

A Reflection for Sunday, 18 October 2020

"Sing a new song"

Peter Johnstone, Convener, Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform

*"O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvellous works among all the peoples."
(Ps 96:1,3)*

The psalmist speaks to the Church of today, a Church that is failing to "*declare God's glory among the nations, God's marvellous works among all the peoples.*" Our Church must model, indeed celebrate, what we claim to believe – the song sung by Jesus.

Catholics committed to renewal of our Church could take the psalm as our mantra (perhaps with more inclusive language). We, the Church, certainly need to '*sing a new song*'. We need to do things differently:

- individually,
- as small communities and parishes,
- in our dioceses,
- nationally, and
- universally.

That's what renewal is about!

The song sung by the Church today is too often not the song sung by Jesus. We need to make Jesus' song new again in our Church. As Christians our responsibility as Church is to model and to proclaim the teachings of Jesus.

What does Jesus expect?

In today's Gospel, Matthew puts into the mouths of Pharisees the very essence of Jesus' teachings:

. . . Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion. . . (Matthew 22:16)

The way of God in accordance with truth - not concerned with the opinions of others. Does the Church model behaviour in accordance with truth? Is it influenced improperly by the opinions of others, more concerned with spin and appearances than truth?

The demand for renewal

The demand for renewal has grown in the Catholic Church over past decades as many Catholics have realised that their Church is failing the teachings of Jesus. Many of us with adolescent-to-adult children have seen our children rejecting a Church failing to meet the standards and values that it proclaims - values that we have tried to teach and model as parents.

Our children's values enable them to perceive hypocrisy. Think of the fable of the child exclaiming what others wouldn't say: "*The emperor has no clothes!*" The fact that so many younger people are alienated from the Church is not because they reject the values of Jesus - they reject the institutional Church for not modelling the values it claims, the values which they in fact respect and seek to live by, and they are prepared to say so.

My generation has experienced a patriarchal and indoctrinating approach in our official Catholic formation – encouraged to accept that we should learn some basic doctrines and then simply follow our priests and bishops: *do as we're told*.

However, the real Church is us the People of God, and we are all responsible for the communion that is the Church. Questioning the Church's leaders is not easy for Catholics who have been taught to be deferential - indeed, to be submissive to the authority of our Church's leaders, leaders selected on a basis that ensures many are not up to the task. Respect for leadership is appropriate but that does not justify deferential submission. We need to grow up.

But we the laity have been taught not to accept responsibility, to simply follow the authority of the Church's leaders. We have been taught the opposite of Matthew's perceived qualities of "*teach(ing) the way of God in accordance with truth . . . not concerned with anyone's opinion*". We have rather been expected simply to "*pay, pray and obey*", even contrary to our consciences: *do as you're told* - that is, told by celibate males, 'ontologically changed', who have been denied many of the real-life experiences of the lay faithful: the experiences of God's world, intended to enrich and inform our lives.

Hypocrisy in our Church

There is hypocrisy in our Church. Few Catholics are aware that even the Church's own canon law rejects this submissive role for the faithful. Canon 212 §3 says:

"The Christian faithful have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain

to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful." (my underlining)

That canon and a number of other supporting canons on 'The Christian Faithful' come from Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, the 'Dogmatic Constitution of the Church'. Canon 208 (from LG n.32) sets the scene:

"Flowing from their rebirth in Christ, there is a genuine equality of dignity and action among all of Christ's faithful. Because of this equality they all contribute, each according to his or her own condition and office, to the building up of the Body of Christ." (my emphasis)

While there are provisions in canon law that are inadequate to the teachings of Jesus, it is a regrettable fact that some important provisions of canon law flowing from Vatican II are often ignored by the hierarchy of the Church.

Calls for renewal

In the words of an Open Letter to the Australian bishops and Pope Benedict auspiced by *Catholics for Renewal* in 2011:

"The Church. . . does not yet embody the vision of Vatican II for a truly collegial Church in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances. Rather, it appears as an institution focussed on centralism, legalism and control, with few effective structures for listening and dialogue, and often more concerned with its institutional image and interests than the spirit of Christ." (my emphasis)

That letter in 2011 was signed by some 8,000 Australian Catholics and presented to the Holy See by the then President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference; no response was received from the Holy See despite follow-ups. The letter also stated that our Church was "*tainted by injustice and blemished by bad decisions*", and identified the "*manifestly inadequate*" response to the child sexual abuse scandal where bishops exposed children to grave harm just to protect the institution's reputation.

Those cynical attempts to protect the institution were of course, contrary to Jesus' commitment to truth, and reflected a craven fear of condemnation by the world. The Church of Jesus actually sacrificed children for its reputation! – the Jesus who said:

"If anyone causes one of these little ones . . . to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

That was Jesus' song, ignored by Jesus' Church.

The Open Letter continued, expressing shock at Bishop Morris being removed from his Toowoomba diocese without due process; dismay at the failure to consult properly on the new English translations of our liturgy. The letter rejected the Church's patriarchal attitude towards women; and dismissed exaggerated claims to infallibility stifling discussion on matters of human sexuality and ministry for women and married men.

In April 2012, *Catholics for Renewal* wrote to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference suggesting a Plenary Council be held in 2015 to address the grave issues facing the Church. A reply was eventually received from the President of the Conference saying tersely the time was "*not opportune*". The Prime Minister then announced the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; so *Catholics for Renewal* wrote again to the bishops suggesting that perhaps the time was now particularly 'opportune' – no reply was received.

Child Sexual Abuse

The Royal Commission, established in 2012, reported in 2017. That 2017 report exposed not only the shocking extent of clerical sexual abuse of children and the Church's deliberate concealment, but also the dysfunctional governance of the Church that actually accepted paedophiles' continued abuse of children. Our Church was exposed not only as immoral but also hypocritical - an institution, whose sole purpose is to model and promote the teachings of Jesus, was found to have facilitated the sexual abuse of children. Many of those precious lives were effectively destroyed, with further destructive impact on families and friends.

Some findings of the Royal Commission about a senior cardinal were delayed until May 2020, having been redacted to avoid prejudice to his criminal trial. We now know that the Royal Commission also found that that cardinal, George Pell, the most senior Australian Catholic prelate, had been "*conscious of child sexual abuse by clergy*" as early as 1973 and had failed to act on complaints about priests. These grave findings have been publicly ignored by the Church. And Pope Francis has last week welcomed Pell back to the Vatican.

Is Francis, a pope who has done much good, repeating in the case of Pell the blindness he demonstrated in his initial response to the Chilean cover-up that eventually ended the episcopates of many bishops. Such wilful blindness seems to be inherent in the Church's clericalist culture.

A Plenary Council of the Australian Church

Clearly, the terrible sexual abuse of children and its concealment were the worst imaginable consequence of a Church that has lost its very sense of purpose and mission. However, following the Royal Commission's exposures, the Bishops Conference in 2015 at last supported a Plenary Council of the Australian Church to be held in 2020, now deferred to 2021 due to COVID-19.

The official question for the Plenary Council is: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?*

But the ultimate question is: *Will the Plenary Council 'sing a new song to the Lord' ?*

Many of us are hopeful but few are optimistic. I pray that the Holy Spirit's involvement, claimed by the President of the Bishops Conference, Archbishop Coleridge, will prevail. Archbishop Coleridge has stated:

"Given that the Council is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will have the final say." (my emphasis)

Let's pray that statement does not prove to have been presumptuous.

I draw some comfort from Vaclav Havel, the great Czech playwright, dissident and President, who described hope as *"not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."* Our hope is solidly based on faith. We hope that the Holy Spirit will indeed "have the final say".

The *Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform*, comprising 19 (and growing) independent renewal organisations across Australia and New Zealand, wrote to Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, the President of the Plenary Council, on 4 August 2020 proposing critical preliminary actions to enable an effective Plenary Council:

1. The early appointment of a woman, committed to the renewal of our Church, as co-chair or deputy chair of the Plenary Council;
2. Gender balance and transparency in the preparation of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the document that will determine the nature of the Plenary Council agenda;
3. The urgent establishment by all diocesan bishops of:
 - o diocesan pastoral councils, and
 - o diocesan synods or assembliesboth with gender balance (and properly representative of the faithful), as essential preparation for the Plenary Council in every diocese.

Some 2½ months after that initial request, the slow and discouraging exchange of correspondence with Archbishop Costelloe's office indicates that he may want to avoid our questions. Yet he recently assured the Australian faithful:

"The sincerity, the deep yearning and, yes, the pain and distress evident in so many of the contributions to the Council so far should not and must not be disregarded or minimised. The Spirit of God is undoubtedly speaking in and through these voices." (my emphasis)

We trust that Archbishop Costelloe is "*sincere and teach(ing) the way of God in accordance with truth*", as Matthew recorded of Jesus.

Inclusion of all the faithful

I should note that the Coalition's proposals for the Plenary Council are consistent with Church teachings. Specifically, canon 511 provides:

"In each diocese, in so far as pastoral circumstances suggest, a pastoral council is to be established . . . to study and weigh those matters which concern the pastoral works in the diocese, and to propose practical conclusions . . ." (my emphasis)

Strangely, most diocesan bishops in Australia have not established pastoral councils and have not explained the "pastoral circumstances" that preclude a council. So much for following canon law.

The Coalition's proposals are essential steps for pastoral leaders to hear the People of God. They are also consistent with *The Light from The Southern Cross*, the recent governance report to the Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia.

The less than enthusiastic response to the Coalition's proposals is regrettably typical of difficulties routinely experienced by the faithful in seeking responses from their bishops, reflecting the dysfunctional governance that must be reformed.

The new song

The Church must sing a new song, and it seems clear to most seeking renewal of the Church that the new song will require a Church with much more respect for the faithful; and with appropriate structures requiring accountability, transparency and inclusion, particularly ensuring the equality of women. Let's be very clear: the Church's exclusion of women from governance of the Church (and from ordination) is simply discrimination and a denial of the equality of women.

Should that inclusion of the People of God not occur, it seems to me that the patience of the laity has been stretched to the limit. One way or another, the People of God must be heard.

Let our Church sing a new song to the Lord! - *the way of God in accordance with truth - not concerned with the opinions of others.*

– a song that reflects the teachings of Jesus, to be sung:

- as individuals,
- as small communities and parishes,
- in our dioceses,
- nationally, and
- universally.

That's what renewal is about!

Let's sing a new song to the Lord!
