

## FRANCIS SULLIVAN LAUNCH SPEECH

### *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming our Church Together*

Newman College, Parkville, Victoria

September 17, 2019

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Ladies and Gentlemen

It seems very fitting that we meet this evening at Newman College to launch *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together*.

This is a place of Jesuit ministry guided through Ignatian spirituality. A place that echoes the call to discernment. A way to name the deeper things.

Getting back on mission implies the need to reset the course towards what is important, even essential. Pope Francis tells us that we live in a change of era. This too implies the imperative to be set on the right course.

To discern the terms of engagement for the Church in a culture that has born the fruits of Christianity and now asks of the Church a relevancy and vibrancy that many wonder if it is up to the task.

No longer do the assumptions of 'Church Triumphant' work.

Neither does resistance to what our culture and the reflection on its human experience tell us.

The trap is to hark back to times not like our own.

To cling to a model and role for Church that has run its course.

Australian Catholics live in an era where the Church is no longer their first port of call for meaning making or for ethical guidance even for education.

Similarly, the Church is no longer essential for the provision of mainstream health care, or for community services and welfare.

Now the Catholic Church is but one option available for people seeking to make sense of their lives and to inculcate virtues and values that will help them through.

Where once it was the Church that called society to account on matters to do with human dignity, social justice and human rights, now the tables are turning.

Where people feel alienated by, discriminated against or even disillusioned with the Church's public persona, formal pronouncements or pastoral practices they increasingly disassociate to the point of disinterest.

The compulsion to stay has lost its sting.

The calls for relevancy are coming from the highest quarters.

Pope Francis states it plainly,

*I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which  
Then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures...  
More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within  
structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, with habits which  
make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying too us:  
'Give them something to eat'.*

Evangelii Gaudium 49

Facing the challenge of relevancy takes courage. It does require a discerning of spirits. It requires openness and flexibility. Undoubtedly this is the challenge for the 2020 Plenary Council.

Usually this means being slow to judge, even slower to justify yourself and ultimately having a disposition that welcomes new information and perspectives that were previously discarded or even worse, deemed to be wrong.

In short it means being in active dialogue with society and being prepared to be influenced by what that conversation reveals.

Letting go of an image of the Church as a bulwark against modernity is the first step.

Appreciating that our common search for goodness and truth are divinely inspired regardless of the quarters they come from is the next.

Building a faith community that people can relate to, feel welcome in and find that they intuitively resonate with its teachings becomes the ultimate goal.

As I read it the authors of *Getting Back on Mission*, understand this change in era and thus the imperative for the Church to reform its terms of engagement.

Our culture is sending crucial signals for the Church's attention.

For too long individualism has been perceived in Church circles as a pejorative. It has been regarded as being too self-centred, selfish and leading to the "me generation".

No wonder the aspirations of the young, the ambitious and those seeking a better life dreams of self-fulfilment have felt increasingly alienated from the Church's rhetoric.

These people of good will and sincerity, often of Christian disposition and character, are shaping a culture that encourages personal agency and the promotion of individuation and achievement well beyond established social roles and conventional mores. They seek what is good and promotes human flourishing. Why is there the assumption that they are not seeking God?

Yes, it does lead to lifestyles not once embraced by the established Church, but they are life giving and meaningful lifestyles that acknowledge the spiritual dimension to existence and strive to meet the call of the moral life.

Rather than keeping this feature of our culture at a distance, the Church needs to embrace it as prophesy, seek out truth and integrate the learning into the very life of the Church itself.

This includes the sophisticated understandings of gender roles and purpose.

These days our communities are characterised far more by diversity than through monolithic and normative social identities.

Being a Church unified through differences, rather than rigidly seeking unity through identity, will open it to a spirit of freshness and possibility that will run counter to the stale obligation to codes of behaviour already deemed old fashioned, even old school.

Traditional family structures and in turn the rhetoric associated with 'family values' is now contestable as committed lifestyles demonstrate that love, nurture and decency are not bound by legalities and social conventions.

This is our context and it is from this that the voice of the Transcendent beckons.

It is a voice the ear of faith seeks.

A voice that resonates with the depths of human experience.

A voice at the centre of intuition unbounded by convention or orthodoxy.

This is the voice that shapes what it means to be a church today.

For too long the voice of the institutional Church has not sounded like the instinctive voice of its members.

This fundamental disconnect is a direct result of the alienation of lay people from the structures and decision making bodies of the Church.

An alienation most starkly seen in the absence of women in governance and in the pastoral approach to same sex attracted people.

*Getting Back on Mission* speaks to this dilemma. It seeks to couch structural and organisational reform within a profound pastoral and missionary zeal.

It aims to make the way the Church thinks, decides and acts reflective of its members. It seeks relevancy to be the number one performance indicator.

In a strange way this book could have been titled '*A Book for the Catholic Bubble: An Insider's Guide.*'

For what we have before us is just that, an insider's guide to modernise the Church. And the point is that it is only insiders who have the influence to change the Church.

Given the all-time low regard the institution has in our times, the bishops should enthusiastically embrace this submission from heartfelt and faith filled members.

That is why we are so fortunate that Catholics for Renewal have gone to such an extraordinary effort to publish their comprehensive submission to the Plenary Council.

For no other reason than the fact that the Council organisers have refused requests for submissions to be made public in what seems an odd take on promoting open dialogue and transparency.

Then again, for those familiar with the 'Catholic Bubble' elements of its 'Culture of Control' are never far from the surface!

The Catholic imagination is actually a cocktail of creativity and prudence. To be Catholic is to hold a sense of the whole as differences emerge. To accommodate diversity of circumstances and times whilst seeking continuity through time.

It is also to respect the centrality of a tradition on the move, ever learning and adapting. A source of wisdom that enlivens, not stalls, one that enlightens not renders the colours of creation to black and white.

This balance has served and can once again serve the Church well. It can carry us through the temptations to place dogma above pastoral outreach or to reduce the search of faith to an ideological, or worse a cultural war.

So, the very existence of *Getting Back on Mission* is itself a courageous statement of faith. It is a testament to lay people committed to their faith tradition and determined to be part of the solution in discerning the signs of the times.

They are pilgrims on a journey who have taken heart from the Gospel and now seek its essence in how we do church.

They are our beckons and tonight I am very privileged to formally declare the fruit of their labours, *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together* launched.

**[CLICK HERE TO PURCHASE:](#)**

**[Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together, Garratt Publishing 2019](#)**