

Catalyst lunch, 'Reasons for Hope,' 14 March

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This time last year I had a silent bargain with Pope Francis to stay alive because I had a deadline to finish this book, which wasn't about him, but it was about the legacy of another Latin American leader of the global church, and I felt it would be a distraction to have the global church electing his successor while I was still trying to end the story!

Then he was discharged from hospital on 23 March, and I breathed easier over the next fortnight before submitting the manuscript to the editor at the start of Easter.

I don't need to replay what happened next, except that while Francis hogged the global spotlight over the days and weeks following his death on Easter Monday, I was consoled by commas and paragraph breaks – the small details of the story that kept me on task as the team at Garratt Publishing did their brilliant work to produce this beautiful book I'm proud to have been part of, and to share part of with you today.

Perhaps a good place to start is the title, which Br Mark O'Connor and I settled on over the long summer of writing. Mark, as many of you who have attended the series over the years will know, is the creative mastermind behind the Hélder Câmara lectures, which have assembled a cast of international speakers in Australia since the 1985 visit of Brazilian archbishop Hélder Câmara. The speakers listed in the book's appendix – over 100 – include cardinals tipped as future popes, who came with stories from the conclaves that elected the first German pope, then the first pope from Latin America. Just before Easter last year Mark was in Rome, in Cardinal Robert Prevost's office in the dicastery of bishops, sweet talking him into joining the Hélder Câmara line up for 2026. But Prevost, slightly inconveniently, was cast in a bigger part on the global stage!

While the story of his unfolding role as the head of the Catholic Church is still being written, I think we can add his election as Leo XIV on the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day to the 'reasons for hope' at this time in history, not as the first American pope, which is how he will go down in some records, but how he continues the work of the Second Vatican Council, where the world's bishops including Hélder Câmara imagined a new role for the Catholic Church – as a partner in people's search and in the rebuilding of shattered lives. Pope Leo, in his inauguration mass, echoed the Council's call to partner as Catholics, with fellow Christians, 'with those who follow other religious paths, with those who are searching for God, with all women and men of good will...in order to achieve that unity which does not cancel

out differences but values the personal history of each person and the social and religious culture of every people.'

I picked up especially on the final line in his inaugural homily: to be a Church that 'allows itself to be made "restless" by history.' It's a line that echoes his role model Augustine, who confessed to being made 'restless for God', but Leo puts the accent on history, as the place where we are made restless. It speaks to my own being made restless by history, which I entered as a profession, and which has continued to shape my own search for witnesses of the past who speak to the present.

One of those witnesses, who has a recurring role in the book although he never actually made it onto the Hélder Câmara stage, is Austrian cardinal Christoph Schönborn. He became archbishop of Vienna the year I moved to Austria as a 17-year-old, as I became an observer of that country's history, of its multinational heritage as the seat of the Holy Roman Empire, and as the harbinger of racial hatred, the birthplace of Hitler and the site of attacks on Jews for centuries. When I arrived, 5 years after German reunification, Austria was a small country coming to terms with its place in the middle of Europe and beginning a belated reckoning with its responsibility for the Holocaust. Schönborn, as the head of the Catholic Church in Austria, was leading efforts, in the face of considerable opposition from some Catholic quarters, to recognise the long tail of Christian antisemitism and to rebuild relations with Vienna's Jewish community as well as with Muslim and Christian migrant communities. As a former child refugee who was forcibly displaced as a baby with his mother and older brother in the chaos at the end of the Second World War, Schönborn was a witness to what he described in his farewell homily last year as 'the world mother tongue of compassion.' 'It understands all people. It does not have to be learned. It gives trust and confidence. It makes us aware that we are one human family, all dependent on one another, we need one another.'

In the book, I quoted one of Schönborn's earlier homilies, given during Lent in Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, at the invitation of his French counterpart Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger who did join Mark's global cast of speakers. Schönborn's Lenten homily, just prior to Lustiger's visit to Australia in 2001, pointed to the 'reasons for hope' at the start of the new millennium, and I think it bears reflection amid our own Lenten journey a quarter century later.

Schönborn acknowledged the continent faced challenges, and while he listed some he didn't dwell on them, 'not out of complacency or ignorance but rather out of the deep conviction that only those who give reasons for hope can also manage effectively to heal Europe's ills.' He didn't diagnose, he told stories. 'I am not anxious about a Europe that prays!' he declared, pointing to the shrines, subways, hospitals, mosques, synagogues and churches where his fellow citizens sought God.

Bearing witness to people's search, rather than diagnosing or curing their problems, might just be how we are made restless by history. 'People who are seeking, and not without suffering, something or someone whom they sense but cannot name,' is how Pope Paul VI defined the vital work of witness in his 1975 encyclical, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, which Pope Francis later called the greatest pastoral document ever written.

'Why are they like this?' Pope Paul asked, as any fledgling historian might also enquire. 'Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst?' When you begin to ask such questions, he said, 'other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones,' questions that require both presence and sharing.

So, those are the questions I want to leave for your own sharing. But before I do, I want to mention a witness in the book whose story raised deeper questions for me, ones that demand attention today.

Cardinal Lustiger, whom I mentioned, was the Catholic archbishop of Paris and also Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, whose mother was murdered at Auschwitz. When he came to Australia to give the Helder Câmara lecture at the turn of the millennium, he addressed not only Catholics and other Christians but also Jewish Australians. In Caulfield, in the heart of Melbourne's Jewish community, as Bondi is the heart of Sydney's Jewish community, Lustiger told his story as a former wartime resister:

At the liberation of Paris when the Germans were defeated, we spoke about the camps. There was in Hotel Lutetia the centre where the deported, the survivors, came back from the camps to Paris. It was not possible to speak within the Resistance, the main resistance, men and women, to speak about Jews. We were not resisters. We were only Jews. We were victims. The antisemitism of those people who were resisters was so instinctive. It was necessary to fight after World War Two, in liberated France, to be recognised as a real citizen.

Lustiger went on to quote St Paul writing to the community in Rome: 'Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.' 'To the excess of evil,' Lustiger continued, God responds with 'the excess of charity that makes one give one's life for those one loves.' The Jewish resister who fought for recognition as a citizen in his own homeland described 'this secret force of love' as the true liberation in the face of death.

'Some may think that resorting to violence is justified,' Lustiger said, 'to establish a more just and more human society. But we have learned in Europe the cost of violence that claims to be liberating. It in turn gives birth to tyrannical violence.'

In a very recent coda to Lustiger, this week the former German chancellor Angela Merkel preached a Lenten homily in the Benedictine monastery of Maria Laach from the same chapter in Romans that Lustiger cited in his Helder Câmara lecture. In her Lenten reflection, Merkel – the daughter of a Lutheran pastor – spoke about Paul’s exhortation to the community not to conform but to ‘be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ Which Merkel translated as: ‘You are to think anew...become different, question what is familiar.’ In these times, when so many of our certainties have been shaken, ‘we need new orientation; we must become aware of our spiritual foundations once again. It is precisely from this awareness that new hope can arise.’ Being a Christian, Merkel said, is ‘a lifelong task. New things constantly flow into each of us. We are called to contribute, to exchange opinions, and to find compromises in order to arrive at common action.’ The call to common action also applied to politicians, she added, ‘who have to make decisions that have far-reaching consequences and affect many people in their own country and around the world.’ ‘We’re allowed to make mistakes,’ said the former chancellor, who has clearly been reflecting on her time in office, ‘but ‘what we must not do is use our mistakes and shortcomings as an excuse to do nothing at all.’

Merkel outlined geopolitics, artificial technology, and the preservation of creation as three arenas in need of renovated thinking. And she cited Article 1 of the German constitution, which was adopted in the West German capital of Bonn on 8th May 1949, on the same Victory in Europe Day anniversary that Pope Leo was elected last year, and which states that ‘human dignity is inviolable.... The German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world.’

‘What is at stake if we close ourselves off to this new way of thinking and everyone retreats into their own shell?’ Merkel asked. ‘I read Paul’s letter to the Romans precisely in this sense,’ she concluded, ‘to continually renew our thinking, not to be content with the world as it is, and in doing so, to understand what God’s will is.’

So, in the spirit of renovated thinking, given that Robert Prevost is no longer available for speaking duties, I think that Angela Merkel would make an outstanding Helder Câmara lecturer – to prompt us with further reasons for hope, as Pope Paul wrote in his 1975 encyclical letter while Merkel was studying physics in her East German university, ‘in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine.’

- *Who are the witnesses among us – Catholics, other Christians, people following different religious paths, people searching for God and all women and men of good will, as Leo said in his first homily – who help us to value each one’s story?*

- *What or who is it that inspires them?*
- *And what other, deeper and perhaps demanding questions, are still to be asked?*

Lenten sermon by the former Chancellor of Germany at Maria Laach Benedictine Abbey

March 4, 2026

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3k8qogShM4> (watch in German)

[Google translated from <https://www.buero-bundestkanzlerin-ad.de/reden/>]

Dear Abbot Mauritius, dear Brothers, dear congregation,

I am pleased to be reflecting with you today on the biblical text from the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans, which is read here in the church during Lent at weekday Vespers and interpreted by various people. As we have just heard, it is verses 1 and 2 from the twelfth chapter of the Letter to the Romans. And I will repeat them once more:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercy of God, to offer your lives as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—as your spiritual worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

In working with this text, I first tried to place myself in the historical context in which it was written. I simply want to better understand how Christianity gradually became a global religion, knowing that I am a layperson and not a historian or theologian. Therefore, I apologize for any errors or misinterpretations I may make.

Paul wrote this letter in 57 or 58 AD, while on his third missionary journey and staying in Corinth. Jesus had been dead for more than 25 years. Paul had converted to Christianity a few years after Jesus' death and subsequently began to persuade others to join him. From the mid-40s AD onward, he also undertook missionary journeys outside the Jewish settlement area, including to Cyprus, Syria, Greece, and what is now Turkey.

When Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans, many Christian communities had already been established, including in Rome. He sent the letter, now known as the Epistle to the Romans, to the church in Rome because he was planning a missionary journey to distant Spain and intended to stop in Rome along the way. With this letter, he wanted to prepare the congregation for his arrival and clarify for the Roman Christians how he understood the Christian faith.

The idea of trying to put myself in the shoes of the Christians of that time came to me during my visits to Pompeii, which fascinated me every time. Perhaps some of you who have also been there felt the same way. We owe it to this excavated city that we can now form a fairly good picture of how people lived in Rome in the first century, including at the end of the 50s of the first century, when the Christians in Rome received Paul's letter—almost 2,000 years ago. The starting point for our being able to see this today was a natural disaster. In August of the year 79, the city of Pompeii disappeared under the ash of Mount Vesuvius. It wasn't until the mid-18th century that excavations began. Today, we can admire large parts of a Roman city from the first century AD, preserved in the bustling state in which its inhabitants were surprised by the glowing lava flows, trapped within them, and thus preserved. In Pompeii, you not only see temples to the Roman gods, but you can wander through the entire street system, enter perfectly preserved villas, admire the workings of the bathhouses, and peek into street eateries for the poor, where flatbreads, soup pots, and wine amphorae are still visible. And you also see something rarely discussed in history: the cramped, impoverished living quarters of the slaves in the villas and houses, and the traces of their arduous labor.

And if you try to imagine their way of life, it becomes clear: On the one hand, Roman citizens, at least the male ones, had the right to property, political participation, and legal assistance, and often lived in considerable prosperity. This prosperity, however, was based on the existence of slaves who were ruthlessly exploited. Moreover, the vast majority of slaves were not even considered human beings, but rather like talking objects. They were people whom the Romans captured on their constant campaigns of conquest and then sold at home. They became the property of the buyer; their human dignity was simply denied them.

Living conditions in Rome at that time were comparable to those in Pompeii, only the city was larger and even busier. Into this hierarchical society burst the new teaching of Jesus as the son of the one God of the Jews, who had died for all people and who, even during his lifetime, had championed all those who were marginalized according to previous religious rules: women, adulteresses, the sick, the mentally disabled, tax collectors, and lepers. After Jesus' death, Christians proclaimed that all people were equal before God. This stood in stark contrast to the prevailing way of life in Rome. In this context, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, offering encouragement and support: "...do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." And I believe Paul was able to do this with particular credibility because he himself had undergone a transformation from a non-Christian to a Christian, from Saul to Paul. My understanding is this: You are not to listen to the Roman gods, but to the one God who sacrificed his Son for you. You are to treat all people equally. You are to think anew. This is service to God, this is your "pleasing sacrifice." You must allow yourselves to be transformed, to become different, to question what is familiar. He encourages Christians to welcome all people into the church, citizens and slaves alike. This caused offense, led to the persecution of Christians at times, and required courageous action from those who professed their faith in Jesus. Paul encouraged the Christians in Rome not to be deterred from this path. Being a Christian was a lifelong commitment.

And for us today, this means: To be a Christian, it is not enough to occasionally light a candle or donate money, to go to church or to pray. That is an important part of the faith, but the Christian faith is more than that; it is a permanent mission. Paul demands only one thing, but he demands it with absolute conviction: to examine what God's will is. The life of Jesus should not only serve as a guide for us, but also give us hope that we can turn things around for the better through our own actions.

I find Paul's exhortation not to conform to the world, but to be transformed through new thinking, just as exciting and challenging for us today as it must have been for the Roman Christians almost 2000 years ago.

Lent is a time of year in which we should consciously reflect on what God's will is.

For me, fasting means two things. First, it means abstaining from something, which leads us to break out of our usual routines and thus compels us to reflect on our lives. Second, for me, Lent means taking time for things that have been neglected for a long time and now finally need to be done, even if they are difficult or very unpleasant. From both of these things, new thinking and changed actions can emerge. And with the end of Lent, with the resurrection of Jesus and the Easter festival, we experience the hope that can arise from it.

Such a pause during Lent seems particularly necessary to me in our time, as so many apparent certainties have been shaken, especially in recent years. In such times, hope that everything will turn out for the better can quickly fade. Therefore, we need new orientation; we must become aware of our spiritual foundations once again. It is precisely from this that new hope can arise.

Being a Christian is not a fixed state, not something static, but an ongoing process, a lifelong task. New things constantly flow into each of us. We are called to take a stand in this world, where so much is changing, to contribute, to exchange opinions, and to find compromises in order to arrive at common action. This applies to parents in raising their children, to grandparents in what they pass on to their grandchildren for their journey through life, and to how we deal with friends and with people with whom we are in conflict. This applies to people who have supervisory responsibility for their employees, and to everyone who encounters other people in their work. It also applies to politicians who have to make decisions that have far-reaching consequences and affect many people both in their own country and around the world.

If I understand Paul correctly, he encourages us and expects courageous action from us. Being a Christian is not a comfortable position to rest on; it is a constant call to use our gifts for the benefit of others. The good news is that we can hope in God's goodness, that we don't have to be perfect, that we are allowed to make mistakes and still be accepted by him as human beings. What we must not do is use our mistakes and shortcomings as an excuse to do nothing at all. Human freedom does not consist of understanding faith as a comfortable cushion, but rather in taking responsibility.

What does that mean in concrete terms?

Let me mention three challenges we face today and for which we must find answers. First, of course, politicians, but also every individual.

First, there is the geopolitical situation, which presents us with entirely new challenges. Today I don't want to address what has particularly preoccupied us in recent days—the war in the Middle East, the military strikes by Israel and the US against the terrorist regime in Iran—but rather I want to focus on what has been troubling us since February 2022.

Four years ago, Russia, under the leadership of President Putin, attacked Ukraine. The Ukrainian people are suffering. The territorial integrity of a sovereign state has been violated, and with it, the entire post-war European order has been shaken.

It is right, important, and in our own interest that we support Ukraine against this aggression, both militarily and with a willingness to engage in diplomatic initiatives. Then we can achieve what we want: that Russia does not win the war, and thus Ukraine, as a sovereign state, has a future in peace and freedom.

The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has also drastically altered our threat landscape. With Donald Trump's second presidency in the USA, the decades-long partnership with the United States is no longer built on the same foundation as we have always known it. Europe, and Germany in particular, faces entirely new challenges. We must invest more money in our internal and external security.

This means, among other things, that our financial resources in society must be redistributed. This is primarily a task for politicians. But it also demands something of the citizens.

Are we all willing to participate in the resulting debate on how this redistribution can be implemented fairly, or do we simply reject every proposal to change the status quo when it affects us and instead point the finger at others, or do we burden future generations with the costs through ever-increasing debt? I am convinced that Christians must contribute constructively to this debate.

Secondly: So-called social media and the ever-evolving possibilities of artificial intelligence call for rules governing their use so that they serve humanity and do not overwhelm it. Politicians must enforce these regulations and create guidelines for corporate activity. Do we, as a society, have the strength to support such regulations, even if others in the world do not? Are we prepared to take a firm stand against hatred, defamation, and incitement against others online? And are we strong enough to rebel when truths are called lies and lies are called truths? Is respect for human dignity, as enshrined in Article 1 of our Basic Law, truly an unshakeable standard for each of us in our dealings with people who are marginalized or insulted by others? Do we prioritize our way of life over that of others? Do we intervene when injustice occurs? Do we stand together as democrats? Christians should be courageous in these debates, advocate for marginalized people, and promote unity among all democrats.

Thirdly: The preservation of creation, meaning the fight against global warming, the extinction of animal and plant species, and the protection of our oceans, to name just three pressing examples. In my political reflections, I have grappled extensively with the question of how well I lived up to my responsibilities as Chancellor regarding climate change.

It is true that much was set in motion both internationally and nationally during my time in office. That was and remains important. But—and this is the second part of the truth—it was not enough to truly protect the world from the catastrophic effects of global warming. We knew and still know all this, yet it has not led to sufficient action, either here or in many other countries.

Even after leaving office, the question remains for me whether we humans are truly willing and able to act in accordance with the precautionary principle and make timely decisions for our survival. The proof is still lacking. This realization weighs heavily on us, myself included.

In light of the changed security situation and new technological developments, the question of preserving creation is in danger of losing even more attention. All the data, however, shows us that human-induced changes to the global climate, ocean pollution, and the extinction of animal and plant species are progressing. Will we join in suppressing these facts, thinking that we can't make a difference anyway, or are we prepared to do everything in our power to fulfill our

obligations under the Paris Climate Agreement and other international agreements, thereby securing the foundations of life for our children and grandchildren? As Christians, we must commit ourselves to preserving creation.

In all the points I've mentioned, it is the responsibility of politicians to make the necessary decisions:

for the safety of our citizens,

for social justice in our society,

for preserving our livelihoods.

But a democratic society can only function if its citizens are actively involved. Fortunately, many are, in their work, in volunteer activities, in their families and neighborhoods. We should be grateful for that. But we live in a time when it can no longer be taken for granted that this will continue. What if we used Lent as an opportunity to rethink our own civic engagement, to consider how we can become even more involved in our society? And what if we reminded ourselves what is at stake if we close ourselves off to this new way of thinking and everyone retreats into their own shell? Many years ago, the former Constitutional Court Justice Wolfgang Böckenförde rightly pointed out that the liberal secular state depends on preconditions that it cannot itself guarantee. To preserve this state, the participation of its citizens is essential. This is about nothing more and nothing less than defending our democratic order, because only it enables us to live in freedom. I read Paul's letter to the Roman Christians precisely in this sense. He encourages us to continually renew our thinking, not to be content with the world as it is, and in doing so, to understand what God's will is. We should allow ourselves to be inspired or even spurred on by the encouragement of the Apostle Paul. Let us strive to live up to his example through our actions.

Thank you!