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A New Annunciation

Imagining our
Church of the future

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Foreword

Our Church evangelises within a world of rapid and constant change. In fact, it has always been characterised by change. But the call for change seems particularly acute now. In modern times, change has been an explicit feature of the Church since the Second Vatican Council and is further heightened here in Australia, immersed as we are in the Plenary Council processes. This gathering of our local Church sits in close alignment with Pope Francis' ever-increasing call for a more synodal Church.

Synodal. An interestingly rich theological term that hasn't had common place in Catholic parlance, even if it has been an aspiration of many, especially since Vatican II. What does a more synodal Church look like? Synodality is essentially about broader and deeper engagement of all the baptised. So, what does it look like when we have a Church of broader and deeper engagement?

Many consider that the blueprint for Francis' papacy is contained within his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*. Published within nine months of being elected Pope, it describes the

role and purpose of the Church in the modern world; and everything Francis has written since finds its source in this document. Having described the purpose and expression of the Church across 283 paragraphs he concludes with a singular reference to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The final paragraph of the document begins: "There is a Marian style to the Church's work of evangelisation."

In the article that follows, consideration is given to a Church of the future that has a distinctive Marian face. One that is attentive to the Holy Spirit, and with courage and faith seeks to bring about God's reign in the world. The article draws heavily on the unpublished works of Fr Craig Larkin SM (RIP, 2015), focusing on the Icon of the Ascension and the call to a more Marian Church that is active and contemplative.

One of the article's authors, David Hall FMS, first encountered Fr Craig's work over twenty years ago and he has been drawing on it ever since in his teaching, lectures and workshops with Catholic school educators and other Church leaders when exploring what a future Church might look like. David has

collaborated with Tracey Edstein to bring into dialogue Fr Craig's wisdom within our current Church context, amidst the Plenary Council processes. This article is the result of their cooperative efforts.

They remind us of our credal proclamation that the Church must be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, proposing that the Marian way needs to be our emphasis into the foreseeable future. At a time when we are discerning our future, and can sometimes get lost and side-tracked in the detail, the principles that Tracey and David propose are well worth our consideration.



Fr Anthony Casamento csma
Vice President

Preamble: In search of a new home

A feature of these Covid times is the proliferation of homes for sale. A familiar house is suddenly tidied up, often painted, windows cleaned, gardens rejuvenated and rubbish stacked on the footpath for removal by council. Soon after the 'for sale' sign appears, it's replaced by 'sold' or at least 'under contract'. The prices are often jaw-dropping. Of course, the vendors will usually become buyers elsewhere, in the same Covid-inflated market.

Commentators say that with large numbers of people working from home, sometimes whole families, homes have been found wanting in ways that a standing desk and a few plants can't address. There is an underlying but persistent dissatisfaction – and so the real estate agent is called.

Is this true too for our Australian Catholic church? The pandemic, becoming more threatening, not less, is bringing out the best and the worst in us, and highlighting the fault lines in a church experiencing the long-awaited and much-vaunted Plenary Council.

Expectations for the outcomes of the Council range from impossibly high to almost non-existent. Some feel it's the last gasp of a church still reeling from revelations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Others welcome a once in a lifetime event, seeing an opportunity, an invitation, an imperative even, to reclaim a church firmly focused on Jesus' promise of the reign of God. They embody hope, that cardinal virtue without which we cannot be a church.

As Richard Lennan writes, "We believe in a church that, through grace, is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, but our hope commits us, in response to grace, to *working* toward the ever greater realisation of a church that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."¹ [authors' emphasis]

Archbishop Mark Coleridge, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, said in August 2016, announcing the 2020 Plenary Council, "I think we have to accept the fact that Christendom is over – by which I mean mass, civic Christianity. It's over."²

Parramatta's Bishop Vincent Long says, "Christians...post-Royal Commission are like Jews after the exile. The future of the Church, like the New Jerusalem that the exilic prophets often speak of, will not be revitalised by way of simply repeating what was done in the past."³

Speaking at the online event, Mission and Church, the first conversation under the *Light from the Southern Cross – Catalyst for Conversation* banner on 7 July 2021, Melissa Dwyer FdCC said, "Yearning for a new way will not produce it. Only ending the old way can do that. You cannot hold onto the old, all the while declaring that you want something new. There is only one way to bring in the new. You must make room for it."⁴

Like potential home vendors, many contemporary Australian Catholics find the notion of a 'new church', a new spiritual home, enticing. Yet, like a homeowner who finds it difficult to articulate exactly what the new home

might look like, we can struggle to imagine a church significantly different from the one we've known.

Even if we wanted to, we can't go back to a church of earlier days. Former editor of *The Tablet*, Catherine Pepinster, has quoted one of the pope's closest aides, the Honduran cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, who has said, "The church does not have a reverse gear, it can only go forward."⁵

The *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working Document) of the Plenary Council alludes to the response of Mary to the mysterious visit of the angel Gabriel as a template for Australian Catholics: "If we, the Catholic community in Australia, can emulate Mary's response then we can trust that the presence of the Word made flesh will be recognised more clearly by the communities and societies in which we live and which we seek to serve. We will be the sacrament of communion with God and of unity among all people that the Lord is calling us to be."⁶

As we contemplate the promise and the hope of a 'new church' amid Council deliberations – and in times that continue to challenge so many of our assumptions and prejudices – it might well be instructive to deepen our relationship with the one whom Pope Francis implored, "Virgin of listening and contemplation, Mother of love... pray for the Church, whose pure icon you are, that she may never be closed in on herself or lose her passion for establishing God's kingdom...pray for us."⁷

1. Richard Lennan, "The Church: Got Hope?" in Richard Lennan & Nancy Pineda-Madrid (eds), *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, New York, Paulist Press, 2013, p 50.

2. Archbishop Mark Coleridge, "From Wandering to Journeying: Thoughts on a Synodal Church" The Cardinal Knox Lecture, 16 May 2016.

3. Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv, Dom Helder Camara Lecture "My hope for the Plenary Council" 30 June 2021 <https://newman.unimelb.edu.au/uploads/helder-camara-lectures/HOPE%20FOR%20THE%20PLENARY%20COUNCIL.pdf>

4. Melissa was quoting Ted Dunn, *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation*, 2020.

5. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/12/pope-francis-catholic-church-child> accessed 18 July 2021.

6. *Continuing the Journey: Instrumentum Laboris* for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia January 2021, ACBC.

7. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel* Catholic Truth Society, London, 2013, n288.

WHAT MIGHT OUR NEW HOME LOOK LIKE?

Marist Father Craig Larkin has opened an innovative window into the possibilities of a 'new church' via informed consideration of iconography; specifically, fourth century icons of the Ascension.

It may be helpful to recall the significance of icons as visual 'creeds-in-miniature', since they belong first to the spirituality of the Eastern church, although for a long time their value in enriching enormously the Western understanding of scripture, theology and faith has been recognised.

While an icon is clearly a striking artistic image, the iconographer does not paint, but rather writes, the icon. This indicates that the icon is not intended to have a decorative or inspirational impact, but rather to be a deep and unequivocal statement of belief. As Larkin writes, "The spirituality of the East, typified in Icons, stresses image, and therefore the value of intuition and the need to gaze. In the Eastern Church Icons contain the presence of God as really as do the Scriptures and the Eucharist."⁸

The phrase "the need to gaze" is edifying, challenging as it does the Western propensity to see the word as greater than the image. Gazing expectantly at icons of the Ascension will reward the one who gazes with insights that would be far more prosaic rendered in words.

Further, unlike Western art, the icon is in no way an indication of the iconographer's personal perspective or faith. Rather, the icon writer must be faithful to what the community of the Church understands and believes as people of faith. An icon is a way of capturing what the faithful believes, collectively, not the iconographer's particular 'take' on the subject.

Larkin offers for consideration a series of icons of the Ascension. While conventional wisdom names Pentecost as the 'birthday' of the church, another interpretation sees Pentecost as the event which led the church to become missionary – to go out boldly bearing the good news – and the Ascension as the event at which the church was born. As Jesus was taken up into heaven, promising, "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age"



(Matt 16:20), the disciples – of whom Matthew says, "they worshiped, but they doubted" (16:17) – became church.

The icon offers an understanding of the admittedly nascent church, still awaiting the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost but "they were continually in the temple praising God" (Luke 24:53).

While there are several icons of the Ascension, emerging as early as the fourth century after the critical Council of Nicaea, we can speak and write of 'the Icon of the Ascension'. This is because in a very real sense, there is but one icon, since each individual icon is faithful to the tradition, as mentioned earlier.

So what does this Icon of the Ascension reveal to us?

The title could be seen as misleading, since the depiction of Jesus' actual ascending is not the dominant image. Consistently, while 'Jesus ascendant' is at the top of the icon, it's the disciples – the 'new church' – who draw the eye. Curiously, they are not focused on Jesus above them, flanked by angels, but rather on each other. Jesus is of heaven but they are of earth, and the counsel of the angels reminds them of this.

The angels, amidst the disciples on earth are asking them, "Why are you looking to heaven? He is gone. Your work is here on earth. Your work is to bring about the reign of God on earth."

8. Fr Craig Larkin SM, "The Icon of the Ascension: A Marian Church" p 2 (unpublished work).

Significantly, heaven and earth – earth and heaven – meet in this icon, but the disciples, including Mary (of whom more later), have earthly concerns to address and earthly tasks to which they must attend. Their task-as-church is no less, in fact, than “making disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”. (Matt 28:19-20).

Their task is our task as the contemporary Australian church: bringing about nothing less than the reign of God and all that it demands. As Benjamin and Burford point out, “the role of each member of the Church is to show to our world – our neighbourhood, fellow workers, our children, our clients and our lovers – something of the divine, the holy, the sacred; something that leads them to ‘see’ Jesus more clearly. When we pause to consider this mandate, it can be quite confronting.”⁹

The key figures depicted in the icon are Peter, garbed in gold; John the Evangelist, in striking red, both on the right; Paul, on the left, in blue, and in the central position, the position to which the eye is drawn, Mary.

Let’s spend time with each of these ‘key characters’, because each has been enormously significant and continues to offer a great deal in terms of our task as church.

Peter – first called Simon, impetuous, ‘boots and all’, faithful yet flawed; a leader because, not in spite of, all this – exemplifies the Petrine church. Jesus told him, “...you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church....I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven...” (Matt 16:18-19). Conventionally, Peter has been called the first pope, although the term ‘pope’ as we understand it belongs to a much later period.¹⁰ Central to the Petrine church is the element of ‘Tradition’ – that which has been handed on by those who knew and walked with Jesus. It’s probably the Petrine element of the church that is most easily recognised by those outside the church.

With Mary, John stood at the foot of the cross. Like Peter, John witnessed to Jesus’ ministry, and unlike Peter, Paul or Mary, John became an evangelist – a gospel writer. John’s gospel is different; it does not follow the pattern of the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is highly literary and symbolic, indicating that John brings a different dimension to the narrative. Larkin writes,

“Then there is John’s experience...that of the one who was a special friend of the Lord, and who laid his head on the Lord’s breast. He puts us in contact with ‘what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have contemplated and touched with our hands, the Word of life.’ (1 Jn 1:1) There’s a beautiful saying in the writings of a 4th century writer called Evagrius of Pontus....

*The lord’s breast; the knowledge of God.
Whoever rests on it will be a theologian.*¹¹

Paul’s appearance in a prominent position is a salutary reminder that an icon’s remit is not to record history, since Paul could not have been present at the Ascension. An icon’s remit is to express what is believed. The belief expressed here is that Paul, as the one whose missionary journeys brought the promise of the kingdom to so many lands, represents a vital face of the church.

Incidentally, but not accidentally, the feet of Peter and John are still, representing a more contemplative stance, while the feet of Paul the missionary are in motion.

Before Peter, John or Paul knew Jesus in any sense, Mary knew Jesus. The *theotokos* – the God-bearer – not only literally bore the Son of God for the world, not only co-operates in God’s dream for the world, but images the mission of the church: bearing God to the world.

Was Mary present at the Ascension? We don’t know, and it doesn’t matter.

What matters is that today the church desperately needs its Marian face.

The church needs its Petrine face: cherishing the twin pillars of Scripture and Tradition.

The church needs its Pauline face: continually going out to those who yearn for the reign of God, not expecting to meet them at the church door.

The church needs its Johannine face: contemplating, praying, pondering the mystery that is God’s love for God’s creation.

And the church needs its Marian face: communing equally with God, with God’s Son, and with God’s people.

As Larkin says of Mary, “She is always in relationship. In any Icon of Mary she is never alone: she is always in relationship either to Jesus or to others. And here, she is there in a relationship of harmony with the other poles of the Church – with Peter and the Petrine element, with Paul and the Apostolic element and with John and the mystical element. She is there as the first believer in the Lord, and as one witnessing to the Lord whom she has experienced.”¹²

This notion of Mary always in relationship is exemplified in the fact that the first name given to Mary in the Greek is not mother, not virgin, not queen, but *Theotokos*, God-bearer. This name originates from the Third Ecumenical Council held at Ephesus in 431 CE. “The title *Theotokos* was approved at Ephesus in the first place because it helped to affirm the reality of Christ. Mary is honoured, therefore, not in isolation but because of her intimate relationship to Christ, the God who became human.”¹³

As Catholics we often say, “Hail Mary, full of grace...blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus...” – but how often do we – how fully can we – *really* grasp this reality of Mary’s bearing God?

As a correlative to this, St Gregory of Nyssa writes of God, “...Although he is so great that he can hold all creation in his palm, you can wholly embrace him. He dwells within you.”¹⁴

9. Anne Benjamin & Charles Burford, *Leadership in a Synodal Church*, Garratt Publishing, Mulgrave, 2021, p 6.

10. *Cf Lumen gentium* n8: “This is the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, (12*) which our Saviour, after His Resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd,(74) and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority,(75) which He erected for all ages as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth”. (76) This Church constituted and organised in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him,(13*) although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure.”

11. Fr Craig Larkin, SM, *op cit*, p 5.

12. *ibid*, p 8.

13. K.K. Fitzgerald, “Mary the Theotokos and the Call to Holiness” in Braaten, Carl E and Jenson, Robert W. *Mary. Mother of God*, Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2004, p 84.

Mary has borne God for each one of us and it is her fervent hope that God might find a place of welcome within God's own creation, each one of us.

And our task is not merely to offer hospitality to God, but to carry God, to bear the God of love in such a way that others are drawn to God and all God offers. Each of us is called to be a *Theotokos*.

A MARIAN WAY FORWARD?

The Creed proclaimed at Mass and originating from the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE states, "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church."

Very succinctly, we could say that the Petrine way is 'one'.

We could say that the Johannine way is 'holy'.

We could say that the Pauline way is 'apostolic'.

And we could say that the Marian way invites us to be 'catholic'.

At a time in the life of the Australian church freighted equally with promise and disquiet, a Marian way forward offers much that is worthy of sustained contemplation and spirited dialogue.

Indeed, early in his papacy, Pope John Paul II wrote, addressing the Roman Curia, "This *Marian* profile is just as – if not more so – fundamental and characterising for the Church as the *apostolic and Petrine* profile to which it is profoundly united. Also in this aspect of the Church, Mary precedes the pilgrim People of God."¹⁵ [authors' emphasis]

Australia's Archbishop Francis Carroll, in an address on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady Help of Christians, 2001, said, on this matter, "The strengths of the Petrine dimension... require the balance of the Marian. Without it an almost monarchic, clericalist and even legalistic spirit can enter in. The Holy Father has consistently appealed to those accorded priestly authority to temper the drive towards power by contemplating the Marian dimension of the Church and its service. Hans Urs von Balthasar

claimed that "if the mystery of the Marian character is obscured or abandoned ... there Christianity must become unisexual, that is all male".

He also wrote that if the Marian dimension is denied or abandoned, "*the Church becomes functionalistic, soulless, a hectic enterprise without any point of rest, estranged from its true nature by the planners. And because, in this manly masculine world, all that we have is one ideology replacing another, everything becomes polemical, critical, bitter, humourless and ultimately boring, and people in their masses run away from such a Church*".¹⁶ [authors' emphasis]

Balthasar's adjectives can be debated but there's no debating that "people in their masses" are abandoning the church as we know it.

A Marian church, by its very nature, is respectful of the Petrine, Pauline and Johannine dimensions. After all, Mary knew Peter – in all his strengths and frailties. At the cross, Jesus entrusted his beloved mother to John:

"When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son."

Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." (John 19:26-27)

Despite his inclusion in the Icon of the Ascension, Paul has not yet become Christian. Icons have a curious disregard for chronology and factual historical accuracy.

When the pregnant Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, Elizabeth proclaims, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." (Luke 1:45)¹⁷

It is easy to sympathise with Australian poet Philip Martin's view:

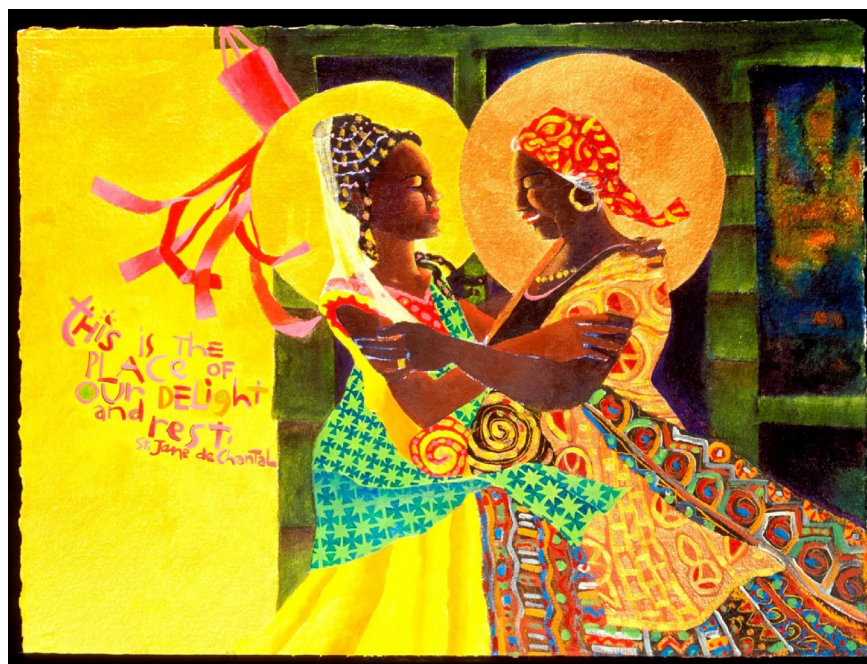
"No room at the inn for them. But this is just

The latest of their tribulations. Think How the ordeal began: the girl pregnant, The man outraged. Well of course he was,

They'd never been to bed. This was the Spirit?

Moving in His mysterious way? Not peace,

A sword..."¹⁸



14. "On the Song of Songs", 2 quoted in Fitzgerald, op cit, p 89.

15. Address of John Paul II to the Cardinals and Prelates of the Roman Curia Received for the Presentation of the Christmas Greetings 22 December 1987. 16. Homily by Archbishop Francis P. Carroll on Our Lady Help of Christians 3 May 2001.

16. Homily by Archbishop Francis P. Carroll on Our Lady Help of Christians 3 May 2001.

17. Richard Rohr ofm writes of Mary's visit to Elizabeth: "...Mary found a place of reality that humanity can begin to touch upon. A woman who goes to visit her cousin in pregnancy. She wasn't caught up in a salvation trip. Mary was caught up in life; and she knew what mattered in life were people...she knew how to surrender herself to people the day after she is told she is to be the Mother of God." Quoted in Craig Larkin sm, *A Certain Way: An exploration of Marist spirituality*, Rome, Centre for Marist Studies, 1995, p 116.

18. Philip Martin, "Stable" in Les A Murray (ed), *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* Collins Dove, Blackburn, 1986, p 150.

Mary's response is worth quoting in full, because it exemplifies her deep faith and confidence at a time that must have also been terrifying.

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;

my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.

For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;

behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.

The Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him.

He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.

He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones

but lifted up the lowly.

The hungry he has filled with good things;

the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy,

according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Luke 1:46-55)

There is so much to ponder here, not least the confidence and conviction of this young Jewish woman's response. Recall Mary's bearing in the Icon of the Ascension: she is centrally placed and she is composed and steadfast, but sombre, for she knows that the way forward will be neither clear nor simple.

Despite having her life turned upside down, and probably experiencing the opprobrium of her community, Mary's words are "ancient words, ever true...They resound with God's own heart..."¹⁹ Like her son will do, she praises the Lord and delights in the unexpected favour of God. Does she not anticipate the sword Simeon foretells in the euphoria of the moment? She is surely as elated as Elizabeth by the

confirmation of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Mary identifies the strength and the mercy of God, and God's abiding fidelity to God's people. She recognises a God who acts unpredictably; who displaces the highly ranked and uplifts the humble. She proclaims a God who feeds the hungry those who believe they have no need for God go away empty. She sees herself as one of the Chosen People, in the lineage of Abraham and his descendants.

In short, Luke portrays Mary as transformed from a perplexed girl, full of doubt and questions, to a mother-to-be whose new situation provides self-assurance and maturity beyond her years.

There is so much here for the architects of a new home for the people of God in Australia, committed to unearthing its Marian face, to contemplate – before the stable, the encounter with Simeon, life in Nazareth, the wedding feast... and always the looming spectre of the cross.

A CHURCH OF THE MAGNIFICAT

A Marian church is a church that proclaims the Magnificat.

A Marian church is so concentrated on the greatness of the God through whom, with whom and in whom it exists, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, that it cannot become distracted by distinctions of role in focusing on the place each of us has in bringing God to birth in the world.

A Marian church is one that has come to know God through God's Son, and does not overlook the humble origins of the Son. Hence its members are at home in simple surroundings, and uneasy in situations where there is too much – too much wealth, too much extravagance, too much comfort, too much that is unnecessary. Like the early church (to which Mary belonged) portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles, resources are for all: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's

need." (Acts 2:44-45)

A Marian church, because it rejoices in the God who has saved, preaches that each one of us is saved, redeemed and most of all loved – as we are. It calls each one of us to greater fidelity, compassion, generosity and love because we are loved by God, not in order to be loved by God.

A Marian church, while honouring the Petrine legacy, is neither focused on, nor seduced by, power for its own sake, but rejoices in the lowly: the gifts and insights of those whose lives are closely aligned to the life of God and who don't seek attention. Pope Francis writes, "Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves."²⁰

A Marian church cares for all in practical ways, echoing Mary who was attentive at Cana and Jesus who fed the people who were not only without food, but were "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). Indeed many church agencies, as well as individuals and parish groups, routinely cater to the needs they see around them directly because of what they believe.

A Marian church is a merciful church, with arms – and doors – wide open. Its teaching and preaching are infused by gospel values, and hence it is clear, uncompromising, and relentlessly infused by inclusion, love and mercy. Think of the family home, however humble or grand. Who would countenance the home that is not open to all the members of the family, whatever their story? "The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door... Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church..."²¹ Pope Francis

19. "Ancient Words" Lyrics by Lynn Deshazo. <https://austinbhebe.wordpress.com/2012/11/30/ancient-words-ever-true/>

20. Pope Francis, op cit, n288.

21. Ibid, n47.

offers this exhortation intending it to be understood both literally and metaphorically; Church buildings with open doors, and Church people with open arms and hearts.

Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Order of Preachers, is unequivocal on this: “Alas, many fine Christians do feel that door is closed, or at least not wide open, because they are divorced and remarried, or gay, or living with partners, or disagree with the Church in some way, or have in some way lost their way....If the Church is our home, we do not have to deserve membership. We do not have to justify taking our place in the congregation.... When the prodigal son came home, he was not given time to make an apology or explain....His father ran and embraced him, and clothed him and held a party.”²²

Perhaps a Marian church involves lots of celebrations!

A Marian church must be a listening church, at least as much as a speaking church. Mary’s major contribution to salvation history arose from her being a listener, and so when God’s invitation was issued by an angel, her attentive disposition heard and responded wholeheartedly. The integrity of Mary’s ‘yes’ offers the possibility that there may have been earlier invitations but the invited were not listening. Remember the parable of the wedding feast? “The feast is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy to come. Go out, therefore, and invite to the feast whomever you find...” (Matt 22:8-9)

Very few of the words spoken by Mary have been recorded – the Magnificat is the example *par excellence* – but there is no doubt that she was a disciple who listened to her son, just as he no doubt listened to her, to Joseph and to the Jewish teachers of his youth. In Sue Monk Kidd’s compelling novel, *The Book of Longings*, Mary tells her daughter-in-law who is experiencing malice from the local community, “Turn the other cheek....Jesus and I have also been the recipients of this kind of malice...I told him what I told

you, ‘Pay them no mind and turn the other cheek. Their hearts are boulders and their heads are straw.’”²³ Why would the wisdom of Jesus not be drawn in part from Mary during the Nazareth years?

The Icon of the Ascension depicts Mary as central but as one of many. No one is speaking, each is silent, poised, as it were, before beginning the task of being Jesus-on-earth. Much earlier, after Jesus is lost and found, Mary is characterised as the one who “kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). Larkin says beautifully, “The Marian Church lives in Nazareth in silence and simplicity. She does not live in a castle. Her home is like all the other homes. She goes out to chat with the other villagers. She weeps with them, she rejoices with them, but she never preaches to them. Above all she listens.”²⁴ [authors’ emphasis]

A CHURCH THAT LISTENS

Writer Andrew Solomon says, “It is nearly impossible to hate anyone whose story you know.”²⁵ In order to know an individual’s – or a community’s – story, you must listen. You may need to listen often, or for a sustained period, and you may first need to hear what isn’t important in order to reach what really matters. Anyone who’s travelled with a friend knows that the conversation deepens as the days go by. There will be no revelations on day one.

Mary and John are people who know each other’s stories. They pivot around Jesus and when Jesus is no longer physically present to them, each balances and strengthens the other. Their relationship is instructive for a church that strives to be merciful and inclusive as well as prayerful and contemplative. Clearly John mirrors Mary’s hospitality and Mary’s faithful pondering finds an echo in the mysticism of John’s gospel. In the simplest terms, a Marian church must be a Johannine church, and vice versa.

A Marian church will be a listening church to the extent that it provides opportunities for its members to listen

to each other. This is especially the task of leadership. Certainly, disciples of the Word need – and want – to hear God’s word, but they also need to hear their own good news – their own gospel – and the gospels of those around them. And having really listened, like Mary, the people of God will be enriched by pondering the fruits of listening in their hearts.

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties, of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”²⁶

To listen deeply is to open oneself to “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age”. The Plenary Council’s scriptural motto is, “Listen to what the Spirit is saying” (Rev 2:7). Does the Spirit not speak most clearly through – and to – those whose voices are not often heard – especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted?

Denis McBride wrote that, “Jesus addressed his message to those whose open woundedness is a cry to the graciousness of God. It is these lost, last and least who are hugged into importance by an eccentric king who cherishes them above all others. These are the ones who are surprised by love and beneficence in the parables of the Kingdom.”²⁷ Mary knows and understands these ‘lost, last and least’.

A touchstone of the Plenary Council might well be the extent to which it invites the ‘unusual suspects’ to share their stories. One of the riches of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013 – 2017) was the opportunity for individuals to share their experiences in private sessions. This made it possible for many to participate who would not otherwise have done so.

Irish poet John O’Donohue describes the place of the Annunciation as “the

22. Timothy Radcliffe OP, *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination*, Bloomsbury, London, 2019, p 206.

23. Sue Monk Kidd, *The Book of Longings*, Headline Publishing Group, London, 2020, p 151.

24. Fr Craig Larkin SM, *A Certain Way: An Exploration of Marist Spirituality*, Centre for Marist Studies, Rome, 1995, p 81.

25. Andrew Solomon, “The Middle of Things: Advice for Young Writers” *The New Yorker*, 11 March 2015.

26. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 8 December 1965, n1.

27. Denis McBride, *Jesus and the gospels*, Redemptorist Publications, Hampshire, 2002, p 110.

room full of listening”²⁸ A church which is authentically Marian needs also to be a ‘room full of listening’; full of people who long to listen – to those who have felt shunned by the church; to those who believe their life choices place them ‘beyond the pale’; to those whose scruples mean they can never accept that they are loved by God; to those who have accrued so much grief that the good news preached by the church rings hollow.

There is no doubt that Mary knew grief. With John, she witnessed Jesus’ harrowing death. Of our iconic figures, Peter had fled, Paul was still Saul, but Mary and John, the mother and the mystic, remained. Mary had lost her only son; John had lost his closest friend. As Mary and John are ‘consigned’ to each other by Jesus, they are forever bonded. Hence a Marian church ‘overlaps’ with a Johannine church; listening and holiness are inseparable.

Mary is a woman of reflection and contemplation rather than a woman of many words. At the wedding feast of Cana, when a shortage of wine threatens embarrassment, Mary simply



says to the servers, “Do whatever he tells you.” (John 2: 5) Embarrassment is averted and Jesus’ glory begins to be manifest.

Mary was not one to push herself forward, to claim any pre-eminence. Jean Coste writes, “One has only to read the Acts of the Apostles to realise that the apostles are the pillars of the Church, and that Mary is among the crowd with those women whom we know had no vote in chapter at that time. There is an infinitely fruitful paradox here. The person closest to Christ...did not claim any position of power or privilege, but simply joined the Church....she gives us to understand that no destiny, however exceptional, can truthfully find place before Christ unless it comes within the Church...the ecclesial community and its unity were more important to her than her personal situation. Today, when the longing is so strong for a renewed Church...Mary is there as the reference point...”²⁹

FINDING UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The desire for, and the difficulty of achieving, unity are at least as much issues today as they were in the first century church. The Marian way invites us to be one, as Mary and Jesus are one. Wisdom woman and 2021 Senior Australian of the Year, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, has painted a series of the Stations of the Cross. One of the paintings “gives us a Mary holding the body of her dead son, Jesus. It takes her keen eye to point out that the hearts of Mary and Jesus are one.”³⁰

However, the ‘oneness’ Christ desires for his church is not synonymous with homogeneity or uniformity. The church of the Acts of the Apostles, founded on Judaism, has become a way of life that spans continents, races, languages and myriad life circumstances. The genius of Pope Francis is that he is able to speak in ways that encourage and enliven a global people of God who reach to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The story of Pentecost presents a microcosm of the future church’s diversity:

“...they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded...”

(Acts 2: 4-7)

Neither Mary, John, Peter nor Paul could have conceived the way in which a church with such inauspicious beginnings would grow – not without scandal, suffering and numerous setbacks but always with the gospel of Jesus as its hallmark.

However, while growth was the church’s clear mission, growth inevitably led to ‘questions arising’, disputes, persecution and factionalism. Today’s ‘left’ and ‘right’, ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ groups are prefigured in Paul’s letters: “While there is jealousy and rivalry among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving in an ordinary human way? Whenever someone says, ‘I belong to Paul’, and another, ‘I belong to Apollos’, are you not merely human?...So let no one boast about human beings...all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God.” (I Cor 3: 3-4, 21-23).

A dispute around dietary law recounted in Acts is resolved when a letter is written stating, “...it is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities....’ When the people read it they were delighted...” (Acts 15: 28, 31). However, then and now, not all tensions are so quickly resolved.

The steps leading to the Assembly of the Plenary Council have required an enormous degree of contemplation, discernment, prayer, conversation, reading – and then it’s all repeated! While for some this is drawn out and frustrating, others recognise in this approach a Marian way, and indeed a

28. John O’Donohue, “The Visitation” *Conamara Blues*, Bantam Books, London, 2000, p 63.

29. Jean Coste sm, *Marie, inspiratrice de vie et d’action apostolique*. 1980, p 8 in Larkin, *A Certain Way*, p 69.

30. Stephanie Dowrick, “Wisdom walks in two worlds” *Spectrum*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17-18 July 2021, p 9.

blueprint for a Marian church. Waiting and wondering were very familiar to Mary – not aimless waiting and wondering, but faith-filled, prayerful and trusting waiting and wondering. “...and his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” (Luke 2:51).

One of the outcomes of this Marian way is that, when true listening and discernment take place, differences are more likely to be genuinely understood and, if not resolved, accepted, because they belong to individuals whose common longing is for the reign of God as promised by God’s son.

It is surely one of the hopes of the Plenary Council that the commitment to discernment and all that it demands – the commitment to a Marian church – will become a hallmark of people’s experience of church life in Australia.

Another hope for the Council expressed by many is that the God-given gifts of women will be recognised in ways that make real Pope Francis’ desire for “...a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.”³¹

As the Boston Seminar noted, “there can be no future for the Church which women have not had a pivotal hand in shaping.”³²

‘Incisive’ and ‘pivotal’ are adjectives which also apply to Mary. While some religious artworks, reflecting their era, portray a pallid and docile Mary, the Icon of the Ascension presents an interdependent, steadfast Mary. She is with, yet slightly apart from, the disciples, and she looks forward rather than to them. Her gaze is incisive and except for the ascendant Jesus, the other figures look to her. Only Jesus and Mary, each in a pivotal position, look beyond the present to the beckoning future.

What do Mary, and a church that bears her name, have to offer here?

As noted earlier, at the wedding feast of Cana, Mary instructs the servers, “Do whatever he tells you.” (John 2: 5). Hers is a calmly confident voice, and in that setting, her confidence is rewarded. It seems reasonable to imagine that there were many occasions, largely unrecorded, when Mary provided this gentle but firm counsel.

In the Icon of the Ascension, she is a still point in a turning world.

In today’s turning world, a Marian voice can be an incisive and pivotal reminder of the core of the gospel: the paths that must be chosen if the reign of God is to be realised.

The voice of a Marian church calls us back, again and again, to the heart of the matter, and deters us, when necessary, from the inevitable diversions that cross our paths.

It’s highly likely that in many diocesan settings, parishes, agency workplaces, universities, even Vatican offices, there are women – and men – who fill this role, amid their own work, not because of the position they hold but because they have a Marian heart. They can see more than those in the thick of decision-making, policy setting and so on and they have the courage and *auctoritas* (as distinct from authority) to speak, or act. They do this, not to draw attention to themselves, but because they feel a vocational call to do so. They are envoys of a Marian church.

Think for a moment of an extended family, perhaps your own. Is there a family member who exerts a certain influence over others? It may be because of age or role; for example, a grandparent. It may be because of particular experience, for example, an individual who has overcome adversity or lives with a disability. In days gone by, a priest or member of a religious congregation would have had an elevated role in the family even though s/he was probably largely absent.³³

This family member may well exercise a Marian influence in being a gentle corrective, an encouraging presence, a contemplative soul. The parish is another setting where individuals

exercise an influence that is ‘under the radar’, entirely benign and entirely altruistic.

The Marian way is at home in the domestic sphere as well as the wider institutional church and is particularly attentive to the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of the whole community, avoiding undue elevation of official or designated roles. The Marian church acknowledges that each individual is gifted and graced.

The Marian way is confronted by the increasing corporatisation of the church, at a time when the church’s stocks are low and yet our country needs what the church, at its best, is well placed to offer. The Marian way promotes leadership from within that is instinctive and integrated, rather than competitive or attention-seeking.

“Typically, society would rightly expect religious groups, including the Catholic Church, to reach out and offer leadership and wisdom in these socially uncertain and sometimes chaotic times. Ironically, just when such wise leadership could be helpful, the Church has lost much of its credibility in the eyes of many in society. Consequently, the Church has lost its voice. Some would even argue it has lost its right to have a voice.”³⁴

Recall the announcement in March 2013 that Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio would become the 266th pope. He chose the name ‘Francis’, honouring a man of deep faith who lived simply. He greeted the people and asked them to pray for him. He took the bus back to the hotel with other bishops rather than the car provided. His new home was not the lavish papal residence but a guesthouse. The first Holy Thursday after his election he washed the feet of Muslim prisoners in Rome. And so on.

In the years since his election Pope Francis has spoken and written of Mary, and the Marian way, on numerous occasions. In doing so he is echoing his immediate predecessors, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. As Damien Mackey indicates, “John Paul II stressed the priority

31. Pope Francis, *op cit*, n103.

32. Elizabeth Johnson quoted in Boston Seminar, p 491, in Benjamin and Burford, *op cit*, p 10.

33. In John Boyne’s novel, *A History of Loneliness* (London, Penguin, 2014) Fr Odran Yates is told by his friend from seminary days, Tom, how much life changes after ordination: “...the respect we get, Odran...It’s like we’re gods now! Nothing like the way we’ve been treated for the last seven years.” p 94.

34. Benjamin & Burford, *op cit*, p 3.

of the Marian in an address to the Roman Curia before Christmas 1987: 'This Marian profile is also – even perhaps more so – fundamental and characteristic for the Church as is the apostolic and Petrine profile to which it is profoundly united....The Church lives on this authentic 'Marian profile....'the Marian dimension of the Church is antecedent to that of the Petrine.... Mary precedes all others...'³⁵

One particularly succinct and compelling statement from Pope Benedict XVI encapsulates his attitude towards Mary: "Mary's greatness consists in the fact that she wants to magnify God, not herself."³⁶

Francis' instinctively humble approach to his papacy is effective in modelling what a church with a Marian face might look like.

Pope Francis is the leader of a people in the way of Peter.

Pope Francis is an indefatigable missionary in the way of Paul.

Pope Francis is clearly a man of deep prayer and contemplation, in the way of John.

And Pope Francis is a man of humility, hospitality and hope, in the way of Mary.

WHAT MIGHT BE THE SIGNS OF A CHURCH AT HOME IN ITS MARIAN DIMENSION?

All who care for the Australian church have hopes for a post-Plenary Council landscape. Those hopes of course are not aligned; at times they may even be strongly opposed. And like the implementation of the new direction of the Second Vatican Council, the implementation of the Plenary Council's outcomes and emphases will take time and commitment.

If the new home we share as Australian Catholics has a Marian face (which does not preclude Petrine, Pauline and Johannine elements) what signs might indicate this good news?

The key could well be as simple as a deep sense of belonging.

After all, if you encounter a place where you feel you belong – a neighbourhood, a friend's home, a café, a gym, a place of worship – you want to go back and you want others to experience it too.

The church is far more than the church building or the 'parish plant' or even the diocesan edifice.

It might be encountered in a small city chapel wedged between high-rises.

It might be encountered in those good folk who visit prisoners in gaols or asylum seekers in detention centres.

It might be encountered in members of the local St Vincent de Paul conference, or the volunteers in an op shop or a shelter for the homeless.

It might be encountered in the person you meet if you're seeking to marry in the church, to have your child baptised, to become part of the RCIA, to have a marriage annulled, or to learn about the sacramental program.

It might be encountered when you make funeral arrangements in a church that has not seen your face for some time.

It might be encountered when you pluck up the courage to admit to the school principal that you have lost your regular income and the school fees will have to take a back seat to groceries and utilities.

If all these significant and at times difficult situations are to be real encounters with Christ's church, then they must embody the qualities Mary embodied: warmth and welcome, hospitality, inclusion, understanding, sustained listening, simplicity, compassion and humility.

A BIGGER PICTURE

These examples are largely drawn from 'one on one' experiences of the People of God, and while these are vital, and it is through them that we meet the Jesus of the gospels, the church has grown to encompass so much more. A Marian church calls for a careful, daily, balancing act so that the heart of the matter is not obscured by the institution. "...since the People of God

is first an ecclesial being, not a juridical one, its essence lies in its spirituality rather than its structures and canonical norms. The law follows and supports the theology, ecclesiology and spirituality; it does not define them."³⁷

If the new home we share as Australian Catholics has a Marian face, how might its 'theology, ecclesiology and spirituality' reflect that unequivocally? If the Plenary Council members 'listen to what the Spirit is saying', as is their mandate, what might emerge?

A Marian church is a listening church, as already asserted, and so the practice of discernment ideally becomes the 'default position' for major decision-making at all levels. If the long-held principle of subsidiarity is also to be upheld, then the importance of discernment processes becoming commonplace is apparent. Presumably the bishops, meeting formally, routinely come to decisions this way, but is this routinely the case in diocesan leadership groups, church agencies, Catholic schools and most importantly, parishes?

We say parishes because this is the setting when most who identify as Catholic come together. As communities become smaller, and attachment may well be more fragile, it is critical that individuals feel listened to, are exhorted to be listeners-in-the-way-of-Mary, and contribute to the decision-making process. Hence the inclusive community that the Marian church espouses is not modelled at the most subsidiary level.

Benjamin and Burford say, "National discernment and shared decision-making on the scale of the Plenary might be reasonably infrequent.

However, regular cycles of consultation and discernment at parish, deanery and diocesan levels are simple to initiate and should be normative in a synodal Church. When the Plenary process was initiated in Australia, one elderly Catholic observed: "This is the first time...anyone has asked me what I hope for my Church."³⁸

Look again at the Icon of the

35. Damien F Mackey, "The Marian Dimension: Part 4, A Marian Church" https://www.academia.edu/27515957/The_Marian_Dimension_Part_Four_A_Marian_Church

36. Pope Benedict XVI in *An Invitation to Faith* Ignatius Press 2007.

37. The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting co-responsible governance in the Catholic Church in Australia, Final Report of the Governance Review Project Team, August 2020, p 11.

38. Benjamin & Burford, *op cit*, p 54.

Ascension. It depicts Mary in a central position, but not the most important position; that is reserved for the ascendant Christ. Mary is clearly *a member of the community* and she holds the community together. This seems an apt model for Church leaders: a member of the community with the God-given gifts and *graces to hold the community together*.

A longstanding role of the church – of all churches – is to advocate for those whose situations require advocacy, and to articulate the truth in gospel terms. Typically this role is taken by church leaders, including leaders of, for example, social services and aid agencies. The Australian church has a history of fulfilling this role, but currently its voice is compromised by the heinous – and widely publicised – crimes of clergy and church personnel. These crimes are far from the whole story but for many they have become emblematic. Yet Jesus said, “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32).

How might a Marian church address this? If it takes seriously the imperatives of mercy, humility and inclusion, its leaders will need to be comfortable with acknowledging collective institutional guilt and reiterating assurances that it will never happen again. There is no room for qualifiers, tempting as they may be. Then, and only then, can the right to a voice be reclaimed. And having been reclaimed, that voice must be Mary’s voice. As observed earlier, Mary did not speak out often, but when she did, she spoke with conviction and power. Greg Sheridan writes, “...we have neglected [Mary’s] agency and strength, her spark and chutzpah.”³⁹

The icon’s ‘assembly’ also suggests an alignment, where possible, of representatives of other churches and organisations who share similar views and who wish to promote them effectively in the community. There is much to imitate in the Magnificat in

terms of a warm personal tone, a strong proclamation of faith and a universal application. This is not the time for church personnel to be hectoring, to be ‘holier than thou’ or to be speaking hierarchically. The medium is the message.

On this matter of the message, Pope Francis’ decision to abandon some of the traditional accoutrements has lessons for all who yearn for a more Marian church. The Marian way prefers the ‘ordinary’, the ‘everyday’, to privilege and partiality and this time of renewal offered by the Plenary Council could well be a time to pare back some accretions. Many of us have been decluttering our homes and lives in Covid days – can we render the same service to our church?

One very practical outcome of a simpler approach would be reducing the gap between those with decision making authority and the broader church membership. Benjamin and Burford purposefully avoid the term ‘laity’, because of its pejorative associations, and remind us that “Those called to ordained ministry are themselves called from within the *laos* to their service of the Church. Laos includes all the people of God: those called to consecrated life and those called to live out their faith in single or married life, as well as those called to ordained ministry. It is time to find another word [to replace laity]”.⁴⁰

Heightened emphasis on the ordained heightens the challenges of an all-male clergy. There is room for greater emphasis on our common baptism which unites us. Indeed, Pope Francis said recently, “St Paul ‘confirms the profound unity that exists between all the baptised, in whatever condition they are bound to, because every one of them is a new creature in Christ. Every distinction becomes secondary to the dignity of being children of God.’”⁴¹

There is a lesson perhaps in early Icons’ representation of Mary and the disciples. Simplicity is key. Over the centuries, artistic representations of Mary became more and more

elaborate. Many treasure these images and find they support devotion, but they can also, ironically, draw a veil over the ‘real’ Mary. There is a contemporary pendulum swing to ‘cleaner’ representations which are more faithful to the Christian scriptures – or indeed, mirror particular cultures which can bring Mary closer to the *laos* of cultures that are neither Western nor Middle Eastern.

The chosen people of the Hebrew scriptures believed fervently in the promise of Yahweh that a Messiah, a Saviour, would come. It was the foundation of their lives. If a journalist interviewed individuals from the times, it’s unlikely that any would have imagined that the Messiah would be born of a seemingly unremarkable virgin from the (then) insignificant village of Nazareth. Hence, Nathanael’s question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

Mary was, to say the least, an ‘unusual suspect’ and as alluded to earlier, her ‘yes’ led to a difficult and ultimately grief-laden life. Hence, she understands the journey of those whose path is unconventional and those who are harshly, and perhaps ignorantly, judged. A Marian church has a special care for these people, and every society includes the poor, the marginalised, those with a disability, those who struggle to find a place where they truly feel ‘at home’. A Marian church provides such a home, a place of belonging.

Further, the wise leaders of a Marian church will create opportunities to listen intently to, and learn from, the ‘unusual suspects’, because that is what Jesus did. He was regularly criticised for mixing with the wrong crowd, disregarding the laws around the Sabbath, fasting and purity, speaking openly with women, socialising too much! It’s ironic that the church that emerged from the gospels (eventually) became known in some quarters for judging more readily than forgiving and assisting, for example, people in

39. Greg Sheridan, *Christians: The Urgent Case for Jesus in our World*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2021, p 130.

40. Benjamin & Burford, *op cit*, p 4.

41. Pope Francis speaking in Rome at his weekly audience, 8 September 2021.

'irregular' relationships, members of the LGBTQI community, unmarried mothers (whatever about the fathers), those whose lives were marred by addiction, and so on.

Plenary Council documentation states, "The primary aim of the 'Listening and Dialogue' phase was to listen to the voice of God speaking through the voices of the people, in order to gain a 'sense of the faith' (*sensus fidei*, EG119). For this reason, the *diverse perspectives of many people were sought* to contribute to the conversation during this phase." [authors' emphasis]⁴² It's easier said than done but this practice – seeking diverse perspectives from many people – is very Marian and very enriching – in life generally, not only in 'church life'.

The Marian way and the Johannine way complement and enrich each other. In John's gospel, Jesus' penultimate words were to his mother and his disciple. The mystical, reflective approach of John's gospel, echoing and fulfilling the lyricism of many of the Hebrew scriptures, perhaps prefigures the riches that the tradition would offer over the centuries to come.

These kinds of possibilities reflect the 'ordinariness', the family-centredness and the community aspects of the Marian church, and invite the *laos* to be strengthened and encouraged by the accumulated wisdom and insight of two millennia. Mary and John were steeped in the Jewish scriptures. Today's disciples can easily access the Christian scriptures and the wisdom of so many faithful women and men. The magisterium has its essential role to play *and* each of us has the grace, in stillness and silence, to recognise the words that speak best to us of the Word.

Building on this spiritual enrichment is another dimension of a new church that lives the Marian and Johannine ways and that is a church that is comfortable with uncertainty, with doubt, with question marks instead of full stops.

Theologian Paul Tillich says, "faith is certain, insofar as it is an experience of the sacred, but...it is uncertain, insofar as it brings finite beings into relation with an infinite reality. The element of uncertainty in faith cannot be avoided, and must be accepted...doubt is included in every act of faith."⁴³

Francois Marc writes, "The Marian Church does not know the answers before the questions are posed. Her path is not traced out in advance. She knows doubt and unease, night and loneliness...She takes her part in the conversation, but makes no claim to know everything. She accepts that she must search."⁴⁴

This can be read as an exhortation to education in the broadest sense. In the contemporary church there are boundless opportunities to learn, to deepen one's understanding, to interrogate what one thinks one knows. A wise leader encourages the *laos* in this direction, shares his/her reading and insights – and his/her questions – and creates settings for sustained, fruitful and respectful conversation. And the ultimate aim of increasing knowledge and understanding? Dominican Herbert McCabe says it well:

"The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us;

I mean there isn't anything else.
Anything else that we

say we believe is just a way of saying that God loves us.

Any proposition, any article of faith is only an expression of faith if it is a way of saying that God loves us."⁴⁵

What could be simpler than believing that God loves us? And yet, how much human suffering has occurred because individuals cannot believe this simple truth – in fact, believe that God will love them when, and only when, they have made sufficient sacrifices, done sufficient penance, confessed enough, overcome enough?

Mary knew that God loved her ceaselessly and a Marian church ceaselessly proclaims this joyous truth.

As the deliberations and outcomes of the Plenary Council continue to unfold, in unintended tandem with the new way of life demanded by the pandemic, will we see a new church home emerge? Will it be a church in which Mary would be at home?

If so, its doors will be open, warmly welcoming all.

Its windows will be open, inviting the Spirit to be at home, to fill the entire house in which we are, as at Pentecost.

Its rooms will be places for people to gather, to share story, to break bread, to drink wine, to dance and to sing.

It will be a place of simple comfort and everything it enfolds will be owned in common.

It will have no fences!

43. <https://www.angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/tillich.html> accessed 6 September 2021.

44. Francois Marc sm "A Marian Church" in Larkin, *A Certain Way*, p 81.

45. Herbert McCabe OP, *Faith Within Reason*, Continuum, London, 2007, p. 33.



A conclusion, for now...

A Church with a Marian face, embracing its Petrine, Pauline, and Johannine dimensions, is a work in progress. As Eliot wrote,

“And the Church must be forever building,
and always decaying,
and always being restored...”⁴⁶

A Marian church resists narrow definition and is always issuing invitations. It is unlimited in scope and seeks to renew itself every day. It is small, poor, humble and ordinary – and it is a treasure house.

Poet David Whyte has wise words for disciples of Jesus in a church of Mary:

“...Be taught now, among the trees and rocks,
how the discarded is woven into shelter,
learn the way things hidden and unspoken
slowly proclaim their voice in the world.
Find that far inward symmetry
to all outward appearances, apprentice
yourself to yourself, begin to welcome
back
all you sent away, be a new
annunciation,
make yourself a door through which
to be hospitable, even to the stranger in
you...”⁴⁷

46. TS Eliot, *The Rock* quoted in Larkin, *A Certain Way* p 45.

47. <https://rollingridge.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Coleman.pdf> accessed 6 September 2021.

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Images used in this publication

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Image 1: The Annunciation II, Daniel Bonnell, cover page

Image 2: Icon of the Ascension, Tom Clark, page [3]

Image 3: Windsock Visitation, Brother Michael O'Neill McGrath OSFS, page [5]

Image 4: Crucifixion, Virgin Mary and Saint John under the cross, stained glass window in church Annunciation of the Lord in Zagreb, www.alamy.com, page [8]

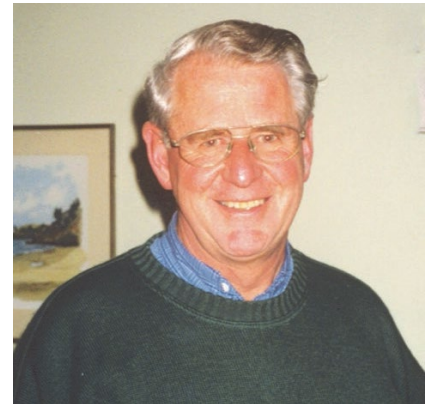
Image 5: Icon of the Annunciation, Michael Galovic, page [13]



Tracey Edstein was a secondary teacher of English and Religious Studies for 22 years in schools with close ties to the Marist and Dominican charisms. She was Religious Studies Co-ordinator with responsibility for curriculum, liturgy, retreats and spiritual staff formation. She completed a Master in Arts (Theology) at Australian Catholic University. Tracey left teaching to become editor of *Aurora*, the monthly magazine of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. Under her leadership the magazine pioneered a unique model, being included in six regional newspapers. Hence its remit became telling the diocesan stories to a broad audience. In 2014 *Aurora* became the first magazine to win both the major awards in Australian Catholic publishing: the Bishop Philip Kennedy Award and the Gutenberg Award. Tracey has long been an active parishioner and has been involved in adult faith formation, various diocesan councils and teams and leading liturgy in the absence of a priest. Currently she is a freelance writer, with a focus on telling authentic faith stories in ways that encourage and affirm readers' own stories. Tracey longs for the day when the gifts of women will be given free rein in the Church.



Professor Br David Hall FMS is the foundation Dean of the La Salle Academy at the Australian Catholic University. La Salle has responsibility for programs that the university offers in the areas of Educational Leadership, Faith Formation and Religious Education and works across the faculties of education and theology. David came to this position after thirty years in Catholic education where he held positions as teacher, head of mission and religious education, principal and systems administrator. In addition to his duties as Dean of La Salle he teaches in Masters of Educational Leadership, and is involved in the governance of Australian Catholic schools. Among his range of international engagements David designed and led a Catholic school leaders program across 22 countries in Africa.



Fr Craig Larkin SM
RIP (1944-2015)

This article draws heavily on some of the unpublished works of Fr Craig Larkin whose material was used with the permission of the Marist Fathers.

Craig Larkin was a New Zealander and a Marist Father with the capacity and commitment to pursue a variety of ministries during his priestly life. He was a gifted teacher and taught at St Patrick's College Silverstream and St Mary's Seminary Greenmeadows. He became Novice Master and later, following study in Rome, became Rector at St Mary's. His time in Rome led to a deep appreciation of the spirituality and prayer of the Eastern Church and in particular, the spirituality of icons. He was able to integrate the Marist story with an informed understanding of the beliefs expressed by iconographers. His easy, accessible style made his work available to a wide audience, through published writings, preaching and lecturing. He was elected province leader of the New Zealand Marist Fathers in 1997 and later served as Vicar General of the Society of Mary for eight years. Craig wrote several books on iconography, Marist spirituality and spirituality generally. Among his titles are *A Certain Way*, an authoritative exploration of Marist history and spirituality; *Pardon in the Wilderness*, a primer for preparing to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation and *An Inner Music*, an introduction to twenty mystics and spiritual teachers. Craig was passionate about addressing people's fears around God and replacing them with an understanding of God's abiding love.



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