

FORWARD THINKING

MANY OF THE articles in this issue of *Compass* examine the future of the Church in Australia. This is a weighty topic indeed, often given over to multilayered analysis—some of which is proved in this volume.

My thinking on this topic crystallized with an experience some years ago when I was conducting an in-service weekend for senior teachers and administrators who were either in, or poised to take on, leadership roles in Catholic schools. As you get more senior in the academy—which I suppose is just a polite way of acknowledging you are getting older—you can tell stories and hopefully have them heard not as tangential, indulgent anecdotes but as narratives which open up complex and hard to explain issues. Be warned though there is more of this type of narrative discourse in one of my articles in this volume!

I was at Mass at a lovely seaside chapel when it suddenly occurred to me that in ten to twenty years everyone in the church that Saturday evening, with the exception of my wife and I, would, in all likelihood, be dead. A morbid thought but one very germane to our discussion on the future of the Church. One question that suddenly popped into my mind, was what happens to an institution when it loses members who are highly committed to it, not on their own terms but in ways that the institution sees as important?

The reason we were attending Mass that night was that earlier in the day, in the course of my presentations, I had proposed to the group, in a very matter of fact way, that we start our Sunday session a little later as this would give us all the chance to go to Mass together at a church very near the seminar venue. I sensed some disquiet in the group but pressed on.

Over lunch, a delegation approached me

and pointed out that it was a little presumptuous to assume that they all went to Mass on Sunday and that in any case their attendance at this weekend seminar more than fulfilled their Sunday obligation. I should also point out a certain moral flavour accompanied these protestations. One of my interlocutors expressed surprise that I was still so unconsciously wedded to a mindset—committed Catholics go to Mass on Sunday—that had now been superseded. Let me repeat this was not a random group of people. Rather, it was a subsection, sponsored by the local diocese, and earmarked for leadership roles in Catholic schools.

When, subsequently, I mentioned this experience to the educational leadership of the diocese they proposed, as had many in the delegation, that we were now dealing with a variety of senses of ‘being Church’ and that the worshiping community model was in eclipse being replaced by other models that did not privilege Sunday worship.

This idea is well supported in the wider literature. A figure that I keep an eye on, largely in American research, is on self described indicators of Catholic identity. It is now clear that a majority of American Catholics, but especially those under forty, do not regard attendance at Sunday Mass as a critical part of Catholic identity. My suspicion is that this figure would be even higher amongst Australians as we tend to lag well behind Americans on measures of religiosity. Does this mean we now need to develop and accept ‘new ways of being Church’ or has something seriously gone wrong with our institutional priorities?

A critical question becomes on what basis does the Church plan its pastoral responses? What template is being used in engaging both the world and the members of the faith community? To be sure, these questions have a

clear practical or pastoral dimension.

The more substantial issue is, however, conceptual—a verification of the principle that there is nothing more practical than a good theory! The key ideological issue that will shape the immediate future of Catholicism, not just in Australia but all over the world, is how are the teachings of the Second Vatican Council best appropriated? This is a debate around what well may become the *leitmotif* of Benedict XVI's papacy, that is, seeing the Council within a hermeneutic of continuity and harmony.

I have selected in this editorial one, albeit foundational, manifestation of this principle, namely what value do we place on Mass attendance? Many other issues could also be cited and discussed which bring up similar arguments. I would maintain that a cogent interpretation of the Council is impossible if we do not place at the heart of our analysis the centrality of the Eucharist. If I am mistaken on this I am prepared for an epitaph on my tombstone to read something like, 'Here lies Richard Rymarz—he did some good things but he totally overemphasized the significance of the Eucharist in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council!'

If the teachings of the Council were intended to make the Eucharist an even more important part of the life of the Church a paradox emerges. Now several decades later, to borrow a term from the practical theologians,

despite heightened theological underpinning, participation in the Eucharist is not part of the lived reality of many Catholics.

How do we respond to this? In the first instance one could argue that this is a misreading of the Council and that its key teachings lay elsewhere. In this case then, an interpretation of the Council will guide pastoral planning in a particular direction. In a similar vein, it could be argued that although the Council did address the centrality of Eucharist in Catholic life, the resolute decline in sacramental participation since the Council will somehow correct itself and no direct response is needed.

If we, however, concede that the Council did indeed intend to highlight and reemphasize the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Christian life and called for action to achieve this vision then a number of different pastoral responses suggest themselves. These would be a need to acknowledge the real and discomfiting challenges that in many ways are easier and safer to ignore.

If, for instance, many prospective educational leaders of Catholic institutions do not see Sunday worship as an irreplaceable part of religious identity and of their own spiritual life then what should be done? There is no easy answer here but at least some progress is being made if we acknowledge this problem and others closely related to it.

—Richard Rymarz, Guest Editor

...the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavour is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper.

—*Vatican II, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, par. 10.*