

Talk by Paul Collins on *Recovering the 'True Church'. Challenges for Australian Catholicism Beyond the Plenary Council*

(Curtin Parish, Thursday April 21, 2022)

Let me be up-front from the beginning: my focus here will *not* be on the Plenary Council (PC). Not that the PC will achieve nothing. I predict it will strongly support the recommendations of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Commission, it will make a reasonably good statement on the environment and support minor improvements in local church governance.

As John Warhurst recently revealed, a document entitled *Towards the Second Assembly* was released by the PC Secretariat, but was only sent to members of the PC. Warhurst says 'Though it's a mixed bag, it's probably the best document emerging from the PC, making it even more frustrating that it's not in the public domain.' The result: Catholics generally have been excluded from what he aptly calls 'a discernment bubble' (*La Croix*, 14/4/22).

But it really doesn't matter because the PC has failed to confront the fundamental issue that Australian Catholicism faces: evolving a ministerial model of church fit for purpose in contemporary Australia. If your ecclesiology – your understanding of the church and how it operates – makes little or no sense to believers, let alone our fellow secular Australians, then clearly there is something seriously wrong.

History of models

Throughout its history the church has worked through several operative models. And here I want to emphasize that genuine Catholicism has never been sectarian and has always interacted with society so as to communicate the message and person of Christ. In turn, it has been influenced by the societies in which it has operated and has and often unconsciously adopted the social and political forms of those societies.

Closest to New Testament models, the early church was less hierarchical and was based on local communities in each city along the lines described in Saint Paul's epistles. In Roman secular law the church was a private religious society in contrast to the official religious cult. What is extraordinary is that despite legal proscription and intermittent persecution, Christianity penetrated into the highest echelons of Roman society, including the imperial court. By 300AD there were around six million Christians in a total population of 44 million, the large majority in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

After Constantine became emperor in October 312, he issued the Edict of Milan lifting all legal proscriptions against Christianity and in 380 Theodosius I made it the official religion of the late-empire. The church quickly became part of the official structure of society, while itself adopting many of the administrative forms of the late-Roman world.

In the Middle Ages church, state and society gradually evolved into the single entity that we call 'Christendom'. From the late-11th to the 13th century there was a struggle between the emperor and pope as to who was supreme in Christendom with Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) claiming not to be both 'vicar of Christ' and 'lord of the world'. This period also a revival of interest in Roman law, the basis of contemporary canon law.

Partly in response to the 16th century Reformation and as a way of dealing with emerging absolute monarchies in Spain, England and France, the church began to image itself as a divine right, absolute monarchy presided over by the pope. It was the Jesuit theologian, Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) who articulated the theory of the church as a divinely established absolute monarchy. 'The church of Christ is a most perfect kingdom and an absolute monarchy which neither depends on the people, nor has from its origin, but depends on the divine will alone' (Response to John Gerson in *Riposta del Card. Bellarmine a due libretti*, 75-76).

In the contemporary church we're still dealing with much historical detritus, especially Bellarmine's divine right monarchy. It's important to highlight here that Bellarmine's approach depends on 'the divine will.' It was in this context that Cardinal George Pell explained that the sexual abuse crisis had nothing to do with the structure of the institutional church. Answering Royal Commission counsel, Gail Furness, Pell said that the sexual abuse failure doesn't 'call into question the divine structure of the church, which goes back to the New Testament [including]...the role of the pope and bishops.' The church's problems, he says, 'have overwhelmingly been more personal faults, personal failures, rather than structures.'

Retreat from monarchical model

Here we get to the nub of this monarchical understanding of the church. The structure is part of the 'divine plan,' so immutable that it cannot be changed. This is the model of church we have been trying to retreat from since Vatican II.

Nowadays the problem is that all the evidence indicates that this model is in serious trouble. In Australia we're experiencing a near catastrophic decline in religious practice with only about 10% of self-declared Catholics attending Mass regularly and a collapse in local recruitment to the priesthood. Linked to incompetent episcopal leadership, the crisis in Australian Catholicism has been increasing especially with the bishops appointed during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

But the generation of Catholics brought-up on Vatican II, especially older people who experienced the pre-conciliar church, are already operating, mostly unconsciously, out of a Vatican II, people of God, community model of church. It's part of their ecclesial DNA. But the church they confront is the Bellarmine monarchy and the two are incompatible. So, until we tackle the issue of conflicting models, we'll simply be whistling in the wind. The PC may tinker at the edges, but what we now confront is the challenge of root and branch reform.

People of God

What then will replace the monarchical model? The primary task of the PC *should be* to articulate for Australia a new way of operating based on the people of God model as articulated in the second chapter of *Lumen gentium*. Here is an image of a community on pilgrimage, drawn together by the Spirit, with each contributing their specific gifts to build-up the church and the world as together we participate in Christ's prophetic and priestly mission.

It is within the context of this new model that we'll be able to actualize principles like full equality of women and men in the life and ministry of the church, as well as transparency and full equality. It is here that Vatican II ecclesiology fit like a glove. And no, I haven't forgotten chapter three of *Lumen gentium* on the hierarchy.

Given that the Council was a meeting of 2500 bishops it was inevitable that they would devote a chapter of *Lumen gentium* to ‘those ministers who are endowed with sacred power,’ a chapter which largely espouses the monarchical model of church. Here we have two successive chapters essentially incompatible with each other. Some try to hold them together in a kind of blancmange, but they are the source of the disjunction that many experience in the contemporary church. As I’ve argued in successive books since 1986, these chapters are mutually exclusive and what we’re involved in now is a process of shifting from one model to another, from monarchy to community. It’s difficult and unsettling, but like it or lump it, we have to negotiate it.

What will this new model look like? Dr Jane Anderson has studied faith communities in Australia in her book *Innovative Catholicism and the Human Condition* (2016). Profiling ‘innovative Catholics’ she says that their age range is from the late-50s to the early-80s; two thirds are life-long laypeople and one third laicized former priests and religious. There are three ‘identifiable trajectories’ among these groups: meditation groups which are ecumenical, but predominately Catholic; the second is the ‘reform movement’ which comprises people focused on the renewal of the church itself. The third group are the ‘advocacy movement’ who work for the poor and marginalised and the development of an ecological consciousness

What they have in common, Anderson says, is that members feel ‘that they are agents of their own destiny’ and are ‘active and collaborative.’ There is much cross-over between them and most participants in these trajectories came to adulthood in the 1960s and 1970s, decades of activism and reform in society, particularly characterised by the Whitlam era (1972-1975). This was a time when people believed in social justice and equity, were interested in going beyond themselves and building relationships, were less preoccupied with individualism and more interested in structural inequity and the common good. These are the foundations upon which a people of God oriented-church can be built

What should be the characteristics of these faith communities? The central focus must be Christ, the image and likeness of God. They should be committed to prayer and Eucharist, like the early house churches. Everything they do must be inspired by the message and presence of Jesus. Leadership within the community will emerge from a discernment process, but leaders will need both theological and ministerial formation.

They must also be firmly rooted in the Catholic tradition. They are not beginning from scratch; they belong a people incorporated into Christ through their baptism, a trans-historical communion of saints. They have a history and their challenge is to take that history and transform it to meet the needs of today.

Finally, they must be geared to ministry. ‘Ministry’ here means outreach, being with people, standing alongside them, as well as an engagement with the authentic issues of the day like global warming, ecological care and social justice. Whatever the ministry, it must reflect commitment to Christ in action, a building-up of the common good.

Jesus sent out the ‘seventy others...ahead of him to every town and place where he himself intended to go’ (Luke 10:1). There is a real sense in which Jesus’ committed followers must now go out like the seventy leaving behind the monarchical-Bellarmino style church to prepare the ‘towns and places,’ the contemporary secular world, for the coming of Jesus and his message. They go as ‘lambs among wolves,’ building new communities that begin to model

a way of being church that is rooted in the New Testament and early Christianity and therefore based firmly in the Catholic tradition, but geared to a secular, individualistic and troubled contemporary world.

However, my take on the PC process is not the majority opinion among Catholics devoted to renewal. Most are still dedicating their energy to the PC process, saying they want to give the bishops one last chance. In my view the bishops have had their chance and failed. Leadership has now devolved to the laity and to the priests and religious supporting them.

But we're still left with the bishops. Most of them have no leadership to offer and their role will only become clear when the emphasis shifts from hierarchy to community. When this happens, the bishops will catch up, arriving on the scene somewhat breathless – as they often do! But first we, the people of God, must take the initiative and run the risk of embracing the Vatican II vision of a community rather than hierarchical church.

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May 1, 2022.