

Recovering The 'True Church'

Paul Collins

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Few have done more in the Australian Catholic Church than Paul Collins to challenge its witness in contemporary Australia to the Gospel message in light of the renewal launched by the Second Vatican Council. As he writes he has been at it for the past fifty years and now brings the experience of this prophetic mission to bear in his latest book.

This is a timely reality check, coming as it does before the Plenary Council convenes for its final session to repair the shattered “earthenware vessel” that the church has become in light of the child sexual abuse outrage.

Recovering The 'True Church' again draws on the tools of “ressourcement” – the theological movement for renewal that was a well-spring for the reforms of Vatican II. Its purpose was to recover the essential elements of the early faith communities in their response to the Spirit of the Risen Christ enlivening them all in joy and peace as Collins quotes St Paul.

This historian and theologian brings an analysis of the situation today every bit as astute as his book *Mixed Blessings* written 36 years ago. Then as now the modern world was being reluctantly confronted and ignored by an all-male leadership unwilling to throw off the clerical culture that cocoons it. Collins' earlier work looked at “the crisis in world Catholicism and the Australian Church.” That was before the profound shock of the extent of institutional sexual abuse and the scandalous way in which the hierarchy from Pope John Paul II to the bishops in this country mishandled it.

Collins is a clear and accessible writer. What he has done in 125 pages is not only outline directions in which reform and renewal could go but he succinctly spells out the issues which the “church authorities try hard to avoid.” And here we are given an inside look at the way the bishops have manipulated the entire process. I would say it is a compelling case that the men and women of the People of God are being treated in bad faith.

The Archbishop of Sydney, Anthony Fisher is quoted at the final mass of the first assembly scarcely hiding his disdain of the renewal movement. “All sorts of things came up this week: some imaginative and wise, some unhelpful even impossible.” Fisher even lamented that God has rarely been mentioned.”

We have as Collins writes an ecclesiastical power structure that owes everything to the 16th century Jesuit, Saint Robert Bellarmine’s absolutist view of its authority. The construct is a false god, more like the Golden Calf the Israelites manufactured when they became impatient with the invisible and mysterious God of Moses. Vatican II began to dismantle this edifice only to have John Paul II and Benedict XVI do their best to restore it. All spelled out by Collins.

Those of us who were hoping that the spirit of the twenty first century Jesuit, Pope Francis might prevail at the Plenary, will put down this book crestfallen. But the author has given us a roadmap to authentic Christian survival. It is found in the catacombs and homes of the early Christians. We are Church.

Collins admits not all are as pessimistic as him about the final outcome but if the reactionaries prevail his words are ominous: “unless the Plenary Council tackles the issues facing the Australian church with radical reform. . . . It will condemn the church to a marginal existence with little or no impact on our society and culture.”

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