



arcvoice

A Report from Australian Reforming Catholics
December 2003

Issue No. 10

Message from the Secretariat

May the reality of the Word made Flesh sustain and enlighten you and may Mary of Nazareth help you to understand and to discern what you must do!

The Feast of the Nativity is as earthy as they come. The incarnated God born in a cowshed! Mary's faith that her son was no ordinary human, however, seems never to have faltered. Luke, more than any other writer of the time (at least of those chosen by the people who compiled the Bible) intuited Mary's special understanding and encapsulated it in what became known as the *Magnificat*. And what is the heart of the *Magnificat*? A proclamation of an era of social justice!

In a recent survey in New York City, it was found that ten per cent of teenage mothers gave birth in car parks! Let the statistic speak for itself. We need no other indicator (though there are many others) to demonstrate that the era of social justice has never been achieved. However, like Mary, those of us who believe in her son never lose faith and understand that we are handmaids constantly bringing justice to birth and for that we shall be blessed!

Now to three Practical Matters:

- 1 Parish Project** As reported in ARCvoice 9, under Ted Lambert's inspiration and drive ARC recommended to parishes around Australia that inclusive language be fostered in public and private worship and in conversation and that at the Sunday liturgies individual parishioners be admitted to the pulpit on certain occasions. Reactions came from priests only and it seems that we were either loved or hated. The action in itself was important, however, because it has indicated that the 'grassroots' are becoming active and more people now know that there is a way to stay within the Church with integrity
- 2 ARC CAMPFIRE 2004** Make a note in your diaries now that **23-24 October 2004** will be devoted to our second conference at **Mary MacKillop Place**, at North Sydney. We are continuing the theme, **Conversations Around Jesus Christ, Our Friend, and**

are inviting a number of panellists who will have quite specific reforms to recommend. These reforms will be in the areas of morality/practices, beliefs/doctrines and Church/structure. There will be as broad a participation as possible in both plenary and break-out sessions and finally we shall produce an **ARC Campfire Declaration**. The final program and brochures should be ready for circulation next March

- 3 Membership and money** It is an unfortunate fact of life that we need money to produce our publications and website and to undertake activities useful to our cause. Members who have not yet renewed for the year 2003/4 are urged to get out your cheque books, fill out the form on the back page and mail them to us. If you are uncertain as to when you are paid up to you will notice on your address label, in discreet small print, the date in question. Those who are not members but have enjoyed receiving the ARCvoices and are sympathetic to our aims, do please join, as we shall have to cease sending our complimentary copies. If there is some reason why you do not wish to be listed as a Member, that is respected and we have the category, Subscriber, which gives all the privileges of Membership except voting rights.

THE ARC SECRETARIAT WISHES YOU ALL A JOYOUS AND FRIENDLY CHRISTMAS AND A CHALLENGING AND FULFILLING NEW YEAR

Barbara Campbell

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A Man of the Word

John Buggy

On Wednesday evening of 15th October 2003, my wife and I were privileged to be in the main lecture theatre of the University of Technology campus at Lindfield to hear Bishop John Selby Spong address a packed out audience on the future of Christianity. The humility and dedication of this man in bringing out the significance of the Christian message is nothing short of inspiring. The fifty minutes of his address was not long enough and the forty minutes of question time was frustratingly short. The packed audience in the lecture theatre paid up to \$20 per head to hear him speak and I know of no other clerical person who would attract such a paying audience and have them come away feeling that they had the Gospel message opened up to them afresh without the hype that often accompanies the so-called 'born again' renewals.

His message was fundamentally simple. Jesus accepted everyone who came to him seeking his love and understanding and unfortunately throughout the centuries we have used all sorts of reasons to find justification for not doing the same. Much of this non-acceptance arises from using the Bible to justify positions from which we tend to make judgments about others that Jesus would never have done. He illustrated once again how the Bible with its significant messages needs to be understood with today's insight, accepting that it was written in periods when the view of the world was restricted by the understanding of the time. In spite of this, people have used the Bible to discriminate against black people, women, homosexuals and anyone else who is different from them. Nothing of this is consistent with Jesus teaching and only serves to bring about more division and conflict.

Many Catholics would be uplifted by the arguments put forward by Bishop Spong and then be torn between what he is saying and official Catholic Church doctrine as they have come to understand it. They would be influenced by all that they have been told about Protestant movements and evangelists over time and feel that they have to be cautious about new ways of interpreting Christ's message.

What is often overlooked is that the same spirit of seeking new insights into the scriptures was clearly encouraged in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

JOHN BUGGY was Chairman at ARC's first conference in 2002. He has written a variety of articles directed towards a modern understanding of the faith, church leadership and the role of tradition.

It is forty years since Vatican II began and, during the last twenty years at least, conservative forces in the Church have tried to negate the openness and spirit of renewal that flowed from the perspective that it encouraged. Over-emphasis on sin, punishment, judgment, and living for the next world gave way to that of living as if we believe that Jesus is among us and of responding to his presence. Our own great Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, who played such a large part in assisting the Council, stressed the presence of grace at the deepest level of every human being, his so-called 'supernatural existential'. Rahner was able to convey the optimism that comes from a belief in our relationship with Jesus. Rather than concentrating on sin and punishment, our movement towards a mature relationship with Jesus comes from an understanding that sin is part of our state of being less than fully human and we strive to be fully human through loving generously and unreservedly.

Spong, in this aspect, is only amplifying the same message. His insight into the scriptures, and particularly the New Testament, were a startling reminder that people down through the centuries have used the Bible to justify a variety of standpoints, many of which are used to condemn or persecute others rather than to show the understanding and compassion that Jesus showed to everyone who approached him in good faith. He illustrated that messages and values from other traditions did have an influence on the sacred writers and much interpretation about Jesus life has been developed by them in order to fulfil earlier prophecies. The truth in the scriptures lies at a different and deeper level.

Bishop John Spong encouraged us to open our minds to ask questions about what we are told is God's word. He asked us to think about what we understand Jesus said and any inconsistencies that seem to go against his central message. For anyone who would like to explore this further he has a wonderful question and answer section on his website: <http://www.bishopspng.com>. If you wish, you can subscribe to receive a regular e-mail letter from him that gives you fresh thoughts on Christian issues. One of the advantages of doing this is to also receive a free easy-to-read short article on how to read Bible stories. Although he has written many books, his latest work *A New Christianity for a New World* which can be obtained from the Eremos Institute in North Parramatta (9683 5096) is extremely enlightening and should be discussed in all Christian communities. □

Revelation and Authority

Ted Lambert

Is the Church using a wrong system of Authority, based on a wrong interpretation of Scripture? If so, both Scripture and Authority must be revisited. The present system is a historically locked one, stemming from patriarchy and its culture. It is locked because the Authority and its interpretation of Scripture states that no other is possible, it is ordained by God to be such. This locks God into being the essential Patriarch.

The simple test is truth. Is God the essential Patriarch? Never mind the Old Testament images. Look first to the nature of God, I AM WHO AM, or GOD-WHO-IS to us. It is inconceivable that God-who-is is a male figure. There is no reason for God-who-is to be a male figure or male God community. Metaphysically, the notion of the divine Being, whose essence is to exist, possessing and acting out of limited male properties is repugnant. The male-oriented god is anthropomorphic. We humans created him, God did not. And we created him during the patriarchal times in the history of our species.

Now that Patriarchy can be discerned as inhuman, unjust, untrue in our emerging awareness of the common dignity of woman and man we must de-create the patriarchal god, in spite of the Old Testament images and the male hierarchical structure of Church authority. These represent 3000-year-old blinkers and tunnel vision. Let's take the blinkers off and see the whole. Especially the whole of God-who-is!

Since God-who-is cannot be a male Patriarch, what about the revelation contained in the Scriptures? My current thinking is that the Scriptures can remain as documents that reveal God-who-is (not least because they encompass Jesus) but we must alter our approaches as to how the revelation is contained therein. Scripture cannot reveal a patriarchal god, because there is none. A male hierarchical Church structure may find this difficult to understand. It will rely on the Fathers (sic) of the Church, the Council of Hippo which compiled the Canon, and the Council of Trent which anathematised anyone touching the Sacred Scriptures. But all of these were blinkered. Well-intentioned tunnel vision, male variety. The people in the tunnel may be surprised to find that the light is also coming from the *end* of the tunnel (and waxing) rather than only coming from its beginning (and waning). True authority in the church should possess a characteristic of being able to discern the errors of the past (from present and glimpsed future light). If such a prophetic

role for church authority emerges, then Galileo may not have lived (and suffered) in vain.

A reading of the Scriptures reveals that a great deal of it is impossible to see as a direct message from God. The Church himself acknowledges this by its non-use of these particular texts. It would be useful to study what percentage of the Bible is used in liturgy, daily prayer, preaching and teaching - my hunch is that more than 50% never is. What a waste of divine inspiration! It is clear that some texts could have no proper use, of the final three chapters of Judges. A possible solution would be to acknowledge that various parts of Scripture have various authenticities. There could be a grading system from crucial through useful to useless or worse. A useless grade would not mean the omission from Scripture in the future - there would still be a historical context, even if the theological content was missing.

It could be enlightened to take the task of grading scriptural texts away from the hierarchy and give it to the people, assisted by scripture scholars who know things about how texts originated and how the more authentic ones inter-relate. But the truth is *for* the people, and the tunnel-visionists should retire until the people find it for them.

While aware of the dangers of Relativism, I am growing to fear these less than the proven dangers of patriarchy and its bulwark, the hierarchy. The system in possession assumes that the Fathers (sic) were so inspired that they could lay the foundations unerringly, so that time could never erode them. Now even a cursory knowledge of what went on would indicate that these Fathers were all over the place, in internecine strife, sometimes with the support of personal armies and habitually using political forces such as emperors, banishments, anathemas, not to mention the worst forms of name-calling. They finally came to an uneasy truce around the Pope - "Leo has spoken". Mind you, the Great Schism and Protestantism were still to come. But the creeds literally hammered out on the anvils of strife and war and hatred are held to be inviolable. Why? If truth is such a martial art, why cannot later champions enter the fray to challenge not only the former champions but also their exploits? But the very imagery of conflict is all wrong.

Surely truth is more about light than might. And how can the creeds of might be final! Why must the integrity

International Observations

Jim Taverne

Women deacons?

The Belgian bishops are in favour of the ordination of women as deacons. An inquiry in the Diocese of Bruges found out that a large majority of the faithful rejects the exclusion of women from important tasks in the church. The bishop of Bruges, Roger Vangheluwe, said: 'The reactions follow the evolution apparent in our society: not gender but ability counts at the appointments to responsible positions' (Volzin 7 Nov.03)

Partenia

When, in January 1995, Jacques Gaillot, then bishop of Evreux, was called to Rome and 'fired', he was given the seat of Partenia, located in Algeria. In fact, the place had disappeared under the sand, after the invasion by the Vandal King Huneric in 484. Partenia is now a large Diocese without borders. Bishop Gaillot has been going on, innovating, preaching the Gospel anywhere in the world through his travels and his gigantic website wwwpartenia.org (English version). He works in Paris with illegal immigrants, homeless families and unemployed youth, etc etc. In May 2000, the French bishops recognised his action and now he is 'Bishop in another way' but in communion with the other French bishops. On the first day of each month he writes a letter (on the internet) to his enormous number of 'parishioners'. The letter of 1 May 2003 is titled *God is not made in our Image*, which begins with: 'During the war in Iraq, have you noticed how God has been called upon, convened, enlisted? Suddenly he has become essential. How is it possible to do without him if he is the God of the armies, the God of the war? It is the interest of everybody to have him on his or her side, for evidently the good cause. When the bombs began to fall on Bagdad, George Bush said: 'God bless our country and those who defend it'. At the same time, Saddam Hussein addressed his people: 'By the will of God, these days will add to our immortal past your share of glory and victory...'

Wir sind Kirche

From their press release of 21 Nov 2003: 30,000 signatures for a second Ecumenical Conference to be held in 2008 were collected by Publik-Forum, the ecumenical paper of critical Christians. The first Ecumenical Conference in Berlin 28 May-1 June of this year showed the way which must be followed. That conference was a great success notwithstanding the hostile attitude of the RC hierarchy,

which culminated in the dismissal of one priest and the attack on another, whose future is still uncertain.

Another press release, dated 18 Nov 2003, deals with the 40th anniversary on 4 December of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Vatican II document on the Liturgy. The changes in the Liturgy were profound: use of the vernacular, people (supposedly) around the altar, celebrant facing the people, who were (supposed to) fully participate as a communion. *Wir sind Kirche* believe that the future of the church depends on the question whether the Eucharistic service can be celebrated in such a way, that the present faithful person experiences it as fully relevant and inspiring. **It is sad that the German hierarchy in their letter to the people of God praise the proposal of September by the Vatican for a new liturgy-instruction.** Many have already voiced their protests. The bishops follow the call by conservative powers to a return to the old liturgy. They say: "The present forms of liturgy run the risk of becoming a colourless habit through which the numerous faithful, who felt completely at home with the previous forms of worship, should not have to suffer."

The Eighth May Movement

This network of organisations started with a large demonstration in The Hague on the occasion of the Pope's visit to the Netherlands in 1985. It has held annual manifestations in which thousands participated. The movement sponsored many other gatherings and activities, including books and monographs and two illustrated newsletters. It has decided to cease operations from 31 December 2003.

Its chairman, Henk Baars, declared: 'Those who know the power relations in church and society may rather be surprised that the movement lasted 18 years'. There has never been any positive response from the hierarchy. Also, the Eighth May Movement has not been able to make her mission relevant for churches other than the Catholic people. Meanwhile, the search for a Catholicism of real significance in today's world will continue. The Eighth May Movement initiated new forms of belief which will continue to influence ordinary Catholics. □

Can any good come out of Byron Bay? (Jn.7:52)

Fr Vince Doyle

Parishioner Reflections

I was appointed parish priest at Byron Bay-Bangalow parish in 1992 and resigned in 1998 because of ill health. Barbara Campbell asked me to share something of a wonderful experiment to encourage lay people in the church to learn how to share the gospel with the world.

'The decade of Evangelisation' is the way Pope John Paul II described the nineties. Paul VI's letter on the Proclamation of the Gospel to all peoples [*Evangelii Nuntiandi*] prepared the way and set out the need for us to be witnesses of the Gospel, not just teachers. Paul VI observed that the modern person has heard so many words with the development of new medias. Now she or he looks to see someone living that good news before they will allow it to touch their lives.

My background is this. I was involved at that time with the Melbourne School of Evangelisation on five occasions within the Lismore Diocese, one in Byron Bay, to teach lay Catholics to share the Gospel with the whole Byron Bay community. But there seemed little confidence amongst Catholics in participating in the work of Evangelisation in the community.

The study of the Abbé Micheneau on behalf of the French Bishops in the 1950s made a deep impression on me. It looked at the phenomenon which occurred in France in the 1950s similar to what we have experienced here in Australia in the last thirty years. Almost all in France went to Mass before the war. After the war there was a great drop-off in attendance. 'The people were sacramentalised not evangelised' was the conclusion of his study.

Without the proclamation of the Word of God, faith declines to a lower expression and even to loss of faith. These were some of the factors that made me more open to the request of the parishioners to share their faith with each other at Mass. It was a safe environment for their confidence to grow.

Michael Horton and Simone Wallington and a few parishioners asked me to hand over the time of the homily every three weeks to parishioners to do the teaching on the gospel in a way that relates more to the lay life situations. I pointed out to Michael the impracticality of the three weeks and suggested once a month.

I also pointed out to the group that in the liturgy the person chosen by the church to proclaim the reflection on the Gospel is the priest. But I could see quite clearly Michael's desire which was embraced by the group of parishioners to relate the gospel in a more practical lay way to their daily lives.

The document on Divine Revelation [*Dei Verbum*] para.19 speaks of the testimony of those who were, from the beginning, 'eyewitnesses and ministers of the word' and who contributed to the writing of the Gospels. So in some way, as the parishioners reflect on their experience of Jesus in their daily lives, they are repeating a similar experience of the first Christians as they share their reflections about Jesus with the Evangelists when the Gospels were written.

The main obstacle to lay people sharing their faith at the homily time is the liturgical role of the priest as the leader of the liturgy and homilist. I do accept without hesitation the liturgical laws of the church. I tried to meet this concern by briefly outlining the message of the readings to the people at Mass and then inviting the parishioner doing the reflection to share the Gospel application to the life of a layperson. I have read somewhere that the church approves the inviting of someone who has special expertise to speak in the church in their speciality.

About the same time we also invited an Aboriginal pastor and his family to share their understanding of the Gospel in the work of Reconciliation. Their faith witness made a deep impression on the community, developing a much greater interest in Reconciliation of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous.

Many great blessings came as a result of the parishioner reflections. A great confidence developed as each shared their faith with the welcoming, loving community that hung on every word.

I felt that one of the reasons why Catholics do not share faith with others is that they lack confidence. In most instances regular Mass-goers who come out of a Catholic home and a Catholic school do not lack knowledge. Sharing their faith within a very supporting community gave the parishioner reflectors the confidence. It overcame what St Ephraim called 'the heresy of frozen

lips', the inability to let their priceless knowledge of God's love get beyond their lips to their needy sisters and brothers.

Before sharing, each reflector had given their reflection before a group of parishioners made up of the other reflectors. I did not wish to be part of the discernment. I wanted them to develop the discernment gifts so needed to share with the believing community. This peer review proved very effective.

The priest has the opportunity to review what is taught later on at the Mass if there is need. I did not have to modify anything in the teaching of the reflectors over two years of the Parishioner Reflection. Most of the parishioners surveyed thought the experiment very beneficial for themselves and the parish. I felt very proud of the Parishioner Reflectors and their deep prayer, study, the seriousness of their preparation and the wonderful blessing that came to every one of us in the parish. □

To sum up, my friends, when you meet for worship, each of you contributing a hymn, some instruction, a revelation, an ecstatic utterance, or its interpretation, see that all of these aim to build up the church (1 Cor.14:26 New Revised English Bible).

Kinda' Catholic

Jim Taverne

Recently, I met several members of this group of young people, who formed Kinda' Catholic in 1998 in Sydney. They have formulated a Charter which:

"Attempts to document their aims and hopes so as to provide direction to its members and friends. Doubtless, aspects of the charter will evolve with the group. Right now, this is what we think we are about:

Our vision (what we hope and dream): To help build a Catholic community which:

- Exemplifies faith as the source of liberation and fullness of life
- Is attractive to others because of the way its members treat all people
- Helps individuals daily, and consciously to take Christ-like options
- Is peopled by deliberate, reflective and thoughtful Christians

Our mission (what we do): To provoke and facilitate actions within the Catholic community to bring about a loving, life giving, liberating and inclusive church.

How we work: On 28-30 May 1999 there was the Kinda Catholic Weekend, in which forty under-forty-year-old participated. There was a follow-up weekend in November 1999."

At our meeting, we came to the conclusion that Kinda Catholic and ARC have a lot in common and that we should cooperate by exchanging information and by talking to each other. Also some ARC members would attend and talk at Kinda Catholic get-togethers and members of Kinda Catholic would participate in Campfire 2004 and other possible gatherings.

For further information, check the website: www.kindacatholic.org □

Have your say!

ARCvoice is a report of news, opinion and reflection on the renewal and reform currently experienced in the Catholic church.

Your contributions, letters, articles or comments are most welcome (maximum length: articles 700 words, letters 100 words)

The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Editor (Margaret Knowlden) nor of ARC

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ARC Occasional Papers No.1

December 2002



Proceedings of Inaugural Conference of
Australian Reforming Catholics
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