ON NOT LOSING HEART

THERE IS MUCH to depress us these days. The cruel treatment of asylum seekers is depressing, especially as it is a course of action that still has majority support in the Australian population. Despite the fact that anyone whose life is threatened has the right to protection and the right to seek asylum rather than migrate through ordinary channels, asylum seekers are branded ‘illegals’ and denied the protection they seek. And in labelling them as ‘illegals’ we do not see them as vulnerable and needy human beings. And what is more, the present policies of our government bear signs of racism.

To lift our spirits we have the hopeful signs of rejection of these policies and efforts to influence Catholics and the Australian population at large to oppose government policies and influence our political leaders to show more decency and humanity. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference statement of 9th May, endorsed by the National Council of Priests, is very welcome. The Catholic Religious of Australia’s National Lament Campaign is likewise welcome. See their website: www.catholicreligiousaustralia.org.

Also depressing are many aspects of the proposed budget. Caritas points out that Australia is a wealthy nation—we are ranked 13th out of the world’s richest nations—and we have a history of generosity, but we are backing away from our commitments, cutting almost $8 billion from Australia’s Overseas Development Assistance. And the poorer within Australia are the ones who will suffer most from this budget, while the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been judged to have fared the worst across every social and economic indicator, despite all the national efforts to ‘close the gap’. This budget, it has been claimed, ‘amounts to an appalling deal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’ (Andrew Meehan, the National Director of ANTaR).

The news is not all bad. The ecumenical movement is good news—though it is difficult to sustain. Many feel that it has reached a stand-still. So we cannot allow ourselves to get carried away.

But we must not lose hope—the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells us, is in our midst.

We had the gospel recently of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were fast losing hope. They were going in the wrong direction—away from Jerusalem where everything they hoped for was yet to happen. Jesus joined them as they walked away and gently turned them around. We need Jesus to walk with us and make sure we are walking in the right direction.

The promised Kingdom of God is not a forlorn hope. We must not lose hope that it will be established and we must keep praying and working to do our part to make it happen. But the Kingdom is God’s achievement.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor.

Only in the darkness can you see the stars.

—Martin Luther King Jr.
ECUMENISM: TOWARDS AN ‘EXCHANGE OF GIFTS’

MARIE T. FARRELL rsm

As the liturgical year moves towards celebration of the feasts of the Lord’s Ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Australian Catholics are mindful of the ecumenical significance of engaging in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. While the novena of prayer for Christian unity is generally celebrated in the northern hemisphere from January 18th-27th (spanning the Feasts of the Chair of St Peter and the Conversion of St Paul), it has been customary here since Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism (1964) to dedicate the Ascension-Pentecost novena to renewed engagement with ecumenical outreach through dialogue (both formal and informal) and prayer (personal and parish-centred). Each annual celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity enables further discernment among Christians with respect to the ultimate goal of ecumenism, namely, the ‘exchange of gifts’ (vs the exchange of theological ideas) among the Churches. In recent years ecumenical awareness has come to be appreciated within the context of the ‘New Evangelisation’. 

Fr. Paul Couturier (1881-1953): Apostle of Unity

As a parish priest in Lyons during the 1920s, Paul Couturier worked tirelessly as a pastor to thousands of Orthodox refugees from Bolshevism. Deeply inspired by the holiness of the Orthodox tradition and as an oblate of the Benedictine Monks of Unity, the influence of Cardinal Mercier and Dom Lambert Beaudin, led him to become heavily involved in the Catholic Church Unity Octave established in 1908. In 1935 Couturier developed this ecumenical venture into a ‘Universal Week of Prayer for the Unity of Christians in the charity and truth of Christ’, taking as a personal motto the saying of Metropolitan Platon Gorodesetsky of Kiev: ‘The walls of separation do not rise as far as Heaven.’

In celebrating of the ‘Week of Prayer’ today Christians continue to remember the ‘dream’ of Paul Couturier as they engage in daily intercessions derived from his original texts in 1934. Brief invocations may be inserted into the Prayers of the Faithful after the Gospel at Mass or used as intercessions during Morning and Evening Prayers of the Church. Alternatively, short prayers may be adapted to accompany a specific theme marking, in order, each day of the novena: The Unity of All Christians, The Sanctification of Catholic Christians, The Sanctification of Orthodox Christians, The Sanctification of Anglican Christians, The Sanctification of Protestant Christians, The Sanctification of the Jewish People, The Sanctification of People of Other Faiths and The Unity of all humanity in the charity and truth of Christ. 

Vatican Council II: The Decree on Ecumenism

On November 21st this year the Church will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Regintegratio) when formal engagement with the modern ecumenical movement was undertaken. Vatican Council II thereby affirmed that under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church would recognise that ‘other’ Christians can contribute to whatever genuinely belongs to the faith. The Introduction to the Decree notes ‘with gladness’ that all who experience the impulse of grace to pledge commitment to fostering...
Ecumenism include:

[all] those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour. They do this not merely as individuals but also members of the corporate groups in which they have heard the Gospel, and which each regards as his or her church and, indeed, God’s. And yet almost everyone, though in different ways, longs for one visible church of God, a church truly universal and sent forth to the whole world that the world may be converted to the Gospel and so be saved for the glory of God. 4

A simple internet search re the history of Catholic ecumenical dialogue will reveal the astounding results already achieved and which are still in dynamic process since 1964. Attention may be given to the significance for Catholic ecumenism instigated via the encyclicals of P. Paul VI (Ecclesiam Suam, 1964) and P. John Paul II (Ut Unum Sint, 1995). The 2004 Report produced by the Joint Working Group (JWG) of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches (WCC) provides further insight into the nature and purpose of ecumenical dialogue. This Report has understood the work of Christian dialogue in terms of the encounter with Jesus by the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35):

Dialogue entails walking with the other; pilgrimage is an apt metaphor for dialogue. Dialogue represents a word—neither the first nor the last—on a common journey, marking a moment between the ‘already’ of our past histories and the ‘not yet’ of our future. It images the disciples’ conversation on the road to Emmaus, recounting the wonders the Lord has worked during a journey in the breaking of bread at a common table. 5

**Spiritual Ecumenism**

Partners engaged in formal ecumenical dialogues between the Churches realise, as must every adult Christian come to realise, that ecumenical commitment demands spiritual commitment if the Holy Spirit is to be ‘free’ to bring about all things in Christ. Just as baptism calls Christians to ecumenism, so it is that, albeit imperfectly attained, there is already among the Churches union in the one Christ in whom we ‘live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism teaches that:

Baptism constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn. But baptism, of itself, is only a beginning, a point of departure, for it is wholly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ. Baptism is thus ordained toward a complete profession of Christ, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ himself willed it to be, and finally through a complete integration into Eucharistic communion. 6

When misunderstood, principles governing the practice of ‘reciprocal Eucharist’ in the Catholic Church frequently cause concern and indignation. Briefly, four principles operate—first, because of their common faith and baptism, both prayer and worship are integral to their Christian life; secondly, since ‘fellowship’ (koinonia/communio/communion) among them is incomplete, this must be expressed in authentic worship; thirdly, Catholics do not participate fully in common Eucharist with other Christians; and fourthly, there are certain circumstances when permission may be granted for welcoming other Christians to receive spiritual nourishment by means of the sacraments of Eucharist, penance and anointing of the sick.

Since the sacrament of Eucharist is the ‘ultimate sign and source of Christian unity’, it is inseparably linked to full ecclesial communion. 7 Catholic discipline, therefore, reflects the Church’s self-understanding of the unbreakable union between sacramental baptism and Eucharist. Catholic ecumenical dialogues aim

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precisely at enabling, once again, worship at one table of Eucharist.\(^8\)

Public celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a way of preventing Christian communities from trivialising the ecumenical movement as simply an attempt by inter-Church theologians to merge diverse traditions of doctrine and liturgy while bypassing aspects of contention. The Week of Prayer is a sincere response to the mind and prayer of Christ as handed down to Christians in the Gospel of John:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:21-23).

The love and the truth of Christ are essential hallmarks to be reconciled among Christian Churches still suffering division through the crises of religious conflict in the course of history.

**Ecumenism: The Australian Scene**

While there has been less than enthusiastic involvement in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in recent years, Australian ecumenism has certainly not gone into hibernation! A common misapprehension might well be that Christian action for justice and peace is seen as merely human work and that prayer and spirituality are incidental to ecumenical endeavour. It is hoped that what follows here as a cursory glimpse of the Australian ecumenical scene, will challenge any illusions about a slackening of passion for ecclesial unity in Australia.

In re-iterating the teaching of the *Decree on Ecumenism*, the preamble to the ‘Mandate of Catholic Bishops’ Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations’ begins by stating that:

The ecumenical movement is a grace of God, given by the Father in answer to the prayer of Jesus and supplication of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit. While it is carried out within the general mission of the Church to unite humanity in Christ, its own specific field is the restoration of unity among Christians. Those who are baptised in the name of Christ are, by that very fact, called to commit themselves to the search for unity. Baptismal communion tends towards full ecclesial communion. To live our baptism is to be caught up in Christ’s mission of making all things one.\(^9\)

The Australian Catholic Episcopal Commission consists of four bishops including one from the Maronite, Melkite, Ukrainian and Chaldean Dioceses. It maintains formal relations with the national Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), the Council of Australian Jewry, Catholic Diocesan Commissions for Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Relations with equivalent bodies in other Christian Churches and with Australian representatives of non-Christian world religions.

In 2004 the Australian Catholic Church became a signatory to ‘Australian Churches Covenanting Together’. In 2007 the National Forum of the NCCA passed a motion that those Churches which have agreed to mutual recognition of Baptism should issue baptismal certificates containing common wording that ‘N… was baptised with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ and list those Churches that have agreed to mutual recognition of Baptism. This list currently includes the Anglican Church of Australia, Antiochian Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Congregational Federation of Australia, Greek Orthodox Diocese of Australia, Lutheran Church of Australia, Mar Thoma Church, Romanian and Eastern Rite Catholic Church, Romanian and Serbian Orthodox Churches and the Uniting Church in Australia.\(^10\)

Since the mid-1960s the NCCA has been developing a ‘covenanting process’ whereby those Churches in covenant partnerships agree to come together in common prayer to investigate their Christian convictions and explore together strategies for mission.

My experience of successful and sensitive ecclesial covenanting has been among the An-
glican and Roman Catholic Dioceses of Bathurst, Broken Bay, Newcastle, Maitland-Newcastle, Brisbane, Ballarat and Toowoomba.

Typical examples of mutual commitment include: an annual Ecumenical Service, a triennial review of the Covenant, a biennial Clergy Day for reflection on pastoral and theological issues, local Liturgical Services to enliven common witness to baptism and examine the growth of relationships in both communities, exploration of possibilities for sharing church plant, co-operation in preparation for Christian marriage and the Christian education of children and young people and regular meetings of the Bishops to foster their friendship and communion.11

Ecclesial covenanting is now happening in parishes among Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church and Baptist communities where, for example, combined liturgies are shared during Lent, Pentecost and Advent, where clergy share pulpits once a year and the parish Councils meet annually. Combined Taize prayer and Social Justice groups are becoming firmly established.

The Australian Unity Commission of the NCCA supports eight ongoing Bilateral Dialogues: Anglican-Roman Catholic, Anglican-Lutheran, Lutheran-Roman Catholic, Anglican-Uniting Church, Catholic-Uniting Church, Anglican-Uniting Church, Uniting Church-Salvation Army and Uniting Church-Baptist. These Dialogues focus generally on texts provided by the World Council of Churches but attend also to matters concerning Australian and Torres Strait Islander heritage and multicultural concerns of the Asia-Pacific region.

Under the auspices of the Australian Catholic Episcopal Conference, all Catholic Dioceses are responsible for establishing their own formal and local occasional ecumenical activities.

Receptive Ecumenism and the ‘Exchange of Gifts’

Compass Readers will recall Gideon Goosen’s reflection on ‘What I have learnt from Other Churches.’12 This article will serve as an introduction to further comments offered here.

The metaphor of ‘new wave’ for ‘Receptive Ecumenism’ was used by Dr Paul D. Murray during his Australian lecture series in 2012. Indeed, may it become a wave, that originating far out to sea, can be caught only as it nears the shore by surfers bold enough to wait for the ‘lip’ to curl in order to ride the ‘pipeline’! Revd. Dr Gerard Kelly,13 prominent Catholic ecumenist, ‘plays’ with the wave image to put serious questions to the Australian Churches: Do you want to ride this wave? How might you catch it? Where will it lead you? Are you ready for the unexpected?14

Participants in recent Australian bilateral dialogues have acknowledged that our communions hold more in common than divides them doctrinally. Nevertheless, there is a certain impasse as to how to witness to the Gospel in a market-place noted for fundamentalist attitudes and a general indifference to religion. The ‘new wave’ calling for ‘ecumenical conversion’ is leading Christians to engage in serious discernment of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the ‘institutional charisms’ of grace in Churches other than one’s own. With Murray, we can appreciate how receptive ecumenical ‘awakening’ is ‘properly a matter of the heart before it is a matter of the head; a matter of falling in love with the experienced presence of God in people, practices, even structures of another tradition and being impelled thereby to search for ways in which all impediments might be overcome.’15

Aware of Goosen’s critique of an apparent exaggerated emphasis afforded to marian devotion in many Catholic parishes, I would draw attention to an ecumenical project that exemplifies ‘receptive ecumenism’ at its best, namely, the final work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC 3), Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ (MGHC).16 My conversations with Fr Peter Cross (an Australian member of the Commission before his illness and death in 2006) prepared me for what would surely become the fruit of friendship, faith, sustained prayer and openness in dialogue coming from the Commission’s trust of the Holy Spir-
COMPASS

it’s presence among them. In so stating that ‘we have learned to receive anew our own traditions, illumined and deepened by the understanding of and appreciation for each other’s tradition’, the Preface of MGHC confirms the contributors’ experience.

Revd. Dr. Charles Sherlock (Australian Anglican member of the Commission) described for me the joy experienced from the theological ‘breakthrough’ leading to the decision to ‘read’ Mary’s place in the divine plan from the Pauline perspective of fulfilment in Christ ‘backwards’ into history. Such an explicitly scriptural method which includes Mary within the destiny of the whole Church, was deemed more ecumenically appropriate than the familiar Catholic method of having interpreted her role in salvation ‘forwardly’ from its beginning in fallen creation. In this way MGHC presented Mary as having been chosen by God ‘before the foundation of the world’ to be ‘holy and blameless and to share in the glory of Christ (Ephesians1:3-5; 5:27). In Romans 8:13, Paul spoke, as it were, from the future retrospectively when teaching that ‘those whom God predestined, he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified’.17

Conscious now of the benefits of ‘receptive ecumenism’, we might ask: What ‘gifts’ can our Australian Churches ‘exchange’ with each other?

At this time, the Catholic Church offers other Christians opportunities for evaluating from within their own faith traditions, the still untapped wisdom of Vatican Council II with respect to Word, Sacrament and Mission, and to matters affecting ecclesial authority, governance and collegiality. Theologians from various Christian traditions are encouraged to study the works of eminent Catholic ecumenists.18

Catholics can share with others the ‘purification of memory’ necessary for healing divisions and sinfulness of the past. In confirming the proper ordering of Mary within the ‘hierarchy of truths’ pertaining to Trinitarian and Christological dogmas, the Catholic Church can allay ‘Protestant’ fears that the Blessed Virgin Mary has ‘eclipsed’ the role of Christ as one and only Mediator. As Pope Francis teaches, the Catholic Church can contribute to being a ‘leaven of peace’ in a war-ravaged world alongside and with trust in all Christian pilgrims.19

In seeking ecumenical unity, the Anglican Church can offer the ‘gift’ of its fourfold patrimony: of exercising a synodal character of governance as a corporate and conciliar system of decision-making and authority; of its distinctive spiritual tradition liked to pastoral practice including the re-establishment of religious life and the valuable gifts of evangelical and reformed piety; of the theological traditions of the Caroline Divines and the Tractarian movement as well as the contribution of ‘Broad Church’ thinkers who have shaped Anglican identity; and of its liturgical and musical tradition of worship in English over many centuries.20

At the heart of the gift of Methodism are the gifts of John and Charles Wesley—their evangelical zeal to reform the inner life of the Church, their pursuit of personal holiness, care for the poor and their enduring hymns. The Methodist tradition of ‘living in connection’ at every level of ecclesial life challenges all Christian churches to live more fully what they confess. Methodist-Catholic dialogue has indicated that, although the ‘spiritual empowerment of lay people for ministry and mission’ is for them a ‘gift’ of the Spirit derived from baptism, they may, in the future, come to recognise the value the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome as a final decision-making authority in the Church.21

In Australia, precious ‘gifts’ received from Orthodox tradition and preserved within Eastern Rite Catholic communities are significant for the ecclesial life of ‘Latin’ Catholics. We immediately think of the ever-explicit, appreciation of the person of the Holy Spirit in the liturgical action and life of the Church and of how theology is never separate from liturgical worship ‘to’ God before being ‘about’ God. Resurrection theology is always experienced simultaneously in Eucharist as ‘present real-
ity' and 'future hope'. Veneration of Ikons regarded as 'sacramentals' (vs mere 'images') indicates that in faith, they are points of contact by which the Mother of God, the saints and the mysteries of Christ touch, embrace, hold and confront one in faith.

The Lutheran-Catholic signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (31/10/1999) has been a 'gift' for both our Churches after 400 years of contention. Although there are differing theological expressions of Christ’s mystery of salvation, Lutherans and Catholics have found that they can now recognise in each other the same Gospel faith.

Conclusion

Based on that of Paul Courturier, the daily prayer of the International Chemin-Neuf Community is a reminder of both the ‘already’ and the ‘not-yet-ness’ of full ecclesial communion:

Lord Jesus, who prayed that we might all be one, we pray to You for the unity of Christians, according to Your will, according to Your means. May Your Spirit enable us to experience the suffering caused by division, to see our sin, and to hope beyond all hope, Amen.

NOTES


3. www.unitas.org.uk; www.paulcouturier.org.uk. Texts may be reproduced free of charge.


7. Flannery, Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n.11.

8. See detailed discussion on ‘Sharing in Sacramental Life’ in Putney, My Ecumenical Journey, 146-150.


10. Formal Covenant statements that recognise common baptism acknowledge differences in doctrine and practice & especially with regard to Eucharistic communion.

11. Examples taken from the Bathurst Covenant signed by the Anglican and Catholic Bishops & their respective Vicars General, 24/5/2012.


13. Dr Kelly is Chair of the NCCA’s Faith & Unity Commission, Co-Chair of the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in Australia, member of Australian Catholic Council for Ecumenical & Interreligious Relations and Interfaith Commission of the Archdiocese of Sydney.


16. Donald Bolen & Gregory Cameron Eds., Mary Grace and Hope in Christ (Continuum, 2006).

17. See MGHC, 56 ff.


ON BEING LESS CATHOLIC AND MORE CHRISTIAN

GUIDEON GOOSEN

It might sound heretical to suggest Catholics should be less Catholic, however, my journey in the modern ecumenical movement has led me to this position. Although the point I wish to make in this article probably applies to all denominations with the necessary adjustments, I will mainly confine myself to Catholicism as it is the religious tradition I know best.

In what follows what I will do is give some background to the idea of catholic (with lowercase ‘c’) and then describes changing religious perspectives which form a background to modern ecumenism. A theological basis for a contemporary ecumenical response is then suggested, with further reflections of how the distinction between traditions and the Tradition can assist us and the need to reform personally and institutionally by going back to the gospel.

The topic under discussion is tied up with many other concepts of great importance. They cannot all be treated adequately, so topics like cosmology, ecclesiology, mission, salvation, etc., will be mentioned in passing with whatever insights seem relevant to our topic. Finally it will be concluded that the challenge for Catholics to be less Catholic and more Christian is a continuing and difficult one.

Meaning of καθολικός (katholikos)

Pope Francis has certainly given Catholics some food for thought in his 2013 interview with The Jesuit Magazine, Civitá Cattolica, in Rome when he suggests a reconsideration of the emphases within Catholicism¹. A subsequent local cartoon suggested that some will be asking (not as a joke): ‘Is the Pope Catholic?’ Indeed what is ‘Catholic’? At a recent liturgy I attended in a parish (not my usual), the congregation, in reciting the creed, had on the overhead screen: ‘I believe in the Catholic Church…’

In many institutions like universities, colleges, and Catholic hospitals, some Vice-Chancellors, CEOs/leaders have been preoccupied in recent decades with the ‘Catholic ethos’ and the ‘Catholic identity’ of the place, not the ‘Christian identity.’ It seems to have been, in part, a reaction to a putative watering down of the tradition caused by ecumenism. Some leaders want their institutions to be more ‘Catholic’. That sounds well and good in theory (one does not want to lose one’s tradition) until one inquires what is meant by ‘Catholic’. Often it can mean emphasizing some individual pet devotion or single aspect among many traditions.

The origins and history of the word, ‘catholic’ are worthwhile recalling to refresh our minds as to the meaning of the ‘I believe in the catholic Church…’ part of the Creed. In early Christian writings it is used to mean ‘throughout the world’ or ‘universal’, and at this time the known world was pretty small—mainly the Mediterranean countries. The phrase in Greek, καθ’όλου (kath’holou) means ‘according to the whole’, suggesting ‘universal’. Christians were present throughout the world, the church was ‘catholic’ or ‘universal’. One could pray for the universal or ‘catholic’ church.

Let me give some examples. In the second century A.D. Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the Smyrnaeans, says that wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal (catholic) Church. In the second century it was some-
times used to mean ‘orthodox’ in the sense of not heretical (hence held ‘universally’), and in the fourth century Emperor Theodosius I stated that only those who follow the same faith as the pope should be called ‘Catholic Christian’.

Today when we pray the creed we say the church is universal. We pray: ‘I believe in the catholic church’, not the ‘Catholic’ Church. It was as a result of the Reformation when many more churches sprang up, that the church with a pope in Rome got the title of ‘Roman Catholic’ Church with its current connotations.

All Christians today are in a sense united in so far as they are all baptized in the one Lord and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. This can easily be inferred from the Vatican II documents. We can also remind ourselves of what is said in Ephesians 4:4-5, ‘There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all.’ If we think of the baptized Christians throughout the world, we have the catholic, universal church (‘wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal (catholic) Church’). Another way of putting it: the Roman Catholic Church is part of the bigger catholic, universal church!

Changing Religious Perspectives

For many traditional Catholics of the pre-Vatican II era, the meaning of ‘Catholic’ is closely tied to a cultural piety. With this piety went the adamant conviction that Protestants were wrong and Catholics were right.

The Church, which controlled salvation, was an hierarchical organization with priests and bishops enjoying a privileged position, dispensing grace and often controlling the spiritual lives of their parishioners. If Catholics stick with the above pre-Vatican II attitude there is no going forward ecumenically because there is nothing to learn, nothing to change.

With Vatican II and the decree Unitatis redintegratio, the idea of the Body of Christ, consisting of all those baptized in whatever church, has been retrieved and reclaimed. The boundaries of the Christian Church, the Body of Christ, are not co-terminus with the Roman Catholic Church.

Another change of perspectives from Vatican II was that of interfaith dialogue. The teaching, from Nostra Aetate, that members of world faiths or religions (Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists) should be regarded in a positive way and that they are capable of salvation, shocked some Catholics who believed they had the monopoly on salvation. Now the thinking is that Catholics might be able to learn something from these faiths too. The best of Catholic thinking has expanded like concentric circles, from focusing on themselves, to other Christians, to other faiths.

Further challenges to religious thinking has come in recent decades with the new cosmology and the new story of creation. This story makes humans realize how insignificant they are and their humble place in the scheme of things. They now see themselves as earthlings that have evolved from stardust and feel a certain exciting closeness to the whole physical universe. This widens our vision of who we are and our place in the story of creation and salvation.

All the above changes and challenges to our thinking, our intellectual horizons, has unsettled some while being inspirational for...
others and giving them new and exciting perspectives against which to see life. The intellectual cultural background has changed in an era where the enquiring scientific mind has carried over into religious questioning.

Theological Basis for Today’s Ecumenical Response

What is our response to these new insights into who we are and where we came from? For the modern Christian let me suggest that our first response is that of awareness of our smallness and a feeling of humility with regard to our insignificance in the context of all creation. Given we are close to nothing as individual beings, humility is a good starting place.

Here let me suggest Phil 2:6 – 8 as a basic biblical springboard on which we can build a spirituality for an age of ecumenism and especially receptive ecumenism. A few verses of this well-known Christological hymn, are worth analysing because of the insights they bring. ‘Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.’ This expression, ‘made himself of no reputation’, is more frequently rendered ‘he emptied himself’.

The Greek word ἐκενωσεν (ekenosen) is translated in various ways. The Jerusalem Bible has ‘his state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave’. The French word is ‘il s’anéantit lui-même’, that is, he made himself nothing (the verb, anéantir, means to reduce to nothing; annihilate); and in a German translation the expression is, ‘sonder entsgahe seiner selbst’, which translates as ‘but he renounced himself’ or ‘he abdicated himself’ (the verb, entsagen, indicates renounce, relinquish, abdicate). The idea of emptying himself, of making himself nothing, is the core of the meaning. He did not fill himself up with this or that Jewish tradition, he did not puff himself up with a particular religious piety.

Rather than seeing human beings as lord and master of the world and rather than Catholics seeing themselves as sole bearers of the truth and salvation, the above new perspectives lead to a humbler sense of us as human beings, as earthlings on this planet and being recipients of God’s grace which is offered to all but in different ways. The essence of this change in attitude springs from Phil 2: 6-8. One of the Pope’s titles is ‘servant of the servants of God’, although historically this emphasis has been lost in the pomp, ceremony and wealth which have nothing to do with Christianity.

This kenosis theology could be central to Catholics becoming less Catholic and more Christian. Catholics need to ‘empty themselves’ of their Catholicism and open themselves to learning from other Christians (receptive ecumenism) and re-appropriating the Christian message. In short they must become better Christians.

In the ecumenical movement one could apply this to all denominations. Thus one could say Anglicans need to be less Anglican, Presbyterians less Presbyterian, Methodists less Methodist, etc. and more Christian. Primary emphasis should be on being Christian and less on being in this or that tradition.

Catholics, as Pope Francis is saying, need to re-examine where their main emphases should be. Jesus did not go around seeking out the heretics. He did not go around decrying homosexuals or divorced people. Francis, for example, repeatedly stresses economic justice and care for the poor as priorities for Catholics (and we might add, for Christians), and he warned that the church has become ‘obsessed’ with a few issues, such as abortion, contraception and homosexuality, and needs a ‘new balance.’ That new balance is what I mean by being more ‘Christian’, or embracing the Tradition as we shall see.

The kenotic approach suggests as a valid starting point an emptying of self which is
applicable to all Christians. For Catholics it means emptying themselves of their peripheral religious customs and practices and a re-commitment to the core gospel message of what ‘Christian’ means and then, only as a second step, re-appropriating the Catholic traditions. For Presbyterians (for example) it means emptying themselves of Presbyterianism and a re-commitment to the core gospel message, and then, only as a second step, re-appropriating the Presbyterian traditions. In this way Catholics and Presbyterians will see themselves firstly as Christians and secondly as nurturing this or that religious tradition. In this way Catholics will become less Catholic and more Christian. I see this as a necessary stage in ecumenism.

Together with the above theological basis, ecclesiology must be mentioned. Without going into it deeply let me mention the shift back to mission. ‘Mission’ is not an additional task of the ‘church’. The very word ‘church’ implies mission. There has been a shift in ecclesiology from privileged centrality to the margins. It rejects a self-referential church. Pope Francis’ actions are a good example of what this means. Action, mission, occurs at the margins. The purpose of mission is the wholeness, the shalom, of all creation. The order is God-world-church not God-church-world. In this shift, church becomes relativized. After all, Matthew (Mt 28:16-20), says that when Jesus appeared to them in Galilee after the resurrection, he gave them the Great Commission. Jesus did not say: Once we have a church with a written constitution I will send you out.

Taking it Further

Where does all the above lead us? The change in thinking and perspectives which came with Vatican II and modern cosmology, will lead us into a consideration of what is Christian and how religious traditions in terms of their particularities have developed.

Yves Congar has reminded us of the key difference between traditions and the Tradition in Chapter 1 of his book, The Meaning of Tradition (1964). Tradition is ‘the entire heritage of the apostles’ or ‘the very substance of the Christian faith’, while traditions are those practices and customs which the church developed over time and in various places to meet certain needs. A closer examination of the distinction between traditions and the Tradition is the key to moving forward ecumenically.

Ecumenism implies an effort to reform oneself by going back to the gospels. Therefore a scrutiny of these traditions is required if the churches take reform as important. By prunning the traditions, by setting aside those traditions which have outlived their usefulness or where the historical circumstances which called them forth no longer apply, churches will align themselves more closely with the essence of the gospels. They will shed unnecessary accretions.

Traditions need to be seen in historical perspective which means seeing them as a reaction or practical response to a certain historical time and set of circumstances. Let me cite a few examples: the rise of a male ordained ministry in the second and third centuries was a response to the need for spiritual leaders in a patriarchal world. The creation of cardinals as ‘princes’ of the church fitted in to the world of kings and palaces in medieval times. The role of bishops and archbishops has mutated into that of bureaucratic CEOs and needs to be re-aligned in a pastoral way. The exclusion of the laity from the chalice at communion came about for logistical reasons in medieval times. The structure of parish councils and finance committees as currently described, may no longer be adequate regarding financial accountability and transparency.

The Tradition is obviously more important than the traditions. Basic Christian commitment is to the Tradition, not to traditions. This implies we know what the basics of the Christian religion are. The ecumenical document known as BEM identifies some of these
essentials: baptism, eucharist, ministry. Other documents highlight other topics but they are all anchored in the gospel. Christians throughout the world are invited to say if what they find in the WCC document entitled, *Church: A Common Vision for the Future*, reflects their denominational understanding of the Tradition.

**Back to the Gospel**

Ecumenism is achieved by many different ways. There is no *one* approach which will solve all problems. With regard to doctrine and church order, much has been has been achieved in the last fifty years. Kasper has outlined these achievements in his book, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue.* In spite of the necessity of examining doctrine, this approach has the danger of being an intellectual pursuit and not bringing churches closer, though in practice it has brought many people together. Receptive ecumenism has the advantage of specifically aiming at encouraging people to value and learn from other churches which complements the kenotic scriptural basis mentioned above.

The reform of the individual and institution, through going back to the gospel, is also a critical step. Why is this so? The answer is that the more churches (and individuals) reform and go back to the gospel principles, the closer to each other they will find themselves. The road of ‘return to the gospel’ leads the churches on convergent pathways towards unity. For this to occur the reform movements throughout the Catholic world, movements like *Wir sind Kirche* in Austria, reform groups in the USA (Call to Action, *etc.*), and groups in Australia like *Australian Coalition for Catholic Church Renewal*, *Catalysts for Reform*, *Australian Reforming Catholics*, will need to get support from the hierarchy and the rest of the church if the reform agenda is to gather speed. Currently these movements get little or no support from the hierarchy. At the time of Martin Luther, the calls for reform in the Catholic Church were largely ignored. That mistake must not be repeated.

In harkening back to the gospel essentials in what it means to be a Christian, Catholics will become less Catholic and more Christian. It is a question of perspective. Placing too much emphasis on the traditions of being Catholic can stand in the way of seeing the Tradition in its full clarity.

The analogy of a blurred picture comes to mind. The focus needs to be adjusted to give a crystal clear picture with a high definition. The difference between traditions and the Tradition needs to be given high definition. Since the Reformation emphasis was placed on all those things (traditions) that made Catholics look different to Protestants.

One should add in parenthesis that in the early days of Christianity, the Greek East differentiated itself from the Latin West by precisely small traditions, for example: which days of the week should one fast? When should Easter be celebrated? Should one work on Sundays? Is sex permissible on Sundays? Should women cover their heads in Church? Can one eat the meat of animals killed by eunuchs?

The problem with the current state of the churches is that they place more emphasis on their own traditions than on the Christian Tradition. This is manifest in many ways. Here are a few examples: Planning a devotional evening on *Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament* on the universally accepted day for the *World Day of Prayer*; by not joining in Christmas Carols with other local churches, or not celebrating Bible Sunday together; by not joining in together with other churches on social justice issues where there is a common stance on the issue; by not coming together to pray for unity in *The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*; by not celebrating baptism with other churches, at least from time to time, to show that through our baptism we *are* the church, the body of Christ (even if imperfectly); by
preferring one’s own devotions and prayers on days which are typically Christian. In short, by not applying the Lund Principle: ‘Should not our Churches ask themselves ... whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?’

**Conclusion**

Much has been achieved on the doctrinal level through dialogues with other churches. Now it is time to focus more on personal and institutional reform. The earlier considerations of this article lead us to take things further by making the distinction between traditions and the Tradition. Catholics need to go through the kenotic process of ‘emptying’ themselves of their traditions (not being puffed up with their particular traditions) so that the Tradition can stand out in its centrality, importance and beauty. Only after this is done, can customs and traditions be re-appropriated.

To date, there has been, and continues to be, too much emphasis on ‘own’ traditions which poses problems among Catholics in overcoming attitudes of arrogance and superiority. The more churches go back to the gospels, the more they concentrate on what is held universally by Christians (i.e., what is ‘catholic’) the closer they will find themselves to other Christians as all being members of the universal catholic church. The big picture will prevail over the smaller, more inward-looking view. Catholics will then be able to pray the Creed with conviction: ‘I believe in the universal community of the baptized’.

**FOOTNOTES**

2. The thrust of this is obvious from the following texts. LG #2 ‘He planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ.’ LG #7 ‘For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body’(1 Cor 12:13) LG #3 ‘The Church, or, in other words, the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly in the world through the power of God’. RU #3 ‘For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.’ RU #3 ‘Nevertheless, all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ.’ RU #3 ‘Moreover some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.’


7. A helpful parish workbook on this topic is: The Gift of Each Other: Learning from Other Christians, 2013, Sydney: NSWEC.


In recent revisions it was felt the need to change the title of the document from a previous version entitled, The Nature and Mission of the Church, to The Church: Towards a Common Vision, because to have the words ‘church’ and ‘mission’ in the title implied that mission had to be added to church rather than being integral to it. Cf. also, Michael Kinnamon, ‘The Theological Basis of Conciliar Ecumenism’, a paper given at the International Consultation of National Council of Churches and Regional Ecumenical Organizations, Melbourne, February 6-10, 2012.


12. Cf, website: Catholic Church Organizations and Reform Groups.

‘Our role [said Father Adalbert Franquesa, Prior of the Benedictine Community in the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur, Jerusalem] is to continue tirelessly to go around the walls of Jericho until the Lord brings them down.

We are not going to bring down by ourselves the walls that still divide the churches. This is the work of the Spirit, but the Lord requires from us that we never give up going around these walls, praying and singing His praise.

At a time when the old obstacles on the road to unity prove more resistant than expected and when new difficulties arise, it might be good to draw inspiration from this biblical image.

IT IS INTERESTING to note that Jules Chevalier (1824 - 1907) and Karl Marx (1815 – 1883) were near contemporaries. Both were concerned about the future direction of society and developed theories about the nature of society: one with the ‘class struggle’, the other with the power of divine love.

While Marx was working in the British Library, composing his critique of capitalism, *Das Kapital*, the young seminarian in Bourges, was dreaming of founding a new religious congregation that could transform the character of society in his part of France. Both young men wanted to change society—but by different means. Each in his own way was a ‘revolutionary’.

Fr Dennis Murphy in a paper entitled ‘The Heart as the Centre’ (1995) argues that Father Chevalier ‘was convinced that the nature of God and of human beings, the whole of our faith, the meaning of human existence, and the meaning of the universe itself could be discovered and presented to the world in the revelation of God’s love in Jesus’ pierced side on the cross, or in other words, in the pierced Heart of Christ’.

Both thinkers were deeply troubled by the modern evils of egoism and indifference that were destroying the fabric of society as a result of the French and Industrial Revolutions (fuelled by the principles of the Enlightenment). Marx was convinced that humanity could only be changed by violent disruption: the destruction of the old and its replacement with a new more egalitarian society. Chevalier was convinced that the answer was found in practical love.

Both men favoured quite different responses to the challenges of their times. Both were ‘missionaries’ but each found his inspiration in a different source. Unlike Chevalier, Marx rejected the role of the transcendent in the transformation of human values.

Chevalier strongly believed in man’s ability to grasp the transcendent love of God; man was the bridge connecting the world with the intentions of God: ‘Man is king and pontiff: king through his intellect, pontiff through his heart’. Whereas for Marx, man was the barrier to a just society.

Christ had become man to establish on earth God’s Kingdom of justice, love and peace. Chevalier wanted to proclaim and continue Christ’s mission in all its dimensions, in all its fullness. He did not want to limit it to the ‘spiritual’ world; as Fr Cuskelly has noted, Chevalier was a pragmatist rather than an idealist. The inspiration for his vision of a new society was Christ’s personal mission.

However, it would be a misunderstanding of the spirit of Chevalier to reduce that mission to a purely social or political one. Chevalier understood the Lord’s mission in a much richer way than that: it has a transcendent di-
mension—it was rooted in Christ’s intimacy with the Father. It is about building the intimate relationship between God and humanity, sharing in the divine life. On the other hand, we would be unfaithful to the vision of the Founder were we to reduce his vision to a sort of pious spirituality: to ‘spiritualize it’. The spirituality of the heart is practical.

Chevalier was a man open to the problems of his time, to the real-life difficulties people encountered and also open to new possibilities for the laity faced with the concrete challenges presented by the social environment of the times. He was convinced that you cannot preach the Gospel without taking seriously its human and social consequences. He had a sense of mission ‘without limits’ which cannot be reduced simply to a ‘spirituality’. It has been said that Marxism proved so popular because of the failure of Christians to address the real issues of the time.

Chevalier had a far more positive view of human possibilities than Marx did. He saw his missionaries as people who were directly involved with the creation of a new and better world; he understood this as one of the principal aims of his young Society, promoting what he called the ‘social reign of the Sacred Heart’. On one occasion we know that he became indignant when one of his younger confreres accused him of being disinterested in the promotion of the ‘social reign of the Sacred Heart’.

No, I am in no way indifferent, as you seem to believe, to the establishment of the social reign of the Sacred Heart. No one wants this more than I. Be sure of that. If time had permitted, I would have had a long time ago, a series of articles in our Annals on this important subject that I regard as one of the principal works of our congregation. I have spoken of this on numerous occasions and no one was able or wanted to undertake the task.

To prepare our Associates to hear about the social and universal reign of the Sacred Heart, you could send us each month a serious, theological article on the Sacred Heart. For example, to begin with you could prove the inalienable rights of Jesus Christ over all nations, first as God, as Redeemer and as conqueror. Once this point has been solidly established, it will be easy for you to show that Jesus Christ wants to reign by his Heart, and that it is necessary, in order to respond to his desires, that we all work to establish and spread this reign of his love.

Father Chevalier clearly understood that the promotion of a society based on the self-giving love revealed in the pierced Heart of Christ on the Cross was one of the main aims of the Archconfraternity of the Sacred Heart that he had established. This was not simply a pious aim, it was also practical, as he demonstrated in the talks on social issues, such as the problems caused by urban poverty, that he gave to the men of the parish of Issoudun.

There is also evidence in his correspondence of his interest in direct political action. He seems to have raised with the Count Albert de Mun, one of the leading French politicians of the time (who was profoundly concerned about the Church’s response to the plight of the workers), a scheme for the formation of a Christian political party, the ‘Chevaliers of the Sacred Heart’. However, the count rejected the proposal: ‘he has told me that since the Holy Father has forbidden him to create a Christian political party in the Chamber [of Deputies], he does not want to become involved with our project, at least not directly, as long as the Pope does not favour such action’ (Letter to Fr Delaporte, 1866). Sadly there is little information available in the archives about this project, which would suggest that Chevalier shared Marx’s concern about social conditions.

It is clear from his writings (as Fr Dennis
Murphy has demonstrated) that Father Chevalier had a ‘cosmic’ understanding of the spirituality of the Heart. It was a spirituality that embraced everything; its agenda was universal, its concern, all that affected the human condition—a spirituality that could bind together the whole of creation and unite it with God.

In his almighty genius, God has found the means to unite matter and spirit. What a miracle is the body of man! God has formed this privileged matter in such a way that the whole lower world is united in it, summed up in it…

Man is not only a mineral that blossoms, a shrub that feels, an animal that reasons: he is a mineral, a tree, an animal who prays, who adores, who gives thanks. In us matter becomes religious.

Man’s vocation—individual and social—is to live the love that unites and builds communion. Thus, Father Chevalier understood that the way of the spirituality of the Heart, that had so taken hold of him, was the continuation of God’s mission of love in the work of creation.

Knowing himself, God loves himself. For him to know himself is to generate his Son. And the Father and the Son love each other with a unique love, and this love is the Holy Spirit, third person of the holy Trinity, whose existence is equally as necessary as that of the Son and the Father. God’s creatures resemble him more in so far as they are more perfect; he wills then that, in his spiritual creatures, knowledge should produce love. It is in order to be loved that he wants to be known. What would it matter to him to be known, if one did not love him?

From this comes the whole of religion: knowledge producing love, and the result of this is adoration and obedience. Such is the external glory that the Creator seeks in his creation.

An authentic human society will reflect the life of the Trinity: a communion of love, or what Pope Paul VI once called a ‘civilization of love’, in which the dignity and development of man in society is assured. What a contrast there is between Chevalier’s vision for the transformation of society and that of Marx. Any visitor to the ‘War Remnants Museum’ in Ho Chi Minh City, is dramatically reminded of the tragic consequences of the destructive solutions proposed by the alternatives of Western militarist/industrial capitalism and Marxism: violence and the destruction of society and nature—not their transformation.

As followers of Father Chevalier and the spirituality of the Heart, today, we are being called to work hard for the transformation of society after the pattern of God’s self-giving love revealed in the Heart of Christ pierced on the Cross.

Jesus, recognized as the King of Peace, is the founder of the civilization of love, the civilization of peace. This is what it cost for Jesus to be the Messiah, to be the Christ, to be the victim of his love and of our peace, as he will be proclaimed to be, in the coming days of Holy Week…

But meanwhile we greet with great joy...the message of peace which Jesus Christ has brought to us ... And we pray that this peace, human, civil, and spiritual will produce brotherhood between people, and that the instincts of egotism, of deceit, of crime will be replaced by a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation...

The events, the symptoms, and the shudders of war arise even today in the life of the world, paralyzing the progress toward peaceful coexistence, producing hatred and cupidity and terrible armaments, producing a precarious and threatened peace, sadly making civilization itself unsure.

—Paul VI, Palm Sunday 1977.
In our Catholic culture sin has been seen almost exclusively in an individual sense. It is a personal act, requiring the personal engagement of knowledge and consent before there is any question of sin. This emphasis on personal sin as an individual act no doubt reflects a long tradition of confessional practice, which has tended to lay stress upon personal sins and the confession of one’s serious transgressions according to number, kind and circumstances.

However, in the Bible sin is considered, not only as a personal action but also, and even more emphatically, especially in the Old Testament, as something done by the community. Sin has a social dimension. Israel is shown to have a solidarity in sin. The Hebrew prophets constantly inveigh against the infidelity of the whole community of Israel and Israel’s breaking of the Covenant with Yahweh. Indeed the Scriptures see sin primarily, not as the malice of individual persons, but as the infidelity of Israel as a whole. For Paul, ‘sin and death reign over all the world’.

In the Christian tradition the social character of sin is brought out in the teaching about ‘original sin’, which, as Richard Gula puts it, is a theological code word for the human condition in a world influenced by more evil than we do by ourselves and for which we carry no personal guilt (Gula 1989,106). We all come into this world, as our experience of life testifies, marked, scarred and weighed down by this sinful condition, for which we are not personally responsible and which we hope to surmount by the superabounding grace of Jesus, our Redeemer:

...the gift itself considerably outweighed the fall. If it is certain that through one man’s fall so many died, it is even more certain that divine grace, coming through the one man, Jesus Christ, came to so many as an abundant free gift...however great the number of sins committed grace was even greater; and so, just as sin reigned wherever there was death, so grace will reign to bring eternal life thanks to the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 5:15-21)

Distinct from the notion of original sin, the biblical character of sin as a social evil on the part of the community as such has been recaptured in recent times in a relatively new concept, social sin, thanks in great part to the work of Liberation Theology. Liberation theologians sought to understand how faith should react to challenges arising from grave violations of social justice in the community. In the Church we have become more aware today of social justice and its demands, despite the fact that, as Andrew Hamilton SJ, points out, in the secular culture around us,

It is unfashionable to speak about social justice because of the emphasis on individual choice and on material advancement in a competitive society. Such an outlook leaves little room for responsibility, and even less for social responsibility to those less fortunate in society. (Hamilton 2014, 1)

Where the demands of social justice are recognised, there is also a growing consciousness of political, economic and social elements in society, and even sometimes in religious institutions, that oppress the poor, aid and abet racism and intolerance, treat asylum seekers and other members of society harshly and inhumanely, endorse a free market that operates on effective demand and not on human need, do grave damage to the environment, and so on. Such unjust social structures and institutions are what is called ‘social sin’.

The first official recognition of the magnitude of evil structures that contaminate the social sphere and that have their source in human pride and selfishness was made in Vatican II’s 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World Today, Gaudium et Spes (No.25).

In 1984 Pope John Paul II gave nuanced
recognised to social sin in his post-synodal exhortation, Reconciliatio et Poenitentia, and again in 1988 in his encyclical Solicitude Rei Socialis (On Social Concern). In this encyclical he instanced as examples of social sin: class struggle, confrontation between blocs of nations and confrontation between different groups within one nation. His statement ran as follows:

Sin and ‘structures of sin’ are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the roots of the evil which afflicts us...it is not out of place to speak of ‘structures of sin’ which...are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people’s behaviour. (No.36)

Society as such cannot sin of course, for sin is a personal act of freedom on the part of an individual person. Pope John Paul recognises that society is the bearer of sinful structures, but he stresses that responsibility for the creation and maintenance of these structures rests upon the personal sins of its members. There is an intimate link between social sin and personal sin. The notion of social sin, therefore, must not lead to underestimating the responsibility of individuals involved. Social sin, as the Pope puts it, thus makes an appeal to the consciences of us all. How this is to be understood remains to be considered.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church again stresses the connection of social sin, as evidenced in such evils as sexism, racism, genocide, oppression of the poor, with the sins of individual persons:

Sin makes (us) accomplices of one another and causes concupiscence, violence, and injustice to reign among (us). Sin gives rise to situations and institutions that are contrary to the Divine Goodness. ‘Structures of sin’ are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense they constitute a ‘social sin’. (No.1869)
by accident but because they are social embodiments of a multitude of sinful attitudes, actions or culpable omissions of a great variety of persons over a long period of time. For example, we may consider the Australian policy regarding asylum seekers and the structures established to implement the policy to be inhumane and immoral, but it is well to remember that these structures would not be in place without the support of over 50% of the Australian population who consider the offshore detention of people seeking asylum from persecution to be justified or even not harsh enough, or the 10% of people who say ‘they don’t know’. Social sin is inextricably linked to personal sin.

2. The influence of social sin on personal behaviour

We are apt to forget the connection between social sin and individual acts. A good percentage of ordinary people see unacceptable social structures and institutions as ‘just the way things are’ or ‘the way things have always been’ and therefore none of our concern. Some people seem to be of such a mind as to simply limit the idea of justice to the criminal justice system, overlooking the demands of the common good and the support of education and the health of the community as vital requirements of social justice.

The structures, institutions and systems of the society and the world in which we live, whether we are aware of it or not, become internalised by us as time goes on. In this way society influences the way we think and behave and relate to one another (Connors and McCormick 1998, 64). This process is illustrated by the story of The Emperor’s New Clothes. His people do not see that he is naked because they are browbeaten by their political leaders. They fear losing their jobs, so they convince themselves they can really see the Emperor’s clothes. It takes a child who has not internalised this viewpoint to see that the Emperor has not got any clothes on. This process of internalisation is the reason why, as Pope John Paul says, structures of sin ‘grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people’s behaviour’.

So there is a vicious circle at work. The sinful actions of individual persons create in society structures of sin and in turn these sinful social structures and institutions, this social sin, have their influence on individuals in society and lead them to further wrongdoing. The structures of society modify our consciousness. So by living and working under the influence of these social structures we help to maintain them and their effects in society, whether we wish to do so or not.

3. Personal moral responsibility for Social Sin

Social sin arises from the personal sins of individual members of society. We share in the creation of the society in which we live at least by maintaining its structures and institutions. However, this does not automatically mean that we are morally responsible for its sinful structures and institutions. Culpability requires knowledge and consent. How then do we become culpable for social sin?

In his encyclical Reconciliatio et Poenitentia to which reference has already been made, Pope John Paul II states that social sin is:

a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required (no, 25).

These strong words ought to move us to examine our consciences. We may not perhaps realise the evil in some of the structures in place in our society and in our world. If, through no fault on our part, we are unaware of the evil, then we cannot bear culpability for it. But failure to recognise evil may not always dispense us from culpability. As not infrequently happens, we fail to recognise the evil
we perpetuate because of the reasons the Pope suggests or others like them. In that case we cannot be excused from blame. It is our own fault that our conscience has become dulled and we are therefore morally responsible for it. We have put ourselves in danger of becoming blind to dehumanising social injustice and to the suffering of people with whom we may never rub shoulders.

But once we do become conscious of ‘structures of sin’ in our society, we have a moral obligation to do what is in our power to avoid, eliminate or limit their impact, at least by urgent prayer that the structures of sin be redressed. Richard Gula sums it up in these words,

But if, after our consciousness has been raised and our imaginations transformed so that we can see clearly the wrongdoing being perpetrated by our social practices, we still do nothing about the oppressive structures, then we are on the verge of culpable personal sin for these social ills. Our liability, or obligation to make reparation for them, becomes proportionate to our degree of culpability. (Gula 1989,120)

In this manner social sin becomes linked with personal sin.

If the moral responsibility for social sin really rests upon us as members of society, what can we do to reform social structures that we perceive to be unjust, that discriminate against the poor, the ‘little people’ and the underprivileged in our society, that are calculated to do grave damage to the environment, and such like?

Collective prejudices, as is well known, lead to an entrenched attitude of resistance to change, whatever it is and even if it is demanded by justice. This must be recognised and overcome. For many that may not be easy. The struggle to change and reform ‘structures of sin’ is a challenge to the consciences of all. It is the only way to liberate both the oppressors and also the victims from the forces that led to the imposition and acceptance of the unjust structures in the first place.

Not everybody may feel able or disposed to engage in public protest or demonstration or direct approach in person or by letter to those in power in the community. But the force of public opinion must never be underestimated, and our expressed attitudes about the dignity of human persons and the right of all to justice and a fair go play an important role in forming that. We do not need to be persons in authority to make our personal attitudes and our judgment of what is going on around us known to those around us, and that is what makes up public opinion.

It is important also that we keep the structures and institutions of our secular society and of the Church under regular scrutiny, to ensure that they are not oppressive of persons or classes in the community and so in need of removal or reform. The Church is no exception to this. The Royal Commission into Institutional Response to the Sexual Abuse of Children by Clergy, in currently calling the Church to account for the structures set in place to deal with this public scandal, does a salutary, if painful, service to the Church.

Finally, sins against justice call for reparation and reconciliation. We have a moral obligation to make reparation for injustice to individual persons. Social sin also lays a demand upon us for atonement and reconciliation. Hopefully, penitential services celebrated by Church communities, in which the Word of God is reflected upon and in which consciences are examined, will serve the dual purpose of awakening us to both personal and social sins and of leading us to sincere reconciliation, especially if a general absolution becomes part of the service.

REFERENCES
Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (RN) of 1891 represents a kind of *magna carta* for modern Catholic social teaching. The backdrop of the encyclical is the rise of modern industrial society and the radical changes taking place in the political, economic, and social fields. In the field of economics, a new form of property had emerged, namely, capital, which went hand in glove with a new form of labour, namely, labour for wages. Labour became a commodity to be bought and sold in the capitalist market place, with the result that workers were not assured of the bare minimum wage needed to support their families. Furthermore, the grim spectre of unemployment was always present, which burdened the suffering and anxiety of the workers and their families to the point where starvation and death became a part of the new industrial landscape. The radical changes underway at the end of the nineteenth century quickly gave rise to a society divided into two classes, and the new political order upheld this situation by safeguarding total economic freedom by the application of laws. At the same time, the advent of capitalism and its new form of labour spawned the growth of Marxist socialist philosophy that sought to address the injustices suffered by workers with its notion of a classless society where all ownership of property belongs to the state. The encyclical is keen to refute Marxist philosophy and upholds the natural right to private ownership of property (RN, 9–15).

The intention of *Rerum Novarum* was to shed light in a systematic way on the conflict that had arisen between capital and labour, and to articulate moral principles that are congruous with a Christian anthropology founded on the mystery of Jesus Christ. Many of the social teachings share a family resemblance with democratic social thought where human reason is used to arrive at principles of justice that advance the well-being of society. Issues raised and principles espoused in *Rerum Novarum* that have a particular poignancy today include: an ongoing debate about what constitutes a fair and just relationship between capital and labour; the dignity of the worker and the dignity of work; the social dimension of work as integral to promoting the common good; the right to a just wage to procure what is required to live; the right to form professional associations such as trade unions or business groups; the requirement of the state authorities to provide properly for the welfare of the workers, their families, and of society in general; the right of the individual to discharge freely his/her religious duties; and the right to private property.

Much of the religious education programme in Catholic schools nowadays revolves around the social teaching of the church, and the social dimension of the gospel continues to receive significant emphasis in church teaching, as is evident in Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). But an important question that arises here is the following: In what ways is Catholic social teaching distinctive from western secular thinking on social issues? If Catholics, both young and adults alike, are to be prepared adequately for activities of social-political praxis, they must have a good sense of what the church actually teaches about Christian life committed to the promotion of justice and the common good. The purpose of this essay is not so much to articulate and delineate fundamental tenets of Catholic social thought that overlap and are congruous with secular viewpoints, as to highlight distinctive dimensions of Catholic teaching that are
closely intertwined with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is the ‘new creation’ in person. In addition to Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the essay will draw upon Pius XI’s encyclicals *Quadragesimo Anno* (QA, 1931) and *Nova Impendet* (NI, 1931), Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* (GS, 1965), Paul VI’s encyclical *Octagesima Adveniens* (OA, 1971), John Paul II’s encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (CA, 1991), and Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG, 2013).

**Fundamental Aspects of Catholic Social Thought**

(i) The first point to be made concerning Catholic social teaching is that it is informed by theological-christological reflections. It is not based purely on human reason (philosophical thought), but reason illuminated by the revelation of Christ the redeemer. The guiding principle of Leo XIII’s encyclical, which is reflected in all of the church’s social teaching, is a certain view of the human person informed by the history of revelation. The understanding of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, together with the unique Christian doctrine regarding our humanity as assumed by the person of the incarnate Word, serves to underline the inalienable worth and dignity of each and every human person; the destiny of which is to partake of the divine nature (CA, 11, 47, 53, 55; QA, 139; RN, 25, 26). Only God as creator and redeemer, and not the human existent as the recipient of divine grace, can ascribe such inalienable worth to creaturely beings. Because of this elevated view of the human person and its mysterious calling to partake of God, the aim of Catholic social teaching is to ‘guide’ intellectual thought and moral behaviour in pathways that advance the truth about the human person and its high vocation.

(ii) A second distinctive point to appreciate is that the church has always maintained the view that an essential bond exists between human freedom and truth. John Paul II points out that the origin of all the evils to which *Rerum Novarum* wished to give a response is ‘a kind of freedom which, in the area of economic and social activity, cuts itself off from the truth about humankind’ (CA, 4). When human freedom refuses to be bound to the truth, it falls into arbitrariness and ends up submitting itself to self-indulgence, self-interest, and a self-love ‘which refuses to be limited by any demand of justice’ (CA, 17). The error of detaching human freedom from the truth about humankind leads to devastating consequences that are apparent in the tragic series of wars, culminating in the Jewish Holocaust, that ravaged Europe in the twentieth century. The situation today in the developed world may seem somewhat better than it was in the last century, yet it would be foolish to not recognise that we are not so much in a state of peace as in a state of non-war. The ideal of true peace still remains elusive, the old forms of totalitarianism and authoritarianism are not completely vanquished and may regain their strength, and the promotion of utilitarian values in the developed world makes it difficult to discern and respect the true vocation of humankind and the dignity to which it is called.

The church has always maintained that no authentic progress is possible without ‘knowing the truth and living according to that truth’ (CA, 29). In the New Testament this is clearly set out in Jesus’ profession: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6). On this view, it is not sufficient to think of progress and development in purely economic terms, for poverty is not only economic but cultural and spiritual as well. What is at stake is the full flourishing of the human person which

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involves the upholding of basic human rights, the enhancing of creativity, and the formation of cultures that facilitate the human experience of encountering God who is the true good of humankind.

(iii) A third distinctive aspect has to do with a pneumatological perspective. The understanding of the human person as created in the divine image, redeemed by Christ, and genuinely free only when it lives according to the truth about itself, cannot be affirmed apart from the presence and workings of the Holy Spirit in the realm of history. Believers confess Jesus as Christ and Lord in the power of the Spirit, and they are empowered by the Spirit in their commitment to building up the common good which is ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily’ (GS, 26). Non-believers, however, as Vatican II acknowledged, need not be excluded from the workings of the Spirit insofar as ‘grace is active invisibly’ in the hearts of all people of good will (GS, 22, 38). Non-believers can be open to the promptings of the Spirit without being aware of it. The difference between believers and non-believers lies in the nature of their receptivity to the Spirit. Christians are consciously aware, and thus more receptive, to the activity of the Spirit as the ‘first fruits’ of the new creation in the person of the risen Lord, as sanctifying the people of God, and as bringing the gift of communion with God as their final destiny; whereas with non-believers the Spirit simply leads them to work towards the common good. Nonetheless, with both believers and non-believers ‘the Spirit of God calls and gifts people to work in active anticipation of the eschatological transformation of the world’ (Volf, 2001, 123). The goal of social action is to be seen as the same in both the church and the world.

(iv) A fourth important point is that church teaching makes it very clear that the reality of the kingdom of God can never be identified with any socio-economic-political system. Whatever gains are made in history with regard to upholding and advancing the common good, they remain a foretaste of the glory of the new creation to come, when sin and death will be no more. The church is all too aware of the limiting realities of sin and death in the world and of humankind’s fundamental need for redemption in Christ who ‘makes all things new’ (Rev 21:5). The ugly face of sin will continue to be an obstacle to God’s reign in the world as long as history is still running its course (CA, 25), yet at the same time there can be no question that the gospel of Christ requires believers to be actively involved in building up the world and to be keenly interested in the good of their fellows (GS, 34). By living ‘according to the Spirit’ (Rom 8), the faithful set their minds on the living God who works for good, find peace in living life in a way that is pleasing to God, and are assisted in their weaknesses and sufferings which are joined to the redemptive sufferings of Jesus Christ.

(v) In connection with the previous point, it is worth underscoring the point that the church affirms neither liberal capitalism nor Marxist socialism, but fundamental principles illuminated by faith in Christ the redeemer who elevates humankind to a dignity beyond compare. Democracy is certainly affirmed as an essential condition for human flourishing in keeping with the doctrine regarding our being created imago Dei, yet the church urges us to be ever vigilant so as to prevent democracy becoming a totalitarian regime in disguise. The fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching do not amount to political programmes or ideologies; rather, they give expression to the transcendent dignity of human existence and are intended as an ‘ideal orientation’ (CA, 43) that leads to the genuine promotion of the common good. Marxist ideology is criticised because of the way it absorbs individual freedom in the collectivity and proffers an atheistic materialism, and liberal ideology is equally criticised for exalting individual freedom by removing every limitation and seeking the autonomy of the individual (OA, 26). What is more, both liberal capital-
ism and Marxist collectivism are criticized for offering purely economic models of human existence that fail to uphold the inalienable dignity of humanity as created in God’s image (Baum, 1991, 60). The Christian contribution to a positive transformation of society lies not in suggesting a ‘middle ground’ between these two economic models, but in ‘going beyond every system’ (OA, 36). The Christian faith is not an ideology, it does not propose a rigid schema into which all realities must be constrained and imprisoned.

By constantly affirming the transcendent dignity of the human person, the church upholds respect for human freedom which attains to its full development by accepting the truth of humanity’s vocation as created in the divine image and called to union and communion with God. If there is no ultimate truth—as held by skeptical relativism which is widely diffused today—to guide and direct social-political activity, then democracy can easily turn into a ‘tholini disguised totalitarianism’ (CA, 46). In a society without truth, freedom loses its foundation and falls into an arbitrariness and humankind are exposed ‘to the violence of passion and to manipulation, both open and hidden’ (CA, 46).

(vi) An especially important church teaching that must be appreciated for its distinctiveness from secular social thought is that the Christian is required to go beyond the principles of human rights enunciated in the papal encyclicals and exercise charity, for reception of the Spirit of the risen Christ means that the Christian is enabled to fulfill the new law of love (Rom 8:1–11; Gal 5; John 15:12). Rerum Novarum, appealing to Thomas Aquinas, reminds the faithful that material possessions should be shared without hesitation with those who are in need (RN, 22). Christians are not expected to distribute to others what is required for their own needs and those of their families, but they are bound by duty to give to the needy what remains over. It is a duty not of justice, but of Christian charity, which cannot be enforced by human law. Charity, as a theological virtue, pertains to the life of the church; it is ‘the mistress and the queen of virtues’ (RN, 63) inasmuch as it is the fulfilling of the whole gospel law which alone can bring about the happy results that are much longed for. Justice alone can certainly remove the causes of social conflict, but it ‘can never bring about union of minds and hearts’ so that the ‘constituent parts of society deeply feel themselves members of one great family’ (QA, 137). Without a deep sense of solidarity and service to others, without exercising that love which ‘bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’ (1 Cor 13:7), the strong emphasis on equality ‘can give rise to an individualism in which each one claims his own rights without wishing to be answerable for the common good’ (OA, 23).

With regard to the exercise of charity, the church teaches that love for the poor is not an optional extra, for in the poor the church sees Christ himself who ‘became poor’ (2 Cor 8:9) for the sake of enriching humanity and the world. Pope Francis has made the inclusion of the poor in society the first great issue in respect of the social dimension of the Gospel (EG, 186–216). The exercise of charity towards the poor involves more, though, than a mere giving from one’s surplus: it also involves ‘a change of life-styles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies’ (CA, 58).

(vii) No human being can live without some form of hope in the future. What is distinctive about the Christian form of hope is that it is not grounded in the human capacity for scientific-technological advances and socio-political activity, but in the crucified and risen Lord who has conquered sin and death and transformed them into the glory of eternal life. Since the nineteenth century, western societies have founded hope on indefinite progress as the necessary condition for human freedom. To attain freedom, humans must master the realm of nature and continue to develop economically, so as to allow them to determine their own destiny (OA, 41). Genuine progress, however, cannot be measured
only in quantitative and scientific terms, since the common good also involves the attainment of objectives of a qualitative order.

There can be no genuine progress without the development of a moral consciousness that guarantees the quality and truth of human relations, and responsibility for the common good. For the Christian, progress comes up against the paschal mystery of Christ: ‘The death of Christ and his resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord help humankind to place their freedom, in creativity and gratitude, within the context of the truth of all progress and the only hope which does not deceive’ (OA, 41, 48). The Christian knows that many obstacles and barriers will have to be faced in promoting the spirit of the gospel, yet because Christian hope comes from the risen Lord they do not ‘lose heart’ (QA, 138) and are given strength to endure the struggles that are a mark of Christian life. Ultimately, the future of the ‘new creation’ will not come about by human effort and struggle, but as gift of God who has transformed and transfigured all things in the crucified and risen Lord. The Christian, by being radically tested in the living out of the gospel in a sinful world, gives ‘witness’ to the kingdom of God revealed in the person of Christ and anticipates the new life to come.

(viii) Finally, since Christian faith is always a tested faith, the Christian has recourse to the practice of lament when things become too distressing and replete with anguish. The lament as a speech form is a ‘limit expression,’ that is, it respects the voice of pain and suffering—How long? and Why?—and dares to complain to God about distressing aspects of present reality that defy all our attempts to control everything and gain certainty about the future. The lament is not, however, an opportunity to wallow in sorrow, self-pity, and misery; rather, because the lament is raised to God in the confidence that God will hear the complaint and perform a new action that will pave a way into a brighter future, it is designed to perform an empowering function. ‘Lament gives hope, because embedded in the lament is an appeal that arises out of trust in the God whose love is forever. Lament is the mode by which hope is reborn’ (Hicks, 2005, 79). In the lament psalms, the complaint to God never stands by itself but is accompanied by a confession of trust in God and concludes with a vow of future praise and thanksgiving. With regard to Jesus’ passion, he pleads with the Father that ‘the cup’ be removed from him, yet he confirms his utter obedience to the Father with whom he is one. The Father does respond to Jesus’ cry of lament on the cross, which takes the form of the new action of raising Jesus from the dead. In this new action of resurrection wherein the work of salvation is completed, a glorious new future has opened up to humanity and the world (Novello, 2013).

On the view that salvation comes through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, the negative realities of suffering, anguish, and death are no longer to be regarded as proof of the absence of God, but rather are to be affirmed as ‘modes of God’s presence’ (Fiddes, 1988, 191–92). Suffering and death are not only conditions from which we seek deliverance, but the means by which final salvation comes. Since lament is the mode by which hope is reborn, the Christian must not seek to keep Christ’s wounds at arm’s length, for Christ, as Pope Francis asserts, wants his disciples ‘to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others’ (EG, 270). At the same time, the pontiff exhorts the faithful to recover the joy of the gospel that should accompany the task of discipleship. Christian joy is not shallow; it adapts, changes, and endures through difficult times, and waits on the final salvation of the Lord (EG, 6). Believers, then, do not lose heart when faced with the negative realities of the world. To whom and to what can non-believers turn when their social-political programmes bear little fruit or no fruit at all? How can true joy be found in a troubled and suffering world without turning to the transcendent reality of God who is both in the fray and above the fray?

**Conclusion: Future as Gift of God**
It has been shown that Catholic social teaching belongs not to the field of ideology, but theology, and has a decidedly eschatological thrust. Ideological systems and practical agendas all suffer the fate of becoming ends in themselves, and of losing touch with the transcendent ideals that continue to inspire human action in pathways that promote and build up the common good. When we turn our attention to the gospel narratives, it becomes readily apparent that the kingdom preached by Jesus is beyond every political and social system. The kingdom of God can never be identified with worldly progress or achievement, although the salvation that comes with the Christ-event is certainly concerned with the temporal welfare as well as the eternal welfare of humanity and the world.

Vatican II explicitly stated that ‘although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society’ (GS, 39). The activity of social praxis should therefore be ascribed inherent and not merely instrumental value (i.e. doing good things as a sanctifying process that leads to the heavenly life). Christian commitment to social justice comes not only under the rubric of sanctification of the individual, but also God’s purposes for the whole of creation. By actively cooperating with God in history, moreover, believers become beacons of hope for their fellow human beings. ‘Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you’ (1 Pet 3:15). Christians are essentially persons who are ‘saved in hope’ (Novello, 2013).

Christians, while committed to the pursuit of the common good, must not be too starry eyed about the human ability to transform the face of the earth. Progress can and should be made, to be sure, but whatever advances are made will always remain a modest contribution to God’s ‘new creation.’ As Rerum Novarum rightly points out, strive as we may, the ills and troubles that beset human life will never be banished as long as history continues to run its course (RN, 18). The western world aspires to reaching a golden socio-economic-political age where people are free from pain and suffering and trouble, and are assured of undisturbed peace and constant enjoyment, but Christians must be wary of such delusions that fail to acknowledge the reality of sin, the finitude of the human being, and the inevitability of death.

As the mystic Julian of Norwich asserted long ago: ‘But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well’ (Julian, 1966, ch. 27). The final salvation in view here is conceived as an ineffable divine gift, for what is impossible to humankind is possible to God, who, in the person of Christ, has transformed the reality of this world into a glorified new creation. The joyful future that humankind so long for will ultimately come as an unmerited gift of God, not through human effort and enterprise that is always marked by sin, self-interest, and self-indulgence. Only the perfection of love (cf. 1 John 4:7–21) made manifest in Christ can transform the face of the earth and bring about the heavenly life of the new creation.

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The National Council of Priests of Australia would like to endorse the statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (issued 8 May) and express our concern also about the Australian government’s treatment of asylum seekers.

Some of our members minister to these asylum seekers in detention centres and are very concerned for their welfare. The hard-line policies of the current Australian government towards asylum seekers and refugees is extinguishing the Christian virtue of hope for many of these people: some of whom have risked their lives for a new and better life after experiencing oppression and extraordinary deprivation both of rights and resources.

Like our Bishops, many of us have seen the faces and heard the stories of these people and cannot hide our shame at the way some are being treated.

We stand with our Bishops in entreaty our nation to relook at the way we are currently treating asylum seekers and ask the Australian government to change its cruel and inhuman policy towards those seeking asylum in Australia.

We do not believe that concealing their stories or faces, or keeping secret what the Australian government has been doing to deter these asylum seekers is helpful. We ourselves as a church know the danger of secrecy in dealing with those who have been abused or mistreated in any way.

We call upon the Australian government and all politicians of goodwill to seriously review these policies in order to respect the human dignity of these asylum seekers both in Australia and those transported by the government to other lands.

(The statement of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on Asylum Seekers can be accessed on the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference website.)

Palm Sunday Rally Sydney April 13 2014

(1) PHIL GLENDENNING

Let me begin by acknowledging the original owners and custodians of the land we gather on today, the Gadigal people of the great Eora nation. And let’s be clear, if there ever were people who really had a problem with people coming to this country by boat, it was the Gadigal people of the great Eora nation!

Since 1788, when the first boat load of unauthorised arrivals landed on these shores, we have all been boat people. All of us here in Hyde Park today, we are all boat people. So I ask the question: what are we afraid of? The answer is probably that we are afraid of ourselves. History happened here. Ask an Aboriginal person. Unless we learn the lessons of our history we are bound to repeat the sins of that history. Today, we are repeating the sins of that history.

When I see the fear and ignorance that
surrounds the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers today in this land of migrants and boat people, I wonder what it is that we are afraid of. We are all boat people in this country. Unless you are an Aboriginal person, you and your mob have come from somewhere else, most likely by boat, so what is it we are afraid of? Perhaps we are afraid of ourselves.

I would like to share with you a poem, written by an Iranian asylum seeker, who identified himself only by his ID number and not his name:

'I do not know what will happen after I die. I do not want to know. But I would like the Potter to make a whistle from the clay of my throat. May this whistle fall into the hands of a naughty child and the child to blow hard on the whistle continuously with the suppressed and silent air of his lungs and disrupt the sleep of those who seem dead to my cries'.

Today as we gather here in Sydney, all of us are here to proclaim to that asylum seeker, and all asylum seekers in Australia, on Manus Island and in Nauru, we are not deaf to your cries.

We hear you. We are here to amplify your voice and declare peace to the refugees, peace to the refugees. Peace. Today we begin this struggle for justice all over again. And if our elected leaders are not up to it, we the people will have to be.

Two days ago in Balmain a young Sri Lankan man in his 20's decided he had had enough. Following the rejection of his case and facing being returned to Sri Lanka, he swallowed half a bucket of petrol and tipped the remainder over his body and set fire to himself. Today he lies in an induced coma and is not expected to live. He left a note thanking the Australian people for their kindness but said he wanted to die in Australia rather than in Sri Lanka.

We have known for a long-time of the mental trauma and degradation that is meted out to asylum seekers in Australia. The Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatrists speak of a new form of mental disorder, ‘asylum seeker syndrome’.

The impact of this falls hardest on children. Today as we stand here in Hyde Park some 1,000 children are being held in detention.

When a nation determines that it is appropriate behaviour to incarcerate children then that nation has an ethical and moral problem at the core of its soul.

At the same time our Government has returned people to Sri Lanka, a country where the Edmund Rice Centre discovered that nine people were killed in the Howard years. We know that many of those returned are kept in jail without charge or trial indefinitely.

Australia today stands with China and Iran in supporting the Sri Lankan regime and failing to support the United Nations Human Rights Council’s investigation into human rights abuses that were not limited to the civil war. What on earth is this nation doing lining up with the mullahs of Iran?

Here today in front of this stage are representatives of the PMOI and National Council of Resistance of Iran. Since last October the Iranian regime has executed over 700 political opponents. Yet of all the nations on the planet Australia is the only nation on Earth—not the Americans, the British or the Europeans—to have the Democratic Opposition of Iran on its banned list of supposed terrorist organisations. Why is Australia supporting the regimes of Sri Lanka and Iran?

What has been missing in our country... the ethical rock on which our response to asylum seekers must be based is that cruelty is an unjustifiable abuse of the dignity of people we...
are obliged to protect.

People are an end in themselves, not a means to a domestic political result.

Compare our situation with that of Lebanon, a country of 4.3 million people who just last month received their one millionth refugee, 50% of whom are children. Rather than call in the military as we have done, the Lebanese have called for more teachers. They suspended the start of the school year so that double shifts could be organised and every child could go to school.

Alternatives are available. The Government does not have to do this. Both major parties’ positions are flawed because they both require people to get in a boat before there is any policy response.

We are spending in advance of $4 billion on mandatory detention. Last year UNHCR spent $3.3 bn globally and only $103 million in South-East Asia.

If we applied some of the billions we spend locking up a few thousand people to working with the nations of the region to assist asylum seekers with work, education and health rights whilst being processed in the region, we would be a long way towards a durable solution. Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke’s Governments showed what was possible in the 70’s and 80’s.

The great Irish poet Seamus Heaney once wrote that it is often foolish to hope on this side of the grave. But every now and then the great tide of justice rises up and ‘hope and history rhyme’. Today on this Palm Sunday we must re-commit ourselves to the dawning of that day, when our hope meets our history.

We cannot be silent on issues of justice and human rights. The neglect of the human dignity of refugees and asylum seekers is not being cruel to be kind. It’s just cruel.

Thirty years from now a Prime Minister will rise in the Parliament and on behalf of the nation he or she will offer an apology to refugees and asylum seekers and their families for the damage that is being done to them today.

Reza Bahrati was a 24 year old Iranian Kurd seeking protection who was killed on Manus Island in a facility established by the Australian Government and funded by Australian taxpayers. He was dragged from his room and bashed to death. He was in our care. He had committed no crime. The tragic appalling deaths of people at sea do not justify his death nor can it justify the continuance of the harsh regime that led to it. It is not acceptable under any circumstances for any young person fleeing a brutal regime to be killed by the people supposed to protect them. It was a conscious choice to create the conditions that enabled this to happen. It’s what happens when humans are treated as a means and not an end. They get killed.

Martin Luther King once famously said that silence is betrayal. We will not be silent. St Catherine of Siena said in the 14th century that we should speak the truth in a million voices for it is the silence that kills. It still does today.

So today I call upon our poets, our singers, our writers, our artists, our creative voices, to speak the truth of these days to the Australian people in as many languages, forms and voices that we can muster.

We have nothing to fear from refugees and asylum seekers. We will, however, have much to fear from ourselves if we as a nation continue to practice such cruelty and excuse it as necessary. It is not necessary. It is a choice.

There can be no peace without justice.

So we refuse to be silent. We refuse to be complicit. Today across this nation from Cooktown to Perth, from Brisbane to Broome, thousands of people are gathering at rallies and marches to say we will not allow these things to be done in our name. If Australia is to become a truly great nation—we will have to learn the lessons of history.

Phil Glendenning is Director of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education and President of the Refugee Council of Australia.
We all know what scapegoating is. You blame someone else for your troubles, you victimise something or someone, hopefully get rid of it, and so get things your own way and come to some sort of peace for a while. Individuals do it, and so do groups, large and small. Even nations. Scapegoating a very old practice and can be found in all societies, ancient and modern. It’s the stuff of literature.

Australia is conducting a major scapegoating episode. By locking asylum seekers up, refusing them entry, pushing them off onto other countries, we are making them victims, sacrificed on the altar of a narrow interpretation of ‘National Security’ and ‘Sovereignty’.

But the trouble with scapegoating is that its cover has been blown. It just doesn’t work any more because it is increasingly obvious that victims are innocent. Most people worldwide can recognise the self-serving trickery of setting up scapegoats. Since it has been realised that the quintessential victim, Jesus, was innocent, the world has been growing conscious of the inherent innocence of all victims.

The people now on Manus Island and Nauru are the victims of Australia. It’s no use just talking about ‘Government’ when we know that the political parties we vote in to govern, have opted for the easier, voter-friendly approach. We keep voting for these people; in fact, the majority of Australians agree with the current hard-line stand.

There have to be other ways of dealing with the problems of people smugglers, deaths at sea, relationships in the region. It doesn’t matter how hard the asylum seeker problem is. It doesn’t matter how huge are the problems that have to be solved. That’s life. Life is difficult.

What does matter is that innocent human beings are being locked up for indeterminate periods of time as a deterrent to others. And we put the onus on them to solve it all by returning to the danger from which they escaped. This cannot be allowed to continue.

It is simply morally wrong to victimise the innocent, to treat as criminals persons who claim to be in fear for their safety. It is morally wrong, no matter how successful it may be.

Australia’s victimisation of asylum seekers is reducing us, as a people. We are rank hypocrites. We treat these people as criminals whereas they have broken no laws, while all the time we are the ones who thumb our collective nose at the Refugee Convention, and thumb our nose at basic human decency.

We in Australia should be acutely aware that it is possible for any person, group, church or nation to stray from its basic principles and moral foundations. Our nation’s structures are built on the Judeo-Christian ethic of the fundamental dignity of human beings. It has often been breached, but remains basic to our structures. It is being attacked by the severity with which asylum seekers are treated. It is being eroded by the refusal of Australia to abide by international agreements.

So on the one hand we have the fact of the gradual awakening of humanity to the innocence of victims, and on the other we have Australia actually using people who have committed no crime as victims. The only way these two opposites can be held together is by a process of self-deception, simple deceit, by pretending that it is right to imprison the innocent, that locking up children is necessary for a greater good, to trumpet ‘the saving of people from drowning’ as the reason, when everyone knows that that is only a by-product.

(2) SUSAN CONNELLY RSJ

We are Victimising Asylum Seekers

We all know what scapegoating is. You blame someone else for your troubles, you victimise something or someone, hopefully get rid of it, and so get things your own way and come to some sort of peace for a while. Individuals do it, and so do groups, large and small. Even nations. Scapegoating a very old practice and can be found in all societies, ancient and modern. It’s the stuff of literature.

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We are Victimising Asylum Seekers

We all know what scapegoating is. You blame someone else for your troubles, you victimise something or someone, hopefully get rid of it, and so get things your own way and come to some sort of peace for a while. Individuals do it, and so do groups, large and small. Even nations. Scapegoating a very old practice and can be found in all societies, ancient and modern. It’s the stuff of literature.

Australia is conducting a major scapegoating episode. By locking asylum seekers up, refusing them entry, pushing them off onto other countries, we are making them victims, sacrificed on the altar of a narrow interpretation of ‘National Security’ and ‘Sovereignty’.

But the trouble with scapegoating is that its cover has been blown. It just doesn’t work any more because it is increasingly obvious that victims are innocent. Most people worldwide can recognise the self-serving trickery of setting up scapegoats. Since it has been realised that the quintessential victim, Jesus, was innocent, the world has been growing conscious of the inherent innocence of all victims.

The people now on Manus Island and Nauru are the victims of Australia. It’s no use just talking about ‘Government’ when we know that the political parties we vote in to govern, have opted for the easier, voter-friendly approach. We keep voting for these people; in fact, the majority of Australians agree with the current hard-line stand.

There have to be other ways of dealing with the problems of people smugglers, deaths at sea, relationships in the region. It doesn’t matter how hard the asylum seeker problem is. It doesn’t matter how huge are the problems that have to be solved. That’s life. Life is difficult.

What does matter is that innocent human beings are being locked up for indeterminate periods of time as a deterrent to others. And we put the onus on them to solve it all by returning to the danger from which they escaped. This cannot be allowed to continue.

It is simply morally wrong to victimise the innocent, to treat as criminals persons who claim to be in fear for their safety. It is morally wrong, no matter how successful it may be.

Australia’s victimisation of asylum seekers is reducing us, as a people. We are rank hypocrites. We treat these people as criminals whereas they have broken no laws, while all the time we are the ones who thumb our collective nose at the Refugee Convention, and thumb our nose at basic human decency.

We in Australia should be acutely aware that it is possible for any person, group, church or nation to stray from its basic principles and moral foundations. Our nation’s structures are built on the Judeo-Christian ethic of the fundamental dignity of human beings. It has often been breached, but remains basic to our structures. It is being attacked by the severity with which asylum seekers are treated. It is being eroded by the refusal of Australia to abide by international agreements.

So on the one hand we have the fact of the gradual awakening of humanity to the innocence of victims, and on the other we have Australia actually using people who have committed no crime as victims. The only way these two opposites can be held together is by a process of self-deception, simple deceit, by pretending that it is right to imprison the innocent, that locking up children is necessary for a greater good, to trumpet ‘the saving of people from drowning’ as the reason, when everyone knows that that is only a by-product.
Stupidly, we then imagine that by some miracle our character as a generally fairminded and generous people will not be affected by the cruel, underhanded violence we are inflicting on weak and vulnerable others. We need to be very concerned about what our behaviour is doing to our identity.

You and I are part of the conscience of Australia. We must continue to stand and speak for these people, who have done no wrong. We must think, and read, and teach. We must respond with ingenuity and courage to Australian Governments and their media drivers. We must not lose heart.

However, the worst thing we can do is to perpetuate the cycle of victimisation. That means, we can’t afford to make the same errors politicians make by turning around and victimising them. Don’t victimise the victimisers. Otherwise we reduce the situation to one of feeding an endless cycle of pathetic point-scoring.

We must engage with decision-makers and opponents, in season and out of season, in civilised and respectful terms. There are good people in Government, on all political sides. What we must do is focus on facts, on humanity, on truth, transparency and goodness. That sort of strength is a match for the deepest moral darkness and can pierce the thickest of parliamentary hot air.

The asylum seeker question is not fundamentally about borders, security, media power, the next election or political trickery. It’s about human beings, the rights of people everywhere to seek safety, and human dignity, including ours. It’s about our human obligation and capacity to put ourselves in others’ shoes, and as Pope Francis has said, to be able to weep’. We weep for asylum seekers. And we weep for Australia and what it risks becoming.

NOTES

1. There are numerous books by René Girard and James Alison where they develop insights into scapegoating and victimization.
2. “…let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty in the world, in ourselves, and even in those who anonymously make socio-economic decisions that open the way to tragedies like this. Who has wept? Who in today’s world has wept?” Pope Francis, 08.07.2013 http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/07/08pope_on_lampedusa:_"the_globalization_of_indifference"/en1-708541

Welcome The Stranger

Jesus identifies himself as a stranger to be welcomed (Matthew 25:35). The Catholic Church teaches that Christ has in some way united himself to every person, whether or not one is aware of this. Christ will consider done to himself the kind of treatment that is reserved to any human person, in particular, to the least among them, the stranger. […]

Pope John Paul II invites us to an ever deeper awareness of the mission of the Catholic Church ‘to see Christ in every brother and sister in need, to proclaim and defend the dignity of every migrant, every displaced person and every refugee. In this way, assistance given will not be considered an alms from the goodness of our heart, but an act of justice due to them’.

—Australian Catholic Migration Office (ACMRO), ‘What the Catholic Church teaches on Asylum and Migration’.
I

MMIGRANTS and immigration policy are the subject of intense debate in many countries, including Australia. The Roman Catholic Church regards the hospitable treatment and regularisation of the status of immigrants, especially asylum-seekers, as a moral bedrock policy, because it implements the Church’s longstanding teaching of treating other human beings as children of God. The Australian Church has long provided programmes, and material assistance, and counselling to help newcomers and would-be immigrants.

The Catholic Church is not alone in accommodating migrants, including asylum-seekers. Various Protestant groups accept them and assist them in becoming legal residents, and help ease language, family, cultural, and economic challenges. In fact, this was the policy of the Christian church from its earliest days, including the first two centuries of its existence, long before Christianity itself was legalised. We can learn much about the spirit of Christ in this era, before the beginnings of the denominations we have today, a period when the oral teachings and Bible interpretations were still preserved in Christian memories, as indicated by the fact that many authors in different parts of Christendom and from different language and cultural backgrounds held identical views on how to treat people, and how love of neighbour is to be implemented in practice.

Some Australians object to an open immigration policy because the current flood of applicants is not Caucasian. The issue is similar in some European countries, where the undesired aliens are Black African or Arab. Thus there is an element of racism, due to the belief that persons of a colour different from the established inhabitants cannot assimilate or blend into the existing population. There was no parallel to this in ancient Christian times; believers before AD 250 welcomed newcomers regardless of skin colour, and perhaps did not even notice it.

Racism was absent in the earliest church and in the non-Christian society surrounding it. Christians and other subjects of the Roman Empire simply did not make distinctions based on race. In fact, mentions of a person’s skin colour were so rare as to be insignificant. On the contrary, the Christian Bardesanes early third-century Syria mentioned the fact that people come in different colours as an example of what everyone agreed was inconsequential, Christian and pagan. The only discriminations were based on cultural factors. Jews divided the world into themselves and Gentiles, while for Greeks the distinction was between themselves and ‘barbarians’, i.e. people who did not share Greek language or culture. The Romans divided people between citizens and non-citizens, and then among various economic classes of citizens. The main Roman xenophobia was against hostile peoples outside the Empire.

In each case, however, individuals could cross the divides by joining the preferred group, through financial or military achievement or by changing religion. Any antipathy was cultural, not ethnic, and was directed most against ‘oriental cults’ or ‘superstitions’, of which Christianity was one. In fact, there is only one xenophobic slur by a Christian in the whole of the New Testament, and even that is a quotation from a member of the maligned group (Titus 1.12f).

Scripture and other early Christian writings say much about how to regard individuals new to a community, whether they come for employment, business opportunities, or

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conditions in their homelands. The term ‘immigrant’ nowhere appears in the early literature because strict separation into nation states did not yet exist, with its restrictions on travel and employment. The ancients did not generally think much about the reasons why newcomers had come, other than military invaders.

The use of the term ‘stranger’ in the early Christian period was thus wide enough to include all persons new to a locale. Christian writers before AD 250 encouraged welcoming and generous treatment of immigrants and other strangers.

The earliest instruction about strangers is Christ’s preaching that they be welcomed and protected, and whoever does so to the least of strangers does it to Jesus himself (Matthew 25.34-45). One apostle wrote that Christians are loyal to God when they render any service to newcomers (3 John 5).

A description of Christianity for heathens written in Athens around AD 125 reported that it was the Christian custom to take strangers into one’s home and rejoice over them as if brothers and sisters. A similar book by a Christian teacher in the City of Rome who was martyred for the faith around AD 165 recorded that local Christian congregations used their funds to provide for orphans, widows, the sick, the needy, and strangers. It also details that among the effects of conversion to Christianity was that ‘we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them’.

According to my dictionary, hospitality is the friendly and generous reception and accommodation of guests and visitors. Saint Paul in his Letter to the Romans 12:13 encouraged his readers to be ‘given to hospitality’ as well as to contribute to the needs of other Christians. First Peter 4:9 exhorts us to practice it ungrudgingly, as well as to be engaged in other forms of charity. One New Testament author and some other ancient Christian writers highly commended hospitality to strangers.

The New Testament and other early Christian writings and sermons were directed to all readers and to all people present in congregations. Their admonitions are put to all of us to provide generously for people we barely know or even not know, simply for the name of Christ and without regard to their means, status or land of birth. Jesus Himself provides a special blessing for the hospitable: in Matthew 10:11f and Luke 10:5 he instructed Christian travellers to salute and wish peace on the homes of hosts who showed them hospitality. These hosts might well have been hospitable to angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2).

In the middle of the second century AD, a brother of a bishop of Rome put forth commandments for the Christian life in a book he said were revelations from the divine. In hospitality, the book said, is a fruitful field for goodness.

In showing how elevated were Christian ethics, a bishop in France in the AD 180s included providing lodging in one’s home to ‘the roofless stranger’ and to ‘give rest to those that are shaken’, which would cover a newcomer feeling disruption from moving to a new country. About the same era, the bishop of Antioch in Syria wrote similarly. Both bishops quoted Zechariah 7:10 in support: ‘And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.’

Clement of Alexandria (Egypt) was dean of the world’s foremost Christian educational institution from AD 192 to 202. He reiterated...
Matthew 25.34-45 to the effect that whoever harbours the least of strangers will be rewarded as if he had done so to Christ Himself. Clement praised hospitality, which he described as ‘akin to love is hospitality, being a congenial art devoted to the treatment of strangers.’ His illustration of its width and why Christians should welcome and assist newcomers was ‘Hospitality, therefore, is occupied in what is useful for strangers; and guests are strangers; and friends are guests; and brethren are friends.’ Even more universal is his statement ‘those are strangers, to whom the things of the world are strange.’

Christian morality, wrote Clement, obliges us to love strangers not only as friends and relatives, but as ourselves, both in body and soul. Accordingly, it is expressly said, ‘Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, for thou wast a sojourner in Egypt,’ designating by the term Egyptian either one of that race, or any one in the world.

Clement’s successor as dean was Origen, the most outstanding Christian teacher, writer and preacher of the first two centuries of church literature, i.e. until AD 250. So great was his knowledge of the Christian faith that he was called upon as a theological consultant by bishops throughout the eastern Mediterranean. In his Commentary on Romans, he regarded receiving guests as a Christian virtue, along with rescuing the innocent and helping unfortunates, such as the hungry and naked. He said that great grace is to be found in hospitality, both with God and with people. In one of his homilies he valued hospitality in the same list as justice, patience, gentleness, and helping the poor. He urged more than waiting for migrants to ask: ‘be anxiously concerned about, and pursue, and make a diligent search for strangers’.

In some localities, hospitality for fellow Christian strangers was a standing institution. A first- or second-century church manual from Syria or Egypt called The Didaché prescribed detailed regulations for the reception and accommodation of travelling Christians. About the same time as Origen, the church father Tertullian in Tunisia placed hospitality to Christian travellers in the same class of Christian activity as relief of the poor and attending church at Easter. A little later, papyrus letters of recommendation for travellers indicate that there was a network of hospitality among the churches.

The Bible considers being hospitable as a desirable trait especially for bishops. First Timothy 3:2 stipulates it in the same passage with such qualifications as being above reproach, an apt communicator, and not a lover of money. Titus 1:7 includes hospitality in a list with such necessary qualities as self-control, being upright, and a lover of goodness. In a paraphrase of 1 Timothy, Origen considered a hospitable nature as necessary for a bishop, as also being above reproach, vigilant and respectable. Such linking reveals early Christians’ high esteem for both the office and the practice: while it demonstrates how dedicated a bishop must be, it also shows the centrality of hospitality in church life.

What about strangers whose skin colour is so different that they and their descendants can never be identical to the established population? Unlike the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and among a few Christians today, no early author asserted that Noah and God cursed the Black race and forever made Africans subordinate to Whites, or outside the circle of people to whom Christians must give equitable treatment (Genesis 9.25-27). This was argued much later by some Whites in South Africa and the Americas as a Biblical justification for Black slavery and apartheid. For their sin, Noah’s son Ham (translation of ‘black’) and grandson Canaan were forever consigned to be slaves of his other (White) sons. Yet, of the 170-odd Christian authors before AD 250 whose writings have come down to us, not one discussed the passage, still less endorsed the argument. They were probably too well-versed in the Old Testament, for the next chapter records that Canaan was the ancestor of the Jebusites, Amorites, and other peoples who...
occupied the Promised Land before Joshua’s invasion. Ham begot the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, not the Ethiopians or other Blacks.

While theories can be based on the Bible in our time, the issue of racism should remind us that it is sometimes inadequate for reaching the complete truth, and that we should also give great weight to writers close to its origins.

These authors lived so early and were so geographically widespread that their sentiments could have originated only with Jesus himself. Because they predate the division into present-day denominations, and before racism and immigration were subjects of controversy, well before Christianity was a state religion, their comments are relevant to Christians of every stripe and hue in Australia today. They are the common inheritance of all Christendom and still regarded as authoritative by many denominations, and should be taken into account when discussing racism and immigration with non-Catholics.

ENDNOTES

Except where otherwise indicated, all quotations from the church fathers are from The Ante-Nicene Fathers; Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. American reprint ed. by A Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885-96; continuously reprinted Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson)

1. Bardesanes On Fate, also known as Book of the Laws of Regions
2. Aristides Apology 15
3. Justin I Apology 67 ANF 1.186f
4. Justin I Apology 14 ANF 1.167
5. Pastor of Hermas Mand. 8.10
6. Irenaeus Against Heresies 4.17.3
7. Theophilus Autolycus 3.12
8. Clement of Alexandria Quis Dives Salvetur 30
9. Clement of Alexandria Stromata 2.9 ANF 2.357
10. Clement of Alexandria Stromata 2.18 ANF 2.367
11. Origen Commentary on Romans 3.3.2
12. Origen Commentary on Romans 10.18.3
13. Origen Homilies on Genesis 11.2
15. Didache chapters 11 and 12
16. Tertullian To His Wife 2.4
18. Origen Commentary on Romans 8.10.5

The current policy has about it a cruelty that does no honour to our nation. How can this be when Australians are so generous in so many situations where human beings are in strife? Think of the way the Vietnamese boat people were welcomed in the 1970s and 80s. The question becomes more pointed when we think of the politicians who are making and implementing the decisions. They are not cruel people. Yet they have made decisions and are implementing policies which are cruel. […]

Do racist attitudes underlie the current policy? Would the policy be the same if the asylum seekers were fair-skinned Westerners rather than dark-skinned people, most of whom are of ‘other’ religious and cultural backgrounds? Is the current policy perhaps bringing to the surface not only a xenophobia in us but also a latent racism? The White Australia policy was thought to be dead and buried, but perhaps it has mutated and is still alive.

IN OUR empirically minded world possible proofs for God’s existence find it difficult to escape entanglement in the demands for ‘evidence’ we can somehow observe or palpably experience. Richard Dawkins, for example, takes only twenty-two pages to incapacitate the traditional proofs and then deftly transforms ‘design’ into an argument against God’s existence. Ultimately, he claims, God is a conjuring trick of the brain’s ‘simulation software’ deluding us into ‘seeing’ what is not really there.¹

Why persist then? One reason, even if not the principal one, is to try to preserve some reflection outside the ‘box’ of the empirical, within which so much of what it means to be human is nowadays trapped. Is everything about us to be explained in terms of physics and chemistry? Is the only form of valid reasoning the technological reasoning that has overrun our modern mindset? Is the resulting consumerism all there is to life?

Three recent works, undaunted by the current climate, revisit the traditional arguments with a view to reformulating them and attuning them to modern sensibilities. Robert J Spitzer in his finely argued New Proofs For the Existence of God begins with an extensive survey of the current scientific evidence concerning the origins of the universe and concludes that the low entropy (disorder) of our universe and its present radiation measures militate against there being huge numbers of cycles or bounces, so lessening the odds for ‘chance’ to be the explanation of everything: ‘there is’, he states, ‘an exceedingly high improbability of explaining our low entropy universe and the anthropic values of our cosmological constants by pure chance’.²

This clears the way for concluding that since the universe, both in its parts and as a whole, is conditioned reality, that is, dependent upon some other reality for its existence, then for its full explanation ‘there must be at least one unconditioned reality in all Reality’.³

Once one understands the full implications of this Reality, we can then see, he maintains, that it grounds all the salient, otherwise unexplained, features of our own reality—our unrestricted desire to know, our tacit awareness of the unlimited intelligibility of all things, our search for unconditional love, the sense of absolute good and justice that grounds conscience, and the restless yearning we experience for more of goodness, beauty and truth.⁴

The second work is Alvin Plantinga’s Where the Conflict Really Lies, which, while covering similar ground to Spitzer’s book, targets the unfounded metaphysical claims of naturalism, particularly the claim that the universe is a ‘closed’ system, thus automatically ruling out any possible influence of the divine.⁵ To show scientifically that it is not ‘astronomically improbable’ for evolution alone to have produced our world, he claims, does not thereby show that it ‘must have happened that way’.⁶ Evolutionary theory, he concludes, has not shown ‘that possibly, all of the features of our world, including mind, have been produced by unguided natural selection’.⁷ On the contrary, both evolution and the fine-tuning of the universe are more probable with the assumption of God’s existence, than that it is all a matter of chance.⁸

Like Spitzer, he argues that our own cognitive powers go far beyond the requirements of reproductive fitness.⁹ Naturalism, on the other hand, by reducing everything, including mind, to physics, chemistry, and adaptive processes, gives us no confidence to believe that ‘our cognitive faculties are for the most part reliable’, for ‘truth’ is a matter of the content of beliefs and is not guaranteed by adaptation.
and survival—false beliefs may be equally adaptive. At the very least, he claims, it certainly casts doubt on naturalism’s metaphysical claims to truth.10

The third work by Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp, *The Predicament of Belief*, while having wider concerns, confronts the same issues as the others. In particular, they explore the reasons we might have to look for further, more ultimate explanations, than those science can provide. The whole enterprise of science, they claim, rests on assumptions that are always in question: why, for example, ‘the most fundamental processes should exist in the first place’.11

After consulting the data they conclude that someone who wants to explain them all in strictly physical terms faces a dilemma:

If she accepts the notion that there is only one universe, she is confronted by striking evidence of fine-tuning that at least seems to suggest that our universe was intentionally framed with initial conditions that would be conducive (in the long run) to the emergence of intelligent life. If, on the other hand, she affirms the theory that ours is only one of innumerable universes, she finds herself subscribing to a framework of universe-transcending laws, which in turn implies the existence of a mindlike realm that precedes or transcends the infinite succession of physical universes.12

Each of these works argues its cases in great detail, and, at the very least they show that the facts allow much more room for manoeuvre than the New Atheists care to admit. Science seeks to offer complete explanations within its own frame of reference, but as human beings we have other frames of reference we need to consider, so other explanations are also possible.

The inescapable question for us is our own existence. We are the outcome of an aeon-long evolutionary process that has produced beings who are self-aware, with an ability to remember the past, to relate to one another as subjects, and to act intentionally in the present to change the future. ‘Chance’ has played so great a part in who we are that if you rewound the process and kept playing it over and over again you would never get the same result. Yet here we find ourselves! Chance is a question, not an answer.

While nature has formed us, and science is best equipped to explore that process, we are above all created by culture and by our own reflection, relationships and choices. Ever since human history began some sense of the ‘divine’ has been the Answer to this human question mark.

The standard atheist objections to this answer are that it is mere wish fulfilment, fear of death, or infantile dependence—in general, an illusion or delusion. Dawkins trawls through shoals of evolutionary explanations: misfiring genes, overshooting agent detection, over-stimulated trust, and cultural inheritance replicating itself (memes).13 It is a quite a catch!

Jesse Bering, an evolutionary psychologist, and also an atheist, in his recent book, *The Belief Instinct*, is prepared to discard most of Dawkins’ haul: the evolutionary origins of religion, he claims, lie rather in the fact that as a species we ‘are exquisitely attuned to the unseen psychological world’ by our ‘theory of mind’, which is our ‘particular trademark’.14

This ability, he argues, overshoots, (that verb again), perceiving intentions and messages where there are none, thus becoming the building blocks of religion:

The intoxicating pull of destiny beliefs, seeing ‘signs’ in a limitless array of unexpected natural events, the unshakable illusion of psychological immortality, and the implicit assumption that misfortunes are related to some divine plan or long-forgotten moral breach—all of these things have meaninglessly coalesced in the human brain to form a set of functional psy-
chological processes... leading our ancestors to feel and behave as though their actions were being observed, tallied, judged by a supernatual audience... 15

Such evolutionary interpretations of religion may explain how we began to think and act religiously, but are not able to answer why we might continue to do so. To do that we have to approach the question from the inside of our lived experience, not from the outside as science does by considering it as an ‘object’.

From the inside of our subjective world facts about our origins are important (and instructive), but it is how we have configured and refigured our adaptive strategies that make us who we are. Bering (unwittingly) shows this with regard to ‘story’, which from the outside is simply ‘where things just happen’. He claims that in reality there is no story:

There is no tidy narrative arc, but just a rather messy, conductorless train of interconnected events hitched together in an impersonal and deterministic fashion, the links between them invisible to the naked eye and beyond the ken of everyday human intelligence. 16

Yet, this outside view is not the only view and it misses what is crucially important to us as human beings. ‘Story’ is essential because we are subjects and agents who are able to create links and innovate by our intentions and goals. We fashion and give content to our lives and relationships by our own reflection and our choices for good or ill. This may be invisible to science but it is the ‘stuff’ of who we are.

Human beings live by value and meaning as much as by nature and facts. Religion too is rooted in nature, but it is central to the discovery and fostering of value and meaning, which contribute to the answer to the human question.

Faith, value, meaning and story cannot simply be swept into the dustbin of illusion. The bleak alternative is made clear in an interview with the novelist, Elizabeth Jane Howard, in the Sydney Morning Herald:

Does she worry about death? ‘Yes I think I’m afraid of it. One of the drawbacks if you don’t believe in Heaven or God, as I don’t, is that you are left thinking of yourself as a bit of a dandelion seed, really—you go into the earth and that will be that... 17

Like mortality and the arts, religion has its own criteria of truth, different from those of science. It concerns the quality of our lives not the quantity. Its success or failure is given in the value it is able to add to our lives, the relatedness it builds, the resources it offers to live well in the midst of the challenges we face, the worth and meaning it gives, and the hope it offers, as well as the personal experience of God we have in our own lives.

Humanity is a work in progress, not just scientific and technological progress, but more especially in love, compassion, justice, reconciliation, care of the earth and peace. Who we are to become depends upon keeping the human question open to something ‘More’. Our lives are going to feel more and more cramped, more shallow and thin, more dandelion-like, if we don’t.

REFERENCES
3. ibid., 119.
4. ibid., 174-6; 239-91.
6. ibid., 24-5.
7. ibid., 58.
8. ibid., 199.
9. ibid., 265-303.
10. ibid., 307-50.
12. ibid., 33.
15. ibid., 191-2.
16. ibid., 153.
BOOK REVIEWS


The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the history of the restoration of the temple, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the repopulation of the city after the Babylonian exile. God’s people learn to walk according to his word, trust in his promises and ultimately know and worship God.

They recognised the hand of God in their rescue and salvation. It was God who was inspiring and organising the leaders of the people, Ezra and Nehemiah, and also the pagan rulers Cyrus and Artaxerxes who authorised their return and promoted and assisted them, providing timber and other necessities. The requirement of the people and leaders was to know and obey God’s commands. When they did what God commanded they and the enterprise of rebuilding the altar, temple and walls and restoring the worship prospered.

The author points out the sessions and challenges for us today in this story. It is very heartening for us in our struggles and efforts, in what we try to do for God and God’s people, and when we meet opposition. We are to be builders; we benefit from others’ efforts, and others will benefit from our efforts. He reflects on the need for ongoing hearing of the word of God, for vigilance and reform.

This is a study that is much more than exegesis: it is spiritual reading, sermon fodder, a text for study groups, a text that provides lessons for life, prayer and living with God. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are launching pads for profound meditations.

Here is a sample of the text:

All of God’s goodness and all of his love was concentrated and poured out in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ in his incarnation, atoning death and resurrection. All of God’s goodness and enduring love is available and accessible to us as it is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. If we have committed major sins, as did God’s people in the past, there is no room for self-punishment, self-banishment, self-segregation or self-imposed exile. There is free forgiveness, free grace, the embracing love of God, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ for our sins. There is the powerful intercession of Christ who is even now our great high priest in heaven, able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him (Hebrews 7:25). We can approach God with confidence and full assurance of faith, entering the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus. (p.51)

I highly recommend this book.

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*Ezra and Nehemiah: Walking in God’s Words* is available from www.cepstore.com.au or (02) 8268 3344. RRP—$19.95 (AUD).

—Barry Brundell MSC


This is a collection of essays, papers and articles that Bishop Michael wrote between 1991 and 2009. His interest and involvement in ecumenism dates from his seminary days. He participated in dialogues with Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, as well as Jews. He served as President of the National Council of Churches in Australia, and in the World Council of Churches, and was a member of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Bishop Michael, former bishop of Townsville, died before Easter this year, and his opening essay, ‘One Man’s Ecumenical

The book takes the form of a debate between an atheist, Leonard Mlodinow, a physics professor, and a proponent of a spiritual view of the universe, the physician Deepak Chopra. Although the book is entitled *Is God an Illusion?*, Chopra is not arguing for the existence of God, exactly. ‘We don’t need God’ he writes. He is arguing for ‘Cosmic Consciousness’, a term which survivors of the Sixties will recall, and which means that the universe is conscious. Every speck of matter has some form of consciousness in Chopra’s view. It seems that he is arguing for a form of panpsychism, which looks like pantheism, *i.e.* there is a spiritual reality immanent in the universe.

However, Chopra quotes with approval from the Bhagavad Gita ‘I am found in all creation. I am inside and outside all that exists’ (p.267), which implies that God is both immanent and transcendent. That, of course, is the traditional Christian view.

Chopra does not seem to have made up his mind about the transcendence of God. Throughout the book it remains unclear whether what he says about cosmic consciousness is true of God as well. He writes at the end of the book that both spirituality and religion ‘depend on a personal journey, leading in the end to the transformation of consciousness,’ (p.301). Most of what he is defending a traditional theist would also defend, though the points of difference are never made explicit.

The contrast between the self-indulgent, wishful-thinking believer and the morally superior, stoical, self denying atheist, which is often in the background in such disputes, is here fully explicit. The atheist is ‘brave’, and the believer, according to Mlodinow, is not. Is she a coward? In Mlodinow’s reckoning, probably.

The two antagonists appear to have different belief ethics. Chopra sometimes gives the impression of treating every proposition as innocent until proven guilty, *i.e.* as acceptable as long as there is no evidence against it, and on the other hand, Mlodinow treats every proposition as guilty until proven innocent, *i.e.* unless guaranteed by evidence. Consequently, Mlodinow is frequently able to dismiss Chopra’s views by remarking that there is no evidence for them.

There is another difference in their approach. Chopra writes forcefully, but he does not nail his objections down. Mlodinow writes with great analytical skill and follows every argument through. Moreover, Chopra tends to

*Journey* is a review of his involvement in the ecumenical movement down the years in which he expresses his gratitude to many people he has known and collaborated with, and his profound gratitude to God for what he believes was a vocation to be an ecumenist.

As Bishop Donald Bolen, Catholic Bishop of Saskatoon, Canada, writes in the opening page of the book: ‘He is an ecumenical giant whose witness has inspired many to imagine in new ways what a healthy reconciled Church could look like’.

—Barry Brundell MSC

*Timothy S. Lowe (Ed.), Hope of Unity: Living Ecumenism Today, Celebrating 40 Years of the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur, AphorismA Verlag, Berlin, 2013.*

The Institute for advanced theological research, situated on the edge of Jerusalem, was established at the request of Pope Paul VI. Down the years many theologians from many religions have come with their families to engage in ecumenical research and dialogue.

This collection of essays studies among other things the significance of Vatican II for the Institute, the influence of Oscar Cullman in Biblical Theology and ecumenism, and the ecumenical movement today—Where are we?—as seen by Western Churches and by Eastern Churches.

—Barry Brundell MSC
declaration and bluster, which Mlodinow disposes of with precision and good humour.

An example of a point which Chopra makes but does not develop, is his claim that observation does not tell the whole story. (Mlodinow repeats, endlessly, that one’s beliefs must be supported by observation.) As well as the outer world, which is observed, Chopra reminds us urgently, there is the inner world.

Mlodinow does not do well on that one. Locke, it may be remembered, divided ‘observation’ into two kinds, perception and introspection. Introspection is commonly passed off by analytical philosophers as being of merely private personal interest. On the contrary, it is essential to several large scale industries, e.g. the discrimination of different flavours is part of the wine industry, the brewing industry, the confectionery industry and the food industry generally. Similarly, the discrimination of different scents is essential to the perfume industry. Apart from its importance in commerce, introspection delivers goods of religious interest e.g. in meditation. What is revealed there is too persistent and well documented to be written off as inconsequential aberrations of consciousness.

Perhaps Mlodinow’s avoidance of introspection is linked to his abhorrence of ‘the immaterial realm’, which is surprising in a contemporary physicist. Is space time material? Is a gravitational field material? Of course, they are both physical, but as Bertrand Russell remarked, science has shown that physical nature is less material than people had thought. As it happens, Mlodinow does acknowledge ‘the intangible force fields’ (p.296), but, over the page he writes, ‘What we observe in the real world has thus far necessitated our always rejecting ideas regarding the immaterial realm’ (p.297).

What now of the intangible force fields? Perhaps they lack most of the properties of material objects, but not all. The brain is surrounded by an electromagnetic field. That would seem to make it an ideal instrument for the mind to act through to the brain.

Mlodinow argues that we are ‘biological machines’ (p.133), and cites numerous instances where brain abnormalities determine behaviour. But knowledge is a source of freedom. Once we learn about these determinants, we can take steps to remove them.

Mlodinow informs us that the brain contains ‘more than a hundred billion neurons’ (p.16). These work harmoniously in incredible intricacy. Despite the charge of out-of-dateness which Mlodinow levels at his opponent, it is hard to believe that such intricate interactions were produced by the crude mechanisms of evolution, ‘the unguided and purposeless forces of nature’ (p.61).

As one might have expected, Mlodinow is not impressed by metaphysics: ‘Metaphysics is fixed and guided by personal belief and wish fulfilment’ (p.299). Elsewhere, metaphysics is described as ‘luxurious’. Mlodinow seems to have no appreciation of how scientific theories descended from metaphysical conjectures e.g., Ancient Greek atomism started off as a philosophy and gradually became a science, and Faraday’s thinking was influenced by Boscovic, whose re-casting of Newtonian physics resulted in a completely immaterial world of point masses and forces acting at a distance.

Metaphysics as a discipline in its own right yielding reliable information is foreign to Mlodinow’s outlook. Is he a positivist? He comes close. ‘Metaphysical, philosophical and mystical speculations... are not bound by constraint of evidence’ (p.31). What counts as evidence according to him? ‘Observational tests,’ he writes (p.130). There is no disputing that such tests have disclosed much of reality, but the claim that only scientific methods reveal reality is not science but ideology viz., a form of positivism.

The book is an interesting read. Both men, in their different ways, write very well. Chopra is a passionate believer, Mlodinow is a cool, clear thinking scientist. Chopra was not quite the right person to respond to him.

—Reg Naulty
ONE REACTION might be to say that it is an impertinent question. Who do I think I am? Yet, would that be God’s reaction? Let’s think about it.

He has created us in the divine image. There is something of God in us. He loves us and invites us to love in return. He wants to be part of our lives and to share everything with us. God takes us seriously and trusts us. He calls us to cooperate in enabling his Reign and his world to gradually emerge. We are co-creators with God, stewards of creation.

If I were God for a day, what would I do? Perhaps it may be that each of us is pulled in two directions.

One is to bring God’s love to the world. But true love is very difficult. As parents know with their growing children, loving means letting go, allowing the person to find their way, respecting their freedom. To watch, wait, be there, and allow them to make their own mistakes, painful though it can be. But always to keep on loving, forgiving.

The other pull is towards the God-given task of bringing order and harmony into the world. That too can be hard. Taken to extreme it can become a compulsion to create a perfect world at any cost. When that is combined with interfering in the name of ‘love’ it can be a sort of dictatorship, a totalitarian state. It’s an instinct to give the world a spring clean, with no nasties, no problems. Everything [and everyone] is in its place, a world where wheelie bins stand at attention on nature strips trimmed with short back and sides. But is it God’s world, God’s Reign?

So we are still left with ‘if I were God for a day, what would I do?’ Is it a question that we actually can answer? Or is it that, at best, we can only get a glimpse of a reply, a hint of an explanation? How? ‘By putting on the mind of Christ’, as Paul says, but also by telling stories. Here are four that blend both of these.

1. We can start by reading the parable of the darnel [the wheat and the weeds] in the Gospel of Matthew 13: 24-30.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everybody was asleep his enemy came, sowed darnel all among the wheat, and made off. When the new wheat sprouted and ripened, the darnel appeared as well. The owner’s servants went to him and said, ‘Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? If so, where does the darnel come from?’ ‘Some enemy has done this’ he answered. And the servants said ‘Do you want us to go and weed it out?’ But he said, ‘No, because when you weed out the darnel you might pull up the wheat with it. Let them both grow till the harvest; and at harvest time I shall say to the reapers: First collect the darnel and tie it in bundles to be burnt, then gather the wheat into my barn.

2. The second is from Anthony de Mello, The Prayer of the Frog Vol. 1.

A woman dreamt she walked into a brand new shop in the marketplace and, to her surprise, found God behind the counter. ‘What do you sell here?’ she asked. ‘Everything your heart desires,’ said God.

Hardly daring to believe what she was hearing, the woman decided to ask for the best things a human being could wish for: ‘I want peace of mind and love and happiness and wisdom and freedom for fear’, she said. Then as an afterthought, she added, ‘Not just for me. For everyone on earth.’

God smiled, ‘I think you’ve got me wrong, my dear.’ He said. ‘We don’t sell fruits here. Only seeds.’
3. Then there is another parable from Anthony de Mello.

A sheep found a hole in the fence and crept through it.
He wandered far and could not find his way back.
And then he realized that he was being followed by a wolf.
He ran and ran, but the wolf kept chasing him,
until the shepherd rescued and carried him lovingly back to the fold.
And in spite of everyone’s advice the shepherd refused to nail up the hole in the fence.

4. The final story comes from George F. Will, a syndicated columnist and commentator in the United States. In a column written in the 1980s entitled ‘Light at the End of the Day’ he starts by saying that Americans consume daily 20 tonnes of aspirin. So they need some form of enjoyment after a stressful day. Many get it from reading to their children, especially poems written for children by an author named Shel Silverstein.

Will goes on to say that ‘all children have a sweet tooth for praise, and there is no praise as sweet as being taken seriously, for example, by a parent who reads to you. Most of all, children like the sense that their parents are realists and truth-tellers. How else can children value their parents’ praise? So it is good for their souls to hear a parent read some of Silverstein’s poems.’ One is called ‘God’s Wheel’ in which a child is speaking. Here is the poem.

God’s Wheel

God says to me with kind of a smile
‘Hey, how would you like to be God awhile and steer the world?’
‘Okay,’ says I, ‘I’ll give it a try.
Where do I set?
How much do I get?
What time is lunch?
When can I quit?’
‘Gimme back that wheel,’ says God,
‘I don’t think you’re quite ready yet.’

Will concludes with this comment:
The smile, part shy and part sly, that flickers across the face of the listening child—a smile of rueful recognition—is, for an adult, more therapeutic than aspirin can ever be.

This reflection is an adapted version of a topic in a series Christian Living published in the NZ Marist Messenger in 2005.

A one-sided emphasis on the ‘not yet’ may lead to defeatism and despair in this life and a neglect of the joy and victory over sin and death in the Spirit’s having already come. The ‘gates of Hades’ (Matt 16:18) shall not overcome the church! [...] The now and the not yet must be held in tension. Believers can rejoice in having passed from death into life and in the abiding presence of the Spirit of God. But the victories in the present life, are also accompanied with all too many defeats. [...] Christians continue to look longingly toward the blessed hope (Titus 2:13), when the Son of Man will return and bring the kingdom to its consummation. Having tasted of the first fruits that are already realized, the believer prays all the more earnestly ‘your kingdom come’ (Matt 6:10) and Maranatha (1Cor 16:22; cf. Rev22:20).

—Bakers Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology
PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD
July to October 2014
From the Fourteenth to the Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Prepared by Michael Trainor

PART ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE READINGS

The following is a brief overview of the Liturgy of the Word for major celebrations proclaimed from the readings for Sundays between July and October, from the Fourteenth to the Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time. Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

· **The First Readings** allow us to listen to the prophets (mainly Isaiah, but also Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Malachi), though readings also appear from the Torah (Exodus –OT 30), and historical (1 Kings-OT 19) writings. The Book of Isaiah is frequently divided into three periods, not written by the same author but reflecting a common spirit of the prophet and dealing with different periods of Israel’s religious life around the time of the Exile. For this reason, commentators identify three Isaiahs: First-Isaiah (Is 1-39), Second-Isaiah (Is 40-55) and Third-Isaiah (Is 56-66). Our present selections cover all three periods. First Isaiah (OT 21, 27 & 28) celebrates God’s holiness and power which shapes the destinies of peoples. It calls Israel to integrity of life and fidelity to their covenant with God. Second Isaiah (OT 25, 29) seeks to comfort the exiled people of Israel and ensure them that God is always with them. Third Isaiah (OT 20) envisages a new moment where all peoples are gathered as one on God’s holy mountain. All the prophetic writings enable present Christian communities to reflect on God’s presence in the midst of our political and religious lives. They invite us to identify God’s action in our world.

· **The Second Readings** allow us to follow Paul’s theological message to three of his Jesus households—ones for which he was responsible (Philippians, Thessalonians) or one that he was planning to visit (Romans). In the Sundays of Ordinary Time 14 to 23 we read Romans from chapter 9 to the end of the letter. Paul is writing from Corinth around 55CE and focuses on God’s promises to Israel (OT 20, 21). He encourages the Roman disciples of Jesus to live authentically within their own culture, conscious of God’s presence with them (OT 22, 23).

The readings from Philippians (OT 25-28), written around 56 CE from Ephesus, offer an opportunity to meditate on the power of life with God and the nature of this life that flows from communion with God. Paul models and encourages the qualities of a faith-filled life focussed on Jesus. It would be important to note that Paul’s hymn to Jesus (Phil 2:6-11) is proclaimed twice in as many weeks (Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross—Sept 14 and OT 26—Sept 28).

On OT 29-30 (October 19-26) we begin to turn our thoughts to the final weeks of the liturgical year and commence reading from the earliest writing of the New Testament, 1 Thessalonians. Written around 50CE from Corinth, the letter explores some of the most fundamental concerns of Christian living: our need for fidelity, openness with God and hospitality.

· **The Gospel readings** continue from the Gospel of Matthew. This is a gospel written for Jewish followers of Jesus in the late first century, undergoing transition, struggle and searching for how to live in their own culture, faithful
to the spirit of Jesus and engaging life. Our selection covers Mt 14-23. This part of the gospel is concerned with missionary endeavour, dealing with internal division and understanding religious history. The evangelist presents a portrait of Jesus concerned about disciples who want to know how to handle conflict and develop a form of leadership that is clear and embracing of those who are excluded. The passages of Mt from OT 19-30 offer wonderful opportunities for Christian communities today to reflect on their own issues: internal division, leadership and engagement with the wider society. These are perennial and ever relevant concerns for all communities of Jesus’ followers throughout history.

PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

July 6—Ordinary Time 14: Zech 9:9-10. God as King will come to deliver, protect and offer peace. Rom 8:9.11-13. We possess God’s Spirit who empowers our daily lives. Mt 11:25-30. We are invited to come to Jesus who wants to be with us in our struggles. Theme—God’s Comfort. Many people today feel the burdens of our faith community gathered in this Sunday Assembly reflects a gentle God who seeks to offer support and comfort to those who struggle. How is this happening practically at a local level?

July 13—Ordinary Time 15: Is 55:10-11. God’s Word is eternally effective. Rom 8:18-23. The whole of creation is caught up with humanity in the inward search for God and the release of God’s spirit of renewal. Mt 13:1-23. This is the ‘Great Parable’ chapter of Mt’s Gospel: God’s Reign is present mysteriously and unexpectedly. Theme—God’s Presence. To dispirited people the invitation to contemplate a God who is present, active and mystery is an essential truth. This uplifts, converts, strengthens and offers a fresh perspective.

July 20—Ordinary Time 16: Wis 12:13.16-19. God teaches, offers hope and wisdom. Rom 8:26-27. God’s Spirit helps us in our weakness. Mt 13:24-43. Here is Jesus’ teaching about good and evil. Theme—Weakness: The human experience of weakness and disaster invites us to draw close to a God who is present in our struggles. Mt’s parables remind us of the reality of life’s ambiguities which are part of discipleship and mysteriously reveal God’s presence.

July 27—Ordinary Time 17: 1 Kings 3:5.7-12. Solomon is blessed for seeking wisdom and discernment rather than wealth. Rom 8:28-30. God invites us to live in the image of Jesus. Mt 13:44-52. This is the parable of the search for the pearl of great price. Theme—Wisdom: All of us desire deep, lingering wisdom to live in peace and happiness with ourselves, others and God. Many illustrations abound where such wisdom is practiced by unwitting disciples. Can we identify and celebrate such disciples?

August 3—Ordinary Time 18. Is 55:1-3. God is the true source that nourishes the inner desires of the human heart. Rom 8:35.37-39. We can never be separated from God’s love for us. Mt 14:13-21. Jesus’ compassion moves him to feed the hungry crowd. Theme—God’s love. The second reading could serve as the basis for a prolonged meditation on God’s love for us. This theology needs to be reclaimed when voices around seem to offer contrary advice.

August 10—Ordinary Time 19. 1 King 19:9, 11-13. The prophet experiences God in the unexpected silence of nature. Rom 9:1-5. Paul affirms the role which the Jewish people play in God’s plan of salvation. Mt 14:22-3. Jesus walks on water and overcomes the powers that threaten to annihilate his community of disciples. Peter accompanies him. Theme—God’s Presence in difficult times: Elijah experiences God’s presence in the silence of nature after the natural violence that precedes it; Jesus overcomes the violence that attempts to destroy Mt’s gospel household (symbolised by the boat). God’s presence never deserts faithful disciples.

August 17—Ordinary Time 20: Is 56: 1, 6-
7. Justice lies at the heart of being open to God and acting religiously. It is the source of unity. Romans 11:13-15, 29-32. Paul continues to acknowledge the role which the Jewish people play in God’s plan. Matthew 15:21-28. A non-Jewish woman’s persistence pays off. Jesus blesses her and heals her daughter. Theme—God’s Attraction. Many faith communities show the attraction which God has for people; everyone is, in their own way, searching for God. This search is evident in people’s commitment to justice (the first reading) or their fidelity in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems (Gospel).

August 24—Ordinary Time 21: Isaiah 22:15,19-23. Shebna, a royal official, is removed from office and Eliakim is given authority (‘the key’) over the royal household. Romans 11:33-36. Paul celebrates God and God’s wisdom. Matthew 16:13-20. Jesus is acknowledged as God’s Messiah; Peter is commissioned with leadership. Theme—Leadership and Authority: Examples abound of political and religious leadership that empowers and includes those who are conventionally are excluded. This is the kind of authority envisaged in Isaiah and Matthew. Can we identify good examples of such leadership in today’s church and government?

August 31—Ordinary Time 22: Jeremiah 20:7-9. The prophet recognises the struggle of the prophetic vocation and mission. Romans 12:1-2. Paul encourages a spiritual renewal that is total, personal and social. Matthew 16:21-27. Jesus prepares his disciples for suffering that awaits. Peter commissioned last week as ‘rock’ this week becomes a ‘stumbling rock’ to Jesus. Theme—Struggle: The liturgy offers a moment to name the many ways that faithful Christians struggle in their local communities. Their fidelity to God in this struggle reveals a contemporary form of prophetic witness and discipleship.

September 7—Ordinary Time 23: Ezekiel 33:7-9. The prophet is entrusted with the task of speaking God’s truth, even though this may be unpopular. Romans 13:8-10. Love of neighbour is the summary of the commandments. Matthew 18:15-20. Jesus offers practical advice for dealing with internal tension. Ultimately, he is always present. Theme—Tensions: Faith communities will always experience difficulties and tensions. They are part of living out of God’s truth (first reading) and the human reality of faith communities (Gospel). What are some of the difficulties that you know that people have today?

September 14—Exaltation of the Holy Cross: Numbers 21:4b-9. The Israelites wander, complain and are punished for their rebellion. Through Moses, God saves them. Philippians 2:6-11. Paul sums up and celebrates the mission of Jesus. Jesus is God’s exalted one and serves humanity through becoming slave-like and dying. God exalts Jesus. We shall hear this reading again in two weeks’ time. John 3:13-17. Jesus is like the serpent that God lifts up in the desert to save the people. Jesus, too, will be ‘lifted up’ or ‘exalted’ for God’s people. Theme—The Cross. Our experience of suffering, either personal or communal, reminds us of our fragility and need to God. Through Jesus, God offers to accompany us in all that we suffer. This is not a God who intervenes but one who accompanies. Jesus is God’s face. Where and how do we need God’s companionship at this time?

September 21—Ordinary Time 25: Isaiah 55:6-9. Here is the Prophet’s invitation to seek out and experience the surprising and mysterious God. Philippians 2:1-11. We are PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD.
invited to have the mind of Jesus through this great hymn about Jesus’ mission and status. We heard this same reading two weeks’ ago on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Mt 21:28-32. The socially and morally unexpected who have the capacity for change and repentance are invited into God’s community. Theme—Change and Repentance: The liturgy presents a moment to encourage and offer hope for those who feel cut off or excluded. Repentance and change are always possible (Gospel). God always embraces the repentant (First Reading).

October 5—Ordinary Time 27. Is 5:1-7. God’s people are like a cared-for vineyard, though sometimes fruitless. Phil 4:6-9. Paul encourages the Philippians not to worry, and live faithfully and confidently in peace. Mt 21:33-43. The parable of what happens to the servants and son of a vineyard owner is an allegory of Mt’s gospel audience as they struggle and suffer. Theme—Suffering. Mt’s Israelite Jesus followers see their own story reflected in today’s Gospel. To live with integrity and authenticity is costly. Are their local and pertinent examples of this?

October 12—Ordinary Time 28: Is 25:6-10a. Isaiah present Paradise and life with God as a mountain feast with choice foods and wines. Phil 4:10-14,19-20. In all that happens to him, no matter his physical or financial resources, Paul’s ultimate focus is God. Mt 22:1-14. God’s lavish banquet is for all, ‘good and bad.’ Theme—Eucharistic Inclusivity. Our local Eucharistic celebration is a reflection of the Universal Church: How do we celebrate inclusivity in our faith communities in a world of such cultural diversity?

October 19—Ordinary Time 29. Is 45:1-4-6. An unexpected non-Israelite military emperor becomes God’s agent of salvation. 1 Thes 1:1-5. We listen to the opening lines of the earliest writing in the NT. Paul addresses a community with faith and openness in God. Mt 22:15-21. Jesus avoids a trap set by the religious leaders. God is the true source of all life, even political. Theme—God and Politics. Today’s readings offer an opportunity to reflect on the way God and religion have been co-opted into contemporary politics and military affairs. They offer an alternative focus: The heart of life and human community is God (First Reading and Gospel), not the human whim for power or the seduction of privilege.

October 26—Ordinary Time 30. Ex 22:21-27. God encourages the Israelites to attend to the poor and not oppress the resident alien. 1 Thes 1:5-10. Paul praises the Thessalonians for their hospitality and openness to God’s preached word. Mt 22:34-40. Here is Jesus’ summary of the heart of ethical life: love of God and neighbour. Theme—Hospitality to the Stranger. The treatment of asylum seekers and the poor in our country is the touchstone of authentic religion. A number of positive examples from the local scene can illustrate the living out of authentic faith.

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Through the yearly cycle the Church unfolds the entire mystery of Christ and keeps the anniversaries of the saints.

Ordinary time is devoted to celebrating the mystery of Christ in all its aspects.