

*Compassionate God,  
Your unconditional love for all  
inspires our hearts and empowers our actions  
for those who are most vulnerable.*

*Keep our hearts open to the joys and the hopes of our world, and  
our ears ready to hear your call to truth, justice and reconciliation.<sup>i</sup>*

These words are part of the commissioning prayer we will soon say together. I am particularly challenged by – Your unconditional love **for all**...for those who are most vulnerable...our ears, ready to hear your call to truth, justice and reconciliation.

We know that major influences of a society's culture include: language and education, laws, religion, ethics and values, food customs and the arts, technology, work patterns and social organisation. In a sense, culture is a society's personality.

Our culture shapes the way we work and play, and it makes a difference in how we view ourselves and others. It affects our values—what we consider right and wrong. This is how the society we live in influences our choices. Our choices can also influence others, and ultimately, help shape our society. We have agency. We can make choices. We can choose 'life to the full'!

Reports of abuse and rape and calls for respect and gender equality have dominated the headlines and social media and come into our everyday conversations.

We have seen and heard people's devastation, shock, anger and frustration. The insatiable drive of power and control has been palpable. The last weeks have felt like a tsunami of horror!

On a recent Q&A we heard Stan Grant's stark words, When a nation is built on theft, invasion, massacre and rape, you then wonder now, why you have a culture and a society that reflects some of these attitudes.<sup>ii</sup>

In March, in a joint statement with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, Premier Daniel Andrews said, the Yoo-rrook, the Wemba Wemba/Wamba Wamba word for 'truth' Justice Commission, will

investigate historical, and ongoing social, political, cultural and economic injustices, committed against Aboriginal Victorians.

Michael Bell, a Guditjmara man and member of the First Peoples' Assembly said, We had a society, it's how we lived, we had structures. There was something here before 1770 and that story hasn't been told.<sup>iii</sup>

Daniel Andrews stated, Today has been owed for 233 years. 233 years of violence, dispossession and deprivation. 233 years of deliberate silence. Today we commit to telling the truth.<sup>iv</sup>

Violence thrives in silence. When we remain silent we are complicit in perpetuating violence. Our Commissioning Prayer is prodding us to action. *'...our ears ready to hear your call to truth, justice and reconciliation.'*

Australian of the Year, Grace Tame said, History, lived experience, the whole truth, sanitised, and unedited, is our greatest learning resource. It is what informs social and structural change.<sup>v</sup>

In my work at McAuley Community Services for Women, I met David, Keisha, Jessica and Melinda. All had lived within family violence.



7-year-old David told me this, about his sand tray picture, *The Creepy World*.

The dinosaur is going to eat their house. There are lots of baddies coming: snakes and rockets and lady bugs and a gorilla and sharks and evil star fishes and evil feathers. The dinosaur is going to eat the whole entire world.<sup>vi</sup>

Nothing in David's world was safe; lady bugs were baddies, and star fishes and feathers were evil.



This is me invisible with a beautiful golden dress,<sup>vii</sup> said 7-year-old Keisha.

The tragedy of a child in a beautiful golden dress, Invisible.

To a significant degree children remain the forgotten victims in the chaos of calculated, coercive violence. What are Keisha and David learning about family life? Research tells us that children who witness partner violence against their parents are 2–4 times as likely to experience partner violence themselves. Indigenous children are 7 times as likely to be the subject of substantiated child abuse or neglect.



Jessica 30 said of her art work, Safety is number one, along with being able to go back to the indigenous community I so love, and spend a lot of time with.<sup>viii</sup>



And Melinda also in her 30s, painted her experience of violence and abuse and wrote: She has no voice... it has disappeared. She's got one eye now. She can see glimpses... There is still part of her left, but it is not noticed.<sup>ix</sup>

On average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner. Aboriginal women suffer domestic violence at rates 40 times higher than the rest of the population.

Violence throughout Australia has been perpetuated for generations. Intergenerational trauma has long term corrosive impacts. We are all affected by violence.

It is now 5 years since the Royal Commission into Family Violence. After 25 days of public hearings, reading commissioned research, engaging in community conversations with 800+ Victorians and going through almost 1000 written submissions, the Commissioners made 227 recommendations. The Commissioners identified **gender inequality** and **power and control over another person**, core, to the ramped violence that infiltrates our society.

Recommendation 165 is specifically directed to faith communities. It reads –  
*Faith leaders and communities establish processes*

- *for examining the ways in which they currently respond to family violence in their communities*

- *and whether any of their practices operate as deterrents to the prevention or reporting of, or recovery from, family violence or are used by perpetrators to excuse or condone abusive behaviour.<sup>x</sup>*

How does our faith impel us to actively address the issue of violence in our society?

Our faith teaches that all people are created in the image of God. We are all precious, we all have innate dignity, we are all equally loved and we should all have the opportunity to develop our potential and to thrive.

Violence against Keisha, David, Jessica and Melinda diminished their capacity to thrive. It also diminished the capacity of their perpetrators to thrive. The acts of violence also diminished our society. We are all affected directly or indirectly by violence.

Our Commissioning Prayer says, *'Your unconditional love for all.'* The all, includes women, men, children. All of us.

As a faith community, let us seize with heart and mind, this 5 year moment to implement thoroughly, recommendation 165. Let us continue contributing to creating a culture in our society, where we can all be safe and flourish?

Church leadership has an important and transformative role in the prevention of violence. Three ways come to mind.<sup>xi</sup>

1. to call out strongly and challenge recognised social enablers of violence against women:
  - a. justification of violence against women
  - b. male-dominated control of decision-making and resources
  - c. fixed ideas and harmful expressions of masculinity and femininity
  - d. disrespect towards women

I want to focus for a moment on some research around these 4 enablers.

Jesuit Social Services Men's Project, in collaboration with Michael Flood, conducted a survey, to find out about the attitudes of young men towards masculinity, and how these influences their behaviour.

The *Man Box* research<sup>xii</sup> demonstrated how damaging the attitudes and beliefs are to women and children. And, how they are destructive to men too – often leading to regular thoughts of self-harm, harm to others, and suicide.

56% believed – a real man would never say no to sex

49 % believed – a real man shouldn't get respect if he talks about his fears

37% believed – a real man always knows the whereabouts of his wife or girlfriend

27% believed – a real man has the final say about decisions in relationships

What intense, heavy pressure! Clearly, many young men are trapped in toxic destructive attitudes, spiralling them into inner chaos and isolation.

Back to the role of Church leadership

2. to use opportunities to preach about the realities and impacts of family violence
3. to promote opportunities for the community to participate in forums and workshops that will empower members
  - a. to be educated about family violence
  - b. to confidently identify signs of abuse
  - c. to refer to support networks
  - d. to courageously call out abuse

Our Commissioning Prayer draws our attention to God's unconditional love **for all**...for those who are most vulnerable...and calls us to have our ears ready to hear. And, a will committed to act truthfully and justly in a spirit of reconciliation.

Let us overturn the love of power, to the power of love.

**Nicole Rotaru RSM**

15 April 2021, CSSV Commissioning Mass

---

<sup>i</sup> CSSV Commissioning Mass Booklet, 2021

<sup>ii</sup> Stan Grant calls out Australia for double standards on Q+A during discussion on sexual assault and the government, Paul Johnson, 25 March, 2021

---

<sup>iii</sup> No peace without truth: Victoria to launch Indigenous reconciliation inquiry, Paul Sakkal, March 9, 2021

<sup>iv</sup> Australia state announces commission to record effects of injustices against Aboriginal people  
Aidan Hookey | Australian National U. College of Law, AU MARCH 10, 2021

<sup>v</sup> Share your truth it is your power, Grace Tame's address to the Press Club, 3 March 2021

<sup>vi</sup> Smarty Pants, Kitty or Tiger, McAuley Community Services for Women, 2017

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>ix</sup> *ibid*

<sup>x</sup> Recommendation - Victorian Government <https://www.vic.gov.au> › family-violence-recommendations

<sup>xi</sup> I acknowledge with thanks material shared by Robyn Boosey, Preventing Violence Against Women Program  
Manager, Melbourne Anglican Diocese Melbourne

<sup>xii</sup> Australian study reveals the dangers of 'toxic masculinity' to men and those around them  
October 16, 2018