

Thematic Paper 4: Humble, Healing and Merciful?

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The full title of this paper is: How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred church in Australia that is Humble, Healing & Merciful? The picture on the front cover is highly apt for the themes of the paper. It is of Pope Francis on Holy Thursday 2018, at the Regina Coeli Prison in Rome. During the Mass, he washed the feet of 12 prison inmates from different cultural and faith backgrounds. The authors of the paper comment:

Pope Francis was not concerned with their crimes, their religion, their race or their sexual orientation. After kneeling before each one, washing and kissing their feet, Pope Francis said to them, I am a sinner like you. But I represent Jesus today. This is service. This is Jesus. Before giving us himself in his body and blood, Jesus risked himself for each one of us - risked himself in service - because he loves us so much (p 2).

I liked this paper for several reasons. First, it has a style which is direct and hard hitting in the punches it delivers. For example, in the opening paragraph of the executive summary, it states unequivocally its focus, which is to respond to:

The distress caused when the Church, through the failings of some members, manifests itself as proud, arrogant, damaging, hierarchical, hypocritical and irrelevant, is far-reaching and antithetical to its true identity (p 1).

In relation to a humble Church, the paper states that 'God is asking the Church in Australia today to start afresh from the place of humility, to reflect and reveal God by being servants, using the power not of might or authority, but of love' (p 2).

Secondly, the paper's three themes of calling the Church to be more humble, healing and merciful are anchored in the actions and words of Pope Francis. Francis' analogy of the Church as a field hospital captures the essence of what it means to be a healing institution. But more dramatic and real are Francis' actions in Rome's Regina Coeli prison: putting humility into practice rather than merely preaching that the Church needs to be humble.

The theme of the merciful Church was highlighted by Francis in 2015/16 when he proclaimed a Year of Mercy for the Church, placing mercy at the centre of the Church's heart and mission. As the paper records, Francis has stated that mercy for the Church

constitutes her very existence, through which the profound truths of the Gospel are made manifest and tangible. Everything is revealed in mercy; everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father (p 6).

Third, the paper has recommendations which are well-thought out and enough detail to make them practical so they can be implemented easily.

A central theme of the paper is that:

The abuse crisis has changed us. The Church carries the scars of this terrible time in our story. We must find a new way of doing business - a way that holds the wounded close to our heart and bears our scars with dignity and hope for the future.

For those who have been wounded, there should be recognition of the importance of restoring their place in the community and welcoming them into the heart of the Church.

In short, the paper's message is that Church is healed through community. This means starting at the parish level by initiating the healing process ourselves. We need to change from being passive parishioners to being active participants in activities such as listening circles. The paper recommends that:

Parishes or communities could host Listening Groups facilitated by skilled persons, creating a compassionate and safe environment for people to share their stories. Such opportunities would provide avenues for healing and restoration to the faith community.

These listening groups, under a trained facilitator, offer the promise of revitalising parish communities by helping parishioners talk about with their own experiences, both good and bad, of being in a church community and listening to the stories of others' experiences. The paper notes that this type of grassroots pastoral care is likely to appeal to non-practising Catholics (and others):

A robust framework of pastoral care that is relevant to people's needs and attentive to their human flourishing can be a bridge for people to engage in the life of the Church.

The paper also advocates a review process that should include formation programs, leadership training, parishes, schools, hospitals, aged care and social service institutions. The paper also asked that this review process include the spiritual: 'how often do the institutions ask those they serve if they experience the love of Jesus Christ in the service they receive?'

I also like the recommendation to practise discernment at all levels in the Church, using the Catholic Action Principles of 'See, Judge, Act'. This involves ensuring that constant review and transparent accountability are evident in all the Church does. The paper advocates that reflection and discernment needs to be embedded in daily practice and decision-making of the Church, so it becomes the normal way of operating.

We need to acknowledge that the Church, despite its divine origins and support, is nevertheless still a collection of human institutions and practices that need to be recreated by its participants in each generation. This rebuilding, which has to involve us all, is absolutely necessary so that the Church can operate more effectively as a community, at the local, regional, national and global levels.