

Governance and Culture: the Catholic Church in Australia.

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Originally published in The Swag, Winter 2017.

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Apart from the establishment of stringent controls concerning the safety of children, the Royal Commission has provided few grounds for optimism concerning the future of the Catholic Church in Australia. Case 50 of the Royal Commission focused on Governance and Culture at the macro level, especially diocesan jurisdictions.

During the last three weeks of Case 50 Ms Gail Furness, Counsel Assisting, and other members of the Commission grilled a large number of incumbent diocesan bishops including the five Metropolitans. Almost unwittingly these archbishops admitted to the failure of Church leadership, not only concerning the sexual abuse tragedy but also in relation to the insidious effects of clericalism. The Archbishops admitted that the sexual abuse scandal was both a catastrophic failure of leadership, and criminal negligence of the duty of care for innocent children.

In her advice to the archbishops, Ms Furness said: 'The delivery of apologies and the creation and publication of practices, policies and guidelines is necessary but not sufficient in terms of dealing with child sexual abuse by clergy.' And Justice Peter McClellan stated: 'It is one thing to deal with the illness once the symptoms have emerged, but unless you address the leadership failure and understand why it happened, you won't deal with the problem, will you?'

During the final days to the Catholic Wrap Up in February 2017 Archbishop Costelloe of Perth acknowledged: 'The Church... saw itself largely as a law unto itself, it was so special, so unique and so important that it stood aside from the normal things that would be a part of any other body that works or exists in a society. It was a very deeply developed concept that we are immune from criticism; we shouldn't be scrutinised; we are a law unto ourselves.'

Brisbane Archbishop Coleridge admitted, 'The way our Church is structured there are certain things that are... fixed in stone... the Australian Bishops, are not able to change our structures of governance.' This idea that ecclesiastical structures are 'fixed in stone' needs to be challenged. A critical study of the origins of the Church will show that Christ neither willed nor established any structures which are unchangeable.

Archbishop Fisher of Sydney conceded: 'Self-protectiveness... the prevention of scandal, and a need to prevent people thinking less of the clergy, the bishops, the religious, or the institution underpinned this behaviour of the Church.' Nowhere during Case 50 was there any mention of Jesus' teaching on causing innocent children to be scandalised: It would be better

for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. (Mt 18:6; Lk 17:2)

Speaking recently at a protection of minors conference in Rome, Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, stated: 'Child sexual abuse has broken the heart of the Church. Not only is there 'brand damage'... there is also a high level of distrust in the bishops: 50 percent of those who attend church weekly consider them 'untrustworthy' as do 70 percent of those who identify themselves as Catholics.' (Gerard O'Connell, Victim advocate: 'The abuse scandal has broken the heart of the Catholic Church in Australia,' America Magazine, March 31, 2017)

Despite the history of criminal negligence dating back decades, Church leaders have, ever since the scale of clerical CSA has been revealed, absolved themselves from responsibility for the shocking manner in which victims have been treated. Bishops, clergy and religious have shown inadequate and insufficient compunction concerning such criminal behaviour: they owed allegiance solely to the Vatican and to no one else, neither their own Catholic community nor civil society.

This 'evil' as Pope Francis has described it, is a key characteristic of the clerical caste whose teaching has often shaped the thinking of many lay adherents. Richard Rohr comments:

Once we saw the clerical state as a place of advancement ...once ordination was not a form of initiation but a continuation of patriarchal patterns, the authentic preaching of the Gospel became the exception rather than the norm... like a secret social contract between clergy and laity... We agree not to tell you anything that would make you uncomfortable, and you will keep coming to our services ('Jesus' Invitation: Follow Me,' Center for Action and Contemplation, October 16, 2016).

The Vatican, episcopal conferences and leadership conferences of religious institutes will continue to debate these issues endlessly. Parishes, however, are the place where the Church primarily exists. People will not be attracted to the Church unless the local community witnesses to the life and teaching of Jesus. Many Catholics have been indoctrinated into a rule book mentality about the Church and have not been led to the person of Christ and his Gospel. Joan Chittister makes clear: 'Religion is not for its own sake. It is not for the sake of organization or hierarchy, social order or social status. The purpose of religion is to lead us beyond even itself to union with God...' (*Welcome to the Wisdom of the World: and its Meaning for You, Eerdmans: Milwaukee, MI, 2007*).

A colleague recently expressed the view that the breakdown in relationship between the Catholic people and their bishops is now almost irreparable:

Popes and bishops have largely lost their connection with the roots of the Church...that [should be] grounded in the theology of Church articulated by St Paul. He taught that the Christian community is a society of equals, an association of free agents whose leadership is elected by community's assent and not by the patriarchal notions of social determinism or patronage. The genius of that vision of Church and its 'original grace' have been steadily eroded over the past thousand years by clericalism which could be judged as having more in common with pre-Christian tribalism than with Christ.

The ‘evil’ of Clericalism

Clericalism is a deviant culture of social elitism, entitlement and privilege which developed out of a particular theological understanding that, at ordination, a man’s very being is elevated to a level of existence superior to that of other human beings. The grades of hierarchical rank, status and power are integral to this distorted culture. Many priests, however, would probably reject these notions now. Clericalism, nonetheless, has had an extremely negative impact on Catholic life for centuries. Appalling misuses of clerical power, lack of accountability, shared responsibility and transparency have been felt at every level of Church life. It is widely believed that an over inflated understanding of priesthood along with a narrow, restricted theology of ministry has resulted in a sacramental famine in this country and abroad. Furthermore, occasional stories about clerical misuse of church funds and an over indulgent lifestyle have caused scandal. The culture of misogyny, which lies at the heart of Clericalism, is also seen as a causal factor in denying diaconal and priestly ordination to women as well as effectively shutting them out the highest levels of governance in the Church.

Hugh Mackay argues: ‘Isn’t leadership about creative thinking, and a willingness to take bold and even unpopular initiatives, to propose visions of what we might become, and to display moral courage’ (Advance Australia... Where? (Hachette: Sydney, NSW, 2007, 160).

This lack of dynamic leadership exists from the highest level to many of the parish clergy. Most priests are aging and many are demoralized. Parishes are being closed or amalgamated, and people are denied the sacramental and pastoral care necessary for a healthy Church. It will take several generations for the Church to regenerate even with the most enlightened solutions. There is no guarantee that this will eventuate.

Alienation and powerlessness of the laity

Many Catholics feel alienated from the Catholic Church. They have lost their sense of belonging to a life-giving community. While they are open to priests of other cultures, some parishioners experience problems arising from language and culture differences that have detrimental effects on the life and function of the Church. Common issues arise in the areas of finance and consultation with parishioners who are often deprived of an effective voice in the running of their local communities, and have little or no recourse to mediation in many cases. Inexperienced clergy sometimes assume a competence that they do not enjoy. Where there is an absence of competence and communication between the priest and school staff, much harm can be done. Complaints to headquarters seldom give cause for hope. Secrecy is the order of the day!

The Commissioners discussed at length the question of seminarians, seminary training and post-ordination registration and supervision. Readiness for a life of celibacy was debated. While the Archbishops agreed that they could demand on-going education concerning sexual abuse, doubt was expressed that they could intrude into the personal life and practice of their priests. In 1993 in response to Archbishop Frank Little’s survey for Tomorrow’s Church, the Cheltenham parish included the following proposals in its submission:

It would be relatively easy to find suitable people in our communities to celebrate the sacraments if the requirement of male and celibate were changed. With no discrimination in terms of sex, marital status and age, the Church must open up sacramental roles to a wide

range of suitable people. In the short term, pastoral workers who minister to the sick and the hospitalized could have the faculty of administering the Sacrament of Healing. Lay ministers of marriages could be introduced and lay funeral celebrants could be extended. The lay people who prepare a family for the child's baptism could also baptize the child.

Discussion of these proposals has been forbidden in the Archdiocese of Melbourne since 1996. This situation needs to end especially since Pope Francis has strongly encouraged open, frank and fearless conversation about every matter of Church life no matter how controversial.

There are many issues, which need to be addressed as a matter of urgency at local and national gatherings of the Australian faithful. Among the most important are: the establishment of diocesan pastoral councils and parish pastoral councils both with written charters outlining the rights and obligations of all members; the need to encourage the leadership of mature, experienced Catholics who have lived 'in the world', and know exactly how organisations work and function efficiently; bishops must make it a priority to appoint women to senior positions within the governance of the Catholic Church in Australia which could include their acting as the bishop's delegate; the need for the Episcopal conference to take up the offer of Pope Francis to explore the idea of ordaining already married 'viri probati', mature, theologically literate men to the priesthood. Associated with that is to take up the invitation of the Royal Commission to examine closely and critically the issues related to obligatory celibacy in the priesthood and the 'rationale' of seminary formation.

Francis Sullivan warns us: 'If people of good will...[especially] the engaged and informed Catholics – don't continue to push for change then...the reactionaries will overcome and nothing will change...This is a very dangerous time for the Catholic Church in Australia...Our Church as a religion will become a marginalized rump, stripped of credibility and relevance.' Sullivan continues: 'We need a stringent policy of putting the right people, with the right skills, in the right places all the time...we cannot afford the blunders of incompetent administration, advisors and minders...[nor] the fumbled attempts to use spin and PR to protect and cotton wool Church leaders from facing the consequences of their actions, or in many cases, inactions.'

'Changes must be made, and if they are not made willingly they will...be forced upon us.'