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**Hélder Câmara Lecture**

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**'CLOSE AND CONCRETE: POPE FRANCIS  
EVANGELIZING A WORLD IN FLUX'**

When he addressed its gathering at the Olympic Stadium in Rome in 2014, Pope Francis warned the Charismatic Renewal against turning in on itself, existing for its own self, and thereby becoming an obstacle to salvation. "You are dispensers of God's grace, not its arbiters!" he told them. "Don't act like a tollhouse for the Holy Spirit!" And he urged them to read the third document of Malines by two great churchmen of the 1970s: Cardinal Leo Suenens of Brussels, and the Bishop of Olinda and Recife for whom this lecture is named, Dom Helder Câmara.

The Malines documents were a series of discernment reflections in the early 1970s by leading church figures on the fast-spreading and surprising eruption of the charismatic renewal. The one the pope was urging them to read, was about service to humanity, not separating personal faith from the justice of the Kingdom of God. Camara was the icon of that integrity in Latin America at that time: he had led the group of bishops who signed the Pact of the Catacomb following the Council, inspired by John XIII's call for a Church for all, but especially of the poor. Francis had famously identified with this current on the days after his election, telling journalists he dreamed of a "poor Church, for the poor".

In that Malines document, Dom Helder says this: "If the Church is to give the example it must, if it is to be the living presence of Christ among men and with men, it urgently and permanently needs to cast off its concern for prestige, to unharness itself from the chariot of the mighty, and to agree to live the prophecy of the Master, which is valid for all times: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the

midst of wolves ... They will hand you over to courts of judgment" (Mt. 10, 16-17)."<sup>1</sup>

When he was with the Italian bishops in May 2016, Francis mentioned Camara again — it's the second reference I've been able to find. He was observing how a priest is a priest in so far as he is part of God's holy faithful people, and not apart from it. This shared identity of lay and clergy — the fruit of a shared baptism, which showers gifts of ministry on all, was what frees us from what he called the "isolating and imprisoning self-referentiality" of clericalism. And he quoted Dom Hélder: "When your boat starts to put down roots into the calm of the pier, set forth out to sea." Not, Francis says, just because you have a mission to fulfil, but because you are in essence a missionary: "in the encounter with Jesus you have experienced the fulness of life, and therefore you desire with your whole being that others recognize themselves in Him."<sup>2</sup>

Friends, it's very good to be with you this afternoon, to bring together these two great Latin-American church figures. My subject is Francis's understanding of evangelization: how the Church is called to witness to the Gospel in this *change of era*, this time of tribulation, this world in flux. I want to share some insights from my three years of researching the deep thinking behind this remarkable pontificate: how Francis sees that the Church needs to change in order to evangelize the contemporary world.

Whenever we speak of a vision for evangelization, we start with a discernment of the age. Francis's discernment is that of the Latin-American Church at the conference of Aparecida in 2007, the CELAM general conference which he shaped and which shaped him. At the heart of Aparecida is the conviction that the Church in the western world has got stuck in self-referentiality, an institutional introversion, and at its worst has embraced a form of corruption, spiritual worldiness, manifest in moralism and clericalism. I want to suggest to you how Francis is helping the Church to respond to the conversion to which Aparecida saw Holy Spirit calling us, what was called there a pastoral and missionary conversion.

At the heart of this conversion is Dom Helder's call to the Church: to unharness itself from the chariots of the mighty, to live as sheep among wolves, and to set forth out to sea —if you'll excuse me mixing three metaphors in one sentence.

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<sup>1</sup> To participants in the 37th National Convocation of the Renewal in the Holy Spirit (1 June 2014)

<sup>2</sup> ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE  
Synod Hall, Monday, 16 May 2016

The call, as Francis defines it, is to learn to emulate the Lord's *synktakabasis*, his going out, his coming down and coming near, in order to be *close and concrete*.

That's why I've called this lecture 'close and concrete'. It's a favourite idea of Francis's: the fleshy proximity of the Incarnation in response to the cold world of technocracy, and the Church's own version of that cold technocracy, Pelagianism and Gnosticism.

This is the vision of Aparecida which Francis re-expressed in *Evangelii Gaudium*. It has been given new drama and urgency by this new wave of the clergy abuse revelations that erupted last year, as if God were impatient with the progress that the Church has so far made in responding to *Evangelii Gaudium*. This dark moment of institutional failure that you are experiencing with dramatic intensity here in Australia, is in the Pope's discernment not a distraction from the pastoral conversion he is calling forth but is integral to it. The revelations of the past have punctured our present; and in the shock and shame of ordinary Catholics and the intense hostility and suspicion towards the Church and its leaders exhibited by wider society, can be glimpsed the acceleration of that conversion.

My friends, Francis is leading the Church on an Ignatian retreat. In his "tribulation letters" that Francis has been writing to the people of God at this time, it is clear he sees we have reached that moment when the spirits are at their most vivid and shrill. The sheer ferocity, rapidity and scale of events suggest, for Pope Francis, an unveiling, an apocalypse. Cardinals are being incarcerated and laicized; there is mob fury; the air is thick with accusation and counter-accusation; there is a hunt for scapegoats — including the pope himself — and demands for purges. It is a time of confusion: Who is guilty, and who innocent? Who can we trust?

The pope's role is to open up the Church to the grace that it is being offered at this time; to openly face and confess our sin and failure, and to recentre ourselves on Christ. And above all to discern: to realize what is the hysterical, panicked, angry spirit of the enemy of human nature, and where is spirit of goodness and mercy, of gentle growth, which is pruning the Church.

He recently told the clergy in Rome: "it is evident that the true meaning of what is happening has to be sought in the bad spirit, in the enemy, who is acting with the pretense of being the Lord of the World". The unveiling of this spirit — the spirit of domination, of abuse — is a shock; yet it is also a sign of God acting in history. "So let's not be discouraged!" he said. "The Lord is purifying His spouse and is converting us all to Him ... He is making us understand that without Him we are dust".

He urged them to read Chapter 16 of Ezekiel, the story of Israel as an ungrateful whore whom God wins back through mercy. “I am going to renew my covenant with you,” God tells Ezekiel/Israel, “and you will learn that I am the Lord, and so remember and be covered with shame, and in your confusion be reduced to silence, when I have pardoned you for all you have done.”

I was fascinated by this reference because this is the chapter which he has often spoken about as his own story. When Francis reads those pages, he told Andrea Torielli in 2016 (*The Name of God is Mercy*), “everything here seems written just for me. Jesus looked at me with mercy, he took me, he put me on the street ... And he has given me an important grace: the grace of shame.”

Jorge Mario encountered that grace – God’s favor -- late in his adolescence, just at the point when he was developing into a tough, self-reliant leader. The experience of shame and grace, of being forgiven, taken in and sent out, would turn him around; and it this would be the template of his teaching: how the grace of shame opens us to the experience of mercy, and mercy leads into mission. It is said that the Holy Spirit at the conclave gives the Church the pope that we need for this time. Perhaps here, in this nexus of shame and grace and conversion, after five years of his pontificate, we are beginning to see more clearly why the cardinals chose Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

I have divided the following into three parts: (1) the discernment of Aparecida of how the Church needs to change: pastoral conversion in response to the ‘change of era’; (2) what it means to be a missionary, pastoral Church re-centered on Christ; (3) how the clergy sex abuse crisis is assisting and accelerating that conversion.

And in each section, I have three words to hang these ideas on: so nine words in all.

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## **I: Discernment & conversion in response to the ‘change of era’**

### (a) Paralysis

What made Aparecida — and Bergoglio, its great articulator — unique in the contemporary Church was not so much the analysis of modernity, but how the Latin-American Church believed it should respond to it. The bishops at the shrine

noted a change of era, driven by digital technology, and considered its impact on society, the poor, and on culture, using the see-judge-act method. What they saw was the erosion of community and culture, the destruction of nature, the weakening of families and respect for life, as well as corruption and growing inequality as the result of idolizing money. And they noted how the traditional faith transmission belts were frayed or breaking as Christianity was expelled from law and culture and families fragmented.

So this wasn't original, although it was very sophisticated. What was original was their judgement: for at Aparecida they didn't simply lament and deplore these circumstances, but criticized those attitudes that saw only "confusion, danger and threats", or which sought to respond with "worn-out ideologies or irresponsible aggressions" — basically, the angry, condemnatory stance of many churchmen faced with change, which was to blame the culture for the Church's failure to evangelize. Instead, they asked how the Church needed to change in order to respond to these new circumstances. Rather than condemn and lament, Aparecida sought to discern and reform. Faced with a world in flux, it invited the Church to rethink its mission.

So what we have here is not just a response to a world in flux, but a diagnosis of why the Church was failing to evangelize. In a letter he wrote to catechists in Buenos Aires a few months after the conference of Aparecida, Bergoglio said the greatest threat to the Church lay not outside but within, from the temptation of fearful self-enclosure faced with the tribulation of change. Just when circumstances demanded that the Church evangelize it had curled in on itself. At a homily at the shrine, Bergoglio made a very deep impression on those present. He spoke of a journey of reorientation, "to free us from becoming a self-referential Church". And he used an image there of the crippled woman in the Gospel "who does no more than look at herself, with the people of God off somewhere else".

It was a powerful image of a fearful, clericalist Church obsessed with its own success and maintenance that had withdrawn from the people. God had not abandoned his people; the Church had. An evangelizing Church was one that returned to the people, to encounter God in the lives of the people. The homily captivated those present, convincing many of them that Bergoglio was the one anointed to lead the Church at this time. When Francis gave a précis of the same homily in his reflections at the pre-conclave gathering in Rome five years later, using exactly that diagnosis and even that image, many of the cardinals reached the same conclusion, and elected him pope days later.

More than a document, Aparecida was a happening. Bergoglio saw it as a “grace event”, a Latin-American Pentecost. Just as in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, when the shattered and fearful disciples were visited by the Holy Spirit and emboldened for mission, Aparecida’s effect was to unleash the missionary potential of the Latin American Church, giving it new energy and direction at a time of fear and uncertainty. Those who were at Aparecida felt this Pentecost wind, convinced it was the Holy Spirit’s invitation to not just to the Latin-Americans but the universal Church, which Francis’s election in 2013 appeared to confirm.

(b) Moralism

Aparecida saw that in reacting fearfully and defensively to secularization and relativism, many Catholics had become victims of what Massimo Borghesi (*The Mind of Pope Francis*) calls “the moralistic drift that characterizes Catholicism in era of globalization”. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis speaks of *eticismo sin bondad*, which is very badly translated by our friends in the Secretariat of State as “ethical systems bereft of kindness”, but really means “cold moralism”: the reduction of the Christian offer to a set of precepts, as if being Catholic meant signing up to an ethical code.

Aparecida asked the Church to restore the kerygma, the personal encounter with a loving God of mercy, to the heart of its proclamation. In its beautiful passages on this *encuentro fundante*, the “foundational encounter”, Aparecida describes the amazement of the disciples at the “exceptional quality of the one speaking to them, especially how he treated them, satisfying the hunger and thirst for life that was in their hearts,” and spelled out the different ways of having this meeting with Christ: in sacraments, liturgies, prayer, and contemplation of Scripture. But Aparecida also spoke of the encounter outside, in popular culture and among the poor, and *Evangelii Gaudium* gave the example of a mother of a sick child praying not in a church or even a sanctuary but in her humble house, gazing with love at a Crucifix. This is an important hermeneutic shift: God is present in the lives of people, His grace assisting them; the Church’s task was to facilitate that encounter.

Restore grace, in other words. Christianity was not “a titanic effort of the will, the effort of someone who decides to be consistent and succeeds,” as Bergoglio had put it in a 2001 speech on *Veritatis Splendor*. “No. Christian morality is simply a

response. It is the heartfelt response to a surprising, unforeseeable, 'unjust' mercy ... This is why the Christian conception of morality is a revolution; it is not a never falling down but an always getting up again."

What Aparecida identified was a Pelagian tendency in Catholicism to believe that the simple act of declaring what was true, or to pronounce the law, was somehow sufficient. As if Christianity were a moral code or a set of precepts, an ideology, and the Church was essentially a regulator and law-giver, distant and abstract and holiness a matter of the will.

Nothing better captures this shift from moralism to openness to grace than *Amoris Laetitia* where he says Jesus "set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery." As he put it in what is arguably the document's key passage (#37):

We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not replace them.

### c. Clericalism

The Australian Royal Commission puts it well: "Clericalism is linked to a sense of entitlement, superiority and exclusion, and abuse of power." It creates a bunker mentality that leads naturally to cover-up. "Clericalism nurtured ideas that the Catholic Church was autonomous and self-sufficient, and promoted the idea that child sexual abuse by clergy and religious was a matter to be dealt with internally and in secret."

Francis has from the beginning declared war on clericalism, seeing it as the major obstacle to evangelization and pastoral conversion. For Francis, clericalism is far more than a vice or failing; it is a symptom of the persistence of a post-

Constantinian ecclesiology that conceives of the institution as self-sufficient, superior to and separate from the outside world, and in which the security, reputation and internal relationships of the clerical caste are the center of attention, and the institution exists for itself. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis opposes this mentality to his dream of a “missionary option”, such that the Church’s structures and culture “can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation”.

It is a mentality, a *forma mentis*, of superiority. “You do not have to be a priest to be clericalist,” Francis told Father Fernando Prado. “Clericalism is an aristocracy.” As such it is a corruption of Vatican II’s clear teaching that the church is the People of God, all endowed with gifts for mission. The purpose of evangelization is not to recruit adherents or fill the pews, but to raise up what Aparecida calls “missionary disciples”, followers of Christ.

Bergoglio’s speech in Aparecida identified the obstacles to this: people with complex personal lives kept from parishes by a black-and-white legalism; the marginalization of young people with a call to service and mission; the lack of formation of priests who do not accompany people but lecture them and so on. So many of Francis’s pastoral reforms have been geared to removing these obstacles to the Church’s proximity: thus the synods on the family and young people, the reform of priestly formation, and so on.

At the heart of clericalism is the misuse of power. To understand what Francis means by clericalism, it is helpful to use a distinction he has long used between a mediator -- one who serves another’s needs, interceding for them -- and an intermediary or middleman, who profits from others. One uses the power to serve, the other the power to exploit. Francis has come to see clergy sex abuse as not, firstly, about a sexual sin, which it obviously is, but an abuse of power, the eroticization of a corrupt power relationship.

Clericalism lives off people, rather than for them. “Lay people are part of the faithful Holy People of God and thus are the protagonists of the Church and of the world,” Francis told Cardinal Marc Ouellet in a 2016 letter. “We are called to serve them, not to be served by them.” When Jesus commanded his followers not to “lord it over” others as the Romans did (Mk 10:42-44), he was asking them to avoid *potestas* — power over, in the sense of ownership of rights over others, as a company boss or landlord or king has — in favor of *potentia*: a power to nurture and guide. Francis modeled this power-as-service at the start of the Easter liturgies that first year as Jesus had at the last supper: by washing feet.

Clericalism corrupts this power, and uses it for the service of an aristocracy. Clericalism naturally seeks wealth and privilege. It has a sense of entitlement. At its most extreme, that sense of entitlement leads to the sexual gratification of shepherds by exploiting the most vulnerable in the flock.

Clericalism's sense of entitlement also leads to a need to promote its moralism through the state. Francis wants the Gospel proclamation to rely on the power of its own attractiveness, not be imposed through the iron cage of the law or the potestas of political alliances. The Church "does not need apologists for her causes nor crusaders for her battles but rather humble and confident sowers of the Truth," he told the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops. A bishop was firstly a "witness to the Risen One"; in safeguarding doctrine he does so "not to measure how distant the world is from it, but to fascinate the world, to captivate it with the beauty of love, and seduce it with the freedom that the Gospel gives." The Church grows, he told the bishops in Mexico City's cathedral in February 2016, by embodying mercy and through close contact with its faithful people, not through links to power and wealth and the "seductive illusion of underhand agreements". Unless they witnessed to having seen Jesus, "then the words with which we recall him will be rhetorical and empty figures of speech ... mere babbling orphans behind a tomb."

## ***(2) What it means to be a missionary, pastoral Church re-centered on Christ***

If the paralysis of defensiveness, the reductionism of moralism, and the corruption of clericalism are the great obstacles to evangelization, what does the opposite look like?

### **(a) mission**

While he was rector of the Colegio Máximo in San Miguel, in Buenos Aires province, Bergoglio created a parish with seven barrios or neighborhoods, and a number of chapels or Mass centres; and he would send out the young Jesuits in formation to go from house to house, praying with people, hearing their stories, inviting them to Mass or catechesis, connecting them with social projects, and so on. It still happens today in the parish, but now the missions, as they call them, are done by young people in the parish. The purpose of the mission is not to fill the

pews but to enable an encounter with the God of mercy. The locus of that encounter, for most people, is their own lives, especially in their needs and their anguish.

This is a key idea in Aparecida — almost a mental shift. Aparecida had noted how the Christian Church came into existence 2,000 years ago in a similar context of urban pluralism, which it made use of to grow. It wasn't, back then, a powerful civic institution seeking influence in the circles of power; Christ's followers were often hounded and persecuted. Yet faith spread rapidly through chaotic cities, because their "gaze of faith" allowed them to see God alive in His people, especially on the margins, and went out to meet Him there.

What Aparecida expressed was a desire to return to "that attitude that planted the faith in the beginnings of the Church". To embrace the idea of mission as not so much an activity or a program as a way of being: "permanent" and "paradigmatic". Not just *ad extra*, but *ad intra* at the same time. In going out on mission, the Church is converted and evangelized. It's spelled out beautifully in *Evangeliu Gaudium*: the People of God evangelizes itself.

The parish isn't just its buildings or the people at Mass on Sunday, but the ties among those who make up its community, only some of whom will be baptized Mass-goers. Aparecida called for a Church "visibly present as a mother who reaches out, a welcoming home, a constant school of missionary communion", as Bergoglio put it back in Buenos Aires. Aparecida also spoke of the encounter outside, in popular culture and among the poor.

Evangelization is not proselytism. Its purpose is not to recover market share, or fill the pews. It is not a matter of plans and programs, of strategies, tactics, maneuvers, techniques, as if all depended on the power of the evangelizer. In the mindset of the Gospel, Francis said in Asunción, Paraguay, in July 2015, "you do not convince people with arguments, strategies or tactics. You convince them by simply learning how to welcome them." As he had earlier put it: "Jesus didn't proselytize, he accompanied .... Closeness: that's the program."

#### (b) Mercy

A few months after Aparecida, Bergoglio gave an interview in Rome to the magazine *30 Giorni* in which he said the Church should not be afraid "to depend solely on the tenderness of God". In a world largely deaf to the Church's words, "only the presence of a God who loves and saves us will

catch people's attention", he said, adding that the Church's evangelizing fervor would return in so far as it witnessed to "the One who loved us first".

He made the point with the Old Testament story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet famous for being swallowed and later regurgitated by a whale. Jonah had at the time been on a ship bound for Tarsis, fleeing God's instruction to evangelize the wicked city of Nineveh. What Jonah was really fleeing, said Bergoglio, was God's mercy, which was unacceptable to him. For Jonah, the archetypal upright religious fellow, quick to anger and poor in mercy, the world was divided into righteous and unrighteous. In the same way, said Bergoglio, there were nowadays "those who, from the closed world of their Tarsis, complain about everything or, feeling their identity threatened, launch themselves into battles only in the end to be still more self-focussed and self-referential". As a description of the defensive, moralistic Catholicism of the time, it could hardly be improved on.

Francis spelled out the challenge in the strongest possible terms. "Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy," he wrote in *Misericordiae Vultus*. The Church's very credibility was at stake in its acceptance or resistance of the need for this conversion, for it had fallen into the mindset of Jonah. Francis's mission has been to restore mercy to the forefront of the Church's proclamation, to bring into the first paragraph the lede that had somehow got buried further down in the story.

In *Misericordiae Vultus* Francis quoted St John Paul II that contemporary technocracy had no room for mercy. But this begged the question. If western culture were now becoming detached from its Christian roots and reverting to paganism — as the widespread practice of abortion and divorce, and a sink-or-swim mentality that trusted only in human and material power, suggested — why was the Church not exploding with converts and vocations? Why was it not notorious for its mercy, infamous for its compassion, outrageous in its standing with the outcast? Why is the Church known not for its mercy but for its moralism?

Hence *Misericordiae Vultus* made the embrace of mercy a life-or-death matter for the Church's future. Wherever there are Christians, Francis said simply, echoing Stark, "everyone should find an oasis of

mercy." In the Jubilee Francis showed how this is done. Mercy is not an idea but a way of being and doing that reflects how God interacts with and saves humanity. That action, as Francis expressed it continually throughout the Jubilee, was a dynamic in four stages: coming close ("welcoming"); sensing need ("discerning"); responding concretely and individually ("accompanying"); and a final stage that involved change: conversion and belonging ("integrating"). The fourfold move was at the heart of *Amoris Laetitia*, and underpinned, for example, the Vatican's advocacy of migrants. To offer mercy in this way is to evangelize, because it performs the way God saves us. It is to experience God.

There can be no evangelization without mercy because mercy communicates who God is: how he responds to sin and suffering in any form. He does so by being close and concrete. The Jubilee of Mercy wasn't just an indictment of cold moralism, but also the kind of social justice that fails to be close. Sure, faith without justice makes no sense: Christ could not be separated from the kingdom he proclaimed. But nor can you separate justice from proximity. Poverty and wretchedness are always unique; they seek to conceal themselves, and can only be revealed by personal contact.

This was why Francis was resisting both an unqualified 'no' or 'yes' on the Communion question, because both shut out God's grace and the Holy Spirit's freedom of action: the first by keeping the doors closed, making change hard; the second by opening them so wide there was no need for change. Neither the lax nor the strict priest witnesses to Christ, he told clergy in March 2014, because "neither takes seriously the person in front of him." While the rigorist "nails the person to the law as understood in a cold and rigid way", the indulgent "only appears merciful, but does not take seriously the problems of that person's conscience, minimizing the sin." *Amoris* demands closeness, accompaniment, discernment, not a taking refuge in abstraction. That's why some hate it. But its authority is not in dispute: it is the fruit of the greatest experience of ecclesial discernment since the Vatican Council — as well as the pope's own discernment. "I sincerely believe," Francis says in *Amoris*, "Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness."

### c. Synodality

The overhaul of the synod of bishops in Rome, and Francis's bid to introduce synodality into the life of the Church may well come to be seen as his greatest reform. The modern synod of bishops, inspired by the councils of the early Church, was created by Pope Paul VI in 1965 to make it easier for the pope and the curia to listen to the local Church and engage the faithful. But under the long pontificate of John Paul II the traffic was mostly in the other direction: the synod became simply another means used by Rome for making sure the bishops listened to the Vatican. Having been a delegate at various synods, one of which (2001) he chaired, Bergoglio was convinced that as it was then constituted, the synod could never be a means of discerning, by the light of the Holy Spirit, responses to doctrinal and pastoral challenges.

"Either there is a pyramidal church, in which what Peter says is done, or there is a synodal church," he told the Belgian magazine *Tertio*. He defined this "synodal Church" as a kind of inverted pyramid, in "in which Peter is Peter but he accompanies the Church, he lets her grow, he listens to her, he learns from this reality and goes about harmonizing it, discerning what comes from the Church and restoring it to her."

It was what he lived at Aparecida that led Francis confidently to tell the bishops in the 2015 synod that "it is precisely this path of synodality that God expects of the Church of the third millennium". His speech marking the 50th anniversary of Paul VI's refounding of the synod during the final session of the Second Vatican Council so inspired Archbishop Mark Coleridge that the Archbishop of Brisbane returned with the idea of what became the Plenary Council.

Synodality takes seriously the Church as the people of God walking together, lead by the Holy Spirit that makes itself felt in free speech and humble listening. Synodality understands is that here could be no clear distinction between the "learning" (*Ecclesia docens*) and the "teaching" Church (*Ecclesia discens*); to teach means to listen; you cannot evangelize without listening. When the people of God evangelizes itself it listens to the Holy Spirit.

"Speak boldly, listen humbly", Francis said at the start of Synod 2014. Synodality takes seriously the participation of the people of God in the governance and direction of the Church. It is to restore the ancient church

principle that *quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet* —what affects all should be discussed by all. It is also key to fostering the kind of adult Christian culture required by a Church of missionary disciples. Participation, consultation, collaboration, mutual listening, discernment — these are the hallmarks of an evangelizing Church rather than a clerical, paralyzed one, or a liberal, worldly one.

### ***(3) How the clergy sex abuse crisis is assisting and accelerating pastoral conversion***

It's wonderful to come here and find your bishops so boldly embracing the *kairós* of conversion offered by this crisis. Bishop Vincent Long on the first Sunday of Lent, for example, spoke of the need for the Church "to die a certain death ... needs to die to whatever is an obstacle, a shackle or a stumbling block to its mission so that it can rise to shine the Gospel of hope for humanity". He saw the Church moving from a position of power and strength to that of powerlessness and vulnerability; from a position of wealth and influence to that of being poor and humble; from a position of greatness to being a minority." — exactly the transition called for by Dom Helder.<sup>3</sup>

The remarkable thing about this crisis is that has appeared almost from nowhere. The combination of so many different reports about the past — Royal Commission, Pennsylvania Grand Jury in July following McCarrick, the German bishops' report of last October — all coming together at the same time, puncturing the present, means the Church finds itself suddenly fulfilling Matthew 10 as quoted by Camara: as sheep in the midst of wolves, handed over to courts of judgment (Mt. 10, 16-17).

It is, as Archbishop Peter on Monday, for St Patrick's, described it, as "an earthquake" that has shifted the landscape permanently. He speaks of broken ground and crumbling edifices ... of letting go of the past and beginning anew. His words remind me of Cardinal Bergoglio's to his priest after he returned from Aparecida: "What happens in a change of era is that things are not longer in their place ... What seemed to us normal about family, Church, society and the world, will no longer apparently be that way". The shift Bergoglio described is exactly the

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<sup>3</sup> Homily for the First Sunday of Lent Year C 2019 with the Rite of Election at St Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta;

one Archbishop Peter spoke of in describing the need to “move away from the institutional centre and relocate ourselves among our local neighbourhoods of grace.”<sup>4</sup> Both bishops are describing precisely the transition to a pastoral, missionary Church, shorn of clericalism, close to the people with Christ at its center.

a. Truth

The conversion begins with facing the truth: about our era, and specifically about the Church’s past and current failures. The revelations of the past year force us to face the truth about a culture, a leadership, an institutional corruption that can’t be rationalized away: it’s not after all about how we deal with the rotten apples; it’s the barrel itself: the culture in which McCarrick could ascend the ecclesiastical ladder even while it was commonly known he was a predatory homosexual, and which Alfonso Lopez Trujillo could be made president of the Pontifical Council for the Family when he was famous for his appetite for rent boys in Medellín. How do we account for this? We can’t.

Addressing the curia at Christmas, Francis likened the media’s role in exposing the corruption to that of the prophet Nathan confronting David and making him see the seriousness of his sin; they “sought to unmask these predators and to make their victims’ voices heard.”<sup>5</sup> As he put it to the People of God last August: The outcry of the victims, long ignored, proved more powerful than attempts to silence it, showing that “the Lord heard that cry and once again shows us on which side he stands”. The scandals are a sign of God’s coming: “An awareness of sin helps us to acknowledge the errors, the crimes and the wounds caused in the past and allows us, in the present, to be more open and committed along a journey of renewed conversion.”<sup>6</sup>

What had gone wrong? In his second letter to the Chilean bishops, which he handed them in Rome in April last year, he asked them to go back to the source of what he called their loss of ecclesial centre. The Church in Chile at one time used to put Christ in the center, and therefore defended the dignity of its people against the powerful; it was humble, prayerful, joyful, and evangelizing. But then came “a loss

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<sup>4</sup> Archbishop Comensoli delivers Patrick Oration

<sup>5</sup> Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia (21 December 2018)

<sup>6</sup> Letter to People of God

of prophetic power” and a “change in its center”, with the result that the Church “itself became the center of attention”.

The loss of ecclesial center meant that the Church became “uprooted from the life of the People of God” which led to “desolation and the perversion of the nature of Church”. The result was “the loss of the healthy awareness of knowing that we belong to God’s holy, faithful people which precedes us and — thank God — will succeed us.” Whenever the People of God has been reduced to “small elites”, Francis told the Chileans, it leads to a “peculiar way of understanding the Church’s authority, one common in many communities where sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience have occurred”. Clericalism, “whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons”, both enables and perpetuates abuse. “To say ‘no’ to abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism.”

#### b. Conversion

In his first letter to the Chilean bishops after receiving Archbishop Scicluna’s report into cover-up and corruption, Francis told them that it was at times like this, when we are “weak, frightened and armor-plated in our comfortable winter palaces”, that “God’s love comes out to meet us to purify our intentions, that we might love as free, mature and critical people”.

The risk for our Churches is to want to stay inside those comfortable winter palaces. The more intense the storm, the greater the desire to keep your head down, stay indoors, batten down the hatches, wait for it to storm to pass. But that is to miss the grace which is on offer.

Back in 1987 Bergoglio wrote about “criteria of discernment, criteria of action so as not to allow ourselves to be dragged down by institutional desolation”. He has referred to these criteria a number of times this past year. In times of persecutions and tribulations the temptations are to focus ideas; to becoming fixated with enemies — the bad people out there, the good people in here — to have an exaggerated sense of victimhood, and of “dwelling on our own desolations.” Rather than discern and reform, to lament and condemn.

In January last year, Francis warned the religious and clergy in Santiago’s cathedral of two temptations in particular in an era of change

and anxiety: “of becoming closed, isolating ourselves and defending our ways of seeing things, which then turn out as nothing more than fine monologues” and “to think that everything is wrong, and in place of ‘good news’, the only thing we profess is apathy and disappointment.”

Francis showed a different path: Peter’s forgiveness by Christ following his betrayal. Facing his weakness, saved by God’s mercy, the failed sinner became a joyful, grateful apostle, sent out to serve. He was capable of evangelizing not because he was righteous and successful, but because he was a forgiven failure, and could therefore witness to the power of the very mercy he proclaimed.

Francis told the bishops: “A wounded Church does not make herself the center of things, does not believe that she is perfect, but puts at the center the one who can heal those wounds, whose name is Jesus Christ.” And he added: “To know both Peter disheartened and Peter transfigured is an invitation to pass from being a Church of the unhappy and disheartened to a Church that serves all those people who are unhappy and disheartened in our midst.”

Here we have the heart of pastoral conversion: a Church that can be of the poor, for the poor, because it is a wounded Church. Its failures were not a reason for recoiling from the world but an invitation to serve it in humility.

The Argentine Jesuits say that Bergoglio’s extraordinary gift in spiritual direction was to spot the temptations specific to each person.

In holding the Church to this path of conversion, Francis has been carefully pointing out these temptations. In the case of Chile, for example, he warned against taking refuge in abstraction and verbiage — the Latin-American vice, one might say. While to the US bishops he has warned them against taking refuge in technical or juridical reforms which are necessary but insufficient. As James Hanvey SJ puts it: “If we do not listen and then respond beyond the necessary protocols and legal instruments, the Church will miss the grace that is being offered. It will run the risk of making itself and its own survival an end in itself, succumbing to the temptation of institutional idolatry.”

In both cases Francis warned the bishops against the urge to denounce, blame, and scapegoat, to call up a restorationist reform and crusades of

purification against “enemies within” — to avoid the hard task of self-accusation, in other words, by accusing others. Archbishop Viganò would offer a perfect example of this temptation.

To restore Christ to the center meant to face the truth, confess your sin, and in fasting and prayer to trust in the power of God’s mercy to bring about an institutional metanoia.

A spiritual corruption can only be purged by a spiritual conversion, a starting-again from Christ. The temptation to accuse, to deflect responsibility, can only be countered by self-accusation.

As Francis said in his speech following the recent anti-abuse summit in Rome, what he called a “positivistic” approach could supply and explanation, but not the meaning; in this case, what we are dealing with is “a manifestation of brazen, aggressive and destructive evil” which in its pride and in its arrogance considers itself “the Lord of the world”.

Protocols and legal structures, punishment of offenders, these are at times necessary, but they will not — as some of the victims groups seem to think — change a culture; they are the necessary signs of conversion, but they are not conversion itself. Indeed, they may become substitutes for it. As Hanvey puts it: “The pope is engaged in something much more difficult: he is asking for the profound adaptive change that conversion requires. Such adaptive change is no threat to the essence and the truth of the Church; it recovers it.”

### c. People of God

Finally, the theological locus of this conversion has to be the People of God. An evil rooted in clericalism cannot be countered by clericalism. In calling for “a penitential exercise of prayer and fasting” Francis in his letter to the people of God noted that “*the only way that we have to respond to this evil that has darkened so many lives is to experience it as a task regarding all of us as the People of God.*” This was “an ecclesial transformation that involves us all”.

In his letter to the US bishops at the start of their January 2019 retreat at Mundelein, Francis continually warned against trying to deal with their crisis of credibility by means of new norms or organigrams as if they were “a human resources agency” or “evangelization business”. The conversion had to be a

*metanoia*, a change in “our ways of praying, of managing power and money, of exercising authority and how we relate to each other and to our world”, he told the Chileans. Only by entering into “affective communion with the feeling of our people” would the bishops avoid banality, defensiveness and triumphalism, or the attempt to reduce everything to a matter of ethics and doctrine.

“It is impossible to imagine the future with this anointing operating in each of you”, he told the faithful in Chile, before going on to outline that future as a new ecclesial culture in which the most vulnerable are listened to, in which criticism is not dismissed as treason, and an atmosphere of respect and care replaces an abusive culture.

For the pope, in other words, change was a process that would be triggered by the Church becoming what *Lumen Gentium* imagined it to be. From the process of encounter and conversion as a body would flow the necessary moral transformation of both individuals and the institution. Through tribulation, conversion; out of conversion and the experience of mercy, mission and evangelization.

## Conclusion

Both Aparecida and Francis’s so-called “tribulation letters” in response to the clergy abuse crisis have in common that they take a clear-eyed view of the current moment. There is no defensiveness, no pining for the past, no attempt at evading or minimizing sin and failure.

But the response is not despair or lamentation; it is not condemnation or resistance. Nor does it take refuge in the fantasy of a restorationist reform, or a strategy of resistance. It is to accept that God is acting in history, and that there is a grace on offer inviting the Church to *metanoia* and thence to mission.

His conviction is that in accusing ourselves, and not anyone else, we create space for God’s mercy to act. With the grace of fortitude and perseverance, and integrating through synodality the presence of God’s holy people and the charisms that the Spirit has so richly bestowed upon them, a new future can be glimpsed, one in which, as Helder Camara hoped, we go out as sheep among wolves, rich in receiving and offering mercy, untethered from the chariots of power.

Pastoral conversion is to be free of paralysis, moralism and clericalism; to embrace mission, mercy and solidarity. The abuse crisis offers the chance to accelerate this conversion: by facing the truth of failure, and receiving grace, we can finally take seriously the missionary discipleship of the people of God.

The Church has been plunged into desolation, both in its response to secularization and by the revelation of its own failure. Yet Francis's words are of consolation. The consolation lies in what the Spirit is calling forth: a Church that recognizes it cannot guarantee its own existence and survival but must live from Christ, capable of transcending self-referentiality in order to evangelize a world in flux.