

THE GRAVITY OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

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To say that these are dark days for the Catholic Church is an understatement. In this fiftieth year since the Second Vatican Council, and in the accompanying Year of Faith, we ought to feel our hearts rising with Christ as they did among his first followers. Instead the ongoing revelations of sexual abuse, our shame of past failures and accusations of maladministration have brought the Church into disgrace and left many ordinary Catholics feeling demoralised.

For those of us who remain close to the life of the Church, who still hold it precious as an intrinsic dimension of our faith, how are to go on with the same confidence and morale? In a certain sense, this is impossible.

The gravity of the present moment and the impending Royal Commission cannot leave us unchanged. Ideally, these darkest of times will promote the reshaping of our community not merely at the level of policy or structure – for it is not as if policies or structures have not been in place – but also impel us toward the deeper, more urgent work of personal, spiritual reform.

To make the situation clear, people have been hurt and are hurting. People's lives have in fact been destroyed by the community of the Church. What does this deep and grievous wound tell us about ourselves and our life together?

I do not propose to answer this question; it would likely invite a number of responses. However, what *is* clear from the first instance is that we have to be prepared to confront or sit with this wound in its severity for some time, without equivocation. It is only by remaining in the face of this unimaginable suffering of others, a suffering we cannot seek to sidestep or disavow, that we might begin to learn anything about ourselves and assume responsibility for what has taken place in our midst.

The confrontation of reality is no simple matter and I think recent weeks have attested to this. There seems to be a temptation to move, ever subtly, to ancillary concerns which in their own way act as 'consolation devices' when we cannot bear, or have not yet borne, the raw fact of human suffering in the lives of victims.

One example would be a focus on the part of media in the abuse scandal now facing the Church. Has the Church been assailed by political and media commentators with more than a trace of anti-Catholic fervour? Of course it has. Satirical distortions of the Catholic religion and attempts to apply the battering ram to the confessional have been expressions of such prejudice or, at the very least, wilful ignorance. It is not difficult as well to detect amidst political and irreligious forces an attempt to subject the Church to the State or otherwise capitalise on Catholic affiliations ahead of the next federal election. The Royal Commission will not be immune from this same kind of politicisation and will be at danger of being engaged for purposes other than itself. All this can be recognised and admitted.

However, the risk of the moment is that in our objection to the politics of media, justified as that objection may be, we avert our eyes from those who have been hurt and are hurting.

We can be otherwise diverted from this terrible wound by flight into an abstract ecclesiology, expressed in comforting self-assurances of the Church's 'abiding holiness' as if it existed in a timeless heaven of ideas. There has been some of this counter-reaction, an idealisation of the Church, among not only the young but more established Catholics as well.

It is true that as Catholics we confess the Church to be 'unfailingly holy' (*Lumen Gentium* 39). However, we do so *not* on account of ourselves but on the account of *God*, on account of his Word and sacraments which assures us that the Church cannot be completely overcome by sin or contradiction. In this light, the Church remains sanctified and must go on to proclaim the Gospel it has received, in and out of season.

However, from its subjective dimension, the Church is a society of persons, full of all-too-human contradictions and sinfulness. We must confess it to be so if healing is to be a possibility. As a pilgrim people, we are unable to say as Christ does, 'Which of you convicts me of sin?' (Jn 8:46). Indeed, in the First Letter of John we read, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 Jn 1:8).

People have been hurt and are hurting. This is no time for defensiveness or obfuscation. If we do not sit in confrontation of the facts, facts that have names and stories of grievous suffering, we, in a sense, evade our own selves, our responsibilities and our radical need of conversion.

This moment calls us to attend to the suffering of others, of past and present victims of abuse. For those of us who yet hold the Church precious, as the sacrament of salvation, our hope is rather obscure at present but it is not without significance. For what does this hope tell us? Hope guarantees nothing but it says there is a chance, a chance of better days if we come to firm grips with the truth.