



Special Lenten Message 2019

**By The Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The shocking news of Cardinal Pell's conviction on child abuse charges, and his subsequent imprisonment, have been and continue to be a cause of great suffering, discouragement and confusion for us all. As the Cardinal is appealing this conviction, and the matter is therefore still the subject of legal proceedings, I am unable to comment on this matter specifically, beyond asking all of us to pray, sincerely and insistently, for everyone caught up in this dreadful situation.

The horror and scandal of the sexual abuse of children and young people in the Church is a source of shame and concern for all the victims and survivors of such abuse and their families, and of deep bewilderment. I have asked myself, as so many of you must also have done, how we could possibly have arrived at such a dreadful and shameful moment in the story of the Catholic Church in Australia. I have also asked myself what I as your Archbishop can do to help the Catholic community in our Archdiocese make sense of this present painful moment and all that has led up to it.

I have written to you about this often and I encourage you to read my previous words again. They are all available on our Archdiocesan website. They are words spoken from my heart and they continue to express my own horror, grief and confusion, and my own desire, with your help, to respond with determination, with courage and with compassion to this catastrophe.

No matter how widespread the abuse of the young might be in our society, and no matter how many other institutions, religious or otherwise, have also harboured abusers, nothing can change the fact that the abuse itself, and the many instances of cover-up which were unmasked by the Royal Commission, should never have happened in the Church. One abused person is one too many, because each instance of abuse represents a vile assault on the innocence and vulnerability of the person who has been attacked in this way. That this abuse has been so prevalent in the Catholic Church leaves us all reeling. It is as if the solid ground of our faith is moving underneath us and we have no secure place on which to stand. And if this is what so many of us are feeling we can only begin to imagine how those who have been abused must be suffering.

In one of my recent letters I wrote of my sincere belief that this crisis of sexual abuse has revealed a profound spiritual sickness at the heart of the Church, just as the widespread nature of this abuse in our society points to a malignant cancer which is eating away at us all. What are we to do?

Without for a moment stepping away from the pressing need to respond to the recommendations of the Royal Commission, and without side-stepping our responsibility to face the uncomfortable questions put to the Church by the Royal



Commission, I want to give voice to my deep concern that we in the Church are facing a crisis of fidelity. We believe that as the Church we are members of the Body of Christ. We are not just a human institution, though we carry all the marks of one. We are a people called together by God to form the community of the Church, so that in and through us Jesus can continue to be present to his people as their Good Shepherd. We are supposed to be following in his footsteps. We are supposed to have our eyes fixed firmly on him. Can anyone believe that a person who has his or her eyes truly fixed on Jesus would have been capable of abusing a child or young person? Can anybody believe that a Church leader deeply steeped in his or her identity as a disciple of Jesus would have been able to turn a blind eye to, or summarily dismiss, someone who had the courage to come forward with a story of abuse? That these things did in fact happen unmasks for us a confronting truth: we have forgotten who we are.

Some years ago we experienced in the Church in Australia the "Year of Grace". It was an opportunity to put aside other things and turn our eyes to Christ. This special year was partly inspired by some words of Saint John Paul II. *"Our witness to the Gospel,"* he said, *"will be hopelessly inadequate if we have not first contemplated the face of Christ"*. And why? Because we are a community that professes Christ to be our Way, and our Truth, and our Life and it is time we started to live as if we believed it. All the procedures we have put in place to make sure that the young are now safe in our communities, all the efforts at structural reform and renewal in the Church which must be pursued, and all the words of apology to victims and survivors and the concrete actions which must accompany them, sincere and well-meaning though they are, will ultimately not bring healing and hope to anyone unless they come from an unflinching acknowledgment of our infidelity to the Lord Jesus, a deep and heart-felt shame about all that has happened, and a fierce determination to return to the heart of our Catholic faith - to return to Christ. This is what I placed before us all when I was installed as your Archbishop eight years ago: *"We must,"* I said, *"return the Church to Christ and return Christ to the Church"*. He has always been there of course but too many of us, for far too long, have pushed him aside and put other things at the centre. No matter how worthwhile those things, those projects, may have been, if they were and are not born of faith in Christ and capable of deepening faith in him, then they will ultimately prove to be fruitless. We are reaping the rotten fruit which is the result of our infidelity and our sterility now.

I am sharing these thoughts with you as we continue our Lenten journey. It is a journey that always leads to the same place: to the Upper Room where Jesus symbolically breaks his body and spills his blood at the Last Supper and calls us to do the same in his memory; to the Garden of Gethsemane, shrouded in the darkness of fear, betrayal and, for some of the disciples, the temptation to despair; and to the cross of suffering, of shame and of death. This is where the Church finds herself now. It is where so many of us find ourselves. Our faith is shaken, our confidence undermined, our trust betrayed. But like every other Lent, the one we are living this year, in 2019, will lead to resurrection. Just as Jesus, dying on the cross, cried out in anguish, *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"* so we too cry to God in pain, in humiliation and in confusion. In doing so we have some small share in the dreadful suffering of those who have been abused. But like Jesus we too are being invited to also say, perhaps from the barely flickering flame of our faith, *"Father into your hands I entrust my spirit"*



- into your hands I entrust my present and my future, and the present and future of your Church."

I hope you will believe me when I say that these words have not been easy to write. But to all those people who look to me for support, guidance and encouragement at this moment, I can only speak from the heart. We are not only facing a crisis of credibility or confidence. We are not only grappling with a loss of respect in our society. We are not only facing the reality of diminishment in numbers and influence. We are facing a crisis of faith. The only way through this crisis is a return to fidelity, a return to the Gospel, a return to Christ. It is he in whom we must place our trust. Our leaders may fail us, our brothers and sisters in the community of the Church may fail us, our own weaknesses and blindness may betray us - but Christ will never fail us.

In the beautiful image which we find in the Book of Revelations, Christ stands at the door of our hearts and of our lives knocking. If we open that door he will come in, sit down with us, and eat with us. His Body and Blood given to us in the Eucharist will strengthen and sustain us, his Word listened to in our communities of faith and in the silence of our own prayer will enlighten and guide us. The example of our brothers and sisters in the Church will encourage and support us. The prayers of the woman Jesus has given to us as our mother will accompany us. But we must open the door of our hearts and lives to him, for there is no handle on the outside of that door, only on the inside. If we keep him locked out then the Church we love, his Church, will continue to suffer, will continue to diminish and will continue to walk the path of mediocrity and infidelity instead of the path of faithfulness which is the only way back to the life the Lord wants to give us.

In this time of darkness let us remember the Lord's promise that he will never abandon his Church. Let us continue to engage in and support the Church's involvement in the many ministries carried out in the fields of education, health care and social outreach to those in need. Quietly, and humbly, let us continue to go about the business of being faithful disciples of Jesus, bringing him into the lives of those we love, those we live with and those we meet each day.

Let us pray for each other at this difficult time; let us live in harmony and peace with each other, resisting the temptation to criticise and tear down; let us love one another as he has loved us.

+ Timothy Costelloe SDB

+Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth

23 March 2019