

**WHERE TO FROM HERE?
A RESPONSE TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION
TO WHAT AND WHO ARE WE RESPONDING?**

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Concerned Catholics Public Forum
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** Check against delivery

The Royal Commission will complete its task in December this year with its final report issued on 15th December. Our response will not just be to the Royal Commission as such but to the church, to the world, to those who think not much will change, who are waiting to get back to normal, especially to those whose lives have been broken by abuse within our church and to all those who have been affected along the way – the dispirited, the disenchanting, the angry - but also to those of us who still have hope that things can be different. This is not to say that we don't all have a mixture of these emotions at any one time.

I presume though, that hope is the basis of such a group as this one gathered here this evening, otherwise we would be indifferent, we would walk away. Silence and walking away are not options if we believe that we can make a difference in our world and bring the message of the gospel to this world in a more effective, accountable and transparent way. We can work for transformation within an organisation in a way that is impossible from the outside, if we all decide to take our cricket bats and go home!

The Royal Commission will make recommendations and we certainly need to take heed of these and organise appropriate responses. But we should not wait until then. It is clear that, as Church, we are being called to something different, to new ways of being in our world in the 21st century – ways which encourage confidence, which promote trust, which enable all of us to see and to know how and why decisions are made, who makes those decisions, and how they might be implemented for the good of all.

We have often heard during the course of the Royal Commission about the culture of clericalism in the Catholic church, the exclusion of women from decision making, the lack of transparency in appointments, decisions etc. In such a climate where culture change is called for, it's always good to go back to basics, to look at our primary calling as Church, the calling in which each of us participate through our baptism.

In Baptism, we are claimed for Christ – all of us – not some more than others – all of us equally. We are confirmed in that faith at the sacrament of confirmation and welcomed at the table of the Lord through Eucharist, which, Pope Francis tells us: 'is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.' EG47

In Baptism, each of us is anointed as priest, prophet and royal person – we are gifted with God's love and called to:

- Serve the Word,
- to speak the truth, and

- to live the mission which Jesus outlined for us in our foundational texts of Scripture. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke we have the account of Jesus in the wilderness, being tempted. These temptations are primal and universal, the same ones we all experience in our daily living: temptations to the misuse of power – power over others (how can I get more than the others?), power through religious belief (how can I gain importance through my religious position?), power through politics (how can I increase my sense of entitlement so that I can exert more influence over others, over their decisions and their actions?). How often did we hear the words power, privilege and entitlement echoed through the hearings of the Royal Commission?

Jesus shows us the importance of resistance to these temptations to power and, in Luke's Gospel, he does this as a backdrop to the announcement of his public mission – that mission into which we are all inaugurated through our baptism, and I quote from Luke Ch. 4 where Jesus goes into the synagogue, picks up the scroll and reads from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Spirit has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. The Spirit has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them:

"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

So, our mission is about proclaiming Good News, setting the downtrodden free, proclaiming God's favour to all.

We need to take this as our charter for mission, for engagement in the life of the Church, here and now.

Understanding of his mission was an evolving process for Jesus. It is clear, that many women were influential in helping him develop a deeper understanding of that mission.

The story of the Syro Phoenician woman (Mt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30) is a confronting one for Jesus and for us. Jesus has gone into foreign territory. A woman, a non-Jew approaches him. Why? Because she is desperate for her daughter who is filled with some malevolent spirit. In today's world, her daughter may be under the influence of drugs or alcohol; she may have a serious physical or mental illness. What parent would not seek out any opportunity for healing for her daughter? Sr. Veronica Lawson (A scripture scholar) talks of this woman being alone in a public space, risking ridicule and rejection. In the face of her pleas Jesus is silent: perhaps because he is affronted by her audacity in crossing boundaries of gender and ethnicity, perhaps he is confused by this request which is not in his position description?

He perceives a conflict in his own understanding of his mission and what this woman is asking of him. The disciples tell him to send her away but Jesus engages in dialogue with her – a dialogue which is quite confronting initially. He uses the word 'children' for his own people and 'house-dogs' in referring to her and her people: 'it is not fair to take the children's food

and throw it to the house-dogs'. The woman is unstoppable; she is not going to be put off by insults and rejection. Her response is also very confronting to Jesus - "even the house-dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table". Jesus learnt something new about his mission that day. It was through sheer persistence and clever dialogue that this marginal person – a woman and a foreigner- brought him to a new understanding of the breadth of the mission to which he was called. The Syrophenician woman began as one begging for mercy. She ends this dialogue as a woman of some authority, who resisted exclusion and persevered in great faith.

We can draw strength from this. We must persist in open respectful dialogue and engage in passionate conversations about the deep values for which we care. We need to resist exclusion in order to move towards greater participation in the church as the People of God. I mentioned at the outset that we should not wait for the end of the year or for others to say what is going to happen.

Otto Scharmer in his work on shaping organisations for the future has developed a framework called Theory U. An important element in this is for organisations to build what he calls 'landing strips for the future' – otherwise known as prototypes. The benefit of a prototype is that it can be developed and tested in a reasonably quick way and can be constantly evaluated for appropriate performance. We can spend a long time sitting around planning the future, and by the time we're ready for implementation the future has changed. Small prototypes of community engagement are needed now, especially in the lead up to the Plenary Council 2020.

Pope Francis gives us a great example of leadership which is inclusive, which is respectful of the dignity of each person, and which challenges deeply rooted practices of comfort, privilege and power in the Church.

But Francis cannot do it all on his own. Nor can we sit around and wait for the universal church to change. We need to create our own landing strips of the future here in the Australian Church, here in the Archdiocese of Canberra Goulburn, here in local communities. From these efforts, critical mass can be built and engagement of all in the church in so far as our capacity allows us will bring about a more inclusive, more gospel centred and I daresay a happier church community.

The Royal Commission has been a difficult time for everyone whom it has touched, most of all those who are broken by the evil of sexual abuse. The Church has been undergoing a purifying process, an emptying process. This is not over yet and won't be for some time. But we need to be sensitive to those spaces which are opening up for us, which are inviting us to a different future. We cannot afford to sit back and wait for others to fill those spaces. Nor can we be complacent in thinking that we can get back to business as usual when all of this is over or, as I have heard some people say, regain lost ground. These are not options for a church which is living the gospel today and into the future. There is no normal to get back to and we do not want to regain lost ground; we need to make new paths. Pope Francis speaks to each of us of our mission – it is not just something like a badge which we can put on and take off at will. 'We have to regard ourselves as being sealed, even branded, by this mission

of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing.... And that every person is worthy of our giving'. EG#273

At the outset, I spoke of Jesus being in the desert experiencing the temptations integral to his mission. The desert is an emptying space, though full of life if we can but see it. It can be seen as a dark place, a wild and confronting place. Precisely for all these reasons it is a place where we can experience the presence of God and open ourselves

- to hear,
- to search,
- to ponder,
- to discern together.

We have to believe the lord is with us no matter how long it takes.

We are being called now not only to be in the darkness and the wilderness, but to recognise the spaces which are opening up.

In Luke's and Matthew's gospels there is a story of the unclean spirit which was cleansed from a person and which went out around the countryside looking for water and other sustenance.

It didn't find very much so decided to go back to check on its original host. Finding the space emptied, cleaned and vacant - it went then to find seven other unclean spirits, buddies it had found on its journey, to come and join it in this newer, larger space.

We are at a time when the space is emerging – much is being cleansed – openings are occurring. We must not leave these spaces empty, much less allow them to be filled with negative spirits.

We are called now -

- To step into those spaces,
- To respond to the call of our baptism -to be priest, prophet and royal one
- To witness to the gospel
- To fill the spaces with love, with healing, with action for
 - ✓ A better,
 - ✓ A more inclusive church,
 - ✓ A church which responds to the marginalised,
 - ✓ Which invites the marginalised to the table of the lord, to the table of dialogue, to the table of decision making for the future.