

Moving the Church: A Theology of Possibility

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God addresses to the Church the question whether it has the courage to undertake an apostolic offensive into [the] future [in] in such a form that no one can have the impression that the Church only exists as a mere survival from earlier times because it has not yet had time to die.¹

The image in this quote, the image of a moribund church lingering on the edge of oblivion, but avoiding the abyss simply because it ‘has not yet had time to die’ has much to say to the church in Australia as it receives the final report of the Royal Commission. The Christian community as a whole faces a crisis of legitimacy, a crisis that is the direct result of criminal actions that the church’s clergy perpetrated. The suffering that sexual abuse by clergy inflicted on so many innocent survivors, suffering that the Commission has illuminated in the starkest terms, and the collusive behaviour of authorities in the church, witness not only to systemic and sustained contradictions between the words and actions of people in the church, but also to a preference for institutional security above a commitment to the dignity and well-being of those created in the image of God. A church whose leaders and ministers are unwilling or unable to learn the lessons of the Commission will disqualify itself from a continuing place in Australian society, even as ‘a mere survival from earlier times.’

If the Christian community is neither to wither away as a result of the ignominy that its own leaders and ministers have generated nor to require civic oversight in order to ensure its officials act responsibly, it is surely indisputable that attitudes and practices within the church must change. The Commission itself has been direct about some necessary changes, such as its recommendation that the Catholic Church, the ecclesial tradition of which I am a part, seek

¹ Karl Rahner, ‘The Changing Church,’ (1965) in *The Christian of the Future*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), 36.

‘ways in which structures and practices of governance may be made more accountable, more transparent, more meaningfully consultative, and more participatory.’²

It remains, however, for Catholics, as well as the Christian Church as a whole, to do more than simply satisfy the principal findings of the Commission. If there is to be a revitalised integrity to the church’s life and ministry, one whose goal exceeds a reduction of the scrutiny to which the church is now subject, the stimulus and tools for that renewal must come from within the church, must find its rationale within the church’s self-understanding and convictions. Although the second half of this paper will make a case for this claim, it is important to state immediately that such a proposal is not a ruse to provide the church with the path of least resistance, nor does it suggest that the church has nothing to learn from the rest of society. It is, however, a recognition that thoroughgoing reform can arise and be organic only if it expresses what is integral to the church’s identity. If there is to be a rigorously honest confrontation with all the issues that ‘the sexual abuse crisis’ encompasses, if there is to be an unequivocal commitment to the protection of children and other vulnerable individuals, as well as actions to ensure the efficacy of this commitment, the church must respond from its own resources. If this does not occur, changed attitudes and actions may amount to little more than a costume that is ultimately disposable.

Clearly, many in the wider Australian community, as well as many former members for whom the church seems now to be beyond redemption, will doubt that real change is possible, and certainly reject the notion that something particular to the church could ever be the catalyst for such change. Even those who continue within the Christian community, perhaps clinging

² *Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, (volume 16; book 1; recommendation 16.70, [December, 2017], 44; the text can be found at: <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/religious-institutions>

only by their fingertips to the hope for greater authenticity in all aspects of the church's life, may wonder whether the church's resources are sufficient to accomplish all that genuine change requires. Such wondering becomes louder and more insistent as each new wave of revelations about sexual abuse and its cover-up batters hope, mine included. If there is to be even an inkling that such hope is not in vain, its only possible foundation is the bedrock of the Christian community's faith: the boundless mercy of the God of Jesus Christ.

Reference to faith and to the church's resources brings me to what I understand to be my brief for our conversation: to address what theology and particularly ecclesiology, the branch of theology that concentrates on the mission and identity of the church, might contribute to the renewal of integrity in the church's life and ministry. In the first half of the paper, I'd like to make three points about the goal and methods of theology. The second part of the paper will address aspects of ecclesiology. I will conclude the paper with some reflections on the relevance of 'hope' to the issues at the heart of our conference.

The Contribution of Theology

The English theologian Nicholas Lash depicts the task of theology as 'the stripping away of the veils of self-assurance by which we seek to protect our faces from exposure to the mystery of God.'³ Theology, then, begins with the recognition that God is always other than us; not simply bigger and better than us, but indescribably different from us. As a result, every encounter with God exposes our limits, even our capacity for self-deception. What saves such encounters from being unbearable for us, is the conviction that God is loving, not naïvely indulgent, but limitlessly generous, desiring only to give life. In the words of the Second Vatican Council's

³ Nicholas Lash, 'Criticism or Construction?: The Task of Theology,' *New Blackfriars* 63 (1982): 153.

description of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, God 'addresses humankind as friends and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into [God's] own company.'⁴ If faith is our response to God's offer, theology is the systematic exploration of the dynamics and implication of faith in God.

To capture what both the difference between God and humanity and God's desire for relationship with humanity mean for theology, Rowan Williams argues that a key element of theology is its obligation to probe 'those aspects of religious practice which pull in the direction of ideological distortion, those things which presuppose that there is a perspective that leaves nothing out, [to] challenge the notion that these are the terms in which *God* is to be imagined.'⁵ Williams makes clear that God is never reducible to our ideas on how God ought to be. Theologians, therefore, must be attentive to the danger of idolatry, to the danger of making God less than God, and substituting for God our convictions about God.

The temptation to idolatry is as old as the first appearance of human beings in the book of Genesis. Sadly, Genesis does not mark the end of the tendency. In fact, when the Royal Commission refers to 'clericalism' as 'the idealisation of the priesthood, and by extension, the idealisation of the Catholic Church,' when it highlights the long-prevailing culture of 'differential obedience' that allowed, as the final report notes, 'poor responses' to sexual abuse to go unchallenged, it is describing a form of idolatry.⁶ Idols cannot ever give life; they can only be a distortion of what God enables.

⁴ The Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 'The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation' (1965), article 2. All quotations from the council's texts come from *Vatican Council II: Constitutions Decrees Declaration*, (rev. trans.), ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014).

⁵ Rowan Williams, 'Theological Integrity,' *Cross Currents* 45 (1995): 323; original emphasis.

⁶ *Report of the Royal Commission* (volume 16; book 1); the reference to 'clericalism' can be found at p. 43; the reference to 'deferential obedience' can be found at p. 44.

In seeking to ensure that idolatry does not become standard practice for the life of the church, theologians employ a hermeneutic of suspicion, an approach that can alert us to our capacity for self-deception. To nurture the creativity that can empower reform in the church, however, there is a need for something beyond suspicion. This brings me to the second point about theology, a point that is a corollary of the warning against idolatry: theology recognises that not only is there more to God than we have grasped to this point, but that our embrace of that ‘more’ will enable, indeed require, that we are willing to move.

Theological reflection promotes openness to what we have not yet experienced; it fosters the acknowledgement that we have not exhausted all that God makes possible. This acknowledgement, set within our relationship with God, has specific consequences, all of which come under the umbrella of ‘conversion,’ a term that implies a change of heart that produces changes in our way of living. It is, I hope, not a misrepresentation of the Commission’s intent to transpose its recommendations into a theological key by describing them as instruments to give concrete form to the need for individual and communal conversion in the church.

Conversion involves a change of heart, an insight that resounds through the psalms and features continually in God’s evaluations of the covenants with Israel, and in the gospel’s assessment of the response to Jesus among his contemporaries.⁷ Hearts, however, exist in embodied persons. As a result, authentic conversion produces new ways of acting—as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* frames the relationship between the two movements: ‘interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.’⁸ Thus, conversion, interpreted as a response to what Pope Francis names the ‘the eternal newness’ of God, has real-

⁷ For the link between openness or hardness of ‘the heart’ and conversion see, for example, Ps 14:1, 44:21, 139:23; Ex 9:12; Jer 29:13; and Mt 15:19.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, article 1430.

world and real-time effects.⁹ It involves not only the expansion of our understanding, but the adoption of actions consistent with this expanded understanding.

The Christian tradition has always interpreted such changes as a response to the prompting of God's Holy Spirit, whose role is to form disciples, to build the Body of Christ in the world (Gal 5:13-26). Conversion to the Spirit must shape our structures and communal activities, no less than our personal lives. Without that conversion, our capacity to do evil, to choose darkness over light, can continue to obscure the presence of the Spirit in the church, even if our structures change. Nor is conversion a one-off process: it remains essential to a healthy relationship with the God who is always other than us. Conversion also manifests our trust that the God who seeks only the good of God's creation, ourselves included, transcends even the structures that seek to serve our relationship with God. This means that the adoption of altered practices of governance in the church, including the expansion of leadership beyond the current monopoly of the ordained and the implementation of effective instruments of accountability for all those in positions of leadership, the need for which the Royal Commission has identified, can represent more than merely corporate reform: such changes can be a response to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

In accompanying and nurturing openness to conversion, theology emphasises that our faith in God moves us forwards, towards what defies the limits of our imagination, not backwards towards some mythological 'golden age' that no longer exists. Along the way—and this is a point I'll develop further in relation to the church—there are manifold opportunities, even imperatives, for changes that respond to what God enables. These opportunities and imperatives challenge us, as Elizabeth Johnson observes, not to blame God for the poverty of our

⁹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 'On the Call to Holiness in Today's World,' (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2018), article 135.

vision and action: 'if the Rock you lean on is too miniscule to support the range of your life's desires, faith will collapse as you grow into maturity. For a community like the church, if the God they lean on together is inadequate, they will lead a cramped religious life.'¹⁰ When the constructions of our faith damage others, the fault does not lie with God. Rather, our efforts to conscript God to buttress our own desires, desires often reflective of the 'cramped religious life' to which Johnson alludes, are responsible for the damage we inflict. Theology's focus on the expansiveness of God offers an alternative to this distortion.

The third point that I would like to make about theology is one that has become especially important in recent decades, reflecting the impact of liberation and feminist thought: the acknowledgment that all thinking about God is contextual; it's done by people who live in specific times and circumstances. This is not a new fact, but a new realization. An appreciation of context frees thinking about God from the illusion that faith floats above history, unaffected by what is specific to each unique time and place.

Contextual thinking does not mean either that each generation and setting will construct its own God or that neither the past nor those beyond our borders in the present has anything to teach us. In other words, an appreciation of the particularity of our context does not require the wholesale abandonment of the Bible, the church's teaching, or any of the various elements within the panoply of Christian life. What it does require is the willingness to grapple with how we might appropriate those sources in our particular here-and-now. By engaging with the theological task of reception, by asking how the resources of our tradition might enable us to express our faith in ways that speak of the living God to the Australia of 2018, especially the

¹⁰ Elizabeth Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness: Writings for the People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 31.

Australia aware of all that the Royal Commission has shown to be the failures of the church, we open ourselves to conversion, while also avoiding idolatry.

The willingness to allow space for all the questions that rise up in our present is an act of faith, one that affirms the union between faith and creativity. In seeking answers to these questions, we must be attentive to sources beyond the often-narrow confines of the Christian community. To do so expresses not a lack of confidence in the resources of our own traditions, but trust that God's Spirit can reach us through manifold sources, including sources beyond the church that can remind us, paradoxically, of neglected aspects of our own traditions. This has certainly been true in recent decades when the wider culture awoke the Christian community to the necessity of care for the earth and the defence and promotion of the rights of women, indigenous people, the disabled, the LGBTIQ community, as well as the needs of other formerly-marginalised groups. These practices can claim a firm foundation in God's creative love and in the desire of Jesus that all people 'may have life, and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10), but it was 'the world' that taught the church of their importance, a lesson that the Christian community must continue to learn and translate into action.

The Royal Commission has confronted the church, especially its leaders and ministers, with its radical failure to place protection of children above the self-interest of the institution.¹¹ In so doing, the Commission has provided the stimulus for the Christian community to bring to the forefront of its awareness that the protection of children, God's children, is inseparable from faith in the God who took flesh in human history. That it has taken a Royal Commission to renew this awareness in the church will remain a matter of deep shame for the Christian community. Not to learn now from all that the Commission has highlighted, not to recognise in

¹¹ *Report of the Royal Commission*, (volume 16, book 1), 28.

its work the presence of the Spirit who forms the church to be a site of liberation, would compound the original failures, suggesting a wilful resistance to conversion.

Taken together the three aspects of theology that I have outlined promote openness to questions and participation in conversation, both of which represent the embrace of God's otherness. Such openness is no small task at a time when our social, political, and ecclesial cultures are dominated by invective delivered in one-hundred-and-forty characters. Engagement with the God who transcends our ideas about God ought to sensitise us constantly to the fact that talking about God can never be a zero-sum game, such that 'the winner' takes all. Only God can legitimately claim the last word, a word that will be more generous than the one we might speak or deserve. Trust in God's generosity frees us to face our own limits and failures. Good theology reminds us what God is like; in doing so, it reminds us that we are not God.

Given my emphasis on the role that context plays in theological thinking, I hope it is appropriate to conclude this section of my paper by identifying briefly three aspects of my situation, since that situation shapes the content of this presentation. First, I am an Australian but have lived in the United States for nearly a dozen years; consequently, I come to this conversation as both an insider and an outsider, with the advantages and deficits intrinsic to this hybrid identity. Secondly, as already noted, I am a Roman Catholic, and an ordained priest; those characteristics inevitably produce certain blinkers, but also fuel my longing for a church—and for a self—that represents the gospel transparently, rather than being an obstacle to it. Thirdly, I am a systematic theologian who works in a university. While members of this guild are often suspect for obscurity, even obfuscation, in their ideas and expression, the endeavour to bring the wisdom of the tradition into dialogue with an array of contemporary insights, the endeavour particular to academic theology, can be a fruitful way to explore our graced humanity and align

heart, soul, and head at the service of faithful discipleship. I hope that the richness of those three features is more evident in this presentation than is their constraints.

The Role of Ecclesiology

Let me turn now to considering what ecclesiology, which considers the church in the light of the three components of theology that I have just outlined, might offer the Christian community as it receives the Royal Commission. As a first step, I'd like to return to the quote that I used to open this presentation. That quote, with its challenge to the Roman Catholic Church to show that it has the potential to change and grow, seems especially relevant to all that brings us together today. It's noteworthy, then, the quote originates not from a time of soul-searching in response to another scandal in the life of the ecclesial community, but from circumstances of great hope for the church and its mission in society. In fact, the quote, which comes from Karl Rahner, a major figure in twentieth-century Catholic thought, expresses a view of what lay ahead of the church at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. That such a sentiment could be applicable to both that shining moment and the mire of disgrace and shame that clerical sexual abuse has produced, brings into relief a truth central to the church in its best of times no less than in its worst: the church is always a project to be realized, not an object to be preserved.

The church is a living reality, one that reflects the complexity emblematic of all living things. As the work not only of the grace of God, whose initiative and presence bring about and sustain the community of faith, but of the people who compose that community and seek to respond to grace, the church defies all efforts to capture it within the perspective of a single lens. In addition, the fact that the church exists, inescapably, in the flux of history, underscores that no single period of the church's history can provide a definitive portrait of the church.

Existing in time, the church can claim no immunity from the vicissitudes of history. Similarly, the church, as a human community, can claim no exemptions from the ravages of human mediocrity, pettiness, and sinfulness, all of which can permeate institutions rather than being contained solely within the ambit of individuals. This analysis of the church by no means excludes all that grace can accomplish in and through the Christian community, but highlights that grace works for our conversion, to align our choices on God's life-giving Holy Spirit, rather than bypassing our humanity.

While taking up the specific recommendations of the Royal Commission will certainly help the church to become a more transparent and authentic body, the renewal of integrity in the church requires more than individual pieces of reform: it requires broad and deep cultural shifts in the church. To achieve the latter, it will be necessary for the church to embrace an overarching approach to change, one that can guide the integration of specific changes. Here, the key question is what might provide such an approach. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, my answer is that the church's own resources can and must be the source.

To make an argument for this claim, I'll build on the second half of Rahner's description of the task facing the church at the end of Vatican II. After challenging the church to change in response to the council, Rahner continues: 'But even if [the Church] has the courage to change, time is needed and time must be taken [for] the Church cannot change into something or other at will, arbitrarily, but only into a new presence of its old reality, into the present and future of its past, of the Gospel, of the grace and truth of God.'¹² I accept that Rahner's contention may be unsatisfactory at first hearing. Its reference to 'taking time' could imply the type of bureaucratic stonewalling that frustrates necessary reforms, while its invocation of 'a new presence' of the

¹² Rahner, 'The Changing Church,' 36.

church's 'old reality' may seem to enable the continuation of the pathologies that facilitated clerical sexual abuse.

Viewed more positively, Rahner captures the paradoxical elements central to the life of the church. On the one hand, he affirms that the church is a product of God's grace revealed in history; a fact that binds the community of faith in every age to what has been passed on through that history—we do not get to devise or name God, but depend, inescapably, on those who were the immediate recipients of God's revelation, including paradigmatically God's revelation in Christ. On the other hand, he makes plain that God's grace not only directs us to all that is yet to come, but requires us to live our faith in the unique circumstances of our present. To respond to this grace, our task is not to build and curate immovable structures, but communities able to respond to the call of the Spirit in service of God's reign. None of this obviates the need for structures, but does challenge the sense that they can be an end in themselves.

From a background markedly different from Rahner's, Serene Jones, a contemporary Protestant feminist theologian, nonetheless converges with him when she identifies 'bounded openness' as a principal feature of the church.¹³ Jones and Rahner share the conviction that God is at work in the church, the ugliness of much of its history notwithstanding. As a result of that conviction, they would also concur that our task today, the task of the Christian community in every age, is not the formation of a 'new' church, a church without roots in the past, but the appropriation of the past in light of the present, and with an eye to the future.

For the church to become in this way what it has always been does not require that the past be either jettisoned or treated as if beyond critique, any more than the present can be beyond critique. It does require, however, that the Christian community be the site where ongoing

¹³ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 170.

discernment of God's desires for God's people is the norm. Broadly speaking, then, the sole non-negotiable in the life of the Christian community is the obligation to be responsive to God's Holy Spirit at the heart of the church. The Spirit, who will always exceed whatever categories we seek to impose on the Spirit, promotes only what is conducive to God's reign and the good of God's people. Every aspect of the church's life, from how we interpret the Scriptures and sacramental worship to the goals we set for our structures and ministries at every level of the Christian community, must continually find its rationale in relation to discernment of the Spirit. Discernment is the polar opposite of idolatry. As Pope Francis describes it, discernment 'is not a solipsistic self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection, but an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God' for the sake of our mission in the world.¹⁴

Looking back over last hundred years of ecclesiology, it is unquestionable that discernment of the Spirit and the consequent openness to movement, no less than the primacy of mission, were not always to the fore. Hence, the church's distorted culture that the Commission has brought into relief.

Much of what the Commission has identified reflects what Yves Congar, another central figure at Vatican II, categorised as 'hierarchology': equating 'the church' with its structures and institutionalised forms of leadership.¹⁵ Hierarchology privileged the unity necessary for the church's well-being, but cast the bishops as the only possible bulwark of unity. That emphasis was at the cost of the church as a community of all the baptised. Similarly, the exclusive concentration on order frustrated the realization of the church as a body able to change and

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, article 175.

¹⁵ Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, trans. D. Attwater (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1965), 45. For an illustration of 'hierarchology,' see the analysis of the church by Adolphe Tanquerey in *A Manual of Dogmatic Theology* (vol. 1), trans. J. Byrnes (New York: Desclee, 1959), 95-140; the original publication of the book, in Latin, was in 1914.

develop, a body whose defining characteristic was responsiveness to the movement of God's Holy Spirit in the world.

Ironically, the prominence accorded to the church's hierarchical structures and conformity to the norms of a central authority was itself an innovation, being largely a reaction to the Reformation and especially the emergence of modernity. The advent of 'nationalism, capitalism, rationalism, and the rise of modern science,' all of which engendered a deep suspicion towards modernity's revolutionary spirit, reinforced for Catholics the importance of structures around which they could rally to maintain a clear sense of their identity and of their independence from worldly powers.¹⁶

Official Catholic teaching buttressed that posture by drawing a direct line between God's favour and the organisation of the church as a social body. Gradually, the church as 'the perfect society,' the model that early-modern Catholic thinkers developed to defend the ecclesial community against incursions by civic rulers seeking to control the church, came to be understood as implying not only rightful independence from external forces, but the superiority, even flawlessness, of the church's social structure.¹⁷ Clearly, such an approach left little room for mechanisms of accountability for those in authority.

Were hierarchology to be all that Catholic reflection on the church could offer, there would be ample grounds for suspicion about the church's capacity to move towards the reforms that the Commission has advocated as necessary for the protection of children. Vatican II's 'Constitution on the Church,' however, provides the basis for an ecclesiology more conducive to

¹⁶ Eric Plumer, 'The Development of Ecclesiology: Early Church to the Reformation,' in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2000), 43-4.

¹⁷ See, for example, Pope Leo XIII, *Satis Cognitum*, 'On the Unity of the Church' (1896), article 10; the text can be found in *The Papal Encyclicals 1878-1903*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Publishing, 1981), 387-404.

significant reform in the church. Two aspects of the council's ecclesiology are especially important for the present moment of the church's life: the identification of the church as the 'people of God' and the description of the church as a 'pilgrim' community.¹⁸

'People of God' reinforces the primacy of baptism within the life of the church. It does so not to devalue ordination, but to make clear that the church is always one people. Consequently, the exercise of particular roles and offices in the church cannot be at the expense of that fundamental unity. Pope Francis's emphasis on the need for the Catholic Church to develop effective practices of 'synodality,' as well as the plans for a Plenary Council in Australia in 2020, represent present-day enactments of Vatican II's teaching.¹⁹

'Pilgrim' makes plain that the church is not yet complete, that it is inseparable from God's grace in history. 'Pilgrim' also expresses the church's vocation to movement, to movement into an unknown future trusting God's faithfulness. All of this requires the church to beware of the tendency to regard any period of its past as an unsurpassable 'golden age.' Such a designation would suggest, falsely, that a certain era in the life of the church had fully mastered grace, thereby ending the ecclesial community's pilgrimage. As a pilgrim, the church can be a community of imagination and creativity, not simply of preservation.

The dynamism proper to 'pilgrim' serves as a reminder that the identity of the church is not independent of times and places. A church that locates its identity in what is beyond history, on the other hand, is less likely to be self-critical, to assess areas for growth and greater authenticity. Not only is 'pilgrim' reconcilable with a self-critical spirit, it can accommodate

¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 'The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which the Second Vatican Council issued in 1964, uses 'The People of God' as the title for its second chapter and 'The Pilgrim Church' as the title for its seventh chapter.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of the role that synodality plays in the papacy of Pope Francis and its implications for the life of the church see, Ormond Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,' *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 299-325.

diversity in the church rather than mandating a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to the manifold expressions of the church’s life. In that vein, Vatican II acknowledges that while Christians ‘are to seek and value the things that are above,’ they are also to demonstrate ‘not less, but greater commitment to working with everyone for the establishment of a more human world.’²⁰

A pilgrim church does not know in advance its response to every exigency, nor even what exigencies may arise, but must discern in the circumstances of each time and place how the Spirit is promoting ‘a more human world.’ In urging the members of the church to cultivate practices of discernment, Pope Francis stresses that discernment ‘is not a matter of applying rules or repeating what was done in the past, since the same solutions are not valid in all circumstances and what was useful in one context may not prove so in another. The discernment of spirits liberates us from rigidity, which has no place before the perennial “today” of the risen Lord. The Spirit alone can penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every situation, and grasp its every nuance, so that the newness of the Gospel can emerge in another light.’²¹

Pope Francis’s stress on the connection between discernment of the Spirit and confrontation with those aspects of ecclesial life that stifle the Spirit’s promotion of change in the church, has an echo in the work of the contemporary American Baptist theologian Eboni Marshall Turman. Reflecting on the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, Turman writes: ‘when ecclesial practices silence, invisibilize, and demonize some, namely by racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism they smother the reality of the Holy Spirit that “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8) as Advocate for the outcast.’²² In illuminating how the church ‘invisibilized’ sexual abuse

²⁰ The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, ‘The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World’ (1965), article 57.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, article 173.

²² Eboni Marshall Turman, ‘The Holy Spirit and the Black Church Tradition: Womanist Considerations,’ in *The Holy Spirit and the Church: Ecumenical Reflections with a Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Thomas Hughson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 107.

and its impact, the Royal Commission has underscored that the smothering of the Spirit is a potent temptation. In urging attention to formerly-marginal groups, ecclesiology is underscoring that the Holy Spirit's activity extends not only beyond the church's hierarchy, but also beyond the 'middle-class, middle-aged, relatively educated, articulate, skilled, if not professional, and, in general, given to a fairly responsible level of participation in the world of business, work and social life.'²³

Contemporary ecclesiologies, reflecting the contextual emphasis to which I referred earlier, are alert not simply to the church's need for conversion, but to the fact that the church, in its quest for authentic responses to the Spirit, can learn from the insights of 'social psychology, organizational and network theories, phenomenology, leadership and educational theories.'²⁴ These disciplines can inform and expand the church's self-understanding, including in relation to practices of effective, creative, and accountable leadership.

Hope and the Church's Future

It would be wonderful to conclude this paper by asserting that the insights of contemporary ecclesiology offer mechanisms that will free the church from the distortions of the past, while ensuring there will be no failures in the future; wonderful, but illusory. Indeed, a critic could suggest—harshly perhaps, but nonetheless accurately—that not only did 'people of God' and 'pilgrim' fail to facilitate a root-and-branch renewal of the church during the fifty years since the end of Vatican II, but that the Royal Commission's findings suggest that 'hierarchology' is far from being an artefact of a former era.

²³ John O'Brien, 'The Authority of the Poor,' in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 218.

²⁴ Nicholas M. Healy, 'Ecclesiology and Practical Theology,' in *Keeping Faith in Practice: Aspects of Catholic Pastoral Theology*, ed. James Sweeney et al. (London: SCM, 2010), 117.

Those of us who believe that God's grace is inextricably linked to the church, that it does sustain the church's mission in history, long for the community of faith to be a transparent witness to that grace, to be a community that reflects thoroughly and consistently the boundless compassion, justice, and reconciliation expressive of the God of Jesus Christ. Even more, we long for that to be true of all of us, everyday, and in our every action. The reality of the church is, of course, otherwise. Nor are the failures of the church a new story, detailed for the first time in the report of the Commission. Indeed, from the moment that St Paul realised that he'd need to write a second letter to the Christian community in Corinth, the church has known dissension, division, and numerous other ways of acting that contradict the gospel. Nor have the church's sins remained only within its own community, but have, indisputably, brought about the sufferings of others. That truth is one that we must never seek to escape or deny.

Remembering, however, is insufficient on its own. As we recognise that the revelations in Boston in 2002 were only the beginning of disclosures about clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up, that the catalogue of shame has continued in Ireland, Chile, and in Australia, and continues still with the recent reports into the abusive actions of Cardinal McCarrick, the former Archbishop of Washington DC, and the still-more recent, and still-more distressing, history of abuse across multiple dioceses in Pennsylvania, we must remember with intent. Johann Baptist Metz, in the context of discussing the task of theology after Auschwitz, explains what 'remembering with intent' implies: 'Christian theology must be able to perceive history in its negativity, in its catastrophic essence ... If this perception is not to turn tragic—that is, develop into a farewell to history—then these catastrophes must be remembered with practical and political intent.'²⁵ Our remembering, then, must drive a commitment to change, must not

²⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, ed. J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998), 40.

dissipate itself in either despair or a casual retreat into ‘business as usual.’ Our conversation over the next few days can be an instance of remembering with intent.

The need for change to realign the church, not just once but in an ongoing way, is certainly clear in relation to the Christian community in Australia at this moment. This need underscores not only that the church is a project, a point made earlier in the paper, but that it is not possible to ‘failure-proof’ the church. The latter is true because of the human beings who compose the Christian community. Consequently, ecclesiology, the necessary work of thinking about the church, will never be able to resolve fully and finally the disjunction that exists between what Clare Watkins names the ‘espoused’ and ‘operant’ voices characteristic of all ecclesial activities; that is, the lack of alignment between what members of the church think is motivating them and what their actions reveal about their actual motivations.²⁶

Here, we confront the ultimate source of all that so often makes the church unpalatable: that the church is composed of people who are no better than ourselves or than anybody else in the wider world.²⁷ That members of the church have acted at times as if this is not so, as if it is a truth that could be denied or overcome, and that bishops and priests have been especially prone to such a temptation while riding on the back of clericalism, are all factors that have contributed to the church’s current plight.

A future for the church, a future that offers an alternative to self-deception, and a future in which the Christian community might become not perfect, but less equivocal in its witness to all that God enables, will not be the product simply of our will-power, or even our best desires. Rather, it can come only from recovering the hope we have in the crucified and risen Christ, the

²⁶ Clare Watkins et al., ‘Practical Ecclesiology: What Counts as Theology in Studying the Church?’, in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 178-79.

²⁷ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* trans. P. Madigan & M. Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1995), 187.

hope ‘that does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom 5:5). This hope is not a soft option, but rather involves what Paul Crowley names ‘obedience to what horrifies,’ including the horror that arises when we stand before the devastation caused by clerical sexual abuse by priests.²⁸

As a church we must not turn away from that devastation; we must remember it with the intent to reform our community and its ministry. We must also, all of us without exception, open our own hearts and actions to the transformation that God’s Spirit seeks and empowers. What difference all of this will make, whether it will aid the healing of survivors of abuse, and whether it will enable some reconciliation with the church for the many people who have walked away in understandable anger and sorrow, we cannot determine or control. Here, we see the radical nature of hope, indeed its poverty, in the face of all that it cannot control. Here too we understand why it is that ‘the mood of the discourse of Christian hope is less that of assertion than request: its form is prayer.’²⁹ This is not prayer as escape, but the prayer that cries out for others and ourselves to the God who alone can heal what human beings have broken.

²⁸ Paul Crowley, *Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross, and Hope* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 58.

²⁹ Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of ‘Religion’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 229.