

## *The Parish - a Community of Evangelisation.\**

“The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.”

“It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.”

- Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, # 28.

### *The earliest communities of the Jesus Movement*

The earliest evidence of the social makeup, function and mission of Christian communities is found in the letters of Paul, specifically in the introduction to his letters. These references, along with other details, provide clear evidence of the authenticity of his letters. His addresses follow a close formula: Paul *apostlos* ..... to the *ekklēsia tou theou* (the assembly of God) which is in.....(Corinth). Another helpful key to understanding a particular Community is its location and its social environment. Conscious of the host culture of his communities, Paul invariably highlighted their Baptismal calling to be identifiably different in the way they treated one another and their non-believing neighbours, conducted themselves as responsible members of society. Paul addressed his converts as *saints*, *'agioi*, the distinctive ones, those whose collective identity stood in sharp contrast with others by magnetic power of its sheer goodness.

Within that related field of meanings then, it is worth noting that one of the earliest words used for the gathering place of the Jesus Communities was *paroikia*, a rest stop for those on a journey; a place of temporary residence in a foreign land (Acts 13: 17; 1 Pt 1: 17 ‘a place of exile’) The English word parish derives from *paroikia*. (See John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless. A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981)

The late Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP concluded that around forty to fifty people made up the *ekklēsia* in any one place and that the community would have gathered in a large house or villa provided by an affluent member. For this reason, the centre of prayer for the Jesus Movement came to be known as *oikos ekklēsia* the house church. (1)

A key feature of these local *ekklēsiai* was stability in holding fast to the Tradition, as a house of welcome and as a source of evangelical mission and outreach. Paul's policy was to let the local community choose its own leadership structure which was Eucharistic in tone and preserved ownership of the Memory of core traditions. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul frequently jolts the minds of his converts to teaching already given with the rhetorical question, *Do you not know?* In order to keep the Memory and the Tradition alive Paul constantly stressed the vital importance of the itinerant *apostoloi presbyteroi* (the elders sent by a parent community). It was their mission to visit the local Churches on a regular basis in order to confirm the members in their faith and to monitor that their adherence to the apostolic tradition. Paul was one of these who had himself been sent as an evangeliser by the

Church at Antioch. The itinerant *apostoloi* are mentioned, with some cautionary advice, in the *Didache* dated around 150 CE:

11: 4 “Let every apostle who comes to you be received as you would the Lord. 5 He will stay one day, and if necessary, a second day, but if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. 6 Let the apostle, when departing take nothing except bread until he arrives at his next lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.”

To guarantee stability and good order in his communities, Paul made sure that when he left them there were reliable and responsible overseers (*episkopoi*) or community organisers. These *episkopoi*-overseers later came to be known as bishops.

It needs to be stressed that Paul had no understanding of the idea of *ekklesia* in theory, in a kind of social vacuum. He only knew the *ekklesia* as a specific community in a distinct social environment. He believed that the local leadership should be charismatic in the broadest sense and be discerned by what is now called the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*. Furthermore, Paul was realistic enough to believe that complacency, inertia and power blocs would be avoided by regular changes in leadership. The wisdom of this was later captured in the dictum of John Henry Newman/ Winston Churchill, *to change is to improve, to be perfect is to change often*.

Paul trusted that mature Christians, with good leaders, could work out the solutions to their own problems without the need for constant outside intervention. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor explains:

“It would be difficult to imagine a cleverer way for Paul both to make his own opinion heard and to insist that the responsibility for a decision lay with the community. Perhaps the situation will be clarified if we think in terms of values and structures. It is the role of an outside authority figure to insist on values, whereas it is the duty of the community to determine the structures in which the values come alive. Thus Paul believed that he should stress the need for the community to purify itself, but felt that he could not impose a solution. The community had to decide how precisely this should be effected. He could point them in the right direction, but they had to find the way themselves. He thereby very carefully balanced his duty of parental oversight (1 Cor 4:15) against the autonomy of the local church. He could suggest and guide, but his converts had to make the decision for themselves. Otherwise they would never mature as Christians.” (2)

### ***Against the odds***

The Irish-American scripture scholar, John Dominic Crossan was once asked what he thought was the greatest miracle in the history of Christianity. He replied that, ***“it’s still here.”*** Another intriguing question too is how did Christianity survive and flourish especially in the first centuries with a belief system described best as an oxymoron or pointed foolishness?

Pretty well everything in the message of the early Christians worked against them: Their hero was a nonentity from a backwater in the Empire and those devoted to him were and his followers judged to be devotees of an obscure and nonsensical Eastern cult.

The central belief of the Jesus Movement was that the life and death of a convicted Jewish subversive who was condemned and executed as a criminal marked a decisive turning point

in human history. Furthermore, they believed that Jesus, in his own being, transformed the very nature of human potentiality by actually achieving a life of sheer goodness and altruism. That was not their only claim. They preached that their hero was not defeated by death. They believed that Jesus was raised from the dead. For the first century listener, Jew or Greek, the whole story was utterly preposterous.

Despite the fact that the Christians and their ‘saviour-god’ were dismissed as objects of scorn by the comfortable, their communities became magnetically attractive to the social outsiders of the Greco-Roman urban melting pots: the unemployed, the dislocated, the dispossessed and those on the outer edges of respectability. These people found their home for the homeless in the Christian *paroikia*.

The outsiders experienced social and religious inclusion because they could identify with the broken, rejected Jesus and the marginalised state of his followers. The credibility of the Jesus people was obvious as their faith and the transparent goodness were totally transparent and congruent. A powerful attraction to the *paroikia* was the way Christians made no distinctions on the basis of ethnicity, socio-economic status or gender. Their common Baptism into the new humanity of Christ was the great equaliser and unifier (Gal 3: 27-28).

A new kind of relationship was now made possible. Christians, without self-consciousness, addressed one another as *sisters* and *brothers*. This radical almost unprecedented way of relating was both revolutionary and dangerous. Those early Christians were ultimately successful because they offered a generous welcome into a community which acknowledged and celebrated people’s human dignity which had been cruelly stripped from them. The Jesus Community formed a genuinely alternative society which stood in sharp contrast from and shamed its host culture. This drove, energised and inspired the people of the *paroikia*, the community on the periphery. The theological vision and pastoral praxis of these early Churches clearly inspired people like Gustavo Gutierrez, the ‘father of Liberation Theology.’

“Our [liberation theology’s] question is not how to speak of God in an adult world [as Bonhoeffer did]. That is the old question posed by progressivist theology. No, the interlocutor of the theology of liberation is the “*nonperson*,” the human being who is not considered human by the present order – the exploited classes, marginalised ethnic groups, and despised cultures. Our question is how to tell the nonperson, the nonhuman, that God is love, and that this makes us brothers and sisters.” - *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Readings*, London: SCM, 1983, 193.

### ***Insiders, Outsiders***

The ethos, community structure and public perception of the Jesus Movement rendered it as a fundamental threat to the foundational values and good order of society. It was seen as dangerously divisive as it was caused rupture with both the patriarchal structure of Jewish life and the fundamental construct of Greco-Roman society, its household code:

From the Maccabean period beginning in the Second Century BCE Judaism had been in the stages of redefining its existence on the basis of radical difference and separation from the non-Jewish world. This was achieved by strict adherence to the laws of ritual purity. By the end of the second century CE there were 613 of these laws, compiled in the *Mishnah*. These

were strongly criticised by Jesus because of the oppressive weight of obligation, compulsion and guilt they imposed on people's lives. (Mt 15: 1-3; 23: 1-5, 6-39)

When Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, he articulated what is probably the foundational statement of his theology. He was addressing the fact that, in Christ, authentic human existence was once again made possible. Acceptance of this was dependent on a free, adult choice without compulsion of any kind. He was acutely conscious as that his most hostile opponents in the Christian movement were the 'people from James' or 'the circumcision party.' They demanded that a condition of entry into the Christian community was acceptance of the Mosaic Law and all its ritual obligations. These prescriptive laws fixed the boundaries of exclusion established by traditional Jewish laws of *Kashrut* (purity). These are found in a compressed form in the morning prayers recited by the quorum (*minyan*) of ten adult Jewish males.

Three of the eighteen morning blessings, the *Shemoneh Esrei Berakoth*, included their thanksgiving to God for not being made a:

<i>Foreigner</i>	Paul responds: 'neither Jew nor Greek'
<i>Slave</i>	'neither slave nor free'
<i>Woman</i>	'neither male and female'

..for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' – Gal 3: 28 (see J.N. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, London, 1961, 5-6.)

Soon after his conversion, Paul quickly came to the conclusion there could be no room in the economy of human restoration and reconciliation with God for both faith in Christ and the obsessive compliance with the Mosaic Law. He regarded this as non-negotiate. To support his conviction, Paul had learnt from the early instruction he received that Jesus had lived constantly as a Law-breaker by rendering himself ritually unclean. He repeatedly violated the Mosaic Law and the interpretations of the Pharisees and their scribes. Jesus compromised the barriers of ritual purity which separated Israel from the unclean Gentiles. This may well have killed him.

Among the Gentiles Paul and his converts risked the wrath of the Roman government. Paul's communities modelled their lives on the Baptismal formula of Gal 3: 27-28. The shattering of Roman social stratification invited a terrible punitive response. It cannot be underestimated just how fundamentally Gal 3: 27-28 threatened and subverted the structural foundations of Roman society enshrined in the Household Code. This code strictly enforced the social divides which fixed and maintained the social and legal status of men, foreigners, slaves and women.

When persecution of the Jesus Movement became Roman policy, Paul's revolutionary teaching was purposefully discredited and censored by fearful Christian authorities. A spectacular example of this are the interpolations which clumsily break the internal logic of Paul's reasoning (1 Cor 14: 34-35). This censorship was supported by letters fraudulently bearing his name, for example Eph 5: 21 ff. Col 3: 18-25. These texts closely mirror the Roman Household code. See also 1 Tim 3: 1-7; 2: 8-15)

Another example of the alteration of the Christian historical record can be found in the exoneration of guilt for Rome's condemnation and judicial murder of Jesus. Yet another very clear example of revisionism can be found in a comparison between the way Luke

acknowledges the critically important role of women in the Gospel and the way he makes them disappear very quickly in the Acts of the Apostles. Luke simply writes them out of the narrative, thereby establishing a precedent for the next 1900 years!

### ***The Church in the Modern World***

The principal tasks of pre Vatican II theology was *Ressourcement*, or going back to the original sources, and it had a two-fold focus: firstly, to identify and recover the essential elements of the Faith of the early Church; secondly, to do the same kind of critical work with the Tradition as it passed through the patristic age to Vat I. All this labour involved identifying core beliefs and the various theological notions used to interpret them. That meant discarding a great deal of conceptual and linguistic ‘packaging’. One has only to observe the tensions between the so called ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’ since Vat II in order to appreciate how disturbing and unsettling this has been.

The *Ressourcement* or *Nouvelle Theologie* of the 30-50s became the theological foundation for the conversations, discussions, debates and documents of the Second Vatican Council. It was a movement to rediscover the treasures of the early Christianity and to track the development of the doctrine and practise from there. It was a perfect example of *reverse engineering*.

Among the great hidden treasures the Council recovered for the Church were the rich theologies of the People of God and the Laity. A great deal of theological rubble had to be removed to expose them to daylight once again.

This was an extremely important development as lay people had often been defined by means of a *via negative*, that is, in terms of *who and what they are not* rather than who and what they are. The opposite pole in the comparison and differentiation of course was the clergy.

One of the greatest minds of modern Catholicism, John Henry Newman, had done his thinking about the laity, not in terms of negative comparison with the clergy. Newman was led back to the Tradition which always maintained that the Laity is indispensable to the very notion of Church. Newman anticipated the foundational theology of laity which became a central focus of Vatican II. Indeed, Pope Paul VI declared that Vatican II was ‘Newman’s Council.’ We cannot afford to ignore or to forget him now, and for good reasons.

### ***Why Newman was and is so dangerous?***

Russell Shaw’s book on clericalism, *To Hunt, to Shoot, to Entertain: Clericalism and the Catholic Laity*. Shaw, a widely published author and professor who worked for some years as the Secretary for Public Affairs at the USCCB, is in an outstanding position to know the lay of this land. The title of the book is taken from one of the more famous clericalist outbursts of the 19th century, furiously written by Msgr. George Talbot to Archbishop Henry Manning when John Henry Newman drew his wrath. Newman had the temerity to suggest that the bishops ought to consult the laity before making critical decisions about those matters in which the laity have expertise, including governance. Protesting to Manning, Talbot ranted:

***What is the province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain? These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters they have no right at all, and this affair of Newman is a matter purely ecclesiastical.... Dr. Newman is the most dangerous man in England, and you will see that he will make use of the laity against your Grace.*** (Ignatius Press, 1993)

The simple answer to Talbot's question is obvious: *Newman took the laity seriously.* (Michael Whelan of *Catalyst for Renewal* responded with some wit when asked what +Bill Morris' big mistake was. Whelan said, Morris *took his people seriously*). Catholics need to take a fresh look at Newman. His insights and perspectives on hierarchical authority and especially papal absolute doctrinal and disciplinary oversight are as fresh and as constructive as ever.

He provided clear insights on how to put intractable situations into the perspective of good conscience and confident faith. He offers his fellow Catholics sound advice on matters of submission of mind, will, conscience and assent to matters of 'faith.' He is very clear that the nature of the Church is founded on principles of interdependence and equilibrium and not on the rigid, formal structures of an *Ecclesia docens* (the teaching Church) and the *Ecclesia docta* (the Church taught). One way transmission teaching was not what he had in mind. By virtue of their baptism and anointing with the gifts of the Spirit, the laity has an authentic and necessary role to play in discerning the *Sensus Fidelium* and even assessing the doctrinal value of teaching. For Newman, the work of determining the truth of God's revelation in Christ belongs to the whole Church, not just to the privileged clerical few. Indeed, "Infallibility resides in the laity and the Magisterium in a unitary way, as a figure is contained on the seal (the Magisterium) and on the wax (the Laity)." (3)

For the last thirty five years or so the hierarchy of the Catholic Church stopped listening to the people. From the papacy and Vatican Curia, all have slipped into a state of selective institutional tone deafness and amnesia. To assist the process, the demands for total, unilateral, passive and blind obedience under the Wojtyla-Ratzinger papacies were intensified. Benedict was fond of describing obedience euphemistically to *listening to Christ*. This, in fact, is coded ecclesiastical dialect for *loyalty to the Pope and (his) personal Magisterium*. The so-called *New Ecclesial Communities* come to mind!

### ***Newman's equilibrium: Hierarchy and Laity in partnership.***

In a landmark essay on the critical role played by the lay Faithful in the Arian Crisis, Newman was at pains to underscore the essential complementary magisterium of the Laity. Vatican II confirms this ( *Lumen Gentium*. 12). While a majority of Bishops at Nicaea were either Arians or became fellow-travellers, it was the Laity which effectively safeguarded faith in the dual natures of Jesus Christ.

Newman rightly acknowledged that at critical times in the history of the Church it was the Laity who emerged as the *gatekeepers* of the Faith and the *custodians* of *Memory* (the Tradition). For forty years after Vatican II these gifts of the Laity fell victim to institutional amnesia. The overbearing authoritarianism of JP II, actively supported by Cardinal Ratzinger, rendered the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium* effectively comatose for nearly forty years and caused almost irreparable damage.

Newman also warned Church leaders against clericalist arrogance and presumption in relation to the laity. He was particularly concerned that Lay people might be pushed to the margins and treated as appendages. Again he draws on his deep sense of Christian history to emphasise the point. He especially cautioned the hierarchy against thinking “the laity should be neglected and relegated to an audience, or at best, playing a supporting role.” – On Consulting the Faithful in matters of Doctrine, 205.

In thinking about the relationship between the ordained and those they serve, it is worth noting what Patrick Hampshire said:

“In his article advocating a married priesthood, Christ McDonnell (“One man, two vocations”, 19 July) does not mention that within the Eastern Rite Churches the concept of episcopal, priestly and diaconal vocation is different from that within the Roman Catholic Church. **Whereas in the Latin West priesthood is seen as a vocation from God, in the East it is a vocation from the Church.** Hence, the stories of the Fathers are replete with men running off into the desert to avoid ordination at all costs, at times being dragged back to be ordained as a priest, or more commonly, a bishop by their congregations. **Another major difference in Eastern ecclesiology is that the deacon, priest and bishop remain members of the laity.** While there has been a tendency to clericalism in some Orthodox Churches, there have always been correcting voices, such as the late Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh and Paul Evdokimov within the Russian tradition of the twentieth century. In this way, bishops, priests and deacons have been more accountable to the Church of which they are part – as opposed to being the Church to which others belong.” - A letter to The Tablet, July 31, 2014.

### ***Looking forward***

*If you want to know who you are, you need to know where you are.* – a paraphrase on Carl Jung from *The Self*.

Co-Chair of CCRI, Rene Reid recently circularised advisors on preparations for a International Coalition meeting in Rome to coincide with the Synod on the Family. She wrote about some of the principal challenging the Catholic people in the face of ecclesiastical self-interests:

“The big issue continues to be: The bishops are meeting inside the Synod and we, representatives of those with the lived experience of family life, are outside the Synod walls begging to be invited in. It’s the same old power struggle that just doesn’t change. No one with power ever wants to voluntarily give it up. What more can we do to change the structure of our Church?

Pope Francis has said in his letter to Families: “This important meeting will involve all the People of God – bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful of the particular Churches of the entire world – all of whom are actively participating in preparations for the meeting through practical suggestions and the crucial support of prayer.” The problem is that the Pope has not set up any viable structure for this to actually happen. So the Bishops continue as they have for centuries meeting in secret and making all the decisions for the People of God. “ (10/07/14 email message)

Reid is correct in pointing out the confusing mixed messages Francis has been sending about consulting the laity. She is rightly concerned about a profound lack of inclusive structures of conversation, consultation and open exchange at the Synod. To balance that out however

Francis has made a lot of Bishops and other clerics very worried when he stressed the critical importance of these forums:

“The bishop must always foster this missionary communion in his diocesan Church, following the ideal of the first Christian communities, in which the believers were of one heart and one soul (cf. *Acts* 4:32). To do so, he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and – above all – allowing the flock to strike out on new paths. ***In his mission of fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion, he will have to encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in the Code of Canon Law, [34] and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear.*** Yet the principal aim of these participatory processes should not be ecclesiastical organization but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone.” *Evangelii Gaudium* # 31

In support of Francis vision, it is encouraging to read what +Patrick Power said in an addresses earlier in 2014. At a Cowra parish anniversary celebration one night followed by a SIP gathering in Bathurst the following evening, +Pat spoke about what continues to inspire, energise and motivate him from the renewal of Vatican II. +Pat particularly notes his enduring dream for the Church which was born when he was a student in Rome during the Council:

“In 1996, I gave a talk in which I expressed my hopes for the Catholic Church. They were that it would be

- a more human Church
- a humbler Church
- a less clerical Church
- a more inclusive Church (and therefore more truly catholic)
- a more open Church
- a Church which finds unity in diversity
- a Church which discovers its whole tradition
- a Church which reflects the person and values of Jesus.

I have restated these hopes many times since, including at the Oceania Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1998 in the presence of Pope John Paul II, the future Pope Benedict XVI and my brother bishops. Surely such aspirations are even more pressing today.

Many Catholics believed that the Church was becoming too comfortable, too respectable yet up until the election of Pope Francis, they felt that nobody was listening to their concerns. Groups calling for reform are regularly dismissed as trouble-makers with little love for the Church when in fact their hearts are breaking for the Church which they see as drifting further away from the message of Jesus. Maybe it has taken the present crisis in the Church to bring us all to our senses. Pope Francis’ willingness to listen and his experience as a very human pastor give us all great hope, but even the Pope recognises the forces which are trying to maintain the status quo.” (4)

Bishop Patrick Power encourages Catholics to believe in an open, courageous, fearless and adult Church. He identifies and affirms that a strong Catholic community can name the truth about itself, be set free by that truth and flourish. Adult faith must not allow itself to be

stunted or paralysed by the inertia and blindness of our leaders. This lesson is well documented in the New Testament's narratives of embarrassment involving Peter and the Twelve.

This culture of studied deafness to the voice of the Catholic laity is hardwired into the psyche of most bishops. It began with the catastrophe of 1968 when Paul VI published *Humanae Vitae* when 98% of Catholic men and women not only did not receive but rejected overwhelmingly a formal moral teaching of the Church. This stunning lesson in the exercise of the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium* and with a clearly informed conscience was not heeded or comprehended. One need look no further than for some of the interpretative comments in the Working Document for the Synod on the Family.

### ***Things that can and must change***

Significant progress will be made, however, when women are re-written into the Church's narrative. The Church needs to re-access its Memory if it is to make up for over nineteen hundred years of institutional amnesia. Pope Francis recent Apostolic Exhortation is most encouraging as Peter Wilkinson explains:

“First, he (Francis) rightly says there are not enough laywomen in ministry, a situation sometimes caused by a lack of formation opportunities, but in many dioceses caused by an ‘excessive clericalism’ [‘a distortion of religion’] which has not allowed them to speak, to act, or to participate in decision-making. Further, where they are involved, it is too often in ‘tasks within the church’, not in applying the Gospel to the transformation of society (*EG*, #s 102-104).” (5)

The issue of an expansive and healthy acknowledgement of the role of women in the Church governance should not be seen as an exercise in paternalism or tokenism. What is a very serious challenge for reform groups in the Catholic community is to advocate and work for changes that can pass the test of reasonableness and realistic achievability. For example, key to transforming governance structures of the Church is more often than not Canon Law. It is Law and clericalism which have effectively excluded the Laity, women and men, from key positions in ecclesial leadership. Over time they have conveniently attracted a peculiar theology of self-interest to support them but that does not amount to divine revelation.

There is nothing to stop women from having access to positions such as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Divine Worship, Sacraments, the Canonical Court (the *Rota*), the Secretary of State and so forth. Once the possible is achieved, the unimaginable is within reach. Women's admission to the Diaconate is dependent not on Sacramental theology but by an interpretation of Canon Law: Canon 1009 # 3 changed in 2009 by Benedict XVI, redefining Diaconate as separate from the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

“That which is possible is that which has been done.”

- R.G. Collingwood. “The Idea of History” (1945)

## *Some challenges ahead*

In the Christian Tradition, the whole Church is only as strong and stable as foundations. The local parish is that foundation. But it is not a thing but a living organism and it does not exist as an abstraction. It is a living, thinking, reflecting, praying and celebrating community of believing human beings.

The purpose of the Parish is to be at the service of the entire community, to animate and empower by the compelling nature of its message and the sheer attractiveness of its community life.

The description of the parish community matches that of the Deacon in ecclesial life: "... whereas deacons are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity". Canon 1009 # 3 In its collective being and action, as partner and helper of the priest, the Parish actually satisfies the Canonical role description of a Deacon.

For the first time in its history the Catholic Church, particularly in the developed countries has the most highly educated laity it has ever had and on every level including theology and pastoral leadership competencies. This has been causing problems in the relationship between many priests and their people for decades and it still persists today, especially with a large sector of overseas born priests. A sensible spirit of collegiality and co-responsibility is desperately needed in order to bring about a healthy sense of perspective and equilibrium.

In order to foster and maintain a healthy Catholicism and to avoid the risk of falling into a form of Congregationalism, there is an urgent need for a system of comprehensive consultation in the selection of parish priests. Frankly, there should be *ex officio* lay members of the diocesan personnel board. A lot of problems may well be avoided if this were to happen. A wider pool of consultation is need also in the formulation of pastoral plans. Peter Wilkinson, among others, continues to do excellent research in this area. A spectacular example of where nothing is happening in the area of comprehensive, informed pastoral planning is the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

At the beginning of 2014, Archbishop Hart conducted a visitation of St Theresa's Parish, Albion in Melbourne's West. Part of this visitation included an informal chat with available members of the PLT. He registered approval and support for the Parish Charter which had been accepted and proclaimed the previous October. On the other hand, ++Hart was less than enthusiastic about official permanent structures and processes for consultation in the archdiocese.

During a meeting of the PLT, the Archbishop was asked a number of questions about the consultative structures mandated by Vatican II, Canon Law and supported by the teaching of the Popes. To his credit, he was prepared to admit that there were no established structures for such consultation in the Archdiocese. However, he became rather agitated when giving his opinions about *why* these institutions were not in place. He was quite tangibly hostile in his attitude to reform groups who asked questions and insisted on transparency and accountability:

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| No regional pastoral plan? | "Manipulators."                          |
| No archdiocesan plan?      | "Trouble-makers."                        |
| No plan for a Synod?       | "People who think they know everything." |

No archdiocesan pastoral council?

No priests' plenary council?

When Archbishop Hart was asked what he actually did for regular trusted advice, he said that he relied on the small group who comprised his Curia. He even boasted, *We know everything*.

He, like some other bishops in Australia, is in breach of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, Canon Law and the constant teaching of Popes. This is all very intriguing when they are continually exhorting the faithful to be obedient to the Pope and to the Magisterium. John Paul II was very clear about the constitutional necessity for the Church to have pastoral Councils and processes of consultation in his 2004, "Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops," (*Apostolorum Successores*).

"On the level of the local community, Pope Francis is quite clear on what constitutes a healthy and well lead parish. It lives within the whole Church community but it is the actual, existential meeting place between the People of God and the world they inhabit. It exists not in a vacuum but in a real historical context which influences it as much as it influences its social environment.

"The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers." – *Evangelii Gaudium*, # 28

### ***Taking the local Church seriously***

The mystique of sacerdotal clericalism which is evident here provides the rationale and authority for the members of that subculture either to avoid or to ignore the Laity.

Catholics in Australia and elsewhere perceive that it is the leadership of the Church, not they, who have broken faith and lost their way. A major blind spot of our hierarchy is the pre-eminence given to the clerical state over the rest of the people of God. The integrity of Jesus Christ, the Gospel and the People of God have been compromised and trivialised by an inflated sense of clerical privilege and entitlement. The Temple has trumped the Prophet!

Pope Francis warns his fellow Catholics that when the People of God loses its prophetic edge, it finds itself being tamed by the cautious and the timid:

"A church without prophets falls into the trap of clericalism. A prophet is someone who listens to the words of God, who reads the spirit of the times, and who knows how to move forward towards the future. True prophets hold within themselves three different moments: past, present, and future. They keep the promise of God alive, they see the suffering of their people, and they bring us the strength to look ahead. God looks after his people by giving them prophets in the hardest times, in the midst of their worst suffering. But when there is no spirit of prophecy amongst the people of God, we fall into the trap of clericalism. In the Gospel, for example, the priests ask Jesus: "With what authority do you do these things? We are the masters of the Temple!"

They didn't understand the prophecy, they had forgotten the promise. They didn't know how to read the spirit of the times, they didn't listen to the words of God; they had only their authority.

When there is no prophecy amongst the people of God, the emptiness that is created gets filled by clericalism. All memory of the past and hope for the future are reduced only to the present: no past promise, no future hope. But when clericalism reigns supreme, the words of God are sorely missed, and true believers weep because they cannot find the Lord. As we prepare for the birth of the Lord, let us pray: "Lord, let us not lack prophets amongst your people!" All those who are baptised are prophets: let us not forget God's promise, let us not tire of moving forward." (6)

An example of a national hierarchy committing itself to establishing pastoral councils is that of the Indian Catholic Bishops Conference at their 5-12/02/14 Plenary Assembly:

"Ensuring for our lay faithful their rightful place: ***Recognizing the God-given talents and potentialities of the lay faithful, we will, in the first place, listen more to their voice.*** Hence, we commit ourselves to establish Pastoral Councils in every diocese. We realize that formation of the lay faithful is the need of the hour. To this end, we commit ourselves, as a priority, to initiate programmes for lay formation to equip them to play their role in the Church and society." 5.iii. My emphasis. (7)

The ACBC could learn a great deal about vision, courage and trust from their colleagues in the Sub-Continent. For far too long most of our Bishops and many of our priests have presumed on the Laity practising three of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in particular: fortitude, piety, fear of the Lord. Vatican II invited the Laity to recover its native confidence, self-possession and to release the power of those long discounted virtues: wisdom, understanding, knowledge and counsel.

In times of great challenge to an undefeated faith supported by Baptised common sense, it might help to take in the wisdom and insight of the Russian definition of an optimist:

***An optimist is a pessimist with more information.***

### ***Endnotes***

- 1) J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (3rd rev. and expanded edn; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002) 178–85
- 2) "Paul the Pastor," in *Thinking Faith*, (29/08/08) [here](#) Pope Francis clearly thinks along the same lines:

[I do] "not believe that the papal Magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. I am conscious of the need to promote "decentralization" (EG. # 16). (See also Jose Comblin, "The Church and charisms according to St. Paul," in *Iglesia Descalza*, 13/06/14. [here.](#))

- 3) See also the very valuable contribution by Peter Wilkinson in his CCRI position paper for the Rome Synod on the Family, “How the Church Learns and Teaches: Listening to the *Sensus Fidelium*.” [here](#). See John Henry Newman “*The episcopate, whose action was so prompt and concordant at Nicea on the rise of Arianism, did not, as a class or order of men, play a good part in the troubles consequent upon the Council, and the laity did. The Catholic people, in the length and breadth of Christendom, were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not. Speaking of the laity, I speak inclusively of their parish priest (so to call them), at least in many places; but on the whole, taking a wide view of history, we are obliged to say that the governing body of the Church came short, and the governed were pre-eminent in faith, zeal, courage and constancy.*” – *Arians in the Fourth Century*. – On Consulting the Faithful in matters of Doctrine, 205.
- 4) The +Patrick Power address is [here](#)
- 5) Peter Wilkinson’s 23/04/’14 address at Sandringham SIP on “The Francis Effect,” [here](#)
- 6) From a homily of Francis on 16 December 2013 linked [Here](#). See also Francis remarks about the role of the Korean laity in ‘founding the Church’ in their country: “The first Korean Christians “did not have the temptation of clericalism, they were able to go on alone” to the found the church, the pope said.’ (The report is linked [here](#). And again, Pope Francis said: "You are the children of the martyrs, heirs to their heroic witness of faith in Christ. You are also heirs to an impressive tradition which began, and largely grew, through the fidelity, perseverance and work of generations of lay persons." The Korean Christian Community traces its foundation back primarily to one man: “The history of Catholicism in Korea began in 1784 when Yi Seung-hun was baptized while in China under the Christian name of Peter. He later returned home with various religious texts and baptized many of his fellow countrymen.” The full article is linked [here](#); Cfr James Nicoloff on the Lay foundation of the Korean Church; Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Boutros Ibrahim Twal, on the ‘priestless 1400 years of the Kerak-Madaba Christians)
- 7) The *Zenit* report is linked is [here](#).

### ***Some final jottings:***

#### ***The Ratzinger Effect – a personal note:***

The problem of Magisterial deafness was compounded under JP II and even more so under the papacy of Benedict. These were forty years of stifled initiative, imagination and the almost complete absence of adult conversation. For example, while claiming to be a champion of speculative conciliar theology, Benedict actually throttled it by imposing ‘definitive’ interpretations of the Council documents and what they meant. He did this by imposing his interpretations as the benchmark. He effectively elevated his own personal Magisterium above that of an Ecumenical Council. He taught that the hermeneutics of *continuity* and *reform of the reform* represented the reference point of authoritative interpretation of the Vatican II. Ratzinger, I believe, nearly destroyed the Church and I believe he knows it. (For a treatment of the monarchical papacy, see my article “The Reinvention of the Fisherman” linked [here](#))

### ***Setting the record straight:***

Irish theologian, Joseph S. O’Leary warned against the fraud of creeping infallibility:

“There is no way of divorcing the authentic sense of Vatican II from that authentic sense enacted by Paul VI and the Council Fathers in the years immediately following the Council. What is much easier to do is to see the inconsistency between the work of the Council and its dismantling in recent decades.” - *Praytell*, 29/11/11

American Maryknoll priest, William Grimm, on “Get the facts straight” in his 03/10/’12 *UCAnews* column offers a correction to Benedict’s revisionist *Hermeneutic of Reform in Continuity* which effectively claimed that the only authentic source of interpreting and understanding the Second Vatican Council is the combined Magisterium of his pontificate and that of John Paul II:

“The salient fact about Vatican II is that it was an ecumenical council, the latest of only twenty-one in the two-millennia history of the Church. It was not a cabal of subversives out to destroy the Church. Apart from a handful of bishops who were unable to attend because of health or political problems (those from some communist countries, for example), the participants were every active Catholic bishop in the world. Catholic teaching reminds us that in such a gathering, the Holy Spirit is also a powerful participant. As such, it was and is to be respected as an especially authoritative voice of the Church. Of course, those who try to make Vatican II something it wasn’t claimed that it was misinterpreted. However, the "interpreters" were the very bishops who had been there and voted on the documents that came out of the council. It was they who oversaw the implementation of the directions the council had set. Something to keep in mind about those bishops as well is that they were not a bunch of feckless radicals. Not one of them, except for those from the Eastern rites, had ever celebrated Mass in any language but Latin. Obviously, not one of them was a post-Vatican II priest. They had, for the most part, been ordained priests in the 1910s, 20s 30s and 40s. The theology in which they had been trained was traditional, and they had studied it in Latin. Nor did the bishops of Vatican II naively follow a group of radical theologians without understanding what they were doing. In fact, the opposite was the case. When the bishops arrived for the council, they found that Vatican curialists had already tried to take control of the process. Not at all compliant or naive, the majority of the council fathers took control, over and over again defeating attempts on the part of others to steer the content of deliberations and statements in a conservative direction. And, what have been the fruits of Vatican II? Well, when all the world’s bishops gathered at the Vatican in 1962, there were about 2,800 of them. The Church has grown so much in the 50 years since then that an ecumenical council today would have to provide seats for more than 5,000 bishops.” (The full article is linked [here](#))

### ***The Eucharist compromised.***

For a useful comment on the primacy of the Eucharist over the institution of priesthood as it has evolved, see North American blogger, Colleen Koch (Colkoch), has often posted on the restrictive consequences for Catholic life caused by clericalism. For example, on the intractable issues of the Eucharist being held to ransom by sacerdotal clericalism, she writes,

“Ordination is the pinnacle of Catholic expression, not the Eucharist. It is the priesthood which will be protected at all costs, not the Eucharist. Until that changes, nothing else in

Catholicism can be reformed.” - “Two views of priesthood” in *Enlightened Catholicism*, 19/08/12.

***Francis undoing some serious damage.***

There are encouraging indications of significant ecclesial changes in the European and especially the Latin American Church. Francis is making some dramatic, even prophetic, decisions in moving quickly to reform the Argentinian hierarchy (Linked [here](#) and [here](#). A recent encouraging sign of just how the pendulum has swung back towards stress on the primacy of the local church, one of the first bishop appointments of Pope Francis was Fr Victor Manuel Fernandez. He is rector of the Catholic University of Argentina, has grass roots experience as pastor in the slum parishes of Buenos Aires: *As rector, Victor Manuel Fernández did a great deal to integrate the university and its initiatives into the city’s social fabric, including the villas miserias, the Buenos Aires slums. The importance attributed to the university is also a sign for the future of the Argentinean Bishops’ Conference.* Fernandez worked closely with Bergoglio in preparing the *Aparecida* Document which parallels in many ways the Medillin document of 1968. Related are the encouragement and support given to Pope Francis by the great champion of Vatican II, emeritus Archbishop of San Francisco, John R. Quinn (*NCR* article [here](#))

David G. Timbs

August 18, 2014.

\*A shortened version of this essay was given as an address at Spirituality in the Pub, Shepparton, August 18, 2014



*Catholics for Renewal Inc.*