

PROCLAIM
2016



On a Mission of Mercy: Evangelising Parishes



**PARISHES OF MERCY:
RESPONDING TO THE SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS**

Workshop by Very Rev Dr David Ranson
Vicar General, Catholic Diocese of Broken Bay

Workshop Abstract

The disclosure of a history of sexual abuse within our Church is a mark of our generation. There is no part of our Church that has not been affected by the scrutiny afforded consistently over the last thirty years by judicial processes and by the media. We now find ourselves in the midst of a Royal Commission which seeks to attend not only to the incidents of abuse but also to the way in which our Church has not responded well to the pain people have experienced. What is the challenge to our communities of faith by this crisis? How might a community of faith live through this experience which deeply impacts upon the whole Church in a way that is genuinely redemptive? How might a community of faith journey with, and contribute to the healing of those who have suffered, especially when the experience of the community and its leaders has been as damaging? The seminar seeks both to provide some lines of reflection and to draw from the wisdom of the participants themselves.



Office for
Evangelisation

CATHOLIC
DIOCESE OF
BROKEN BAY



Introduction

Why have we chosen this workshop?

Is there an experience of responding to sexual abuse in our community that we ourselves have had to confront?

Importance of acknowledging that what is suggested in this seminar relates more to communities than individuals

Part One: The Demands of the Situation if we are to move from the crisis being an “irritant” to an “invitation”

From Cover-Up to Conversion

- a. Cover-up
- b. Compensation
- c. Confession

The late Sebastian Moore wrote, “We need conversion not so much from sin as we need conversion from innocence.”¹ What did he mean by this but that any illusion to innocence needs to be shattered if we are to truly receive the call of the Spirit. As John V Taylor wrote,

The Spirit does not give itself where our encounters are glib, masked exchanges of second-hand thoughts. Our defenses must be down, broken either by intense joy or despair. One way or the other we must come to the end of ourselves. So this shameful humiliation of Christians, not only in our generation but all times, is better than self-congratulation, for it is the pre-requisite for a renewal of the Holy Spirit. It is worth remembering that the root of the word humiliation and humility is humus. To be down in the straw and the dung and the refuse in Paul’s words is to become the soil in which the seed of Christ’s manhood falls and dies and brings forth the harvest.²

- d. Conversation: learning from those who have suffered

Conversation begins with a listening heart. Loughlin Sofield has commented that both the desire and the ability to listen is the foundation of genuine ministry. It reveals the leader’s wanting to learn and to grow through understanding the wisdom others offer. Listening, he says, implies dialogue, the respectful exchange at the adult-to-adult level. It involves the suspension of one’s own viewpoint to attempt to truly hear and understand another. He emphasises that because listening is a complex process, leaders need to develop their listening skills to be able to sort through all they might hear to get to the essential truth of a situation. And then he most significantly concludes, listening gives the leader access to people and their needs, hopes, weaknesses and strength. It reveals the state of the community. In other words, the quality of listening will manifest the health of the community: where there is little to no listening, the community will simply spiral into dysfunction. The presence or absence of listening acts as the barometer of the Church’s health and vitality.

Edward Schillebeeckx recognises that “any theologian who claims history as the starting point for speech about God must grapple with the realities of senseless suffering and the multiple ways in which history is laced with the non-sense of evil.”³ For Schillebeeckx suffering and salvation are intrinsically related: “Salvation cannot . . . be found *outside* suffering.”⁴ For another theologian,

¹Sebastian Moore, *Jesus, the Liberator of Desire*, (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 37.

²John V Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, (London: SCM Press, 1972), 128.

³Mary Hilbert, “Edward Schillebeeckx, op (1914-): Encountering God in a secular and suffering world.” *Theology Today* 62 (2005), 380.

⁴Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The experience of Jesus as Lord*, translated by John Bowden, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 769-770.



Johannes Metz, too, one can only theologise through a narrative identification with those who have suffered. As Downey summarises, “in narrative we remember and connect. By participating in a narrative we trade experiences with others. This keeps memory and solidarity alive.”⁵ Keeping memory and solidarity alive means entering into a radical conversation with the one who suffers. It means allowing that conversation to unfold in new and unexpected ways

What might happen if we were now truly prepared to “sit with” and listen deeply to the pain of stories and to wonder in the midst of such pain, how such trauma acts as the catalyst for theology, and our self-understanding as Church? How does people’s pain in this instance shape our sense of God, of Christ, of the Church, of redemption?

e. Conversion

This is precisely what this work achieves through such a sustained and deep immersion with the author’s own experience of anguish, on the one hand, and on the other hand her profound attentiveness to the very Word of God, the normative reference for the Church’s life.

The Engagement of our Paradox

‘There is nothing on this earth as ugly as the Catholic Church And nothing so beautiful’ (Cardinal John Henry Newman)

It is the truth of this paradox, and our full engagement of it, that alone offers us a future. The beauty we hold as a Church does not negate the ugliness we have experienced; the ugliness does not negate the beauty. Both exist. And both must be engaged. If we only engage the celebration, the beauty, the light, we have no guarantee that we do not get caught up in a grand illusion of ourselves – something which is the opposite of gospel humility and which defends us from the difficult pathway of sustained conversion to which the gospel unquestionably always calls us. If we only engage the ugliness, then we can become overwhelmed by the darkness, and be left paralysed and in despair. The ugliness we have to face ensures that the beauty has realism; the beauty that we celebrate ensures that the ugliness is not the whole, or the final, word.

This relates to what I might term, the “scandal of the Resurrection” – Christ’s Risen Body is a motley group of people, vulnerable and sinful.

How much I must criticize you, my church and yet how much I love you.
 You have made me suffer more than anyone and yet I owe you more than I owe anyone.
 I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your presence.
 You have given me much scandal and yet you alone have made me understand holiness.
 Never in the world have I seen anything more obscurantist, more compromised, more false, yet never have I touched anything more pure, more generous or more beautiful.
 Countless times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face - and yet, every night I have prayed that I might die in your arms!
 No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you.
 Then too - where should I go?
 To build another church?
 But I cannot build another church without the same defects, for they are my own defects.
 And again, if I were to build another church, it would be my church, not Christ’s church.
 No, I am old enough. I know better.⁶

⁵John K Downey, ed. *Love’s Strategy: The political theology of Johann Baptist Metz.* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 8.

⁶Carlo Carretto (1910-1988), “Letter to the Church,” in *I Sought and I Found: My experience of God and of the Church,* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984)



A Community of Mercy: The Difference between indifference and involvement

Key to the understanding of Mercy for Pope Francis

He is not aloof from us. Each one of us has a place in his heart. He knows us by name, he cares for us and he seeks us out whenever we turn away from him. He is interested in each of us; his love does not allow him to be indifferent to what happens to us. Usually, when we are healthy and comfortable, we forget about others (something God the Father never does): we are unconcerned with their problems, their sufferings and the injustices they endure... Our heart grows cold. As long as I am relatively healthy and comfortable, I don't think about those less well off . . . Today, this selfish attitude of indifference has taken on global proportions, to the extent that we can speak of a globalization of indifference. It is a problem which we, as Christians, need to confront . . . Indifference to our neighbour and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians.⁷

True mercy *takes the person into one's care*, listens to him attentively, approaches the situation with respect and truth, and accompanies him on the journey of reconciliation.⁸

It calls for a certain tenderness, a "revolution of tenderness"⁹

Disclosed in Mark 10

And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way.

In the Gospel of Mark we also heard the experience of Bartimaeus, who joined the group of Jesus' followers. He became a disciple at the last minute. This happened during the Lord's final journey, from Jericho to Jerusalem, where he was about to be handed over. A blind beggar, Bartimaeus sat on the roadside, pushed aside. When he heard Jesus passing by, he began to cry out. Walking with Jesus were his apostles, the disciples and the women who were his followers. They were at his side as he journeyed through Palestine, proclaiming the Kingdom of God. There was also a great crowd. Two things about this story jump out at us and make an impression. On the one hand, there is the cry of a beggar, and on the other, the different reactions of the disciples. It is as if the Evangelist wanted to show us the effect which Bartimaeus' cry had on people's lives, on the lives of Jesus' followers. How did they react when faced with the suffering of that man on the side of the road, wallowing in his misery. There were three responses to the cry of the blind man. We can describe them with three phrases taken from the Gospel: They passed by, they told him to be quiet, and they told him to take heart and get up.

1. They passed by. Perhaps some of those who passed by did not even hear his shouting. Passing by is the response of indifference, of avoiding other people's problems because they do not affect us. We do not hear them; we do not recognize them. Here we have the temptation to see suffering as something natural, to take injustice for granted. We say to ourselves, "This is nothing unusual; this is the way things are". It is the response born of a blind, closed heart, a heart which has lost the ability to be touched and hence the possibility to change. A heart used to passing-by without letting itself be

⁷Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2015

⁸Pope Francis, Address to the Parish Priests of the Diocese of Rome, 6 March 2014; Pope Francis, Homily at Installation, 19 March 2013.

⁹*Evangelii gaudium*, n. 88



touched; a life which passes from one thing to the next, without ever sinking roots in the lives of the people around us.

We could call this “the spirituality of zapping”. It is always on the move, but it has nothing to show for it. There are people who keep up with the latest news, the most recent best sellers, but they never manage to connect with others, to strike up a relationship, to get involved.

You may say to me, “But Father, those people in the Gospel were busy listening to the words of the Master. They were intent on him.” I think that this is one of the most challenging things about Christian spirituality. The Evangelist John tells us, “How can you love God, whom you do not see, if you do not love your brother whom you do see?” (1 Jn 4:20). One of the great temptations we encounter along the way is to separate these two things, which belong together. We need to be aware of this. The way we listen to God the Father is how we should listen to his faithful people.

To pass by, without hearing the pain of our people, without sinking roots in their lives and in their world, is like listening to the word of God without letting it take root and bear fruit in our hearts. Like a tree, a life without roots is a one which withers and dies.

2. They told him to be quiet. This is the second response to Bartimaeus’ cry: keep quiet, don’t bother us, leave us alone. Unlike the first response, this one hears, acknowledges, and makes contact with the cry of another person. It recognizes that he or she is there, but reacts simply by scolding. It is the attitude of some leaders of God’s people; they continually scold others, hurl reproaches at them, tell them to be quiet.

This is the drama of the isolated consciousness, of those who think that the life of Jesus is only for those deserve it. They seem to believe there is only room for the “worthy”, for the “better people”, and little by little they separate themselves from the others. They have made their identity a badge of superiority.

They hear, but they don’t listen. The need to show that they are different has closed their heart. Their need to tell themselves, “I am not like that person, like those people”, not only cuts them off from the cry of their people, from their tears, but most of all from their reasons for rejoicing. Laughing with those who laugh, weeping with those who weep; all this is part of the mystery of a priestly heart.

3. They told him to take heart and get up. Lastly, we come upon the third response. It is not so much a direct response to the cry of Bartimaeus as an echo, or a reflection, of the way Jesus himself responded to the pleading of the blind beggar. In those who told him to take heart and get up, the beggar’s cry issued in a word, an invitation, a new and changed way of responding to God’s holy People.

Unlike those who simply passed by, the Gospel says that Jesus stopped and asked what was happening. He stopped when someone cried out to him. Jesus singled him out from the nameless crowd and got involved in his life. And far from ordering him to keep quiet, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” He didn’t have to show that he was different, somehow apart; he didn’t decide whether Bartimaeus was worthy or not before speaking to him. He simply asked him a question, looked at him and sought to come into his life, to share his lot. And by doing this he gradually restored the man’s lost dignity; he included him. Far from looking down on him, Jesus was moved to identify with the man’s problems and thus to show the transforming power of mercy. There can be no compassion without stopping, hearing and showing solidarity with the other. Compassion is not about zapping, it is not about silencing pain, it is about the logic of love. A logic, a way of thinking and feeling, which is not grounded in fear but in the freedom born of love and of desire to put the good of others before all else. A logic born of not being afraid to draw near to the pain of our people. Even if often this means no more than standing at their side and praying with them.



This is the logic of discipleship, it is what the Holy Spirit does with us and in us. We are witnesses of this. One day Jesus saw us on the side of the road, wallowing in our own pain and misery. He did not close his ear to our cries. He stopped, drew near and asked what he could do for us. And thanks to many witnesses, who told us, “Take heart; get up”, gradually we experienced this merciful love, this transforming love, which enabled us to see the light. We are witnesses not of an ideology, of a recipe, of a particular theology. We are witnesses to the healing and merciful love of Jesus. We are witnesses of his working in the lives of our communities. This is the pedagogy of the Master, this is the pedagogy which God uses with his people. It leads us to passing from distracted zapping to the point where we can say to others: “Take heart; get up. The Master is calling you” (*Mk 10:49*). Not so that we can be special, not so that we can be better than others, not so that we can be God’s functionaries, but only because we are grateful witnesses to the mercy which changed us.¹⁰

Jesus never marginalises anyone, but rather includes in His life the excluded and demonstrates the fundamental value of the word ‘proximity.’ Without proximity, the Pope stressed, one cannot make peace or do good. “This is the mystery of Jesus [who] takes upon himself our dirt, our impurities,” Francis said, recalling how St. Paul described how Jesus emptied himself for us. “Proximity,” the Pope said, calls for an examination of conscience on behalf of “the Church, parishes, communities, consecrated persons, the bishops, priests, everyone.” Concluding his homily, Pope Francis called on the faithful to ask themselves. “Do I have the spirit, the strength and the courage to touch the marginalized?”¹¹

This means living in Proximity to the Wounds of Others

. . . I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. . . And you have to start from the ground up.¹²

The Church above all needs the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity . . . it needs ministers of mercy . . . a Church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the Good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up their neighbour. This is pure Gospel.¹³

Using a language of mercy, which is expressed in gestures and attitudes even before words.¹⁴

Part Two: Translating this Practically for Communities

a. A Scriptural Template in which communities might discover themselves

The American pastoral theologian, Robert Schreiter suggests that the post-Resurrection account of John 21, provides us with a template.¹⁵

Chapter 21 of the Gospel of John is the familiar scene of Jesus meeting his disciples by the sea as they fish. The story begins in a climate of rupture, in an experience of alienation and fragmentation. In their disenchantment with all that has occurred through the apparent failure of Jesus, the disciples are attempting to return to the normalcy of their life but without success. They try to fish but nothing works. They continue to carry the heavy burdens of the past.

But it is here where Jesus meets them. Such a stance of Jesus suggests, according to Schreiter, that the ministry of reconciliation begins with our readiness to be available to people where they are, to

¹⁰Pope’s Prepared Address to Clergy, Religious in Bolivia 9 July 2015

¹¹Pope Francis, Morning Homily at Santa Marta, 26 June 2015.

¹²Interview with Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America* 30 September 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>

¹³Pope Francis, Interview in *America*, 30 September 2013.

¹⁴Pope Francis, Address to Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, 14 October 2013.

¹⁵Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 83-96.



journey with them in whatever place of hurt and exclusion they may be experiencing,

This kind of accompaniment is marked by a listening patience that allows the other to reveal that which is a burden even when the person might not be articulate about what that burden is and why it weighs so heavily.

But Jesus doesn't simply meet the disciples. He goes much further. He cooks the disciples breakfast. He demonstrates hospitality. This hospitality carries with it a sense of both graciousness and spaciousness – an abundance that will act in time to invite a new way of thinking about possibilities. The hospitality that Jesus extends creates a new space in which Jesus can question Peter.

The questions that Jesus poses, (thrice asking, “Do you love me?”) act to re-connect Peter to himself and his story. They provide Peter with the space by which a confession can be given – albeit implicitly in this particular story. But importantly, such a confession in this case, recalls the past in such a way as that it might be remembered in a new way. After each confession of Peter, Jesus replies, “Feed my sheep.” The confession, enabled by the space Jesus creates, ends the isolation experienced by Peter and suggests a previously unimagined possibility. In reconnecting Peter to the whole story, Peter is thus commissioned in a new way.

Schreiter suggests that this post-resurrection gospel account indicates the characteristics of a ministry of reconciliation. Through accompaniment, hospitality, facilitating connections and commissioning one another in Resurrection light and grace, we enable communities of reconciliation to spring up.

Communities of reconciliation, resurrection communities, are communities of safety where people can explore their wounds and experience the safety to rebuild their trust in life. They are communities of memory where memory can be retrieved in a redemptive way. And they are communities of hope from which people can go forth empowered, commissioned to bring forth life in abundance.

b. Breaking the Silence

Owning the Situation as a Community

- Chapel of Prayer through use of particular images
- Prayers of the Faithful
- Sensitive Preaching
- Information Evenings (Truth Healing Justice Commission)
- Liturgies of Lament

Personally

- Never express disbelief
 - Am I the first person to have been told this?
 - Have you informed the police?
 - Notifying both police and diocese
- Small things mean most
 - Do not leave people hanging through waiting
 - Phonecalls returned
 - Requests responded
- Meeting on neutral ground
 - Titles, clothes, premises
- Mutual courage/mutual trust

Sensitive to language: avoiding the use of labels of victims, survivors, and instead referring always to those who have experience the pain of abuse.



c. The Importance of Information and Availability of Processes

Clear but brief written communication

Avoiding public discussion but providing open frameworks for people

Allowing people the space that they may require

Allowing for diversity of response and interest

Never presuming what people carry

One situation opens up another that may have nothing to do with the current one

Urging people to read the communication

Detailing contacts and details for police

Working collaboratively with police

Being available for people to approach

Having counsellors available for any public occasion

Providing for paid counselling

Allowing opportunity for people to come together in small groups in a facilitated way

d. The Importance of Time

As we enter into these processes, remembering the insights of Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*

Opening the arms

Gesture of the body reaching for the other

A sign of discontent with my own self-enclosed identity, a code of desire for the other

I do not want to be myself only: I want the other to be part of who I am and I want to be part of the other

A sign that I have created space in myself for the other to come in

In opening its arms, the self makes room for the other and sets on a journey toward the other in one and the same act

They signify an aperture on the boundary of the self through which the other can come in

A gesture of invitation

They are a soft knock on the other's door. The desire to enter the space of the other has been signaled by the very same act by which the self has opened itself up for the other to come in

Waiting

The act of embrace is not an act of invasion

The other cannot be coerced or manipulated into embrace

Violence is so much the opposite of embrace that it undoes the embrace

If embrace takes place, it will always be because the other has desired the self just as the self has desired the other. This is what distinguishes embrace from grasping after the other, and holding the other in one's power.

Waiting is a sign that, although embrace may have a one-sidedness in its origin, it can never reach its goal without reciprocity.



Closing the Arms

It takes two pairs of arms for one embrace

A soft touch is necessary. I may not close my arms around the other too tightly, so as to crush her and assimilate her, otherwise I will be engaged in a concealed power act of exclusion

An embrace is not a bear hug

Opening the Arms

The other must be let go of so that his alterity may be preserved

Conclusion

Several years ago, I had the fortune of being able to visit the island of Malta upon which Paul had been shipwrecked on his way to Rome. It was an extraordinary opportunity to enter into those accounts of Paul's story. I realised especially that the texts of Paul's time on Malta were not simply historical in character but were, in fact, highly elaborate commentaries, not simply on Paul, but on the Church itself for which Paul is presented as a metaphor. The actual account of Paul's shipwreck detailed in the 27th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles teaches us it in a very particular way. Taking the peculiarities of the chapter into account this is not just a chapter about Paul's arrival on Malta. It is not just a story of Paul battling rough seas and who is seeking to reach the shore safely. Much more profoundly, it is actually the story of the early Church at sea and in the midst of storms threatening to shipwreck it, discovering that which is most essential to it – the very mystery of the Eucharist. What brings Paul to safety in the midst of his own storm is the mystery of the Eucharist. At the heart of the storm as the text says, "he took bread, gave thanks to God in everybody's presence, broke it and began to eat. All were encouraged and they ate too." (Acts 27: 35-36). This is a clear scriptural allusion to the Eucharist and demonstrates what is most central for us. In the midst of the storm of our own moment in history we too must not cease to take bread, give thanks, break it and share it. This means that in the midst of all that we face we must come back to the essential Christian act: the act of self-emptying become a self-giving which is what the Eucharistic mystery is about. This is the mystery that is its true anchor and through which alone the Church must find its harbour and safety at this time. As the story alludes everything else can be jettisoned overboard. In the very midst of the storm the mystery of the Eucharist, that mystery of Jesus' self-emptying become a self-giving, is the one thing, however, we must remain true to, that gives meaning to all else, and that holds us together. Thus, the current experience of exile into which we have been led by circumstances is resolved only by a renewed witness of sacrificial love. We can say nothing in our defense. We have sinned, through our fault, in what we have done and in what we have failed to do. We can however act. And the way of action forward must exemplify a Eucharistic love. Such action alone will bring us forward to a new harbour.