work harder to be a good Muslim.’ ‘Don’t you have any understanding that God understands?’ ‘No, I’ll just have to work really hard.’ I’m not someone who enjoyed reading Paul, I’m not someone who is hugely into the sin and guilt and humans are so awful that we can’t do anything without God. I have a fairly high view of humanity, in spite of all this stuff, but it made me realise how much even so, even how much I just take an understanding of grace for granted.

According to Rev’d Kathleen’s understanding of Mahmud’s faith he did not believe in forgiveness from God and the expectation was one of having to earn God’s favour rather than being able to put a mistake behind him and move on.

It could easily be expected that such an
understanding would lead to reluctance to forgive other people. It has frequently been noted by theologians that one’s image of God affects how one treats other people; however, the same refugee who did not believe he could be forgiven for accidentally ingesting alcohol, sent a gift to the then Minister for Immigration on his release. Rev’d Kathleen related:

I understand politically wanting to make connections, but he was wanting to show forgiveness. So for someone who wasn’t expecting to experience forgiveness from God, he was still willing to offer it.

Yet, for at least some Muslims, forgiveness is from other humans and needs to be asked from those whom one has hurt. To seek absolution from ordained ministry, or even God, risks creating cheap forgiveness that does not call the lives of offenders into account. On the other hand, other advocates also spoke of this willingness to offer forgiveness in spite of the depth of hurt. Caroline asked Jacob, a Christian refugee who had been tortured in his country of origin, what it meant to forgive the perpetrators of the torture:

He said forgiveness was handing things back to God and telling him to deal with that person because I couldn’t do it... It was a real definition of forgiveness because you hadn’t gone on wearing the hate. He admitted that he didn’t know how he would cope if he came face to face with that person, but he just handed it over. [Caroline]

Even those who did not talk about forgiveness explored the connected issue of grace. Grace is an undeserved gift, so it could be argued that forgiveness is one of the greatest acts of grace. Certainly, whilst perpetrators can repent and make reparation, forgiveness itself is not of their making. There are no actions that can make one ‘worthy’ of forgiveness or force another to forgive, since it is about dealing with the past. Hence, to be offered forgiveness is a grace.

The advocates expressed grace as something which occurred on both sides of the relationship. Some spoke of the experiences of grace from their own point of view; others reflected on what it meant in the stories shared with them by the asylum seekers. With the system being so harsh on the asylum seekers, moments of grace stood out:

That was the ruling, but Geoff Gallop was the Premier at the time, and there was a delegation went to Geoff Gallop and explained to him what the problem was. These people wanted to learn English, but they couldn’t enrol in TAFE because they didn’t have a Visa. And so he said, ‘This isn’t right, but I can’t change the law, but they can go to TAFE, they’re allowed to go to TAFE but they can’t get an official certificate to say they’ve done the course.’ So many, many of them did go to TAFE to learn English and it was sort of undercover in a way. [Barbara]

The importance of grace must be understood in the context of the harshness of the detention system, and why it had the potential to change people’s understandings of their faith. For those who were in detention, the experience of having people who cared for them, although they were strangers, was challenging to their understanding of their faith. Sarah reflected:

One of the comments that one of the Muslims made was that they had to come to Australia and be cared for by Christians to understand what Islam is.

For this refugee this learning was about the difference between what is written in the Scriptures and what is actually practiced. His experiences of Christian supporters shed new light on his understanding of the writings of Islam.

Other advocates spoke of the grace they experienced from refugees, particularly when in many ways the advocates can be identified with the system which is causing the problems. One advocate spoke of visiting a refugee camp in Africa:

She [a refugee in the camp] said how can those white people call themselves Christians? I was very shocked at first. And afterwards I realised that she didn’t say, ‘How can you call yourselves Christians’ because I was there [Rev’d Tom]

The grace for Rev’d Tom was that this
refugee woman was able to differentiate between his actions and the lack of actions of those in affluent countries which had left her suffering. For many of the advocates grace also meant seeing the goodness in people, particularly those whom society shuns. This perhaps connects to the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, which was a common motif in the advocate’s theological reflections. Larry saw it as an explicit example of how Christians are called to behave towards those who are suffering. Betty affirmed:

There’s always beauty in the human being. Even in the jail, there you can always find something beautiful, you can. You can always find compassion, I suppose. It’s just a lot more difficult.

Rev’d Steve also explored this concept and related an incident when he was working in an African refugee camp. He had taken some aid to a woman, who had given him food in return, although it had represented her family’s dinner. He described this incident of being ministered to by a woman in extreme poverty as an example of a ‘life changing moment of grace.’

Grace was not only offered by the detainees, but also in many ways by the advocates themselves. It was the gift of a reciprocal relationship between the advocates and asylum seekers. Not only were the advocates working against the system to create a gift of a humane environment, but the asylum seekers were also working against the system in developing their relationships with the advocates.

You know, I can see what you’re giving them, but what are they giving you? And I think they’re giving me the great gift of trust. Where they’ve come from situations where all of them, I’d say, without exception are in situations where they haven’t been able to trust anybody much and they’ve left their country, very often without telling anybody. And you know escaped literally against the law and against all sorts of obstacles, they don’t trust anybody. [Frances]

Grace and forgiveness, as we have seen, were integral to the building and development of on-going relationships between the asylum seekers and advocates. The advocates who heard stories of the asylum seekers and refugees offering forgiveness, found their faith challenged and in particular were forced to rethink how they viewed forgiveness in the Christian context.

Towards a Hopeful Theology of Forgiveness

Whilst both Moltmann and some of advocates talked about forgiveness in connection to hope, their nuances were significantly different. Moltmann explores hope as bringing new life to the guilty, whereas those of the advocates who explored issues of forgiveness did so without any need for the offender to recognise his or her guilt. Indeed, most of the anecdotes of asylum seekers forgiving those caught up in the system related to people who continued to be involved in the system and in a very public way continued to deny their guilt.

The concept of forgiving someone who does not recognise his or her guilt has the potential to be easily misused. This certainly could relate to the traditional concept of forgiveness, particularly in the light of what is often interpreted as the biblical injunction for limitless forgiveness. However, one must ask whether such an injunction really applies to people who are systematically victimised over an extended period. It is, therefore, the connection between forgiveness and reconciliation which may help illuminate how forgiveness is relevant to asylum seekers and refugees.

The connection between forgiveness and reconciliation is disputable. Some authors see the two as synonymous, whereas others explicitly deny any intrinsic link between the two concepts. However, in the case of the asylum seekers who forgave the guards or even their torturers in their home countries for their actions, no such reconciliation can take place because there is no continuing relationship. For the refugee who forgave the then Minister of Immigration, there was no personal relationship in the first place. Rather the Minister, who was far removed from the situation, continued to be responsible for his welfare and to be negligent.
in this regard. To link reconciliation as a necessary part of forgiveness would by definition exclude such examples and therefore it is my argument that reconciliation can be part of forgiveness, but it does not need to be. Forgiveness is still able to occur even when there is no possibility of reconciliation. Perhaps then, it is more accurate to say that forgiveness is not synonymous with reconciliation, but rather opens the possibility for the latter to occur.

If reconciliation is excluded as a necessary part of a definition of forgiveness, the issue remains as to what forgiveness actually is. From a human point of view, the reflection of Jacob that forgiveness involves handing back the hurts to God has two strengths to it. Firstly it allows for dealing with hurts that are so deep that it is not humanly possible to forgive. Although the hurt and pain may continue to be ongoing from the incidents that call for forgiveness, it allows for a sense of closure for the victim, even if the perpetrator does not know about this. The need for ‘closure’ is often observed in our contemporary world, and perhaps this sense of ‘handing over to God’ is a healthier method of achieving this than minimising the pain or seeking revenge. Secondly, ‘handing over to God’ acknowledges the role of God in forgiveness. This means that when the victim continues to struggle with the hurt and pain of past events, there is not also the added burden of guilt for feeling unable to forgive. Even with the best intentions, there are hurts that are so deep they continue to reverberate in lives and small events can trigger memories of those experiences. This, of course, does not mean the victim has not forgiven the perpetrator, but rather what the perpetrator has done inevitably remains part of their life experience. This ongoing effect is illustrated most clearly in the case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a disorder with which many of the refugees and asylum seekers have to deal. There are times when small events can trigger overwhelming memories of traumatic events. Whilst PTSD is an extreme example, it must be noted that flashbacks can occur with less traumatic experiences. Forgiveness is therefore about not allowing such past experiences to continue to affect daily life, ideally for both the victim and perpetrator.

However, it must be noted that the connection between forgiveness and hope is both a theological and a pastoral issue. For those who have offered or accepted forgiveness, it means that the past no longer continues to alter the ways in which the oppressed person experience the world and can even bring healing to relationships and systems. As to those who accept forgiveness, remorse for the past should also mean a change of behaviour for the future. Linn et al. do not view forgiveness as a passive response to oppression, rather they argue that by working through the stages of grief, one can arrive at a position wherein positive action can be taken which changes the situation for both the victim and perpetrator. They suggest that it is through listening to the internal voice underlying the initial response one is able to identify what is truly desired and determine a positive action that can be taken to amend the situation.

Yet, for the asylum seekers, in most cases positive action led to further victimisation. An advocate cited examples where asylum seekers were specifically targeted because they had attempted to take positive action:

He had never been in the management unit, but then one day when he was trying to defend a friend who the guards were attacking and dragging him away, he said he’s OK, he’s going through a bit of a hard time, he was trying to be gentle with them. So they came back and took him and some others to the management unit. [Gloria]

Under such circumstances, even Linn’s radical definition of forgiveness does not seem to apply. Perhaps then, the offering of forgiveness is more to do with not allowing past hurts to continue to impact upon the present, particularly on relationships with other people. For many of the asylum seekers there was no possibility of mending the relationship as Linn suggest. However, without addressing the issues involved of power and control, in
the example given by Gloria, trauma can continue to affect other relationships and thus continue to reverberate through life.

Between Moltmann and the advocates, there seems to be two sides to the one coin. Moltmann talks about receiving forgiveness, which can be constructed in more traditional terms, whereas the advocates discuss the offering of forgiveness by the offended party. Although these concepts interact, they are not both necessarily present. Being forgiven does bring, as Moltmann points out, new life to the guilty. It calls forth a change in behaviour and, as traditional theology maintains, requires recognition of guilt. Yet, for the offended party, forgiveness involves letting go of that which affects relationships, not only with the offended party, but also with other people. It is through this double action of forgiveness, given and received, that hope is generated on both sides for a new beginning, not only with God or the offended party, but also with humanity. Neither the victim nor the perpetrator needs to continue to play the roles into which they have been cast by past actions and therefore they are free to be truly themselves.

Not every perpetrator will take up the offer of forgiveness, but those who do are able to recognise their past wrongs and restore relationships, if not with the victim, then certainly with others who have been or might have been affected by the on-going impact of the perpetrator’s actions. Forgiveness offers both the hope and the possibility that life can be different to that which is experienced in the present. Thus the actions of the asylum seekers, as related by the advocates, not only demonstrate a model of forgiveness which connects with hope, but also this can be generalised into examining forgiveness for a variety of situations.

However, a further aspect still needs to be addressed and that is the question as to why there is the connection between hope and forgiveness. The connection is more than simply the offer of a new beginning for both the perpetrator and the victim. In a conversation that I had with a survivor of torture I raised the issue of the connection between these concepts and the fact that Moltmann had not written about the links. The survivor differentiated between the two concepts, saying that forgiveness deals with the now whereas hope looks towards the future: when one is coping with the effects of torture, the now is what is important. This could well be a starting point for thinking about the connections. It is only through dealing with the now, that we can look towards the future; forgiveness aims to deal with past hurts and therefore enables the survivor to hope for the future.

Whilst this point is valid and useful, the connection between hope and forgiveness is more than a continuum. Whether or not it is recognised at the time, forgiveness is in itself an act of hope. This view of forgiveness recognises that even the perpetrator is the beloved of God and hence treats the perpetrator as such. It recognises in the perpetrator the potential to grow and change regardless of whether he/she does so for himself/herself.

At the same time, forgiveness names the wrongs, which is a necessary step towards enacting the future reign of God. It is not so much about minimising past hurts as seeking to use those hurts creatively in order to generate a new future for all concerned. Naming the evils is a necessary part of the process. There are actions of humans that cannot simply be swept away; the torture experienced by many of the asylum seekers is one such example. Through naming events as evil, a victim is able to recognise that such events were in no way his/her fault. It also allows victims to take control of their reactions. However, forgiveness enables the humanity of the perpetrator to be recognised and by so doing reduces the risk of dehumanising them and seeking revenge. Revenge simply perpetuates the cycle of violence that can occur where one party does not recognise the other as fully human; forgiveness breaks this cycle and allows for a new beginning. Where a continuing relationship occurs, forgiveness enables the development of creative solutions which can change that relationship in order to create a new future for all concerned.
Forgiveness is essential to Christianity and it brings hope on both sides of the equation. Yet care must be taken that it does not become an obligation that is used to further abuse the hurt, but rather that it is part of the healing process. Being able to forgive can free both victim and perpetrator from the past in order to recreate a new future. This does not necessarily mean the development of a relationship, particularly where one did not exist prior to the events requiring forgiveness. However, it does mean that although those events may inform the future, they no longer determine it.

NOTES

1. Databases searched were Proudest, Academic OneFile and Atla Religion Database
3. Ethics approval was gained from Murdoch University to complete this study and all names referred to in this article are pseudonyms.
4. For example in Jürgen Moltmann, The crucified God: The cross of Christ as the foundation and criticism of Christian theology, trans. R. A. & Bowden Wilson, John (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974), there are eight references to forgiveness all of which discuss forgiveness by God. Similar results are found in searching others of Moltmann’s books.
8. Ibid., 53.
11. When I refer to ‘Islam’ it is important to note that this really relates to Islam as the advocates related the refugees’ understanding. Like most other religions, Islam has a wide variety of interpretations and no one can be considered the correct one. However, it must also be noted that many of the asylum seekers and refugees were fleeing from fundamentalist Islam and therefore this would have colored their views on many of the concepts discussed.
12. Such as in Rosemary Radford Ruether, Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 74
13. This concept was expressed to me by a Muslim refugee who moved from her homeland as a child.
14. Moltmann, In the end, 75
15. For example in J. K. Grider, ‘Forgiveness,’ in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 460. Also found in biblical passages such as Matthew 18:22 that speaks of forgiving ‘seventy-seven times’ i.e. a limitless number of times
18. I am reflecting here on the frequency with which on the news at the end of a court case a victim is interviewed and says ‘this has brought closure, I can move on now’ and I am personally questioning whether that sense of closure is more about having an official attribution of blame. As I am writing this, there were recently several news articles where these comments were made on the ABC Online (www.abc.net.au/news)
20. Ibid., 608
21. Dennis Linn, Matthew Linn, and Sheila Fabricant Linn, Don’t forgive too soon: extending the two hands that heal (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 32
22. Ibid., 43

A T FIRST SIGHT one might think that our current economic turmoil has little or nothing to do with the steady, patient work of reinforcing and honouring human rights. Yet basic human rights suffer during economic depressions, especially the rights to work, adequate nutrition, health care and education among others. As Cardinal Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said in 2010, globalisation has lifted millions out of poverty, but also displayed ‘flagrant disregard for human dignity, inequality, poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, social exclusion, violations of religious freedom, and materialism that continue to ravage human communities, with destructive consequences for the future of our planet and for our human family.’

(An or) But what are the drivers of these destructive aspects of globalisation? I am arguing that the economic crisis derives from ideologies that indirectly are undermining human rights and involve a concerted attack on them. In support of this view, I have drawn from some leading economists who are arguing for a recovery of the moral dimension of economics so as better to promote human wellbeing. One cannot help noting some remarkable congruences between many of their views and traditional Catholic positions on the philosophy of economics. In my view, this represents an historic opportunity for Catholic and other religious thinkers to engage more closely with economists in reworking the moral foundations of this critical discipline.

One doesn’t have to be a Marxist to recognise that powerful financial and corporate interests have been exposed as acting like ‘robber barons’ of the current financial era. But I was intrigued by a comment by Joseph Stiglitz (2002, xv) a decade ago in *Globalization and Its Discontents* that there was *not* a giant conspiracy at work to undermine the global economy: ‘You won’t find hard evidence of a terrible conspiracy by Wall Street and the IMF to take over the world. I don’t believe such a conspiracy exists. The truth is subtler.’

Stiglitz won a Nobel Prize in 2001, was senior vice-president and chief economist at the World Bank from 1997 to 2001, and president of the council of economic advisers to President Clinton, so he writes from extensive experience as an insider about these international economic and political institutions. He is also an adviser, among others to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, and his thinking has helped shape the conversation behind formal Catholic responses to economic problems. What did he mean by this claim that the ‘truth is subtler’?

In a series of books since, Stiglitz detailed the systemic corruption in global markets and institutions. Clearly no conspirators in their right minds would set out deliberately to undermine the international markets. It was not a conspiracy in that sense. Yet he is arguing...
that the collusion of large numbers of people in financial and economic circles, buttressed by the free-market ideology of neoliberalism, manipulated the levers of the global economy in their own financial interest. 'Decisions were made on the basis of what seemed a curious blend of ideology and bad economics, dogma that sometimes seemed to be thinly veiling special interests.' (Stiglitz, 2002, xiii).

Stiglitz highlighted two crucial factors: the impact of the economic ideology that obscured what was actually happening or likely to happen, misleading many of the players involved; and secondly, the extensive influence of powerful sectional and business interests manipulating policies and outcomes for their own short-term benefit. Though these groups did not intend such economic mayhem, that was the effect of their collusion.

This combination of ideology and special interests amounts to a concerted assault on the human rights of millions of people who find themselves denied the means of social and economic fulfilment and participation. Church and community groups involved in a wide range of social services are faced with responding to greater need in societies, to ameliorate the effects of this social distress.

It is very important, then, that social service networks see their role not just as one of direct service provision, but as challenging the policies and philosophies that result in such pernicious outcomes in terms of human rights. The decisive battles must be fought at this level also, and not just in the day-by-day political argy-bargy over detailed policies.

As we all know, the complexity of these issues, not to mention the mystification of much economics and financial details, can be quite bewildering and disempowering. However, a number of leading economists have been charting a way through this morass. They warned against the likelihood of just such an economic collapse as the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), and what they regarded as the failure not just of many economists, but of the discipline of economics itself (Krugman, 2009; Kuttner, 1991, 5). Some of these critics talk about the crisis as fundamentally a moral crisis, resulting from a collapse of values.

According to Tomas Sedlacek in his Economics of Good and Evil, ‘For economists, ethics became uninteresting and irrelevant. There was no need to talk about ethics—it sufficed to rely on the invisible hand of the market; it would automatically transform private vices (such as selfishness) into general welfare (such as growth in efficiency).’ (Sedlacek, 2011, 183).

In view of this, how should church and community groups respond to such an ethical collapse, and how might they contribute to rebuilding a moral consensus about the goals of social and economic policy?

Given the uncertainty and complexity of economic philosophy and analysis, as well as the different disciplines involved, theologians have been slow to engage vigorously in economic debates, despite the resources available in works such as Boswell et al. (2000) and Himes (2004) along with the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004) and statements from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2011, 2012). Yet some leading economists have been advising Vatican agencies for several decades, including Kenneth J. Arrow, Partha Dasgupta, Jacques H. Dreze, and Amartya Sen. Arrow warned in 1990: The ‘relaxation of moral standards and an over-vivid exaltation of the markets and of the value of greed in the last decade have led to new abuses.’ He argued that the market should not be the final arbiter. ‘Actions of individuals must be governed by moral considerations of consequences and by legal controls’
The eyes of the world looked to the Vatican for an incisive moral critique of the economic crisis, but Pope Benedict has been careful with his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, which was delayed two years to make a more comprehensive response. Fortunately, eminent economists have continued advising Vatican agencies about the causes and interpretation of events, particularly the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, chaired by Professor Mary Ann Glendon.

**Ideology and the effects of the GFC**

The Global Financial Crisis has carved a path of destruction through various national economies, not least in the United States whence in large part it sprang. Tens of millions of people in Europe and the United States alone have been out of work. According to Paul Krugman (2012, 8-9) in *End this Depression Now!* six million Americans had been out of work for six months or more, four million for over a year. A survey in June 2011 found that a third of Americans had either lost work themselves or one of their family had, while 40 percent of families had suffered reduced wages or benefits. Some 300,000 school teachers had been laid off and the US economy was running 7 percent below potential, representing a loss of $1 trillion of output a year (Krugman, 2012, 14-16).

Full-time employment in the US declined by 8.7 million in the four years from November 2007. A survey revealed that only 38 percent of the unemployed received unemployment benefits, and 44 percent had never received any (Stiglitz, 2012, 10-11). By early 2012, 8 million American families had lost their homes, and 3-4 million more could still lose theirs (Stiglitz, 2012, 199).

In the euro zone countries, 25 million people were registered as unemployed in August 2010, with the unemployment rate in October 2012 in Greece at 24.4% and Spain at 25%, and double that for youth unemployment. Unless these economies improve quickly, the unemployment rates may result in the rise of extreme political movements. It is inconceivable that such countries could maintain political stability if they had to endure another five or more years of austerity and depression.

As many people have pointed out, the crisis could have and should have been avoided (Stiglitz, 2010b, 1). It resulted from a combination of outright greed corrupting key economic, financial and political institutions, along with a heavy dose of economic dogma, disguised in the rhetoric of what Stiglitz calls ‘free-market fundamentalism’, or neoliberalism, with its belief that free markets would of themselves resolve moral issues and produce the fairest outcomes. This neoliberalism emphasised liberalisation and a minimal role for the state, along with its ‘strong faith’ in unfettered markets (Serra, Spiegel and Stiglitz, 2008, 41).

Stiglitz’s early writing focused on the free-market policies of the International Monetary Institution, which was pursuing policies of privatisation, free trade, and liberalisation, particularly of financial markets, but without putting in place an international structure of governance for the processes of globalisation, and neglecting considerations of social equity and sustainability (Serra et al., 2008, 3-9). This set of IMF policies was heavily biased against developing countries, as the Asian financial crisis of 1997 demonstrated. Stiglitz commented that ‘capital account liberalization was the single most important factor leading to the [Asian] crisis.’ (Stiglitz, 2002, 99).

Jeffrey Sachs from the Earth Institute at Columbia University, in *The Price of Civilization: Economics and Ethics after the Fall*, likewise deplored policies that led to deregulated markets, tax cuts for the rich and reduced social spending resulting in widening inequality. ‘Globalization unleashed vast corporate power and undermined whole regions’ (Sachs, 2011, xii). He continued: ‘The key question today is global and urgent: how can capitalism in the twenty-first century deliver the three overarching goals sought by socie-
ties around the world: economic prosperity, social justice, and environmental sustainability?’ (Sachs, xv).

Confronting the Power of Special Interests

These neoliberal policies won supporters because they served the interests of powerful interest groups. Stiglitz wrote in 2010 in the Stiglitz Report, commissioned by the president of the UN General Assembly, Miguel D’Escoto Brockmann: ‘While ideas matter, so do interests: the regulatory regime may have been affected more by the influence of certain special interests than the merits of theoretical arguments.’ (Stiglitz et al, 2010b, 64).

Stiglitz warned that there was a danger that ‘existing power structures can seize hold of these moments of crisis and use them for their own benefit, reinforcing inequalities and inequities. There may be a greater concentration of economic and political power after the crisis than before.’ He asked rhetorically: ‘Can we manage the global economy in ways that enhance the well-being of most citizens around the world? We believe we can’ (2010b, 198-99), promoting the human wellbeing especially of the poorest people.

This is a hopeful note to strike, but Stiglitz (2006, 278) is very well aware of the forces arrayed against him. He especially notes that major corporations had been shaping the processes of globalisation in their own interests, and he named Microsoft, ExxonMobil, along with agricultural and pharmaceutical interests for corrupting the political process through their donations to both major US political parties.

For much of the world, globalization as it has been managed seems like a pact with the devil… closer integration into the global economy has brought greater volatility and insecurity, and more inequality. It has even threatened fundamental values (Stiglitz, 2010b, 292).

In The Price of Inequality, Stiglitz seeks to expose the power of special interests. ‘A central thesis of this book is that rent seeking is pervasive in the American economy’ (2012, 107), impairing efficiency and widening inequalities. He added that ‘the agenda of privatization and liberalization has itself been corrupt; it has garnered high rents for those who used their political influence to push it.’ (2012, 176). ‘We have created an economy and a society in which great wealth is amassed through rent seeking, sometimes through direct transfers from the public to the wealthy’, but mostly through ‘monopoly power and other forms of exploitation’ (2012, 266). Stiglitz endorsed the billionaire philanthropist, Warren Buffitt, saying: ‘There’s been class warfare going on for the last 20 years and my class has won.’ (2012, 180).

Restoring Social Equity

For many years, Stiglitz and others have been alarmed at the growing inequality involved with neoliberal economic policies. In his pre-GFC book, Making Globalization work: the next Steps to Global Justice, Stiglitz (2006, 44) wrote that even the IMF was finally recognising that market fundamentalism had deep flaws and was damaging poorer countries. He insisted that true ‘success means sustainable, equitable, and democratic development that focuses on increasing living standards, not just on measured GDP’, but in terms of social equity, with improved incomes, health, life expectancy and infant mortality rates.

Stiglitz highlighted the growing inequality resulting from neoliberal economics and the manipulation by special interests in his essay ‘Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%’ in Vanity Fair in May 2011, detailing the redistribution of wealth in the United States away from the great majority of the population to the top 1 percent of income earners. His writings helped stimulate the Occupy Wall Street protests.

Alarmed about the growing inequality of wealth, Stiglitz developed his call for a renewal of morality in economics. Even before the 2007 crisis, ‘the top 0.1 percent of America’s households had an income that was 220 times larger than the average of the bottom 90 percent’, with the wealthiest 1 percent owning
more than a third of the nation’s wealth. Moreover, ‘the top 1 percent of Americans gained 93 percent of the additional income created in the country’ in 2010, and the ratio of ‘CEO annual compensation to that of the typical worker by 2010 was back to what it had been before the crisis to 243 to 1.’ (Stiglitz, 2012, 3). In Japan the ratio between CEO pay and that of the typical worker is 16 to 1; and the old US ratio was 30 to 1 (Stiglitz, 2012, 21). Minimum wages in the USA had fallen behind inflation, and the real federal minimum wage in 2011 was ‘15 percent lower’ than in 1980 (Stiglitz, 2012, 242).

By late 2012, in the US ‘the share of national income going to the top 0.1 percent (some 16,000 families) has risen from just over 1 per cent in 1980 to almost 5 per cent now’ (Anon., 2012, 48-49).

Such extreme inequality is contrary to the moral aspirations of economists like Keynes. Krugman (2012, 208) quotes from Keynes’s *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*: ‘The outstanding faults of the economic society in which we live are its failure to provide for full employment and its arbitrary and inequitable distribution of wealth and income’. One could say the same today. Economics needs to restore these aspirations for social equity to the heart of economic thinking and policy.

**Forewarned but not Forearmed**

The Global Financial Crisis was not like a natural tragedy that was unavoidable and unforeseen. It was foreseen, with people like Stiglitz (2010a, 8) repeatedly warning about such a looming crisis. But too many people were making too much money out of the ‘bubble’ that they did not want to take precautions. It is not just the leading decision-makers and bankers that were derelict in their duty. Tens of thousands of others, in finance and banking, along with the insurance and housing scams, were complicit, perhaps believing in the mantra that they had invented a whole new world of finance and derivatives, a new economy that had surpassed the fundamentals of economics and could ignore the lessons of economic history and past ‘bubbles’.

Other leading economists had also warned of approaching disaster: Nouriel Roubini and Stephen Mihm (2010), Robert J Shiller, and the financier, George Soros among others. Soros (2004, 91-92) insisted that markets on their own were incapable of ensuring collective goods or social justice, which only a ‘political process’ could provide. Amartya Sen (1987/92) and others had long been pointing to the need for a renewed moral framework within economics, and deploring the gap between economics as a discipline and moral philosophy.

Stiglitz (2012, 248) argues that the US Federal Reserve was ‘captured’ by the worldview of dominant bankers, which helps explain why the Obama administration bailed out the banks at the expense of homeowners. Of this ‘the world’s most massive transfer of wealth’, he wrote: ‘never in the history of the planet had so many given so much to so few who were so rich without asking anything in return.’ (Stiglitz, 2012, 168). The insurance giant AIG ‘got more than $150 billion–more than was spent on welfare to the poor from 1990 to 2006.’ (Stiglitz, 2012, 180).

Stiglitz contended that the government should have directed the funds to bailing out homeowners, writing down the principal, perhaps with debt-to-equity conversions (2012, 170). ‘The administration’s response to the massive violations of the rule of law by the banks reflects our new style of corruption: the Obama administration actually fought against attempts by states to hold the banks accountable.’ (Stiglitz, 2012, 201).

Jeffrey Sachs (2011, 23), too, lamented the handling of the crisis by the Obama administration. ‘Wall Street firms such as Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, and JP Morgan Chase not only were the central actors in the financial crisis of 2008 but were the very places to which Obama turned to staff the senior economic posts in his administration.’ The bankers who brought down the world economy remain at
the top of the heap’ in lucrative positions on Wall Street, academia or in government (Sachs, 24).

As for ways to solve the crisis, Stiglitz (2012, 236) strongly opposes contractionary policies on the plea of reducing debt. ‘What’s striking is how many people… have been seduced by the myth of austerity and the myth that the government budget is like a household’s budget.’ In his view, the 1 percent has ‘distorted the budget debate—using an understandable concern about overspending to provide cover for a program aimed at downsizing the government’, weakening the economy and increasing unemployment. Stiglitz (2012, 217) criticised the ‘deficit fetishism’ that had gained ground. ‘The ratings agencies—still trusted in spite of their incredibly bad performance in recent decades—have joined the fray, downgrading US debt.’

Paul Krugman also strongly opposed harsh austerity policies, saying they will plunge the world deeper into depression. Instead he argues for thoughtful expansionary stimulus policies, including in surplus countries, which he thinks could end the depression within a few years. ‘The Austerian desire to slash government spending and reduce deficits even in the face of a depressed economy may be wrongheaded; indeed, my view is that it’s deeply destructive’. He was ‘quite shocked’ with the OECD call for rate hikes in May 2010 (2012, 202). He blamed the push for further austerity on lenders and bankers who insist that priority be given to repaying debts. They also ‘oppose any action on the monetary side that either deprives bankers of returns by keeping rates low or erodes the value of claims through inflation’ (2012, 207). In other words, these creditors are putting their claims to profits before the basic human rights of millions of others to work and a decent livelihood for their families.

A Crisis in Values in Economics

Markets must be tamed, Stiglitz wrote, so that they benefited most citizens.

Much of what has gone on can only be described by the words ‘moral deprivation’. Something wrong happened to the moral compass of so many of the people working in the financial sector and elsewhere.

He noted that hardly anyone responsible for the crisis had been convicted. ‘What is remarkable is how few seemed—and still seem—to feel guilt, and how few were the whistleblowers. Something has happened to our sense of values when the end of making more money justifies the means, which in the U.S. subprime crisis meant exploiting the poorest and least-educated among us.’ (Stiglitz, 2012, xvii).

The GFC is not just another financial crisis. It is global in its impact, and threatens the very viability of international markets and trade. Fundamentally it is a moral crisis which has corroded from within the institutions and values we thought were firmly established. In the view of Stiglitz (2010a, 278), ‘too little has been written about the underlying ‘moral deficit’ that has been exposed [by the] unrelenting pursuit of profits and the elevation of the pursuit of self-interest.’

Jeffrey Sachs (2011, xv) also called for a return to ‘civic virtue...to reconnect public values and public policy’. He wrote that ‘Globalization unleashed vast corporate power and undermined whole regions’, challenging the hopes that capitalism would provide ‘prosperity, social justice and environmental sustainability.’ The biographer of Keynes, Robert Skidelsky (2009, 3), concurred: ‘At the heart of the moral failure is the worship of growth for its own sake, rather than as a way to achieve the ‘good life’.’ Robert and Edward Skidelsky wrote in How much is enough? Money and the Good Life:

The Anglo-American version of individualist capitalism is kept going largely for the benefit of a predatory plutocracy, whose members cream off the richest prizes while justifying their predation in the language of freedom and globalization... At the core of our system is a moral decay that is tolerated only because the cleaning of its Augean stables is too traumatic to contemplate. (Skidelsky, 2012, 181).

Many leading economists are thus insisting
on the need to develop policies that truly serve human wellbeing, and for clearer awareness of the role of moral values and human rights not just in the personal conduct of players, but in the institutions themselves, including the ratings agencies, the banking systems, in governance and media. But we are still far from such positive outcomes, and as Roubini and Mihm (2010, 300) warned, we may face ‘far more frequent and virulent crises’ especially because of the volatility of capital movements.

**Conclusion**

These writings on the current crisis suggest that this is an important moment for the churches to engage in focused but public conversation, first, about the values needed to redevelop a sustainable economics, with fairer outcomes especially for the poorer sections of humanity; and secondly to promote efforts to translate such values into policy directions and outcomes that promote and protect basic human rights. It is normally not the role of church officials to take on the professional work of people in the social sciences and policy areas, though of course many relevant church agencies have contributions to make here. But the churches have a duty to encourage people to run a moral template over policies and actions to ensure outcomes are fair and equitable, especially for more vulnerable sections of the population. As one of the reputed contributors to the writing of *Caritas in Veritate*, Stefano Zamagni noted, capitalism is not capable of generating the ‘cultural inputs and sophisticated moral code’ needed to sustain it, hence its need for an ethical foundation such as religion provides (Zamagni, 2010a, 63).

The implications of the GFC are that unless the power of global corporations is curtailed and made accountable, then the assault of basic human rights will continue, especially because of the redistribution of wealth to upper income groups. Without major adjustments to the distribution of wealth, demand will continue to lag, resulting in high unemployment, low wages, reduced influence of labour movements, homelessness, poor health and educational outcomes for millions of people, along with social and political marginalisation. Some prominent economists fear all this could even undermine democracy, leaving corporations in control and managing economies in their own interests. As Sedlacek wrote (2011, 109), ‘The large and growing role of big money in politics is the grim political reality of our times. It is the key to understanding the expanding tentacles of the corporatocracy.’

Recent popes have given strong leadership on these matters, including Pope Benedict’s *Caritas in Veritate*. In April 2010, Benedict said: ‘The worldwide financial breakdown... has also shown the error of the assumption that the market is capable of regulating itself... as a sort of self-calibrating mechanism driven by self-interest and profit-seeking.’ Instead it must support ‘the dignity of the person, the pursuit of the common good’ and the ‘integral development’ of everyone. He repeated his warning from *Caritas in Veritate* that trust was essential, for without ‘trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation.’ (Benedict, 2011, #5).

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ON THE SURFACE the problem of evil seems to have sunk out of sight in the current debate between theism and the new atheism. Given the Darwinian tenor of the debate, any ‘problem’ with ‘evil’ dissolves into the processes of evolution, as Richard Dawkins explains: ‘Evolutionary biologists see no problem, because evil and suffering don’t count for anything, one way or the other, in the calculus of gene survival.’

Dawkins dismisses the traditional debate about ‘evil’ to focus on other issues, particularly the argument from design, because he thinks believers have too much wriggle room to escape when it is God versus evil:

But for a more sophisticated believer in some kind of supernatural intelligence, it is childishly easy to overcome the problem of evil. Simply postulate a nasty god—such as the one who stalks every page of the Old Testament. Or, if you don’t like that, invent a separate evil god, call him Satan, and blame his cosmic battle against the good god for evil in the world. Or—a more sophisticated solution—postulate a God with grander things to do than to fuss about human distress. Or a god who is not indifferent to suffering but regards it as the price that has to be paid for free will in an orderly, lawful cosmos. Theologians can be found buying into all these rationalisations.

At this point it is not all clear which is the worse situation to be in: to blithely accept that there are no questions or answers as regards suffering and evil or to struggle to find an answer in terms of God’s ultimate providence for us.

It is crucial to note that there are two diametrically opposed life situations at stake on this issue: the laboratory view of scientific investigation and experimentation and the personal viewpoint of the victims of suffering. For a scientist such as Dawkins, evolution is the greatest show on earth, with its improbable events, random selection, consolidated gene survival, dead-ends and successes, even though these are less than perfect and the system is constantly ‘misfiring’. This may be good science, but it seems a less than satisfactory answer to someone who is suffering.

The problem of evil is a crucial problem for believers, first, because they believe the Creator God is good, but also, just as crucially, because religion faces the issue from a personal point of view. For Judeo-Christians, at least from the time of the writing of the first chapters of Genesis and the Book of Job, the question of human suffering has been an issue for faith: Why do innocent human beings suffer? Why is there so much violence and destruction in the world? In modern times the issue seems even more acute as the wars and violence of the twentieth century multiplied victims in unimaginable numbers. In particular, how could an evil as great as the Holocaust be allowed to happen? In this century we seem to be inundated with atrocities and calamities which continually fill our TV screens and keep the question inescapably before us.

While Dawkins may push the issue aside, others are not so dismissive. Colin Howson, a philosopher, rather than a scientist, considers the problem of evil still to be the principal and decisive argument against theism; as he explains:

Since God is the cause of everything that hap-
pens it would seem to follow that God must be the cause of that suffering. How could a supposedly all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good God be a cause of evil?²

And he concludes:

Earthquake, tempest, disease, to say nothing of the periodic infliction of terror and suffering by one part of the human creation on another, might have posed no logical threat to the vindictive warlords of the ancient religions, but they seem barely consistent with this new super-social-worker. Woody Allen’s suggestion that God is simply an underachiever might exonerate a less capable individual but hardly an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and all-caring Demiurge.⁴

The argument is that an omnipotent and good God cannot coexist with evil and suffering in the world. Omnipotence, it is argued, means that God is always able to act: it is immoral for such a Being to stand by and allow innocent beings to suffer when he could intervene—God is therefore either impotent or evil.

The assumption is that God is like any human agent, who, when he or she is in a position to act to prevent a harm from occurring, has a general duty, in normal circumstances, to try and save that person from harm, e.g. a good swimmer who happens to see someone drowning. It is a powerful analogy, but does it apply to God? It is not clear that it does.

First, God’s action in creating is unlike any other action that we know. God creates in the eternal ‘Now’ of the Godhead, outside all space and time, while space and time unfolds according to the laws, numbers and processes set in place with creation—it is this ‘fine tuning’ that modern science has uncovered.

Secondly, God’s acts ‘beyond’ the Godhead never express all that God is, as Christians believe with regard to the human nature of Christ—such actions are always limited by God’s free act in creating a material universe. When, therefore, we talk of God’s omnipotence we must take into account the fine tuning of this particular material universe and the limitations it imposes.

Thirdly, theology has long maintained that God acts in our world through secondary causes. God is always the Ultimate Cause, not just another cause in the world, and all God’s creative activity in our world happens through the unfolding processes of space and time together with human historical action in the world. What would it be like, we can wonder, for the Creator to be constantly directly ‘intervening’ in creation?

The New Atheism has a lot of suggestions towards improving the situation. Here is one of Howsen’s suggestions for a world without human evil:

Let people have the intention of acting in a way that is harmful to others, but let God prevent them from performing those actions. Having the intention is enough to convict, so God can discharge his function of judgment in a no-harm world in which actors have free will. God is quite capable of constructing such a world, since it is logically possible, and he is, we can remind ourselves, bounded only by logical possibility.⁵

But, as we have just seen, it is not only a question of ‘logical possibility’, but of the kind of universe God has created. Howsen’s solution seems to recommend a kind of shut-off switch hard-wired into our nervous systems. Neater and safer it might be, but we would be more like advanced computers or exotic pets than human beings. Given the amount of suffering in the world, we might be tempted to ask whether that would neces-
sarily be a bad thing!

Modern science tells us that we are one possible world among a billion billion others, each, we can suppose, with its own ‘tuning’ of set laws and numbers. We will never know what those other possibilities might be, but we are learning more and more of the chance events and evolutionary processes that have given us the life we have now. Is it, even given the amount of suffering, a good world?

Our world is a ‘perfectible’ world. It began with a given set of laws and numbers which were ‘fine tuned’ for life. This billions of years process has involved enormously improbable chance events, geological changes over aeons, successive climate changes, intricate food chains, mass extinctions, genetic survival mechanisms, random selection, and many dead-ends, to arrive finally at human self-consciousness and freedom.

We, as human beings, experience ourselves as beings of indefinable depth, with an unconscious that encapsulates the aeon-long development of the human species, a brain of immense complexity, a body with its own specific capabilities and connectedness with the evolving world, the freedom to create a distance of the self from the environment with the ability to act autonomously, and a self-consciousness that allows us to relate to others as persons. Are we, then, in a position to say what kind of complex conditions were necessary to produce such unique, thinking, feeling, choosing, and potentially responsible beings, able to share in the future of a perfectible world?

New Atheism’s evidence for suffering is stretched to include all animal pain and predation. Yet science tells us pain has crucial functions in biological evolution both as an awareness of something wrong with a system, and as a spur to development. Can you have bodies without pain? Ecological systems depend for the maintenance of their balance, complexity and diversity on the efficient working of natural food chains, so that no one species endangers the system as a whole. It is difficult to see how you can have evolution at all without pain. Cruelty apart, from an ecological point of view, real animal pain consists in loss of habitat and threat of extinction.

At face value, we experience the world as ordered, intelligible, complex, unimaginably rich in species and ecosystems, beautiful and a fitting place for all species, including human beings, to live and prosper. On the human side, we find self-consciousness, autonomy, expanding knowledge, and the potential for goodness, culture and genuine civility.

The critical issue, however, remains human suffering, some of which is the result of natural disasters, much due to biological breakdown, and much again through human neglect and evil. Here suffering becomes personal and we look for answers which will address the human need for meaning and value in our lives.

As New Atheism has pointed out the problem of evil revolves around how we understand God. For the most part the debate has focused on the God of the Philosophers—omniscient, omnipotent, all-good, a collection of attributes each of which tends to be taken absolutely, rather than together as a dynamic whole. In the Scriptures, on the other hand, God is personal and God’s attributes are manifested in personal terms as word and action addressed to human beings. It is there that we find a truly personal response to suffering.

From the outset, Jesus’ mission confronted sickness, suffering and human evil. He did not stay by the Jordan as John the Baptist did, but travelled throughout the countryside, reaching out to the poor, the outcast, the sick and the sinner, offering them healing, inclusion and wholeness, as a sign of God’s Kingdom, now present in his ministry, and to be brought to fulfilment in his death and resurrection.
For Christians the cross confronts head-on the world’s suffering, injustice and loss. Rejection, betrayal, cruelty, violence and Jesus’ execution, are all part of God entering into the darkness of our world. God is identified in Christ with all victims of suffering, rejection and injustice throughout history. For us God is never more the One true God than on the cross of Jesus.

There is hope in suffering because the cross is not the final word. Rather, God’s final Word is the resurrection of Jesus: there God’s promise appears in the darkness of human suffering and death, assuring us that nothing good is ever lost and offering courage, consolation, hope and love to all those who suffer and struggle for a more just world.

The enormity of suffering and evil in our world is always a challenge to faith. The past hundred years have shown, as never before, the malignant forces in our world ever more capable of wreaking indescribable suffering and destruction. Yet, for faith, suffering, victimhood and death, cease to be absolutes, opaque facts we cannot see beyond, but can, in the light of Christ, be seen in the context of our own part in the creation of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (Rev 21:1).

Following Christ’s own example, suffering is something we are meant to strive to overcome where possible. It is we who often stand by and do nothing or, worse, squander the world’s resources. If the world spent the trillions of dollars it spends each year on armaments and excessive luxuries rather on ways to alleviate suffering, there would be much less suffering in the world today. This is our responsibility in a perfectible world.

Personal suffering in our world is inescapable, made worse when it involves those we love, and worse still when it involves innocent human beings. Glib answers do great harm. The cross of Jesus is God’s own response to the utter darkness of that pain and the resurrection an offer of ultimate meaning and hope.

NOTES

4 *ibid.,* 61.
5 *ibid.,* 50.

*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchisedech.* (Hebrews 5.7-10)
THE YEAR OF FAITH which began on October 11th 2012, celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the last Ecumenical Council and acknowledges its profound effects on the Church. Prior to the opening, Benedict XVI addressed participants gathered for the 23rd International Marian Congress in Rome:

As you know, on October 11, to remember that extraordinary event, we will solemnly begin the Year of Faith, that I wanted to orient with the Motu Proprio ‘Porta Fidei,’ which presents Mary as a model of faith, I invoke your special protection and advocacy on the path of the Church entrusted in her, blessed because she believed, this time of grace.¹

This date is of special significance for Blessed John XXIII wanted the Ecumenical Council to open precisely on October 11, on the same day on which the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) proclaimed Mary as ‘Theotokos’ Mother of God. In placing the Year of Faith under the protection of Mary, the Pope exhorted those present to work towards a new theological understanding of what Mary means to the Church today.

A new theological insight suggests more than simply a progression of ideas. At particular times through the centuries different aspects of Mary’s role in the history of salvation have come to the fore. Earliest scholarship, built on the Gospel stories, saw as its primary focus the recognition of Christ as the promised Messiah. Mary’s role was interpreted and defined by those who sought to identify her within this Christological context. She is acknowledged as the human mother who gave Christ his Davidic and Messianic heritage.² Mary’s recognition as Theotokos at the Council of Ephesus in 431 consolidates and ratifies this proposition. Her motherhood of the person Jesus takes in both his human and divine natures.

Benedict XVI, in his earlier role as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, expresses the complexity of this title and its formal progression to ‘Mother of the Church’, a title officially bestowed on Mary by Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council.³ Mary, says Ratzinger, represents creation called to respond to God and attain completion therein. ‘Mary thus represents saved and liberated man, but she does so precisely as a woman…the ‘biological’ and the human are inseparable in the figure of Mary, just as are the ‘human’ and the theological’.⁴

Despite acknowledging Mary’s biological necessity, the Church has concentrated on a theological understanding of her role as Theotokos, the Mother of God. She is further acknowledged as Regina, Queen of Heaven, as Ecclesia the personification of the Church and latterly, as a model for faithful discipleship.⁵ Essential as these understandings are, before Mary was any of these, she was a human mother.

It has been left largely to artists through the ages to make manifest the physical realities of Mary’s pregnancy and Christ’s birth. The mother suckling her baby, Maria Lactans, the essence of motherhood, was the earliest visualization of Mary. Two images, both painted in the catacombs towards the end of the second century⁶ show Mary as a contemporary mother feeding her baby - a motif, endlessly repeated throughout a history of art,
which was to reach its romantic high-point in the late Renaissance. The Counter Reformation brought with it new restrictions. Both Catholic and Reformed societies were becoming more insistent on bodily control and decorum in public places. Post-Tridentine Catholicism presented a more modest model for the faithful to imitate. Mary became silent, self-controlled, enclosed, obedient and demure. Since then Mary has become increasingly distanced from the maternal, her image beautified or glorified to suit the thinking of the times. With the social upheavals of the 70s and 80s the person of Mary as physical Mother has struggled for an identity.

When Marina Warner produced her ground-breaking study on the cult of the Virgin Mary—*Alone of All Her Sex*, written in the seventies but first published in Britain in 1985, she was writing from within the ambit of the sexual revolution and the rise of a populist movement which became identified as ‘women’s lib’. The title itself, taken from a work, *Paschalis Carminus*, by the fifth century Christian poet, Caelius Sedulius, encapsulates both the uniqueness and the enduring power of the Virgin Mary in Christian history. In one short phrase Mary is identified as a sexual being yet marked by her distance from it. The word ‘sex’ both recognises the difference between a man and a woman and names the act which brings them most intimately together. Mary is both a woman who shares something of what we understand today as womanhood but proposes also a model that we cannot hope to emulate. Such a model has ridden out the first wave of feminist condemnation and been buffeted by the shoals and eddies of feminist interpretation. Mary has been resuscitated and glorified by magisterial phraseology and dismissed in an age where virginity is at best misunderstood or thought simply irrelevant. Yet she remains defined arguably more often by her virginity than by her singular purpose—that of being the Mother of God. ‘The Virgin Mary’ is our most common identification both in salutation and in prayer.

The insistence of the Church on the superior value of virginity has a long and battered history. It began with the first man and woman. Eve’s temptation of Adam, sinless and made in God’s image, moves within a biblical page, from the sin of disobedience to a recognition of sexual difference translated immutably and irrevocably by the early exegetes, into the ‘sin’ of sex. From the earliest writings of the Church Fathers, Mary’s virginal and immaculate motherhood stood in opposition to the destructive femininity of Eve.

The Eve-Mary parallel had its foundations in Paul’s recognition of Christ as the second Adam (Romans 5:12-21). As Christ was the new Adam so, logically, Mary became the second Eve. Beginning with Justin in the second century A.D. the redemption of Eve in Mary came to symbolize the salvation of the whole female sex. The mirroring of the Latin ‘Eva’ into the ‘Ave’ of the angel’s greeting became the *imprimatur* for a new understanding of Mary’s role in the history of salvation.

Paul’s admonitions about the dangers of sex and the difficulties intrinsic in the married state set the tone for early Christian exegesis. He says: ‘There is something I want to add for the sake of the widows and those who are not married: it is a good thing for them to stay as they are but if they cannot control the sexual urges, they should get married since it is better to be married than to be tortured.’ (1Cor 7:8-9) The biblical scholar Raymond Brown, however, commenting on Matthew and Luke, points out that although ‘those evange-
lists might be considered unconsciously patriarchal...neither of them presents the conception of Jesus in the context of the superiority of celibacy or the impurity of women’s sexuality..." It was left to Paul to make that connection.

Such ideas flourished within a historical and sociological background. Jewish laws concerning cleanliness and the ‘impure’ nature of blood and the debris of the womb (Leviticus 12-15) focussed on the unknown workings of the body and the perceived threats of both spiritual and physical contagion. Origen’s notions that conception and birth were a type of stain from which the body must inevitably be purified as it moved towards freedom, formed a thirsty seedbed for ideas of the anti-spiritual nature of the act of intercourse. Increasing interest in the functions of the body saw a pseudo-scientific line drawn between the sacred and profane, between virginity and moral integrity and the messy mixing and unstringing that physical union entailed, viewed as it was as a loss of control, a weakening of the human persona. A generation later, Augustine was to tie together the act of intercourse with the transmission of original sin introducing ‘a powerful and toxic theme into medieval theology’. Virginity and celibacy seemed a propitious choice for the noble mind but, in societies with devastating mortality and high reproductive requirements, it was easier said than done. The begetting and rearing of legitimate children was a civic duty and the young were ‘discretely mobilised’ to that task simply for the population of the Roman Empire to remain static. Men were urged to marry. For women at least there was a history of consecrated virginity. The pagan world honoured such sacrifice. Civic virgins were recruited by the city and dedicated to the service of the gods. This was not always a life-time commitment; some were free to marry later in life. In the subsequent Christian world this history was captured for the Christian cause.

By the end of the second century women had become identified with consecrated virginity. Biology of the time augmented that value, women were understood as ‘failed men. Within the womb vital juices coagulated to a more intense degree in male foetuses making them strong and virile; left without such strength, women were soft and liquid, ‘failed males’.

According to Hilda Graef, the importance of virginity came to the fore only after Constantine legitimised the Christian religion (Milan 313) and martyrdom ceased to be one of the main elements of the Christian life. Ascetism, especially in the form of virginity, took its place. As a consecrated state with its own rules and customs Mary was the obvious exemplar. A Coptic document (325) announced the virginal attributes: ‘Mary never saw the face of man, she never left her house, she ate only to sustain her body, she shut her eyes when she put on a garment….’. Mary was now portrayed not as she appears in scripture but as the ideal of a fourth-century consecrated virgin.

By the end of the fourth century Brown suggests, virginity formed the bench-mark for holiness. People held prominence in the Church according to whether or not, or even how much they had been contaminated by sex - virgins and celibates at the top; widows second and married people last...a marker, he says, between the pure and the less pure, a distinction in the hierarchy which pointed heavenwards.

Through centuries of theological debate Mary has attracted a carapace of doctrine
which has served to emphasize the difference between her humanity—that which links her to our human condition and her divine task of mothering the Son of God. It has edged her ever further from the human realities of motherhood and its intimacies and placed her safely within a space distanced from the human but with an affinity for it which both alienates yet attracts.

But the primacy of virginity belongs now to another time and another place. Where virginity had an understanding and a purpose in the ancient world which carried through to early Christianity, it no longer has the same call or meaning. It might have made sense to the early writers to see Christ as the human Son of God, impregnated in totality by the Spirit without any contributing genetic structure and simply ‘grown’ in his mother’s womb, but modern knowledge knows otherwise. Artists of the Middle Ages illustrated the extent of reproductive knowledge of the times. There are many examples of the Annunciation up to and beyond the sixteenth century, where the foetus is shown riding down the beams of light emanating from the Father, as a fully formed baby - at times already shouldering his cross.24 An illumination from a Book of Hours, the Hours of Chevalier de Rohan, shows the Angel Gabriel kneeling before the Virgin as a baby descends down shafts of light. The Virgin holds a baker’s tray since she is the ‘oven in which the Bread of Life is to be baked.’25

Such ideas now are quaint representations of a former age. Society has undergone radical change over the last fifty years. Science and sociology give a different perspective. Women question the validity of arguments which, from earliest Christian understanding, have relegated the single and most important God-given task of re-creation: that of conceiving, forming and nurturing other beings in the image and likeness of God, to at best a second rate duty for those who cannot resist the lures of the flesh, at worst—implied but not stated—to something lustful and uncontrolled.

An ignoring, rather than an ignorance of human biology has seen the emphasis of theological discourse fall undeservedly on the dangers inherent in relationships with the Eve/woman. An understanding of physiology undermines the idea of woman as seductress. It acknowledges what human observation has always known, that a woman can live her life begetting and raising children without a lustful thought or action. Man on the other hand must reach a measure of excitement for the act to take place.26 An historic emphasis on ownership and a ‘woman’s duty’ gave men a sense of entitlement and with it a presumption of, or indifference to, any idea of mutual pleasure. Only in modern times have women had some measure of reproductive freedom. Such freedom has allowed them to make choices. Right or wrong, these choices now form part of the moral fabric of our society and must be taken into account. Marriage is no longer a societal necessity; virginity has become a considered choice.

Mary as virgin before, during and after the birth of her Son is an article of our faith. Mary’s virgin motherhood was commensurate with the divinity she bore. Her perpetual virginity, once a hotly contested theological point, now vested with the note of infallibility, is not so easy to assimilate. The sacrament of marriage has to negotiate that fraught hinge between the human and divine—between Mary as model wife and mother and the realities of human life. For those called to this vocation, the virginal model is to a great extent an anachronism. It is a model of a relationship which overrides and ignores the defining characteristic of marriage in both canon and common law. It provides a textbook case for an annulment in both.

There is ground to be gained by focussing not on the ‘superlative’ aspects of Mary’s life, those aspects which none can hope to emulate, but to focus on those that we can. The ‘maiden’ who answered the angel’s call, if we are to believe the only source for stories of
her early life, those found in the Early Christian Apocrypha, was groomed from birth for both virginity and a God-given task. Her response was not submissive or meek as we hear it so often described, but strong, courageous, resilient and questioning, her capitulation one of trust and renunciation. Mary’s glory comes not from the virtue of virginity *per se* but from her courageous acceptance of the Lord’s call. Her only call was to be a mother. Her child was not incarnated in some outer theological space separated from human reality by an obfuscating screen of mystery and doctrine, but deep inside the warm body of a woman. She contributed all that was human in her child, she gestated him and brought him to birth.

Mary’s journey through motherhood was punctuated by familiar episodes of maternal distress. What mother does not recognise the anguish and the blame when the child she thought to be with others is lost for three days in the Temple? What mother faces without pain, the recognition that her son is on a different journey, that the power base has changed and it is no longer the mother guiding her son but the son separating from his mother? What mother does not recognise the intuitive response to an observed need ‘They have no wine’? It makes no sense to a woman to white-wash the discomforts of pregnancy, to ignore the responsibilities, relentless concern and pain of growing another human being and to elevate simply the sufferings of a mother at the foot of the cross. Mary’s pain began at the conception of her son.

An understanding of Mary as the Mother of God in the Church today needs a radical rethinking if she is to become again a model for our time. She has been theologised to the point that the laity have taken matters into their own hands, granting her a devotion which is often both unrealistic and cultish. Apparitions and titles which take no account of her motherhood appear to border on the model for which the early Reformers saved their particular invective, as did the Church itself- an adoration of the woman herself. A new understanding of Mary’s place in the Church today invites a return to the beginning, a return to the scholarship of the early Church Fathers who first determined the importance and meaning of her presence within salvation history. Early beliefs need to be re-examined in the light of modern knowledge—the Gospels warn us against the dangers of putting new wine into old wine skins (Mark 2:22).

This is a year to get to grips with Mary’s motherhood, to explore the full meaning of what it is to be a mother. Virginity and the celibate life are particular callings, they are not for all of us, nor as the Church has held them to be, are they greater than any of the vocations which humanity has found itself called to. Some values are over-arching. The virtues of continence and chastity apply equally to the married state. The primacy of priesthood will always remain with us as the physical and constant sign of God’s promise and fulfilment. The necessity of celibacy for those called to this vocation remains a matter for debate.

Motherhood, however, is particular and universal; it transcends vocation, it is something we are all called to share for it demands what is particularly human, the need to bring to life and to love and to nurture those who come within our care, the need to love and allow ourselves to be loved. It is a way of engaging with life which recognises and takes on a responsibility not only for a personal family but also for the greater ‘human family’. This is the human side of Mary, the Mary we can identify with and emulate. This is her gift to us. ‘Theotokos’ is not just a doctrinal appellation for Mary but provides a real and meaningful way of living in the world today. ‘The world of the New Testament is not our world, but the task of translating the challenge of Mary, woman and mother, which will speak to the women and men of our own times is an important one’.

MARY’S MOTHERHOOD MATTERS MOST
The Mother of the Redeemer has a precise place in the plan of salvation, for ‘when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’’ (Gal. 4.4-6)
MARY, OUR MENTOR
IN PRAYER

MARY OF NAZARETH was among the ‘little poor ones’ known as God’s *anawim*. Fully graced from the first moment of her existence by the most Holy Trinity, and Mother-Disciple of Jesus Christ the Lord, she was in her earthly life, and now from among the communion of saints in glory, pre-eminently the Woman of Faith. There is a mysterious dynamic at work whereby past memory of Mary enables her loving presence to be experienced in the Church today offering an enduring hope for its role in extending the Reign of God.

Salvation history is marked throughout by decisive moments calling for free human decision to be made in faith. We might think immediately of Abraham’s decision to obey the Word of God commanding him to take his son Isaac to Mount Moriah for sacrifice (Gen 22: 1-14), or recall Moses’ absolute trepidation when faced with his ‘Burning Bush’ experience (Ex 3: 1-12). We might recall other numinous experiences of divine encounter—of Isaiah’s temple vision of the Lord of Hosts and the cleansing of his lips with a live coal (Is 6: 1-13), of Ezechiel’s vision of a raging storm flashing apocalyptic creatures (Ez 1), or of Paul’s blinding ‘Damascus’ experience (Acts 9:1-9). In this reflection we will think especially of the Word of God being revealed in Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary of Nazareth (Lk 1: 26-38). In empathy with her, we enter into the mystery of the Incarnation; we are fraught with her as she is confronted with the implications of being asked to give flesh to the Son of God; we are astounded at her forthright courage in questioning a divine plan that would cut across all her normal reference points; we rejoice in the far-reaching consequences of her heart’s decision: ‘Be it done to me according to your word …’

Every revelatory God-moment is simultaneously a human moment of what is known as *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*. Such moments of insight allure while filling us with holy fear; God invites but never coerces us, to surrender to the Word of the living God. Poet T.S. Eliot captures something of this mysterious experience in his metaphor of ‘the still point in the turning world’.

At the still point of the turning world.
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point,
there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance…
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit, understood
In the completion of its partial ecstasy…

I am using this metaphor in reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary. ‘The still point in the turning world’ of permeable time—Mary’s time, the Church’s time, our time—suggests a delicate balance between what may be described as contemplation in the field of eternity, and as action in the field of time. Thus, Eliot’s ‘dance’ of salvation involves ecstasy and agony as well as daily humdrum ordinari-ness. However turbulent one’s ‘turning world’ may be, there remains faith’s ‘still point’ to be discovered in contemplative prayer, through treasuring the Word and pondering it in the heart as Mary did (Lk 2:19, 51).
Mary of Nazareth was nurtured in the covenant faith of her People. The psalms of David were a source for her prayer. Before and after her marriage to Joseph, Jewish family, social, scriptural, ritual and liturgical traditions formed the pattern of her life of prayer. Placed on the lips of a young woman newly pregnant with the long-awaited Messiah, how magnificently does Luke’s Canticle of Mary (Lk 1:46-55), capture the history of her people and echo Israel’s ancient ‘cry of the poor’ seeking liberation from bondage and injustice. How well it captures too the early Church’s sense of Mary’s prophetic witness to the great deeds of God’s redemptive action yet to be accomplished in Christ.

I acclaim the greatness of the Lord,
I delight in God my Saviour;
who regarded my humble state.
Truly from this day on
all ages will call me blessed.
For God, wonderful in power
has used that strength for me.
Holy the name of the Lord!
whose mercy embraces the faithful,
one generation to the next.
The mighty arm of God
scatters the proud in their conceit,
pulls tyrants from their thrones and raises up
the humble.
The Lord fills the starving
and lets the rich go hungry.
God rescues lowly Israel,
recalling the promise of mercy
the promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham’s heirs forever.4

We have intimations only of how Mary’s mature prayer life developed during and after the public ministry of Jesus until the time of her own death. The synoptic Gospel tradition includes Mary among the ‘true kindred’ of Jesus, namely all those who hear the word of God and do it (Mk 3:31-35; Mt 12:46-50; Lk 8:19-21), a reality reaffirmed when an anonymous woman raised her voice in praise of Mary: ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and

the breasts that nursed you!’ To which Jesus responded: ‘Blessed rather5 are those who hear the word of God and obey it!’ (Lk 11:27-28). The stress on ‘rather’ or ‘in fact’ is revealing in the light of Luke’s parable of the seed falling upon good soil (Lk 8:15): ‘...as for [the seed] in good soil, they are those who hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit in patience’. Thanks to Mary’s ‘holding fast’ to God’s word in faith and action, ‘the blessed fruit of her womb’ is Jesus.

Two powerful prayer moments—‘They have no wine’, uttered at the wedding in Cana (Jn. 2:1-12), and Mary’s silent prayer of agony as she stood by the Cross of Jesus—are handed down to us in the highly symbolic presentation of the Mother of Jesus in the Gospel of John (Jn 19:25-27).

The last explicit mention of Mary at prayer in the New Testament speaks of her presence among the group of Jesus’ disciples at the Church’s Pentecost awakening: ‘...All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers [and sisters]’ (Acts 1:14).

Mary as Mentor

In naming her as ‘our Mentor in prayer’, we imply that Mary, Woman of Faith, guides us in specifically Christian prayer (Mt 6; Lk 11:1-13; Jn 17:1-25). It is important to remember how Jesus’ teaching on prayer as recorded in Luke’s gospel, gives particular emphasis to the
fact that the greatest gift of God in answer to all needs addressed to the Father in our daily ‘asking and seeking and knocking’, is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:13). It is St Paul who would have us know well that,

…it is the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ... [and have us know also, that when we pray] that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:16-17; 26-27).

Gabriel’s promise that: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...’ (Lk 1:35), has been fulfilled in Mary. With her faith re-confirmed at Pentecost, Mary can, and does, lead believers into the ways of the Spirit for ‘building up the Body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Eph 4:13).

If we identify Mary as our Mentor in prayer, then it is presupposed that we have already begun to ‘live Christ’ in ways that are open to the whisperings of the Spirit. We can all, men and women alike, claim Mary, the faithful disciple, as an intimate, pilgrim-companion—compañera as Latin American women like to call her—on our journey of faith. As a mentor, Mary can be claimed as someone who wisely and lovingly encourages, challenges and supports us in discerning pathways to be followed at critical turning points in life, who respects our common humanity and freedom, who befriends us in joy, in oppression (and depression) and in hope; she is ‘truly our sister’ and soul-friend (anam cara) as the Irish like to call her. Christian memories of Mary’s family life in Galilee during the time of Herod the Great, of her being a victim of culture and circumstance in a society dominated by Roman occupation, bring today’s victims courage from remembering her single-mindedness and extraordinary confidence in divine power to reverse the dehumanizing powers of evil. Memory of her active co-operation in the mission of Jesus, and in the first apostolic community qualifies her as our Mentor par excellence.

Mary within the Church

When Vatican Council II included its teaching on ‘The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church’ as Chapter 8 within the document Lumen Gentium, a momentous decision was taken. From the late Middle Ages devotion to Mary in the Church of the West, had steadily developed into a ‘mariology of privileges’ that eclipsed the humble Mary of Nazareth. An exaggerated ‘pious enthusiasm’ for Mary as arch-intercessor on behalf of all those ‘mourning and weeping in a valley of tears’, in effect, displaced Christ as ‘one and only Mediator’ with the Father (Heb 8:6; 12:24). Popular perception of Christ as an angry and vengeful Judge, frequently afforded the person of Mary pseudo-goddess, Magna-Mater status. Art work in the mediaeval West represented her as the high Queen of Heaven, magnificently arrayed and splendidly crowned. Thanks to Vatican II, the place of Mary within—vs being ‘above’ or ‘higher’ than—the Church has been reclaimed in a number of ways, for example:

- Contemporary theology of the Holy Spirit has recovered awareness of the Spirit’s role in the Old Testament, in the mission of Jesus, in the life of Mary and the Church. Honorific titles attributed to Mary as Advocate, Helper, Mediatrix and Mother of the Church, have been reclaimed for the Spirit, the original ‘mother of all believers’.

- Marian dogmas and doctrines (e.g. Immaculate Conception, virginal maternity and Assumption), all of which are primarily about Christ and not about Mary-in-herself, have been developed theologically so as to clarify their relevance to the Church.
Mary’s role in the history of salvation and evangelization, and in the focus given to her in liberation and feminist theologies have been studied closely. Appreciation of the place of marian piety with respect to the Church’s liturgical worship has been restored. The relevance of Mary’s discipleship has become critical in contributing to the Church’s self-understanding today. Well developed ecumenical dialogue has already ‘removed’ Mary from being a major source of contention for many Protestant Christians. Interfaith Islamic-Catholic dialogue has enabled Catholics to discover the importance of Jesus and Mary in the Qur’an. These factors combine to enrich the context for naming Mary as our Mentor in Christian life and prayer.

Mary at Prayer within the Church
at Prayer

The significance of Vatican II’s consideration of Mary’s place in the Church becomes more apparent when we consider the connection of Lumen Gentium: 8 with Chapter 5, ‘The Call of the Universal Church to Holiness’. There is no hierarchy of privilege for being graced in the Spirit. There is one baptismal calling whereby, ‘all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life’. Among the ‘cloud of witnesses’ on earth and in glory, Mary joins many other mentors who encourage us, who are still ‘running the race’ while looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...(Heb. 12:1-2)

The Church’s liturgical prayer is ever mindful of the uniqueness of Mary’s divine motherhood as we celebrate her calling. We honour her as ‘the ever virgin mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God” in the Eucharistic prayers. We remember Mary in major feast-days throughout the year, beginning with the feast of her Divine Motherhood on January 1st that carries forward into major celebrations of the Annunciation, the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception. During Advent each year we enter deeply into the mystery of Mary’s waiting upon the Word praying that Christ will be re-born in the hearts of the faithful at Christmas time. We call upon ‘Holy Mary, Mother of God’ immediately after Christ when calling upon all the saints in the liturgy of baptism. Naming invokes presence. The Latin American Church has a cherished sense of this when, in including the names of their own martyrs in the litany of the saints, the people respond, Presente! instead of Pray for us. Presente invites Mary’s presence and expresses a palpable trust that she is among the community. The Magnificat (Mary’s ‘toast to God!’) is prayed as the Church’s prayer throughout the world continuously across all time zones in the Evening Office of religious communities. In private prayer such as the Rosary and the Angelus we also, with Mary, give thanks for her role in salvation history.

Mary, First Disciple

Since Vatican II, the Catholic community has experienced the results of a shift away from ‘theoretical’ concentration on Mary’s divine motherhood as a fundamental theological principle for representing her as an archetypal model of the Church. Under the influence of modern biblical scholarship, a paradigm of ‘discipleship’ has enabled a renewed way of ‘seeing’ Mary as involved, like ourselves, in the obscurity of faith’s pilgrimage in history; it has allowed for an understanding of Mary in terms of her commitment to Jesus in a ‘hospitality of faith more than in the hospitality of her body which welcomed his coming to his people”. A paradigm of discipleship provides a contemporary perspective for enhancing appreciation of the divine privileges associated with Mary’s motherhood of Christ.

A ‘discipleship’ paradigm allows the Church to relate to the accompanying presence of Mary as our Mentor in an intimately
symbolic way not readily possible when she is represented as a theoretical ‘sign’, or an idealised ‘exemplar’ whom we strive to imitate. We are deeply aware at present of the paradox expressed in Lumen Gentium: 1, §8 that the Church is both holy in her essence but sinful in her members, that while being truly the sacrament of the Risen Christ, she is always in need of purification through penance and renewal in order to reveal God’s Word in history. At the very heart of her reality, the Church is called to servant-discipleship, to be totally and unconditionally, which is to say ‘virginally’, open to the love of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit as Mary was and is.

In keeping with the intention of Lumen Gentium: 8, the exhortation, Marialis Cultis (1974) by P. Paul VI gave a timely reminder to the faithful, of the importance of situating true devotion to Mary within the framework of biblical, liturgical, ecumenical and anthropological criteria. Mary was proposed by the Pope as a ‘shining example’, as a ‘mirror’ reflecting the expectations of contemporary women and men. She was therefore deemed worthy of our imitation because of her hearing and doing the Word of God and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. I would like to suggest that while P. Paul VI made use of vocabulary associated with an understanding of Mary as an ‘exemplary model’ in describing her, the thoughts expressed may be re-read now through a ‘discipleship’ lens that accords perfectly well with the understanding of Mary as Mentor that we have been considering.

Marialis Cultis emphasized the importance of the ecclesial nature of our devotion to Mary. Overshadowed by the Spirit and blessed with Mary’s prayer and presence, the Church of history is in the act of becoming an ‘attentive virgin’ accepting, proclaiming and venerating the Word of God in faith and in her mission of responding to the signs of our times. The Church, is called now to be with Mary a ‘virgin at prayer’ praising God unceasingly and interceding for the needs of the world; to be a fruitful ‘virgin mother’ in giving birth to new children through the sacrament of baptism, and to be a ‘virgin presenting offerings’ in every Eucharistic celebration of the Lord’s Passover until he comes again. With Mary, may we as the Church now, strive to be a new anawim, struggling in the midst of action on behalf of the Reign of God, to create a quality of contemplative heart-space for the Spirit to renew the face of the earth. With Mary, may the Church’s presence in the world come to realize Isaiah’s portrayal of the servant-disciple who awakens, morning by morning, to God’s gift of a ‘disciple’s ear’ that listens deeply to God’s word so as to teach it with a ‘disciple’s tongue’ (Isaiah 50:1-5).

When the Church remembers Mary as Disciple, we are alerted to an ‘edge of danger’ that prevents an easy accommodation to or settling down into an unjust status quo. Our service of discipleship towards others, especially those suffering from the myriad forms of injustice, can quicken hope. Modern litanies support a consciousness of the presence of Mary among us, as illustrated, for example by some selections from the litany of Mary of Nazareth, promoted by Pax Christi:

Mary, wellspring of peace, be our guide
Model of courage …
Model of risk …
Model of openness …
Model of perseverance …
Mother of the Liberator, pray for us
Mother of the homeless …
Mother of the non-violent …
Mother of a political prisoner …
Oppressed woman, lead us to life
Marginalised woman …
Sign of contradiction …
Seeker of sanctuary …
First disciple, empower us
Woman of mercy …
Woman of faith …
Woman of vision …
Woman pregnant with hope …
Woman centred in God …

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Finally, let me return to the poet’s metaphor of ‘stillness’; it echoes, I believe, much of contemporary experiences of turbulence:

The endless cycle of idea and action
Endless intervention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of  

stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.

Mary, Woman of Faith, our Mentor in prayer,

Presente!  

NOTES

4 ICEL translation.
5 Emphases throughout are mine.
10 *Lumen Gentium*: 5, nn. 39; 41.
11 E.g. Eucharistic Prayer 1
16 *Marialis Cultus* §§17, 18, 19, 20.

Mary is also the Virgin in prayer. She appears as such in the visit to the Mother of the Precursor, when she pours out her soul in expressions glorifying God, and expressions of humility, faith and hope. This prayer is the Magnificat, Mary’s prayer par excellence, the song of the messianic times in which there mingles the joy of the ancient and the new Israel.

PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

From the Sixth Sunday of Easter to the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year C

Prepared by Michael Trainor

PART ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE READINGS

The following is a brief overview of the readings of the Liturgy of the Word for major celebrations proclaimed while this issue of Compass is current. It focuses on the readings for Sundays between April and July, from the Sixth Sunday in the season of Easter to the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C). Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

1. The First reading for each Sunday, as we know, has been selected generally with the Gospel in mind. There are notable exceptions in the Sunday selections below, especially with the final Sundays of the Easter Season. During this time the first reading is from the Second (‘New’) Testament and Luke’s Book of Acts. The aim of Acts is to show how the life of the Risen Jesus continues to enliven the early Christian community. This conviction reaches its liturgical highpoint in the celebration of Pentecost on May 19. The implications of these readings for our reflections on today’s church and our experience of community are most relevant. At a time when church attendance is falling and ecclesial leadership tested, there is an invitation that emerges through all these readings to return to the faith conviction held by the first generations of Jesus followers and reflected in the readings: God is present and close, and desires our renewal.

Outside of Easter the June-July selections for the first reading range from Genesis (Body and Blood, and the actions of the enigmatic Melchisedek; Ordinary Time 16 and 17 with its reflection on Abraham), Deuteronomy (Ordinary Time 15, about God’s Law), 1 Kings (Ordinary Time 13, Elijah’s anointing of Elisha), and the prophetic tradition with Isaiah (Ordinary Time 14, God’s consolation of the people). There is also an outstanding reading on the Feast of the Holy Trinity (May 26) from the Book of Proverbs celebrating God’s Wisdom (‘Sophia’).

2. The Second Reading in the present Easter selection continues from the Book of Revelation. This is a prophetic letter written to churches in west Asia Minor towards the end of the first century CE, by an imprisoned and exiled prophet whom we know as ‘John’ (This not the ‘John’ of the Gospel or letters). The intention of the writer is to offer consolation and perspective to Jesus followers struggling in their cultural situation. This is most relevant today, especially for a Church that is struggling and beset with scandal. The selection from Revelation that we have in Easter offers ample opportunity to reflect on the potential for life in Jesus today.

Outside of Easter, in Ordinary Time, the lectionary returns to its usual presentation of selections from the Pauline literature with its semi-continuous readings. From Ordinary Time 10 to 14, the Letter to the Galatians (chapters 1 to 6) is proclaimed. Galatians is one of Paul’s most important letters. Written probably from Ephesus c 54 CE, it addresses concerns about how one can have commun-
ion with God (which Paul calls technically, ‘justification’). Clearly, Paul is under threat by conservative Jesus’ followers who seek to discredit his authority. In this context, the Galatian reading for OT 10 is important. For Paul, rather than a legalistic spirit of theological rigorism, Jesus is the only way to authentic communion with God. Paul seek to encourage households of Jesus followers that are inclusive and non-discriminatory of gender, race or ethnic diversity. This key teaching from Paul is found in Gal 3:27-28 and proclaimed in OT 12 (June 23): ‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.’ Paul’s first century vision of the union formed in Jesus which dissolves all division still awaits realisation in our faith communities.

In OT 15 to 18, our attention turns to the Letter to the Colossians 1-2. This letter in the Pauline genre was probably written by one of Paul’s disciples, I think Epaphras who appears in Col 1, sometime in the 60s. It seeks to affirm for Jesus followers, tempted to perform cultic and ascetic rituals to appease cosmic forces, the place of Jesus and his authority in the universe. This central theme flows over the Sundays of Ordinary Time 15 to 17 (14 and 28 July). Readings from Galatians and Colossians might provide alternatives to the main liturgical themes suggested by the first reading and the Gospel.

### PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

**May 5—Easter 6: Acts 15:1-29.** This is a watershed story in Luke’s story of the early followers: the formal acceptance of the Gentiles into the life of the Jesus household. Rev 21: 10-14, 22-23. The vision of last week continues presented in this reading celebrates God’s city on earth, totally inclusive and accessible (with so many gates). With God’s presence so tangible, there is no need of a temple. Jn 14:23-29. Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure. He promises his abiding peace and the presence of his teaching Advocate. **Theme—Easter Presence:** God’s presence is tangible in, around and among us. Easter continues; it is especially tangible in moments and places of gracious hospitality and acceptance.

**May 12—Ascension: Acts 1:1-11.** With Jesus’ departure the disciples are encouraged to continue in their active ministry in the world. They cannot simply remain gazing into the
heavens. Heb 9:24f. Jesus is with God forever, acting on our behalf. Lk 24:46-53. This final Gospel scene completes the events of Easter day. Jesus blesses his disciples and departs physically to God. The Gospel ends on a note of joy. Theme—God’s Presence in times of apparent aloneness: Dealing with absence is one of the most painful experiences. This absence can occur when feeling alone, deserted or mourning the death of one close. Or it can occur in feeling the loss of an institution (like the church) that seems to have abandoned one. Reflection on all these experiences can open the door for renewal in God’s desire to be with us. We are invited to turn to God.

May 19—Pentecost: Acts 2:1-11. A story reminiscent of Sinai: the covenantal renewal of God’s people that brings unity and energy. 1 Cor 12:3-7. 12-13. The Holy Spirit empowers, gifts and renews Jesus’ household with unity. Jn 20:19-23. Jesus breathes his spirit on to the frightened community of disciples and brings peace and forgiveness. Theme—Unity of God’s community. The readings celebrate the unity of God’s people that emerges through the action of the Spirit. There are many signs of that unity today, especially amongst Christian communities. These could be named and celebrated. Ecumenism is a reality already, though we need to continue to move forward as we seek complete unity.

May 26—Holy Trinity: Prov 8:22-31. This is a hymn to God’s eternal, creative and active Sophia (‘wisdom’). Rom 5:1-5. Communion with God through Jesus brings peace and an authentic existence. Jn 16:12-15. Jesus’ Spirit will guide his disciples into God’s truth. Theme—God’s inner life of friendship. God’s life permeates the universe, our local community and each of our personal lives. We can easily see signs of this life, of God’s Sophia encouraging us. This recognition can come despite difficulties and apparent contradictions. An obvious sign of God’s Triune life is friendship.


June 9—Ordinary Time 10: I Kings 17.8-9, 17-21a, 22-24. The prophet Elijah brings healing to a widow’s only son and restores him to her. Gal 1.11-19. Paul attests his divine call and offers us a snapshot of his life. Lk 7:11-17. Jesus has compassion on the widow who accompanies her dead son to burial. Jesus brings the young man and his mother to life. Theme—Restoration: When we feel lost, alone, hopeless or distraught it seems there is no way out. God comforts us with stories of restoration (First reading and gospel). Where do we, personally, communally or as a church, seek restoration, renewal and hope?

June 16—Ordinary Time 11: 2 Sam 12:7-10.13. King David recognises his sinfulness when confronted by the prophet Nathan. Gal 2:16. 19-21. Here is Paul’s radical statement of his faith in Jesus as the centre of his life. Lk 7:36-8:3. This is a powerful story of authentic discipleship, from a woman who focuses her total loving attention on Jesus. Theme—Focussed on God: Nathan helps David see his need to come back to God (First Reading) and Jesus shows what true fidelity really consists of demonstrated by the women (Gospel). What are some of the ways that enable us in our challenged and diverse world to focus on God? Who models this kind of practice?

Paul reflects on the heart of baptism: everything that distinguishes one from another (ethnic, status and gender) dissolves through union with Jesus. Lk 9:18-24. The disciples affirm Jesus as God’s anointed one. As Messiah, Jesus will suffer and be executed. His disciples are invited to accompany him in this. Theme—Compassion. Compassion is a gift of communion; it is the ability to identify with those who struggle. Ultimately it is God’s gift. Zechariah recognises this gift among the Israelites; the disciples are invited to identify with the suffering Jesus. Who are those in our faith community that illustrate and exercise this gift? Who among us need to be shown the face of compassion?


July 7—Ordinary Time 14. Is 66:10-14. God’s desire to comfort the disconsolate is tangibly and powerfully expressed in this beautiful hymn. Gal 6:14-18. Paul expresses his desire for total union with Jesus, even in suffering. Lk 10:1-12.17-20. Jesus sends his disciples on a difficult and, at times, unappreciated mission. Theme—Union with Jesus. Paul exemplifies the meaning of Christian living—union with Jesus that permeates his whole life to the point that it becomes a reflection of Jesus’ own life. There are many examples of those who live this kind of life today. These might be named and celebrated today.


—Michael Trainor, Department of Theology, Flinders University at the Adelaide College of Divinity.

Moses reminds the people that God’s Word (‘Law’/ Torah), is accessible, personal and interior. Col 1:15-20. This powerful hymn to Jesus concerns God’s expression of Sophia (‘Wisdom’) and celebrates Jesus’ cosmic authority to reconcile all. Lk 10:25-37. This parable subverts the traditional and expected patterns of preferential behavior. Theme—Our World: From Colossians, Jesus’ presence permeates the whole universe. Therefore the world is good. This challenges the conventional commercial and industrial treatment of our world. It also invites us to embrace a spirit of reconciliation and to recover an ecological spirituality.

July 21—Ordinary Time 16: Gen 18:1-10. Abraham offers hospitality to unexpected and unrecognised angelic visitors, and is blessed. Col 1:24-28. The writer encourages a disposition to make God’s Word fully known, to teach through Jesus in all wisdom and bring others to genuine maturity. Lk 10:38-42. Luke offers us a snapshot of ministerial tension: either get all the work done or focus on Jesus. The encouragement is to focus on Jesus in the midst of life’s concerns. Theme—Hospitality. A life of busyness and time of upheaval can leave us diving for self-survival. The readings (First Reading and Gospel) encourage a disposition of hospitality practically open to others and essentially focussed on God.

July 28—Ordinary Time 17: Gen 18:20-32. God is revealed as compassionate, forgiving and conversational. Col 2:6-14. The writer celebrates the communion that the baptised disciple shares with Jesus. Lk 11:1-13. This is Luke’s insight into Jesus’ teaching on prayer. Theme—Communion with God. Two readings (First Reading and Gospel) invite reflection on the centrality of prayer in our lives, as conversation with a God who is open. In a NT highpoint, Colossians presents Jesus as God’s tangible expression in bodily form. Both themes are important and complementary. They invite us into communion with God through Jesus.