

## Homily for Feast of Christ the King

November 2012 @ St Patrick's Cathedral Ballarat

Michael Mullins, editor of Eureka Street a great Jesuit inspired e-newsletter wrote "Last week we received a fine article on the child sexual abuse Royal Commission from a writer who had worked for a Catholic Church agency that deals with children. He told of how he'd been at a consultation that included presentations from the Church and from advocates representing victims of church-related sexual abuse. Afterwards he accidentally struck up what he called a 'warm and constructive friendship' with a victims' rights advocate that led to some significant cooperation.

A few hours after sending the article, the writer wrote again to withdraw it. I was disappointed, but pleased that he subsequently gave me permission to quote from his email, in which he explained his decision:

*I've been trying to figure my discomfort... and it is something like this:  
that any words we write at this time run the risk of justifying ourselves as church people,  
instead of undertaking our real task which is to sit in silence and shame and confusion....  
and repent."*

Mullin's went on to say that he believed that the writer made the correct call. It is, as he suggests, time to let the dignity of victims shine, and for the Church to set *its* dignity aside, without question, and accept the humiliation that has come its way. In other words, the Church needs to take its own advice about imitating the humility of Christ. It often preaches this using the text from St Paul's letter to the Philippians:

*'In humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.'*

Any hope that the Church has of being a credible witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ depends upon its ability to accept its current humiliation and give glory instead to the sexual abuse victims whom it has humiliated. There is acknowledgement of the need for the churches to be 'lesser' and the victims of abuse to be 'greater'.

Christ's peace, which passes understanding, lies in surrender to the truth and the ongoing practising of repentance. Churches - all the churches - will do well to admit culpability where and when it is due, and to continue to offer sincere apologies, compensation and payment for professional counselling. Belligerent defence, 'lawyering up', finger pointing at other institutions (that also failed children) and rationalisations will not aid either the victims of abuse nor the churches.

Facing the Truth is the name of the submission of the Catholic Church to the current parliamentary inquiry which takes Blessed John Henry Newman's words for its inspiration *"Let us take things as we find them: let us not attempt to distort them into what they are not... We cannot make facts. All our wishing cannot change them. We must use them."*<sup>1</sup>

Today's Gospel for this feast of Christ the King proclaims Jesus, innocence personified, before Pilate, civil power personified, can serve as a model and an inspiration to us, even though we are far from innocent and our general community of Christians self-admitted sinners. "Pilate entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have the power to release you and the power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had come from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." It is not easy being a follower of Christ. It is not always easy to know what is the right thing to say or do in certain circumstances. But there is always time to give no answer - immediately. There is always time to reflect and pray to the Father for guidance and humility. Humility and truth.

Importantly, there are not two groups - the Church and victims of abuse. Most of the victims are or were members of the Church. They were the most victimised members of the Church with little or no voice to be heard. They are the shamed and humiliated face of Christ which the powerful in the Church have often not recognised as such. Their shame and humiliation is the shame and humiliation of the body of Christ. Conversion, repentance and reparation at all levels of the Church's life are the only way forward. Our church communities need to become places where survivors of abuse feel safe, not just tolerated or pitied, or worse still made to feel excluded by the silence.

Bishop Bill Wright of Maitland-Newcastle also wrote during this past week that he thinks the Royal Commission will be a healing opportunity. Yes, there will be a lot of pain involved, a lot of facing up to be done, a lot of exposure of past wrongs. That's good. It's healthy to have to face up to what you have done, to confess the wrong, to stiffen up your resolve that these things must not happen again. There can be no great change while we hide the truth, and especially when we choose to hide it from ourselves. That's true for individuals, and it's true for institutions.

He went on to say that he is glad, that through the Royal Commission we will see the need for a whole-of-society response to child abuse.

My hope is that after the Royal Commission there will be no more conspiracy of silence around child abuse, no more blaming the victim, no more resigned acceptance that it's going to happen. These would be great outcomes. If the Church has to take a battering along the way, so be it. In the meantime, we in the Church must strive to the uttermost to help the Parliamentary Inquiry and the Royal Commission do their job.