



'The Purity of Truth'

"I am the way, the truth....." Jn 14:6

A reflection by Peter Thomas, JPIC Team

Fake news is immoral when it masquerades as truth, when it irresponsibly diverts people's attention from fact. Sometimes it is gossip and other times it distorts the truth so much that the truth about important local, national and international justice issues are sacrificed in favour of a newspaper obtaining a bigger readership or a television station a higher rating or social media seeking more users. When this happens it is unapologetically justified as a commercial measure to guarantee advertising dollars and hence better returns for shareholders. The morality is often overlooked with little regard to the fact that sharing a lie makes the medium, the publisher, the producer, the journalist co-conspirators in telling the lie.

Communication technology is so advanced that we may soon face events on social media that never happened, created in such a way that even experts will have trouble detecting fact from fiction. Two recent headlines in social media that made their way into some traditional media are typical examples of fake news. "Pope Francis found guilty of Child Trafficking, Rape and Murder" was a scurrilous report that went around the world in seconds but fortunately was squashed by the Vatican Communication's arm and recognised by most reputable media outlets as bogus. Potentially it could have caused the Church considerable grief. Less damaging but nevertheless fake are stories such as, "Sniffing Rosemary increases human memory by up to 75%." These manufactured tabloid stories are carefully designed click-bait to insure that people visit and stay with web sites and read certain kinds of magazines, most notably in Australia the so-called women's magazines genre.

Rumours, gossip, false stories...people often believe and share anything that reinforces their

beliefs choosing media that acts as an echo-chamber for their prejudices. The major offenders in Australia are radio shock jocks and certain cable TV commentators; there are others but their modus operandi is subtle and therefore potentially more dangerous. With so much traditional and social media we are awash with information having access to just about anything we want if we know how, or have the resources to do it, including false information or fake news, misinformation of the most noxious kind, feeding the prejudices of the naïve, the ignorant and the fearful, supporting our injustices.

Amidst this gloom the church has its mission to uphold a tone of hope, to not give into despair, to not become resigned to a position that the media is always suspect and to encourage quality media that we know is truthful striving to be in accord with fact or reality. It's true and understandable that many people today are sceptical about any media's claim to the truth and because of this distrust want to give up the hunt for truth altogether. But can we get by without knowing the truth? How do we discern the truth about social justice issues such as wealth inequality, asylum seekers and refugees, climate science, obligations to the disabled, senior citizens and a thousand-and-one other issues demanding our attention.

Journalism's first obligation is to the truth as consumers have a right to know reliable, accurate facts put in a

meaningful context. And yet today truth is a disputed territory. We are all suffering from what might be called 'truth fatigue'. We're tired of



fighting about it yet we know that ultimately its truth that works and that matters. We know that truth is a first principle.

What is the Truth?

The question, 'What is truth?' (Jn. 18:38) is found in the gospel when standing trial before the Roman governor Pilate, Jesus said to Pilate, 'For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.' (Jn. 18:37) Pilate responded by asking, 'What is truth?' If only Pilate had known that the truth was standing before him, looking him in the eye. Truth is the church's credibility and therefore it must be passionately committed to the pursuit of truth, the foundational truth about God, whether or not God exists and the truth about God's nature. Jesus certainly had a position about the nature of truth and the nature of God. He believed objective truth exists and could be grasped. Like a good journalist he was about evidence and truth; the evidence demonstrating his commitment to justice, to his deity and the truth about God's Kingdom.

So for a Christian, Jesus as truth is the benchmark, the starting point, the standard. As Jesus is in Christian belief the Son of God and because Christians believe that God is true, all truth derives from and corresponds to him. It's our yardstick as we examine the importance of truth in communication's media.

Dutch Carmelite saint and journalist, Blessed Titus Brandsma, was murdered by lethal injection in Dachau Concentration Camp on July 26, 1942 for declaring publicly through the influential Dutch Catholic press that Nazism was incompatible with Christian faith. Among the many inspirational quotes we have from his writings two stand out as we seek to understand the demands of truth:

"They who want to win the world for Christ must have the courage to come into conflict with it."

"Do not yield to hatred. We are here in a dark tunnel, but we have to go on. At the end, an eternal light is shining for us."

Titus saw his first obligation as a Christian and a journalist to the truth. For this he gave his life.

In early April 2019, Kerry O'Brien in his speech at the Walkley Fund for Journalism Dinner, at which part of the brief is to promote quality journalism, argued that journalism is failing in Australia and elsewhere as much as it is succeeding. 'In every under-staffed newsroom', said O'Brien, 'where media releases are published with little or no basic fact-checking, it's failing.' He gave numerous examples to back-up this claim and derided the shallowness and promotion of news, even serious news as entertainment, or **infotainment**, as it quickly came to be called.



For the church the problem in coming to the assistance of media in the promotion of truthful journalism is demythologising media. To many in the church the media is a shadowy world. Driven by profit, defiantly secular and sceptical about anything that is sacred, the media, especially since the sexual abuse scandals, are often pushed aside as alien environments. Such a position adopted by many in the church arises out of fear, a paralysing agent if we are to be *yeast* and *salt*; instruments of change.

Where the rule of law, natural justice and fundamental human rights cease to exist as a result of

political, economic, social or military pressures, the truth, starting

with the truth of love often mediated through traditional and social media, can set us free.



The world rests on three pillars, truth, justice and peace. The three are one. If justice is realised, truth is vindicated and peace results.

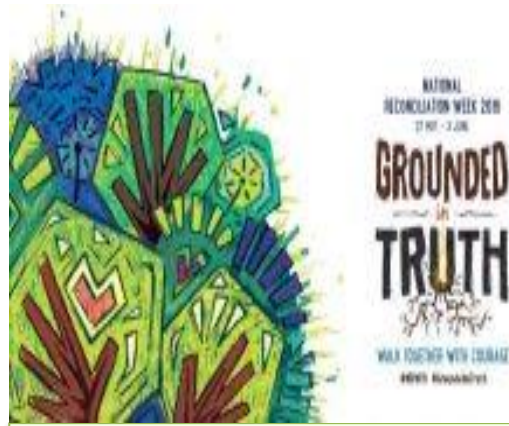
Peter Thomas

'The history of our race, and each individual's experience, are sown thick with evidence that a truth is not hard to kill and that a lie told well is immortal'

Mark Twain (1835 - 1910), Advice to Youth

FOR YOUR CALENDAR – MAY

- 1st May** St Joseph the Worker – International Workers Day
- 6 May** – 1992 Introduction of mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia
- 8 May** – World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day
- 8 May** - 1970 First anti-Vietnam War Moratorium march in Australia
- 10 May** - 1994 Nelson Mandela’s Inaugural address as President of South Africa
- 11 May** – World Fair Trade Day
- 15 May** – International Day of Families
- 20 May** – **2001 Timor-Leste Constitution** comes into force with Xanana Gusmao as First President
- 22 May – International Day for Biological Diversity
- 24 May – 2015 Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si* released
- 1948 Foundation of World Council of Churches
- 26 May – National Sorry Day**
1997: Tabling of *Bringing Them Home Report* in Parliament
2017: *Uluru Statement from the Heart, MADE BY Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leaders*
- 27 May – Beginning of National Reconciliation Week**
1967: Referendum to change articles in the Australian Constitution that discriminated against Indigenous People
- 29 May – 1992 Launch of Torres Strait Islander flag



NATIONAL RECONCILIATION WEEK 2019 – 27 May – 3 June

Today, 80 per cent of Australians believe it is important to undertake formal truth telling processes, according to the 2018 Australian Reconciliation Barometer. Australians are ready to come to terms with our history as a crucial step towards a unified future, in which we understand, value and respect each other. This National Reconciliation Week, we invite Australians from all backgrounds to contribute to our national movement towards a unified future.

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/national-reconciliation-week/>

VOTING FOR COMPASSION AND COURAGE A FAIR DEAL FOR ALL

For Christians, the work of social transformation is not an optional extra. It stems from God’s own passion for those who are marginalised and suffering. And it involves every aspect of our lives. The approaching Federal Election has engendered much publicity. As Australians and as Christians, we are challenged to reflect on some of the values and issues we want our country to consider as we face this particular period in our history.

*“Considering the common good the following points are relevant: ...
to provide employment for as many workers as possible;
to take care lest privileged groups arise even amongst the workers themselves;
to maintain a balance between wages and prices;
to make accessible the goods and services for a better life
to as many persons as possible;
either to eliminate or to keep within bounds the inequalities
that exist between different sectors of the economy;
to balance properly any increases in output,
with advances in services provided to citizens,
especially by public authority.” (79) Mater et Magistra, Pope John XX111, 1961*

Catholic Religious Australia: <https://www.catholicreligious.org.au/justice-committee>

Come Holy Spirit,
whose justice outwits international conspiracy, whose light outshines spiritual bigotry,
whose peace can overcome the destructive potential of warfare,
whose promise invigorates our every effort
to create a new heaven and a new earth now and forever. Amen.

Diarmuid O’Murchu MSC