

# LOOKING AT CHURCH TEACHINGS AND PASTORAL PRACTICES

CHARLES WADDELL

**T**HERE PERSISTS a common tendency in some Church circles to define a 'Good Catholic' as one who accepts Church teachings and pastoral practices. But surely, are there not good Catholics who do not accept some Church teachings and/or pastoral practices?

While ordinarily, Church teachings and pastoral practices may jointly operate in everyday parish life, they are analytically separable. This is apparent, for example, when priests, lay Catholics and non-Catholics talk about the Sacrament of Penance, the Sunday Mass obligation and the dispensation for a mixed marriage or a dispensation from place of marriage. Perhaps today, this separability is most apparent when bishops, priests, parents and young adults talk about the forthcoming Synod on the Family. Many

Catholic parents particularly seem to separate Church teachings and pastoral practices when they talk about their adult children and the Church's teachings on the exclusivity of sex within marriage and the monogamous, heterosexual and indissoluble nature of marriage and the pastoral practice of commonly restricting eucharistic reception to people in irregular sexual unions. Such talk is often heart-felt because they grieve that their children are no longer practicing the Faith; they commonly assume these Church teachings and pastoral practices contribute to their children's religious estrangement. Regardless of the validity of their assumptions, their talk on Church teachings and practices may be schematically diagrammed in the following table:

## Responses to Church Teachings and Pastoral Practices

	Teachings	Practices
Good Catholics	Accept	Accept
Reformers	Accept	Reject
Resigned	Reject	Accept
Alienated	Reject	Reject

The table presents four possible responses to Church teachings and pastoral practices in any particular ecclesial arena—e.g., Penance, Sunday obligation, irregular sexual unions, etc.: (1) Good Catholics accept both Church teachings and pastoral practices; (2) Reformers reject current pastoral practices yet accept Church teachings; (3) Resigned Catholics may reject particular Church teachings but, resigned that teachings will not change, accept the relevant current pastoral practices; and (4) Alienated Catholics reject both Church teachings and pastoral practices in a particular arena.

With respect to parents of adult children and Church teachings on sex and marriage and the pastoral practice of eucharistic exclusion of their children in irregular sexual unions, 'Good Catholic' parents accept the Church's teachings on marriage and sex; they also accept eucharistic restriction for their children who engage in premarital sex or gay sex and for their children divorced and 'remarried'. With love for Church traditions, they reason that the indissolubility of the marital bond and the exclusiveness of sexual intercourse within marriage between a man and a woman follow a long, well established tradition culminating in a rich deposit of moral and sacramental theology and Canon Law; furthermore, they cite the sacredness of marriage and sex as gifts coming from God Himself for the procreation of children and the continuation of the human race. They argue, not without empathy for the difficulties of married life, that marriage is a covenant that cannot be wished away because of mistakes, hardships or disappointments; only the validity of the marital bond not its difficulty in a particular case, governs the nullity of the bond. They posit that Church teachings on the indissolubility of the marital bond and the exclusiveness of sexual intercourse within marriage between a man and a woman should be reasserted by maintaining



*Charles Waddell is a priest in the Archdiocese of Perth. He has recently published *Jesus Matters* (St Pauls Publication, Strathfield, NSW, 2014).*

eucharistic restrictions on people, even, sadly, their own children in irregular sexual unions.

The 'Reformer' parents accept the Church's teachings on marriage and sex again because of their love for the Church and its traditions; they also include the perceived familial need for absolute moral guidance in a confusing, sexually permissive world as a reason to accept these Church teachings. Nonetheless, they want the pastoral practice of eucharistic restrictions lifted for their children divorced and remarried or in other irregular sexual unions. These parents say that eucharistic restrictions do not seem to be settled and fixed, noting differences in its 'enforcement' in parishes and dioceses and at liturgical events; furthermore, they cite Gospel narratives telling stories of Jesus sharing his table with those broken by sin, sadness, doubt and weakness. They argue that the mercy and compassion of Jesus rather than a legal or dogmatic perspective should govern eucharistic admissions. They desire that the Church act more inclusively of all in a family by lifting restrictions to the Eucharist not only for those in irregular sexual unions but also for the non-Catholic partner in mixed marriages. Furthermore, they commonly reason that there should be Church acceptance of marital breakdown and the allowance of remarriage.

The 'Resigned' and 'Alienated' parents may seem dissimilar to each other—after all, isn't the 'Resigned' more noble bowing in obedience

to Church practice even if they think their children are somehow 'OK' in an irregular sexual union? However, the 'Alienated' parent may be more nobly authentic—rejecting Church teachings about their children and rejecting the practice of restricting their children from the Eucharist. Both perceive the need for the Church to 'get real' about the realities of twenty-first century psychological and biological knowledge and the Australian life style of 'change', 'pluralism' and 'postmodernism'. As people live in this changing society the parental 'talk' here is for the need of a Church that embraces and supports their children while they make wrong decisions, yet without losing the capacity to change. Both the 'Resigned' and the 'Alienated' parents similarly fear that if the Church is not inclusive today, in word and deed, of their children just as they are, the Church will lose them forever.

What do we make of all this? One thing is that this conceptual schema is merely a tool to look at, to appreciate and to understand perhaps a bit better the relationship between Church teachings and pastoral practices in different ecclesial arenas for a variety of people; while this note looked at parental response to Church teachings and pastoral practices with respect to sex, marriage and eucharistic restrictions, it may be useful in understanding other arenas of Church teachings and practices for people in different positions in the Church or, more widely, different positions in life.

Secondly, the responses people make to

Church teachings and pastoral practices do not necessarily make them more or less 'Good Catholics'; indeed, Catholics struggling with Church teachings and/or pastoral practices need to be embraced as Catholics.

Thirdly, there are many reasons why people stop practicing the Faith that go beyond Church teachings and practices—still, let us ensure that our Church teachings and practices do not drive unnecessarily people from the Church.

Fourthly, as the acceptance of the idea of the 'development of doctrine' preoccupied many in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the Second Vatican Council the idea of the 'development of pastoral practice' may characterise the late twentieth century and the first half of this century.

In elaboration of this last point, John Henry Newman<sup>1</sup> argued that the development of doctrine was present from the beginnings of the Church implicitly in the Divine Revelation in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Pastoral practice today seems more linked to buttressing Church teachings than to Divine Revelation and the beginnings of the Church. That the former link is understandable does not obviate the significance of Scripture and Tradition in developing our pastoral practices. I suggest that the idea of the 'development of pastoral practice' needs to be pursued so that the Church, in accordance with Divine Revelation, an example of which is the Council of Jerusalem,<sup>2</sup> is pastorally inclusive while continuing to be magisterially strong.

## NOTES

1 John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (16th impr.; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1920). First published in 1845, the book was

republished in a revised form in 1878.

2 Circa 48, this Council decreed, amongst other things, that Gentile Christians did not have to observe the Mosaic Law (Acts 15).