



Easter candle: reflections on child sexual abuse in the Church and the light of Christ

[Joe Caddy]

Whenever a priest begins ministry in a new parish, he inherits a rich culture. When I commenced 18 months ago at St Mary's, East St Kilda, I not only took on responsibility for one of the most beautiful churches in the archdiocese but also a very welcoming community.

A beautiful tradition at St Mary's is the practice of having the Easter candle decorated each year by an artist. My predecessor Fr Barry Moran initiated this tradition over a decade ago when he asked Gabrielle Banozzo—an art teacher at Presentation College, Windsor—to come up with a design. Gabrielle, now retired, continues to provide her creative services each year.

In our Easter candle we offer a beautiful work of art up to God as a burnt offering, but we are also left with the colourful remnants of past Easter candles, which we bring out and keep alight during our Easter Vigil and Christmas midnight Masses.

Early this year I began to think about what we would like to see on our 2018 Easter candle. I had been reflecting on the fact that every Sunday trusting parents bring their innocent, beautiful and vulnerable children up to our baptismal font, under the light of the Easter candle, to be embraced by Jesus and welcomed into the Christian community.

I felt deeply moved by that reflection as I contemplated the terrible abuses of that trust that have been perpetrated in our Church over generations. As the Royal Commission has revealed, the levels of child sexual abuse were sickening and the defence of institution over the wellbeing of innocent victims was shameful.

This has led us to a very dark place as a Church. Yet despite it all, many parents continue to bring their children to us for blessing at St Mary's. As I contemplated all of this, I came to the conclusion that it is really only the light of Christ that will lead us out of this darkness.

Yes, we need to respond to the recommendations of the Royal Commission, which we should do with generous though chastened hearts. Yes, we need to ensure that we

not only comply with but take deeply to heart state and Church safety standards for children and vulnerable people. However, more importantly, we need to change our culture, to become a Church for the poor and vulnerable; a Church for those who are struggling and searching for meaning and purpose.

The light of Christ alone will show us the way out of our darkness. Gabrielle responded to this idea with a beautiful and challenging artistic interpretation that brings together the key themes of sin, shame and lamentation on the one hand, and hope and light on the other.

Gabrielle's work expresses the hope of the Resurrection that the Easter candle proclaims. With our history of the sinful abuse of the innocent, we have entered the tomb; yet as Christians we believe that Jesus, through his own Crucifixion and death, absorbs and transforms all of that evil and violence. The love of the Father overwhelms it, bringing us all—the sinned against and yes, the sinners too—out of that place of darkness to new life.

Gabrielle used images like the baptismal font to express new life. Tear-stained faces of children portray betrayed innocence and vulnerability. The Word points us to the integrity of truth that we find in the Scriptures and teachings of our Church. In the Pieta, Mary represents the pain of parents at the loss of a child. A girl and boy with knapsacks on their backs, gazing towards the light, speak to us of young people setting out on their journey of life who seek direction from good role models within the Church community. The image of those hopeful young people may even speak to us of a Church that must, not for the first time, begin its journey anew in holiness, humility and hope.

Parishioners at St Mary's have spent time in prayer contemplating the candle and allowing the images to offer them hope and some healing for a future that will take us beyond the darkness and into the glorious light of Christ. It is to walk in that same light of Christ that these trusting parents bring their beautiful babies for baptism; this is their hope and ours.



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