

The Church – to include or not to include?



Sister Patty Fawkner SGS

If I include myself in any critique I make of the Church, and if I reflect on how I obscure the Gospel, I will be taking a step – an important step – in “fostering ecclesial community”, writes Sister Patty Fawkner.

By Sister Patty Fawkner SGS

Boston’s gain has been Australia’s loss. Richard Lennan, a priest of the Maitland Diocese taught Theology at the Catholic Institute of Sydney for fifteen years before transferring to Boston College in 2008 where he now serves as Professor of Systematic Theology and Chair of the Ecclesiastical Faculty.

I have had the privilege of ‘sitting at the feet’ of Richard three times over the past fifteen months at conferences in Melbourne and Sydney. Richard continues to stretch my thinking and nourish my understanding of what it means to be Church. He was an obvious choice when we Good Samaritan Sisters were looking for a theologian to help us explore how we might “foster ecclesial community” and to “stand with and bring hope to our bruised and grieving Church” (Sisters of the Good Samaritan Chapter Statement of Directions 2017-2023).

Richard agreed to a video-recorded interview with me, so that his insights could be shared with our far flung communities.

Words are powerful and important. Richard’s first challenge was how to use the two words, ‘the Church’. Do I use it in a way that includes me? “I try to encourage people to be aware of what they mean when they say ‘the Church’,” Richard says. “Who’s included and who’s not?” Richard believes that people talk about ‘the Church’ as something “over there”. If we want to talk about the Pope and the Bishops, then do so, he says, but only in the context of they are not the whole Church.

And then there’s how we talk about the “institutional Church”. Richard is cautious about the phrase because there is no way that the Church can be otherwise. The Church has an institutional dimension, he says, “because it has human beings. We can be critical of its present institutional form but we need to be cautious about pretending that there could be a non-institutional format. We would not exist. So, it’s how do I come to terms positively with the institution recognising its limitations?”

“Obscuring the Gospel” is how Richard speaks about the limitations in the institution. The evil, crime and sin of clerical sexual abuse is a stark reminder of how Jesus’ message of Good News has been “obscured”, thwarted and how, in the extreme, people have been damaged physically, emotionally and spiritually.

However, Richard is quick to remind me that “I can also obscure the Gospel, Jesus and the Spirit and damage people.” If I can own that, the more I can come to terms with the Church being, like me, in need of ongoing conversion, “inescapably a collective of mixed people – flawed and brilliant and capable of great virtue and capable of obscuring the Gospel.”

We spoke of the Church striving to be faithful to God’s mission and God’s dream for God’s people within a milieu of cynicism and truncated credibility in the wake of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Keen to explore his thoughts and hopes for the 2020 Plenary Council, given this climate, I asked Richard about the “hermeneutic of suspicion”, that is prevalent – even among fully committed Catholics.

Richard doesn’t dismiss the need for a healthy suspicion which protects us from naiveté and gullibility. But, and it’s a big ‘but’, if that’s all I have and I summarily dismiss the 2020 Plenary Council as merely a public relations exercise which will deliver nothing, I realise I am impoverishing my commitment to fostering ecclesial community and the 2020 Plenary journey.

A hermeneutic of suspicion must be balanced by a “hermeneutic of trust”, trust in the good will and intentions of all those involved in the 2020 Plenary Council, including the 222,000 people who participated in the initial dialogue and listening sessions.

Ultimately our trust is in God and God’s faithfulness to us, even in the face of our own infidelity. “The sole non-negotiable in the life of the Christian community,” Richard says, “is the obligation to be responsive to God’s Holy Spirit at the heart of the Church.”

I concur with Richard about the importance of managing expectations in regard to the 2020 Plenary Council. “The Plenary Council is not going to remake the Church of Australia in one fell swoop. That is not going to happen; not because the Council is limited, but because you’re asking it to do something impossible.”

But what it can do is to “take a step toward something. If we do believe the Spirit is working through this and that the Spirit’s direction is always forward, then you take the step and you know there is going to be another step.”

Richard is positive about the Plenary Council while not wanting to be naïve. “It is not all going to be wonderful. It is being able to embrace the mixed reality that it is. And yet still commit ourselves to this as an important and good thing for us to do at this moment in history. It is in fact, a radical thing for us to do,” he concludes.

Expectations are one thing; hope is another. One of my key hopes for the Plenary Council is that it will be a force for change so that women’s experience is honoured and that women become more visible and vocal in the life of the Church. I hope that their insights are sought in decision-making in every aspect of Church life, so that the Church becomes more “whole”.

It occurs to me that if I take to heart Richard Lennan’s caution in how I speak about the Church, if I include myself in any critique I make of the Church, and if I reflect on how I obscure the Gospel, I will be taking a step – an important step – in “fostering ecclesial community”.

Managing my expectations of the Plenary Council with “non-gullible trust”, while still hanging on to my hope for a Church more inclusive of women, will also be an expression of “standing with and bringing hope to our bruised and grieving Church”.

Patty Fawkner

Good Samaritan Sister Patty Fawkner is the Congregational Leader of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan. She is an adult educator, writer and facilitator with formal tertiary qualifications in arts, education, theology and spirituality. Patty is interested in exploring what wisdom the Christian tradition has for contemporary issues. She has an abiding interest in questions of justice and spirituality.



Taken from The Sisters of the Good Samaritan newsletter