

ASH WEDNESDAY REFLECTION (2019)

If ever repentance and conversion are needed in the Australian Catholic Church it is at this very moment. Significantly, this urgent call for a change of heart is not coming from our Church leaders but from the wider Australian community, the media and, most importantly, from deeply committed Catholics and those who share their hopes and aspirations.

The harrowing revelations from the Royal Commission and, most recently, the conviction of Cardinal George Pell have rocked the Catholic Church in this country to its foundations. American Rabbi Shmuley Boteach is “spot on” when he says that Australians are deeply traumatised in the wake of all this. But before we start feeling sorry for ourselves and the loss of reputation, we must clearly focus on the untold damage done to victims of abuse. Innocent lives have been irreparably damaged by such abuse which has been perpetrated by God’s representatives. This has led to confusion, guilt and shame on the part of the young ones abused, preventing them from sharing this with parents and others who might have been able to help them. Often when they did open up, they weren’t believed. At least now that it is all out in the open, there may be some hope of bringing belated healing and reparation to those so harshly treated along with their families and loved ones.

It goes without saying that it is not just individual “rotten apples” which have caused such destruction but a total system failure in the mentality and structures of the Catholic Church. Branch and root reform needs to be fearlessly undertaken if the Church is to return to the mission entrusted to it by Jesus.

In 1996, I gave a talk in which I expressed my hopes for the Catholic Church. They were that it would be

- * a more human church;
- * a humbler church;
- * a less clerical church;
- * a more inclusive church (and therefore more truly catholic);
- * a more open church;
- * a church which finds unity in diversity;
- * a church which discovers its whole tradition;
- * a church which reflects the person and values of Jesus.

I have restated those hopes many times since, including at the Oceania Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1998 in the presence of Pope John Paul II, the future Pope Benedict XVI and my brother bishops. Surely such aspirations are even more relevant today.

A male and clerically dominated church has a lot to answer for in terms of today’s woes. It is hard to imagine that the church would be in its present parlous state if women had been in effective decision-making and governance roles. Nowadays, I sometimes hear bishops speaking of clericalism in critical terms but I wonder if there is any genuine change of heart when all real power continues to reside in the clergy. Sadly, at times this can be reflected at the parish level as well where the priest is able to have the first and last say in everything. This was well illustrated in Sydney priest, John Crothers’ recent book *The Clergy Club* which

strongly made that point. Authoritarianism is not a reflection of the true authority exercised by Jesus of Nazareth.

A large part of the problem has been the relationship of the Church in Australia (and elsewhere around the world) with the central authority of the Vatican. The notion of communion is an integral part of what it is to be a Catholic and that includes being in communion with one another, our local bishop and the Pope, the Bishop of Rome. It enables us to maintain unity in diversity respecting the cultural diversity of our world.

But there needs to be serious and urgent consideration of the questions of the ordination of women and optional celibacy for the clergy. These issues are seemingly off the agenda in terms of the central authority in Rome. In the present regime, a vast number of excellent candidates for the priesthood are being excluded. That has been well argued by individuals and groups wishing to bring about such reform. I do not wish to go over the debate except to say that I strongly support such reform and believe it is highly relevant to the present crisis in the church. Allied to all this is Catholic teaching on sexuality. There are many lessons to be learned from the same-sex marriage debate which has so occupied the Australian psyche in recent times. It is not enough for the Catholic Church to be repeating mantras from a past age. There are many voices which need to be respectfully listened to and critiqued. In the past, there has been far too much laying down the law by those in power and too little listening. Groups such as Australian Reforming Catholics, Women and the Australian Church (WATAC) and Catalyst for Renewal were often looked upon with suspicion and seen as disloyal whereas they have a great love for the Church and often their hearts are breaking with what is happening. Currently, the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform and our local Concerned Catholics Canberra-Goulburn are providing effective forums where the voices of the people can be expressed.

The news of George Pell's conviction has brought me great sadness. I laid hands on him and Peter Connors when they were ordained bishops a year after I was. Over the years, as brother bishops, he and I were fairly regularly on the opposite side of the argument. I saw him as the champion of conservative positions which I did not espouse and which I believed did not embrace the teaching or the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. But he was well connected in the Vatican and with highly ranked conservative American bishops and cardinals. Clearly, this was all part of his advancement to high office in the Catholic Church. When he was made Cardinal in 2003, I publicly criticised his elevation because I said that I did not consider that he represented mainstream Australian Catholicism. For all that, he and I maintained an amicable relationship and I was shocked when the allegations were brought against him. I found it hard to believe they were true. Twice last year, I wrote to offer my support and promise my prayers. Last weekend as he was beginning his time in remand, I offered Mass for him and asked someone close to him to convey that to him. I have to leave it to the courts to decide his fate. Over the years, I have spent a fair amount of time visiting prisons, often to comfort fellow priests who have offended. I have some insight into what a horrible existence it is. I take no joy whatever in George's fate.

I write this on Ash Wednesday in a spirit of repentance on behalf of my Church which has failed and hurt many good people. It saddens me when so many people have lost faith and hope in the Catholic Church. It is understandable. But I simply say that God will never

abandon you even when others have let you down or sinned against you. But I retain hope. When people asked me over the years when I was regularly in trouble with the Vatican why I remained in the Church, I said it was because it was my spiritual home. Today, I spoke with Bishop Bill Morris who was so unjustly removed from office in 2011 as Bishop of Toowoomba. I am in awe of the fact that he is completely devoid of bitterness and continues to have a rich pastoral ministry. Bill and I are regularly in touch with each other and when we spoke today and I sought his counsel about this article, he simply replied "Make sure you give them hope."

I see that hope when I look at all the wonderful people involved in Catholic education, health-care, social justice and social services and the St Vincent de Paul Society. I find it, too, in commentators such as Frank Brennan, Francis Sullivan, Paul Collins and Bishop Vincent Long who have helped through the media in recent days to make some sense of what has been happening.

Pope Francis gives encouragement in his Lenten message: "The path to Easter demands that we renew our faces and hearts as Christians through repentance, conversion and forgiveness so as to live fully the abundant grace of the paschal mystery."

(Bishop) Pat Power
Canberra ACT,
6 March 2019

In June 2012, Pat Power retired as Auxiliary Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn but continues to exercise a pastoral ministry.