

CATHOLIC IDENTITY IN A TIME SUCH AS THIS
Re-contextualizing Pedagogy Conference
By Bishop Vincent Long OFMConv, November 30th 2021

I would like to pay my respects and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather respectively. Here in Parramatta, it is the land of the Darug people. I acknowledge their physical and spiritual connections to their land, their stories, traditions and living cultures. I also pay respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

It is a privilege for me to be speaking to you this morning, conscious that this year we are celebrating 200 years of Catholic Education in Australia. The early Catholic educators took a prophetic stance in not simply providing affordable quality education to the poor masses but fundamentally in meeting the great cultural challenges of their times. They were pioneers and trailblazers rather than taillights in leading their people. They were audacious in acting out of their love of God and God's anawim, that is, the blessed poor and needy. They had the courage to launch into the deep.

We stand on their shoulders and continue their spirit of missionary and innovative leadership. We owe it to them not simply by repeating what they did for the people of their times but by reimagining and re-contextualizing the Christian story that drove them in the first place. We owe it to them to put flesh on the marrow of the Gospel for the people of our time.

No longer in Kansas, we are in uncharted territory:

Our time is marked by profound crisis. The Church is at a critical juncture. There is a need for deep discernment and courage to embrace God's new direction. The experience of darkness, fragility and loss provides us with an opportunity for necessary change and transformation. It is characteristic of true believers to embrace the newness that the Holy Spirit awakens in and through crisis.

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy wakes up to find that she is no longer in her safe, comfortable and familiar home town of Kansas but in the topsy turvy land of Oz. We Catholics need to wake up to the reality that the Church is no longer in the safe harbour of Christendom or any semblance of it. Instead, we are in this new and uncharted territory. The Church is in this liminal space between the death of

the old comfort zone and the emergence of the new reality, which we must come to terms with.

In the exile, God's people experienced a profound loss. From being a great nation with all the status symbols of power, they were reduced to a powerless and stateless people. Yet, it was in that moment of utter powerlessness, they gained a new insight into what it meant to be God's people. There was a paradigm shift, a fundamental change in the way they related to God, to others and the world around them. They gradually came to a new understanding of the disorientation, dislocation and marginalization that was forced upon them. They learned to reengage with their spiritual legacy –without the familiar symbols of identity, like the temple, the priesthood, the festivals, the land etc...

The exile, therefore, was not simply a moment of trial and tribulation after which it would be business as usual. It was truly a watershed moment and catalyst for a new Israel. A seismic shift in consciousness and a radical understanding of who God was and what it meant to be his people emerged from one of the darkest chapters in Israel's history. Removed from their once safe, secure and prosperous world of yesteryear, the exiles or more precisely the faithful remnants reimagined their faith story in a way that enabled them to make sense of their lived experience.

Time of prophetic reframing and reimagining a new future:

We can see evidence of this prophetic reframing in the writings of the prophets. For example, Isaiah speaks of “the house of God” being established on the mountain where nations would come to worship together. Using poetic metaphors, such as wolves lying with lambs or mountains being laid low, he calls them to change and conversion. This is a call to build a new society based not on the imperial paradigm of dominion but the new model of communion and the care economy for the vulnerable. Martin Luther King Jr used these very words of Isaiah in his famous “I have a dream” speech. He was in line with the prophetic tradition in calling for the dismantling of systemic racial injustice and the creation of an inclusive society.

Similarly, Ezekiel envisions a new temple, which would surpass the old in its life-giving capability. These metaphors point to a new reality towards which

God's people are called. In effect, their faith relationship grew beyond the confines of physical symbols of land, temple and rituals into new horizons of love, compassion and justice. They realized that their mission was not to build a strong and powerful nation but to be an alternative society under God's rule, a covenanted community of neighbourly justice.

This prophetic re-imagination is fitting for us as we find ourselves in a new "captivity". The Church in Australia after the Royal Commission has stepped into uncharted territory. Here we witness in many ways the adverse impacts of secularization and disaffiliation. The Church's numbers and resources are diminishing. But even far worse than these is the loss of the Church's moral stature, credibility and trust capital. Yet like Israel, we must seek fresh ways of embodying God's redeeming, forgiving and empowering love. The Church must not lose sight of the invitation to embark on a new adventure with God as he helps us to step out of the old and into the new.

In spite of our resistance to change, we will need to let go of the old paradigms in order to truly see the reality and hope that God is at work in the Church today. This liminal space challenges our sense of security, continuity and predictability. It is our openness and humility that allow us to recognize moments of divine rupture at the critical juncture in history.

One of the implications for Christians living in the post-Christian culture is the fostering of our sense of identity. Clearly, we need to be at home with our minority status with all that entails. It means that our value system is often at odds with those of the dominant culture. It means that our engagement in the public sphere may be fraught when we advocate for matters that government and other civic powers oppose. Nurturing a post-Christian or a kind of "exilic" identity in a culture of rampant individualism, profit-driven and success-oriented is no easy task.

Another lesson to be learned from the biblical exile is the totalizing system that seeks to explain everything in order to justify itself. The practice of empires is to squash any dissent and any alternative vision that challenges the dominant narrative. It was critical that the exiles did not allow their spirit to be domesticated. They maintained intentional disciplines that distinguish the

membership of the subversive community from those of the empire (Sabbath anti-slavery rest, culture, koshered foods, safety nets for the poor etc..).

Similarly, Christians today need to keep imagination alive, to support our members in their ability to hold and practice faith in an environment that is antithetical to our Gospel-oriented vision and to keep our spirit from being subdued. We today need to maintain the disciplines of life that attune our minds and hearts to that vision, including prayer, reflection, critical thinking, consistent lifestyle etc.

We are called to be a blessing for the Church and the world by the measure of our authentic witness. This authenticity lies in our courage to be the voice of the minority and the conscience of the outsiders to the totalizing system. We are called to be like the prophets of old who have the burning passion, urgency, discomfort and the itch to speak God's alternate vision for humanity. Now we need to embody that vision in living as contrast communities, avoiding cultural accommodation and demonstrating a different way to be a society.

Emerging paradigms, new wineskins:

Many Catholics hope that the Plenary Council will see a change in a number of priority issues such as greater inclusion of the laity, the role of women, clerical celibacy etc. While it is important that there is an openness and boldness to discuss these matters, what is more important is to envision a new way of being Church in the world.

The model of the Church based on clerical hegemony has run its course. Insofar as it is deeply embedded in patriarchal and monarchical structures, it is incapable of helping us to meet the needs of the world and culture in which we live. We have long moved out of the Ancien Regime and the age of absolute monarchs. We are on this side of the secular state and the rise of democracy. Yet it seems that the deeply entrenched patriarchal and monarchical structures of the Church have failed to correspond with our lived experience.

For the Church to flourish, it is crucial that we come to terms with the flaws of clericalism and move beyond its patriarchal and monarchical matrix. What is

urgent is that we need to find fresh ways of being Church. New wine into new wineskins! The new wine of God's unconditional love, radical inclusivity and equality needs to be poured into new wineskins of humility, mutuality, compassion and powerlessness. The old wineskins of triumphalism, elitism and supersessionism which were part of the legacy of the pre-Vatican II era can no longer contain this new wine. (Supersessionism gave rise to anti-semitism and colonialism).

The Church cannot have a better future if it does not break with those old wineskins. In the world where the rules are made by the strong and the structures of power favour the privileged, the Church must be true to its founding stories and responsive to the living presence of God. It must find ways to promote a community of equals and empower men and women disciples to share their gifts for human flourishing and the growth of the Kingdom.

Our founding stories are those of emancipation and liberation. It is the story of Moses and the movement of the new social order against the tyranny of empires that lies at the heart of the prophetic imagination. It inspires Mary who sings of the God who overthrows the powerful and lifts up the lowly. It is the story of Jesus who washes the feet of his followers and subverts the power structures that are tilted towards the strong. This narrative of the new reality that envisions radical reordering of human relationships was in fact the hallmark of the earliest Christian movement.

The Church must continue to embrace the alternative relational paradigm that Jesus exemplified and the early Christian community embodied as antidote to imperial domination. This alternative relational paradigm turns the world's system of power structures on its head because it is rooted in the biblical narrative of the new social order of radical inclusion, justice and equality. The Church cannot have a prophetic voice in society if we fail to be the model egalitarian community where those disadvantaged on account of their race, gender, social status and disability find empowerment for a dignified life.

Pope Francis and the change of era:

The arrival of Pope Francis is a game changer. The image of the newly elected Pope bowing in silence before the euphoric, then hushed, crowd at St Peter's Square was truly the prophetic sign of the century. It signaled that the time had

come to set aside old wineskins and reach for new. He is a leader who has unambiguously embraced the call to lead us beyond the safety of the status quo into the challenge of responding to the dislocation and marginalization of the Church.

He has launched the Barque of Peter away from the shallow harbour of Christendom and into the tumultuous waters of the post-Christian society. He is like the pioneer who left the billabong in search of the life-giving river. He constantly urges the whole Church to go beyond itself: *"I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."*

Pope Francis has challenged the whole Church to wake up to the new reality with a new attitude. He said that we are not living in an era of change but change of era. It cannot be status quo at any cost, because the ground under our feet has shifted. There needs to be an attitudinal change at every level, a conversion of mind and heart that conforms us to the spirit of the Gospel, a new wine into new wineskins, not a merely cosmetic change or worse a retreat into restorationism.

Pope Francis has stated that the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is "a propitious time to find the courage for *a new imagination of the possible*, with the realism that only the Gospel can offer us." This is an extraordinary utterance. He has applied the art of prophetic reframing and challenged humanity to a new level of existence.

For Pope Francis, understanding what God is saying to us at this time of pandemic also represents a challenge for the Church's mission. It is also clear that we must first of all understand what we have done wrong.

For Pope Francis, what we have done wrong in the socio-political sphere is the narrow paradigm of self-interest expressed in individualism and nationalism. The Covid crisis, the Pope says, has exposed our vulnerability. It has revealed the fallacy of individualism as the organizing principle of our Western society. It has given the lie to a "myth of self-sufficiency" that sanctions rampant inequalities and frays the ties that bind societies together. If we want a different world, we must become a different people.

In the light of this systemic flaw, we are not called simply “to restart” in order to return to the normality of a golden age that in reality never was golden, but instead “to start anew.” The narratives of the restart are harmful, because they naturally tend to restore balances and systemic injustices that must change. We need a new beginning for a post Covid Church and a post Covid world.

By the way, there has been a strong social movement that challenges the narratives of restart. In America and in Europe, many confederate statues and symbols of the dark legacy of slavery have been vandalized, destroyed or removed altogether. Some of these have stood proudly as public monuments for decades but now are gone from sight. It is nothing short of revolutionary. These events have triggered a collective soul searching and a consciousness raising exercise. Amid the chaos, confusion and anger in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests and the pandemic, there is a silver lining of sorts. There has been a shift of consciousness to a new level of truth, justice and equity in relation to our treatment of marginalized groups. Few people who have seen the shocking images of aboriginal men in chains can remain unmoved by the dark chapters of our nation’s history. We might have reservations about critical race theory. But clearly, there have been critical flaws in the narrative and system of Western democracy that need to be challenged.

The Church too is at a point at which a courageous reframing in the way of the prophets must be articulated. What the Church needs is not simply a renewal or an updating of methods of evangelizing. Rather we desperately need is an inner conversion, a radical revolution in our mindsets and patterns of action.

We need a radical conversion that acknowledges that we have come up short with our methods, our rigour, our lack of sensitivity to certain issues or groups of people. Yes, but what we need to re-examine is also attitudinal, systemic, structural and cultural.

The narrative of re-evangelisation or new evangelisation is problematic when it glosses over the deficiencies of the old model of Church and fails to acknowledge the fundamental structures and ecclesiological underpinnings that need to change.

Until we have the courage to admit the old ways of being Church, which is steeped in a culture of clerical power, dominance and privilege, we cannot rise to a Christlike way of humility, inclusivity, compassion and powerlessness.

There is a sense in which the Church must change into a more Christlike pattern of humility, simplicity and powerlessness as opposed to worldly triumphalism, splendour, dominance and power. Christians in the post Royal Commission are like the Jews after the exile. The future of the Church like the new Jerusalem that the exilic prophets often speak of will not be revitalized by way of simply repeating what was done in the past. It will not be simply a restoration project or doing the old things better. Rather, we must have the courage to do new things; we must be open to the Spirit leading us to new horizons even as we tend to revert to the old ways.

Critical yeast for critical times:

We are in a global breakthrough in evolution and if we want a different world, we must become a different people. We have a chance to rewire ourselves for a new existence, but we must begin to live in a new way. We must abandon the old framework of individualism, siloism and the default controllable, manageable and profitable systems that undergird the operations of our society.

It is time to embrace our new reality. I believe that as educators, we have the opportunity to form a new generation that values the common good more than individual success. Just as the Pope calls for a new politics of inclusion in the light of the systemic inequalities in the world, we also need an education that forms young people into men and women of deep empathy, solidarity and communion as opposed to individualism and self-interest.

The coronavirus crisis reveals a world that is fractured. It tells us that the dominant mode of human conquest and dominion is no longer sustainable. The human centered planet is out of sync with nature and heading to ruins. We may be on top of the food chain, but our survival depends on our partnership with every form of life. We need a radical new way of relating and living that brings harmony and sustainability to all of life. We humans are part of the interconnected cosmic web of creation and we need to live a new paradigm of communion with all that is. The present crisis can be turned into new horizons

of possibility, for us but also beyond us, to future generations and to the world that God loves.

Pope Francis has stated that Covid has taught us “no one is saved alone”. That knowledge demands a new politics of inclusion and communion. It equips us to avoid both excessive individualism and the aggressive populism that thrives on identifying enemies at home and abroad. “Fraternity,” the pope insists, “is the new frontier”, capable of knitting together the often competing demands of liberty and equality.

We have a prophetic role to play in stretching the imagination of our fellow men and women, and in leading them towards this new frontier. The fraternity that we called to live and to signal to the world of the new social ordering is not merely a rejection of individualism. It is about a way of life that is based on *reciprocal* and *interconnected* relationships. It is inherent in the indigenous wisdom which acknowledges the radical independence and reciprocity within diverse webs of life. Thus fraternity is a mindset and practice of community and a circular, harmonious relationship with all life and nature. It contrasts with the Western paradigm of domination of top-down linear thinking, separation of nature and humanity, competition, and divisions.

Conclusion:

There is a sense that we are being cut loose from the safe and secure moorings of the past. But that has been the pattern of the Judeo-Christian story even since Abraham and Sarah left the land of Ur to go to where the spirit beckoned. It's in their DNA and ours to read the signs of the times and follow where the river flows. It is not in yearning for or holding on to the known and the familiar but in reimagining the future and venturing into the unknown chaos like the old exodus that we shall find new life. We can react with fear, despair or denial in these unsettling times. This was the way many Israelites reacted when faced with the barren desert. I suspect many of our contemporaries do the same with respect to the crisis in the Church. There is something hauntingly similar between the Israelites' penchant for certitudes of Egypt and many of Pope Francis' critics' demand for dogmatic clarity.

The time that we are living in can be likened to Holy Saturday in the Gospel. It is a liminal interval, a time in which one stands between the old and the new.

Our task is to live the creative tension between the pain of the present and the hope of the future. The Catholic Church in this country will face diminishment and decline as a result of combined forces such as the secularization of our society, the institutional malaise and of course, the impact of the Royal Commission. There will be collateral damage that will impact adversely on the Church's mission. And that's alright as long as we like the midwives during the slavery in Egypt know how to deliver and nurture new life in the face of painful transition.

We need to listen to the people we lead as they struggle with their young adult children who are 'leaving the church', we need to listen to the voices of those who are reacting to the liminal by fearfully holding on to old paradigms, we need to hear those who say they increasingly lack trust in ministers, we need to be honest with those who are doubting that their faith will survive in this space. It is all valid in a time of liminality. Grief is a normal response. Anger is valid too. Disorientation is the norm. Doubt is a given.....yet so is hope. Paul Ricoeur spoke of the second naiveite or the post-critical belief where one moves beyond the stage of critique to a more mature critical understanding.

It humbles me that God is in the mess, the margins, the disorientation and even in the perceived irrelevancy of the Church. It comforts me, too, to know that the Church was not at its best when it reached the heights of its power in what was known as Christendom. The Church was at its best when it was poor, persecuted and powerless. All of the metaphors and all of the dispositions of Jesus point to a humble Church: a little salt, a little yeast and a little light. Christendom and for the most part of history, we have tried to be great, powerful and dominant. This liminal time may turn out to be the best time to be part of a humble, inclusive and servant Church.

As we move into the strange land ahead of us, we need to follow the example of our spiritual ancestors by reimagining our faith story. The Christian of the future will need to be deeply rooted in our biblical and theological traditions. He/she will also need to be engaged ecumenically, inter-religiously and even cosmologically. Finally, as Karl Rahner once remarked, he/she would need to be a mystic who is able to negotiate between the immediate and the transcendental; whose faith is evident through personal transformation more than institutional affiliation.