

The smell of the sheep

By Peter Day

We need to have a serious conversation about the mess we're in. One that doesn't play the 'man' (bishops/clerics), but rather the 'ball' (church governance/culture). What we face is deep and systemic; it requires root and branch reform. Without such reform we will continue to produce fertile ground for the abuse of power.

The catastrophe that is sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and the cultural factors that have contributed to it are seriously complex, and unravelling the mess will take a generation... or two, or three!

One readily identifiable and accepted contributor to this disaster is clericalism. In essence, the abusive wielding of power by clergy - lording it over others, rather than serving them.

As Lord Acton said insightfully over a century ago, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

And while many of our bishops seem genuinely keen to eradicate this dysfunctional power imbalance; is it not the case that the very culture in which they find themselves is at the heart of the problem? For instance, the process of selecting bishops is, itself, clericalism writ large: a series of generally secret actions bereft of transparency and overseen by a *select few* ordained males. It is emblematic of the Catholic hierarchical project; one that, for the most part, totally ignores and sidelines the people of God, thus, trashing the Vatican II notion of "the priesthood of the baptised".

Our Bishops, if reluctantly so for some, are afforded much power within the church. And while many are sensible and prudent in wielding said power, that's more down to the particular personality of the man, rather than the existence of imbedded governance and oversight structures that demand accountability and rein-in the potential for autocratic rule.

This patriarchal backdrop also ensures the continued and abject marginalisation of half the Catholic population: women, who have no say at all in the governance of the universal church beyond the odd managerial position which, again, comes down to the particular disposition of the bishop in charge. Bearing in mind, these managers are employees of the bishops and, regardless of the significance, or nature of their role; they can never be equal partners in the governance of dioceses. Ultimately, power always rests with the ordained man – and it's the same in parishes. Thus, approximately 500 million Catholics 'don't get to vote'.

Imagine if there were a law excluding women from being members of the government's Cabinet; excluding them from shaping our nation as equal partners – indeed, untenable.

It might reasonably be said, then, that like some of our decent, well-intentioned politicians, our equally decent and well-intentioned bishops have been marinating for too long in a culture of privilege and comfort and power – the three main ingredients of clericalism.

Literally, “they’re soaking in it.” And we know well: that which soaks in a marinade slowly, but surely takes on the essence and flavour of said marinade: problem is, like the proverbial ‘boiling frog’, many don’t realise it.

‘It’s hard to make a man understand something when his career depends on him not understanding it’. What chance, then, those bishops who have benefitted from such a system would want to reform it?

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28)

To be frank, it seems pretty evident that too few of our past and present church leaders have taken this ‘commandment’ of Christ to heart. There has been more ‘lording’ than ‘serving’ – no wonder the catastrophic mess!

It’s as if our Shepherds have been agisted in different, verdant paddocks; ones impervious to drought; thus, they have lost the sense of *the smell of the sheep* – and don’t the sheep know it.

What is it, for instance, about the public utterances of some of our leaders that leave people saying, “They just don’t get it?”

Why this gulf between pastors and the people they are called to serve?

Perhaps we need to turn to a couple of other “Whys?” to help explain the divide.

Why these honorifics for men who seek to follow Christ, *the one who emptied himself and became a slave*:

Excellency; Your Grace; My Lord; The Most Reverend; The Very Reverend?

They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. (Matthew 23: 7-12)

Why these symbols of power for those who are called to follow the One who so utterly rejected power:

Large pectoral crosses; triumphal vestments; tall Mitres, and ‘gold-plated’ Croziers?

They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. (Matthew 23: 5-6)

Is there not a lesson in Pope Francis's refusal to take on so many of the trappings and entitlements afforded those in power: be it his accommodation, the car he drives, or the simple vestments he wears?

Indeed, clericalism is a sickness that Pope Francis has been tackling head-on since his inauguration in March 2013. And he got onto the front foot early, excoriating his Curia during a Christmas address in 2014, listing a number of ailments that he said were undermining their calling to be, first and foremost, men of God: good shepherds. These included:

- **Being rivals or boastful.** 'When one's appearance, the colour of one's vestments or honorific titles become the primary objective of life.'
- **Suffering from 'existential schizophrenia.'** 'It's the sickness of those who live a double life; one of hypocrisy that is typical of mediocre and progressive spiritual emptiness that academic degrees cannot fill. It's a sickness that often affects those who, abandoning pastoral service, limit themselves to bureaucratic work, losing contact with reality and concrete people.'
- **Glorifying one's bosses.** 'It's the sickness of those who court their superiors, hoping for their benevolence. They are victims of careerism and opportunism; they honour people who aren't God.'
- **Seeking worldly profit and showing off.** 'It's the sickness of those who insatiably try to multiply their powers and to do so are capable of calumny, defamation and discrediting others.'

The pope's words are redolent of another prophet, Ezekiel, who lambasted the clericalism of his day:

The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. (Ezekiel 34: 1-4)

For Pope Francis, central to breaking down this clericalism - this corporatisation of the institution - is a beautiful, frightening, radical dream: "a church which is poor and for the poor".

"For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily theological; [it is not] a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical [choice]," he says.

"God shows the poor his first mercy." (*Evangelii Gaudium, no. 198*)

And this first mercy is well known to each of us:

- *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. (Luke 4:18)*
- *In so far as you did this to one of the least of these... you did it to me. (Matthew 25:40)*

- *No, when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. (Luke 14:13)*
- *James and Cephas and John... offered their right hands to Barnabas and me as a sign of partnership... They asked nothing more than we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do. (Galatians 2:9-10)*

Whatever one may feel about this dream that triages the marginalised as a priority, we should be careful not to patronise it as noble sentiment; or dismiss it as a niche aspiration for the specialised few – a kind of ‘soup kitchen’ social work.

As Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI wrote in 2006: “Love for widows and orphans, for prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to the [Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.”(Deus Caritas Est, p.36 no.22)

A poor church for the poor, like any divinely inspired dream, invites us beyond what is familiar, what is safe, what is comfortable: this is a disturbing prospect, especially for a rich, well-meaning young man – and archbishop, and priest, and parish - looking to our Lord for some consolation, for an easier way.

But is not the response the same: *You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. (Luke 18:22)*

To put it bluntly, perhaps our leaders need to spend less time in airport lounges and offices, and more time on the ground – in ‘soup kitchens’: a new marinade flavoured by the smell of the sheep, especially the poorest and most vulnerable of them.

And it’s not as though we need degrees in ecclesiology, or theology to discern what being a good shepherd looks like:

Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. (Philippians 2:5-7)

God became poor.

This is why Pope Francis says, “I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us... We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 198)

By allowing the *smell of the sheep* to lead them, our shepherds would be better equipped to avoid the culture-trap that spawns princes and corporate-types.

It feels like a terribly sad thing to say, but the evidence is out: the Church, which we dearly love, is sick to its institutional core. It has a nasty, though very treatable cancer that is being fed by a pervasive clericalism. And, unless we treat it aggressively and decisively, the cancer will metastasise – and we will continue to be a church that re-crucifies Christ over and over: just ask the children and their families who’ve been scourged and nailed to crosses by religious brutes and cowards.

So, where to from here; how to reclaim the servant leadership of Christ?

Well, we know from pastoral experience, especially in the area of addictions, that it is only when we reach rock bottom – that place of powerlessness, despair and humiliation – that true and lasting change is possible. In acknowledging its inner demons and shame, the church, like the addict, is ripe for conversion. The drug of choice in this case is *power* and, like most other insidious ‘substances’, it has a deep and enduring hold on the addict.

So, how to detox? How to rehabilitate?

We might do well to turn to the wisdom of the first Four Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous:

1. *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*
2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
3. *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*
4. *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*

This journey to conversion must also be underpinned by a commitment to embrace fully the following disposition:

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13: 13-15)

In other words, the ordained hierarchy of the Catholic Church needs to divest itself of power – that insidious drug that has taken it to the precipice – and share it more substantially with the body of the Church in governance, strategic decision making, financial supervisions, selection of office holders. The simple fact is that the Catholic Church is trapped in an administrative prison that may have been developed long ago to correct abuses of former ages. But today, it is inflicting its own abuse on the capacity of the church to do its job – preach the Gospel in word and deed.

This divesting will entail, among other things, the Church humbly submitting to the wisdom of the secular world which has much to teach it about sound governance – i.e. the benefits of Incorporation, Board structures that hold CEOs to account and rein-in power, the importance of gender balance for institutions, etc.

Indeed, new and sound governance is where the rubber hits the road and where the Church’s detoxification begins. It is a telling comment on how the Church is run from Rome that, in Italian, there is no word for accountability!

To change things, here are a few of suggestions - by no means all new - that may well require some Canon Law tinkering. But that’s okay, because such tinkering will help counter those who resolutely ‘cling to human traditions and not God’s’:

- That the watchwords of sound governance – transparency and accountability – be institutionalised in the conduct of the Church’s clerical governance in everything from the selection of bishops and diocesan office holders to parish priests;

- That the Pope pursues a policy of filling the ranks of his civil service – the Curia – with women, including their employment as heads of Dicasteries or the bureaucracies that manage the Vatican’s activities;
- That bishops include women as diocesan Consultors, or establish new structures that allow women to share governance of the diocese beyond managerial roles;
- That the selection of bishops include serious input from the laity in the way that corporations, universities, judicial benches and other organizations do – advertising positions and the desired qualities of candidates selected by a known group of assessors whose own capacities are also declared;
- That parishioners be part of the process in appointing parish priests which is not hard to do: identify the critical needs of a community; nominate the characteristics required of its leader; specify what capacities are needed in the pastor; review and assess the applicants. In other words, treat pastoral appointments the way any position is advertised, specified, assessed and made in just about every industry today;
- That there be mandated yearly reviews of priestly and episcopal performance conducted by an appropriately qualified and properly representative bodies; this may also feed into a lay led diocesan body – i.e. a human resources team that has oversight powers, along with the bishop, concerning priestly accountability and health (physical and pastoral);
- That celibacy become optional – in fact, already there are married Catholic priests in Australia: those men who, for differing reasons, have resigned from their ministry within the Anglican Communion. Beyond the stunting effect it has on the emotional growth of some priests, it needlessly diminishes the pool the Church has to draw on for its priests. There continues to be quite a bit of institutional denial around this topic. Like marriage, celibacy, is fraught: very few do it well always, many battle on in good faith, but fall down every now and then, while a tiny minority do it very badly always. Celibacy, like marriage, is not for everyone.

But celibacy has wider significance. It is a bulwark of the clericalism that the Pope rightly identifies as a cancer killing the Church. While it is generally accepted that celibacy is not a causal factor in sexual abuse, it may well be an aggravating one.

In the Catholic context, for instance, celibacy – *the great counter-cultural sacrifice* – has bestowed upon Catholic priests and religious a sort of mystique: a perceived super-natural separateness. Thus, “Father is special; closer to God than the rest of us – he simply wouldn’t do that.” No wonder the children, and parents... and others weren’t believed!

In the end, Jesus Christ, who, himself, experienced abuse and humiliation at the hands of religious leaders, has left us an eternal and living legacy; a profound responsibility: to walk humbly and gently alongside others, especially the most vulnerable, whatever the cost.

“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)