

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Chris McGillion and John O'Carroll, *Our Fathers. What Australian Catholic priests really think about their lives and their Church*, Garratt Publishing, 2011.**

Catholic priests have been much in the news. There has been much discussion of a book by Chris McGillion and John O'Carroll on Catholic priests working in parishes: .

The discussion of *Our Fathers* has been colourful. It has retailed pithy quotes from priests interviewed in the book, and highlighted disagreement with church positions, and critical judgments of Roman and episcopal authority. The book and the criticism made of it deserve reflection.

Media coverage of the Catholic Church usually assumes that it is a homogeneous and disciplined body with bishops, priests and laity walking in step with the Pope, and that its uniformity derives from fear of authority. From this perspective the difference of views and plain speaking among Catholics will always be presented like rebellious voices in a strict school, with unspoken anticipation about how the headmaster will deal with the situation.

This way of telling the story is unreal. Priests are more like franchisees than employees. They identify with their parish and are fairly independent in building it up. Like franchisees most have been ready to criticise any authority above them, and always ready to grumble. This need not amount to disaffection.

In this survey the level of dissatisfaction is about what I would have expected. It reflects the tumultuous times priests have lived through, when as a group they have gone from being highly to lowly esteemed, when the church they serve has diminished and aged, and when their own workload has increased with age.

The attitudes to moral issues and to doctrine described in this book are also much as I

would have expected, especially given the ambiguity of the statements to which the priests were expected to respond. Most priests learn to use words carefully when dealing with questions about contentious issues of faith and morals.

In the survey, for example, they were offered the options to agree, disagree or be undecided in responding to the statement 'it is always a sin for unmarried people to have sex'. This statement could be understood in two different ways. It might be taken to mean that it is never objectively morally justifiable for unmarried people to have sex. Or it could mean that unmarried people always commit a sin when they have sex (including, presumably, if they are sleep walking, are ignorant that what they are doing is wrong, *etc*).

Priests who understood the sentence in the second sense would have to disagree with it, even if they accepted the Catholic position that objectively sex is properly reserved to marriage.

Given similar ambiguities in other statements to which the priests were asked to respond, I am not convinced that the survey reveals a widespread rejection by priests of Catholic moral positions. The question needs closer and more precise analysis.

The quotations from interviews with a range of priests are the most thought-provoking part of the book. The priests generally speak the language of their people: blunt and straightforward. Their views are salty and down to earth, sometimes compassionate, sometimes unfair, and always worth listening to. Their language is that of men who have worked through the heat of the day.

For all their criticism of the Catholic Church, they present as a committed group of men with a passion for what they do. Indeed, most of the aspects of the Church that they criticise, whatever their presuppositions, are associated with a lack of generous passion.

Their language is characteristically Australian. A significant point in which it seems lacking is that words do not come easily to speak of the hunger for God and the relationship with God that underlies their ministry. That lack is also Australian. It is understandable when so much Church language is stale, referring to but not evoking God's presence. But in times when a deep centre is required to be a priest, deep and earthed words are needed.

Taken together *Our Fathers* and 'Catholic Parish Ministry in Australia: Facing Disaster' suggest the size of the challenges that the Church faces. That is why they deserve close reflection.

A generally aging clergy whose numbers are clearly inadequate to carry on the forms of service and of local gathering that have been inherited, and who have toiled to serve their people in this difficult situation, need encouragement. It will be important that they can contribute their wisdom to the necessary reconfiguring of the Australian Church, and that their energies are engaged only in projects that have a high importance and a persuasive rationale.

—Andrew Hamilton SJ

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***Building Bridges: Social Justice Statements from Australia's Catholic Bishops 1988 to 2013.* Price: \$35.00 (incl. GST and postage within Australia). Paperback, 270 x 210 mm; 312 pp. Includes index. ISBN 9780987597809.**

The Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, Bishop Christopher Saunders, has welcomed the publication of *Building Bridges: Social Justice Statements from Australia's Catholic Bishops 1988 to 2013*.

'*Building Bridges* is an exceptional resource for everybody who wants to learn more about the Church's social doctrine. It is especially valuable for schools, universities and parish and diocesan groups', Bishop Saunders said.

'I am very pleased to see these documents

brought together in such an accessible form. I believe that this book will offer an invaluable insight into Catholic social teaching brought to life in an Australian context', Bishop Saunders said.

'These Statements address major social justice issues in our world: the quest for peace, economic justice, a just and inclusive society, and environmental integrity. In particular, they reveal an abiding concern to achieve justice for Indigenous Australians, for refugees and asylum seekers, for the disadvantaged and those on the margins of our society.

'It seems that today more than ever before, our society is in need of voices that call for a focus on the common good and concern for the most vulnerable', Bishop Saunders said.

The volume is fully indexed, making it an ideal resource for students and social justice groups. It includes an introduction by Sandie Cornish, a former Executive Officer of the ACSJC, that gives an excellent overview of the main issues addressed by the documents and supplies a summary of what the Church's social doctrine has to say about our nation and our sisters and brothers in our region.

(Available from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council Phone: (02) 8306 3499. For more information: David Brennan, Acting Executive Officer, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (02) 8306 3499.)

**Neil Darragh (ed.), *But Is It Fair? Faith Communities and Social Justice*, Accent Publications, Auckland, New Zealand, 2014. ISBN 978-0-9922485-1-2.**

This is a collection of articles written by laity, clergy and religious of New Zealand on issues that are pressing today—action against inequality in society, unemployment, inadequate housing; the effects of migration, imprisonment, racism and sexism.

In this book thirty-one people tell the stories of faith communities that promote greater fairness in New Zealand. It is a resource that will educate and encourage Christians in the twenty-first century.