

“We can't put up a sign saying 'business as usual,'”

- Archbishop Coleridge, *The Courier Mail*, February 8, 2017.

During the final days of the February 2017 Catholic Wrap Up at the Royal Commission the Australian Catholic bishops made a number of undertakings both to the Commission and to the Catholic people. These included commitments to address failures in structure, policy and procedure in order to bring these into compliance with civil requirements and to rebuild institutional trust as an honest corporate citizen. They called upon the Royal Commission to assist them with advice to address the pressing issues of their flawed episcopal governance and culture. No doubt that will be coming very soon in the Commission's Final Report.

The bishops also made it clear that they they accepted responsibility for breaking faith with the people entrusted to them, that the proportions of their failures of leadership were catastrophic. They have signalled that they will strive to be pastors who will listen closely to the concerns of their people, accept the advice and council that the Catholic community will offer them and that they will engage with the faithful in the work of reform and renewal. A specific undertaking on the part of the bishops was to welcome full, active participation by all Australian Catholics in the planning, preparation for and participation in the 2020 National Plenary Council. When papal approval for this general synod is given, Australian Catholics will be looking closely for clear signs that the bishops deliver on their promises.

“If the Church in Australia doesn't see continuous, concerted change from our leaders driven and backed by an active and demanding Catholic Community, then our Church as a religion will become a marginalized rump, stripped of credibility and relevance, left to preach to an ever aging congregation with eyes on an ever dimming here after.”

- Francis Sullivan, CEO of the *Truth Justice and Healing Council*, addressing a Catalyst for Renewal gathering at Hunters Hill, NSW, March 10, 2017.

The Catholic bishops of Australia are faced with unprecedented challenges to deliver on the undertakings they made before the Royal Commission Catholic Wrap up in February 2017 and to initiate internal structural and cultural reform as well as necessary civil compliance requirements. As part of this process, the bishops will also need to collaborate closely with their fellow Catholics to bring about restorative justice and redress for the enormous damage resulting from what Perth Archbishop Timothy Costelloe has termed ‘the catastrophic failure’ of their leadership. They cannot afford to prevaricate, put up smoke screens or to make excuses to avoid the discipline of

embarking on a profound conversion in their thinking and governance. An initial step in genuine *metanoia* would be for them to embrace what some are calling a ‘powerful symbolic gesture.’ An example would be a concrete acknowledgment by the bishops that they are, before anything else, members of a community of sisters and brothers, baptised equals, and not branch managers of a stratified multi-national corporation.

It is now a matter of deep concern for many Australian Catholics that, despite years of exposures, revelations, the Victoria State Inquiry and a National Royal Commission, many of the bishops have not demonstrated clearly that they have grasped the gravity of the underlying issues related to the clerical child sexual abuse and institutional coverup scandals. With a few notable exceptions, it is the bishops collectively who do not comprehend that the real problem is to be found deeply embedded in the culture of clericalism and the lack of social accountability that goes with it.

In the Catholic Church’s hierarchical structure, bishops are accountable only to the Pope, and the Pope is accountable to no one except God. Neither Popes nor bishops are accountable to the rest of the People of God and this dysfunctional social arrangement has created major obstacles in the way of reform. The system of ecclesiastical governance is so profoundly rooted in the conviction that it was divinely willed that it has assumed the status of permanence and unchangeability. Deep systemic reform, therefore, verges on both the unthinkable and the unimaginable.

The bishops at Vatican II could have provided an authoritative correction to all of this. They failed to do it properly then so the hierarchical pyramid theology is back in possession at the expense of the People of God. There is probably no other high governance structure on earth that brackets itself off from the normal expectations of accountability, transparency and responsibility than the episcopal leadership of the Catholic Church. It may be helpful to assess the actual performance of the bishops and their structures of governance against the definition of governance offered by *Catholics for Renewal*:

Governance is a term used to describe how organisations are directed, controlled and held to account, encompassing the leadership, authority, accountability, culture and control of an organisation. Good organisations have good governance with high levels of accountability, transparency and inclusiveness of their members, regardless of gender or other diversity.¹

The bishops failure to embrace these criteria has been further compounded at the Royal Commission hearings by the astonishing organisational moral blindness of some bishops who repeatedly described the rape of children by clerics as a mere internal disciplinary matter, a ‘mischief,’ ‘misbehaviour’ or a ‘moral lapse’ and not as a crime in civil law.

This bewilderingly blind arrogance and appalling ignorance shown by some of the bishops have come at a great cost. The persuasive power of the Gospel of Jesus has been degraded and diminished by men sworn to be its guardians; the power of the Catholic community to project any effective evangelizing outreach and witness has been compromised; and the bond of trust between

bishops and the faithful has been shattered perhaps beyond repair. Bluntly, this ‘catastrophic failure’ of leadership flows from an intrinsically disordered system of governance.

Francis Sullivan, speaking for the Truth, Justice and Healing Council in evidence at the Royal Commission on February 6, 2017, said:

How the Catholic Church dealt with the child sexual abuse is very much the concern and responsibility of today's leadership. The hypocrisy involved in these historic failures is grossly unbecoming a Church which seeks to be, and should be, held to its own high standard. This data, along with all we have heard over the past four years, can only be interpreted for what it is: . . . a misguided determination by leaders at the time to put the interests of the Church ahead of the most vulnerable; and a corruption of the gospel the Church seeks to profess. As Catholics, we hang our heads in shame.”²

Interestingly, the ecclesiastical culture which enabled this chain of disasters is not an ancient one at all but is, rather, the reactionary result of the internal and external challenges over the past few centuries. The dogma of papal infallibility, the rapid ascendancy of sacerdotal clericalism following the French Revolution and, in more recent times, the John Paul II/Benedict XVI retreat from the ecclesial reforms of Vatican II have shifted the Church’s centre of gravity away from the notion of Peoplehood back to that of hierarchical structure. Accountability, transparency and shared responsibility were shunted sideways too.

It is noteworthy now that the Royal Commission has literally compelled the bishops and other religious leaders to present themselves in the forum of public accountability. What is almost incomprehensible for many Catholics was the sight of the bishops expressing extraordinary eagerness for the Royal Commission to educate them in their civil and even ecclesiastical responsibilities and how to conduct themselves as ethical citizens in a democratic. It did not escape notice that, collectively, the bishops have never invited their fellow Catholics to join with them for a serious wide-ranging consultation about the challenges facing the Church and their possible solutions. As the 2020 National Plenary Council approaches, it would be the reasonable expectation of clergy and laity for the bishops to embrace synodality in all its aspects. This will be an enormous challenge for them.

One such challenge will be for the bishops, consciously and as a group, to divest themselves of the residual culture of clerical entitlement, privilege and deference which has been deeply embedded in the Australian episcopal psyche since the late 1800s ecclesiastical coup when the Irish clergy toppled the English Benedictines.³ When they stopped listening and learning back then, it became their normalized *modus operandi*. They need also to disabuse themselves of the fiction that at ordination they received an infused ‘grace of office’ that gives them a head start on the rest of the People of God, who have also received the gifts of the Holy Spirit including wisdom, insight and counsel and use them exceptionally well.

Common sense and sound pastoral instinct demand that the bishops accept the fact that there is in many respects a profound difference between the doctrine they teach publicly and what most Catholics actually believe and practice. Acceptance of this would be a healthy starting point and any attempt to rationalise it as the invincible ignorance of the people or the failure of the hierarchy to catechise the people adequately will fail. Doctrine has shifted and it was the Catholics in the pews and on the peripheries who did the shifting. They had worked out decades ago practical solutions to the intractable pastoral, Canonical and theological problems that the Synods of Bishops have been anguishing about particularly in recent years. They had grasped the core of *Amoris Laetitia* well before it was written, so now the Catholic people are waiting for most of the hierarchy to abandon the defensive rhetoric and to read the signs of the times. This is not crass moral relativism infiltrating the Church, it is the *sensus fidei fidelium* working its grace.

The Australian bishops may not be in a position to resist all Vatican micromanagement, control and command but they can, with a great deal of help, be transformed into the kind of modern pastors envisioned by Vatican II and encouraged by the teachings of Pope Francis.

It is imperative for the bishops to understand that as a result of the clerical sexual abuse of children scandals and other failures of leadership, they have broken faith with their people; they have lost their way as pastors and have forfeited their moral authority. They will have to re-earn all that lost trust and respect. This will depend on a number of critically important admissions as well as demonstrable changes and adjustments over the years leading up to and beyond the 2020 national plenary council. These will include wide ranging inclusive consultation with the Catholic people about the key matters of concern for them. This would be done best and most effectively through regular scheduled parish, deanery, regional and diocesan listening assemblies. Bishops and senior advisers must be at these meetings in person especially at the larger meetings; that bishops commit themselves to the immediate establishment of diocesan pastoral and expanded priests' councils and seek canonical exemptions to mandate parish councils in their dioceses. For the most part, bishops do not have to get permission from Rome to achieve most of these.

The principle issues which will inform the development of an agenda for the 2020 Plenary should be the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission, submissions sent to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference by individuals and groups who long for renewal, and above all, feedback from the listening assemblies in the lead up to the plenary council. These will best reflect the local workings of the *sensus fidei fidelium*.⁴ Pope Francis recently addressed the Italian bishops on the importance and necessity of stripping themselves of their own prejudices and listen closely to the real situations of their people:

“Let us return to the things that truly count: faith, love for the Lord, service freely rendered with joy.” Such a focus resists “the temptation to reduce Christianity to a series of principles deprived of concreteness and to judge people without listening to them”.⁵

At their May 2017 Plenary Meeting, the ACBC gave the following welcome undertakings:

Consultation and discernment process regarding Plenary Council

The Conference discussed submissions received from Catholics who are calling for renewal and reform in the Church. Some submissions relate to the Church's response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, while others concern key aspects of Church life and mission and are more likely to relate to the Plenary Council. The Conference intends that the scope of consultation and discernment processes towards the Plenary Council will be inclusive of the whole Catholic community in its breadth and diversity. The Conference determined that the matters referred to in recent submissions might properly be referred to the Plenary Council.⁶

Conclusion

While it is encouraging to see the bishops finally opening up a formerly closed episcopal circle to the counsel, wisdom, insight and shared common faith of their sisters and brothers, it is of paramount importance, a moral imperative, for all dioceses to hold assemblies/synods of their own in preparation for 2020 plenary council; otherwise, it will be a colossal waste of time and resources and will end in disaster. These next three years probably offer the last chance for the bishops to demonstrate moral courage, credible leadership and to restore some degree of trust with their people.

To do the necessary thorough preparation for the national plenary council, the real triumph of prophetic insight, sound ecclesiology and common sense over institutional short-sightedness, the real test of genuine pastoral resolve will be for bishops to sit down with Catholic communities to listen and to learn. Led by Cardinal John Dew, the Archdiocese of Wellington, New Zealand, will hold a 3-day diocesan synod this September. The preparation for this diocesan event represents a benchmark of outstanding ecclesiology and pastoral courage. Australians can learn much from our sisters and brothers across the Tasman.⁷

References:

- 1) Final report on the Open Letter to the Bishops with comments (Accessed 01/-6/2017 <http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/Reporting%20OL%20to%20Bishops%20of%20Australia%20with%20App%20comments-%20FINAL%20-%20202%20May%202017.pdf>).
- 2) Statement read by Francis Sullivan, CEO, Truth Justice and Healing Council on February 2017 (Accessed 27/05/2017 <http://mediablog.catholic.org.au/statement-from-the-truth-justice-and-healing-council-to-the-royal-commission-as-part-of-case-study-50-catholic-church-authorities-in-australia>). See also, Mark Bowling, "We created the abuse church official leading response to child abuse tells priests it's time to listen to the community," the Catholic Leader, April , 2017 (Accessed 27/05/2017 <http://catholicleader.com.au/news/we-created-the-abuse-church-official-leading-response-to-child-sexual-abuse-tells-priests-its-time-to-listen-to-the-community>).
- 3) Peter J Wilkinson, "Catholic Synods in Australia, 1844-2011" (Accessed 28/05/2017 <http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/News%20Items/P%20Wilkinson%20Synods%20April%202012x.pdf>).

- 4) Catholics for Renewal, Open Letter to the Bishops of Australia, 2 May, 2017 (Accessed 01/06/2017 <http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/open-letter>). Final report to the Bishops with comments (Accessed 01/6/2017 <http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/Reporting%20OL%20to%20Bishops%20of%20Australia%20with%20App%20comments-%20FINAL%20-%20202%20May%202017.pdf>).
- 5) “The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.” Pope Francis in: Anthony Spadaro, Interview with Pope Francis August 19, 2013 (Accessed 11/06/2017 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-franc...>).
- 6) Cindy Wooden, “Faith, love and service are key to bishops’ ministry, pope tells Italians,” *CNS* 24/05/2017 (Accessed 26/05/2017 <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/05/24/faith-love-service-key-bishops-ministry-pope-tells-italians/>). For a local example of Pope Francis’s teaching in practice, see Bishop Vincent Long, “Bishop Vincent Address: the Catholic Church in post Royal Commission Australia,” *Catholic Outlook*, May 29, 2017 (Accessed 31/05/2017 <https://catholicoutlook.org/bishop-vincent-address-catholic-church-post-royal-commission-australia/>). Bishops, 80 year old West African Cardinal Bernadin Gantin said in an interview in 2006, bishops should do more "sitting, listening and praying with their own believers".
- 7) Summary statement of the ACBC at the conclusion of their May 2017 Plenary meeting in Sydney (Accessed 01/06/2017 <https://www.catholic.org.au/acbc-media/downloads/plenary-meeting/1935-plenary-summary-may-2017/file>).
- 8) Synod Participation Booklet, *Archdiocese of Wellington* (Accessed 01/06/2017 <http://www.wn.catholic.org.nz/synod-17/synod-participation-booklet/>). For local Australian advocacy of a National Plenary Council see, Peter J. Wilkinson, “Would an Australian Synod go a long way to pulling the Catholic Church out of the ‘nure? The last one was held in 1937.” *Catholica* 02/07/13. On published from *The Swag* Vol 20. No 2. 2013 (Accessed 04/06/2017 http://www.catholica.com.au/gc2/occ3/124_occ3_030713.php).

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