

# The challenge of Church leadership

Andrew Hamilton | 12 August 2021

Among Australian Catholics the Plenary Council and the preparations for the Synod in Rome on Synodality have aroused hope and stirred scepticism. It is clear that a Church diminishing in numbers of participants in its public life and in its financial resources, and discouraged by the extent of child abuse by its officers, must find new ways. But that the processes of the Council and the Synod will spark fresh energy for change is not a given.



Two recent books set out the size of the challenge and the kind of leadership for meeting it envisaged by Pope Francis in his Synodal process. As its title suggests, *Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy* takes a critical view of the leadership of the Catholic Church. It comprises annotated articles and talks of John Warhurst, a political scientist and long-standing columnist in *Eureka Street*. The collection gathers together descriptions of the Australian Catholic Church and its relationship to the State, correspondence, advocacy and personal views.

It begins with the findings of the Royal Commission on Sexual Abuse, which offered a study of an organisation whose operative values differed sharply from its professed mission both in the action of some of its officers and the cover up of their crimes. It led a group of Canberra Catholics to which Warhurst belonged to advocate for church reform in response to this event, and later to the announcement of the Plenary Council.

Warhurst brings to this work his extensive participation and experience in Catholic agencies concerned with social justice. In his engagement with Catholic leaders about the Plenary Council and its processes he found them generally intent on avoiding engagement. The overall tone of his writing is not polemical but explanatory and persuasive, respectful of persons and positive in proposing necessary reform. He was clearly frustrated by the difficulty of persuading Church leaders to engage in ways that are recognised commonly as good governance. He sees the defects of Catholic hierarchical leadership as structural, leading to a lack of transparency, accountability, consultation, inclusivity and humility, and a surfeit of clericalism. In that sense the tone of the book is elegiac.

Warhurst's work is helpful in illustrating in great detail the difficulties of promoting needed change in the face of structural paralysis. The short book of Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford complements it by presenting an attractive and detailed understanding of leadership in the Church which might free the energy needed for reform. *Leadership in a Synodal Church* is informed with familiarity with contemporary theories of leadership. It provides the background for understanding Pope Francis' concept of a synodal Church.

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The great virtue of this book is its comprehensive and systematic account of the elements and contexts that characterise good organisations and their leadership. It emphasises the importance of the mission of the Church and the values it embodies, and of its embodiment in the culture of the church – the 'this is the way we do things here' – and in its governance and its decision making. Good leadership ensures the coherence between these facets of the church. It is grounded in faith.

Benjamin and Burford build the discussion of leadership around Pope Francis' emphasis on Synodality, itself based on a clear and challenging understanding of mission as spreading the Kingdom of God in following Jesus' way. Leadership will embody this mission by

encouraging relationships that embody its values at all levels of policy and administration. It will be characterised by transparency, responsibility, shared decision making, consistent respect in all internal and external relationships and processes, and energy released for mission. As in Warhurst's writing, the polar opposite of this model is illustrated by the sexual abuse crisis and the way in which church leaders first responded to it.

The writers illustrate what leadership involves by referring Pope Francis' image of Synodality. He sees in it a way to break down the paralysis inherent in hierarchical management structures, a self-referential leadership caste, and decision making that is arbitrary and non-consultative. In Synodality leadership is exercised at all levels of the Church as the insights gained in local congregations in their engagement with those at the margins of the Church are sought out by bishops, are in turn reflected on, are brought into conversation at national and international level, and then expressed in the life of the church. Relationships at all levels are characterised by listening and by embodying the values inherent in the Mission of the Church. Synodality presupposes in the participants self-knowledge and commitment to the following of Jesus.

The attractive picture of Christian leadership in this book, and the bracing picture of intractability and inertia in Warhurst's account, will naturally prompt readers to ask whether Pope Francis' Synodal project is in with a chance. Many Catholics have their doubts. These doubts are reasonable. They are based in judgments about the predicament of the Catholic Church and of contemporary Western societies.

A major difficulty, recognised by Warhurst, is that Bishops, who will need to encourage and lead Australian buy-in to the Synodal process, are poorly resourced in terms of people, money and time. They have few and ageing clergy, diminishing congregations, little money, and increasing responsibilities and limitations under Government legislation. They also bear the weight of history. Once able to act as feudal lords of their own demesne under a distant king, they were then treated as agents of a Papal Monarch who enjoyed the divine right of kings and are now part of a large and loose bureaucracy without power but with great responsibility. They are reluctant to act without Roman authorisation, have no effective structures to act as a national group, bear the taint of the child sexual abuse scandal, and have few local resources.

In addition, they have limited capacity to implement change in their own dioceses. They need to work through their parish clergy. This is not always easy. Challenged by a parishioner for disagreeing with the infallible Pope, one Parish Priest replied humorously but with some plausibility, 'Every parish priest is infallible in his own parish'.

These are some of the factors that make people doubt whether Synodal conversation will generate energy for mission. Trends in public life may also intensify doubt. Lack of trust in

governance that is seen as ineffectual, deliberately opaque, self-interested and distant from the lives of people, flows over into other institutions, including churches, and expresses itself in apathy and resentment.

Conversation of the kind envisaged by Pope Francis requires from all its participants great energy, readiness to change their opinion, and willingness to have their own passionate convictions sidelined in broader conversations. Those who enter it must be open to be persuaded by people with whom they disagree, and to require more than majority opinion to validate decisions.

The challenge facing leaders who commend such a strategy is to make people believe in it, whether they be Presidents, Prime Ministers, Bishops, central administrators, priests, or people in congregations. Leaders need to be able to touch beliefs or commitments that lie deeper than individual interests and command engagement rather than detachment. Only an operative faith in community, democracy, or solidarity can overcome disengagement.

In the Catholic Church such trust depends on the operative belief that the Holy Spirit is active in the life of the Church to make the Gospel come alive, and can make a bonfire out of sodden wood. Pope Francis clearly has this trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to break through all obstacles, and to make barren soil fertile. Others may be sceptical. But what other than such trust could enable reform in public life or in church?



Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of *Eureka Street*, and writer at Jesuit Social Services.

Main image: The stained glass window depicting St Patrick in St Patrick's Basilica, Montreal (Aleroy4/Getty images)