

THE CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

Some Thoughts on the Immediate Future

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I WOULD LIKE to approach the question of the immediate future of the Church in Australia primarily through two personal narratives. These try to give both a sense of historical perspective and an *entree* into some of the complex issue at stake here. I would propose that the discussion about the future of the Church needs to enter a new phase, one that recognizes that the challenges facing the Church today are different from those of the immediate postconciliar period.

Let me begin with a recollection of an exchange between a close friend and myself nearly thirty years ago. At the time we were university students, heavily involved with the Catholic student group, the Newman Society, at both a local and national level. In conversation he unexpectedly asked, ‘What would we do if a person came to us interested in Catholicism, wanting to find out how he could learn more with a view to becoming a Catholic?’ It was, and still is, a good question. The Catholicism that we lived in the early 1980’s was not geared to evangelization. We were much happier talking about our faith in abstract or intellectual terms—or better still arguing about it. The idea that we could bring others into the Church rarely crossed our minds. As we tussled with the question we were soon aware that what our hypothetical enquirer wanted was not a lecture or a book or readings. More important was personal witness and an encounter with a vibrant community of faith—a place to see the Holy Spirit alive and at work.

I thought to myself we needed something like the fellowship evident in the university Evangelical union. Here were people who seemed to be alive with the love of Christ—a little effusive—but nonetheless sincere. The

Evangelicals were also very keen to bring others into a deeper relationship with Christ or, as we termed it then, to ‘recruit’. My friend and I just could not think of any Catholic equivalent to this and had to reassure ourselves that in all likelihood no one would ever ask us about becoming a Catholic. The question has, nonetheless, stayed with me.

At about the same time as this conversation John Paul II was beginning to enunciate a concept, the so-called ‘new evangelization’, which was aimed primarily at those who had lost an active sense of the faith but who have not, in many cases, abandoned any type of religious allegiance or sensibility. It is not classical evangelization which is directed *Ad Gentes*—to the nations—or to those who have not yet heard the gospel. Neither is it catechesis to those who already have a strong and vital faith.

The unstated assumption in our conversation was that the questioner was not a Catholic and never had been. Strictly speaking this distinguishes him or her from the principal target group of the new evangelization. If my friend and I, nonetheless, had been more reflective in our callow youth then we would have realized that there was another important dimension to our discussion about welcoming people into the Church. Some elementary calculations would have made a telling point. The university we were attending was one of the largest in Australia. At the time it had well over 20,000 students. There was no reason to believe that the Catholic proportion of the university was anything less than the roughly 25% of the general population. This meant that, at least in theory, 5,000 students or so were Catholic. Our Catholic student club

had no more than thirty active members. We could have easily asked ourselves at least two additional questions. Firstly, why were so few Catholics joining, assuming that wanting to join a student group is a sign of wanting to deepen religious commitment? Secondly, and a development of our actual discussion, if an ‘inactive’ Catholic came to us and wanted to reanimate his or her faith what would we suggest?

The reason we did not ask ourselves these supplementary questions tells us something about the era. We were aware of the large number of Catholics who were ‘on the books’ but not actively involved, but this was not seen as a pressing issue. Many at the time regarded this loose affiliation as a positive sign; that people not having completely severed their links to the faith community was a sign of intrinsic and residual strength. A common corollary of this view, what Argyle and Beit Hallahmi call the ‘traditional theory’, was that this lack of fervour would correct itself and after a period of searching, many would reemerge at some time in the future as engaged and committed Catholics.¹ This was, after all, the era where the Church was itself emerging from the turmoil of the postconciliar era and was in many ways reorientating itself. In this atmosphere evangelization was not something that was at the forefront of Catholic consciousness. In Dulles’ terms, it was an era where, ‘religious dialogue replace[d] missionary proclamation.’²

Let me move this reminiscence on to the third millennium. In 2003 I was approached to lead a research project looking at the needs, concerns and aspirations of Catholic university students. Funding for the project was not extravagant. Our methodology depended on being able to access participants who were members of functioning groups. We did not have the resources to identify students ourselves so we planned to make contact with the university Catholic student group and ask them to assist us in contacting suitable participants. The project was never undertaken. It was very



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hard to find extant university Catholic student groups. Even at my *alma mater* which now had a student enrolment of close to 35,000 the Newman group had been defunct for many years. An interesting aside was that many of the universities we contacted had what appeared to be vibrant and well subscribed groups catering for overseas Catholic students, but that is another story.

In the intervening decades the vitality of Catholic university fellowship had not seemed to have improved. From any number of perspectives this is not a reassuring or isolated situation. The lack of an active university presence at many universities could be a significant portent of the future. It seems safe to assume that many students at university or other tertiary institutions if asked on a survey or something similar would identify themselves as Catholic. They are, however, not prepared to take this affiliation further, to seek to strengthen it and to make it a more transformative element in their lives. What seems to be lacking here is a sense of strong commitment and personal conversion in many Catholics today, especially younger ones. This does not equate, in most cases, to hostility toward religion, rather a sense that religious belief does not have a significant impact on how life is lived or on major life-shaping choices. Many Catholics lack an identity that makes them different or distinctive from others in the general culture. ‘Different’ here does not have a moral connotation. It does not mean better but it does refer to a clear and obvious way of living and of believing that sets apart the be-

liever from the rest. One way of marking this difference is by being prepared to make significant life decisions on the basis of deeply held religious convictions. This is sometimes referred to as being part of a high cost religion—one that makes demands on members. Many Catholics, on the other hand seem more content to minimize the demands that being a Catholic may place on them.

Malloy provides an interesting anecdote to illustrate this point, he asks his first year university students to imagine that they have applied for a position with a prestigious law firm. He then asks if they would ‘take Catholic off your resume if the law firm...subtly communicated to you that you should tone down the fact you attend Mass every Sunday and teach CCD’. Eighty percent of the students say they would drop the mention of Catholicism from their resume.³

For many decades there has been a sense in the Catholic community that this situation will, in time, right itself. Instead of looking at the gradual increase in loosely affiliated Catholics in urgent terms another perspective is to argue that ‘the glass is not half empty it is half full’, that is, many Catholics, especially younger ones, still identify with the tradition and at some time in the future will reconnect in a more substantial way. A variation of this argument is that traditional markers of Catholic identity such as reception of the sacraments have been superseded by other ways of ‘staying connected’ such as participation in Catholic schools.

It is enough to flag here some of the consequences of this view. It can lead to a certain complacency, as if those involved in leadership and planning do not need to take action as what is being played out is almost a natural life history culminating in stronger religious affiliation later in life or reemerge in new ways. In this mindset what needs to be avoided is alarmist overreaction which does not recognize the natural lifecycle of faith development.

Hopefully the mentality that surrounds discussion of pastoral issues has changed. Forty

years on the argument that the Church still needs to proceed cautiously until those teachings of the Second Vatican Council are more clearly and readily understood is not as compelling or as universally accepted as it was in my undergraduate days. It is time to discuss responses, both pastoral and conceptual which are bolder, more confident and less inward looking—ones which recognize that to admit serious challenges facing the Church is not a capitulation to an unfounded pessimism but an acknowledgment of the present reality and the Church’s ability to be able to respond.

The challenge facing the Church today, and in the immediate future, in countries such as Australia is one of human capital. To be concise, who is going to do the work of religious organizations? This dilemma can be seen in a range of Catholic agencies. An important illustration is provided by Catholic educational institutions, which in many countries are a critical public face of Catholicism. In their study of Catholic higher education Morey and Piderit pointed out:

The vibrancy of organizational culture requires knowledge about content, its beliefs, and its shared assumptions and norms. Cultural knowledge alone, however, is not enough to sustain the vitality of organizational culture beyond the present generation. Cultural inheritability in a group or organization requires significant levels of commitment from the community of cultural catalysts and citizens in order for there to be any chance it will appeal to the future generations required to sustain it. Commitment connects what a person wants to do with what he or she is supposed to do.⁴

Any group which cannot point to a more than insignificant number of members who are highly committed to it faces a problematic future. To illustrate, consider the case of Sandra, an emblem of the ‘Boomer’ Catholic—those born in the immediate post war period. Although this instance is from Catholic education it could apply to any agency that operates under the Catholic umbrella. Schools are, however, the most tangible Catholic contribution

to wider Australian culture. Sandra is married with adult children. She started teaching in Catholic secondary schools decades ago. She has been: a Year Level Head, a Religious Education Coordinator, a Deputy Principal, has sat on numerous School Boards and mentored generations of new teachers. Over the years Sandra has had a long involvement in her parish. On a deeper level she gives embodiment to the beliefs and values that the school proclaims.

The list of her accomplishments could be extended even further but there are at least two points to note here and these bear directly on the immediate future of the Church in Australia.

Firstly, Sandra has been at the forefront of providing leadership and embodying the religious dimensions of Catholic schools. If you were to look closely at the contribution that she makes much of it has an overtly religious tone—teaching and coordinating religious education, organizing liturgies, researching and applying the charism of the founder of the order that established the school, liaising with parishes over sacramental programs and many other duties.

The second point is that Sandra and many others like her will retire very soon or already have done so. The central question is, who is going to replace them? At issue here is not simply a question of personnel—there are many individuals prepared to work in Catholic institutions such as schools and, to use the ubiquitous expression, to ‘support its ethos’. Many of these people have a range of strong human qualities and can bring a professional competence to their working lives. They may accurately describe themselves as spiritual but this is not characterized by strong religious commitment. Rather, spirituality here is understood as an idiosyncratic and private set of beliefs that bears little relationship to what Smith and Denton (2005, 171) call traditional Christianity.

The language and therefore experience of trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctifi-

cation, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness and an earned heavenly reward. It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith⁵

Whatever its theological merit or its sociological accuracy this ‘colonized’ Christianity does not lead to transformative action such as taking an active, ongoing role in strengthening the Catholic identity of the institution based on one’s own personal conviction and life choices. Or to put it another way, the critical issue has become: how many people now working in Catholic agencies are prepared to create and animate the ethos of the institution rather than passively support it? In terms of the work that Sandra does, who is going to teach religious education with passion and conviction, who is going to prepare the opening of the school year Mass, who is going to help mentor new teachers and introduce them to the school’s Catholic ethos?

I have used schools here but this argument could be extended to a range of Catholic agencies. One often hears, for example, of the shortage of priests and religious, which is a real issue. It is, however, a manifestation of a much larger problem. We can take priests, seminarians and religious as exemplars of religious commitment. The difficulty in recruiting people to these ministries is part of the much wider problem of finding highly committed individuals for all aspects of the Church’s mission. If this issue is not addressed with some urgency then the short-term consequences are relatively minor. The *status quo* that has emerged in the forty or so years since the Council remains intact. But even in a decade consequences of inaction will be simply unavoidable.

Without a strong, contemporary and future human expression through the witness and

action of its members, there is the decided danger that Christianity will, in some places, become a lifeless, historical curio. Of course Catholic institutions do not need to be made up exclusively of people of strong personal commitment, and, indeed, it is not essential that a majority of people show this dedicated service. However, there is a point below which the work of the Church is imperilled if it does not have a sufficient number of highly committed individuals to carry this work forward. This highly committed group is not in opposition to the more loosely affiliated individuals, but they are distinct from them because they are prepared to live out their deepest religious

convictions. One important consequence of this living witness is that Catholic identity and culture come to life not as an abstraction but as a concrete reality.

The deeper question that I think is paradigmatic of the new pastoral discourse is how does the Church shape and nurture not just loose connection but deep active faith, or what I have called here strong commitment, in a changed cultural context. This culture is not overtly anti-religious and is in many ways conducive to disengaged religious affiliation. It is, however, a cultural context which calls for a new set of priorities and a new pastoral mentality.

NOTES

1. Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi. (1975), *The Social Psychology of Religion*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 65. They contrast this with the 'stability theory' which argues that levels of religious commitment do not fluctuate much over time.

2. Avery Dulles. (2000), *The New World of Faith*, Our Sunday Visitor, Huntington, IN., 107

3. Richard G Malloy, *A Faith that Frees: Catholic Matters for the 21st Century*, Orbis Books. Maryknoll, New York, 48-49.

4. Melanie Morey and John Piderit. (2006), *Catholic Higher Education*. Oxford University Press. New York, 271. The article referred to in the quotation is James Provost, 'The Sides of Catholic Identity' in John Wilcox and Irene King, (Eds) (2000), *Enhancing Religious Identity*. Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., 23.

5. Smith, C. and Denton, M.L. (2005), *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford University Press, New York.

The Bishops spoke...of a gradual lessening of the natural religious sense which has led to disorientation in people's moral life and conscience. A large part of Oceania, particularly Australia and New Zealand, has entered upon an era marked by increasing secularization...Religious convictions and the insights of faith are at times denied their due role in forming people's consciences...In presenting Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Church must respond in new and effective ways to these moral and social questions without ever allowing her voice to be silenced or her witness to be marginalized.

—**John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Oceania*. 2001.**