

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 25, 2014 at 9:50am

Notes from the cutting room floor of my reporting trip to Australia

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

One of the unfortunate consequences of a reporting trip of the sort I took in Australia in November is that so much necessarily ends up, as it were, on the cutting room floor. In two weeks of what felt like nonstop conversations and interviews, dozens of people generously gave their time and insights.

While not all of them made it into the stories, they nonetheless were valuable and allowed me, I hope, to write with a bit of authority about the state of things in the church in Australia. (Read Part 1 and Part 2.)

There was a moment fitting to the end of a trip, when one might be thinking he's got a line on things, at St. Francis Parish in Paddington*. There I was reminded again, as I have been in so many other circumstances, that the narratives in this church are hardly ever neat and easy to compartmentalize. There, in a congregation known for a certain liberal bent, was a 20-member or so choir in the sanctuary in formal robes, doing glorious traditional hymns, some in Latin, in wonderfully complex harmonies. They were led by Noel Debien, a producer for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a trained musician and a former seminarian who was also kind enough to show this visitor some of the iconic and repurposed Catholic sites in the region.

Outside Mass that Sunday, inadvertently emphasizing the point about diversity within the community, I met and spoke with Robert Tilley, a lecturer in biblical studies at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, where a lot of the country's seminarians are trained.

I didn't run into many people who had warm feelings for Cardinal George Pell, even among those who grudgingly granted him the benefit of the doubt on one issue or another. But Tilley is all in as a "great supporter of Cardinal Pell and a great supporter of the magisterium and dogma." But before I had the

chance to go too far down the path of presumptions about Tilley, he qualified that support by noting: "I would disagree with the cardinal and with a number of others on economics." Among the others he mentioned specifically "the American magazine *First Things*" and one of its principal figures, George Weigel.

Tilley, a 1997 convert to Catholicism from the Calvinist tradition, said he is "actually a Democratic Socialist, and I don't hold to the free market." And no, socialism is not a dirty word in Australia, where the minimum wage is north of \$15 an hour and there's universal health care, but that's another matter entirely.

Tilley is, at the same time, highly critical of outlets like the Jesuits' Eureka Street, an online publication that would fall into the progressive category. And yet, one of the things that attracted him to the church was his view of magisterial teaching as "incredibly inclusive."

"Look, you can have Eureka Street and you can have Opus Dei and you can have the Neocats [Neocatechumenate movement], you can have this, you can have that in this really beautiful unity. And that's what I love about it."

The Pope Francis era was getting into gear at the time of my visit, and Tilley said he viewed it as an impulse toward a greater unity, perhaps balancing out a critique that Tilley himself finds valuable. That critique, of liberal theology, is tied in with his critique of free-market capitalism. The critique given strongest expression by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, he said, "is pertinent and effective against the culture of death. And what I mean by that is in capitalism, we see the full commodification of human life in abortion and the accoutrements of that in things like embryonic stem cell research and such. What we find in liberal theology is an extension of the liberal bourgeoisie, an extension of the capitalist class."

But critique of the liberal project for him doesn't seem to mandate the kind of rigidity one might find in some quarters -- liberal and conservative -- in the United States. He seems to think that Francis is opening some space for debate. "I think it is Chesterton who pointed out: If you have real equality, the master of the house will have arguments with the butler. I think that's what's going on at the moment."

Later that day at St. Patrick's Church in downtown Sydney, I listened to a presentation by forensic psychologist Gerard Webster. While it was filled with data, much of it from work done in the United States, I found most intriguing his invitation to engage in a meditation on the crucifixion scene. I'll leave off these notes with segments of his prepared remarks because I think they begin to engage the conversation around areas of sex abuse and what is required for forgiveness and healing not often dealt with in public forums.

Advertisement

We start with the crowd shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" and Pilot's submission to their demands despite finding "no ground for the sentence of death". Jesus was led him away with two criminals to be put to death.

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals ... Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but

the leaders scoffed at him ? One of the criminals who were hanged there said "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Let's consider the scene on Golgotha.

- Look first at Jesus, having been tortured, imprisoned, ridiculed, crucified and finally lanced after his death -- the innocent victim of gross and multiple abuses.
- Look down from the cross and see Mary weeping -- the mother who was rendered powerless to protect her child from the abuse, unable to prevent his death.
- Look across to the soldiers, still jeering at him, dividing up his clothes, and celebrating their ability to dominate and oppress others.
- Look at the crowds of bystanders. Some weeping. Some sneering. Some there for the spectacle.
- Look to the apostles who are present. Look particularly to Peter, the future leader of the Church, who only the night before had denied his association with Christ.
- And now look to the left and to the right of Jesus. Two men -- both of whom had committed serious criminal offences, were justly tried, found guilty and were facing their punishment according to law.
- Finally, look to the crowd and find the parents and family members of the criminals who are also sobbing in their shame and for their loss.

Various accounts of the crucifixion have Jesus talking throughout the crucifixion scene. He speaks of relationship between his mother and John the Beloved -- "He said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." (John 18: 26-27) He makes a bond of love with a convicted criminal -- He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43).

I would like to suggest to you that the crucifixion scene draws our attention to the key people we need to consider and guides our approach as we reflect on the sexual abuse crisis that has now come to a head in the Church.

- Look to the image of Christ. Here, we may recognise the innocent children who have been abused by clergy who hold great power;
- Look the figure of Mary, where we may recognise the parents who now share their child's pain and anger, and who often suffer guilt because they failed to see the risk and protect their children from harm;
- Look to the image of Peter. Here, we may consider Church leaders whose fallibility has become very clear to all;
- Look to the image of the repentant criminal, where we may consider those members of the Church (be they priest, religious, or laypersons) who have had motive, access and opportunity to sexually abuse other, more vulnerable members of the Church community; and
- Look to the image of the families of criminals. Here, we may consider those members of the Church community who are the parents, family members, and friends of offenders ? Church members who are shamed by the actions of their loved one in the abuse of children.

To me, Christ's message is clearly one of inclusiveness rather than exclusion, of love

rather than hate, of justice rather than injustice. But most of all, I see in the Crucifixion as what contemporary psychoanalyst Joseph Lichtenberg (2002; 2011) refers to as a "model scene" -- where we, who want to live in a humane society, are called to privilege "relationship" with others over our more base instincts and reactions to harm being done to the innocent.

In his final moments, Christ demonstrated what being fully human in the face of injustice looks like. His final moments privileged "relationship" from a state of "surrender" -- relationships with (1) those who were most close to him (his own mother and his closest companion); (2) with a convicted offender who had committed a [heinous] act; and (3) with God, His father.

**An earlier version of this story misidentified the parish.*

Source URL (retrieved on 03/19/2018 - 3:12pm): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/notes-cutting-room-floor-my-reporting-trip-australia>

Links:

- [1] <https://www.ncronline.org/forward/join?clickSource=end-article>
- [2] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/160616>