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Living the Marian Dimension of the Church

The Christian life is fostered and nurtured through the Church. Pope Francis observes that it is not possible to be Christian without the Church and “claiming to be is purely idealistic and not real” (Harris, 2014). With the Church central to Christians, it is important to understand how to live and be church. The pontificate of Pope Francis has involved calls for a shift in the Church’s self-understanding and what the implications of this could mean for it. An example is his emphasis on the need for the Church to trust in the grace of God rather than creating bureaucratic obstacles (Hodges, 2014). This evaluation will explore this shift as a renewal of the Church today being called to live the Marian dimension. The discussion will begin with a reflection on the Church and the call for renewal. The different dimensions of the Church will be highlighted and the need for living the Marian dimension of the Church will be explained. This will lead to a definition of the Marian dimension, its relevance to the Church and reflect on how the pontificate of Pope Francis and his actions are encouraging a renewal that will make the Marian dimension a reality. The evaluation will conclude with a reflection on ecclesial movements and how the charism of the Marist Brothers and The Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat are seeking to be authentic examples of the Marian dimension in today’s Church. Living the Marian dimension of the Church is not a new way of living church but it is radical because it calls for the Church to have greater faith in the Holy Spirit to bring about the Kingdom of God.

THE CHURCH IN NEED OF RENEWAL

The renewal of the Church can only occur if the Church is open to being led by the Holy Spirit. A renewal does not change the Church, as Pope Benedict XVI said “the Church both before and

after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) is the same holy, catholic and apostolic Church (Lösel, 2008, p. 23). A renewal simply implies making what has previously occurred new again. “The Church has always had a duty of scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting in light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes*, §4) and for it to be able to do this, the Church must seek renewal through the Holy Spirit (*Lumen Gentium*, §15).

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was a bold renewal in the Church that attempted to place the Church back within the centre of society. *Gaudium et Spes* (§2) states “the Church yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives of the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today”. At the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) “the Church had become a foreign body in a changed world, respected but misunderstood and unloved” (Pesch, & Dempsey, 2014, p. 19). Whilst the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) brought about a renewed life in the Church for a short time, the understanding of the Church being misunderstood and unloved still applies today. One just needs to look to the treatment of the Church in the media to affirm this truth. The media will highlight controversies involving Church teaching, the Church comes out on the losing side and the Church hierarchy is pitted against the low lever clergy and lay Catholics (Shaw, 2012, p. 459). The Church seems to be disjointed in its view of the world and can only be united through renewal.

The mystical Body of Christ is the Church who “were all baptised by the Spirit to form one Body” (1 Cor 12:13, NRSV) and as the Body of Christ its mission should be to initiate activities, especially those designed for the needy, such as the works of mercy, unity and the basic right of every person (*Gaudium et Spes*, §42). The Church is the mystical Body of Christ complete with lay, ordained and

consecrated men and women (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §904). The institutional Church, the hierarchy and magisterium, make up only a part of the mystical Body of Christ. Trust in other parts of the Body, like the laity, is needed if the Church is to faithfully carry out God's mission. The Church needs to make new again the same Spirit that guided the first apostles to "go make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt, 28: 19-20, NRSV). It needs to lead Christians to an encounter with Christ through compassion, service, trust, unity and through personal relationships.

THE DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF THE LIVING CHURCH

For the Church to undergo genuine renewal, it needs to trust in the direction it is being led by the Holy Spirit. Hans Urs von Balthasar preferred to speak of the Church as multi-dimensional and by understanding these dimensions an appreciation for renewal can be ascertained. This idea pictures the Church with Mary, Peter, James, John and Paul around Jesus forming a network of principles, which relate to Jesus (McDade, 2005, p. 99). Each of these principles is a dimension of the Church and contributes to the life of the Church. Each dimension is unique, yet each needs the other for the Church to prosper. The Church needs renewal because too great a focus has been given to the Petrine dimension. The Petrine dimension involves the pastoral office (McDade, 2005, p. 105) that comes from the knowledge that Jesus handed Peter the keys to the Kingdom and gave him authority over the Church. This dimension is the hierarchy, the magisterium that guides the Church and conveys teachings on the important doctrine and dogma. It is the authority that gives structure, proper instruction and articulates the beliefs of the Church. A problem has arisen because the Petrine dimension has been placed at the centre of church life, with an over emphasis on the judging and condemning of others (McDade, 2005, p. 104). The Petrine dimension should be in service of the other dimensions and supporting their functioning if the Church is to flourish. This will only happen when the Marian dimension is placed at the centre of the Church. With Mary at the centre, the other dimensions flow because she is always in relationship with either Jesus, Peter, Paul, James and John (Larkin, 2007).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MARIAN DIMENSION OF THE CHURCH

The Marian dimension of the Church is the renewal the Church needs to find its proper place in the world again. Living the Marian dimension suggests the Church, as the mystical Body of Christ, will be able to perceive through faith and personal experience, Mary's motherly care in the ministry of the Church (Kereszty, 2013, p. 790). The Marian dimension is a living Church which makes a choice for compassion over competition, an option for relationship over dogmatism, for humility over power, for service over dominance and it is a Church that pushes boundaries to include all, rather than defining its boundaries to include only the chosen (Larkin, 1995, p. 80). It is these qualities that will flow from a Church that chooses to live the Marian dimension.

The Church acknowledges the Marian dimension precedes the Petrine (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §773) and needs this to filter through to bring the laity into their rightful place within the mystical Body of Christ. The Marian dimension is the secular dimension which makes the Church grow by making it present and operative in places and circumstances where only through the laity can it become relevant (McCarthy, 2015). Where the Petrine dimension of the Church has led to frustration over Church rules and bureaucracy, the relationship between the institutional Church and the laity will most likely change once the all-pervasive Marian dimension of the Church is revealed (Kereszty, 2013, p. 789). This is the renewal the Church is being called to live, a renewal in compassion, unity, relationship, humility, service and trusting in the Holy Spirit.

POPE FRANCIS AND THE MARIAN DIMENSION OF THE CHURCH

The renewal of the Church to live out the Marian dimension has been inspired by the Holy Spirit and is being lived out by Pope Francis. As Francis affirms, "the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of the living Church and it is important to live up to the mission of the Holy Spirit to stop reducing faith to morals and ethics" (Bordini, 2016). Since the beginning of his pontificate, Francis' leadership and rhetoric have been deeply Marian. One need look at his first encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (§1),

“The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus...I encourage the Christian faithful to embark on a new chapter marked by joy.” These sentiments touch on the very essence of the Marian dimension, an encounter with Jesus and the experience of joy. Francis has recognised the need for renewal in the Church, the need to make new again a way of being church that has been forgotten. “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own securities” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §49).

Living the Marian dimension however, requires a renewal of the mystical Body of Christ. Francis speaks to the everyday Christian about what they need to be doing to bring forth Christ in their own way (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §285). There is a shift in the language used by the Church, it is not an ‘us’, the clergy, and ‘them’, the laity, rhetoric, but rather a ‘we’ as the Body of Christ. Francis is holding every member of the Body of Christ to account to help with living the Marian dimension of the Church. There is a call for the laity to cooperate more immediately in the apostolate of the hierarchy, like those men and women who helped the apostle Paul in the Gospel (McCarthy, 2015.)

It is necessary to point out that Pope Francis is calling the Church to live the Marian dimension through his actions and his language. In his writings, he never explicitly mentions the Marian dimension, yet he writes of a Church that is communal, personal, collegial, compassionate, serving and trusting in the Spirit, all essential elements of the Marian dimension. It is the responsibility of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ, to respond to the challenge of Pope Francis and to be renewed in living the Marian dimension.

ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS MAKING THE MARIAN DIMENSION A REALITY

The Marian dimension of the Church is the mystical Body of Christ acknowledging the role of each member, as lay, ordained or consecrated and it is the Church that is inclusive, compassionate, humble and trusting in the Spirit. These are simple characteristics that focus on the spirit of the Church rather than emphasising the clericalism and hierarchy. The Church has always shared in the

characteristics of the Marian dimension and it is now being called to make it central to a way of being Church. This is happening through ecclesial movements which have been growing in the Church since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). There has been an emergence of new ecclesial movements built around particular styles of discipleship and these men and women from all states of life, seek to serve the Church (Green, 2013, p. 3). Everything is destined to come to an end and this is the challenge faced by every institute that wishes to last in history, that is to renew itself, remaining itself, without changing its identity (Hoy See Press Office, 2016, p. 1). This is what the Church is trying to do, renew itself in the world and remain truthful to the Gospel message.

THE ASSOCIATION OF ST MARCELLIN CHAMPAGNAT

One example of ecclesial movements growing in Australia is the Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat. This Association has grown from a knowing and loving of being Church through the Marist charism. The Marist charism is a spirituality flowing in the tradition of St Marcellin Champagnat, who through his life and works, inspired the Institute of the Marist Brothers. The spirituality has at its heart Marcellin’s own experience of being loved by Jesus and called by Mary (Marist Brothers, 2007, p. 9). Key elements of Marist spirituality are trusting in God, making Jesus Christ known and loved, family spirit, simplicity and in Mary’s way (Marist Brothers, 2007, §17, 19, 30). Those identifying as Marists understand these as a way of being Christian that is humble, serving, merciful, that is openness to others and embedded in the knowledge that “without Mary we are nothing and with Mary we have everything, because Mary always has her adorable Son within her arms or in her heart (Marist Brothers, 2007, §25). These qualities of the Marist charism link to the Marian dimension of the Church offering a church that is relational, humble and gives service to others. It is from this charism of the Institute of the Marist Brothers that the Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat blossomed.

Ecclesial groups are a new way of being church that cannot simply be understood as a voluntary association of persons because they provoke an

attraction to the Gospel and offer a proposal of the Christian life which touches every aspect of human existence (*Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, §2). The Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat does this in a way that is Marian and is an example of the Marian dimension of the Church. What makes the Association an example of the Marian dimension of the Church is its acceptance that men, women, lay, ordained or consecrated are equally involved in God's mission, which is the mission of the Church. The Association is a genuine response to a call for co-responsibility for the life and mission of the wider Australian Marist community and the Church (Ministry together with Lay Marists, n.d.). It is an expression of Church that embraces God's mission with Marian joy, hope and audacity and is a place of compassion, communion and service in the Church (Marist Association, 2016, p. 5). It is ecclesial movements like the Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat that are helping the Church renew its identity by living the Marian dimension that is inclusive, inviting, merciful, full of joy and incredibly human.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This evaluation has been an attempt to understand the Church and its need for renewal. It has identified issues with the image of the Church in society and the negative attention drawn to the Church when it emphasises dogma and doctrine. There was a discussion on the multi-dimensional Church and the problems that have arisen from living only the Petrine dimension. It was concluded that the Marian dimension is the mediating dimension between the others as it draws forth the best aspects of each dimension that allow them to be fruitful for the Church. An argument was made that the Spirit is inspiring the mystical Body of Christ to live the Marian dimension, which is being led by the words and actions of Pope Francis. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) new ecclesial movements have flourished, with this evaluation focusing on the Institute of the Marist Brothers and the Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat. It has shown that the Marian dimension of the Church as inspired by the Spirit and being lived by Pope Francis, is also being made a reality by the Marist Association of St Marcellin Champagnat whose members aim to bring the mind and heart of God to actuality of

human experience (Green and McGregor, 2015, p. 12). The Church will always need renewal if it hopes to remain meaningful in the world. At this point in history, the Church needs renewal in terms of its relationship with the world and the best way to do this is to respond to the call of the Spirit to live the Marian dimension of the Church.

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