

SPEECH

Concerned Catholics Tasmania Launch

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I join you today as a concerned Catholic.

Is there really any other kind?

We Catholics expend a lot of energy self-justifying.

We are either trying to explain what it is to be a Catholic today, or we fiercely extoll what real Catholicism is to an ever puzzled, maybe disinterested, audience.

So not to be outdone let me indulge in a stream of consciousness for a bit.

I have lived within the embrace of the Catholic Church all my life.

I have been raised in it; married in it; raised children in it; even buried family in it.

I have worked in it; prospered because of it; even defended it.

There have been many times that I have been proud of it.

From early on I have seen it as my pathway through life.

I still practice the faith and find personal sustenance in the tradition of my religion.

Like everyone else my life has been marked by ups and downs.

I have had to negotiate personal tragedy and been confounded by the inexplicable and the shocking.

Most of the time my faith, structured by my Church, has served me well.

I have found myself grappling with the deeper questions in my life from the perspective I have learnt through the Church.

For the majority of my life I have been a contented Catholic.

Then my eyes were opened on a number of fronts.

My time with the clerical sexual abuse scandal changed everything.

I was shocked and confronted.

I had not understood the degree to which the institution would lie to protect itself.

The degree to which it would sacrifice the welfare and wellbeing of defenceless people for the sake of its image.

The degree to which the clergy would protect wrong doers from within their ranks even when they were appalled by their actions.

The degree to which the bishops and religious leaders would tolerate criminals, belittle victims and obfuscate to the public.

In short, I had never imagined how venal the institution could be.

And yet I still had a deep desire to be a part of that living faith community.

One where the Gospel means more than words.

One where a quest to find God is far bigger than being blindly committed to the institution as if you were joined in some battle to the end.

It was my desire to see justice done and to help give voice to the heart of our belief that kept me motivated throughout the years of the Royal Commission.

And this takes me to the second eye opening realisation.

That being a Catholic, being a member of the Church, does not require a rigid compliance to a pre-determined template for living.

That being a Catholic means becoming deeply respectful of the diversity of human experience and the dignity of human expression as it is lived out by genuine and sincere people.

Holding what can seem at times to be polar opposites or diverse expressions of human nature in a creative embrace is the essence of a Catholic perspective.

This has become a pivotal awakening for me.

I think for a good deal of my adult life I had the assumption that to be true to my Catholic faith I somehow needed to place it at odds with the world around me.

That to be an authentic Catholic, true to the teachings of the Church, I needed to follow a set of beliefs that often ran in a counter cultural fashion to that of modern life.

That the doctrines of the Church required a suspicion of intelligent inquiry, particularly in the technical and social sciences.

In short, it seemed to me, that the Church asked us to leave our intelligence, reason and critical thought at the door as we entered the chapel.

In today's culture I can't see that as a sensible understanding of how God reveals the nature of the Divine in ordinary life.

So, my faith journey has taken a deliberate path to actively engage with and search for God in the circumstances and culture in which I live.

As St Bonaventure said:

God is the centre without a circumference.

No need for tribalism, nor for witch hunts to surface the 'true Catholics' from the rest.

My experience had leached me of any passion to embrace the style of Catholicism that was like mounting a bulwark against any perceived threats to my religious values or beliefs as if they are immutable and need to be defended to the bitter end.

It is from that basis I want to name some of my concerns and maybe see if you find any resonance for your own circumstances.

From the outset I want to be very clear.

It means a lot to me to call myself Catholic and to find ways to be nurtured in the tradition of the Church.

I have been patient with the conservatism of the institutional Church.

The way it drags the chain on changes that are so obvious to the ordinary person but somehow are anathema to the institution.

I have repeatedly excused the ham-fisted public statements of bishops. Even when they embarrass sensible thinking people for their lack of logic or sensitivity.

Maybe because I am a male, I have been too slow to call out the sexist and homophobic attitudes of bishops and other clergy and spokespeople.

I have been too slow as well to join in the rage over the way women are mistreated in the Church, the secret double lives of some clergy and their arrogance in presuming that they can still preach about behavioural and moral standards.

Just as expediently I have been too complicit in bolstering the dominion of the clerical caste and enabling the culture of clericalism to ride roughshod over the interests of the laity and the better natures of the bishops and religious leaders.

That said, these days I find myself angry with the inertia of the institution and its intolerance of differences and the demonising of sincere dissent.

My impatience for changes that seem to all too obvious, even commonsensical, does corrode my confidence in the Church leadership.

I shake my head at the public positions of some bishops. It is embarrassing to be associated with statements that sound homophobic and fail to stand up for vulnerable people out of some misplaced sensitivity of appearing to be too political.

I find the inane stridency of loud minority groups trumpeting nasty critiques of their fellow Catholics bordering on the pathological.

I find myself beyond lament with the chasm that has emerged between younger generations and the Church.

As a very proud parent of three impressive, socially conscious and compassionate adults, I am thankful for their Catholic education yet remain puzzled over why they like most other Catholic school graduates feel no desire to engage formally with the institution.

If relevance is the goal, then I just can't detect the strategy.

In recent times I wince at the slap downs from some bishops towards groups of practicing Catholics articulating the urgency for change.

This dismissive episcopal attitude has long been a feature of our Church.

It is arrogant and near sighted.

It speaks less about leadership and more of a reflection of an institution under threat and out of ideas.

And the biggest anxiety I carry is that it increasingly feels like the Church of my upbringing, the Church of my adult life is no longer keeping pace with my life to the point where becoming homeless is a real possibility.

Our most recent history as a church in Australia has been marked by far more than being in a state of confusion or despair.

The overriding formative feature of that cultural history is one of denial. It is endemic in our culture that has ingrained instincts of control and face-saving.

The most recent instance has been the clerical sex abuse scandal.

Denial and lying were features of the Church's response.

So too was the denial of the testimony of victims.

Even today some dioceses and religious orders, through high paid lawyers, seek to undermine the stories of victims, minimise the payments to survivors and even scoff at allegations in a vain attempt to ease the trauma which now besets the Church.

The recent Church attendance survey demonstrated an accelerated decline in participation by people disillusioned with the way the abuse scandal was handled.

Of major note was the rate of fall out in the over 50 aged groups. Nearly 22 per cent of this group's mass goes have left regular practice.

These once 'rusted on' Catholics have voted with their feet.

I don't think it is overstating the situation when I say that there is a massive dislocation occurring in the Church today.

The 'insiders' who can avail themselves of access to decision makers, influencers and resources navigate their religion very differently to the rest.

Those on the periphery struggle to engage with an institution that seems to have a life of its own.

Decisions are made well away from the people effected and resources are allocated without any genuine involvement of local communities.

Consultation, even for something as important as the Plenary Council, is at best orchestrated.

The selection of delegates has been at the mercy and ideological disposition of local bishops.

There has been no open account of the selection process, the criteria used, or the individuals involved in the decision making.

Consultation processes are also manipulated. It is a common feature of the institution that when processes call for consultation there is plenty of evidence that they stack the participants and control the numbers when votes are in play.

There is equally strong evidence that only some feedback is tolerated.

There has been strong anecdotal evidence that too many bishops are wary of the Plenary Council, lukewarm about its prospects and very threatened over the nature of what the laity will call for.

Moreover, even though a major Royal Commission finding for the Church was to instil better accountability and transparency, features the archbishops at the time said were very important in a more functional church, crucial elements of the Plenary Council process are

shrouded in secrecy and the responsiveness of those in charge of the project is anything but accountable to the faith community.

It is as if the bishops think that the Plenary Council is theirs to control and theirs to share when and with whom they deem suitable.

Nothing about this cultural cameo of the institution speaks of a contemporary culture where inclusion, participation and mutual respect are hallmarks.

Yet we continue to engage and contribute.

Concerned Catholic groups and other organised efforts at church renewal and reform have, and continue to put their shoulders to the wheel.

Through submissions, discussion forums and public events these groups keep raising heartfelt concerns about the life of the Church and the needs of ordinary Catholics.

These groups have taken to heart the claim from the president of the Bishops Conference, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, in launching the Plenary Council that 'everything is on the table'. That all issues are up for debate, discussion and discernment.

So why the manic control?

Reform groups tell of instances where their efforts are greeted with hostility by some clerics, indifference by prelates and active interference by church officials. Some Catholic media outlets do not report on their events.

All in a vain attempt to silence, to shut down debate and keep scrutiny at bay.

Sadly, the instincts of the institution to control the message, the image and the faithful are still alive and well.

Clearly the attitude of some senior clerics is that democracy has no place in the church.

They pay lip service to the fact that we are all equal as baptised Christians.

They are quick to point out that we are not all equal under canon law.

The clerics have more institutional power, and the laity are regarded as being effectively of a second class.

The terms of engagement for the participation of the laity are hard wired in the canon law.

The bishop always has the veto vote.

There are 'cleric only' zones of influence where clerics administer and adjudicate on their brother clerics.

Community standards of best practice and accountability are alien to the canons when issues of dispute, conflict and probity are at stake.

It is effectively a closed shop and the mechanisms to change any of this falls to, you guessed it, the clerics.

The Catholic culture has been too submissive and too compliant for too long. It has not only supported but rewarded this dysfunctional behaviour.

Power is never shared, only the burden of administering the church is shifted to willing lay people.

If there was a genuine desire to share governance then lay people would have a vote alongside the clergy in the appointment of parish priests, the selection of bishops, the design and development of pastoral and ministerial initiatives and the formation of priests and other pastors in and for the diocese.

Accountability is never universally adopted.

Bishops and clergy are not held to performance assessments, but the employed lay people of the church almost always are.

There are still no hard and fast requirements for priests to retrain, update and keep pace with best practices in pastoral and welfare services.

There is still no expectation, let alone obligation, that bishops have high level qualifications in theology and spirituality even though the biggest challenge to the Church in secular times is its capacity to engage intelligently and persuasively.

The scrutiny of lay people by church authorities is extraordinary.

Whether it is about their private lives, the orthodoxy of their beliefs or their propensity to be outspoken and 'difficult', lay people are judged far more harshly than the clergy over similar issues.

Yet, despite all this, we remain in the Church and stand ever ready to contribute.

Our current Church context, some of which I have just described, can be best summarised as a state of grief.

There is anger, disillusion, despair and a sense of hopelessness.

We do see groups turning on each other and bishops reverting to authoritarian styles almost out of desperation.

Maybe they too are discouraged by the all too obvious decline.

We see Church administrations trying to keep parishes and agencies afloat with overseas clergy who struggle to assimilate into our cultural context.

The intransigence over the introduction of married clergy, even the promotion of women deacons means that Catholics are subjected to liturgical and sacramental services of a quality less than what could be.

At the same time the rapidly declining numbers of Catholics who regularly attend weekend masses speaks of an irreversible trend unless the teachings of the Church can bring insight and guidance to the lived experiences of their members.

It is from within this context that I admire the efforts of Concerned Catholics Tasmania.

In essence to understand what motivates groupings of Catholics who seek renewal and reform you need look no further than to their spirituality.

They have a vision for an inclusive Church. Open and hospitable.

Far from being something new and radical this understanding of catholicity which seeks unity through diversity rather than one that calls for conformity to a rigid identity is steeped in the tradition of the Church.

It is based on the acknowledgment that we are all made in the image of God.

That being human is our common cause, not adjusting our God given nature to comply with some conventional understanding of what constitutes an acceptable human life and behaviour.

This is a vital point. It is fundamentally a pastoral, compassionate approach completely consistent with the teaching of the Church.

It calls for an openness to the way human nature is developing and evolving.

It is less doctrinaire and more aligned with the commitment Pope Francis calls for – to accompany each other on the journey of becoming human together.

For some this may sound like a different orthodoxy from their early years in the Church. It could well be if you were raised to think that Catholicism was exclusionary and doctrinaire.

Yet the richness of the tradition of Catholic social thought is far from socially conservative and divisive.

It forms the basis for a spiritually inspired movement, motivated to build communities, sustain human development and inspire an appreciation for the Transcendent in daily life.

This is a stance very much at the heart of being Catholic.

It is what can make Catholicism attractive.

Given that diocesan administrations are preoccupied in the practicalities of their agencies, parishes and clergy, the pastoral strategy of an evolving Church needs a major revamp.

Given that there are too few effective Diocesan Pastoral Councils, and where they do exist struggle to be representative of their faith community, it is left to groups, like Concerned Catholics Tasmania to raise the issues that call the Church to its heart, its missionary zeal and purpose.

When this happens our Church speaks from a disposition drawn to human suffering and fragility, not sinfulness and failure.

It calls for the Church to be ever watchful to heal divisions, engender relationality, erase factionalism and promote consensus.

It calls for a more mystical approach to the complexities of life, less prone to judgementalism or over reliance on rules and restrictive practices – more disposed to celebrate life in its quirkiness and beauty than be obsessed with its deviancy from some questionable norm.

It calls for a Church more concerned with reaching out to people, addressing their needs than preaching to them.

This will see the Church becoming a common companion to the underdog, the forgotten and the discarded. A fellow traveller with the outsider and the misunderstood. A soul mate to the confused and abandoned.

Most of all it calls for a Church less preoccupied with itself, its dogma and its image.

A Church where actions speak louder than words, where the poor are no longer homeless, where the young feel at ease, where the elderly are prized for their wisdom, where everyone is encouraged to develop and follow their conscience and where the underside of history finds voice and favour.

As I proudly launch Concerned Catholics Tasmania today I would like to associate its on-going work to the deeper mission we all share as Christians within the Catholic tradition. That is to be active listeners to the movements of the Spirit. To join the quest of the search for God in our lives, communities and world.

We need to heed the counsel of the German theologian, Wofhart Panneberg when he said: “ religions die when their lights fail.”

That is, when what they have to say no longer throws enough light on the circumstances their adherents face, then the religion becomes irrelevant.

Then the religion risks a downward spiral to extinction. Yes some adherents will want to cling to the established views and attitudes but usually history will eventually cast them aside.

For God is forever creating things anew.

The task for us all is to sense where God is moving and to follow.

It is not to set up a religious culture that resists the challenges of modern life and the insights from human intellectual inquiry and imagination.

It is to find a sustainable blend between spiritual awareness and human compassion. The classic prayer and praxis of the tradition.

This is the template for the engagement of concerned Catholics. It is the template for any Catholic committed to living a life based on the Gospel message and within a faith community of believers.

It is a spirituality for today's Catholic and one that will stand the test of time as we move with God through history.

So with that clarion call it gives me great pleasure to formally launch Concerned Catholics Tasmania. I wish you well and every blessing as you partner with others of good will to revitalise, make relevant and restore respect for the Church in Tasmania. Our common prayer can be that we, like the travellers on the road to Emmaus, will discover the Risen Christ in our lives.