

## The Rights and Responsibilities of Christ's Faithful in Australia

For many Catholics the idea of having rights will be alien. Their awareness is more likely to be of their myriad responsibilities itemised in the Catechism. Yet the rights of Christ's faithful, derived from Baptism, are integral to Christian tradition, identity and mission. The Apostle Paul said:

For as many of you as were baptised into Christ, have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew, nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3: 27-28; cf. 1 Cor 12: 13; Col 3: 9-11).

This basic teaching of Paul expresses the 'constitutional' basis for the Church's identity, functioning and mission.

In the Middle Ages church lawyers protected the rights of ordinary Christians from arbitrary abuses and exploitation by autocratic rulers, both clerical and lay. They insisted that, before God, everyone is equal and endowed with the same rights that flow from baptism. In God's sight earthly rank, status and entitlement count for nothing.

The tendency for elites, autocrats, and inequality to emerge in the Church is evident once again. Today's crisis stems from entitlement, injustice, and lack of compassion, the same evils which caused the crisis and the very obstacles that stand in the way of reform and renewal: deep seated clerical elitism, the sidelining of the 'sensus fidelium' and dismissal of the collective wisdom of the people of God. These were actually defended by Pope Pius X:

[T]he Church is essentially an *unequal* society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors" ([Vehementer Nos](#), 1906, n.8).

That arrogant approach was earlier dismissed by St John Henry Cardinal Newman and later by Vatican II. The Church has however not yet fully recovered the grace and power of Paul's vision which must be embraced anew as the 'constitution' for reform and renewal.

Vatican II conveyed the essential rights and responsibilities of Christ's faithful, including their right to the Eucharist, the Word, the sacraments and a share in church governance. It called for renewal. But many bishops, Vatican bureaucrats, clerics and laity prefer 'business as usual'. They will not embrace the new vision of a Church for the times which is synodal, collegial and co-responsible, and cling rigidly to fixed notions of ecclesial 'tradition' and 'memory', even when Pope Francis has called on them to let go and not obstruct the true [mission of the Church](#).

To recreate Paul's vision of a community of free and equal women and men in Christ, a first step should be the drawing up of a 'Charter of Rights and Responsibilities'. That charter

would inform Christ's faithful of their baptismal rights and duties, set out the essential principles of good governance and culture, and promote the much-needed ongoing and co-responsible dialogue between pastors and laity – all directed to more effective pursuit of the mission given the Church by Jesus.

Rights and responsibilities of the people of God were deeply embedded in the life, Scriptures and structures of the early Church. Vatican II recalled it in *Gaudium et Spes*, and Paul VI sought to highlight it in a proposed *Fundamental Law of the Church*, many elements of which are incorporated in the *1983 Revised Code of Canon Law* ([Canons 208-223](#)) and . the 1971 Ordinary Synod Bishops' document *Justice in the World*.

The Church's ability to attract people to Christ has always depended on how faithfully and effectively it witnesses to the values of the Kingdom of God. (cf. [A People not a Pyramid](#) ). [Justice in the World](#) insisted that only a Church which "acts justly, loves tenderly and walks humbly with God" (Micah 6:8) will be regarded as a true sign of the Kingdom. Failure to do so will rightly be judged as hypocritical and nullify the Church's evangelical message.

While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes, Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church itself" (*Justice in the World* n. 40).

Catholics for Renewal strongly urges the Plenary Council to put in place measures which will impel the Church in Australia to act justly and tenderly, and to walk humbly with God. Specifically, we recommend that it draw up a **Charter of Rights and Responsibilities for Christ's Faithful in Australia**.<sup>1</sup> The Charter should then be prominently displayed in every Catholic institution throughout the nation: in churches, chanceries, schools, universities, hospitals, nursing homes, refuges and elsewhere, so that all the faithful will know and understand their baptismal dignity, and their rights and responsibilities in the community of Christ's Body, the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> At its 2019 conference in Warsaw, the International Church Reform Network (ICRN) adopted such a Charter which was published by the Irish Association of Catholic Priests on 7 October 2019 (HERE). Also, see Appendix 3 (pp. 278-9) of *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming our Church Together*, Garratt Publishing, 2019