

## **Response to Bishop Vincent Long's Ann D Clark Lecture**

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I have studied Bishop Long's address which he gave on 19th August 2016 with interest and found that much in his address is commendable, such as the following:

- He reminds us that "Consistently in salvation history, [God] has brought unexpected outcomes out of the most crushing defeats."
- He calls us to bear "new life on behalf of those who feel hopeless and disenfranchised."
- He calls for the Church to go out to the poor and marginalised and to bear the "weaknesses and struggles" of our fellow human beings.
- He invites us to be "on the side of the poor, the vulnerable, the suffering people" and to "stand in solidarity with those without hope."
- He reminds us that "our challenge is to accompany people from the margins into a journey towards the fullness of life and love."
- He encourages to act like the Good Samaritan and to care for the "victims of injustice".
- He calls us not to engage in "the ill-treatment of racial minorities, women and homosexual persons".
- He reminds us that respect for "the fundamental dignity of each and every person" and "Attention to the most vulnerable and needy is written into our...Catholic ethos".
- He calls for our Christian work to be "based on mutuality not exclusion, love not fear, service not clericalism, engagement with the world not flight from or hostility against it, incarnate grace not dualism."
- He reminds us that in our ministry we ought to "have the smell of the sheep, to walk with people, identifying with them in their struggles, their questions and their uncertainties."
- He invites us "to discern and live out the vision of hope in the midst of life's disappointments."
- He encourages us with these words: "May all of us enact the rhythm of the paschal mystery of dying and rising in the pattern of our Lord who is the Alpha and the Omega."

I have to say that I am truly grateful for these heartfelt words which clearly stem from an attitude of love and compassion.

By way of a general observation, however, and I have to say regrettably, Bishop Long has a tendency to depict the Church of the past in a negative light while claiming that the Church of the present is radically different—that it is now beginning to rouse itself from this dark past and to be faithful to the Lord Jesus; he seems to be saying that somehow the Church of the past got most things wrong while the Church of the present is now starting to get most things right; that somehow the Church of the past had neglected the Lord's example of compassion and mercy for the disenfranchised and the underprivileged, but that now the Church is miraculously recovering from such forgetfulness. I have to say that this tendency is misguided and that it creates a false sense of euphoria.

We ought to consider instead that the Church has for centuries been the origin and source of so many saints and heroes of virtue, the storehouse of abundant manifestations of mercy, both spiritual and corporal, and our Mother in Christ who delivered to us the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Bishop Long depicts the Church of the past as an entity defensive “against threat of encroachment and loss of its status and privileges”, that it sought “a role of power, dominance and privilege”, that the Church of the past had been “an enclosure for the virtuous” instead of “an oasis for the weary and downtrodden”, and that “the Church has not been a shining beacon and a trail-blazer in the fight against inequality and intolerance.” One has to say that these are all “straw man” arguments.

I wonder what evidence Bishop Long has for such claims? Has he really tried to give us a balanced appraisal of all the merits and faults of the Church? To judge the whole Church of the past by the sins of some Church members is unjust. He insinuates that the Church formerly got everything wrong, or at least most things wrong. This view cannot be substantiated by an honest look at history. It neglects the truth that the Church of the past brought forth abundant fruit, abundant works of charity, and preserved the standards of the Gospel for centuries. To pit the Church of the past against the Church of the present is sorely misguided.

The Bishop implies that the struggles of the poor, the underprivileged, and the marginalised are somehow the result of the Church's negligence, but he neglects to point out the real origin of human misery: and that is sin

and the absence of God in people's lives.

In general, Bishop Long has a tendency to "criminalise" the Church of the past as though the Church has for centuries been a sort of culprit or at best unfaithful to the demands of the Gospel, when, in fact, it is precisely the Catholic Church which was the birthplace of so many humanitarian initiatives (such as the origin of schools and the preservation of learning, hospitals, universities, and charitable organisations), and the Church has always been the spiritual Mother of souls and of so many saints.

In what follows I will address specific comments which Bishop Long made in his address:

1. "He [Pope Francis] himself said poignantly that we are not living in an era of change but change of era. By this, he means that it is the church that needs to live up to its fundamental call to be "ecclesia semper reformanda" or the church always in need of reform to be in sync with the movement of the Holy Spirit and direction of the Kingdom."

The Church is, in fact, always being reformed under the influence of the Holy Spirit and with the help of our cooperation with Him. The fact that Pope Francis has reiterated this is a good thing. But we must remember that such reform entails both a docility to the Holy Spirit and fidelity to the everlasting Gospel. True "reform" does not mean a change of the teaching of the Church but instead the transformation of individual souls who cooperate with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

As Cardinal Giacomo Buffi put it: "We have no need of announcers of the word who want to change the Gospel with the excuse of adapting it to our times, but of announcers who endeavour each day, even with little results, to change themselves everyday ever more conformed to the Gospel which does not change".

2. "Our story, the Judeo-Christian story is a narrative of hope in despair and of reordering human relationships in the light of unfolding revelation. It began with the story in Genesis where the seed of hope was sown and a promise of redemption was made in the face of sin and brokenness. The story of the great exile likewise puts in bold relief how hope was born in a situation of utter vulnerability. In the light of this experience, there

occurred a paradigm shift in the way the people related to God and to others. A vengeful, jealous, petty and tribal deity gave way to a much more expansive vision of the divine: a truly universal and all-embracing God. As a consequence, human relationships and social structures were reordered in a way that was consonant with the evolving consciousness."

God's Revelation was made complete and perfect when the Son of God became man, when Jesus Christ was manifested among us (see John, Chapter 1; Hebrews 1:1, and so many other scriptures...). The Public Revelation (the Deposit of Faith) ended with the death of the last of the Apostles, according to the First Vatican Council.

So when Bishop Long speaks of an "unfolding revelation" and of an "evolving consciousness", I wonder what he could mean? Jesus did not intend that His revelation would unfold over time, nor that it would change over time. Our understanding of Revelation may grow and increase but Revelation itself does not change. The evidence for this in the Scriptures and in Church teaching is overwhelming.

So we ought to be careful not to be preaching "another gospel", as St Paul warned us: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!" (Galatians 1:8). And again: "So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter." (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

3. "In opening our eyes and hearts to the sufferings of our world, hope can be awakened, a hope that allows us to see things from the perspective of God. This was what Mary MacKillop did when she rallied her sisters behind the poor and vulnerable in colonial Australia. She took a prophetic stance not simply in providing affordable quality Catholic education and health care to the poor masses but fundamentally in meeting the great cultural challenges of their times. "Never see a need without doing something about it". In acting out of a strong passion for the Kingdom and a visceral compassion for the suffering, she brought about a fresh hope for others."

This is a great testimony to the sanctity and heroic virtue of Saint Mary MacKillop. However, we ought to be careful: while the Church has

always been the greatest protagonist of aid to the poor, and always been the greatest help of the poor and the underprivileged, we cannot presume to identify such corporal acts of mercy with the Kingdom of God—which Kingdom is constituted primarily by the reign of Christ in our hearts and souls, leading us ever closer to God. Corporal acts of mercy are always desired but they will never be as great or as merciful as the acts of love by which the Church rescues souls from sin and error and eternal damnation. The Catholic Church is not primarily a charity organisation, as such, designed for purposes of social aid; instead the Church is the Body of Christ, founded by the Son of God principally to restore souls to God’s friendship and to lead them to eternal life.

4. “Pope Francis constantly calls us to move beyond the security of status quo and take the risk of going to the periphery. The church must be the church of the poor and for the poor.”

On the contrary, Jesus said: “The poor you will always have with you” and at the same time He emphasised the Kingdom of God above all else. Christ did not come to establish an earthly paradise based on human standards and ideas, but to conquer hearts and souls for Himself, to bring us back to the house of the Father, that we may come to know and love the Lord, for this is eternal life: “This is eternal life, Father, that they may know you, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3). There is no conflict between the service of our spiritual needs and that of our physical needs, but to identify the Church’s mission as primarily in service of the poor is to radically compromise the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

5. “It is the latter [the poor] that we who pattern ourselves according to Jesus the prophet on the margins endeavours to serve.”

This identification of Jesus as “the prophet”, while not acknowledging Him as the Son of God, is deeply disturbing, and contravenes what our Lord Jesus said of Himself in the Scriptures.

6. “Prior to the 2nd Vatican Council, the church was suspicious of the world which was perceived as evil. Remember the classic three enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil. It was a defensive, fortress church. Followed the lead of Pope John XXIII and his optimistic *aggiornamento*, guided by “the signs of the times”, the gathered bishops

recognized that the church needed to open itself to the world, engage with the world and even to learn from the world.”

Let’s take one statement at a time here:

“the church was suspicious of the world which was perceived as evil”. If the Church has traditionally been a sign of contradiction in the world, pointing out the world’s errors and sins, and calling all men and women to repentance and to communion with God, it is because Her Lord and Master taught the Church to do so, established the Church as a light in the darkness, and taught His Apostles that “You are in the world but not of the world”.

“Remember the classic three enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil.” It is the scripture that states this, that the enemies of the soul’s salvation are the world, the flesh and the devil. To contradict this is to contradict the Sacred Scriptures.

“It was a defensive, fortress church.” On the contrary, the Church has always defended the Truth while sacrificing itself.

“the gathered bishops recognized that the church needed to open itself to the world, engage with the world and even to learn from the world.”

The Church may learn from the world insofar as the world makes progress in, for example, the sciences and humanities, but the Church is the supreme authority in matters that pertain to the Revelation which Jesus Christ entrusted to His Apostles. Human philosophy, insofar as it is true, may assist in the understanding of the Faith but can never alter the Faith delivered once and for all time to the Apostles. (See St John Paul II’s ‘Faith and Reason’ for more detail.

7. “For me, one of the greatest challenges the church faces today is to be inclusive, to be a big tent church. Pope Francis urges us to be a church where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live according to the Gospel. You heard me say in my Installation Homily that there can be no future for the living church without this vital sense of ecclesial inclusiveness. By that I mean there must be space for everyone, especially those who have been hurt, excluded or alienated, be they abuse victims, survivors, divorcees, gays, lesbians, women, disaffected

members.”

It is wonderful that Bishop Long talks about inclusion here but “inclusion” is a vague word. If by “inclusion” we mean that God desires all to come to salvation and that God “does not desire the death of the sinner” then this understanding of inclusion is accordance with the Gospel. But if by “inclusion” we mean compromising the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in order to accommodate sinful lifestyles then we need to reject such an idea. Let’s not be misunderstood here: Jesus never rejects a contrite heart. If one cares to read the Gospels one will certainly come to understand that our Lord Jesus came neither to condemn us in our sins nor to condone our sins, but to save us from them. This is the context in which we can rightly understand the “inclusion” of Christ.

8. “The teachings of Jesus like the parable of the Good Samaritan challenge us to think outside the square, outside the established patterns, norms and conventions. Jesus teaches us some home truths that are truly confronting and incisive. Samaritans were considered outsiders and outcasts by ordinary Jews. Yet in the parable, it was the Samaritan who was the unlikely hero. For he showed love and compassion to the person in need. On the contrary, the priest and the Levite who were considered the respected class of society and the custodians of tradition were found wanting. They put tradition and law in the way of basic human love....That is what Jesus consistently does. He has a habit of challenging ingrained stereotyped attitudes, subverting the tyranny of the majority, breaking social taboos, pushing the boundaries of love and redefining its meaning. “You heard it said that love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you....” ...As the Gospel illustrates, it is the holders of the tradition who are often guilty of prejudice, discrimination and oppressive stereotype.”

This passage is commendable for highlighting Jesus’ radical love and compassion and the Lord’s obvious desire that all should come into the house of His Father. However, it has to be said that, if Jesus spoke against tradition, it was human traditions and human laws that He opposed, not the Divine law and Divine traditions. Note our Lord’s words in this regard: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Matthew 5:17).

9. “It won’t wash with young people especially when we purport to treat gay people with love and compassion and yet define their sexuality as “intrinsically disordered”. This is particularly true when the Church has not been a shining beacon and a trail-blazer in the fight against inequality and intolerance. Rather, it has been driven involuntarily into a new world where many of the old stereotypes have been put to rest and the identities and rights of the marginalised are accorded justice, acceptance, affirmation and protection in our secular and egalitarian society.”

The Church indeed offers homosexual persons the love of Christ which is, without a doubt, ordered to the happiness of each and every person. Respect for homosexual persons and the desire for their eternal welfare are not opposed to one another: they both stem from true love, the love of Jesus Christ. The Church, like Her Lord and Master, wants to care for all souls with the utmost respect and love in order to lead all men and women to eternal life. Jesus came neither to condemn us in our sins nor to condone our sins, but to save us from them. Therefore, we can be both respectful of all persons while at the same time pointing out to them the true path to eternal life: faith in Christ and obedience to His commandments. The Lord desires neither cruelty towards other persons nor that any soul should perish. We as Church are called to act in the same way.

In conclusion, what is commendable about Bishop Long’s address is that he offers us many worthy exhortations to love especially those who are marginalised and considered social outcasts, he evokes many heartfelt sentiments of respect and compassion, and he encourages us to “discern and live out the vision of hope in the midst of life’s disappointments.” On the other hand, the Bishop’s address manifests serious flaws and errors: he often conflates the idea of spiritual mercy with that of corporal mercy, failing to prioritise them rightly; he pits the Church of the past against the Church of the present in a misguided attempt to spark new enthusiasm for the apostolate; he implicitly pits pastoral work against the teaching of Catholic doctrine in a false dichotomy; he presents various “straw man” arguments against the Church of the past; and he fails to give us a solid doctrinal basis for the pastoral work which he invites us to undertake.

