



2017 LENTEN MESSAGE

By The Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth

8 March, 2017

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As we enter into the season of Lent this year, we do so immediately after the conclusion of the final hearing into the Catholic Church of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual abuse.

I recently issued a Pastoral Letter to our Catholic community in relation to this matter, and I would encourage you to read it if you can. Among the many urgent questions raised by this shocking reality of sexual abuse in our Church is the "how" question. How could this possibly have happened in a Church which is supposed to be the "salt of the earth and the light of the world"? How could clergy and religious, who were supposed to be living signs of the presence of the Lord among his people, betray this trust so cruelly and so comprehensively? How could people to whom we entrusted our children in schools and other Church settings cause so much pain?

There are many complex answers to these confronting questions. I will not rehearse them here. The Royal Commission has brought them out into the open and they must now be dealt with. One that perhaps has not yet been fully considered is the spiritual cause of this tragedy. It is this that I would invite you to reflect on as we enter our Lenten journey together in 2017.

When I became Archbishop of Perth five years ago, I said in the homily at the Mass of Installation, that the greatest challenge facing the Church today, and facing our Archdiocese as part of that Church, is to return Christ to the Church and to return the Church to Christ. As an institution, the Catholic Church in Australia has contributed a great deal to our society. Our network of schools and universities, of hospitals and health and aged care facilities, and of social justice and social outreach agencies, is remarkable. Many thousands of committed, compassionate and competent people who work in Church agencies bring the spirit of the Gospel alive. Hundreds of thousands of people benefit from their commitment and generosity. By some measures at least, we are a successful enterprise.

But more than an institution, or an enterprise, or a Non-Government Organisation, we are a Church. We have been called into existence by God to be the bearers of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Good News of salvation, to our world. We do not measure our success by the grandeur of our buildings, or the political clout we might have, or the influence of our world-wide community, but by our fidelity to the Gospel and by the sincerity of our faith. And, as Pope Francis reminds us, just as Pope Benedict and Pope Saint John Paul II did before him, our faith is not in an abstract idea, or a system, or a set of rules. Our faith is in a person. Our faith is in Jesus Christ.

The history of the Church teaches us that whenever we lose sight of Christ as the only foundation of our Church, and begin to put our trust in something else, we quickly lose our way. When we forget that all the good things we want to do as a Church make no sense at all, and will be built on foundations of shifting sand, if they are not centred firmly and consciously on Christ, then everything will begin to unravel. For a while the structures might stand. Outwardly they might appear solid and unshakeable. But if they have no soul, or some kind of cancer is eating away from within, they will eventually begin to crumble. Surely this, at least in part, helps us to understand the terrible reality of sexual abuse in our Church. So many pushed the one they were supposed to be following out of their lives and out of their consciousness.

Of course what is happening on a larger scale can be duplicated in our own lives as individual Christians and as local Christian communities. The damage caused will rarely be as devastating as that caused by sexual abuse, but we will nevertheless be so much less than we could have been. Saint Augustine once famously prayed, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Unless we find our centre in the Lord, we will never be really at peace and our lives will never be all that they could be. Outwardly, things might seem to be going well. We might even be able to convince ourselves that life is good. But slowly, the foundations of our lives might be weakening and shifting, and we could well find ourselves stumbling to the point where we fall flat on our faces. This can happen in our individual lives, in our family lives and in the lives of our communities of faith.

Lent is the antidote to this malaise. When the ashes are placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday and the call to "repent and believe in the Gospel" is addressed to us, we are really being encouraged to return Christ to his rightful place in our lives. He is God's Word to us; he is God's Good News. When we are invited to "believe in the Gospel" we are being invited to "trust in Jesus". In our Christian understanding, this is what belief is: trusting faith in God, who comes to us in his Son, Jesus.

We have been assured by Jesus that he is the Way - so why not follow him? He has told us that he is the Truth - so why not take him at his word? He has revealed himself to us as the Life - so why not embrace with enthusiasm the life he offers? This is what returning our lives to Christ means: this is what returning Christ to our lives looks like.

As our Archdiocesan Plan begins to be implemented across the Archdiocese, I think it is important to remember what lies at its heart: we are trying to be, and become more and more, a people who are walking together in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. If we keep our eyes fixed on him we cannot go wrong: indeed it is the only way to ensure that we do not go wrong.

May Lent be a time when we all rediscover him as our Way, our Truth and our Life.

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