

PCN-V. GREG REYNOLDS. 26-10-14.

Hello Church !!

I greet you and address you as 'Church' because that is who you are.
We are the Church. – plus a couple of atheists, who are warmly welcome.
It intrigues me how often I, and others, continue to fall into the old habit of still referring to the hierarchy as the Church.
The indoctrination has been so affective.

Firstly let me thank the PCN-V for this privileged opportunity to speak and share with you all today. Special thanks to the organizing committee.

I am not an academic or a scholar, and I guess the main reason I have been invited to speak is because I have been a naughty boy.
I invite you to listen to my sharing today mainly with your hearts more than your minds.

May the divine peace of God, Allah, be with us.

A couple of months ago Pope Francis verbally excommunicated the Italian Mafia. When I was excommunicated, a little over a year ago, one of the main comments made to me was that I was in good company with St Mary MacKillop, who also had been excommunicated.

So take your pick !!

I don't think I fit appropriately in either camp.

Being excommunicated has become something of a badge of honour; which is a sad indictment on the state of the church.

And I mean no disrespect to St Mary MacKillop for whom it was surely a most painful and burdensome cross to bear, given those times.

Over the past year the few occasions when I have felt the sting of it has been when attending a couple of friends requiem Masses and not been allowed to receive Holy Communion; that did hurt.

However, the fact that I brazenly continue to celebrate illicit Masses means that I am not generally deprived of the Eucharist.

I know there are people who envy me;

some people have even asked me, only half jokingly, how can they apply to get excommunicated.

In reflecting on my view of the Catholic Church naturally it is impossible to be completely objective; it never is.

However, I would argue that I can be more objective than most, for a number of reasons:

firstly, while my experience in recent years has involved moments of pain and sadness, by and large it has been a joyful, liberating and loving time.

I have received so much support, affirmation and kindness from so many people; especially including those here today.

So I don't present with much anger or bitterness; mainly, being excommunicated has resulted in much freedom and new experiences and new friendships.

Also my greater objectivity comes from being at the periphery of the Church. When one is deeply immersed in the middle of any culture, and especially a church culture it is very difficult to be at all objective. Being on the fringe has definitely given me much clearer eyes.

In these modern times I think most of us see excommunication as being so archaic, and yet at the same time, for me it has been a real gift; albeit a bit of an odd one. Not something for Santa's wish list.

My big punch line for today's talk was going to be;
"The Catholic church is NOT in crisis; it's DYING."
But I have revised that line, and now say;
"The Catholic Church IS in crisis; And it IS DYING."

There are way over a billion Roman Catholics in the world, and over 5,000 Bishops.

So to say that the Church is dying, is a very big statement.

And I don't state it from a pessimistic view point, or as sour grapes, or as some upstart prophet of doom. Our history has been scattered with those.

The idea that the Catholic Church is dying is not a condemnation on my part, rather I see it as a development, a sign of new life.

We need to welcome her, in the spirit of St Francis of Assisi, who referred to her as SISTER Death.

No matter what your progressive Christology surrounding the death of Jesus, it is hard to get around the reality that death is the only way to new life.

In the dying of the Church I believe that Jesus will be ever more present to us.

In believing that the Church is dying is for me Good News.

It is sad, there is inevitable pain and grief but it is mysteriously mixed with a huge dose of hope and joy.

How can the Church ever become what She is meant to be, the Body of Christ, if She does not die; so that She may rise again – it is the Paschal Mystery.

What we are faced with is a grieving process, why would it or could it be otherwise.

The best chance for the Church NOT to die out would be if;

Isis manages to dramatically expand,

Or if the ebola virus spreads globally,

Or if Richmond misses out on the finals next year;

THEN, and only then, will the Church flourish and be renewed.

I know which I would prefer!! - to sacrifice the Church, the Body of Christ, and trust in a new Ressurrection.

There is one other possibility for saving the church, and that would be a nuclear war. We still live under an imminent threat of nuclear devastation. Even though not many people even like to talk about it.

We may destroy ourselves relatively slowly by continuing to rape the planet;

But we just might wipe ourselves out by a nuclear conflict, at any moment, and then the Church wont have a chance to die; it will all be over !

There is something to pray about, if that is your thing.

Apparently this very week is the annual Disarmament Week,

Given our global denial, it seems to hardly rate a mention.

The Catholic church is obviously a mixed bag, there are wonderful individuals and communities being and doing grace-filled works. And the very structure of the Church being hierarchical and universal has enabled her to do things that are beyond the reach of congregational Churches. The Church has undertaken some fruitful initiatives in promoting inter-faith dialogue. The Catholic Church is able to put significant resources into biblical scholarship and research. The Church engages with and in science and medicine; she plays a very significant role globally in education and welfare. Sadly she is dragging her feet in addressing the climate change crisis.

I think it is good for Christianity to have different models of Church, provided they are open to each other, and striving to compliment one another. There can be unity in diversity. Uniformity is the killer; and that is a big problem within the Catholic Church itself. Diversity is Divine; Division is Demonic.

Why would the Catholic Church be dying at this particular moment in history ?? The flaws and failings of the Church have been exposed and cross-examined, like never before; and that is part of the upside of the horrendous ongoing abuse scandals. The Church is under intense scrutiny, and in Australia at least, has become a bit of a laughing stock. But that is not necessarily grounds for the Church to be condemned to death. It could rather be seen as an opportunity for serious wonderful renewal.

If you were to accept what I am suggesting, that the Church is dying, then to ask WHY and Whose To Blame, is to focus on the wrong questions.

When confronted with death the important responses are;

- to initially try and save the subject, and then to move on and
- provide care and support for the dying, and
- to prepare for life without the deceased.

Over the past couple of decades there has been significant calls and actions promoting renewal from within the Church. This has been happening around the world mainly in Europe and North America with significant contributions happening here in Australia.

The weaknesses of the Catholic Church both pastorally and organizationally have been well described and documented by certain brave bishops, priests and laity alike.

This includes the lack of compassion and natural justice, the secrecy, the self-protection of image and reputation, self-preservation, excessively centralized power, clericalism, misogyny, homophobia, etc., etc., etc.

Underlying most of it is, I suspect, the fundamental sins of pride and greed, along with fear.

There seems to be this persistent fear of the secular world; not that I am claiming that the secular is perfect.

And for those in power there is always that great fear of losing that power; which is of course what is helping to bring them undone.

Don't get me started on the hierarchy's unwillingness to embrace inclusive language and inclusive images of God.

Some people think I am just caught up in political correctness. They naively fail to appreciate the power of words to form and manipulate our thinking.

Unlike Iraq, the devil has many weapons for the Mass's destruction.

Just to pick one fundamental Structural flaw;
There is no place in the official structure of the Church for the voice of the laity. When it comes to any decision-making, the role of any laity is purely advisory. And I would argue that historically the laity have been complicit in this arrangement. The hierarchy have been happy to take all the power and the laity have been willing to relinquish all the responsibility. Finally, now people are beginning to find their voice and take responsibility, and Pope Francis seems to be encouraging this.

Just to pick out one more of my pet flaws of the Catholic Church, because it has affected me so directly and personally; it is to do with loyalty.

I think there are some interesting parallels between the clerical culture and the military culture. In both, it seems to me, there is an unhealthy over-emphasis on loyalty and obedience to one's superiors; to the down-playing of honesty, openness, freedom and compassion.

There is no place for loyal dissent; which is the position from which I see myself as speaking. I claim to be loyal to the Church but my first loyalty is to God and conscience.

To be judged as disloyal and heretical is sad and hurtful, but to me it says more about the rigidity and narrow-mindedness of the culture.

If I am right in saying that the Church is dying, is it appropriate, is it worthwhile, to be putting effort and energy into Church renewal?

My answer is an emphatic YES.

If we think of the Church as the Body of Christ and that the body is dying, then surely the quality of life of the body is more important than ever.

As the Church dies, it becomes ever more critical that the Spirit of Jesus is strengthened and purified; so that the Spirit of the Gospel will rise up with ever greater zeal and enthusiasm.

However, a word of warning;

Too much focus on Church renewal and reform, can risk falling into the same trap, or temptation, that got us into the current mess.

The Church by its very nature needs to be missionary and outward looking; serving the world; even, or especially, when it is in urgent need of internal reform.

It best renews itself by ignoring itself and being and doing what it exists for.

It is a question of balance. It's the same individual challenge we all need to grapple with throughout life; if I wait till I am perfect before I feel ready to serve others then, good luck with that !

We need to forget about the survival of the Church and focus on loving God and neighbor. It's dying anyway, and it is NOT FOR RESUSITATION.

So while it is great that we have some folk pushing for Church renewal, my own personal priority is on responding to the impending death.

The denial of death is the denial of hope.

Yet that is how most of us live most of our lives.

To face up to death is not to be defeatist; on the contrary, for a Christian, it is to embrace the joy of new life that awaits beyond it.

When I say that the Catholic Church is dying, all that I am saying is that a particular way of being Church is dying.

Now I don't mean to down-play that, it is huge, it's a big deal (or no deal), but it's not the end, it's not the defeat of goodness.

It's saying that a new Church is being born, and that has got to be Good News.

There is loss and grief and sadness, and we need to pastor and care for each other through the grieving process. And understandably individuals are all at different stages of the process.

Nuns have a lot to teach us in this area.

Religious Sisters are a very particular and significant feature of the Catholic Church. In general terms they have been treated abysmally by the hierarchy. Bishops have a history of controlling and dominating them; or at least trying to. Some of you will have been following the way Rome has been dealing with the nuns in the USA, investigating their ministries and pastoral works. The arrogance !!

Thankfully the nuns have been standing up to them.

Some Religious Orders have been dealing with a dying Church for many years. Here across Australia we have some amazing nuns, women doing courageous, loving, inspiring work; and yet very few young women join them. It is a real grief and loss for these religious communities.

They provide an important model for the rest of us.

They have faced the dying of their Orders, they accept it graciously, in the main, and have then just got on with the real work of serving the poor and marginalized. Retaining a spirit of joy and hope in the dying.

The exciting future is that no one has any idea what the new Risen Church might look like; we may not even recognize her at first as she emerges from the empty tomb. We might mistake her for the gardener !!

But we need to prepare; we need to be doing our pre-natal exercises; whatever that might entail. But at least part of preparing the way will surely involve experimenting with new ideas, and new discoveries, in our brave new world. Surely to be ever more inclusive. One might even go so far as to become Inclusive Catholics.

The big question or potential scandal behind the notion of the church dying is; could it be God's will ??

Dying can be most loving. It is certainly a mystery.

The new life that will follow, the new birth, will surely NOT be a Virgin birth - surely not.

Lets just leave that to the Holy Spirit.

With the beauty of Death as a back-drop, where are we now,

What is the current state of play ?

The recent Roman Synod on the Family raised many controversial issues and highlighted the need for reform.

Church reform is a huge topic and I would just like to conclude my reflections today with some fairly random thoughts about various groupings within the Church.

Firstly bishops, always a soft target.

Some commentators and observers have caricatured most bishops as 'Yes Men', and yes they are all men. But they are described as being like branch managers of an organization that is totally controlled and run from headquarters.

In one sense that is true, especially given my earlier comment about blind loyalty. However it is only part of the picture.

Within the serious constraints imposed by Rome, in relation to its dogmas and doctrines, bishops are more like dictators in their own diocese. Within the particular boundaries requiring absolute obedience, bishops have serious power and freedom to rule; nothing akin to being like a branch manager.

The same power trade-off, or compromise, exists down the chain of command with parish priests. Providing the PP complies with the restrictions imposed from above, he has enormous latitude and power within his local parish.

So with Pope Francis inviting bishops to share their opinions, what is emerging is a range of ideas and disagreements. Bishops and priests are so much more than 'yes men', they are used to taking initiatives and exercising their considerable power, albeit, within certain strict parameters.

If Pope Francis is allowed to move the goal posts and expands the areas of responsibility that bishops can have dominion over, I am sure they will not hesitate to take initiatives wherever they can.

A real stumbling-block for any significant Church reform is the reluctance of bishops and priests to relinquish any of their power. The only way for renewal to occur is by empowering the laity. But it is so hard to give up power once you have had a taste of it.

Pope Francis' desire for genuine collegiality can only be achieved with bishops willing to really listen with openness, humility and compassion;

Truly listening to each other, to the other people of God, to the rest of the world and even to the Spirit within.

Pope Francis has been leading by example; by listening, not dominating or lording it over people at the recent Synod.

Allied to this is the challenge of how to reduce clericalism ?!

The \$64,000 question ?

One part of the solution, I think, is to reduce the distinctions between clergy and laity; to blur the lines.

Certainly the laity and clergy have two distinct roles and vocations within the life of the Church; but I feel the way forward, in building the reign of God on earth, is to emphasize the Royal Priesthood of all the baptized more than the Ministerial Priesthood.

The opposing argument, as I understand it, would say that the way to build up the role and vocation of the laity is to heighten the distinction between the two categories, as a way of clarifying the distinct vocation of the laity, so that the laity don't identify themselves with the clergy in any way to avoid them becoming like little priests or dwarf clergy.

I see their logic; but it strikes me as seriously flawed.

It justifies wearing clerical dress, having titles and a different life-style.
A two caste system is not what Jesus had in mind, I'm sure, when He called the disciples to be servants of their communities.
It is amazing how we can rationalize and justify just about anything.

Next group; Youth.

I believe the Church is doomed because of young people.
The Church has lost a couple of generations -- and they are not coming back ! TG.
We need to end, the seemingly endless, conversations around the desperate question of how to attract the youth back into the Church.
We don't. They have moved on. They are not coming back.
They have bigger fish to fry.
I trust that there will be plenty of younger people to embrace the Spirit of Jesus and follow Him; but where Jesus will lead them is out into the wilderness – to a new and unknown horizon.
Pope Francis in speaking to young people has urged them to have wings and roots, - he says to them, dare to try new things and not forget who they are and where they come from.
I think his message is for all of us; I'm sure we are all young at heart.
Some of us are beginning to forget who we are and where we come from;
But lets dare to try new things, anyway.

One analogy I came across for the current state of the Church was that she is like a senile grand-mother; it is most important to respect her, but not base your decisions on what she says !

The second last group that I would like to say a word about is that little group of people that we call Women.

How Catholic women can put up with the way our male dominated Church treats you, I don't understand. Why are most women so patient and gentle, and not revolting. It only makes sense when one reflects on the whole story of human history.

The oppression, injustice, inequality, violence and most of all just being ignored. Years ago I remember hearing a report on a survey in the USA, they love questionnaires and surveys. The number one cause of anxiety and fear among Catholic clergy was – fear of conflict with women !! that is not healthy.

The whole Catholic Church edifice is built around celibate males; if we let women in, the whole organization would have to be totally transformed.
So we largely reject the idea of married priests and totally oppose the possibility of women priests.

Ironically the effort to maintain the status quo is quickening the impending death. Its not sustainable.

The Roman Catholic Women Priests movement that started in Europe is small but active, particularly in America, where there are a few dozen illicitly ordained women. Interestingly, here in Australia, we don't seem to be following along in the same foot-steps, like we do with so many other trends. Australian women, it seems to me, have by-passed this step and are moving beyond the institution in their thinking and spirituality; to a place that is post-Catholic; for some post-

Christian; but definitely post-Catholic Church; to a space that is more inclusive, creative, free and fearless; to a Church yet unformed; slowly evolving. These things can't be rushed, just as they can't be stopped. They are not going to be slowed or distracted by getting caught up in an institution that they instinctively know is dying. On the ecumenical front, I have read about R.C. officials blaming the Anglicans for putting up a barrier to greater unity by going ahead with the ordination of Women Priests and now Bishops. Yeah blame the Anglicans. It can't be the Catholics fault, just because we refuse to even allow the subject to be discussed. Unity is surely the ultimate goal; but to compromise justice and equality to get there is just ridiculous.

The final group that I would like to mention is homosexuals; or should I say more inclusively, LGBT people or some say LGBTIQQ people. I suspect that Jesus might have been gay, and still is !! The important point about this isSO WHAT. It doesn't matter, because in God's reign there is no male or female, straight or gay, black or white, rich or poor, slave or free. We are all one in Christ.

The oneness is what matters.

Thank you.