

## **Being Church beyond the Royal Commission.**

Paul Bongiorno

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Wurundjeri on which we meet and recognise their continuing connection to the land, waters and culture who like the first peoples of the Amazon draw deep spiritual nourishment from its beauty and bounty. And I pay my respect to their elders past, present and emerging.

It was with some real trepidation that I agreed to fill in for Francis Sullivan when he was unable to meet his commitment here today. The Truth Justice and Healing Council which he led and which was set up by the Australian bishops to deal with the Royal Commission into institutional sexual abuse was in fact a model of response and an admission from the bishops they did not have the credibility to do the job.

There can be no healing without truth nor any justice either. That is our challenge as a church and our condemnation.

The Letter to the Hebrews says “the word of God is something alive and active: it cuts like any double-edged sword but more finely: it can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or joints from the marrow...no created thing can hide from him.”

You may remember a scene in the movie “Gandhi” where the great Indian leader stepped down from his campaign train with one message for his enthusiastic supporters: “Rather than say that God is Truth, I should say that Truth is God.”

In his writings Gandhi said instead of the usual maxim God is Truth – Truth is God enables me to see God face to face as it were. I feel him pervade every fibre of my being.

It has deep resonance with St Paul’s speech in Athens as recorded in the Book of Acts: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands...he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.”

For those of us who profess this faith the judgement of the Royal Commission cut deeply indeed. For truth is of a piece. As my old colleague in the Ballarat Diocese Pat Flanagan wrote to the Tablet earlier this month quoting Thomas

Aquinas “Every truth without exception and whoever may utter it is from the Holy Spirit.”

As an Australian church we are still struggling to come to terms with the horrible truth about ourselves and the drama is still playing out. And our responses are still falling far short.

Last week channel Ten Melbourne sent its court reporter to Canberra to cover the High Court’s response to Cardinal George Pell’s appeal. Back in the Parliament House news bureau I was sitting at an adjacent desk when she took a call. She ended the brief conversation with a terse remark: “typical of the Catholic Church.” I asked her what was that about and she said it was the Sydney Chief of Staff alerting her to a statement released by Archbishop Anthony Fisher.

She said the short statement was full of compassion for George Pell and scarcely mentioned the fact that there was a victim involved.

Now the purpose in telling you this is not to deny George Pell his right to exhaust the judicial process to establish his assertion that he is not guilty beyond reasonable doubt.

It is to show you the damage already done not only to the cardinal’s reputation but to the entire church. We are already seen as “whited sepulchres” to quote Jesus’ condemnation of the Jewish religious leaders of his time.

The highly paid top legal counsel are arguing not that they disbelieve the accuser but there is still a reasonable doubt about his testimony sworn on oath and accepted by a jury and a lower appeal court..

So we are in the horrible position of not being able to credibly join with the Prime Minister when on behalf of the nation last October he said:

“Mr Speaker, today, as a nation, we confront our failure to listen, to believe and to provide justice.

And again we say sorry.

To the children we failed, sorry.

To the parents whose trust was betrayed and who have struggled to pick up the pieces, sorry.

To the spouses, partners, wives, husbands and children who have dealt with the consequences of the abuse, cover-ups and obstruction, sorry.”

We await the High Court’s decision but the record shows the Catholic Church, our church, more often than not at the instigation of George Pell himself has spent millions of dollars disbelieving the victims. The Ellis defence the most egregious example condemned by the Royal Commission.

And talking of the Royal Commission when the Pell matter is finally discharged its heavily redacted findings of his testimony and contribution to the church’s response in three dioceses – two of them major metropolitan Sees will be released.

And we know they would not have been redacted if they were favourable to the Cardinal. The Commissioners were not shy in calling into question the truthfulness of other bishops and church leaders in the final report.

I sincerely hope that if the cardinal’s appeal is upheld that a report I received last week is untrue. I was told that some of his eminence’s supporters wanted to pick him up from jail in a limousine and head to St Patrick’s Cathedral to give thanks had his Victorian appeal succeeded.

My source is impeccable and I would not have mentioned it, if I doubted it.

So as this conference of Voices of Hope and Challenge draws to an end I am sure none of you are in any doubt about the challenges but what about the hope?

There are voices of hope and the loudest is Pope Francis in Rome. In Australia we have a strong echo in Bishop Long but we also have the conflict between the humble church and the triumphal church. A conflict dramatized in Umberto Eco’s novel *The Name of The Rose* and currently on SBS TV. There the medieval *overall* movement inspired by St Francis of Assisi and carried forward by the Franciscan friar William of Baskerville is confronted by a champion of the powerful church and papacy, the Dominican inquisitor Bernardo Gui.

And make no mistake the Dominican Archbishop of Sydney and his allies, half the bishops’ conference, are very luke-warm about the upcoming Plenary Council and the excitement many Catholics have that the merciful, inclusive church the Pope champions will be advanced. George Pell when he was still riding high in Rome warned Archbishop Mark Coleridge that the council was a bad idea as “we already know what the laity want they will be on about married priests and ordaining women.” But perhaps the first sign that the Spirit is at work, Mark

Coleridge though he tied the vote for president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference with Anthony Fisher got the job on seniority. While Coleridge is president and while Pope Francis is alive I have no doubt the voices for reform and a return to the spirit and letter of Vatican II have a greater chance of being heard.

How great is the question. Already we are seeing what appears to be a manipulation of the membership of the six writing and discernment groups. Analysis by the social psychologist Professor Des Cahill says the process is dominated by bishops and priests and New South Wales dominated. He says it is clear that many, if not most of the lay members are employees of Church organisations. There is a marked reluctance to include many active members of the various reform groups.

In the Cathedral parish in Canberra, the administrator warned the various groups meeting about the plenary that changing the nature of the church was not on the agenda. Of course it depends what he means by that, but he like his Archbishop Christopher Prowse believes a more prayerful approach and the example of Our Lady's faith and humility is the answer to the church's crisis.

There is little evidence of the embrace of the Vatican II pastoral approach of Pope Francis. At an event where women of the Archdiocese invited Christopher Prowse to come and discuss the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, he spent most of the time talking about "one of the greatest theologians of our time" Hans Urs Von Balthasar. There was scarcely a reference to the encyclical let alone its vision.

I will get a bit more hopeful in a minute. But we need to be utterly realistic about what we are up against.

The thirty five years of the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI did enormous damage stalling and even destroying the reforms of Vatican II. These were the so called restorationist years. But restoration to what? Not the Gospel vision of the People of God and the *sensus fidelium*, the college of bishops and the pilgrim church of Vatican II but to the 19<sup>th</sup> century absolutist model of papal governance and high clericalism.

This agenda or worldwide conspiracy as I prefer to call it, to ignore the ecclesiology and theology of the two great constitutions on the church at the council had no greater champion than the Australian churchman George Pell. Though his membership of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the

Congregation of Bishops and his cultivating of strong friendships with powerful conservatives like Raymond Burke and others he wielded enormous influence. A former Apostolic Nuncio told me that more often than not his *terna* or three names for who should be bishop or archbishop and where were ignored due to Pell's interventions. This goes a long way to explain why the Australian church lacks the sort of leadership we are now seeing from the German bishops pushing for real synodality and the South American Bishops at the just concluded Amazon synod.

At its apex Pell's influence through the misnamed *Vox Clara* – the theologian Gerard O'Collins SJ says it should be called *Vox Obscura* - was able to ignore the consensus of the English speaking bishops of the world to impose the unecumenical and dreadful translation of the liturgy we now have. Out the window went the achievement post Vatican II of having the language of the liturgy agreed upon as far as possible with the mainstream Protestant and Anglican churches. My wife and I attended a concelebrated Eucharist at St John the Evangelist Episcopalian Church near the White House on Lafayette Square in Washington DC a few years ago. The responses and prayers were the familiar ICEL formulae replaced in 1998, the main celebrant was a woman priest who invited us all to approach the table of the Lord for communion. I thought to myself this is a glimpse of the Roman Catholic Church to come. There is no theological reason against it, just decaying, narrow thinking as is so eloquently pointed out in the submission to the Plenary by Catholics For Renewal.

There is no doubt that under this Pope he is looking to decentralize the church's pastoral mission and new ways to exercise it. He has invited the bishops to share with him their discernment of the signs of the times and how they can best respond. Already we know from the German bishops, because they released the findings in defiance of the curia, what they learned from their consultations ahead of the synod on the family. The Australian bishops did not tell us what they were told let alone what if anything they learned ahead of that synod. Would it have been any different to the Germans who found: "in most cases where the church's teaching is known, it is only selectively accepted?" They said "most of the baptized enter into marriage with the expectation and hope of concluding a bond for life. The church's statements on premarital sexual relations, on homosexuality, on those divorced and remarried, and on birth control, by contrast, are virtually never accepted, or expressly rejected in a majority of cases."

We know in Australia the response publicly is a tin ear. The position adopted by the bishops to marriage equality and recently in New South Wales to the decriminalization of abortion was narrowly rules based and out of harmony with contemporary sentiment of inclusion on one hand, compassion and non-judgemental concern on the other.

In a telling article in *The Table* after the election of Jorge Bergoglio as Pope Francis, the late cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster told how he and six other European cardinals learned from Josef Ratzinger's numbers man at the previous conclave, George Pell, how to lobby and get their man up – with the help of the Holy Spirit of course.

Murphy-O'Connor described the JPII, Benedict – Pell church as a “city-on-the-hill” Church. But he felt strongly that such a church lacked credibility in a pluralist society in which what he described as “the grammar of faith was slipping away.”

The late cardinal said the “Church’s credibility had to come from its closeness to people, the ‘*vicinanza*’ embodied by *Gaudium et Spes* – The Church in The Modern World and by Pope John XXIII. In mustering the numbers for Bergoglio he and his fellow six European cardinals believed the next pope should have a heart for the poor, implement collegiality, reform the Curia, and above all be a pastor.

The Amazonian bishops were not afraid to put the central expression of Catholic practice and belief, the celebration of the Eucharist, ahead of centuries’ old resistance to a married priesthood or to the ordination of women as deacons. Of course that would, without doubt break the dam wall holding back the ordination of women to the priesthood. The Pope says he is considering both and already we know there is historic precedent strengthening his hand against people like the sacked head of the Holy Office Cardinal Gerhard Muller who now says making celibacy optional would be heresy. Really. Where do these people get off?

The Vatican correspondent Christopher Lamb summed up the Pope’s attitude quoting him saying to the synod fathers “women put out a sign that says: Please listen to us, may we be heard. And I pick up that gauntlet.” But what the Amazon synod went to the heart of was the church’s future direction. Does the Church and by that we mean its leaders, bishops, priests, deacons and lay men and women

have as Francis asked at the opening mass the “daring prudence to find new ways to plant the seeds of the Gospel in the contemporary world? Is the Church ready to trust in the surprises of the Holy Spirit, or will it return to the styles, disciplines and customs that were used in the past? In the Pope’s eyes according to Lamb the choice facing the church is stark: to be and he quotes the pope, to be a “museum faith” or to be a living one?

Here is the vision of John XXIII’s Council resurrected. If I may borrow from Luke’s Gospel – how my heart burns within me as I hear the words spoken again. Just like fifty three years ago when myself and the other recently arrived Australian students at the Pontifical Urban University began studying the Documents of Vatican II. Here was the corrective Council to the unscriptural and untraditional absolutism of Vatican I that John Henry Newman forecast would be needed.

But what we still have is Canon 1404 that enshrines an unaccountable authority: “The First See (the Bishop of Rome) is judged by no one.” This is the absolutism that cascades down the ranks to the bishops and parish priests, that ignores other canons that talk about the rights of the faithful. This is the ‘Golden Calf’– the false tangible god created by and for men to entrench their power. And we saw it at work as I have said when this power was used to defy and constrain and dispose of the reforms set in train by the Council and to some extent by Pope Paul VI.

Pardon me if I feel insecure – I have been a witness to it at work. Pope John Paul exploited his unfettered power to damaging and almost immediate effect. The sacking of good Pastoral bishops in the Netherlands, France and Australia without natural justice. The firing in Rome of professors who taught me, some periti or theological experts at the council. The determined dismantling in Melbourne of the pastoral architecture in the parishes and regional seminary fostered by Archbishops Knox and Little. The best explanation one priest was given when he was being dismissed from his teaching role was not because he was a heretic but because the new Archbishop didn’t like his theology.

But as I look around this room, as I did in Wagga a few weeks back when Canberra Concerned Catholics like the wise men of the Magi, although we had wise women too, hopped on our camels and went due south west to help Catholics there set up a similar organization, and at Jamberoo, Spirituality in the Pub last Thursday, I see men and women hopeful that this time, spurred on and shocked by the dreadful and scandalous failures documented in the Royal

Commission we can build the inclusive and humble church Pope Francis says we are called to.

At the Jamberoo get together a Sydney priest came up to me and said the parishes are inundated with missives from the Archbishop claiming the Church is under siege from the secular world and urging campaigns for more protection of religious freedom. Archbishop Fisher is asking for carve outs from Australian secular law that protects the dignity and freedom of all citizens irrespective of their, race gender, sexual preference, marital status or religious beliefs and practice. The message he sends is exclusive rather than inclusive outreach and offensive to fair minded Australians. He is under siege all right – from the truth.

In August 2018, the Pope in his first ever letter to the People of God wants and I am quoting “active and assertive Catholics.” No more ‘sheeple’ or quiet Australian Catholics. It is a call to a prophetic role and as such is a dangerous one. The prophets were mostly violently rejected. As Jesus lamented when he wept over the Holy City of Jerusalem.

But the existence of *Catholics for Renewal*, *Concerned Catholic* and others will at least make sure the bishops know they are on notice. What the Plenary gives us is a grace filled opportunity for institutional redemption.

Archbishop Prowse described those of us in *Concerned Catholics* Canberra Goulburn as “white middle class grandparents.” He’s right, our formative years were the 60s and 70s. The flower power, “tell it as it is,” “make love not war” generation. The willingness to confront reality “warts and all.” A generation fed up with hypocritical “discretion,” that challenged the two faced sexual mores - the legacy of Victorian puritanism and prurience. That revolution was born of a loss of faith in institutions that failed in World War II, better education and the liberation of a secularism discarding superstition and unquestioned authority.

For many of us it is no surprise that our adult children, though educated in Catholic schools and recipients of the sacraments, no longer see in the Church an institution that has anything to say to them.

They see a Church thanks to the public interventions of its leaders telling gays, the divorced and remarried, those who use contraception that they are excluded. They see a Church that does not practice what it preaches and is more into fighting for its own privileges. They see misogyny, homophobia and even bigotry. They see a rejection of those who are on the fringes. Their judgments are not always

fair or accurate but they are fed by many church people, who the Pope himself condemns as self- righteous and like the boastful Pharisee in the Gospel.

The Pope finished his homily at the Amazonian Synod's final mass with these words:

“Let us pray for the grace to be able to listen to the cry of the poor: this is the cry of hope of the Church. The cry of the poor is the Church's cry of hope. When we make that cry our own, we can be certain our prayers too will be heard.”

Paul Bongiorno

Melbourne

17.11.2019