What the Church can learn from its exile to the margins

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I have a strong interest in the biblical stories of exile. This year marks 50 years since the Fall of Saigon. I was a teenager when it happened. As a survivor of that tragic event and — later on — a refugee, I learned that building resilience is a lifelong lesson. My parents themselves were refugees before me. Following the Geneva Convention that divided Vietnam into two opposing sides, they took to the sea and sailed south. I thank God they made that courageous decision and instilled in me the sense of risk-taking. I took the motto 'go further into the deep' partly because of the lesson I learned from my parents. Hope, I learned, is not a passive thing. It demands movement.

Now, half a century later, the world again feels unmoored. War in Ukraine and Palestine, a worsening climate crisis, the cost-of-living emergency, and political about-faces in once-stable democracies have cast a long shadow. For those already on the margins — the poor, the displaced, the excluded — these crises are a daily reality. And yet, amid the wreckage, we are called not to retreat into despair but to walk forward in hope.

Pope Francis has named this a Jubilee Year, a time to become 'Pilgrims of Hope.' Jubilee, deeply rooted in the Jewish sabbatical tradition, was an act of radical reset: debts forgiven, slaves freed, land returned. It was a vision of restoration for communities fractured by greed and inequality. In our time, the call is no less urgent. Jubilee is not about nostalgia or ritual. It is a prophetic summons to renew our common life, to embrace solidarity, to reject the empire's old logic of domination and extraction.

As someone formed by the experience of exile, I find myself returning to the biblical stories of displacement — especially the prophets who stood with their people in exile, helping them interpret the times and reimagine the future.

In the Book of Exodus, we meet Shiprah and Puah, two Hebrew midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh's command to kill all male Hebrew babies at birth. These female characters are often overshadowed by their male counterparts, but they preceded Moses and Aaron not just in years but also in stature and agency. We could describe them as the pioneers of the biblical civil rights movement. In defying Pharaoh's orders, they took the side of the vulnerable. Instead of staying under the radar and retreating into a collective apathy, Shipra and Puah showed faithfulness to God in choosing compassion. This, too, is the Church's vocation. We are called not to power but to presence. Not to preach from balconies but to stand beside the broken.

Mary McKillop and other women of hope similarly took a prophetic stance against injustice, in the trickle-down, sectarian and merit-based society of colonial Australia. They pioneered a radical alternative system of equity, inclusion, solidarity and preferential option for the poor. Out of this vision grew the Church's network of not-for-profit schools, orphanages, hospitals, clinics, and social services. These institutions weren't built to form a Catholic enclave. They came into existence because, in the words of Mary McKillop, they saw a need and decided to do something about it. That unmet need was the poor, unmarried mothers, Indigenous communities, and others left behind. Their witness stands in contrast to a socio-economic system too often shaped by exclusion and meritocracy, offering instead a Gospel ethic of compassion and hospitality.

Today, the need is great. We are living at a time when there is a sense of chaos, uncertainty and instability in the world. The trade wars, the stock market collapse, the war in Ukraine and Palestine, the about-face in United States government policies. The global community is in a precarious situation and the jitters are being felt across the board. People on the margins of society who are already bearing the brunt of the cost-of-living crisis will be even more adversely affected. And these are just some of the reasons for collective consternation. In the face of these challenges, it is easy for us to be overwhelmed, numbed and despondent.

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But at the heart of the whole Judeo-Christian enterprise is a vision of God who listens to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. Wherever people suffer, wherever creation groans, the Gospel community is meant to be present, offering both solidarity and liberation. When we stand with those who have no voice, and act together in compassion, we become instruments of hope. It is this hope, born of attentiveness to suffering, that allows us to see with the eyes of God.

One of the great signs of hope for me is Pope Francis himself. In a world where many are deemed undeserving or expendable, he has emerged as an increasingly solitary moral voice, speaking against nationalism, xenophobia, and ecological indifference. And his witness is not abstract. In the United States, when the new administration moved to expand mass deportations of undocumented immigrants — many of them long-standing, peaceful members of their communities — Pope Francis raised their treatment with the American bishops. His defense of human dignity is unrelenting, extending to migrants, prisoners, the homeless, victims of war, and LGBTQ+ people alike. Again and again, he urges us to walk forward together in a renewed spirit of fraternity and solidarity, working generously for the common good.

Pope Francis reminds us that the Church must not settle for the status quo or cling to institutional security. It must move to the peripheries to become, once again, the Church of the poor and for the poor. This means sharing in the burdens of humanity, listening closely to the cry of the poor, and reforming itself from the ground up by heeding the voices of the humble — the *anawim* of God — who stood at the heart of Jesus's public ministry.

Another sign of hope is the Church's ongoing renewal, even through the painful reckoning of the sexual abuse crisis. Amid loss and disillusionment, a different Church is emerging; smaller perhaps, but more honest and more faithful to its Gospel roots. In Australia, this transformation is visible in the vitality of parishes where migrants, refugees, and the socially disadvantaged gather. These are not enclaves of the privileged, but communities of resilience and grace. In them, we see the Church returning to its ancient vocation: as refuge for the poor and oasis for the oppressed.

During my sojourn in Italy, I found myself intrigued by private tombs in churches. In the medieval era, it was not uncommon for clergy, nobles and even well-heeled citizens to be buried in ornate church buildings. I wonder if this was a vestige of a time when the Church was a central arena for power. And I wonder if this was the natural progression of the imperial Church. Thank God we have moved on and the vision of Church of the *anawim* is being rightfully reclaimed for our time.

One of the most hopeful signs in the Church today is the growing recognition of the laity's co-responsibility in building the Kingdom. Pastoral ministry is no longer the sole domain of clergy; it is being lived out daily by the baptized in diverse and abundant ways. As the number of ordained leaders declines, laypeople increasingly carry the mantle of leadership. Reimagining Church beyond clerical structures is not a loss but a gift, a source of renewal and shared mission. In a secular age, those who live and work 'in the world' are called to be leaven, transforming the culture from within, invisibly yet powerfully.

Jubilee offers a framework for this renewal.

At its heart, Jubilee is a radical reset: a return to freedom, justice, and sustainability. Rooted in the Jewish Sabbath tradition and echoed in the Christian Eucharist, it invites us to see the world through divine perspective; to restore relationships, repair injustice, and reimagine community in alignment with God's vision for human flourishing.

Jubilee has its roots in the Jewish Sabbatical tradition that is related to the care of the poor, the indebted and the oppressed. In exile, observing the Sabbath became a marker of identity. It was an intentional discipline of resistance that distinguished the membership of the covenant community to that of the empire. Keeping Sabbath was pivotal for a community where there would be no permanent underclass. The practice of Sabbatical rest and jubilee interrupted cycles of accumulation and inequality, insisting instead on rest, reciprocity, and care for the vulnerable, and stood in sharp contrast with the exploitation and grab-what-you-can modus operandi of the empire. In exile, it was that practice that maintained human dignity, long term sustainability and fruitfulness.

That wisdom is urgently needed today. To recover the spirit of Jubilee is to reject the logic of domination and extraction and embrace an ethic of regeneration, one that honours the dignity of all and sustains the earth.

Our world is suffering not only an environmental crisis but a spiritual one. We live in a world that prioritises wealth, power and individualism over charity, humility and the common good. We live in world addicted to busyness and productivity, when public responsibility is on the wane and the most privileged desperately work to improve their private estate. Based on an economic model of constant growth and productivity, we have become alienated from each other, from the earth, from God.

In such a world, we are called to be an economy of solidarity that takes care of all, especially the poorest among us. In such a world, regeneration matters more than profit.

Given that we are likely to become a minority in the future, our call is not to batten down the hatches and circle the wagons but to be the critical yeast for critical times by modelling a new way of being together for the sake of God's creation and for the sake of the poor.

We live in a particularly polarised time. In some countries, partisan politics is so entrenched, it threatens to undermine social cohesion and unravel the fabric of a democratic society. Australia is not immune from these global trends. Ideological positions are widening on every issue, whether it is immigration, environment, gender, or the Voice for Indigenous Australians. But Catholic tradition offers something different. It invites us to listen. To discern. To act with integrity, courage, humility and truth. And in so doing, the Church is called to be the conscience of society and the voice of justice.

It is more important than ever that we do not lose sight of our calling, which according to the Second Vatican Council, is a sacrament of God's love and a sign of hope for the world. That hope must be visible in how we live, relate, and serve and share resources.

The early Christians understood this. In the face of a fractured society, they shone as a community of radical inclusivity, hospitality and justice. Against the dominant system of exploitation, self-interest and greed, they enacted an ethos of communion, justice and compassion. The Church was transformed beyond the original company that Jesus had gathered and yet this creative process remained faithful to his core values.

Despite all our failings and distortions, individually and institutionally, the Church still bears within it the possibility of new life. We are the people who dare to dream, who cross boundaries, who notice the hurt, who honour the weak. We have no monopoly on these matters, yet we take this agenda as our primary mission. To answer those human questions of justice and reconciliation, of welcome and friendship, of hospitality and love.

We are not naïve. But we are not resigned either. We believe in the possibility of transformation not because we are strong, but because God is present, even in the ruins. We are heirs to a rich legacy. And now it is the Church's turn to embody the boundary-breaking spirit of Jesus. We can not only envision a different world to the fractured, polarised and destructive one we are living in, but also live it out. Inspired by Jesus' model of privileging the downtrodden, we can work towards an economy and a society that listens to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.

And so the Church must embrace its calling to be critical yeast in critical times; to model a different way of being human, grounded in justice, animated by mercy, and sustained by hope. Let us go forward then, walking with and for the poor, and building a world where no one is left behind.

That is our task. That is our witness. That is our hope.

This is an edited version of an address to the 2025 CSSA national conference 'Hope in action.'