



# A Door Wide Open

## A Lenten Pastoral Letter

In Rome the Year of Mercy began on 8 December last year. But that was hardly realistic here in the Antipodes, with the rush to Christmas through December and then the January lull. We opened the Door of Mercy in the Cathedral on the Third Sunday of Advent, but the Year of Mercy really begins now as we start the journey through Lent to Easter.

For all of us the Jubilee is to be a new experience of God's mercy, so that we can in turn become a more powerful experience of God's mercy for others, especially those most in need of it. That's what the Church is called to be: a community where those needing mercy can find a home in a world where homelessness often threatens.

That's why Jesus has given us the gift of the Sacrament of Mercy. Traditionally it's been called the Sacrament of Penance or, more recently, the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Through the Jubilee Year, I suggest we call it the Sacrament of Mercy. Of course the Eucharist is the supreme sacrament of mercy, but the Lord has given us another powerful moment when we can stand as children of God before the truth of sin in our life and before the far greater truth of God's forgiveness of sin. That's the Sacrament of Mercy, which is fundamental to the journey of the Jubilee.

Around the Archdiocese, I've chosen six pilgrimage churches of mercy: the Cathedral, Red Hill, Clear Island Waters, Nambour, Annerley and Ipswich. Each of these

will offer ample times for celebrating the Sacrament, with help from priests in the Archdiocese, including the retired. I've also asked the Pauline Fathers at Marian Valley to help in the same way, so that it becomes a seventh place of pilgrimage. It would also be good if the various ethnic communities could make provision for their people so that they can celebrate the Sacrament in their own way and language.

Each parish is invited to organise a pilgrimage of mercy to one of these churches, perhaps during Lent. The pilgrimage could include a ritual entry through the Door of Mercy into the church, a celebration (perhaps of the Second Rite) of the Sacrament of Mercy, individual absolution, followed by communal praise and thanksgiving and perhaps even a picnic lunch before returning home. I've written to all priests asking that they indicate their willingness to help at these churches, and I ask that each parish let the church concerned know when they intend to come.

In recent times we've heard a lot of talk about the need for reform and innovation in Australia – reform of the tax system usually and innovation across the board, turning good ideas into good business. Through Lent we see that each of us needs reform with an element of innovation, and that's what the Sacrament of Mercy is about. But it's not just individuals who need reform and innovation; so too does the Church.

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Reform in the Church has had a long and interesting history. In the first millennium, it was thought of as restoring the Church to the purity of early Christianity. The weeds had to be removed from God's field, which was how the Church was seen. Individuals within the Church who had gone astray either doctrinally or morally had to be reformed or removed, so that the Bride of Christ could be restored to her spotless beauty.

In the medieval period, however, the understanding of reform began to shift. Now it was not just wayward individuals in the Church who needed to be reformed but the Church as a whole. This was something new, and it really took hold at the time of the Reformation. But it was also at the heart of the Catholic Counter-Reformation flowing from the Council of Trent. It wasn't just the weeds that need to be removed from God's field. They did need to be removed, but the entire field also needed new life.

The whole Church needed reform in order to be more faithful to the Gospel and more powerful in mission. The purpose wasn't just to return to the purity of early Christianity but to proclaim the Gospel in ways appropriate to the current times which were different from times past. Both reform and innovation were needed – reform to restore what had been lost and innovation to discover new ways of proclaiming the Gospel now.

This was what Pope John XXIII meant when he spoke of *aggiornamento* at the Second Vatican Council. He intended a reform that would enable a new evangelisation. The reform would have one eye firmly fixed on the ways of early Christianity and the other eye no less firmly fixed on the reality of now.

At the heart of the Council's teaching was a vision of the synodality of the Church, which was also central to the recent Synods on marriage and the family. When Pope Francis spoke at the last Synod about the synodality of the Church, he saw it as something applying to all of the Church all of the time, not just some of the bishops some of the time. He went on to say that a synodal Church has to be a listening Church, a people journeying with ears wide open.

It has to be a Church listening above all to the voice of the Holy Spirit who speaks in ways that need to be discerned. Part of that discernment is patience, waiting for the Spirit to speak from the silence. Then it requires understanding of what we hear, because the Spirit doesn't always speak in ways we expect or grasp immediately. Finally, it calls for obedience, a willingness to act on what we hear, even if it seems strange or too demanding.

We must also listen anew to each other, aware that the Spirit doesn't always speak through the people we expect. The Spirit doesn't always speak through the leaders, but may speak through the least, those who inhabit not the centre but the periphery. The Spirit may speak through people with a different accent or from a different culture, people who can be hard to understand and who leave us asking what it is they're really saying. The Spirit may speak through people whom we find difficult or with whom we disagree, but to whom we need to listen if we really are journeying together.

The Church must also learn more of what it means to listen to the voice of the world, without ever becoming worldly – indeed to listen to the voice of the world in order not to become worldly. The world can certainly learn from the Church, but so too the Church can learn from the world. The prime dialogue is between God and the world, not God and the Church. God has a Church for the sake of the world. That's why the dialogue between the Church and the world – with the mutuality it implies – really does matter. If the Church can't listen to the world, to its deepest groanings, then it's unlikely that we'll be listening to the real God.

Lent traditionally urges the three disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Each of these looks to the mercy of God. In prayer, we open the ears of the heart to hear the voice of infinite mercy; in fasting, we free the body from its cravings to allow the spirit to find what it truly desires, which is mercy; and in almsgiving we show to others the mercy God has shown to us. The disciplines of Lent are all about liberation – from all that makes us and the world merciless.

In this Jubilee Year, may the ancient disciplines join with our pilgrimages of mercy to open us anew to the God who sees sin but sees so much more, the God who opens up for us new visions of possibility, visions of infinite mercy and therefore of infinite hope. Such visions enable true reform and innovation, both personal and communal. The door is wide open: let's walk through it together on the way to Easter.

+ Mark Coleridge  
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