

## ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY, MELBOURNE SENATUS, 2 APRIL 2017

The Royal Commission has now completed its hearings on the Catholic Church. It is shocking and saddening to think of the callous evil of the crimes, and the extent of the suffering endured by victims. We keep praying for those who suffered such deep wrongs at the hands of the perpetrators who completely betrayed the trust placed in them, and to do all we can to bring them justice and healing.

Despite misinformation still sometimes spread, we're all aware procedures and safeguards are now far different to what took place especially in the 1960s-80s. Our bishops have many times expressed their apologies for the tragically inadequate responses of their predecessors and taken action to prevent this happening again.

An issue for many Catholics has been how all this affects their faith. Further, as legionaries we're especially called to help support the faith of others, so it's good to have thought about these matters, and to be able to speak about them wisely. Not everyone we meet will be ready to listen to us, so we have to discern in various situations what is useful and what is counter-productive; but at least we should be clear about it in our own minds. The following are some considerations that have helped me remain firm in commitment to Christ and to the Church he established:

For an approach which is fully moral and Christian, these issues must be understood not just through our emotions but with clear reasoning, if a right assessment is to be reached. Emotion by itself, often mistaken for moral righteousness, is unable to make important distinctions, and in its search to apportion blame, lumps the innocent together with the guilty, falling into the mistake of assigning 'collective guilt'. An indiscriminately-directed anger (to *all* bishops, or *all* clergy, or *all* Catholics, or to 'the Church' – instead of to those actually individually guilty of crimes or negligence) leads us away from truth.

The question of the obvious wrongness of the crimes, and of their facilitation, must be carefully distinguished from the question of whether the crimes somehow invalidate Christ's teachings and sacraments. Often a defence of Christ's teachings being true, despite the crimes of those who were called to proclaim them, is mistaken by others for a defence or a minimisation of the crimes themselves. But dealing with the abuse and its legacy still leaves everyone with the obligation of seeking and following the truth about God.

Christ guarantees the truth of Catholic teachings, and the grace of the Sacraments. He never took away our free will, and never guaranteed the moral goodness of Catholics, even of Shepherds in the Church, as we see repeatedly through history. So unsurprisingly, scandals have always occurred – as Jesus himself predicted (as in the parables of the good and bad fish in the kingdom, or the weeds and wheat (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 18:6-7)). How can the fulfilment of his prediction invalidate what he instituted? To use the crimes to reject Catholic teachings is in effect to transfer the blame for sin from the free choice of human beings to the Son of God – the very one who suffered for our sins.

There is sometimes the feeling that defending the Church's divine aspects in these circumstances is somehow a morally-deluded attempt at 'self-justification' that we should just abandon. But this is a serious confusion. The Catholic Church isn't like some tobacco or asbestos company desperately trying to defend financial interests of shareholders, that would simply disband if it had the decency. All the evidence of reason, history and scripture shows it to be at the centre of the path of salvation God has provided for the whole human race. We have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of for following this path and being Catholics.

On the contrary, given what we know about Christ and his teachings, the greatest shame would be abandonment of God's command and desertion from his mission at this difficult moment, by rejecting Catholic faith and practice. We're not in this for our self-indulgence, but because we recognise God's call on humanity to belong to this family of salvation. Anyone aware of this who has humanity's common good at heart, will keep sharing and defending Catholic Faith by all appropriate means. Defending the Church's divine aspects isn't defending *ourselves* but defending God's message, and trying to ensure others aren't led away from the primary channels of his truth and grace, to their very serious detriment.

The ultimate rational support for our following the Catholic Church doesn't come from the holiness or wisdom of individual leaders. How can what happened centuries later possibly invalidate the evidence for the miracles of Christ and his saints, or Christ's promises to St Peter, the first Pope, and of the permanent guidance given to Church teachings by the Holy Spirit of Truth? If we were Catholics because 'Bishop X is a really holy and wise man', then evidence of his lack of holiness and wisdom would undermine our reasons – but not otherwise.

I won't speak in depth of the causes of abuse. A key question is how much of the criminal activity and its facilitation arose from cultural factors specific to the Church, and how much is simply from the equal presence of sinful humanity both inside and outside the Church. Most people know that abuse is a widespread scourge, and it seems the percentage of male offenders against minors is of the same *order of magnitude* inside and outside the priesthood.

Even so, it seems likely the percentage of offenders was still somewhat higher in the priesthood in those decades, and there it becomes reasonable to look for specific cultural factors in the Church that may have influenced this. Inevitably, celibacy is mentioned. However, prior study has rejected that this is a direct cause: being celibate does not cause deviant tendencies – people's inclinations don't get easily modified in this way. But what may have happened is that those whose inclinations were already deviant were less attracted to marriage and so more easily came towards priesthood. Here is where the psychological screening introduced in more recent decades is crucial.

One of the deepest wrongs done to victims is the deprivation of their spiritual heritage that the crimes can lead to. When the scandals are used to undermine Catholic Faith itself, this ultimately contributes to a similar spiritual deprivation not just for victims but for all. I owe my own faith to a member of my family who (I later learnt) was a victim of clerical abuse, and who for a time was disaffected from the Church. I am grateful that over time this family member listened to God, rather than what would lead away from Him – thus eventually enabling me to also have the happiness of right faith. Jesus' command, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' absolutely demands of me, and of all of us, that we not abandon the call to guide others to Christ and his Church.