

Pope Francis' US visit, Redress.....

Pope Francis certainly made a hit in the United States last week. Expectations were sky high and there were commentators on every street corner with their take on what he said, didn't say or should have said. So, since it's the season to 'have a view of Francis' it's my turn.

The Pope's address to the United States Congress was a cracker! I was particularly taken with his singling out of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. Both 'giants' in the modern US Church, strong social advocates and people of the Gospel.

Individuals who bravely forged pathways to address contemporary social ills and abuses of human dignity. The parallels for the challenge facing the Church over its handling of sexual abuse were obvious to me.

When mentioning Dorothy Day he highlighted her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed. She lived a life of real solidarity with victims of an oppressive system. She identified with their plight and didn't rest until it could be alleviated. She was the Gospel in action.

So too with Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk. Very tellingly, the Pope said of Merton that he was "a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church". This is very poignant. The Pope is clearly saying that nothing is set in concrete.

That real change is needed to address injustice, to enable inclusivity and the Church needs to be part of that change. Powerful words and images in a country that for too long has been riven with 'cultural wars' within the Church to the detriment of being an effective campaigner for social justice beyond its walls.

And this definitely applies to the sex abuse scandal.

US dioceses, one after another, have fallen foul of the courts as the depth and scope of the clerical abuse scandal is revealed. It is almost as if the US church has spent so long protecting itself that the necessary actions to promote justice are only recently gaining any real attention. It seems pretty clear that the Pope sees a Church turned in on itself, more concerned with justification than embracing the message of outreach inherent in the Gospel, is an institution lost to the world.

The Church needs to provide horizons of hope for people, regardless of their circumstance or relationship to the Church. People need to feel the passion and warmth that belief engenders. The only certitude in our complex and diverse world is the value of compassion – its capacity to break down barriers, heal rifts and build communities. As always, actions will speak louder than words.

So too for us in Australia. As the Royal Commission begins yet another examination of a church-based institution we cannot succumb to the inevitable fatigue these hearings bring to the public consciousness.

For too long the depth and scope of institutional child abuse has been hidden from the community.

The fact that institution after institution has mishandled, covered up and unjustly dealt with victims is a damning indictment. So too is the fact that so many victims have received little or no redress from those institutions that the Royal Commission has had to accelerate its recommendations for a national redress system to be established.

Yet our governments are effectively lying low. They either want to shift responsibility amongst themselves or they posture over the efforts they previously made for some victims on some occasions.

The demands of justice seem straight forward. Victims of child sexual abuse within institutions, no matter where or when, deserve access to an independent, generous redress scheme. Only our governments can put that in place. And only the institutions responsible for the abuse should pay that compensation.

Francis Sullivan, CEO, TJHC

www.tjhcouncil.org.au

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