

Bishop Vincent's Address to the Concerned Catholic of Canberra and Goulburn

28 September 2018



Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv. Image: Diocese of Parramatta.

“The Role of the Faithful in a post-Royal Commission Church in Australia”

Dear friends,

I would like to pay my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this meeting takes place, and also pay respect to Elders both past and present.

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this forum and to have the opportunity to listen to the voices of the Concerned Catholics of Canberra and Goulburn in the spirit of genuine synodality.

The events in these last few weeks, including the sensational accusations against Pope Francis himself by the former nuncio to the U.S. has caused great turmoil in the Church. The sexual abuse crisis is inundating the whole Church like a tsunami and it has the potential to cause long-term damage, chaos and even schism. (Mind you, there is already a silent schism in that the majority of Australian Catholics have simply walked away from the practice of the faith.)

It is the biggest crisis since the Reformation and it exposes the ideological conflict that runs deeply through the length and breadth of the universal Church.

The anti-Pope Francis forces who have accelerated their frontal attacks against him in a coordinated and virulent manner. The gloves are clearly off and they have seized this moment of turmoil as an opportunity to undermine his papacy and derail his reform agenda. How time has changed in the Catholic Church!

Only until recently, criticisms against a sitting pope were deemed absolute anathema.

Now the shoe is on the other foot and papal sniping is becoming quite a sport among some Catholic circles. (We are after all in the capital of sniping of a different kind!) They might even agree with Paul Collins' view on papal power but for different reasons I would suspect.

What is interesting, too, is the number of bishops who have chosen to sympathise with these forces and therefore shown their not so subtle disapproval of the way the Pope is leading the Church. Clearly, Captain Francis will have to weather both the storm and the mutiny onboard. I just hope and pray that he stays the course because nothing less than a deep and comprehensive reform will restore confidence and trust in the Church.

I must hasten to add that in as much as I am pleased with the wind of change blowing from Santa Marta, I do not believe that it will sufficiently carry the deep and comprehensive reform the Church of 21st century needs. Let us be under no illusions about the change we seek which is not only in attitude of the office holders but the very structure and culture of the Church.

After all, Pope Francis might just be a banana slip away from his reform agenda and we might all end up sliding backwards.

Many of you have lived through the roller coaster, the highs and lows of the Church after the Second Vatican Council. You know the disappointment of shattered hopes and unfulfilled dreams. We cannot but take ownership of our baptismal responsibility in holding our Church leaders to account.

Furthermore, significant change rarely comes through appealing to the ruling class, even the progressive elements thereof. Rather, it comes quite often through the grassroots and movements from below. It is time, then, that ordinary Catholics take their rightful place and effect the change needed for the Church to live up to what She is meant to be.

A TIME OF CONVERSION:

The failures in the Catholic Church's response to child sex abuse that the Royal Commission has exposed are largely the failures of leadership, more specifically the failures of a clerical system of leadership. I actually believe that the lay faithful suffer largely from guilt by association. It is worth noting that the Royal Commission does not see the Catholic Church as monolithic. It recommends, for instance, that the clerical governance structures be reviewed, drawing from the modes of governance already implemented in Catholic health, community services and education agencies (which are mostly administered by lay professionals).

The time has come for the hierarchy to not only admit the need for change but to discern with the faithful as to what the process and the agenda for change should look like going forward. In other words, for the Church to be truly synodal and listening, for the Church to go beyond the "business as usual" model, the inclusion of the *sensus fidelium* in all deliberations and responses is critical.

The Church has been humbled and humiliated. It has been thrown off its high horse because it has been exposed as having failed its mission and betrayed its own ethos. But it is not necessarily a bad thing that we now have to start from a position of weakness and vulnerability in order to regain our trust and indeed our Gospel compass. I am reminded of the story of the Apostle Paul on his way to Damascus.

He fell off his high horse in more ways than one.

The fall from his privileged position and the temporary physical blindness meant he had to be led by the hand. But this complete vulnerability was the catalyst for a whole new way of seeing, acting and relating. Paul was never the same afterwards. He learned to be humble, open and docile to God's way. His strength no longer came from his status, entitlement, privilege and power.

The Catholic Church has had its Damascus moment in the sexual abuse crisis. It has fallen from the privileged position in society and the power and influence that came with that status. Now, like Paul who was led into a place of vulnerability, we are undergoing a time of uncertainty and darkness until we can learn to see, act and relate in the way of Christ the Humble Servant.

We should not fear this time, which is a kind of a Holy Saturday experience. It is a time of ambiguity, of mourning and yet hoping for Good News; it is a liminal interval, a time in which one stands between the old and the new.

THE DEATH OF THE CLERICAL CULTURE:

It is becoming increasingly evident that clerical sexual abuse crisis is a symptom of a dysfunctional, corrosive and destructive culture in the Church. Pope Francis often denounces clericalism, which he sees as being endemic to many aspects and levels of the institutional Church such as the Roman Curia, Diocesan structures, seminaries et cetera. (For example, he compares ill-prepared young priests to little monsters and speaks of the pathology of power as one of 15 diseases of clericalism.)

Ultimately, it is not just a question of individual manifestations of clericalism.

Indeed, there were and have been great priests who lived and ministered heroically even within the constraints of the old mould.

Still, it is a question of clericalism inherent in the very culture of the Church, which we must look at very honestly. In his letter following the Chilean scandal, Pope Francis wrote: "It would be irresponsible not to go deep in looking for the roots and structures that allowed these evil acts to happen and simply to go on."

The culture of clerical hegemony has been solidly entrenched in the Catholic Church ever since it took centre stage in the Roman Empire. It is a by-product of the model of Church, which sees itself as self-sufficient, superior to and separate from the outside world. Its security, reputation and internal relationships are the centre of attention. The Church in this model becomes the Church of the ordained at the expense of the baptised.

As a result, the ordained becomes an exalted and elitist club that protects the interests and privileges of its members. This explains the obfuscation and cover-up which is so endemic to this club mentality. It is a far cry from the model of the Humble Servant that Jesus exemplified and this celibate clerical club provides the ideal condition for the disease of clericalism to fester.

In my opinion, we really need to once and for all jettison the clericalist model of Church with its by-product of the exclusive clerical club. It has served us well beyond its use by date. The Church as understood and articulated by the Second Vatican Council sees itself as a pilgrim People of God, incarnate in the world. It is a new paradigm – one that is based on mutuality not exclusion, love not fear, service not clericalism, engagement with the world not flight from or hostility against it, incarnate grace not dualism. It is the Church going out of itself as opposed to closing in on itself.

The time has come for us to embrace and implement unambiguously and decisively the vision of the pilgrim Church, that the Second Vatican Council entrusted to us. The time has come for the Church to be truly the Church of the baptised and together with the ordained, all the People of God can create a new culture of humility, accountability and service.

The model of the Church based on clerical hegemony has run its course. Insofar as it is deeply embedded in patriarchal and monarchical structures, it is incapable of helping us to meet the needs of the world and culture in which we live. We have long moved out of the Ancien Regime and the age of absolute monarchs. We are on this side of the secular state and the rise of democracy.

Yet it seems that the deeply entrenched patriarchal and monarchical structures of the Church have failed to correspond with our lived experience.

In fact, important as it is to consider the question of women ordained ministries in the Church (for which the Study Commission on Women's Diaconate was set up), it is far worse to persist with structures that fail to convey the message of the Gospel to the deep yearnings of men and women of today.

Adding women into the archaic structures that need fundamental reforms may be likened to pouring new wine into old wineskins.

For the Church to flourish, it is crucial that we come to terms with the flaws of clericalism and move beyond its patriarchal and monarchical matrix.

The Pope famously said that we need a new theology of women. I would like to postulate that what we need even more is to find fresh ways of being Church and fresh ways of ministry and service for both men and women disciples.

RECLAIMING THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE FAITHFUL:

One of the ways through which we can move the Church forward is to reclaim the baptismal identity and mission of all its members. In other words, it is time to make the Church less the Church of the ordained and more of the Church of the whole body of the baptised.

I visited Mundelein Seminary in Chicago a few months ago and I noticed an interesting feature of the Seminary Chapel. There were seven steps leading to the high altar and on the side of each step was written the respective name of one of the seven Holy Orders. Each step would create an ever growing chasm and a power distance between the candidate and the people. It dawned on me that these vestiges of the Tridentine model of priesthood are powerful symbols of the clerical class. It reflects an ecclesiology that emphasises the ontological change and separation of the ordained from the faithful.

There existed a variety of ministries in the early Church. Yet over the centuries, this richness has been gradually concentrated in the ordained at the expense of the baptised. In effect, the priesthood of the ordained has usurped the rich and varied ministries and the priesthood of the baptised. It is time for us to break open the priesthood and allow the ministries of the baptised to flourish. The Church will not be fully energised while the faithful are still unable to participate with full citizenship in its life, governance structures and decision making processes.

The difficulty, which we face today, is that we are living in a transition period between a dying model of Church and an emerging model of Church. Much of the clerical structure of our Church reflects the now dying model of Church. Besides the tendency on the part of the hierarchy to revert to the default position, there is also a small but vocal movement which seeks to resist change and to re-establish the old order.

There needs to be a bold and strong leadership to nurture and to enable the emerging model to prevail. There is also a need for committed people who act like critical yeast in critical time.

The Church needs prophetic voices, even voices from the margins and from outside, to keep its leaders honest, transparent and accountable. We cannot afford to let the momentum for cultural and structural change in the Church fizzle out. It is for the sake of a healthier Church that all the baptised participate in its functioning and bring their gifts to bear on its growth.

THE CHURCH ORIENTED TO MUTUALITY AND PARTNERSHIP:

Finally, I believe that the old way of being Church, which is deeply steeped in clerical practice and structure is coming to an end. I'd like to use the metaphor of the wine at the wedding banquet in Cana to describe the transition between the dying paradigm and the emerging one. Like the old wine, the old ecclesial paradigm rooted in clerical hegemony. But that model of Church – like its corollary, the exalted, separated and elitist priesthood is drawing its last breaths – at least in many parts of the world including Australia. It is time for us to drink the new wine that is being poured.

The new wine of God's unconditional love, boundless mercy, radical inclusivity and equality needs to be poured into new wineskins of humility, mutuality, compassion and powerlessness. The old wineskins of triumphalism, authoritarianism and supremacy, abetted by clerical power, superiority, and rigidity, are breaking.

When Jesus sent out his disciples on a mission to announce the Good News, he sent them not as lone rangers but in pairs. What I derive from that practice of his is that Christians can only minister effectively when they recognise their limits as individual and are open to partnership with others. Priests particularly must learn to minister in relationship with one another and with their community.

Yet, ironically, the whole clerical culture is often geared towards individual heroism and even messiah complex.

The Cure d'Ars is probably the patron saint par excellence of the kind of priestly individual heroism. No wonder many of us suffer from ministerial burn out, depression and loneliness.

If the priesthood has a better future, it has to be humanized; it has to find expression in better mutual support, collaboration and partnership. It has to free itself from the variant strains of clericalism such as sexism, paternalism, narcissism and superiority complex.

It seems to me that the Church cannot have a better future if it persists in the old paradigm of triumphalism, self-reference and male supremacy.

So long as we continue to exclude women from the Church's governance structures, decision making processes and institutional functions, we deprive ourselves of richness of our full humanity. So long as we continue to make women invisible and inferior in the Church's language, liturgy, theology and law, we impoverish ourselves as if we heard with only one ear, we saw with only one eye and we thought with only one half of the brain – and often the lowest reptilian section thereof. Until we have truly incorporated the gift of women and the feminine dimension of our Christian faith, we will not be able to fully energise the life of the Church.

CONCLUSION:

A few months ago, I was in Rome for a conference on migrants and refugees. It took place at the same time as the Voices of Faith International Women's Day Conference at which Mary McAleese, former president of Ireland gave a powerful speech on women and the Catholic Church.

I was particularly struck by the image she uses to describe the state of the Church. She said – practically within the pope's earshot – that the exclusion of women from decision-making roles “has left the Church flapping about awkwardly on one wing”.

It is a tragic description of the state of affairs and many may disagree with her. Others, however, feel that the Church has alienated far too many people with its stance on women. What is undeniable is the need to read the signs of the times and to respond with prophetic courage.

We are witnessing a profound transition in the Church. It is being reborn beyond the clerical structures. There needs to be a bold and strong leadership at all levels to steer the Church to a more humble, inclusive and compassionate model moving forward. There is also a need for committed people like yourselves to act like critical yeast in critical time.

The Church needs the voice of the faithful, the *sensus fidelium*, to keep its leaders honest, transparent and accountable. The Pope needs voices of women like Mary McAleese to remind him of the many disillusioned Catholic women (and men) who yearn for a more inclusive church.

As a religious bishop, I find myself at times in many situations of conflict. Bishops as you know are custodians of traditions while religious, especially those of the mendicant and itinerant variety are more identified with the people on the periphery.

St Francis was not a rebel but neither was he simply someone who endorsed the status quo of the Church at the time. He was a reformer and even a critic in the best sense of the word. He challenged the medieval system steeped in the pursuit of wealth and power with a vision of radical powerlessness of the Gospel.

Holding both of those charisms in tension is not always easy.

My testimony at the Royal Commission was a good example of this. I found myself being a critic of the very system of which I am a part. I wonder how Pope Francis can live up to his call to be a reformer without upsetting the system. That is a tough task. Nevertheless, that is the call of “*ecclesia semper reformanda*” that we are all committed to by virtue of our baptism.

May we respond to that call in this time of transition with courage, integrity and faithfulness.

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