



## Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse – Living the Faith.

Stacey Wilson

### Introduction

This paper will examine the claim that discerning who we are in God and how we are called to respond are essential components of living the Christian faith. I propose that living the faith is a communal process undertaken by individuals and that the work of discernment and response is embedded in relationship- with God, with others and with creation. By drawing on the works of Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, this paper will explore the concept of vocation within a theological framework and in doing so, challenge the notion that the primary purpose of faith is to develop the capacity to articulate and justify a particular theological position.<sup>1</sup> This discussion will be framed within the context of a reflection on my own experience and the findings of Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.<sup>2</sup>

### Beyond Belief

Migliore in his opening chapter states that “Theology arises from the freedom and responsibility of the Christian community to enquire about its faith in God” and involves the process of “reflection on the praxis of Christian faith”.<sup>3</sup> However, there is a temptation among humans to settle for and into clearly articulated belief systems, rules and regulations which clarify our moral decision making.<sup>4</sup> It has been suggested that at the base of this, for many western expressions of faith, is dualism and a model of deficit which has grown out of an overemphasis of doctrines of sin and redemption and biblical passages such as Genesis 3.<sup>5</sup> This practice often results in a simplistic form of discipleship, founded on concepts of orthodoxy and heresy and frequently gives rise to an institutionalised ecclesiology lead by a class of religious elite tasked with indoctrination and regulating compliance.<sup>6</sup>

In Luke 11 we witness an interaction between Jesus and a Pharisee over a meal. Jesus reclines to eat without first washing (11:38) and when he is questioned about his behaviour, he makes a series of “Woe to you” statements which challenge the foundation of the religious system of the day with its assumed

---

<sup>1</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000);

<sup>2</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report* (Commonwealth of Australia: 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014) p1

<sup>4</sup> Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p3

<sup>5</sup> Terry LeBlanc, New Old Perspectives: Theological Observations Reflecting Indigenous Worldviews, in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman, Gene L. Green (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012) p166; this is also explored by Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right*, (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2016), p 9

<sup>6</sup> As demonstrated in Sarah Coakley discussion of trinitarian orthodoxy in chapter three of her book *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2013)

superiority and authority of religious leaders and imposed behavioural compliance.<sup>7</sup> In this passage, and a similar section in Matthew 23:13-39, Jesus names the embedded theology of the Pharisees and the impact it is having on others. The Pharisees are accused of reducing their faith to outward appearances of holiness (Matt 23:25, 27; Luke 11:39, 44), and meticulous rule following (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42) while revelling in the status and veneration their leadership position grants them (Matt 23:5-7; Luke 11:43). In doing so, they burden the people with moral loads they cannot carry (Matt 23:4; Luke 11:46), as they claim the right to define and control access to the sacred (Matt 23:16, 13; Luke 11:52) and, despite thinking otherwise, refuse to hear the call of the prophets (Matt 23:30-34; Luke 11:47-49). These two passages when held alongside the great commandment<sup>8</sup>, demonstrate the contrast between adherence to a narrow set of doctrines or a particular theological viewpoint and the wider value-based outworking of a life of faith. Jesus calls the Pharisees instead to seek justice, mercy, faithfulness (Matt 23:23), the love of God (Luke 11:42) and generosity (Luke 11:41).

The apostle Paul when writing to the church in Corinth argues that foundation of both identity and vocation is love (1 Cor 13:1-3). Echoing the great commandment (Matt 22:36-40; Mark 12:29-32; Luke 10:27-28) and Jesus' parting words to his disciples (John 13:34-35) Paul reminds us that the love of God, self and others, marks us as followers of Jesus. This theology of vocation is more powerful than words, prophecy, knowledge, faith, generosity and even sacrifice. The simplicity of this call often obscures the complexity of living it out. Using the image of a physical body (1 Cor 12:12-26) Paul illustrates the intrinsic relationality of vocation, embedded in the interconnectedness and interdependence of all believers within the community of faith and their creator. Harper, in her exploration of Genesis, proposes that this interconnection has its roots in the creation narrative and the Hebrew concept of shalom.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in verse twelve Paul states: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." This verse holds a particular truth; living the faith does not offer us the security of certainty based on rules and regulations but rather an opportunity to participate in an unfathomable relationship with our Creator, each other and the created world. This distinction is important for a number of reasons, beyond seeking an individualistic model of 'best practice' Christianity. These passages make it clear that there is risk attached to a narrow legalistic approach to living the faith.

The Final Report of Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA) echoes Matthew 23 and Luke 11 in many ways as it tells the story of victims and survivors<sup>10</sup> of sexual abuse within religious institutions. Most of the denominations examined by the RCIRCSA share

<sup>7</sup> Luke 11:42-44, 46, 47, 52; echoed in the seven woes in Matt 23:13-39

<sup>8</sup> Matt 22:36-40; Mark 12:29-32; Luke 10:27-28; John 13:34-35

<sup>9</sup> Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*, p13

<sup>10</sup> The phrase "victims and survivors" is used to acknowledge the truth that a child bears no responsibility for an act of abuse and that not everyone survives the impact of this experience, yet many no longer want their life to be defined by the abusive acts they endured. Both terms are used by those who shared their stories with the RCIRCSA for specific and important reasons which I honour here.

a particular theology of hierarchy and leadership.<sup>11</sup> Within these religious institutions clerical authority and status<sup>12</sup> enabled the perpetrators to wield power<sup>13</sup>, while “being afforded a higher level of trust and credibility” which ensured unsupervised and unquestioned access to vulnerable children.<sup>14</sup> The hierarchical leadership structures when combined with an expectation of deferential obedience<sup>15</sup> was identified by a number of expert witnesses in the RCIRCSA Final Report as contributing to a culture which “binds an individual (even blindly) to authority … and thus one’s value is subsumed by identification with the power, prestige, and status of the church.”<sup>16</sup> This results in a distortion of identity; the true self is overwhelmed by a vocational theology grounded in externalised morality and the subjugation of the self. It is important to note that this observation in no way removes individual culpability or responsibility for acts of abuse. Rather, it is an example of the harm that can be done by those whose identity is distorted by the belief of their own superiority. This distortion of self creates a unique paradox within clerical perpetrators, research has demonstrated that they often “lived out of an unreflective script of private powerlessness whilst ministering in a site of unsupervised and unchallenged public dominance”.<sup>17</sup> From this position, clerical perpetrators manipulated theological or doctrinal positions to maintain their status, groom their congregations and justify or explain abusive behaviour.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that I am in no way claiming a causal relationship between sexual abuse and hierarchical leadership structures, however it can be argued that they are significant risk factor. The RCIRCSA states “*Among these factors, it appears to us that clericalism sits at the centre, where it is interconnected with, and in some instances is the root or foundation of, the other contributing factors.*” Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Volume 16, Religious Institutions Book 2*, (Commonwealth of Australia: 2017), p616

<sup>12</sup> “*Survivors who grew up in the Catholic and Anglican faiths told us that as children they were taught that ‘priests, Brothers and nuns were closer to God’, that priests were ‘up there like with God’, were ‘next to God’, had ‘a direct link to God’, ‘were gods’, or were ‘the representation of God’.* Survivors told us that they had been taught as children that priests were ‘the next step down from God … all-powerful and special’, and ‘incapable of sin’.” Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Volume 16, Religious Institutions Book 1*, (Commonwealth of Australia: 2017), p 454

<sup>13</sup> “*People in religious ministry are conferred with a unique status and spiritual authority which means they can exert considerable power over children. Research that we commissioned into the role of organisational culture in child sexual abuse noted that ‘the more power adults possess over children and young people in institutions, the better positioned they are to sexually abuse them’.*” *Final Report, 16/1*, p 355

<sup>14</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Executive Summary*, (Commonwealth of Australia: 2017), p10

<sup>15</sup> Dr Marie Keenan, an Irish psychologist who has conducted extensive research in the field of clerical abuse told the RCIRCSA that “*the role of obedience in the current crisis of child sexual abuse hitting the Catholic Church cannot be underestimated*”. *Final Report, 16/2*, p628

<sup>16</sup> *Final Report, 16/2*, p628; Dr Robert Doyle; *Final Report, 16/2*, p656

<sup>17</sup> Dr Keenan, *Final Report, 16/2*, p629

<sup>18</sup> The following examples are taken from victims and survivors testimonies and demonstrate the use of theology in the enacting of abuse:

“we’re doing God’s work”. *Final Report 16/1*, p529

“This is a matter between you, me and God”. *Final Report 16/1*, p450

“it was okay, because if it was wrong, God wouldn’t let it happen”. *Final Report 16/1*, p454

“…pain and suffering was a way to get closer to God”. *Final Report 16/1*, p521

“..if [she] loved God, it would be okay to have sex with him because he was God’s representative”.

*Final Report 16/1*, p454

Another feature of clerical perpetrators identified in Dr Keenan’s work was “anger and over-controlled hostility … that came from a lifetime of submission and attempts at living a life that was impossible to live.”<sup>19</sup> Palmer describes his own experience of “lining up the loftiest ideals” to live out, as a “noble way to live a life that was not my own” and the devastating consequences this had in his own life and the life of others.<sup>20</sup> He critiques a theology of vocation “rooted in a deep distrust of selfhood”.<sup>21</sup>

The distrust of self is influenced by the Augustine understanding of self as ‘infected’ by sin, ruled by selfishness which is passed down through humanity by the sexual act, its presence demonstrated by persistent sensuality.<sup>22</sup> The dehumanising language of contamination and moral depravity used to describe children by those tasked with their care, demonstrates that this understanding of self was also imposed on others.<sup>23</sup> This belief also contributed significantly to the doctrine of compulsory celibacy. The RCIRCSA Final Report notes that while celibacy is not a causal factor in sexual abuse, it is often “an unattainable ideal … that for many proved impossible”.<sup>24</sup> The outworking of the imposed denial of an intrinsic part of the self was paradoxical; sexuality was shrouded in stigma and guilt and yet the breaking of vows of chastity were seen to be almost inevitable, this created a culture of concealment and duplicity.<sup>25</sup> Palmer states “If we are unfaithful to our true self we will extract a price from others.”

### Call and Response

For the believer to embrace an alternate understanding of vocation, the radical call to love, in a way that does not bring harm to the self and others requires authenticity and openness.<sup>26</sup> When we take up Jesus’ command to love one another as we have been loved (John 13:34) we also open ourselves to “share in his sufferings” (Rom 8:17). While Paul focuses on shared physical suffering (Rom 8:35), to love another is also to deliberately embrace the vulnerability of relational connection; to intentionally open our self to the ‘suffering’ associated with love. As Ford explores the complexity of humanities shared suffering he states that our need for “compassionate attention” lays in the hands of others and this that vulnerable state often leads us to seek “alternate forms of security” to the detriment of the self and those around us.<sup>27</sup> Yet, Ford rejects easy answers declaring “To be in the image of God is to mourn”.<sup>28</sup> Our suffering is held in the

<sup>19</sup> *Final Report 16/2*, p607

<sup>20</sup> Palmer, p3

<sup>21</sup> Palmer, p10

<sup>22</sup> Ernesto Bonaiuti and Giorgio La Piana, *The Genesis of St. Augustine's Idea of Original Sin*, The Harvard Theological Review, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Apr., 1917), pp. 159- 175; Palmer, p10

<sup>23</sup> The following are taken from victim and survivor statements to the RCIRCSA and reflect the perception of children within religious institutions: ‘filthy little beast’, ‘dirty little bugger’, ‘ungrateful little bastard’ 16/3 p52; ‘evil’ 16/1 p473; ‘a lying, blaspheming little bastard’ 16/1 p495; ‘scum of the earth’, ‘slut’, ‘filthy pig’ 16/1 p401; ‘a devil’ 16/1 p471; ‘filthy little brat’ 16/1 p472; ‘filthy animal’ 16/1 p545; ‘evil Jezebel’ 16/1 p470; ‘garbage’ 16/3 p52

<sup>24</sup> *Final Report 16/1*, p47

<sup>25</sup> *Final Report 16/1*, p47

<sup>26</sup> Palmer, p30

<sup>27</sup> David Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p143

<sup>28</sup> Ford, *The Shape of Living*, p152

being of God, who came that we “may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). To do so will require a deep examination and profound understanding of the self.

### **Identity**

Stories of people wrestling with the question of who we are in God are scattered throughout scripture. Yet, perhaps some of the most profound examples are located in the stories of exile. In the lives of Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Mary, Paul and many others we witness the process and consequences of the loss of a particular sense of identity. Some appear to make this transition quietly by holding on to a sense of self embedded in something deeper than their current circumstances. Others fight and blunder through this process, often causing harm to others, as they wrestle to find understanding in this new reality. Palmer describes this as the tension between “the way my ego wants to identify me, with its protective masks and self-serving fictions, and my true self”.<sup>29</sup>

There is some similarity between Palmer’s experience and my own, which is perhaps why this book has played such a pivotal role in my life. The faith tradition I grew up in assigned to me a very specific vocation- wife, mother, church volunteer. This vocation “forced on the self from without rather than grown from within” reinforced the harm my true self had already experienced.<sup>30</sup> For a great part of my early life I believed that my true self was unlovable, I became adept at reading other people and shaped myself to be what I believed they wanted me to be. My most defining characteristic in this time was self-sacrifice. I put the needs of others before my own to avoid rejection.

In March 1998, aged 25, I became a mother and I truly believed that I had finally achieved my calling in life. My belief that, as a Christian woman, motherhood was the most joyful, spiritual and rewarding ministry possible, did not stand up to the realities of stay at home parenting. Three short years later, after the birth of my second child, my life collapsed. The sense of shame and failure was overwhelming. Looking back at this time, marked by clinical depression and anxiety, I see my true self forcefully rejecting the restrictions I and others had placed on it.<sup>31</sup>

Jürgen Moltmann in his discussion on disability articulates the importance of the love of self and a holistic understanding of identity. He states, “Won’t someone who despises himself also scorn his fellow humans?”.<sup>32</sup> Moltmann contrasts self-love and egotism: the first comes from the assurance of our worth, the other driven by fear and a sense of inferiority.<sup>33</sup> In an earlier work, Moltmann states that the *imago dei* “says something about the God who creates his image for himself, and who enters into a particular

---

<sup>29</sup> Palmer, p5

<sup>30</sup> Palmer, p4

<sup>31</sup> Palmer, p4

<sup>32</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, “Liberate Yourself by Accepting One Another” in *Human disability and the service of God: Reassessing religious practice*, edited by Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers, 105-122 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p106

<sup>33</sup> Moltmann, *Human disability and the service of God*, p107

relationship with that image, before it says anything about the human being".<sup>34</sup> Using a theological rather than anthropological lens on the concept of *imago dei* adds to our understanding of the relational nature of our created identity and vocational response.

Our understanding of living the faith has been significantly challenged by the recent COVID 19 pandemic. My own experience of this time has also included a personal health crisis. Unable to participate in many my usual expressions of vocation, which give me a strong sense of achievement and personal validation, I have been called into a deeper examination of identity (who I am in God) and vocation (how I am called to respond). Here I have encountered the wisdom of Richard Rohr's work on Centre and Circumference, and the "strong and sensitizing face of *what is*".<sup>35</sup> An identity shaped by the belief that the self is unworthy, condemned and contaminated by sin, separated from God, is difficult to set aside. It has been my great privilege recently to sit with a group of indigenous theologians who, in the midst of intergenerational trauma, oppression and rejection of their selfhood, hold the mystery of relational connection with the Creator and the world deep in their souls. They do not attempt to explain this concept in words, instead using breath, song and dance, embody its profound truth. In this I see Palmer's definition of vocation lived out. The thing "I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and do not fully understand myself but that are none the less compelling."<sup>36</sup> This new centre in my life is the mystery that the Creator not only finds me worthy of love but created me for no other reason. This is the image I bear. As I live out my faith in this truth, I am able to face the reality that I, like all others, do not know how long I will live here on earth. A faulty heart valve and aortic aneurysm has not changed that fact. I can see that the denial of the worth and value any part of God's creation, human or otherwise, as an act of injustice. I am able to witness the sacramental nature of laughter and grief, birth and death, river and mountain and it brings me a peace that passes all understanding. Vocation has become my self's response to the love of the Creator.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love ... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. (John 15:9, 11-12)

## Conclusion

Holding a clearly articulated theology is often insufficient to support the act of living the faith. While it lends a framework of certainty to the attempt, it rarely survives the dark night of the soul. The knowing of the mind is a fragile thing for there is much unknowing in the mystery of God. As we live out our faith together, it is our identity in God which shapes our enacting of call.

---

<sup>34</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), p 220

<sup>35</sup> Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, (New York: Crossroads, 1999), p 15

<sup>36</sup> Palmer, p 25

## Bibliography

Ernesto Bonaiuti and Giorgio La Piana, *The Genesis of St. Augustine's Idea of Original Sin*, The Harvard Theological Review, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Apr., 1917), pp. 159- 175

Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2013)

David Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002)

Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right*, (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2016)

Terry LeBlanc, New Old Perspectives: Theological Observations Reflecting Indigenous Worldviews, in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman, Gene L. Green (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012) p165-178

Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014)

Jürgen Moltmann, "Liberate Yourself by Accepting One Another" in *Human disability and the service of God: Reassessing religious practice*, edited by Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) p 105-122

Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993)

Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000);

Richard Rohr, Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer, (New York: Crossroads, 1999)

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Executive Summary*, (Commonwealth of Australia: 2017) accessed at <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Volume 16, Religious Institutions Book 1*, (Commonwealth of Australia: 2017) accessed at <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Volume 16, Religious Institutions Book 2*, (Commonwealth of Australia: 2017) accessed at <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Volume 16, Religious Institutions Book 3*, (Commonwealth of Australia: 2017) accessed at <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>