

A Complementary Voice in Catholicism – Summary

Kevin Liston (19 November 2020)

Introduction

As baptised Catholics, we have an authority and voice in Church matters that has too seldom been exercised and too often overlooked. It is based on our natural right as persons to participate in matters that concern us and, on our membership, (citizenship) of the Church through Baptism. My aim here is to clarify the grounds for this authority. My reason is that all Catholics, not just the clergy or hierarchy, should feel assured and confident that they have a voice in renewal and promotion of the ongoing evolution of our Church by right, not just by delegation or permission. The resulting expansion will be enormously enriching.

While recognising the validity and value of other Christian Churches, my concern here is with the Catholic tradition which, to a remarkable extent, has become institutionalised in organisational and worshipping/liturgical aspects. The authority and voice of institutionalised structures and personnel often seems to be the only ones with weight. The voice of the people, ‘ordinary’ Catholics, the community Church is sidelined. Both voices are essential for a healthy Church.

Natural right

Every one of us has a natural dignity by virtue of being human with its innate drive for autonomy and control in our own lives, and for pursuing our destinies according to our abilities and conditions. It is an imperative inherent in our very nature. Its existential expression is life itself deriving from our human make-up as thinking, deciding, responsible people. It is how we exist as persons, the way we are. At the heart of Jesus’ vision was an insistence that every person has her or his own worth and dignity. This is affirmed in the non-religious world in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child*.

Baptism

For Catholics, Baptism is the foundational, categorical sacrament that sets the context, frame and groundwork for all others. The appropriation and actualisation of Baptism occurs as a conversion of heart and mind, the adoption of a Christian perspective and values, and recognition of a relationship with Jesus and with God, and so a particular identification and self-concept. Until this is done the sacrament is incomplete. Becoming a true follower of Jesus and a committed Christian is the work of a lifetime. Through appropriating the meaning and intent of Baptism we take on a new orientation and purpose in life. Baptism, like all human growth is in a context of community. Taking on the mind of Christ and become ‘members of the Body of Christ’ (1Cor 12:27). This is ongoing personal encounter with Jesus.

This identification with the mind and values of Jesus, i.e. the ‘mind and values’ of God (Phil. 2:5), making us full members of the Christian community, the body of Christ, confers its own authority. Participation in Christ is participation in his authority.

Catholic living

The essence of being a Christian in the Catholic tradition is in how we live, our personal standards of integrity and morality, how we care for and relate to others, being responsible members of society, inspired by the vision and message of Jesus. Our spirituality, the set of beliefs, ideals, values, meanings, priorities and relationships that we live by, forms the foundation for everything else. It comes from our heart, the deep inner core of our being, of who we are, emerging through lived experience.

An authentic Catholic life is a rewarding experience, grounded in a desire for authenticity and rejection of hypocrisy. It involves a personal search for identity, for a way of expressing and living one's true self. It is satisfying, in finding wholeness in making decisions for ourselves, in discovering our own particular style or expression and following it. It leads to a fuller life, bringing us closer to others as well as providing a secure basis for living, loving and discerning truth, what is worthwhile and valuable. We are gifted with the vision, truth and conviction of Jesus, the Word and Revelation of God, with being able to imagine a fair, equitable and person-affirming society and an integral ecology. As adult Christians, we learn how to take increasing responsibility for our own lives and for community Christian life. We can make real, pragmatic, realisable decisions about enabling and creating opportunities and spaces for this. It would be a failure of responsibility to leave it to others.

This commitment and achievement have their authority and rights, as each of us in a wholesome mature society expects and demands the autonomy of our hearts.

All four Gospels make the point that Jesus envisaged a fulfilling life, free of coercion and open to flourishing. Jn 10:10 states this most directly. 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.' Thanks to Jesus, we can envision living life on a higher plane, a broader perspective, and, with him, have the strength and courage to do it.

Living communities

We discover who we are through relationships. We need places for free and open sharing as we also expect sincerity in return. The autonomy and safety of supportive communities is essential for wholesome growth.

In Jesus, we have not only a vision and way of living, but also a personal invitation to share his perspective and stance in life. The Big Life he is suggesting reaches out far beyond our ordinary horizons, revealing a viewpoint from which we can see our world more clearly and recognise values that would transform lives everywhere. Now more than ever our world needs people with a Big Life commitment and friends to address climate change and degraded environments, to speak up for social justice and asylum seekers, to restore the prospect of a positive future for our children, to develop economic systems that do not exploit the vulnerable, to educate for dignity and opportunity, to invest in peace rather than war and drag our institutional Church into the evolutionary-minded 21st century. This is an exciting vision full of promise for a better world.

We are all participants in and responsible for creating communities and the world. Everyone has a right and true basis for speaking up and acting on their own initiative. Pope Francis invites every Catholic and every community to be creative and daring in rethinking the goals, structures, style and manner of living the Gospel in their own areas.

Communities take many forms. The family is the basic unit of society, no matter how varied or fractured it is. It is our first and primordial community coming in all shapes and sizes. Small groups create relationships and connect people beyond the family. Enabling people to relate and interact personally, they contribute enormously to the faith and life of the Christian community. Again, they take many forms.

Catholic living, personal as well as in community, will flourish more fully when we recognise the full scope of, and give free rein to the authentic sensitivity, authority, place and role of all baptised women and men, and bring those gifts to centre stage in our Church.

The sense of the faith of the faithful

The source and basis for the voice of the people is summed up in the phrase, ‘the sense of the faith of the faithful’ (*sensus fidei fidelium*). It is grounded in the lived experience of believers. Over time, living with faith and love, working on making Catholicism real in the hustle and bustle of life, being a responsible adult, having a family and joining a community or (more likely) communities, lead to developing a sensitivity in relation to our faith. As we live through days and months and years, holding our faith and traditions close to our hearts, we work on making our Baptism real and vitalising in our lives. We seek to appropriate its meaning and intent in our self-creation and respond to the commitments made by ourselves or on our behalf.

The sense of faith of the faithful of Australia has been clearly expressed in the past through submissions to the Plenary Council process and voting pattern during the ‘gay marriage’ plebiscite. It is evident in the enormous gap between what the institutional Church teaches and what Catholics believe. The faith, convictions and values of Catholics have been expressed. The future health of our Church community requires that they be recognised and accepted by institutional authorities. The resulting enrichment will lead to growth in ways not currently imagined. All of us, from grassroots to the heights of the institution, will be the beneficiaries

Looking to the future

The Church of the future will grow from below and be comprised of people who have made a deliberate commitment to the way of Jesus. The emerging New Story will bring together traditional salvation history with the evolution of the universe and the broad history of humanity. The future Church will be multi-dimensional with unity based on the quest for the fullness of life and following Jesus rather than profession of a common creedal formula or compliance with organisational procedures. Collaboration, synodality and subsidiarity will be central features of governance and in informing the use of authority. Our Church community will grow by attracting people to our life-enhancing vision, values, way of living and the quality of our proposals and actions for bringing about a better world.

Conclusion

A healthy Church is one where everybody feels welcome and respected, treated as equal, where adults can act as adults without unjust discrimination such as currently exists with regard to women. Communities are made and remade every day by the people in them as relationships are constantly renewed and revised. Social, cultural and religious communities and structures are essential for human flourishing. Within that context and framework, every person has an authentic voice that must be heard. Otherwise we will all be less than we could be.

Catholic Christians are committed to seeking the fullness of life, creating communities, where people know, love and care for one another, inspire one another, open vistas of possibilities for living abundantly, sharing and reaching out to others. Developing this community of communities, community for the world, is at the heart of what being in the Jesus movement is about. Every one of us has a unique and valuable part to play in this magnificent enterprise.

Catholicism will continue and flourish if it is truly Christian, in its respect for the baptismal role of its people. The relevant questions relate not to whether it will continue but, ‘What kind of Catholicism will we have?’ and ‘Who will shape its future?’ We can do it. The lesson of Pentecost is not so much in the kind of community the disciples formed but that they did it. It may take a lot of searching, reflection and discernment and some courage to uncover the voice of the Spirit within each of us, but it is there, and we can act on it.