

Building the Church We Need

Week Three: A Church for All Australians

Yarra Theological Union

16 May 2022, 7.30-9.00pm: Session with Claire Victory, National President St Vincent de Paul Society

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My aspiration is for a church which is large, out-going, inclusive, transparent, accountable, and participatory. That's a big aspiration, but it hangs together. Tonight, I want to take this opportunity to explore what that means for me. These are big aspirations with a large vision which I do not wish to 'tailor down' to current circumstances in either the Plenary Council or the Synod of Bishops consultation. I want to 'hang in there' to proclaim these values. As a church its different parts are moving at different speeds and directions, sometimes in the right direction. Maintaining that direction will need enormous patience and resilience, but the disaggregated structure of the church, i.e. dioceses and parishes and agencies, offers some possibilities.

The notion of 'A Church for All Australia' means for me one which involves full participation and co-responsible leadership for as many Catholics as possible. It means a church which is welcoming to all, including those defined as being on the margins. People should feel at home in the Church not excluded from it. Participation means full participation not just toleration or second -class membership. It means being at a round table, not a long thin one. It means a Church in which participation is extended into leadership at all levels for all who possess the gifts and who wish to step forward. That includes a serious injection of lay leadership.

It means a church in which we are not afraid to humbly learn from secular society; and in which we are confident about proclaiming a democratic spirit within the Church and speaking proudly of our participation within it. It also means a church in which frank and adult discussions are the norm, not obfuscated by existing church language, structures or culture.

Such an agenda means significant cultural and structural change. It will necessitate considerable changes of heart and attention to life-long formation in all its forms. It cannot be undertaken just to regain the credibility of the Church. That may follow, but the driving force must be acceptance, as [The Light from the Southern Cross](#) report concluded, that it is the right thing to do.

Such renewal must be accompanied by a revitalised church media and by freedom of speech and conscience within the Church. Too often communication is strictly controlled. The Church must be reoriented from a church of caution and fear, in which members are afraid to speak out for fear of isolation and retribution, to a church in which open conversation is valued as the norm.

The Church in Australia has included a growing number of employees combined with a declining membership. Many employees depend for their livelihood on church patronage, which can be ruthlessly exercised. This widespread Church employment has implications for true synodality and for freedom of expression within the Church.

The implications of hierarchy and conflict of interest for synodality and co-responsibility must be explored. The literature on synodality does not do this. The voices of those not employed by the Church must be heard, as must the voices of vulnerable Church employees. Those in and beyond the pews, but not in the inner circle, must be empowered.

The numerical decline of Church membership and adherence must be halted for renewal and reform to be successful. Those of all stripes who advocate a 'small' Church must be convinced that the Church should ideally return to being a mass Church if it is to fulfil its mission.

I draw on my experience on church boards, my membership of the Light from the Southern Cross writing team, working alongside Massimo Faggioli, and my membership of the Plenary Council. I reflect on my own contributions within the renewal movement, within the PC Assembly and within the Synod of Bishops consultation.

Two related issues among those raised above are crucial for the successful operation of a church for all in which hierarchy acknowledges synodality. I mean a synodality in which everyone is at the table, a round table not a long table with some people at the top and others at the bottom end.

They are (i) the persistent threats to freedom of expression and open communication within the church, and (ii) the complications that are introduced for synodality by the presence within the church community of many church employees.

Freedom of expression and open communication in a culture of compliance

Walking together and listening to one another is enhanced immeasurably if there is a culture of freedom of communication and robust expression within the church. Yet too often there is not. Rather the culture of the church can be one of control by insiders of information and communication in the guise of 'need to know'.

Regrettably that was my experience during my most recent tenure on a national church agency advisory council. Key information, including a review report, was not released to the advisory council members because it was the so-called 'property' of the bishops. This unsatisfactory experience, which I wrote about in my book Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy, was a harsh lesson in church process for me and my colleagues.

Disappointingly it has also been my experience as a member of the Plenary Council, though the PC authorities pledge their undying commitment to transparency. In many ways both ordinary PC members and the general Catholic community have been excluded from too much of the process without good reason. Too much has been done behind closed doors to the detriment of a fair and productive synodal process.

It has also been my experience, as chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn since 2017, that diocesan church media has also often been a closed shop. Once, when I raised my concerns with a senior lay diocesan employee about our group being frozen out of the local church media, I was told that it was 'our' (meaning the authorities') newspaper and that 'we' (the authorities) could do what 'we' liked with it, without any obligation to represent the views of the wider Catholic community. Outsiders had no rights. In some church media editors continue to act like censors against church renewal.

I have tried to address all these issues in my various official roles. This has involved taking up issues, both as a renewal movement leader and a PC member, with those holding church authority. My interventions have often fallen on deaf ears. The Light from the Southern Cross report did recommend a more open church media (R. 63) and I took up the issue in a personal PC intervention.

There are signs of improvement, but the hierarchical church continues to resist anything which questions the official 'line'. It also does not believe in sharing information in a timely fashion and allowing (or even better encouraging) robust discussion and exchange of views on controversial issues.

This lack of transparency is bad enough. What is even worse is retribution and fear of retribution within the church. The church can be ruthless with so-called dissidents.

High-profile examples of such retribution are well known. They include official investigation by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome of Catholic writers, such as Paul Collins, the sacking by the Vatican of the Bishop of Toowoomba, Bill Morris, and the silencing and dismissal of Fr Frank Brennan SJ, CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia, for his stance on same sex marriage. The official rejection of Sister Joan Chittister is in the same boat.

This culture of witch-hunts and suppression of diverse views within the church permeates our whole organisation to an extent which is not widely recognised. The consequence is a culture of fear and wariness at lower levels, especially among those whose livelihoods depend on church employment. By wariness I mean a culture which discourages open expression of views which challenge orthodoxy and hierarchy. The consequence can be summed up in the phrase, "Better to pull your head in, play it safe, and not attract attention to yourself".

Let me give some examples in my experience. They suggest more widespread cultural failure. When Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn held its first forum some years ago, I was surprised to hear that a Catholic teacher wondered aloud if it was OK for a person in their position to attend. Subsequently another Catholic teacher was advised that prominence within our group was not encouraged by the Catholic Education Office. It may not be 'career enhancing'.

Within the PC I have also been surprised by three separate instances where members have expressed concern to me that their advancement and perhaps even their livelihood and chosen career within the church may be hindered or at least 'complicated' by being

outspoken within the Council. The hierarchical structure of the church means that it is easy for individuals to be sidelined and we are all the worse for that.

Church Employees and Synodality

It is against this background that I discuss the implication for co-responsibility of the presence within the Church in Australia of a large number of church employees and bureaucrats. These implications have not been widely addressed. Yet limits on freedom of expression fall hardest on church employees as well as priests and religious.

Too often we discuss synodality using an over-simplified model of the church which is quite misleading. Our simplified model of a pyramidal hierarchical church usually incorporates just bishops, priests, leaders of religious institutes, members of religious institutes, and lay women and men. While it recognises the negative influence of hierarchy and deference it fails to recognise the widespread employer-employee relationship within the church. Here I will concentrate on lay employees, but priests and religious may be in the same position. Cecilia Francisco-Tan spoke last week about limitations on freedom of thought for seminarians which make them afraid to think for themselves.

The membership of the church in Australia is steadily declining, but it remains a huge employer of many Catholics as well as numerous others. For the Catholics their employment is a central part of their Church experience. If they feel unable to speak out, we are in big trouble. If it takes courage we are also in big trouble.

The Catholic education sector, for instance, employs more than 100,000 staff in 1,755 schools. There is also considerable employment, most of it lay, in health, social services, aged care and international development. The National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR), in a study for the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (ACCCER), found in 2017 that about 220,000 people are employed in over 3,500 separate Catholic organisations (R. Dixon et al, [Our Work Matters: Catholic Church employers and employees in Australia](#)). This makes the church almost as big as the Commonwealth government, as big as Wesfarmers, and bigger than combined local government employment.

A small, but influential sub-set of church employees, is church bureaucrats, employed to directly support Australia's bishops and archbishops. Almost all of them are now lay Catholics, working alongside clerical vicars, including Vicars-General.

Like mini-curias they are to mostly be found in chancelries, the episcopal headquarters. They are the bishops' off-siders, often personally selected. They occupy roles in general management, finance, communications, evangelisation, child safety, planning, formation and training and church tribunals. Associated with them are key roles such as seminary rectors and leaders of tertiary education institutions. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference secretariat in Canberra is also a key church bureaucracy.

Church bureaucrats, including lay women and men, have a potentially important role in opening up church communications. They are insiders who often wield considerable power and have significant delegated authority. As far as freedom of expression is concerned, however, they face the same issues as other church employees. This tension comes with the

job. Like civil servants, part of their job specification is faithfulness and loyalty to church authorities.

We should aim for Church employees and church bureaucrats themselves to be as diverse as the wider church itself. If we are to be an inclusive church for all, that is a goal we should set for ourselves. They must be respected participants in diocesan synods, pastoral councils and assemblies. They will also frequently be members of church boards and key committees. Their activities are one part of the exercise of co-responsibility and synodality.

They are, however, only a small percentage of the wider church in the pews and beyond. For synodality to be more fully reflective of a church for all the process of walking together and listening to each other should incorporate as wide a selection of backgrounds as possible. Church bureaucrats are often the easy choice for wider church roles, because they are close-by and handy to the bishops, but they should not predominate. Church authorities should reach out rather than look inwards when making choices. Despite large church employment most Catholics still live their working lives in the secular world, and they should not be forgotten.

The Plenary Council composition is a useful case study. Church employees make up a significant proportion of its membership. Some, like Vice-Chancellors of Catholic Universities and seminary rectors, are ex-officio, but many others are discretionary choices. This may signify the composition of the contemporary church in Australia: a church with a growing number of church employees in its midst. Church employment naturally has attracted many Catholics.

But I worry that it also signifies a narrow-minded selection process. The PC membership would have benefitted from a wider representation of Catholics from the secular world, even if it meant departing from orthodoxy. As someone who spent their working life in secular universities, I have sometimes felt like a fish out of water within the PC. Where are the Catholic business leaders, trade unionists, leaders of secular NGOs and/or other professionals? My point is that there is a big danger that as we shrink as a church we become too inward-looking.

To Conclude

We must grasp the vision and spirit of Dr Mary McAleese, Professor Massimo Faggioli and Dr Cecelia Francisco-Tan as well as Claire Victory tonight.

My own aspiration is for a church for all types of Australian Catholics, representing the full diversity of the community. We should be a fully inclusive, transparent, participative and accountable church for all. Not inclusiveness just for some Catholics; not participation just for some Catholics; not transparency just for some issues; not accountability just for some issues.

Women's equality must be absolutely central and non-negotiable. The same should be true for LGBTQI+ and divorced and remarried Catholics and everyone currently excluded by exclusive church teachings and practices.

For these aspirations to be realized we need some new structures, and extensive cultural change involving new styles of formation for all must follow.

I've chosen to speak this evening mainly about two themes.

The first involves rejecting a culture of passivity and fear within the church, advocating instead for freedom of expression in its fullest sense. This includes opening up the church's books to all Catholics, through government and church reporting, and seeking open church communications and full release of information.

The second involves greater exploration of synodality and a deeper understanding of the consequences for synodality of the role of church employees within it. Church employment is a distinguishing feature of the church in Australia. Some church bureaucrats, including lay men and women, hold privileged positions and reinforce episcopal authority, but many more thousands are vulnerable to prevailing orthodoxy and fearful of speaking out. Walking together means more than coping with clerical hierarchy but must also address the restrictive consequences of employer-employee relations within the church.

What has distressed me about some opposition to church renewal is the idea that so-called 'little Australia' has little to offer the universal church. This is so contrary to the spirit of The Light from the Southern Cross. We all need to keep raising our voices as full citizens of the church to give our aspirations a chance to be fully realised. We have a great deal to offer.

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