

## **CONCERNED CATHOLICS FORUM**

**11 September 2018**

**Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture  
Canberra**

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### **The Future of the Church in Australia and the Role of the Laity in Church Renewal**

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I too acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to elders.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you tonight and to share this reflection with Vincent and Anne.

Challenging times between the hierarchy and the laity in the Australian Church has a long history. As the church developed in the 1800's conflict grew between the first bishop, Englishman John Bede Polding OSB and his English Benedictines, with the laity who were increasingly Irish. This came to a head in 1850's when the laity i.e. the men, believed that they did not have a sufficient role to play in church governance and parish life. In 1854 Polding went to Rome to hand in his resignation, which the Pope did not accept. If the Pope had accepted his resignation, I would not be here tonight, as it was Polding who following his return to Australia, founded the Sisters of the Good Samaritans in 1857.

Today, some 160 years later, we the Australian Church are at a critical crossroads. The Royal Commission has unveiled a drastic failure in Church leadership. The whole of church needs to respond to the findings of the Royal Commission and to the responses of the bishops and religious leaders. The healing work will take many years, if not generations. Now is the time to rebuild and renew, so what do we need to do? How do we have meaningful conversations across each diocese? Where is our starting point? For some, it seems too big. What if each diocese commenced with a Diocese Gathering with broad representation and a commitment to move forward in a renewed way. Let us start now, not wait until post 2020.

I think that there are other significant failures in leadership, which go hand in hand with the failure to act in regard to the child abuse crisis. The Royal Commission sets out some minimum standards. As a Catholic community, we need to go much deeper and rediscover our true identity. The gospel demands a different approach to decision making, which will involve a more open approach.

I'd like to focus on a couple of other failures.

### **ADULT FAITH FORMATION**

There were strong adult faith formation and education directions during the immediate post Vatican 11 period. There was a hunger amongst people for strong adult theological learning and deepening of spirituality. However from 1980's onward these directions were wound back. Apart from degree courses in Catholic Universities, now there is little systematic adult faith education in the broader church. There can be many reasons proposed for this wind back. However I believe there was a growing reticence amongst bishops. I ask: Was this development somehow threatening what they understood as their teaching role. The period pre-Vatican 11 looked safer and more controlled. We had a cultural faith, and so change on many levels was resisted.

Was this conscious? Who knows! But it has left the Australian church bereft of quality faith education amongst an otherwise educated laity. Those who have pursued such an education have often been sidelined and marginalised within diocesan or parish structures. As a consequence, there has been a failure in promoting strong adult lay faith leadership throughout the church. For the renewal of the church by all of church, there needs to be a revival in strong adult faith formation for equal partnerships to grow.

### **CHURCH RELATIONSHIP TO SOCIETY**

Over the past 40 years, the institutional church has lost more and more of its connections with changing society. A fortress mentality has prevailed. Pope Francis noted, that society is experiencing a change in epoch and this has implications for church. A simple example for the church is that going to Sunday Mass no longer defines a Catholic. There are those who have walked away, what Vincent referred to as the *Silent Schism*. Living daily by gospel values might be a better yardstick of what Catholic life looks like. Yet we are a Eucharist Community. But forming community today is a very different reality. One parish has all its parishioners on email. They are informed of what's happening. They know when a dear member dies.

As a woman I am part of 51% of the general population, 63% of church goers in the Catholic Community, but governed by 0.4% male clergy.

### **STRUCTURAL CHANGE AND COMMUNAL CONVERSION**

So is it structural change or conversion of heart that is needed or both?

I'd suggest that it is both. Structural change without individual and communal conversion will not renew the church. Conversion of heart, without concurrent structural change and equality of ministry will continue to leave the church divided.

From the Bishops' and Religious Leaders' response to the 80 recommendations of the Royal Commission which applied to the church, I want to highlight just one.

Recommendation 16.38

*Consistent with Child Safe Standard 1, each religious institution should ensure that religious leaders are accountable to an appropriate authority or body, such as a board of management or council, for the decisions they make with respect to child safety.*

Let me say, that I believe all church leaders need to be accountable for all decisions that they make, no matter what the area.

The action noted in the ACBC and CRA response has various components, but I highlight one:

*It should be noted that Catholic ecclesiology traditionally presents the office of bishop as a threefold responsibility to teach, govern and sanctify, with rights and obligations that enable bishops to fulfil these responsibilities. The model of accountability adopted will need to be receptive to and respectful of this ecclesiology (refer Recommendation 16.7).*

This response concerns me. How the office of teaching, governing and sanctifying is often interpreted, can be very narrow. Unfortunately, it can be interpreted that the bishop, and for that matter the parish priest has ultimate power and must make every decision. The ecclesiology that is

often missing is that of *communio*. and of servant leadership as outlined in the Gospel. Too often, authority is interpreted as power and control.

I believe we need creative structures where there can be clear delegated authority. For example, a bishop can best exercise this teaching role by having a strong group of theologians and spiritual guides teaching in the diocese. These can be lay, religious and priests. The bishop can fulfil this role through others rightly delegated.

Governance tasks can be delegated similarly. Team approaches produce better results. The Adelaide model of the Diocesan Pastoral Team worked.

Vincent referred at length to the culture of clericalism of a privileged class. The predominant thinking of the theology and the role of priesthood needs a thorough re-think. We need new language, as all of us must find our place as servant leaders amongst one another, where the gifts of the Spirit are recognised and encouraged amongst all people. As Pope Francis stated *the only gospel leadership is servant leadership and the only power is the power of the cross*. This is our challenge. Are we up to it?

During my time ministering at the governance level in an Archdiocese, I grew in my appreciation for the burdens placed upon Bishops. Their vocation is to be pastor to the people in their care. Yet in today's society, they are expected or they actually place the expectation on themselves to be all things to all people. Ordination as a priest or consecration as a bishop does not bestow on anyone the expertise and skills required for leading or managing a large organisation, e.g. a diocese. Ordination does not bestow property skills, finance acumen, human resource management, counselling skills or civil legal knowledge. Some bishops may have acquired these attributes over the years. My experience tells me that church leaders are too hands on and do not give clear authority to competent people. Also a more humble church might do away with honorifics and distinctive attire which reinforce a class structure.

## **OUR OWN WORST ENEMIES**

One key problem I experienced in a diocesan role was those people whose only response to a bishop was 'yes my Lord' and who never questioned or challenged the Bishop or Vicar General. Such a response was either made out of a misplaced reverence or a fear of losing one's job, rather than from a place of equality of persons. I have witnessed poor employment policies or behaviours amongst Church Authorities who have failed to act from a gospel value base, but rather from a position of power. In the future, laity need to speak up with confidence.

## **AUSTRALIA'S FIRST PEOPLE**

Can we ensure that no one is excluded, that no one is left behind? Pope Francis constantly talks about *the church of the poor, not a church for the poor*. We are now the poor. The church has been humbled, humiliated and made vulnerable. Have we the courage to start from that place?

I would hope that the Local Churches will engage with Australia's First Peoples in very significant ways. How can the church engage with aboriginal spirituality, be respectful of the original story of this country and bring that story to the centre and the heart of church life, mission and liturgical experience. Can we become a southern hemisphere church, which is multicultural, rather than the

European Church that we have inherited? What would an authentic Australian church really look like?

It is time to dream anew!

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