

### **A Church Humble, Healing and Merciful**

We continue looking at the six ‘Discernment Papers’ preparing for the Plenary Council, reflecting on the fourth theme, **‘How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is Humble, Healing and Merciful?’**

To be humble, healing and merciful belongs to the nature of the Church. The Church is humble, because she and her members possess nothing of themselves: in our emptiness we receive all we are and have as gift from God. And although the Church as such is the perfectly holy Bride of Christ, all of us, her members here on earth from the pope down, remain sinners. So obviously, sin still exists within God’s Holy Church; and even cultures of sin can arise, in the interaction of her sinful members.

The Church ‘is holy though she has sinners in her bosom, because she herself has no other life but that of grace: it is by living by her life that her members are sanctified; it is by removing themselves from her life that they fall into sins and disorders that prevent the radiation of her sanctity. This is why she suffers and does penance for these offences, of which she has the power to free her children through the Blood of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ (St Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*)

We recall here a possible misinterpretation. It’s true we’re meant to be humble about *ourselves* – recognising our own sinfulness, the failure of the members to live out what the Church is meant to be. But we’re not meant to be humble about the things *of God*, and the gifts he’s entrusted us with. So if we put down the *divine* aspects of the Church, we’re not ‘humbly’ putting *ourselves* down – we’re putting down what God has established for human salvation.

So that is the humility of the Church. Then, the Church of her nature is healing and merciful – because she makes present the healing and mercy of Christ. Again we recall a possible misinterpretation: for some people a ‘merciful’ Church might mean one that tells people they don’t really need to follow God’s laws – as though God’s truth and law are burdens from which we need to mercifully liberate people.

In truth, ‘genuine understanding and compassion must mean love for the person, for his true good, for his authentic freedom. And this does not result, certainly, from concealing or weakening moral truth, but rather from proposing it in its most profound meaning as an outpouring of God’s eternal Wisdom, which we have received in Christ, and as a service to man, to the growth of his freedom and to the attainment of his happiness. Still, a clear and forceful presentation of moral truth can never be separated from a profound and heartfelt respect, born of that patient and trusting love which man always needs along his moral journey, a journey frequently wearisome on account of difficulties, weakness and painful situations.’ (St John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* 95)

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Turning to the Discernment Paper specifically, a natural focus of the Paper is, in its own words, ‘How can the Church heal from the sexual abuse crisis and rebuild trust?’ Here it offers much that comes from heartfelt reflection, drawing on broad practical experience of recent decades. In these aspects, I defer to those with special expertise and experience, and limit my reflections to more theological matters.

The Paper makes the important statement that ‘criticisms from the faithful are sometimes aimed at the “Church”, without a sense that “we are the Church”, eliciting a prophetic call for a deeper understanding of our shared baptismal vocation’. This reminds us of the error that can arise if we speak loosely of ‘the Church’ sinning – when what is meant is the sins of some, or many, bishops and priests. One might speak in this way as a kind of shorthand – but it easily misleads. Speaking more precisely, anyone who acts against Christ’s teachings is thereby *failing* to ‘be Church’. Also, to call the sins of this or that cleric, or even of many of them, the sins ‘of the Church’ tends to identify ‘the Church’ with the clergy, in a clericalist way. The Church is the whole Body, and it is not the whole Body that sins. It is best not even to call sins of clerics the sins ‘of the priesthood’ or ‘of the hierarchy’ – because this attributes those sins to clergy indiscriminately, whether guilty and innocent. In short: each sin is the responsibility of the individual who commits it.

Neither is there something called ‘the institutional Church’ that sins, different from some other ‘wider’ Church. Vatican II explained: ‘The society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element.’ (*Lumen Gentium* 8) Really, the entire structured Body is both institutional and spiritual, and we become members of ‘the Institution’ by Baptism. Let no one deprive you of that membership by saying (again in a clericalist way) that only clergy are ‘the Institution’.

If the Plenary Council issues any national apology e.g. for sexual abuse (as the Paper suggests), it should take care not to attribute the sins to ‘the Church’ as a whole. That would implicitly attribute the sins to the victims of abuse and their families who remain part of the Church; and to the wider faithful, including innocent priests and bishops, who have themselves suffered from the abuse and its enabling, rather than inflicting it. All these should be among the recipients of an apology from guilty individuals, rather than being themselves part of an apology given, as members of a fictitious guilty ‘Church’, to others. The latter approach deflects and dilutes the real guilt of actual individuals. Depending on what is meant by ‘apology’, an apology given by the innocent risks being ultimately insincere and empty.

One misconception in the Paper is that for the Church to be ‘hierarchical’ and ‘dogmatic’ is somehow wrong. So it states, ‘Criticisms are raised about governance structures that obscure the face of Christ and present a Church to the world that is hierarchical, dogmatic, judgemental and lacking in love. Unjust structures of power that place heavy burdens on the faithful obfuscate the true Magisterium.’

True, in our society, ‘hierarchical’ and ‘dogmatic’ are typically seen as negative qualities – and so they really are, in certain contexts. But evidently the Catholic view is that these are *positive* things in the context of the hierarchical constitution of the Church established by Christ, and of the Church proclaiming the truth of Christ with infallible ‘dogmatic’ authority. Vatican II itself produced two ‘Dogmatic’ Constitutions, and one of these, *Lumen Gentium*, had an entire chapter on ‘The Hierarchical Structure of the Church’.

These aspects of the Church may need to be *explained* more deeply to others, so that they are not misunderstood. But the Paper goes astray in considering them negative in themselves: they do not form an ‘unjust structure of power’ placing ‘heavy burdens on the faithful’ (the ‘burdens’ referred to, one imagines, being aspects of God’s truth and God’s law). Christ taught ‘with authority’ (*Mk* 1:22), and his Church makes that liberating authority a present living reality. (cf. *Lk* 10:16; *2 Tim* 4:2)

