

## Summary Paper No. 4

2020/2021 Plenary Council (5<sup>th</sup> Australian Plenary Council) Resource

### Clericalism

Among the many definitions of clericalism, one that covers most aspects is that it is “a mindset that views the church as being principally, if not exclusively, the clergy, to the neglect or downplaying of the laity, with the consequence that undue power and status is conferred on or assumed by the clergy and their role within the people of God is distorted from being that of service to that of domination”.

Pope Francis describes clericalism as:

- a ‘scourge’,
- a ‘*toxic disease*’ and
- ‘***a perversion of the Church***’.

Clericalism, he says,

*“forgets that the visibility and the sacramentality of the Church belong to all the people of God and not just to an illuminated and elected few”*,

*“is one of the greatest distortions affecting the Church”*, and

*“a mistaken way of living out the ecclesiology proposed by the Second Vatican Council.”*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Radio Vaticana, “Pope Francis: Clericalism distorts the Church.” April 26, 2016 (Retrieved from [http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2016/04/26/pope\\_francis\\_clericalism\\_distorts\\_the\\_church\\_/en-1225638\\_20/3/2020](http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2016/04/26/pope_francis_clericalism_distorts_the_church_/en-1225638_20/3/2020)) Pope Francis, Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Chile and Peru. 15-22 January 2018. Meeting with the Bishops, Santiago Cathedral Sacristy, Tuesday, 6 January 2018. (Retrieved from [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180116\\_cile-santiago-vescovi.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180116_cile-santiago-vescovi.html) 20/03/2020); Cindy Wooden, “Clericalism: The culture that enables abuse and insists on hiding it” Crux now Aug 23, 2018 (Retrieved from <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/08/clericalism-the-culture-that-enables-abuse-and-insists-on-hiding-it/> 20/03/2020)

Clericalism is a counter-force to God's mission and the reign of God. It strangles evangelisation.

The clericalist culture is incapable of self-regulation or 'policing', for it is obsessed with power, self-preservation, entitlement and privilege. Attempts to reform this clerical caste system have invariably been vigorously resisted.<sup>2</sup>

The causes of clericalism are multiple and complex. Bad theology stands out:

- that the Church is a perfect society with a two-tiered citizenry favouring the ordained; and
- that the Church is the clergy, with the laity their clients and beneficiaries.

A clearer understanding and explanation of the effects of ordination would help.

Others are the way bishops are selected, the way priests are formed, and a law obliging the laity to "show reverence to clerics according to the diversity of their grades and responsibilities"<sup>3</sup>, resulting in excessive deference to clerics and the denial of individual freedom of conscience.

Can clericalism be eradicated or minimised?

Benedict XVI said clerics would need a 'change of mindset, particularly concerning lay people'. They would also have to start thinking of the laity as 'co-responsible' for the Church's being and action.<sup>4</sup>

Church law will also have to be changed for genuine cultural and structural reform. Clerics must be made accountable to Christ's faithful, and lay women and men have to be given their rightful share in church governance at all levels.

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<sup>2</sup>Fr Peter Daly, "Tackle clericalism first when attempting priesthood reform", *NCR*, Aug 13, 2019. (Retrieved from <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/priestly-diary/tackle-clericalism-first-when-attempting-priesthood-reform> 30/03/2020)]

<sup>3</sup> Canon 119, 1917 Code of Canon Law. The canon remained in force until 1983 when it was abrogated.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Rome Diocese, May 2009

There has to be a return to a more accountable and consultative process for the appointment of bishops” as recommended by Pope Leo the Great (440-461): “He who is to preside over all must be elected by all”.

There needs to be a system of clergy review, whereby the ministry of all bishops, priests and deacons in ministry is regularly assessed by panels representative of Christ’s faithful.<sup>5</sup>

Seminaries, the formation program for priests and deacons, and the way candidates for ordination are recruited and screened must be thoroughly reviewed and updated. Candidates for the priesthood should be formed among and alongside the lay faithful so as to promote their ‘solidarity’ with the people of God. Outdated and ineffective formation methods and practices have to yield to better ones. Diocesan seminarians will be better formed living, for the most part, in the general community, and preferably, in non-institutional settings.<sup>6</sup>.

A renewed Catholic Church, if it is to be a credible sign of the Kingdom of God, can no longer trivialise and diminish the baptismal dignity of its lay members. It must proclaim the equality of all in word and deed.

As St John Henry Cardinal Newman, asked by a priest his opinion of the laity, replied, ‘Well, we’d look rather silly without them!’

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<sup>5</sup> Catholics for Renewal, *Getting Back On Mission*, pp. 127-129, Garrett Publishing, Mulgrave, VIC, 2019

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Recommendation 4.23