

A Complementary Voice in Catholicism

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INTRODUCTION

Conversations on the present state of the Catholic Church in Australia tend to follow a regular pattern. A litany of all that is wrong is usually followed by suggestions for what ‘they’, the clergy, bishops, the Pope, the Vatican bureaucracy or all of them indiscriminately, should do about it.

There certainly are many problems at all levels in our Church but focusing on the shortcomings of institutional authority cannot be the only strategy as we look for a way forward. Nor is it always the approach most likely to yield positive results. There is another way. We should consider what we can do; we who see ourselves as followers of Jesus, simply based on having appropriated and lived our Baptism and so become mature members of this community. We have our own authority and a right to exercise it. I believe there are pathways available to us for action towards renewing and revitalising our Church.

My aim

In this paper, I seek to explore the grounds for this voice, the basis and foundation for a role for all Catholics in relation to living and practising our faith and in organising as a Church. It rests on who we are as persons and as Catholics. This is distinct from the authority and voice of the Church as institution. I would like to address all Catholics, but especially the non-ordained, who seek to be part of a Church responsive to the circumstances, needs and opportunities of our age, one able to rise to the level of the times. I particularly wish to speak to people who are questioning the value of staying with this Church and feel frustrated by their lack of authority or power in a Church with an amazingly rich heritage which holds so much promise.

Our voice

Within the tradition and culture of our Church, the voice of Catholics as Catholics, living in the way of Jesus and discovering there the fullness of life (Jn 10:10) and the Spirit in our hearts (Rom 5:5) is seldom heard or given its due place. This voice arises from experience, personal insight and deliberation implicit in self-making, family and community/social living. It is complementary to the traditional, handed-down, hierarchical authority, the one that has been institutionalised through the centuries. It offers a point of view which emerges from the experience of living out our Baptism and suggests a particular perspective on what it is to be a Christian. This distinction of voices reflects differences between personal experience of living Catholicism and the experience of organisation in the institutional setting; it does not suggest one has to be either a community person or an institution person. Some people inhabit both territories and perspectives successfully, others less so.

Both the personal and institutional dimensions of life and of the Church are essential, two sides of one coin. Focussing exclusively on personal spirituality could leave us ultimately isolated and alone, pursuing a narrow vision and goal. Concentrating on institutionalised aspects alone could take us into heartless, formal and ultimately cold, empty rituals and dogmas with limited vision. We need both, just as we are neither islands nor members of a collectivist mass. We need to engage with our rich tradition, much of which is transmitted by institutional structures, as without it we are putting down roots in very thin soil. Both voices are necessary for a healthy, productive and participant Church community.

The larger context

Being Christian is our personal commitment to living authentically, intelligently and responsibly. It is being in love with people, the natural world and the whole universe. It is being all that we can be and, with compassion and care, enabling others too to reach their fulfilment. Jesus, the Word of God, with his vision, truth and conviction, is central to our appreciation of what makes for a good life. We believe in him and his message. We experience within and among us an enlivening Spirit that encourages us, individually and together, to strive for the full realisation of the realm of God. We seek a fair, equitable and person-affirming society, a world where all people live abundantly. An integral ecology, for which we take responsibility, is essential for the future of our planet.

Through understanding and appreciating Jesus, the man, we get a glimpse of the potential for a quality life inherent in his relationship with the one he called Father. Together, we his followers, create a thriving and flourishing community Church, as we live in his vision. The convictions and conversions of each individual form the existential basis for Eucharist celebration. Being a Christian is a serious affair. It takes commitment, energy, conviction and determination. We are not in this for a quick fix or superficial glossing over of deep issues. We are simply affirming the dignity and worth of every woman, man and child that is theirs by virtue of being who they are and loved unconditionally by God.

Terminology

The term “spiritual” is used here for personal or individual aspects of our search for transcendence and relationship with God. “Religion” refers to the social and community dimensions of the same life-long journey. I use the word “Catholics” to refer to all members of our Church, as baptized, confirmed and celebrating communion with one another. The term includes, overwhelmingly, people who are not ordained. I avoid ‘laity’ as it is an exclusionary term, the non-ordained. The ordained, a small minority among Catholics, and members of religious orders, congregations, etc. are not thereby excluded; we all stand on the same ground of Baptism and share the Christian experience, albeit in diverse ways.¹ “Catholicism” is our way of living, our religious culture. As well as beliefs, it includes values, traditions, customs and spiritualities but it is not prescriptive. It includes many traditions and spiritualities, a complex assortment of different forms. Every individual is a unique expression of personal appropriation of this complex inheritance.

The ‘Church’ is the way Catholicism is organised. It takes many forms including worship-liturgical assemblies, institution and caring, relationship-based communities. These forms of Church are neither mutually exclusive nor totally encompassing. Unfortunately, much discussion and writing on the Church does not differentiate adequately regarding which form is in question. This results in statements based on experience in one area being used in other fields of Church life. Examples include the use of metaphorical and ‘mythic’ scriptural language, legitimate for prayer and liturgies, being used uncritically as history, and attempts at community development using methods proper to governance. Very confusing! My main focus here is on the community, the living body of Christ, that forms the Church.

While my intended readership is Catholic, I do not seek to be exclusive. I interchange the terms, Christianity and Catholic frequently for ease of reading but recognise that they do not mean the same. Where the context allows for a broader reference, I tend to use ‘Christian’. Catholics are just one family among Christians. Other Christian families have their own traditions, gifts, charisms and

¹ In Canon law, non-ordained members of religious orders, congregations, etc. are lay people but there is much ambiguity in general discussion and community perception.

cultures and are to be respected as also providing authentic pathways for a relationship with God and for abundant living. The more we each work for integrity and growth in our respective Church families, the better we will all be together. Of course, 'Christian' always has resonances beyond Catholicism; we do not live in discreet compartments.

The place of the non-ordained

We non-ordained Catholics often find we are regarded as people to be recruited into the mission of the institutional Church - we are the 'faithful' to be formed and provided with sacraments or we are here to do a job. These are good and necessary features of a healthy Catholic community but there is more to us than that. While our Church is missionary, that should not overshadow its primary reality as a community or family of believers, of people who have come to know Jesus Christ and identify with him as the personal revelation of God.

Discussion and debate on our Church, its role and function, are usually based on a service provider perspective and tend to concentrate on institutional features and liturgical practices with less attention given to personal experience and to community aspects or social dimensions of daily living.² References to the lives and voices of Catholics, the 'faithful', are often brief, presumptive and shallow. It is generally taken for granted that only the hierarchy has authority in the Church, derived from the apostles and the Pope, and transmitted by ordination. Lay people are involved by invitation, delegation and permission at the discretion of bishops and priests. In a service provider perspective, the focus is on work to be done, the service to be provided. In a community perspective, personal flourishing, participation, mutual care and concern and building community relationships are foundational. Primary evangelization consists in reaching out to one another in community. Extending solidarity to others is a natural concomitant and expression of such living.

Sections of this paper

I begin with a consideration, in Section 1, of the inherent value of all people and the natural right of everyone to live a full life with dignity, respect and a voice in what concerns them. In Section 2, the paper moves into the explicitly Christian domain, exploring the meaning of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist in the life of the believer as she or he consciously and deliberately takes on a Catholic identity. Section 3 looks at the personal growth and development inherent in Christian living. As adults in the faith, we come to an understanding and appreciation of the transformative dynamic demanding expression in our living. With a developed conscience, people can take responsibility for their decisions and have an internal moral compass to guide their choices. The social growth and development that emerges in our relationships and communities is considered in Section 4. The sense of faith of the faithful is discussed in Section 5. Catholics, reflecting on and expressing their faith and how it enhances their lives, become more explicitly aware of their relationships with God and the role of the Spirit in their lived experience. Section 6 is a brief reflection on the future.

Each section presents a philosophical and/or theological reflection upon the issue in question, followed by references to various relevant authorities to clarify and situate my position within the tradition. These pages quote regularly from popes, canon law and the Catechism as well as theologians and other sources. Such references are to be taken as attesting to the fact of authority, right, dignity and worth of every Catholic. They do not confer authority but witness to the reality. Authority exists by natural right, personal authenticity and a lifestyle that actualises one's relationship with God (the inner reality signified and celebrated sacramentally).

² This is starkly exemplified in the Plenary Council Thematic Papers where the focus leans heavily on what the Church does or could do as a provider of services to an apparently docile 'laity' and compliant others.

1. NATURAL RIGHT

Every one of us has a natural dignity by virtue of being human with its intrinsic drive for autonomy and control in our own lives, and for pursuing our destinies according to our abilities and conditions. It is an imperative inherent in our very nature. Its existential expression is life itself.

Personal dignity

Our natural right to develop and make use of our talents and reach our potential derives from our human constitution as thinking, deciding, responsible people, from how we exist as persons, the way we are. Our experience of knowing and choosing is as constitutive of the human spirit as respiration, digestion and circulation systems are of the body. Authentic exercise of this right demands that we pay attention to what is going on, the world around us, act intelligently and reasonably. Our decisions and choices show how responsible and mature we are in directing our lives and in relating to others. Our feelings reveal our values and give psychic and emotional weight to our relationships. By using these abilities effectively, we become mature adults. This is human living. To deny the use of these abilities, gifts and skills is to deny our humanity.

We reach personal maturity when we discover that it is up to ourselves to decide what we are to be, what we are to make of ourselves, think and choose for ourselves, affirm our autonomy and take responsibility. “There is a critical point in the increasing autonomy of the subject (the individual) when he finds out for himself that it is up to himself to decide what he is to make of himself.”³

Jesus’ vision

At the heart of Jesus’ vision was an insistence that every person has her or his own worth and dignity. He inspired self-esteem and self-regard, an appreciation of their own value in everyone he met. He sought to change their way of thinking about themselves and their world, encouraging them to recognise their innate qualities. ‘Your faith has healed you’, not ‘Your faith in me’ or ‘Your faith in God’, but simply ‘your faith’ (Mk, 4:40, 5:34, 9:24-25, 10:52). With that example and encouragement, we too can develop our own capacities for maturity, responsibility, growth and having a voice in matters that affect us. Paul was clear on this point, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Cor 12:27).⁴ People have different gifts, charisms, talents and skills and everyone has a right to exercise their own (1Cor. 12: 4-11). The natural corollary is that we are expected to use those gifts personally and in the community.

In the non-religious world, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child* provide internationally agreed recognition and affirmation of the basic dignity and rights of persons.

To flourish as humans, we need to exercise our natural rights to ensure our development as persons and to contribute effectively to the quality of life of the people around us. It is life itself to acknowledge and affirm personal authority and autonomy, let our voices be heard. It is incumbent on us to join together to realise our own authenticity and that of others, and to give community expression to what we experience, what we know and regard as responsible courses of action. We are adult citizens of the communities we live in.

³ *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Vol 17: Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*. (R C. Croken & R. M. Doran, eds) p. 315. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). Hereafter CWL.

Dear reader, please excuse the gender-usage of this and other authors/sources which reflect earlier times or institutional anachronism.

⁴ New Testament quotations are taken from the NRSV Anglicized edition.

2. BAPTISM

Through Baptism, we become Christians and so gain access to the opportunities, rights and responsibilities that membership of this community implies. Growing in maturity and in relationship with others and with God, we develop in the personal authority of adulthood.

The door

Baptism is the defining feature and marker of Christian life. Pope Francis describes it as “the door”.⁵ It is not simply one among seven but the fundamental, categorical sacrament that sets the context, frame or groundwork for all others. For most of us, baptized as babies, the act of baptizing is just opening the door, but we still need to go through. Becoming a true follower of Jesus and a committed Christian is the work of a lifetime. As with psychological maturity there is a progression from the dependence and impotence of the infant to the maturity of the young adult and the further self-making that continues through life.

Actualising Baptism

During the baptism of a child, parents and godparents accept responsibility for bringing up the child in the practice of the faith. It will be their duty to introduce him/her to the Christian way of life of love of God and neighbour. Baptism, like all human growth is in a context of community. We complete our Baptism when, as adults, we consciously and deliberately take on the commitment made earlier on our behalf. The actualisation of Baptism is primarily a conversion of heart and mind, the adoption of a Christian perspective and values, and recognition of a relationship with God, and so a particular identification and self-concept. Until this is done, the sacrament is incomplete. Through appropriating the meaning and intent of Baptism we take on a new orientation and purpose in life. We take on the mind of Christ and become ‘members of the Body of Christ’. (1Cor 12:27).

There is nothing magical about it. We are present to God to the extent that we identify with what is said and done. If we do not mean and identify with what we, the minister, parents, sponsors, the community present and, later, the maturing Christian, are saying and doing, it is all a meaningless, valueless ritual.

Authority of Baptism

The authority of Baptism comes from the deliberate appropriation of and identification with the mind and values of Jesus, i.e. the ‘mind and values’ of God, which is what makes us authentic members of the Christian community, (Phil. 2:5). The validity of Baptism is grounded in the authenticity of the conversion and the integrity of the baptised person. It is lived in commitment, authenticity, integrity, honesty, quality of one’s relationships, responsibility in relation to our communities, society generally and our environment. It is a personal commitment to the life-long work of transformation into one who loves God “with all one’s heart and soul and strength and mind” (Lk 10:27). ‘Every Christian accomplishes this (commitment to Christ) when she or he subjectively ratifies the event that occurred objectively at baptism. This ratification takes sacramental form at Confirmation.’⁶ The reality of Baptism is expressed sacramentally in liturgy. Through it, we become citizens of the community of Jesus, the Church. Participation in the life of Christ is participation in his authority

⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation: *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, #47. Hereafter referenced as EG.

⁶ Jacques Servais, S.J. (ed). *Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Spiritual Exercises: An anthology*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press. 1993) p. 129.

Reductionism and reality

Baptism is often reduced, in popular theology, poor preaching and some catechisms, to a rather basic or ‘bare bones’ form, to the ritual of baptism itself without reference to the lived perspectives and experiences of the people involved. This is reductionism at its worst.

We quite often refer glibly to receiving the Holy Spirit at Baptism. The reality is more complex. In the context of human living the unique significance of Baptism is seen as entering into a new relationship with the Holy Spirit and with Christ as ‘*priest, prophet and king*’⁷ Bishop Robert Barron, referring to all Catholics, explains that priests embody the harmony between God and people, prophets speak out their convictions and kings take responsibility for community and public affairs.⁸ To speak of Christians as priests, prophets and kings without reference to their convictions and values and their responsibility and right to speak up, be heard and have active roles in the community makes no sense and simply adulterates the meaning of Baptism.

Baptism, foundational to becoming Christian, is strengthened and supported by the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist, as noted in the Constitution on the Church.⁹ The observations above about appropriating and actualising in our lives the significance and value of Baptism apply equally to Eucharist and Holy Communion which are celebrated in a context – of believers coming together with dispositions and intentions reflective of their existential living.

Bringing Christ to the Eucharist

We come together at the Eucharist to celebrate our identity with Christ, reflect on our inspiring heritage and refresh community ties. But we do not come from a vacuum or with empty hands and hearts. We bring our experience and wisdom, our joys and sorrows, expectations and hopes but, above all, we come with our own faith and personal relationships with God. The Eucharist is an opportunity to nourish and strengthen a prior relationship, the fruit of personalised and interiorized Baptism. It is the ongoing life of faithful, sincere Christians which is the urge and impetus that brings us to join with others in celebrating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, to share and express our common faith. The inner reality of the Eucharist and Communion is in the hearts and minds, the spirits, of us gathered believers. In our commitment to Jesus and to one another, we form the body of Christ at that moment. In doing so we both celebrate our own faith and share a common bond and tradition with the wider Christian community. Too often, writing and preaching on the Eucharist seem to overlook the fact that we come with real spiritual assets. We are not spiritually empty vessels to be filled.

Baptism is both an opportunity and a responsibility. It brings with it both the autonomy of the ‘child’ of God and the responsibility to act as an adult

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1241. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM accessed 2020 September 2020. Hereafter CCC.

⁸ Robert Barron, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, 2014, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/priest-prophet-and-king-2818>. Accessed 10 July 2020.

⁹ Second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium: The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #11. Hereafter LG.

3. CHRISTIAN LIVING

As members of our Church community, we Catholics, committed to following the way of Jesus, have thereby an authority and a voice in relation to its organisation and activities. It is too often unexpressed by ourselves or overlooked by others. The desire to follow him, comes from appreciating who Jesus was, having some understanding of what he was about, his perspective and what he hoped to achieve. Some refer to this as encountering Jesus; others as falling in love with him.

A way of living

The essence of being a Catholic Christian is in how we live, our personal standards of integrity and morality, how we care for and relate to others, being responsible members of society, inspired by the vision and message of Jesus.¹⁰ The way we live is what really matters, the quality of our characters, open and honest with ourselves, our families, friends, colleagues and others. When we come together to celebrate Mass or a sacrament, we are celebrating and ritualising something that is already taking place in our own lives and bringing it to another level, externally and with a community of like-minded people, consciously in the presence of God. Our spirituality, the set of beliefs, ideals, values, meanings, priorities and relationships that we live by, forms the foundation for everything else. It comes from our heart, the deep inner core of our being, of who we are, emerging from our lived experience.

An authentic Catholic life is a rewarding experience, grounded in a desire for authenticity and rejection of hypocrisy. It involves a personal search for identity, for a way of expressing and living one's true self. It is fulfilling in finding wholeness in making decisions for ourselves, in discovering our own particular style or expression and following it. It leads to a fuller life, bringing one closer to others as well as providing a secure basis for living, loving and discerning truth, what is worthwhile and valuable. The achievement has its own authority and dignity as each of us in a wholesome mature society expects and demands the autonomy of our hearts. It is being gifted with the vision, truth and conviction of Jesus, the Word of God, being able to imagine a fair, equitable and person-affirming society and an integral ecology.

In our living and loving, we discern hope without which despair dominates. It is hope or confidence that enables us to look positively to the future and believe in progress. (Jesus' term, the 'Realm of God', must surely rank as one of the strongest expressions ever of anticipated progress). Hope enables us to commit to goals and values and to celebrate our loves and achievements, the beauty of our world and the wonder of life; it reveals the Spirit alive in us, the love of God poured into our hearts.¹¹

Personal responsibility

Being Christian is a personal opportunity. Jesus had a way, in parables and riddles, of prompting people to think things out for themselves. It is imperative for us too that we each bring our own thinking to the questions of faith, belief, behaviour, etc. We all need to listen to and be guided by experts but ultimately, we each enjoy the freedom to embrace that life to the full as people of God. A friend in a senior position in a religious congregation expressed it this way, "For years, I and many women I suspect, have chosen what we will take and not take. So, having long ago built my own deep relationship with God, I guess at the end of the day that is what matters to me, to all around me and to God."

¹⁰ Mt. 25 makes this point with shocking emphasis.

¹¹ Cf. Rom. 5:5

As adult Christians, we learn how to take increasing responsibility for our own lives and for community Christian life. We can make real, pragmatic, realisable decisions about enabling and creating opportunities and spaces for this. It would be a failure of responsibility to leave it to others. To move forward as a community, it is imperative that we behave as grown-ups, that we not only learn to think for ourselves theologically but also act on our own initiative. Mature people know their own minds and do not need to pretend otherwise. When Jesus responded to Peter's profession, 'You are the Messiah' by saying, 'My Father in heaven has revealed this to you' (Mt 16:16-17) he was not talking about a special transmission of knowledge by God into Peter's brain. Through thinking it out for himself, Peter had come to the realisation that this was the intelligent and mature conclusion from his experience of living with and loving Jesus. That is how adults discern. Peter did not have it all worked out as the immediately following narrative notes, but he was getting there.¹² As Denis Edwards says, '*God works through secondary causes,*'¹³ in this case, Peter's mind and heart.

Abundant life

All four Gospels make the point that Jesus envisaged a fulfilling life, free of coercion and open to flourishing. Jn 10:10 states this most directly. 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.' Through Jesus, we have the opportunity to live life on a higher plane with total intensity.

Love is a core feature of Christian living. Paul was emphatic that our '*hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts*' (Rom 5:5). Our hope is grounded in our experience of love. He adds, '*neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, no height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*' (Rom. 8:38-39). The Gospel writers also gave top priority to love – love of God, of Jesus and of one another (Mk. 12: 30-31; Mt. 22: 37, 39; Lk. 10:27; Jn. 13:34, 14:23, 15:9, 21:15-17). In love, women and men reach a level of self-transcendence not otherwise attainable.

Living and loving

Pope Francis frequently refers to the 'spirituality of the people' - an instinct for and sense of transcendence in human living. It is a source of authority, of authenticity and power inherent in each and every person that is independent of any institutional authority. It is also a resource for exploring creative responses to the issues of our times. He sees Christian living as a joyful experience, titling his first encyclical, '*The Joy of the Gospel*'. He suggests we should not deprive ourselves of happiness.¹⁴ Where is this joy to come from? It comes from the conviction that there is a Big Life that is larger than life, that the universe of Christian living has no boundary-making horizon. That is the meaning of resurrection. Life is much more than a cradle-to-grave existence. The truth of incarnation is that we all share in the life of God here and now, unendingly, together with everything that exists, ever has or ever will. A central truth of Trinity surely is that we exist as gifted by a Source, as expressions of a Word and as life-forces of a Spirit. In that perspective, fear is relegated to the background. We become free to live up to our potential, be all that we can be and reach out to others in love.

¹² Mt. 16: 21-23 relates how Peter reacted to Jesus telling them he would be tortured and killed and his rebuke of Peter, calling him a devil.

¹³ Denis Edwards *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action*. (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2010)

¹⁴ EG #4

Personal love is foundational. It relates people to one another; it is the reference frame for all true living. Paul's 'hymn' on love in 1Cor. 13 could be read as a commentary on Jesus' exhortation, 'Love God and love your neighbour. Chapter 14 then makes it clear that Paul is referring to gifts received by individuals, to be used for the benefit of the community. Christian living is the context in which Paul writes about the 'Lord's Supper'. Of the 16 chapters in that first letter to the Corinthians, only part of one refers to the Supper. The rest of the letter is almost entirely devoted to how the Christians of Corinth should live and behave. Life is to be lived before it is celebrated. Paul declared that calling God 'Abba' proves we are inspired by the Spirit.¹⁵ Experience reveals our relationship with God. Use of the familial term implies intimacy, security, comfort, a contented and happy people. Here we have a home, a place of autonomy and freedom. Here we are free to be artists, creating the first and only versions of ourselves.

Knowing Jesus

Francis is clear in repeated statements that the Christian faith is rooted in a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. This is one-to-one. It means getting to know Jesus as a human being, understanding his growing and maturing, grasping his vision, identifying with his values and committing to following his way. The renewal of our Church and our world begins with personal renewal of our lives, lived according to the vision of Jesus which invites us to understand, know and love him, the man with a God-consciousness, holding out for us the possibility of overt living in a personal relationship with God. Enveloped as we are with lots of spiritualising and theologising about Jesus, it is easy to lose sight of him as a real human, a man who had to find his way in the hard reality of Roman dominated Palestine. He did not have the benefit of super-human insight into the mind of God, but had to work it out for himself. Knowing Jesus means appreciating his inner struggles and insecurities, his longing for love and his alone-ness.

This is adult work, demanding that we be mature and responsible about it. Vatican II insisted that we act as grown-ups, probably the first Council to ask this of all Catholics. This is our call - to be adults in an adult Church.

Conscience

Conscience is the inner demand in us for integrity, sincerity, honesty and abhorrence of hypocrisy as we seek to be all we can be. It is an extraordinary, unique spark, individual to each of us, yet open to recognition by others and strengthened by sharing. It is both intensely personal and, when recognised, is constructive of a healthy society. Once we become aware of it, we are impelled to respond with attention, intelligence and responsibility, nourishing it carefully. Developing a mature, robust and effective conscience is the work of a lifetime, taking place deep in our hearts. An educated conscience is crucial for mature Christian living.¹⁶ It is honed, refined and developed in a life of attentive responsibility or, alternatively, undermined, dis-integrated and even obliterated by negligence and deliberate avoidance. The good woman or man is characterised by a strong clear conscience underpinning a sense of direction and purpose in their life. We all know, or know of, women and men who exude a Conscientious authority by the way they live, their integrity, the values they profess and uphold, and the vigour with which they seek the truth and the good of others.

We are morally and ethically mature people to the extent that we follow our consciences in our responses to the opportunities and demands of living. As Lonergan put it, responsibility and

¹⁵ Cf. Gal. 4:6

¹⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church #1783 'Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator.' Hereafter CCC.

conscience coalesce and coincide in deliberation, evaluation and decision, and acting accordingly.¹⁷ An informed conscience is the result of a mature consideration of the relevant issues in personal discernment. We stake our lives on this exercise of ultimate freedom and responsibility. It is for each person to determine the scope and reach of that life-shaping deliberation, not anyone else.

Conscience is at the heart of the Gospel message. Jesus was direct in his call, ‘Repent and believe the Good News’ (Mk 1:15); ‘Repent for the Kingdom is close at hand’ (Mt 4:17). That call implies that his hearers already knew in their own consciences what they should do. Similarly, the response of hearers to Peter’s ‘Pentecost sermon’ was, ‘... they were cut to the heart’. (Acts 2:37). The appeal to conscience is foundational and essential to Christianity. Paul refers to the unique intimacy of personal discernment, ‘The depths of a person can only be known by their spirit’ (1 Cor 2:1).

John Henry Newman is probably the foremost proponent of the place of conscience in relation to personal integrity and authenticity in our tradition. ‘The sense of right and wrong (authentic conscience) is the first element in religion.’¹⁸ He insists that we are bound to abide by the demands of conscience, a law of the mind, above all other authority.¹⁹ It is the ultimate guiding star for each of us.²⁰ It is the basis and authentication for an inner voice and authority in relation to how we conduct our living, how we grow and shape a responsible self and the relationships we engage in. The imperatives of conscience demand expression in our religious activities and the communities we form.

Conscience is the canary in the coal mine for faithfulness to our relationship with God. Newman described it as the ‘*aboriginal Vicar of Christ*’.²¹ In response to a question on drinking a toast to the Pope, he declared, ‘*I shall drink to conscience first and then to the Pope*’.²² The *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* describes conscience, where one is truly alone with God, as an interior law that must be followed.²³

Conscience is an expression of the sense of the faith in individuals. When people diligently and responsibly discern truth or value in ways that constitute a moral imperative for how they live, they cannot be ignored. Not only do they have a right and a duty to speak to the ‘sacred pastors’, but they also each have an obligation to act in accordance with conscience.²⁴ That is personal authority. When multiplied and shared, it is community authority.

From the heart

One of the themes running through the Newman Forum presentations (2019-20), was that of learning from and building on experience.²⁵ Catholics reflected on the events of their lives that shaped what they had become. They spoke about core convictions related to the vision and mission of Jesus. While they found support, encouragement, friendship and community in a variety of ways,

¹⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd.) p. 268-9.

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *Letter to Duke of Norfolk*, Section 5.

<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/section5.html> accessed 17/6/2020

¹⁹ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, Section 5.

²⁰ CCC #1776 "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey.

²¹ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, Section 5.

²² Thomas Carr, *Newman on Conscience: An idea for our time?* (Catholic education Resource Centre, 2020)

²³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium at Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #16. Hereafter GS.

²⁴ CCL # 212 §3

²⁵ The Newman Forums were a series of reflections on personal spirituality conducted in Adelaide between May 2019 and February 2020.

the predominant guiding light lay in discerning from among their varied experiences, the intuitions, connections, moments of insight and grace that led to realising dreams and hopes that lay deep in their hearts.

This is a time for adults to be grown-ups. Karl Rahner claimed we are transitioning to a Church made up of people who work to “*reach a personal, clear and explicitly responsible decision of faith*”.²⁶ On personal spirituality, Richard Rohr points out the importance of having one’s own voice, ‘*Authentic spirituality is always first about you - about allowing your own heart and mind to be changed. It’s about getting your own ‘who’ right.*’²⁷

Our institutional Church also recognises that all Christians are equal in dignity and in the activities in which we work together to build up our Church, each in our own way. We all share the responsibility and so, the status of co-workers, in realising the potential inherent in this community.²⁸ Caring for our Church community means, not only undertaking or supporting what is good but also calling out wrong-doing, mismanagement, hypocrisy and cover-up wherever it exists. As in other areas of life, the standard we let pass is the standard we accept.

Our capacity is for life to the full and should not be compromised. Every Catholic has a voice. The more we each speak our truth; the stronger will be our Church community and the more abundant our living.

4. LIVING COMMUNITIES

We discover who we are through relationships. We need places for free and open sharing as we also expect honesty in return. The autonomy and safety of supportive communities is integral to wholesome growth. As essential features of healthy living, local and personal-level communities have a genuine authority and voice in the lives of their people and the wider Church.

Community life

In our living, personally and socially, with our individual and shared relationships with God, we are the Church, the community of the followers of Jesus. Any discussion of Christian community has to refer to Mt 18:19-20 ‘*Again truly, I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*’ Community is as basic to human living as individuality. They are like a dancing couple, each complementing the movements of the other while engaged in their own creative artistry.

Life is inter-relational. Every one of us begins in our mother’s body. We are born into a family. The long slow developmental process leading eventually to authentic self-determining responsible maturity is done in the context of multiple relationships. There is an ongoing inter-action between the self-affirming person and the training and education provided through the wisdom (or lack of it) and experience of the community. Christian community builds on the reality that fullness of life is to be found in loving one another with personal authenticity.

²⁶ R Dedern, A review of Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, translation and introduction by Edward Quinn (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974). P. 219.

²⁷ Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation, 15.9.19.

²⁸ Code of Canon Law #208. Hereafter CCL.

Creating a loving community is an opportunity for positive experiences and deep satisfaction. When it is successful, we feel the uplift, the pleasure of being part of this group. It raises our spirits, gives us hope and connects us with like-minded people. Appreciating the fullness of life, participating in celebration, creating communion and worshipping a loving God can be a liberating, life-enhancing factor in our lives.

A Big Life vision

In Jesus, we have not only a vision and way of living, but also a personal invitation to share his perspective and stance in life. The Big Life he is suggesting reaches out far beyond our ordinary horizons, revealing a viewpoint from which we can see our world more clearly and recognise values that would transform lives everywhere.

Now more than ever our world needs people with a Big Life commitment and friends to address climate change and degraded environments, to speak up for social justice and asylum seekers, to restore the prospect of a positive future for our children, to develop economic systems that do not exploit the vulnerable, to educate for dignity and opportunity, to invest in peace rather than war and drag our institutional Church into the evolutionary-minded 21st century. This is an exciting vision full of promise for a better world.

As Christian living is grounded in conversion to the way of Jesus and commitment to his vision and values, Christian community is formed when committed believers come together. *‘Conversion is existential, intensely personal, utterly intimate. But it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many, and they form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation and to help one another in working out the implications and fulfilling the promise of their new life.’*²⁹ A community is successful when it enables its members to reach the abundant life that Jesus spoke of. It is authentic to the extent that it is faithful to the originating conversion and attentive to evolving circumstances. It is as powerful as the cooperation it elicits from its members; that power is legitimate and demands expression in so far as it promotes love, life, vision and conversion in the community.

Communities for the world

Communities constitute the combined authority of their members’ conversions, implicit in their Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharistic communion, as well as their experience, convictions and commitments to Christian living. This authority from the ground up seems to have been well recognised in the early years and centuries of the Church but with gradual institutionalisation, it has been overlooked and moved into the background. Our Church would benefit greatly from a recovery of the role and voice of this authority, providing for a mutually enhancing conversation or dialogue between handed-down institutional wisdom and the wisdom emergent in the life-experiences of Catholics.

The Church institution exists for people, those within and others. It is not itself an ultimate criterion of value; its value is in how it enables all of us to live well. The unity of the Church centres on common union with Jesus in all he personified. Through liturgy, Catholics communally express their faith and relationship with God and celebrate their common faith and shared commitment to the way of Jesus, the Word of God in human form. Liturgy is authentic insofar as its language and gestures express the deep sentiments and dispositions of participants and lead to further deepening

²⁹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 130

of personal conversion. At its best it reflects what it means for Catholics to live out their Baptism as disciples of Jesus open to “*full, conscious and active participation*” in a vibrant sacramental life.³⁰

Community authority

We are all participants in and responsible for creating community.³¹ Everyone has a right and true basis for speaking up and acting on their own initiative. Pope Francis invites every Catholic and group to be creative and daring in rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of creating and building Christian communities in their own areas.³²

The ‘Petrine Promise’ of Mt 16:18, ‘... you are Peter and, on this rock, ...’ has a context which needs to be recovered.³³ Genuine authority is always conditional and cognisant of diverse sources of authority. The universally collaborative nature of responsibility in the Church is noted by the LSC report in the overview of its theological foundations.³⁴

The image of the Church as a community on the move, a pilgrim people, has become a powerful symbol for our times.³⁵ We experience the achievements and joys of moving towards our pilgrim goal along with the challenges and setbacks that befall us. We have our parts to play in the evolution of our Church in its need to address the signs of the times and the needs of the age. Change is a constant in the lives and circumstances of individuals and communities. In our solidarity with Jesus, it is not always necessary or even appropriate or beneficial to call upon senior executives for guidance. The circumstances and conditions of a particular time and place often call for expertise on the spot to provide a remedy. There, where the form of the problem will determine the form of the appropriate solution, the grown-up Christian comes into her own. In *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis refers to initiatives taken by women that ensured the survival of Catholicism in Amazonia despite the absence of priests in many areas for long periods.³⁶

Families

The family is the basic unit of society, no matter how varied or fractured it is. It is our first and primordial community. Families come in all shapes and sizes – two parents with children, single parents, adopted children, grandparents with grandchildren, same sex and heterosexual, old and young, mono-cultural to multiracial, and lots more. Family members often have divergent positions on faith and spirituality. Whatever the situation, these are the circumstances in which Catholics live out their convictions and values. Such experiences are the ‘joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties’³⁷ that have a right to be spoken, listened to, and acted on with love, care and compassion in our Church community. All families, whatever their condition, have a place in our community.³⁸

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium, Decree on the Liturgy*, #14, Hereafter SC.

³¹ CCL #208,

³² EG #20, #33

³³ See Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: The evolution of Catholicism*. (New York, 2008: Harper Collins). p 96-97. ‘The conferral of the power of the keys to the Kingdom surely suggests an imposing measure of authority, given the symbolism of the keys, but there is no explicit indication that the authority conferred was meant to be exercised over others, much less that it was to be absolutely monarchical in kind (as claimed and exercised by later popes, especially in the Middle Ages and even into the late twentieth century).’

³⁴ *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*, Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference (ACBC) August 2020 p 25. Hereafter LSC.

³⁵ EG #111

³⁶ Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, 2020. # 99

³⁷ GS #1

³⁸ Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Paper 1 p. 16. The six Thematic Discernment Papers are available at: <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/continuing-the-journey-of-discernment/> accessed on 29 September 2020. Hereafter, these papers will be referenced as PCTP, followed by the paper number.

Small Christian Groups

Small groups and communities reach and connect people beyond the family. They contribute enormously to the faith and life of the Christian community. They take many forms, from prayer and contemplation to action-oriented, from meditation and rosary groups to Vinnies' conferences and informal reflection groups. The sharing of experiences in conversation, prayer, scripture study and faith perspectives in such informal groups is valuable.³⁹ Small groups offer everyone opportunities to participate, speak and be heard, personal opportunities for growth and mutual support. There, people can form meaningful relationships wherein life-issues can be explored deeply and safely and affirm one another. They have, not just a rightful place in the Church community but also a contribution that needs to be acknowledged on its own merits.

Pope Francis believes that the active participation of all Catholics is essential for ecclesial and social change.⁴⁰ This applies in all areas of Church life in the community, the worshipping assembly and the institution. Community living will flourish fully when we recognise non-ordained women and men, the great majority of Catholics, as having authentic authority, missions and roles due to their Baptism.

5. THE SENSE OF THE FAITH OF THE FAITHFUL

The source and basis for the voice of the people is summed up in the phrase, the sense of the faith of the faithful (*sensus fidei fidelium*). It is grounded in the lived experience of believers. Our spiritualities gather up our pasts, our present efforts and achievements and our insights into what our lives mean now and are to mean in the future. Everyone has her or his own spirituality, their spirit in action - a personal stance or attitude towards life though differences between one person and another vary from the obvious to quite subtle.

A sensitivity

Over time, living with faith and love, working on making Catholicism real in the hustle and bustle of life, being a responsible adult, having a family, joining a community or (more likely) communities, lead to developing a sensitivity in relation to our faith. Just as the avid bushwalker develops a feel for the sounds of nature, the surfer for the good wave or a teacher for the receptivity of her class, Christians enmeshed with their faith-lives have an instinct for what is true and good or, alternatively, deviant and counter-productive.

The work of a lifetime

As we live through days and months and years, holding our faith and traditions close to our hearts, we work on making our Baptism and Confirmation real and vitalising in our lives. We seek to appropriate their meaning and intent in our self-creation and respond to the commitments made by ourselves or on our behalf. Similarly, through celebrating the Eucharist we identify with Jesus, his sense of participation in divinity and his relationship with the Father and the Spirit. Our personal soul-searching as we discern how best to be the woman or man we are capable of being and how we can develop our lives and opportunities with integrity, refines our sensitivities. Entering into

³⁹ EG #29; PCTP 3.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God*, 2018

<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/08/20/180820a.html> Accessed 29 September 2020

relationships of various kinds, having a family, playing different parts in our communities, coping with adversity, illness or long-term disability and growing old all contribute to our sense of what it is to be a Christian and a follower of Jesus in our world. As Ignatius of Loyola might have said, *'There is a wisdom here that can only be discerned through attention to feelings and spirits that have endured the testing and cross-examination of living.'* Dogmas and doctrines are interpreted and given practical applicability in the existential milieu of growth and relationships or they are simply ignored and become driftwood on the sea of life to end up on some abandoned shore.

Developing and refining a mature sense or instinct for the truth and value inherent in Christianity is the work of a lifetime. Described as the sense of the faith of the faithful, it is a rock on which we build relationships with God.

Revelation happening

Theologians explain it like this. *"The Spirit's instrument for interpreting divine revelation is the sensus fidei, a "sense of the faith", or better, a sense for the faith. It is a capacity which the Spirit gives, along with the gift of faith, to every baptized believer and to the church as a whole".*⁴¹ Rush adds, *"... more fundamentally, the sensus fidelium must be listened to because it is a locus theologicus, a place where the revealing God can be heard speaking to the church today. Why listen to the sensus fidelium? - "to find what the Lord asks of his Church today."*⁴² Revelation comes through scripture, tradition and the body of Christ which is what believers are.

Through growing into mature membership of the community of Jesus, Christians become attuned to the Holy Spirit and thereby are inspired to bring to life again, their roles as proclaimers of truth, love and justice. The insight into their faith gained through the experience of living as followers of Jesus is Spirit-inspired and confidence-boosting in affirming the News as good.⁴³ The Holy Spirit is in them, bringing a personal and intimate knowledge of the Christian faith.⁴⁴ *"The faithful have an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables them to recognise and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false".*⁴⁵

Learning from experience

Experience is a wonderful teacher and source of learning. The insights and wisdom gained through every-day living bring a valuable and enriching sensitivity to our personal perspectives: the search for an authentic sense of self, developing a career, securing a regular income, falling in love, being married, having children with its attendant parenting commitments and responsibilities, repaying a mortgage, meeting insurance and health-care demands, providing for the future and retirement and playing one's part in community/communities. The unique sensitivities of people who have known discrimination or marginalisation in any way, including women in our Church, are a special source of insight and inspiration. When the distinct experiences and perspectives of women and men are fully and freely expressed, we are all enriched.

⁴¹ Ormond Rush, *Plenary Council Participation and Reception: Synodality and Discerning the Sensus Fidelium*, p 1. plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au Accessed on 23 June 2020.

⁴² Ormond Rush, *Plenary Council Participation and Reception: Synodality and Discerning the Sensus Fidelium*, p 8. (Quoting Pope Francis).

⁴³ The International Theological Commission (ITC), *'Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church'* 2014 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html Accessed on 22 June 2020. Hereafter ITC.

⁴⁴ ITC, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, #1.

⁴⁵ ITC #2

Pope Francis advises preachers to listen to their people in order to know what to talk about. They are to pay attention to how people live so that they can speak in their language and meet their questions fairly.⁴⁶ Appreciation of the faith and its relevance to lived experience are sources to be consulted by preachers, alongside the scriptures and formal theology. Referring to the instinct of the people for discovering ways of promoting the Gospel, he points out that occasionally the bishop should follow his people *'allowing the flock to strike out on new paths'*.⁴⁷ Walter Kasper supports this view, noting that Francis promotes the doctrine of the sense of faith of the faithful and advises the Church to listen to the voice of the people.⁴⁸

The ITC notes the contribution of the body of Christians to the sense of the faith. *"From the beginning of Christianity, all the faithful played an active role in the development of Christian belief. Sometimes the people of God, and in particular the laity, intuitively felt in which direction the development of doctrine would go, even when theologians and bishops were divided on the issue."*⁴⁹ *"In certain areas, the teaching of the Church has developed as a result of lay people discovering the imperatives arising from new situations."*⁵⁰

The sense of the faith among Australian Catholics

The sense of faith of the faithful of Australia has been clearly expressed in the past. It was reflected in the submissions to the Plenary Council process which were, in most cases, expressions of the faith of the Catholics but also included people of other faiths. The voting pattern of a majority of Catholics in the 'same sex' plebiscite in 2017, contrary to the advice of the ACBC,⁵¹ was another expression of the sense of the faith of the faithful.

The sense of the faith of the faithful on many current issues is clearly in favour of major reconsideration of their position by institutional Church authorities including, on the continuing subjection of women to discrimination which is a great embarrassment to most Catholics. This discomfort is evidenced clearly in multiple references in the Plenary Council Thematic Papers and in the *Light from the Southern Cross* report. That Indigenous and LGBTI+ people, as well as others, feel excluded is also a cause of serious questioning and rejection of the authority of the Church. Other signs that cry out for attention include the drift away from attendance at Mass and the sacraments, the widespread abandoning of confession/reconciliation, the continuing deteriorating credibility of the hierarchy, disregard for the official position in relation to contraception, sacramental reception and homosexuality, and the lack of transparency, accountability and inclusiveness in governance. Major discrepancies between what the institutional Church teaches and what Catholics believe are a scandal and an embarrassment. These make it difficult to speak openly or engage in frank conversation about Catholicism, basic 'evangelisation', in our own backyards. They require critical examination just as sexual abuses and the attendant cover-ups did. These are major roadblocks for our efforts to promote our core life-giving message of love and life. The Vatican II declaration, *"... the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel"* seems to have been archived.⁵²

⁴⁶ EG #154

⁴⁷ Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*. (Tr, William Madges). (New York: Paulist Press, 2015).

⁴⁸ EG #31

⁴⁹ ITC #72

⁵⁰ ITC #73

⁵¹ The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

⁵² GS #4

As a Church community we are learning to dialogue internally and appreciate diverse ideas and expressions of common goals as we journey together. In relation to a range of issues, many Catholics have come to discern conscientious positions that differ from the statements of the magisterium or Canon Law. It is too easy to become preoccupied with uniformity and non-essentials instead of focusing on the extraordinary message of the life-giving love of God.⁵³ Some are learning to live with this situation; others have walked away

Vatican II explained clearly that there are two complementary modes of transmission of the faith, through believers and through preachers. *‘There is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.’* (My emphasis)⁵⁴ The role of all believers in the development and transmission of the faith is clear.

The faith, convictions and values, the sense of the faith of the faithful, of Catholics has a right of expression, recognition and acceptance in the ongoing life of the Church. It is critical for the future of our Church that we claim our place and make our voice heard. Ignoring or diminishing this voice and authority impoverishes the Church and distorts Catholicism.

6. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Where does this leave us in relation to creating a future for Catholicism, for our Church?

Personal conversion and commitment

Karl Rahner predicted that the Church of the future would be made up "of those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach a personal, clear and explicitly responsible decision of faith"⁵⁵ He expected the Church to grow from below.⁵⁶ *‘Not all authentic religious inspiration originates from the hierarchy which, in the exercise of its mission to rule, teach, and sanctify, is not necessarily inspired.’*⁵⁷

A New Story

People are talking about a New Story, one that offers a poetic inspirational quality to our scientific narrative of evolution. For centuries, we had a salvation history/narrative which was a mix of biblical and Christian history and myth. The need to reframe this wondrous story within the context of human evolution and human history has been evident for decades. The scope has expanded again. We now have the opportunity to see salvation history and human history in the context of the evolution of the universe and health of the natural environment. Pope Francis calls it ‘Integral Ecology’. *Laudato Si* was its launching pad but it’s development will need enlargement on a much broader scale. The Christian narrative, the New Story, will incorporate everything from the Big Bang to Incarnation, Trinity and Resurrection. Some of our most treasured formulations and expressions will be transformed as we, Christians, learn how to offer a comprehensive vision and

⁵³ PCTP 6. p. 11; The Catechism also makes this point at #83.

⁵⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum, Constitution on Divine Revelation*. #8

⁵⁵ Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*. Quoted by Raoul Dederen in *Karl Rahner’s The Shape of the Church to Come: A review Article*, 219

⁵⁶ Dederen p. 220 reflecting on Rahner’s comments.

⁵⁷ Dederen p. 223

hope to the world. It is time to put the opposing of science and religion in the dust bin. Opportunities offered by advances in science, psychology, sociology, climate change research, peace initiatives, international relations and more can greatly expand our Christian perspectives.

Focus on the essentials

In the face of enormous challenges and opportunities, it is frustrating indeed to find that some of our leaders are preoccupied with liturgical formulae, dragging their heels over basic operational and governance procedures and seem oblivious to changing society. It is all the more necessary and urgent that Catholics who see openings and pathways towards concrete progress, use their initiative and personal resources to move ahead. No one wants to simply abandon those who cannot see, but we should not be held hostage to their intransigence. The future Church will be multi-dimensional with unity based on the quest for the fullness of life and following the way of Jesus rather than profession of a common credal formula or compliance with organisational procedures.

All together

Pope Francis imagines a future built by everyone making their diverse contributions, not one to be developed by the professionals alone.⁵⁸ There are many good people in the institutional Church who are willing and able to provide leadership, who will be prominent in bringing the New Story into our lives and the ethos of the nation. Evangelisation is multi-dimensional. It is another word for bringing the gospel to life in our own lives and the lives of others. For each one of us, it is about bringing out the best in ourselves, in growing to our full stature. It is a gospel of freedom, of self-actualisation, enabling us to be all we can be. Together we can build a better world. In this, we need to work together - lay people, priests bishops and institutional structures. *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Fratelli Tutti* are invitations to maximise the opportunities of human living in a divine context.

Our Church community grows by attracting people to our vision, values, way of living and the quality of our proposals and actions for bringing about a better world. As we articulate and demonstrate these features, we internally strengthen ourselves and our communities. Externally, we signal that we have a worthwhile message on offer. However, a credible, effective voice in the public square depends on a profile of sincerity and integrity, values that resonate with the best in people, realistic contributions to local, national and international debates and lifestyle practices that gain respect. Establishing such a voice will take time and effort. We cannot leave this task to a section of our Church that is not up to it at present.

New structures

Appropriate structures will be required to give effect to the voice of Catholics in the community and to provide for an ongoing dialogue between them and institutional authority. Creativity and inventiveness, not hitherto a feature of Church life, will be needed to develop a suitable system which will adequately and authentically represent the experience and evolving understanding of Catholics without itself becoming another rule-bound institution. Synodality, as advocated by Pope Francis, shows promise but it needs to be operationalised locally.⁵⁹ The German synodal way includes Catholics of all Church roles, lay and ordained, consecrated and secular, working side by

⁵⁸ EG #120

⁵⁹ In Francis' usage, synodality means walking together, participating in regular, structured forums for listening to all members of the Church

side.⁶⁰ A truly collaborative, inclusive implementation of the principle of subsidiarity would deliver transforming results.⁶¹

All Catholics will be recognised as being more involved in pastoral activity over the coming decades. In the past, pastoral work was regarded as the province of the clergy. It is fast becoming mutual care for one another; the nature of the activity is itself evolving. We need to *‘implement collaborative structures of pastoral leadership to reflect the partnership of clergy and laity in bringing about the realm of God’*.⁶² It is as basic as working together on a project with more emphasis on cooperation and getting the job done, less on who is in charge. Dividing the Church community into leaders and followers is simplistic, reductionist and harmful.

Flexibility

Pope Francis’ image of a field hospital is relevant here. Adaptability and innovation will be the order of the day. The ability to heal wounds and to warm hearts are keys to building community. These require compassion, familiarity and walking together, being there when the need arises, ready to provide whatever help the moment requires. *‘And you have to start from the ground up.’*⁶³

We are all in this together and, together we can reclaim our Church. We need to make our voices heard in word and action, not for the good of a section but for all. Our quest for the fullness of life will not succeed if we restrict our vision to part of the Catholic community or to one Christian denomination, to one religion or even to religious people. All people are people of God. We are all loved by God. The whole universe is loved by God. If we do not work out how to live in harmony with our environment, or ecology, we will not find life – of any kind. With our rich history and tradition, and a variety of spiritualities, we Catholics have opportunities to offer healing and liberation in life-giving communities in solidarity with the whole universe and the Source of life itself.⁶⁴

As Bernard Lonergan famously put it, *“The Church (institutional) always arrives on the scene a little breathless and a little late.”* In a sense the institutional Church is always in a process of catching up with the spirituality of its people. That is the nature of institutions. But we cannot suspend our living while waiting for the organisation to catch up, to get its breath back. While the official Church is working out its position, it is urgent that we acknowledge and claim the personal and community dimensions of authority and its voice. This is truly being Church and working to bring about the realm of God.

CONCLUSION

A healthy Church is one where everybody feels welcome and respected, treated as equal, where adults can act as adults without unjust discrimination such as currently exists with regard to women. Communities are made and remade every day by the people in them as relationships are

⁶⁰ The German Synodal Way is a two-year process bringing together lay people and bishops to discern the way forward for the Church in Germany.

⁶¹ Subsidiarity means that authority and decision-making are exercised as close as possible to the level of those affected.

⁶² PCTP 3 p. 14

⁶³ Pope Francis, General Audience of August 9, 2017. Quoted in PCTP 4, p. 5

⁶⁴ EG #89

constantly renewed and revised. As in other areas, hierarchy can have an infantilising effect. It must be balanced by a mature, informed and articulate presentation of alternative perspectives.

Social, cultural and religious communities and structures are essential for human flourishing. Within that context and framework, every person is a voice to be heard. The value of the voice is to be discerned in terms of its authenticity and coherence, not in terms of its status in the system. Inspired visionaries such as Mary McKillop, Catherine McAuley, Frederick Ozanam, Francis of Assisi and so many others did not wait for official approval or blessing before setting out to make their dreams and visions a reality.

Catholic Christians are committed to seeking the fullness of life, creating communities, where people know, love and care for one another, inspire one another, open vistas of possibilities for living abundantly, sharing and reaching out to others. Developing this community of communities, a community for the world, is at the heart of what being in the Jesus movement is about. Every one of us has a unique and valuable part to play in this magnificent enterprise.

These words by Bishop Vincent Long of Parramatta, sum up the thrust of this paper.⁶⁵

“One of the ways through which we can move the Church forward is to reclaim the baptismal identity and mission of all its members.

It is time, then, that ordinary Catholics take their rightful place and effect the change needed for the Church to live up to what it is meant to be. There needs to be a bold and strong leadership to nurture and to enable the emerging model to prevail. There is also a need for committed people who act like critical yeast in critical time.

Until we have truly incorporated the gift of women and the feminine dimension of our Christian faith, we will not be able to fully energise the life of the Church.

For the Church to be truly synodal and listening, for the Church to go beyond the “business as usual” model, the inclusion of the *sensus fidelium* in all deliberations and responses is critical. The Church will not be fully energised while the faithful are still unable to participate with full citizenship in its life, governance structures and decision-making processes.”

I have attempted to set out the grounds for a genuine authority and voice for Catholics based on our baptism and lived experiences and commitments. How that authority is to be exercised and find its expression is a task for another day.

Catholicism will continue and flourish if it is truly Christian in its respect for the baptismal role of its people. The relevant questions relate not to whether it will continue but, ‘What kind of Catholicism will we have?’ and ‘Who will shape its future?’ We can do it. The lesson of Pentecost is not so much in the kind of community the disciples formed but that they did it. It may take a lot of searching, reflection and discernment to uncover the voice of the Spirit within each of us, but it is there, and we can act on it.

⁶⁵ Vincent Long van Nguyen, Bishop of Parramatta. Address to Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, 11 September 2018.