



arcvoice

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Think Globally, Act Locally

The *Instrumentum Laboris* document drafted to guide The Synod of Bishops this October is an interesting read. Its many, many pages of ecclesial rhetoric are full of ideals, not least of which is ‘to open horizons of hope for the fulfilment of the Church’s mission’. The agenda for the synod is expressed in the form of 15 questions, which on the surface present a quite reasonable set of issues to tackle. What strikes me most profoundly, however, when delving a little deeper into its pages, is an overwhelming sense of unreality.

Given that our perceptions of reality are heavily affected by our individual contexts, and that the synod is addressing the global reality of the Catholic Church, the scope for vastly differing individual contexts and circumstances is huge. It is this diversity of realities that deserves deeper consideration.

The unreality I experience when reading this document arises from an absence of recognition of salient features of our Australian cultural context, which could be described briefly as ‘western, secular, educated, mostly affluent, disenchanted and mostly switched off institutional religion’. Any positive movement towards the fulfilment of the Church’s mission in this context will need to address this reality and be driven by the creative responses to the specific circumstances of this situation. Similarly, when considering what is appropriate in fulfilling the Church’s mission in Hanoi Vietnam, members of that diocese will need to be cognizant of the dominant communist culture, the country’s youthful demography, its struggling economic development, censorial restrictions on the Church and packed church attendance.

A tension is evident throughout the 60 pages of *Instrumentum Laboris* which remains unaddressed. This is the inclination to sustain centralised uniformity in the face of significant cultural diversity across the dioceses.

If the diocese is to remain as the basic ecclesial unit of the global Catholic church, and the cultural uniqueness of each diocese is to be embraced, then bishops need to be free to be bishops in a manner that best suits their diocese’s needs, issues, and opportunities. This freedom will in turn require that they are able to exercise authority without being overly restricted by concerns for uniformity.

Question B2.5 (page 45) asks: How can we renew and promote the bishop’s ministry from a missionary synodal perspective? And adds in the commentary, that ‘the synodal process asks them to live a radical trust in the action of the Spirit in the life of their communities, without fear that the participation of everyone need be a threat to their ministry of community leadership’.

Our time and plurality of contexts calls for an emptying of authority structures that no longer serve the Church’s mission well and the adoption of a more decentralised, less conformist approach that empowers the bishop and the people of each diocese to pursue the Church’s mission within the specific reality of their needs and issues.

‘all paths lead to God for God is on them all evenly’
Meister Eckhart

Michael Sibert

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Letters to the Editor

I write in relation to the Zoom session with Bishop Paul Bird recently that was hosted by ARC.

I found the conversation respectful and Paul's input pleasant. But his contribution, overall, was disappointing and uninspiring, unfortunately.

While some parts of his responses were good and I could detect that he may have perhaps been showing leadership in his Diocese, he seemed to me to either not acknowledge or to avoid many of the real issues raised and that are evident in our Church life and structures today; he did not show any leadership in the context of the Zoom session, which is what our Church in Australia is in dire need of.

Perhaps we are spoiled in our Parramatta Diocese with a forward-thinking and acting bishop in Vincent Long. Paul did not show, to me, any strong conviction that real change was needed, let alone urgent. I think he could have shown leadership while not being directly critical of individuals, if that was his concern. Nevertheless, I wish him all the best in his role going forward.

*Jim Potts
Emu Plains, NSW*

Thank you to those involved for the program with Bishop Paul Bird. It was a brave and worthy enterprise. Though Zoom is not a good traveller with Q and A sessions, Paul Bird managed well and was patient, bless him.

I was disappointed though. The 'conversation' was clearly a bishop holding the party line, answering the excellent questions very well but in the way most bishops would have, I suspect. Just the bishop and then us. Clericalism in action. Was he speaking freely from the heart of a Church needing reform? Was he reflecting from his heart as a human being and a faithful Christian?

It was gratifying that there were so many fluent and thoughtful women participants. In spite of this, women in the wider church didn't seem to feature.

I look forward to a session with someone from ARC as leader and a bishop or two sharing in an open and free conversation concerning Church reform.

*Judy Kenny
Melba ACT*

We have taken considerable effort to ensure that ARC is at the forefront of significant Catholic Church reform. We have upgraded the website and now have a Zoom room for meetings and conferences, and have more people joining us to advocate for reform. This costs money and we continue to rely on your support through your membership. Please continue to support these efforts through your annual subscription as a valued member of ARC.

ARC Secretariat

A Family Split

Given my personal involvement over many years with movements for change in the Catholic Church (WATAC, Women-Church and ARC), I am somewhat disturbed to discover that one of my siblings has moved in a radically different direction and she and her husband seem to have joined the notorious Opus Dei movement. Why else would they have been to Međjugorje three times? She described it as the 'holiest of experiences', with '1,000 people all silently saying their rosaries' and confessionals available for different language groups. To me it sounds like a step back in time. She once told me that, although in considerable pain following an operation, she was 'offering it up for the souls in Purgatory' and she sent me a website from Poland calling for a return to the Latin Mass about which she claims to be 'passionate'. It is certainly not a vision of a pre-Vatican II church which I would consider returning to. Do any ARC members feel equally estranged from family members?

*Margaret Knowlden
Editor*

German Assembly shows how Gospel guides reform

Recorded interview with Susan Sullivan

Thursday 20 April 2023

An Australian observer at the recent Assembly on the German Synodal Way, Susan Sullivan, has reported on the robust and candid discussions involving lay people and bishops on issues including women's ordination, priestly celibacy and acceptance of gay and transgender members. As a member of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, she attended the conference in Frankfurt in early March at the invitation of the co-chairs of the German Synod.

It was an extraordinary opportunity to witness at close hand the workings of the German approach to synodality...' Susan says. Many of the assembly debates were based on a contemporary anthropology of the human person, and a theology grounded in the Gospel's witness to compassion. 'These are the same issues articulated in Australia, but yet to be met with such a compassionate, practical and inclusive response,' she says.

Her comprehensive report on the Assembly can be viewed at [230310+-REPORT+-on+the+German+Synod+-Susan+Sullivan.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.squarespace.com/230310+-REPORT+-on+the+German+Synod+-Susan+Sullivan.pdf).

The German Synodal Path was explicitly a response to the sex abuse crisis and its cover-up, and the findings of what is known as the MHG study on sexual abuse. The themes focusing the Synod arose from that study and are consistent with those arising from the consultations leading up to the Australian Plenary Council: Power and separation of powers in the Church, priestly existence, women in ministries, and life in sexuality and partnership.

She says the Assembly attendees appeared to include a reasonable balance of gender and a younger-than-expected age profile, with many in the first half of life – a contrast to the predominance of ageing Catholics actively participating in similar events in Australia. Susan was impressed by the robust meeting processes designed to create transparency and meaningful, inclusive participation. This included seating arrangements that meant bishops, religious and lay people were randomly seated together.

'The debates across all the issues reflected a breadth of perspectives and often robust exchange on widely divergent positions. The obvious engagement, activism on emerging issues and confidence of the non-clerical participants was impressive. It was personally astonishing and humbling to listen to the interventions of people who identify as transgender and gay addressing the assembly in a confident and unapologetic way.'

She was 'intrigued by the candidness of the bishops, their willingness to openly name hard issues and to be honest about what is really happening in the church. On the issue of obligatory celibacy for instance ... there was a refreshing honesty that the present situation is unsustainable.

'The issues around sexuality are the same issues articulated in Australia, but yet to be met with such a compassionate, practical and inclusive response. 'The success of motions on blessings for same-sex couples, divorced and remarried Catholics and couples who choose to not marry, prompted a very emotional outbreak of exuberant, sustained celebration. 'Likewise, the session on the final day, 'Women and sacramental ministry' resulted in a very emotional debate with movingly heartfelt interventions by a number of women.'

Germany's Cardinal Marx reflected on his own change of heart stating that over time the arguments against women had become weaker and less acceptable. However, *realpolitik* prevailed and the final motion put to the Assembly was worded to request the Vatican 'to open sacramental diaconate to women'.

The German Synod has provoked considerable controversy primarily around concerns that outcomes pose the risk of schism. Implicit in this concern appears to be the belief that the adoption of different practices in different places threatens unity. 'I returned from Frankfurt with the conviction that the three questions of 'unity in diversity' is central to the success of this new movement in the Church to adopt synodality as its *modus operandi*.' The assembly wrestled to build consensus. For example, the text on priestly celibacy was modified to recommend the Vatican re-examine rather than rescind obligatory celibacy, a significant moderation in tone. The texts relating to women in ministry ultimately chose to advocate for diaconate rather than priestly ordination.

A question central to Susan's observations was why

and how the German Church has achieved such a contemporary and cogent perspective on the issues facing the Church. A significant factor has been the long-established status and access to bishops of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), a lay Catholic organisation that has developed a key relationship with the hierarchy since it began in 1868. ‘Synodality is seen as a renewed and renewing path for the Church today. So, like all things new and the Gospel imperative to ‘be made new’, we need to

engage by drawing on the best of our intellectual wisdom combined with spiritual wisdom, drawing on the core spiritual virtues of perseverance, humility, patience and, above all, hope.’

The Assembly proceedings were live-streamed and are now available on the Assembly website with English translation at <https://www.synodalerweg.de/english>. Contact: Mark Metherell 0417 603 697

Theological twists and turns—It’s time to make a significant shift in our perspective on ‘God’

John A. Dick

Not so long ago I met a young energetic and inquisitive university student, when he was visiting mutual friends. He knew I was a retired professor and asked what my field was. I told him theology. He stared at me, then chuckled, and said that he no longer believed in Santa Claus and the old Deity up in the sky. I laughed and said, ‘I don’t either’. Then, surprisingly, we got into a very serious discussion about belief, Jesus, and God. That discussion, I hope, will continue.

Over the past two thousand years, Christianity has gone through a lot of theological twists and turns. Most involve a shifting focus on either ‘orthopraxy’ or ‘orthodoxy.’ In a life-centered Christian theology, the primary focus is orthopraxy, which means ‘correct conduct.’ Orthodoxy, on the other hand, means and emphasizes ‘correct belief.’

A Church too much focused on orthodoxy rather than orthopraxy?

Orthopraxy was certainly the focus in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth: being courageous, compassionate, and inspiring in the midst of life’s ups and downs. And Jesus certainly experienced life’s ups and downs. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says: ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light

of life’ (John 8:12). In orthopraxy the Christian is like the Good Samaritan and embodies and lives out the Sermon on the Mount by caring for the marginalised, promoting compassion and peace, and sharing God’s love.

Perhaps we miss an emphasis on orthopraxy today? The young university student told me he finds the Church cold, antiquated and only interested in itself as an institution. A Church too much focused on orthodoxy?

Certainly in Roman Catholic history the focus on unquestioning acceptance of orthodoxy created an atmosphere of thought control and, quite often, fear for those who dared to question. Growing up as a pious Catholic teenager, I remember regularly saying the Act of Faith prayer, in which I so fervently prayed: ‘...I believe these and all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches because you have revealed them, who are eternal truth and wisdom, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. In this faith I intend to live and die.’ My high school classmates called me ‘Pious Dick’.

Orthodoxy is not life-centered but doctrine-centered. It is about correct teaching. When orthodoxy is stressed, people are taught the official doctrine and must then unquestioningly accept that doctrine.

Strongly enforced orthodoxy

From 1910 to 1967, by way of example, all Roman Catholic ‘clergy, pastors, confessors, preachers, religious superiors, and professors in philosophical-theological seminaries’ had to take the Oath Against Modernism. Theological modernism interpreted Christian teaching by taking into consideration modern knowledge, science and ethics. It emphasised the importance of reason and experience over doctrinal authority. The Oath marked a high point in Pope Pius X’s campaign against ‘modernism’ which he denounced as

heretical. Although Pius X died in 1914, his very far right influence on Catholic thought control lasted a long time.

In the fullness of time, Pious Dick grew up and became an open-minded professor of historical theology in a ‘philosophical-theological seminary’. Fortunately, he never had to take the Oath Against Modernism. He did occasionally have to confront a couple of bishops who strongly resonated with PiusX’s narrow vision and accused him of heretical teachings.

The focus on a strongly enforced orthodoxy in Christianity began actually in 310 CE, when Constantine legalised Christianity in his Roman Empire. Although he was not baptised until close to death in 337, Constantine was very pragmatic about Christianity and wanted to use it for his own political agenda.

Constantine called the First Council of Nicaea in 325. The bishops had to attend. Most significantly, the Council of Nicaea issued the very first uniform statement of Christian doctrine, called the Nicene Creed. Anyone who refused to obediently accept the Nicene Creed was excommunicated and exiled...or worse. I have always found it noteworthy that the Nicene Creed says nothing about actual Christian living, i.e. orthopraxy. After Nicaea ‘faith’ very quickly became a matter of intellectual assent.

Mistranslating faith into obedience

Actually, ‘faith’ had its original meaning in the Greek word *pistis*, which means trust, commitment and personal engagement. Faith in God, therefore, was a trust in and a commitment to God. Faith in Christ was an engaged commitment to the call and ministry of Jesus. It was a commitment to do the Gospel, to be a follower of Christ. Originally, therefore, ‘faith’ meant active living — orthopraxy. Between 383 and 404 CE, however, when Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, the Greek word *pistis* was translated as the Latin word *fides* (belief): a matter of intellectual assent.

By the late fourth century and early fifth century the Church was becoming an authoritarian institution demanding obedience: faithful assent. The Church’s understanding of God, thanks to Bishop Augustine of Hippo’s doctrine of original sin, became that of a heavenly judge seated on HIS throne. Augustine taught that humans have a sinful tainted nature passed on through sexual intercourse. About five hundred years after him, another bishop, Anselm of Canterbury, made the perspective on God even much worse with his Satisfaction Theory of Atonement.

Bishop Anselm said that God was so greatly offended by human sinfulness that God demanded the crucifixion and death of his own son Jesus to atone for humankind’s sin. A strange view of God. A very severe orthodoxy. A strange understanding of the historical Jesus.

A more healthy theological perspective — the Jesus perspective — has no sinister view of God but sees God as the Divine Presence. ‘God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them’ we read in the First Epistle of John (1 Jn 4:15). Jesus revealed the Divine Presence within the human. His dream was for people to see the Divine Presence within them. So very different from Bishop Anselm of Canterbury’s vision of an offended and vengeful God up in heaven who chose to disconnect from sinful Humanity.

In his book *It’s Time: Challenges to the Doctrine of the Faith*, the Australian theologian, Michael Morwood, stresses: ‘It is time to break from the worldview of two thousand years ago with its notions of a Supreme overlord God who lived in the heavens and who disconnected access to ‘Himself’ because of some supposed sin by the first human.’

Yes. It is time to make a significant shift in our perspective on ‘God’. We need to move to an appreciation of the Divine Presence always here, always and everywhere active in an expanding universe, and in the evolution of life on this planet. This changed perspective resonates with contemporary science, which finds itself speaking in terms of mystery and wonder as it tries to explain the how and why of reality. And then there is the problem of evil. Our contemporary understanding of Humanity realises that we humans are capable of destroying ourselves and everything around us. Indeed, Humanity can give its best expression to the Divine Presence only when it frees itself from destructive activity and behaviour that destroys people and damages the natural world.

We humans can only truly experience and give expression to the Divine Presence within us when we follow the universal and life-giving patterns of co-operation and working together. We, not a God in heaven, have to overcome evil. And the only thing needed for the triumph of evil is for good people to stand by and do nothing.

John A. DICK is an historical theologian and former academic dean at the American College, KU Leuven (Belgium) and professor at the KU Leuven and the University of Ghent. His latest book is *Jean Jadot: Paul’s Man in Washington* (Another Voice Publications, 2021).

Will Synodality Help to Move the Hierarchy to Face Realities?

John Buggy

Perhaps you missed a proclamation from the Vatican on the 5th of July this year, giving you a special consideration provided that you are a grandparent, elderly, or ‘motivated by the true spirit of penance and charity’. Based on any of these qualifications, you could have gained a Plenary Indulgence. And you thought you could not get these any more! Let me remind you – you still can. An indulgence is ‘a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven’. But to obtain a Plenary Indulgence the person must be in the state of grace, have complete detachment from sin and pray for the Pope’s intentions. The person must also go to confession, confess their sins, and receive the Eucharist around twenty days before or after they say the prayers for the indulgence. Have you noted that?

You could have obtained this a bit more easily if you had dedicated the 23rd of July (the feast day of Saints Joachim and Anne – ostensibly the grandparents of Jesus) to visiting the elderly, sick, disabled or abandoned. One concession to modernity is that you could have done this by phone or video call! And what is the effect? You will escape some level of punishment in the next life.

It is hard to believe that anyone would promote such strange notions along with such complying conditions without expecting significant embarrassment. What does Pope Francis really think about this? Pope Francis has put out consistently the message of mercy and the image of God as a loving father with infinite love. The above contradictory contortions depict the image of a father, who has just heard his child apologise in tears and who agreed to ‘no sweets today’, demanding that it is not good enough and that greater punishment must follow.

I can only assume that the very conservative forces in the Vatican, bolstered by those who have continuously opposed Francis, have taken an opportunity to engage him in something he would prefer to celebrate in a different way. He could not refuse to say the Grandparents’ Day Mass and has had to accept what has been attached to it. Coming, as it does, so close to the Synod of Bishops in October, he would not want unnecessary distraction at this time and has let it pass. Synodality is to be his legacy and is a bigger game. He is relying on it to turn the rusty wheel.

However, this proclamation serves to illustrate the extremely difficult path to significant reform that still remains. Before we get too excited about concept of synodality and the fact that controversial issues are on the agenda for the first meeting of the Synod of Bishops, we should remind ourselves of what happened at our own Plenary Council. A concept as innocuous as the equality of men and women could not be endorsed by a majority of our bishops until a group of Council members staged a startling yet silent protest. We might expect that something similar will have to occur, led by non-clerical groups, if this Synod is to go beyond statements of good intentions. As the John Dick and Michael Sibert items in this issue state, it is time for realities to be faced and acted on. Some person or group may have to say in whatever language says it best: ‘get real’.

The Passionist Family Group Movement

Noelene Uren

A few weeks ago at the Church of St-Anthony's in the Fields a celebration was held marking the 50th Anniversary of the movement known as Family Groups. Actually the official name of the Church is just St Anthony's, the 'in-the-fields' was added by Father Peter McGrath when he became Pastor back in the early 1970's. St Anthony's was literally then in the fields, a tiny weatherboard building in the then sparsely populated suburb of Terrey Hills, a part of the Northern Beaches area of Sydney.

Father Peter was a priest who belonged to the Passionist religious order which came to Australia from Spain in the mid-1800's, primarily as a missionary order. Later they became involved as pastors of parishes and this was how, as a young priest, Father Peter was given the ministry of caring for the fledgling Terrey Hills parish.

Not having a lot of time for what could be described as petty rules, Father Peter preached his favourite Gospel message: *Love one another as I have loved you*. With a congregation of only thirty or forty, the parishioners all knew each other and following their priest's lead were able to experience the intimacy and caring that can be found in a small group. Under his care the parish thrived, the congregation grew and the church was extended but never big enough to contain all the people who came. Usually there was standing room only for latecomers to Mass or a spot on the verandah outside.

But as the parish rapidly grew, Father Peter was concerned with maintaining the intimacy and caring that the small number of parishioners had originally experienced. So he suggested the formation of small groups where like-minded people could have regular contact. All would be welcome – married, single, divorced, young, old and in-between – and if a partner wasn't a Catholic that didn't matter, they would be warmly welcomed too. The members of the group would be like an extended family with a sense of responsibility for each other, of belonging, of being there to share each other's joys and sorrows. They could plan social occasions, hold home masses, whatever suited their group. It was a means of preserving the community spirit and living Christ's message of 'Love one another'.

So the Passionist family Group Movement, a ministry of the Passionists, was born. Father Peter never envisioned the concept becoming wide spread, but so successful were these small groups in the parish that other parishes began approaching him to assist

them in setting up family groups. Members of the Terrey Hills parish willingly helped and the movement began to grow. It grew at a phenomenal rate and with a combination of lay and Passionist workers, PFG became the largest parish movement throughout the country. The national coordinating team now provides support to over 140 parishes in Australia and groups are also established in New Zealand, the USA, England and Ireland.

And what now of St Anthony's? Unfortunately, the Passionists could no longer support a pastor for us and we came under Diocesan jurisdiction. Over the years numbers attending the church for Mass dwindled, as they have in so many parishes. But the 50th anniversary celebration proved that the spirit, ignited by Father Peter, still lives and thrives in the parish of St Anthony's in the Fields. Rest in peace Father Peter McGrath (1939-2018).

As John Kleinsman wrote, "The notion that God can be encountered in the people around us is a fundamental principle of the family Group Movement. We all know that as a rule people don't stand up and announce to the world their need for support and help. At best we are prepared to whisper to those we feel care about us. We will only pick up God's voice in the whisperings of persons when we are able to get close enough to them." John went on to ask these questions.

1. How well do you know the people in your parish community?
2. Who are the people in your parish who are lonely, suffering or needing support in some way? The fact that you don't know any of them doesn't mean they are not there;
3. How is your parish reaching out to those on the 'margins', those who do not attend the weekly Eucharist?

The Passionist Family Group Movement is a way of encountering God outside the four walls of our churches. At a time when so many people are no longer attending their parish church it is a way of drawing the people of the parish together and of living that passage from Matthew's Gospel: *As long as you do it to the least of your brothers or sisters, you do it to me*.

References:

The Family Group website, www.pfgm.org
The Family Group Movement by Brenda Gottche



The other form of abuse in the Catholic Church

John Crothers

When we hear the term 'abuse' in relation to the Catholic Church, we immediately think of crimes of a sexual nature committed against children by the clergy.

But there is another form of abuse taking place in the Church and it's just as real. It's called emotional abuse, and is most evident in the attitude of the Church hierarchy towards women.

It is characterised by such things as patronising language, silencing of voices, refusal to engage and failure to empower.

It can be subtle and may even go unnoticed. That's because it is structural in nature, camouflaged within the rules and guidelines of the institution.

An example of this structural abuse is the Church's exclusion of women from ministry, particularly ordained ministry, and the silence that surrounds it. There is no dialogue, no come back. Women are simply told that the Pope has spoken. The case is closed. No discussion will be entered into.

The silent treatment is often used by the Church hierarchy as a way of avoiding an uncomfortable exchange. I have experienced it myself.

Over my thirty-eight years as a priest in the Sydney Archdiocese I have written four personal letters to various bishops. Some of the issues I addressed were certainly contentious, but the letters were written respectfully and affably.

I didn't receive a reply to any of those four letters.

A friend told me recently that some years ago she wrote to two consecutive parish priests in her parish asking for an explanation as to why women couldn't be formally instituted as acolytes or lectors. She received no response from either priest.

It is true that Canon Law has now been changed to formally allow women to be instituted as acolytes and lectors, but the long delay in implementing the new policy seems to be another exercise in power and control by the hierarchy.

It is more than eighteen months since Pope Francis made the change, but no bishop has yet installed a woman as acolyte, at least in the Sydney

Archdiocese, and no satisfactory explanation has been given for the delay.

Earlier this year I enquired as to the reason for the delay but only received a vague response saying that there is still no plan of how to exactly proceed with the matter.

Clearly there is a lack of will on behalf of the bishops to do anything to support women's greater participation in the Church, even when the issue pertains to lay ministry rather than ordained ministry, as in the case of acolytes and lectors.

The same attitude was seen at last year's Plenary Council when the Australian bishops voted down a motion asking them to accept women deacons in their dioceses if at some stage the Pope should allow women to be ordained to the diaconate.

In essence the bishops were prepared to defy the Pope rather than welcome women into their dioceses as deacons.

They later changed their vote after seeing the response by other members of the Council, particularly the women members, but how could they not have anticipated the hurt and sense of betrayal that would follow their decision.

The bishops' unwillingness to bend in the area of inclusive language in the liturgy is another example where women are being subjected to indignity, and constantly having their self-esteem undermined.

Being told that words like 'brothers' and 'men' actually refer to women, is akin to saying 'You are not important enough to even be mentioned.'

How easy it would be to make a change to more inclusive terms, but the bishops refuse to compromise in any way and expect women to simply grin and bear it.

Why is it that the Church hierarchy shows so little empathy with Catholic women and their struggle for greater participation in the life of the Church? Why do they never advocate on their behalf?

At least part of the reason is that most Catholic clergy spend little time conversing with women in any depth. Their world is a very male world.

They don't understand the hurt experienced by women who feel let down by the hierarchy. They never feel their pain.

Added to that, most clergy have little or no experience of being marginalised. They don't know what it's like to have their voice silenced.

Bishops in particular have never felt the distress of being excluded, of being ignored, of being disempowered.

Then there is the broader patriarchal culture that pervades the Church hierarchy. It produces a club mentality among the clergy that is exclusive and elitist.

In the context of structural abuse in the Church, it's a perfect storm.

The Catholic Church sees itself as a promoter of human rights. Pope Francis has spoken on numerous occasions defending the rights of women.

But there is an inconsistency here. As long as women are excluded in our Church, whether it be

from ministry, from language, or any other type of exclusion, we are giving a message to the world that women should not have the same recognition and opportunities in life as men.

Until that changes, until women are given the same dignity, respect and opportunities as men, the Church will continue to contribute to the scourge of emotional abuse against women, which sadly is still so prevalent in our world today.

JOHN CROTHERS is a priest of the Sydney Archdiocese and author of *The Clergy Club*. He also posts videos on his *John Crothers Singer Songwriter* YouTube channel advocating for a more inclusive Church. He is a Member of ARC. This article was published on *Pearls & Irritations*.

Allow married Indigenous men to become priests: Archbishop Coleridge

Married Indigenous men should be allowed to be ordained as Catholic priests and the centuries-old rule of compulsory celibacy will 'very likely' ultimately be changed by the Vatican, says Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge.

Archbishop Coleridge has warned that the Church will need to 'look quite different' to flourish, ahead of the October Synod on Synodality.

He has proposed an exemption for Indigenous priests and said 'it was necessary when there was 'no way you're going to recruit a celibate clergy in those cultures'.

West Australian Labor senator Patrick Dodson, a foundational figure in the Aboriginal reconciliation movement, is the only Indigenous man ever to be admitted to the Catholic priesthood. 'And Pat Dodson ended up leaving after a relatively short time,' Archbishop Coleridge said.

'I think it's fairly bleak with regard to the Church generally now. So one of the things I have just floated is that: Is there reason enough to say that within Indigenous communities we will ordain married men?

'We have married clergy. I mean, some of the clergy who are from other churches are married men ... so it's not as if we don't know married clergy.'

The Pope appeared ready to test the water on celibacy after Vatican Synod in 2019, but recommended it be suspended in the Amazon region of South America to address a chronic shortage of priests there – only to retreat, with Francis saying further 'discernment' was required.

Backing Archbishop Coleridge's call for the change to start with Indigenous men, Bishop of Darwin Charles Gauci said: 'With Aboriginal people, we need to be respectful of culture. Pope Francis has said that he is open in certain situations to ordaining married men; that is not off the agenda.

'The opportunity to have Indigenous priests ministering to their communities is one that we aspire to. I would be open to discussing this matter if it arose.'

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Paradigm Shifts and the Catholic Church

Alan Clague

In 1962 Thomas Kuhn introduced the term ‘Paradigm Shift’ to describe scientific discoveries that made a fundamental change in our basic concepts of an area of science, such as the change from a geocentric to a heliocentric universe. The concept was expanded to other areas of knowledge, and the theologian Hans Kung wrote a book ‘Paradigm Shifts in the History of Christianity’, detailing six shifts in the history of Christian thought and theology. He cited the Early Jewish apocalyptic paradigm, the Hellenistic paradigm of the patristic period, the medieval Roman Catholic paradigm, the Reformation Protestant paradigm, the Enlightenment modern paradigm, and the Contemporary ecumenical paradigm. In all of these Christian paradigm shifts, major changes occurred. For example, the earliest Aramaic Jewish Church changed to a Hellenistic Church as it spread throughout the Roman empire, then changed the Greek to Latin as Rome became predominant.

There have been a number of other changes that could be termed ‘paradigm shifts’ confined to the Catholic Church. Many of these changes have been associated with Councils, Particularly Trent, Vatican I and Vatican 2. The shifts considered here are those related to changes to the Church’s attitude to various groups of people since the 19th century, formulated especially in Vatican 2. The Vatican 2 Declaration of the Church on Other Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time) stated ‘The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past The Church reproves any discrimination against people on the basis of their Religion.’ These changes have swept aside the overt hostility directed by the Church towards these groups. Some of these shifts would fit into Kung’s ecumenical paradigm.

Jews: In the early years of Christianity, when Jews and Christians were equally weak, there was implacable mutual hostility. Following adoption of Christianity by the Roman empire, the Jews were relentlessly persecuted. This attitude culminated in

Hitler’s attempted extermination of the Jews in the Holocaust. Vatican 2 ushered in a paradigm shift. *Nostra Aetate* stated ‘Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is so great, this sacred synod wants to foster....mutual understanding and respect’.

Muslims: The spread of Islam outside Arabia was initially into Christian countries, and Islam became the enemy of Christianity. Crusades were fought against Muslims, and they were expelled from Spain. *Nostra Aetate* ended the centuries of religious hostility: ‘The Church also has a high regard for Muslims’. *Lumen Gentium*, the Vatican 2 Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, stated ‘But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims’

Protestants: Hostility was also directed towards Protestants. Various forms of Protestantism made major inroads into Catholic countries. Wars broke out between Catholic and Protestant countries. Catholics were forbidden to attend Protestant services, and ‘mixed marriages’ were discouraged. Vatican 2, in its Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, stated: ‘The Catholic Church embraces them as brothers, with respect and affection’

Slaves: Paul equated slaves with free people, although he did not condemn slavery as such. Over the centuries, the Church had a complex relationship with slavery, not condemning it, but advocating charity to slaves. In the 13th century, slavery was the punishment for certain crimes. Slavery of Muslims was accepted. In the 15th century Spain and Portugal were given authority to enslave the native peoples of their colonies in Africa and America. In the 19th century slavery became unacceptable, but not unequivocally condemned. It was only with the Vatican 2 Pastoral Constitution on the World, *Gaudium et Spes*, which declared slavery an ‘infamy’ that the paradigm shift against slavery was made unambiguous.

Women: The final consideration of paradigm shifts involving groups of people is the Church’s changing attitude to half the Catholic community, its women. Paul’s original Christian groups treated women and men equally (Gal 3:28). The named leaders in his epistles included both women and men. This

changed in the generation after Paul's death, so that women were excluded from consideration as bishops in the pastoral epistles (originally erroneously attributed to Paul), and the Epistle to the Colossians, now usually considered to be also post-Pauline, omits equality between women and men (Col 3:11). This exclusion of women, enlarged to include priests and deacons, continued through the subsequent centuries.

The last two hundred years has seen an immense improvement in the status of women in secular society, although the degree of improvement varies in different countries. In Western society, women now can retain ownership of their assets when they marry, they can vote in parliamentary elections, they can receive the same education as men and enter the same professions as men, receiving the same remuneration. Most importantly, they can control the number of children they have.

The Church also has introduced some changes to its treatment of women, who are now allowed much more active participation in the life of the Church, but has refused to repeal its innate patriarchy. Pope Pius XI's encyclical in 1931, *Casti Connubi*, claimed that a woman's duties to her family would prevent her from being involved in 'business and even public affairs'. Neglect of these duties meant that 'even without the knowledge of and against the wishes of the husband, (she) would be at liberty to conduct her own affairs'. This fitted in with the demand of the Epistle to the Colossians 'Wives, be subject to your husbands' (Col 3:18), but these aspects of the encyclical have now been repudiated. Pope St John Paul II wrote in his 1995 Letter to Women 'There is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights.' However, the emancipation of women by oral contraception from a lifetime of bearing children, which was effectively forbidden by Pope St Paul VI in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, is still the official Church policy (but one ignored by the people).

The other major element of residual patriarchy in the Church is the abovementioned exclusion of women from the priesthood, a relic from the patriarchal post-Pauline Church. Pope Saint John XXIII, in his 1963 Pastoral Letter, *Pacem in Terris* stated 'Human beings also have the right to choose for themselves the kind of life which appeals to them; whether it is to found a family – in the founding of which the man and the woman have equal rights and duties – or to embrace the priesthood or religious life.' However, this aspiration for women has been rejected by all subsequent Popes. After his endorsement of gender equality in his 'Letter to Women', Pope St John Paul II then effectively contradicts it by saying 'If Christ by his free and sovereign choice, clearly attested by the gospel and by the Church's constant tradition entrusted only to men exercise of the ministerial priesthood, this in no way detracts from the role of women.' There is no strong argument to exclude women from the priesthood in modern society. Theological arguments like 'Christ only had male apostles, because he wanted to exclude women from being priests' are not accepted by most biblical scholars who are not trying to defend the Catholic status quo. The rejection of patriarchy in modern secular society means that inclusion of women in the priesthood would not appear anomalous.

Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular have undergone many paradigm shifts over the centuries. The acceptance of women as true equals to men is a major shift necessary to move towards fulfillment of Paul's aspirations for the people of Christ.

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Don't be afraid of Secularisation!

Michael Sibert

'Vision — the capacity to perceive God actively at work — is the prophetic foundation of calling people to work with God.'

Bruce Chilton

What are we aiming for in pursuing reform of the Church? Is there a vision capable of uniting the collective energies of the reform movement, within the 'western' cultural context?

The Christ event continues to provide the paradigm for such a vision. The incarnation of God in Jesus implies an emptying, a kenosis of previous notions and conceptions about God. It is this 'emptying' that has great visionary potential for humanity's relationship with God. God in human form was a radical paradigm shift, one which continues to roll through human history with radical implications.

Could it be that the process of secularisation rather than being feared, should be embraced as the natural fulfillment of Christianity? As a cultural phenomenon, secularisation is evidence of the need for the institutional Church to undergo an emptying. Specifically, for the hierarchy to relax the grip of strong metaphysical and dogmatic conceptions about the nature of God and their subsequent manifestation in rigid Church structures and practices. These aspects of the Church's tradition have become a hinderance to its ability to connect with westerners' lives and therefore no longer serve its mission within the 'western' cultural context.

The seeds of a vision most suited to the contemporary 'western' context are rooted deep within the mystical and apophatic insights of the Christian tradition. The negative theology emphasised by early Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-395) and Basil the Great (329-379) and Meister Eckhart (c.1260–c.1328), to name a few, steps back from defining God and allows God to be God. This humility will serve the Church well in enabling an emptying transformation that clears away non-essential aspects of belief and structure to reveal the essentials of Jesus' teachings more clearly, that is: charity, compassion and inclusion of everyone. All ethics that continue to have great appeal within secular culture.

When asked about their religion in the 1971 Census, 6.7% selected the 'No Religion' option. When asked in 2021, that figure had risen to 38.9%. On face value this data highlights the reality of increasing secularisation. It is also worth noting, however, that many surveys into the perspectives of these people reveal there is a very large component within the 38.9% who indicate they are 'spiritual but not religious'.

Phillip Hughes from the Christian Research Association also observes that there was a 12% growth, between 2016 and 2021, in the number of people who wrote 'Christian' in the Census, rather than ticking one of the specific denomination boxes. He suggests this increase is due to more people not wishing to identify with a particular denomination or institutional form of Christianity at all, while not wishing to jettison their 'Christianity' altogether.

To these observations we can add data from the National Centre for Pastoral Research, which revealed that by 2016, Sunday Mass attendance rates across the country had dropped to just 11.8 per cent of all Catholics, while at the same time Catholic school enrolments remain strong.

Taken together these facts certainly reveal a disenchantment with traditional religious expressions, but not a complete 'letting go' of the reality of God in most people's lives. Most of these people are not lost, they are working through their salvation in the freedom and agency their secular culture provides. The sacred is being found within the secular.

The mystical and apophatic appreciation of God provides the non-literal, non-absolutist basis for a vision of Church that will be effective within this secularised context, as it respects the spiritual agency of all people to encounter the mystery of God in their lives as they are. And prompts the hierarchy to step back from its inclination to control every aspect of people's lives. A leadership model most suitable within our secular culture sees the ordained working collegially with laity on church governance. The priority for the ordained is to facilitate the revelation of the omnipresent mystery of God, found through Jesus, within various communities. Emptying the accumulated institutional clutter from the orthodox practice of Catholicism has huge potential appeal to the disenchanted and for the ultimate success of the church's mission. The association between hierarchical structure and the abuse of power, implicated in the paedophilia crisis, is but one tragic case in point of the need for a letting go of old structures that have passed their 'use by' date. This emptying will not only be noted and respected by the

many who have absented themselves from regular church practices, it will also energise the many creative ways educated laity will find to give fruitful expression to their engagement with Jesus the Christ and affirm their vital part in the building of the kingdom of heaven in their secular lives.

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The Journey of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson

60 Years a Priest

Documentary DVD



The Journey of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson documents a previously untold story of Bishop Geoffrey. First as a young boy, priest, bishop, and also a teacher, scholar, spiritual guide and unfamiliar disciple

This documentary reveals the pioneering vision Bishop Geoffrey had – a new way of thinking most Bishops at the time did not have an awareness of.

The Journey of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson is a fascinating and enlightening celebration of the life of a much-loved and respected bishop.

It was fascinating to see the vision Geoff had ... it was pioneering a new way of thinking most Bishops at the time did not have an awareness of.

Bishop Emeritus Peter Ingham

Review

Rarely does a person transcend generations and leave long-lasting impressions through vocation. Bishop Geoffrey's voice still resonates today through his passion for the scriptures, with Jesus being his eschaton. He was not loud and did not tower over his congregation, but was part of them – gently, quietly, and humbly. Like his master, he walked amongst them.

The purpose of this video was to document a previously untold story of a young boy – then priest and bishop – but more importantly, a teacher, scholar, spiritual guide, and unfamiliar disciple. This is a story told by Geoff and those who knew him well. For that we owe much to Geoff, for being courageous and rowing against the tide during difficult times.

The work Geoff did to help the Church understand was profound. Being a member of the 'courageous people' group in Rome during Vatican II was life-changing for Geoff. When the group returned to Australia from overseas, they found themselves rowing against the tide.

Sr Johanna Conway RSM

The parishioners are honoured to call him 'our Bishop'. ... he is our preacher, our counsellor, our teacher, our listener, our friend, and faith-journey companion. This community is blessed to have been brought closer to Christ by his ministry. He has shown us that he is a true disciple of our loving God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Extract from a plaque on the wall of Saint Joseph's Church, Enfield
where Bishop Geoffrey Robinson was in residence since 1988

What on Earth is ChatGPT?

Annette & Ted Spooner

There has been a lot of talk in the news about Artificial Intelligence and something called ChatGPT. You may be wondering what all the fuss is about.

ChatGPT is a computer program, driven by Artificial Intelligence. It allows you to have a human-like conversation with it, accepting questions and providing answers about anything you can think of. It can ‘understand’ the context of your questions and search a vast store of information on the Internet, to produce answers in natural-sounding text. It is known as a Natural Language Processing (NLP) system.

As a result it can be helpful in many ways. It can write essays, stories, poems, speeches, even homilies, on any topic you can think of, in many different styles. It can suggest solutions to problems, create a travel itinerary, create a recipe, write a book review or even an article for the New Terrygraph – its use is only limited by your imagination. And the speed with which it does this is simply astonishing.

Like many new disruptive tools it has its downside, and schools and universities are having to rethink how they set assignments so that students can learn from this wonderful new tool without cheating. And of course the answers that ChatGPT provides are not always 100% correct, so it pays to review them before using them. ChatGPT cannot ‘think’ for itself. It is just a computer algorithm, albeit a very clever and fast one. It won’t replace humans or take over the world – it is just a tool to help us.

Recently we decided to test ChatGPT to see if it could be helpful in the context of our church. First we asked it to suggest ways of attracting young people to the church. Next, we asked it to write a homily for Palm Sunday that is relevant to today’s world. The results of these two simple questions are shown below, but the more detail you include in the questions you ask of ChatGPT, the more the answers are likely to reflect what you are looking for.

ChatGPT may not have all the answers but it is a very powerful tool and something worth looking at. If you really want to have some fun, ask ChatGPT to give you an output in pirate speak or in Shakespearian language or even as a rap. Give it a go.

My Question: **How do we get young people to come to church?**

ChatGPT output:

Attracting young people to church can be a multi-faceted endeavour that involves understanding their needs, interests, and the challenges they face. Here are several strategies that can help engage young people and encourage their participation in church:

1. **Relevant and Relatable Worship:** Create a dynamic and contemporary worship experience that resonates with young people. Incorporate modern music styles, technology and multimedia elements to make the services engaging and relatable to their lives.
2. **Authentic Community:** Foster a welcoming and inclusive community where young people feel accepted, valued and supported. Encourage connections through small groups, mentorship programs, and social activities specifically designed for them.
3. **Meaningful Teaching:** Provide teachings that address relevant topics and real-life issues. Offer opportunities for open discussions and interactive learning experiences. Encourage young people to ask questions and explore their faith intellectually.
4. **Service and Outreach:** Encourage young people to actively participate in service projects and outreach initiatives that address social justice issues, community needs and global challenges. Engaging in meaningful acts of service can help young people see the practical application of their faith and make a positive impact.
5. **Youth Programs and Events:** Establish dedicated youth programs that cater to the unique needs and interests of young people. Offer youth-oriented events such as retreats, conferences, camps and mission trips. These activities provide opportunities for personal growth, spiritual development and building relationships with peers.
6. **Mentorship and Leadership Development:** Empower young people to take on leadership roles within the church. Provide mentorship and guidance to help them grow in their faith and develop their talents. Encourage their involvement in decision-making processes and give them opportunities to contribute to the church community.
7. **Utilise Technology and Social Media:** Leverage technology and social media platforms to connect with young people. Maintain an active online presence, share relevant content and provide opportunities for virtual engagement. Livestream services and create online communities where young people can connect and discuss faith-related topics.
8. **Address Doubts and Questions:** Create a safe space for young people to express their doubts, questions and concerns about faith. Provide resources and engage in open dialogues to help them navigate their spiritual journey and find answers to their inquiries.

Remember, building relationships and demonstrating genuine care and understanding are crucial in attracting and retaining young people in the church. Listen to their perspectives, involve them in decision-making processes, and create a sense of belonging within the church community.

My Question: Please write me a sermon on Palm Sunday and make it relevant to things happening in the world today.

ChatGPT output:

My dear friends, as we gather here on this blessed Palm Sunday, we are reminded of the triumphant entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem, where he was welcomed with palms and cheers from the crowds. This event marks the beginning of Holy Week, a time of reflection and spiritual renewal for Christians all over the world.

As we reflect on the significance of this day, we are reminded of the many challenges that we face in the world today. We are living in a time of great uncertainty, where our faith and our values are constantly being tested. We are faced with social, economic, and political turmoil, and we are often left wondering where to turn for hope and guidance.

But just as the people of Jerusalem welcomed Jesus with open arms and hearts, we too can find solace and strength in our faith. We can look to the example of Jesus and his message of love and compassion, and we can strive to live our lives in accordance with his teachings.

In these trying times, it is important that we come together as a community and support one another. We must be kind and compassionate to those around us, especially to those who are struggling. We must be mindful of our actions and the impact that they have on others, and we must work together to build a more just and equitable society.

As we carry our palm branches today, let us be reminded of the hope and promise that they represent. Let us be inspired by the example of Jesus and his unwavering commitment to justice and love, and let us strive to embody these values in our daily lives.

May we find strength and comfort in our faith, and may we continue to work together to build a better world for all.

Amen.

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Book Review & Commentary

Steve Hyndes *A Safe Distance*

– *Surviving Religious Trauma*

Review by Leonie Martin RSM

May 2023 I attended the Book Launch in Sydney of Steve Hyndes' *A SAFE DISTANCE – Surviving Religious Trauma*. This book launch and the reading of Steve's book left me very sad and knocked out. I was in my late 20's when I worked with Steve and the Youth in the same parish. He worked creatively, productively, compassionately and gave these teenagers a very good experience in the joy and humanity of the Vatican II Church of Pope John XXIII. I had no idea that he was struggling so deeply. I was too. Fortunately, I was able to take 'a leave of absence' for my wellbeing. I was deeply traumatised by the rigidity of the institution and the rejection of me by some Sisters ... seemingly because I was 'a little too human'. We learnt to deny our true selves of affection, love, and family – for what purpose?

Reading Steve's story makes me ashamed of our Church. Yet I know Steve's heritage to those he served was good and much appreciated. He, like many struggling people in a dedicated religious role, is basically and truly a human being.

Lay people are the unsung Saints in the Church – loyal and working hard, within their own limitations, to build Catholic Churches and Schools and support many charities. THEY are the ones who keep the Church financed, alive, compassionate and viable. They make significant sacrifices. The clerical church seems to have forgotten this fact.

Many incredibly good and true, compassionate, creative, heroic and new life deeds, for those less fortunate, have been and still are changing lives for the better by religious now, and over past hundreds of years. We were dedicated human beings, but often forced to deny our character. In his book Steve gives us an honest look at his real experience of life as a clergyman in the Catholic Church. His recollections, writings and art therapy are cathartic no doubt for himself as well as others. Bravely produced.

LEONIE MARTIN is a religious Sister of Mercy and a member of ARC.

ARC Secretariat

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