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Shame, Hope and the Church: A Journey with Mary

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Book review by Glenn Morrison

Ryan SM, Thomas. *Shame, Hope and the Church: A Journey with Mary*. Strathfield NSW: St. Pauls Publications, 2020. ISBN 978 1 925494 44 0

The Church is a mystery of communion, covenant and promise revealing the salvific presence of Christ in the world. Within the mystery of God's eternal love in Creation, the history of the body of Christ given for the world has been embroidered through the sacraments and liturgy, the prayers and theological searching and questioning of the people of God. All such activity produces, as it were, an infinite artwork of faith, an artwork ongoing through time that can only be completed by the hand of God. However, members of the Church have the potential to damage such sacred 'artwork'. What therefore could be done to restore such artwork where damage has been done to especially vulnerable people like children?

Thomas Ryan's recent book, 'Shame, Hope and the Church: A Journey with Mary,' has sought to imagine a response, to the shame of sexual abuse in Church in light of renewing the biblical appreciation and Jewish origins of Mary as much as, 'The central place of Mary in the Catholic imagination' (p. 2). Ryan's book works towards hope in the moments where all seems lost. Of particular focus of bringing words of healing and hope to the Church is Ryan's portrayal of Mary's personal experience of shame in the Gospels. He utilises the example of Mary in her relation to Christ for approaching victims of sexual abuse especially in 'the Australian context and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child sexual abuse' (p. 99).

Ryan's purpose is at once pastoral, spiritual and moral. Relating the mystery of Mary as a companion and archetype of faith, Ryan sets a foundation to share about the human condition. Drawing from his experience as a priest and pastoral theologian, he presents a journey into understanding the dynamics of shame. He does this in terms of testifying to the prophetic call to care about others in terms of healing. To this end, he reveals four moments of encountering the painful emotion of shame. First, putting a name to how we feel. Second, claiming the emotion and depth of feeling by having a voice and making an I-statement such as 'I feel ashamed'. Third, through understanding, awareness and learning how to tame the emotion of shame by freeing oneself from its force and control as a 'learned response' (p.22). Fourth and lastly, aiming to continue the process of self-awareness and healing of shame to help one discern and accept personal limitations of the vulnerable self. In almost a poetic and poignant manner, Ryan describes succinctly the four moments of shame: 'Shame named, embrace and shared is tamed and "aimed"' (p. 22).

Building on the pastoral expression of shame, Ryan is never far away from looking at Mary in connection with her Son. A question that does not escape any theological perspective is 'Who is Jesus Christ today?' Ryan's response is deeply incarnational. Assuming the vulnerability of humanity, 'Jesus was subject to harm, pain, decay and death' (p. 26). For the purpose of salvation history, these experiences overflowing with emotions and feelings like shame, fear and rejection, helped to animate Jesus' mission and vocation as the Messiah. Through shame and betrayal, through being misunderstood, Jesus experienced God's surprising and disruptive word to think and act otherwise. Beyond the temptation of self-preservation or 'public embarrassment'

(p.32), Jesus in the footsteps of his Mother anticipating God's will at the Annunciation, names, claims, tames and aims at his encounter of shame though his messianic mission. Ryan demonstrates in a revealing way how the Gospels give witness to the 'visible' nature of: (i) Jesus' 'shame at the service of love' (p.32) as we see in Jesus healing the leper in Mk 1:40-5; and (ii) 'Jesus 'love at the service of shame' (p. 33) in his prayer at Gethsemane (Mk 14:42). This creative use of language gives meaning to shame that such an emotion is not for nothing and reveals transforming moments of hope 'towards what is good' (p.33).

We know that Jesus cares deeply for the outcasts of society, the people persecuted who are voiceless, vulnerable and reduced to silence. Jesus laments with them to cry out to God. Ryan captures the interest of his audience by revealing that Mary too is one of these outcast ones. For she is 'a defenceless woman' with a 'child in danger' (p. 50). This is no metaphor. The experience is real and compelling. If we are to see Mary in this way, we see her son also. Out of the depths of shame where all seems lost heralds the possibility and hope for new beginnings. Here, Ryan points out that the Church must return to its scandalous beginnings to see and understand the paradoxical yet overarching revelation of the humiliating death of Christ upon the Cross. Further Ryan points out that Mary, as a type of Church, in her shame and defencelessness, reveals the compelling Pauline truth: that 'God's power and love, paradigmatically embodied in Jesus Christ, are at best in weakness and limitation (2 Cor 12:9)' (pp. 108-9).

In terms of facing the suffering of victims of sexual abuse, Ryan's first pastoral chapters (one to six) come to a momentum towards a spiritual response in Chapter Seven, 'Listening to Victims with Mary' and a moral response in Chapter Eight, 'A Church Disgraced: Guideposts from Mary'. These are two decisive chapters that Ryan gives the reader much preparation to attend and begin to approach. They are decisive because it is not easy. Speaking of shame before the truth of the other's outrage and suffering is not meant to be easy. It is one of the hardest things to speak about. Even more so about the shame, trauma and spiritual wounds of children. This is why we need Mary as a companion and guide to speak about such horrors of evil in the Church and world.

In Chapter Seven, Ryan, integrating his pastoral concerns towards a spiritual horizon, has a section entitled, 'Spiritual Healing: Possibilities'. The positive support of loving relationships forms a foundation to approach God and receive the gift of healing grace that Ryan describes uniquely as 'a process of re-ordering the victim's imagination' (p. 105). This means that wounds upon the soul need images and stories to help to process the shame and trauma of sexual abuse. Accordingly, Ryan invites readers to reflect upon Mary at the Cross as a means to reveal the spiritual insight: 'Healing grace comes from the cross' (p. 106).

In Chapter Eight, looking at Mary's shame (such as the crucifixion of her son) and the Church's disgrace over sexual abuse, Ryan dares to ask a piercing and moral question: '... is there a window through which we can try to make some sense of all that has been happening?' (p. 117) Through pondering with both Jesus and Mary, the window of the Church community must scrape off, so to speak, all the apathy, defensiveness, and lack of tears and care. The challenge then is to accompany Mary at the foot of the cross so that together the Church community knows and feels

about shame and brokenness as much as the pathway to hope and healing. For Ryan, such a pathway towards compassion must be addressed also in the current Plenary Council here in Australia.

To ponder with Mary about these issues is to pray, to lament and to learn that in and through Christ the Church faithful may find the courage and confidence 'to listen to and *learn from victims*' (p. 126). This is a moral imperative that reveals an affectivity of faith: the bodiliness of Mary and of Christ. Mary, spontaneously and without hesitation, shares in the pain of her Son at the foot of the Cross. In her powerlessness, she points the way to stand with victims of sexual abuse. Offering a narrative and memory of empathy and compassion, Ryan attests to Mary's witness at the cross. He points out that this signifies Mary's Jewish heritage of prayer and lament and further to the effect of the transformation of the soul, namely the courage to face suffering, claim it and seek justice.

In sum, Ryan's book is one that has the potential to instil a pathway of prayer and formation within the Church. His questions for reflection at the end of each chapter add a dimension of allowing Mary's companionship to remain as a source of hope, patience and endurance amidst the experience of shame. Not only does Ryan seek to value Mary as an archetype and companion of faith, but his book also works to help members of the Church at all levels to know the Gospel and the sufferings of others, and in particular the suffering of the victims of child sexual abuse. The book is constant in its effort to exemplify that at the soul of theology is Scripture, the very ingredient that helps people to digest the challenges and stirrings of faith. Hence, Ryan invites his readers to take a biblical path with both Jesus and Mary towards the Cross to evoke hope for resurrection in the Church. He thereby encourages the journey of faith following Mary's example.

Ryan succeeds in his book to create a pastoral, spiritual and moral sense of understanding the emotion of shame to move towards appreciating and valuing Mary's humanity and care for the Church faithful. The aim then of the book is to nurture 'a culture of trust, a 'heart change'' (p. 145). This is nothing more than being true to the biblical tradition of caring for the vulnerable members of society. There is also something Messianic and hopeful about this. Waiting for the day of salvation, we become vigilant like Simeon and Anna greeting, meeting and blessing the Holy Family, Joseph, Mary and the Child Jesus. The hopes of Simeon and Anna for salvation lie within Mary's arms. Here lies hope for Church, the Sacrament of Christ, to discover a 'heart change': to return to the image of the fragility and vulnerability of the baby Jesus presented at the Temple (Lk 2: 22-38). The Church may then learn humbly to go and journey 'in peace' (Lk 2:29), and behold the splendour, grace and blessing of the beautiful Marian 'artwork' of God - that in the arms of every mother, there is a precious child giving joy and hope to the world.