



arcvoice

A Report from Australian Reforming Catholics Inc.

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What Does ARC Stand For?

I was asked this question by a couple of people recently and it came as a surprise to me. With all the articles that have been written and the amount of detail on our website, I had assumed that the focus of ARC was well established and known.

ARC was born in the year 2000, responding to many practising Catholics who were frustrated by the words of the liturgy and the many sermons they had heard that no longer express how they had come to believe. They were looking both to new ways of understanding doctrine and wanting to influence changes to some of the Church's teaching.

Conferences were held in each of the next few years that followed. During these conferences the main aims of ARC emerged. Firstly, it was to point out to Catholics that doctrines do change over time and that particular ones should be changed or reinterpreted today. We wanted bishops to be reminded of this and that is the reason why copies of *ARCvoice* are sent each quarter to every bishop in Australia.

Secondly, we wanted to help ARC members to feel more comfortable in their difficulty in accepting particular doctrines of the Church which they now feel are incompatible with reason. Many Catholics, including those in religious orders, find it difficult to recite the Nicene and Apostles Creeds with conviction and some priests omit them from the liturgy for this reason. Doctrines are not faith; rather they are supposed to help in the understanding of the faith.

About fifteen years ago, some members proposed that we should have an ARC Prayer that expresses our desires and reflects how we see ourselves. The prayer, shown on our website and on page 2 of this edition, expresses our orientation. The wording of the prayer is very deliberate. In attempting to draw in all those struggling in their faith journey, it tries to express sentiments that a wide range of believers might be able to identify with. In stating our love of

Jesus, it does not enunciate how Jesus is God, nor does it state the path that ultimately enables a person to reach their relationship with him. It expresses a desire that the Church, through its community, would always help in discerning the best path.

Fundamentally, ARC is about appealing for genuine reform in the Church's doctrine and teachings, recognising that the Church, as an institution, cannot always claim to be without error. We now have a much greater understanding of the sources of our knowledge than those who wrote the scriptures and framed the doctrines. Jesus did not define himself with any precision. The type of person that he was, combined with the simple messages in his teachings, drew people to him. ARC tries to point out what may prevent or confuse people in their search for or an understanding of Jesus and, to some extent God, as they endeavour to deepen their spirituality.

John Buggy

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Rob Brian retires

Rob has been a member of the Secretariat almost from the beginning and was the Administrator for many years. We thank him very sincerely and wish him and his wife Maureen every blessing in the coming years.

The Prayer of Australian Reforming Catholics

*J*esus, our friend, through whom we see something of the mystery of God, help us in our efforts to reform structures, teachings and practices in the Church that developed over time from your simple command that we love one another.

*H*elp us to discern and express what is in keeping with your Spirit and to inspire others to join us in the task of making the Church a visible sign of what your love means.

*E*nable us to make known biased teachings and practices that hurt and confuse those who seek you with willing hearts.

*G*ive us the courage to speak and act in seeking necessary reform in the Church.

*E*mpower us to work with the same love, compassion and truthfulness that showed in everything you said and did.

*M*ay we be instruments in bringing about change so that more people feel happy to say 'Our Church' when they speak of the community or path that leads them to you.

ARCVoice Feedback

Denis Mockler (Secretariat member/Administrator) has spoken to a number of ARC members who have consistently praised *ARCVoice*. This is one recent email:

I appreciate the quality of the writers and the dedication and hard work of the production team.

Leigh Osborne
Taigum, Qld

Circles of Light

Michael Sibert

Being a father of three adult children ranging in age from 34 to 41, I am acutely aware of the socio-economic injustices they are encountering in contemporary Australian society. Injustices that I did not have to endure when I was in their age bracket. Injustices like growing income and wealth inequality, the extreme difficulty in attaining home ownership, rampant wages theft, the negative impacts of climate change and the dis-proportional impacts of increasing costs for rent, insurance, energy and food on younger generations. The darkness of these realities is evident in the growing incidence of mental health issues among our younger generations, and I wonder whether the church my children were raised and educated in really cares about the difficult life circumstances they endure and what would happen if it did?

The Australian Census data shows that in 2021 the number of Australians identifying as No Religion reached 38.9% which is more than double the 15.5% recorded in 2001. A 2025 report titled 'An Undercurrent of Faith' by McCrindle Research identified that:

51% change their religious identity from Christian to 'no religion' because they feel disappointed in the church due to a lack of accountability, hypocrisy and dishonesty; while,

38% say they feel disillusioned with how Christianity is practiced or represented by its leaders or institutions; and

45% felt religion was no longer meaningful or relevant to their lives.

This research data and the socio/economic inequities my children and their peers experience are inextricably connected and, when taken together, form a significant part of the context within which the Church is attempting to become more synodal and relevant.

The missionary and participatory aspects of the synodal vision implicitly require an outreach to the Australians declaring No-Religion in the census and to most Catholic parents who, like my daughter, send their children to Catholic Schools but are not active participants in their parish. It is heartening to read the Sense of the Faithful's July 2025 case study on the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, as it gives

explicit recognition of the need for 'outward-focused' parishes and notes that inward-looking reforms related to parish governance are not enough. Catholic education is meeting a broadly valued need; Catholic parishes, for all but a few, are not!

David Hinton refers to cultures which provide both practical and existential support that helps people in their struggles to live meaningful, hopeful lives, as 'circles of light'. The light of such cultures comes from providing a vision of a fairer, better world and from boldly advocating for the social and political changes required to bring that vision into being. This vision exists, but it is not being heard.

As highlighted by John Buggy in the June 2025 *ARCVoice* editorial, the Church has within its tradition a salient and inspirational vision ready at hand. Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (See page 14) provides a critique of the extremes of both capitalism and socialism and, in doing so, strongly advocates for a balanced middle path that rejects the absolutes of both visions. In the mid-20th century, the Church may have been justified in focussing its efforts on countering views that would shift the pendulum towards socialism. However, in the early 21st century we need to realise and actively confront a definite pendulum shift towards a malignant form of capitalism. We now live in a culture dominated by one ethic: the maximisation of profits; a culture that justifies obscene accumulations of private wealth, inhumane work practices and a disregard for the negative social and environmental consequences of corporate business models, while effectively silencing ethics of equity, sharing and compassion.

Under the leadership of Pope Leo XIV, it is time to brush the dust off *Rerum Novarum*, add it to the vision presented in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*. Familiarise yourself with these documents and join in bringing these Catholic social justice teachings into public discourse at every opportunity. Both encyclicals contain the light required to address the needs of many who are afflicted by the excesses of contemporary capitalism and will attract their interest. Building outwardly-focused synodal churches will work, like our schools, if they address the socio-economic and existential needs of people. Our churches can become 'circles of light', full of meaning, relevance and integrity.

MICHAEL SIBERT is
a Teacher and Member of the ARC Secretariat

The Church's listening crisis

Jackie Minnock

Open communication is a two-way street. It requires not only words, but also silence – the kind that creates space for others to speak. As one observer noted, it is no accident that the word silent is an anagram of listen. Yet within the Church today, silence often feels less like reverence and more like avoidance.

From comfort to isolation

Reflecting on the 1967 Tremeloes song *Silence is Golden*, the line 'Silence is golden, but my eyes still see' captures a growing unease. For many among the people of God, the phrase silence is golden has lost its lustre. In the face of injustice, it no longer comforts – it isolates. In today's Church, they suggest, perhaps it is listening that should be called golden. When the Synod on Synodality was launched, it was heralded as a new era of listening. The idea was simple yet profound: the people of God would gather and, together as the Church, chart a path forward. But lived experience tells a different story. In my parish, parishioners recall attending a Synod meeting with hope. The gathering was open and reflective. People spoke candidly. But after that session:

- No further communication came.
- The report was presumably submitted to the diocese but was never shared locally.

Those who had participated so honestly never learned how their words were handled. The final diocesan summary appeared, with no clear link back to their parish's input. Voices offered, but not received.

In this case, the process faltered from the beginning. The faithful offered their voices, but the institutional Church – bishops, diocesan structures, clergy, and official decision-making bodies – did not answer. Many in this parish are part of a long tradition of lay Catholics who have listened, prayed, paid and obeyed – faithfully and patiently. But they say they have not been heard. Familiar echoes and

institutional resistance. Synodality was meant to be an opportunity for change. Yet for many, it has become just another structure where the Church hierarchy controls the flow of information and engagement. Since that first meeting, silence has prevailed – not the silence of contemplation, but the silence of disengagement. The faithful wait. They continue to listen to God and to one another, hoping for genuine dialogue. When responses do emerge, they sound familiar: soft-spoken variations of the same refrain: 'We'd love to say yes, but tradition won't allow it.' Behind the courteous tone lies an institutional unwillingness to shift.

Rediscovering Christ's example

Such exclusion stands in stark contrast to the example of Christ, who not only rejected prejudice but sought out those marginalised by religious authority.

- The woman at the well (John 4:1-42)
- The woman with the haemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34)
- Jesus heals on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-17)
- The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
- The Gospel of the marginalised is where our credibility is at stake, is discovered and is revealed.'

Pope Francis, Mass with new cardinals, February 15, 2015

A call to action

If synodality is to be more than performance, it must become a pathway to conversion.

- Listening must lead to action
- To change
- To communion Because without that, silence is not golden. It is wounding.

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Do we really understand Children's Baptism?

Maureen Ryan

In my Catholic community, my role as a Baptism Coordinator involves an individual visit to the parents of infants to help them prepare for their child's Baptism.

Most of the people I visit do not participate in the celebration of the Eucharist but they still think it is important that their child is baptised. They usually know it is initiation into the church, but it seems to be more about a celebration of Catholic family identity rather than belonging to a wider community of faith. Though this vague Catholic sense of belonging is good, there are so many more good reasons to celebrate this Sacrament of Initiation. Failure to appreciate the greater depth of the gift of initiation diminishes the joy of understanding the wonderful relationship their child should experience through the love of Jesus within his Christian family.

The Baptism liturgy is bursting with symbols of the faith: initiation, forgiveness and relationship, to name just a few. Failure to understand these fairly mysterious symbols just leads to more disconnection of young families who view church liturgies, including the Eucharist, as mostly irrelevant to their modern lives. So my preparation technique with parents is that together we unlock many of the meanings of the symbols of the Baptism liturgy.

Some powerful, positive symbols that help parents value this Sacrament include the anointing of the **Oil of Chrism** which illustrates the gift of the spirit received by the child and authorises the child to share in the living of the Gospel values. The **white garment** reminds us of the innocence of Jesus which the child shares. It is a reminder of innocence and goodness to be treasured throughout her/his life.

One of the meanings of the **water** used in the liturgy reminds the parents of the importance of relationship and trust in Jesus that will come to a fullness within their child's spiritual life.' . . . *but those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life*' (Jn 4:14).

The **lighted candle** and the renewal of their own **baptismal promises** reminds both the parents and godparents of their responsibility to keep their own faith and their child's faith alive.

Not so easy to understand are some of the other symbols of Baptism that confuse and could alienate parents. When I ask parents why we use **water** in the baptism of a child they invariably say, somewhat tentatively, that the water is a cleansing of sin. The anointing of the **Oil of Baptism** with its connection to its forgiveness of the 'technical Original Sin' takes quite a bit of explaining to the parents of an infant who has committed no personal sin.

In my opinion, we do not need to talk about Original Sin at children's Baptism. However, within many families there are different understandings of the purpose of infant baptism. Although some do understand that it is not a heavenly insurance policy, there remains a lurking doubt and they are usually quite glad to know that Pope Benedict said that Limbo has never been a defined truth of faith, thereby effectively dismissing it. I see my main role as emphasising the love and gift of belonging to a community with Jesus at its heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit being given to every member of the Church community.

My conclusion is that an initiation liturgy for infants has been not well adapted from an adult Baptism liturgy and needs to be rewritten. In addition, those parents preparing for infant Baptism need to present the families with the positive aspects of Baptism. There is no need for any emphasis on 'Original Sin' for a child who is without personal sin when it may only confuse or alienate the parents needlessly.

Rather than being a high point for the parents in their preparation and celebration of their little ones, this Sacrament is in danger of yet another blockage to an authentic commitment to receiving the ever-present love of Jesus.

On a positive note, this could be the time to gently challenge parents to review their own faith, to remind them of God's love and the power of belonging to the faith community. It is also an opportunity to remind them that the initiation is celebrated in each reception of the Eucharist, the gift that Jesus gave to his followers at the Last Supper.

MAUREEN RYAN is a Member of the ARC Secretariat and she is on the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation team for children in the newly combined Catholic Church Communities of the Upper Blue Mountains

The Quiet Exodus: Why Young Women are Drifting from the Church

Christine Jolly

As senior staff with the University Fellowship of Christians at the University of Tasmania, I have the unique privilege of walking alongside Gen Z women and men as they navigate faith, purpose and community during a formative time in their lives. The recent data from sources like the [2022 Australian Community Survey](#), hinting at a divergence in church engagement between young men and women, sparks vital conversations. While young men may increasingly claim Christian identity, we are seeing a nuanced, often silent shift among young women: a quiet quitting of the church.

This isn't a loud, rebellious exit. It is a gradual disengagement, a slow drift away from formal church involvement, even if they still hold to Christian belief. To truly understand this phenomenon, we must look beyond simplistic answers and instead consider the complex interplay of historical, societal and theological factors.

The Shifting Sands of Society

Our religious landscape is never static; it constantly interacts with the broader cultural currents. Gen Z has grown up in a rapidly secularising Western world, saturated with digital information and diverse perspectives. They are often acutely aware of social injustices and societal inequalities. This context shapes their expectations of any community, including the church.

For young women, the intersection of faith with evolving societal expectations around career, education and personal autonomy is particularly salient. If the church feels out of step with these realities, or if its teachings seem to perpetuate outdated norms, it creates a subtle but persistent friction.

Peta, in her thirties, reflected to me: 'When I was young, I thought in black and white, my whole life revolved around church. I supported the party that my church repeatedly said was the only one Christians 'in any good conscience' could vote for. I had the energy to commit to 101 things and so was able to win the favour that I've now all but given up on with church

leadership. I'm sort of resolved to being a permanent outsider now, because I think very differently and no longer gel with as many people. I didn't have to when I was young, but now I'd need to be a contortionist to fit in, and the will for all of that has left me. I am still part of it, but at the moment I have a sense that I just don't belong there.'

The Unspoken Assumption: God's Goodness

One of the most profound insights from my work with university students is that the inherent goodness of God is no longer a foundational assumption for many in this emerging generation. While they might grasp the goodness of creation, the very character of God as merciful, gracious and abounding in faithful love (as described in Exodus 34:6-7) isn't a given.

I experienced this firsthand in an evangelism training where I had to 'punch the pause button' to establish this truth before discussing God's judgment of sin. The hunger for this understanding was palpable, especially among young women in the group, many of whom photographed the Exodus passage and its scriptural allusions I had mapped out on butcher's paper for the training. If God is primarily presented as a figure of rules or judgment, without a clear, consistent grounding in [God's] profound love and desire for human flourishing, the entire message of the church can feel alienating. Why engage if the foundation feels shaky or unloving?

Why the 'Quiet Quitting'?

So, what are the specific factors contributing to young women's quiet departure?

1. *Feeling Unseen and Unheard:* Young women are seeking communities where their voices are genuinely valued, their questions are engaged with thoughtfully and their experiences are understood. If they perceive that their concerns are dismissed or their perspectives are marginalised, disengagement naturally follows.

2. *Unequal Participation:* Biblically, women have played vital roles in the early church – from evangelists (Samaritan woman), prophets (Philip's daughters), deacons (Phoebe), to being imprisoned and notable among the apostles (Junia), to partners

in ministry (Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Euodia, Syntyche, Nympha, Apphia), to founders of charitable movements (Dorcas). However, historically, institutional limitations have often stifled their full participation. When young women don't see clear pathways to meaningfully use their gifts, it signals that their full potential isn't valued. As Romans 12:4-8 reminds us, the body of Christ thrives when all its diverse parts function.

3. *Lack of Relevance*: If sermons, programs or community discussions fail to address the complex issues young women navigate – mental health, social justice, career aspirations, healthy relationships are just some – the church can feel disconnected from their lived realities.

4. *Perceived Hypocrisy or Injustice*: Young women are often acutely attuned to inconsistencies. If they witness abuse scandals, unhealthy power dynamics or a lack of accountability within the church, it erodes their trust. Similarly, if the church's practices seem to embody sexism or gender bias, it conflicts with their core values of equality and justice.

The Shadow of Patriarchy: As scholars like Beth Allison Barr and Kristin Du Mez suggest, the 'sin of patriarchy' – systems of power that subordinate women – can be a significant driver of disengagement. When church culture feels rooted in '1950s domestic ideals' rather than the radical inclusivity taught and lived by Jesus, it alienates those seeking a truly Christ-like community. This isn't about rejecting the church; it's often a rejection of structures that feel oppressive or unbiblical.

Interacting Trends: Men and Women

The increased interest in Christianity among some Gen Z men, particularly those leaning traditional, and the disengagement of young women are interacting trends. If the church's response to the former leads to an increased focus on rigid gender roles or a less inclusive environment, it risks further alienating young women. Elizabeth Hance writes for *The Gospel Coalition* of the need for 'good shepherds' in traditional churches to step up. They can make a

marked difference to whether a young woman stays or leaves her church. Today, in the eyes of many young women, a 'good shepherd' isn't just one who is kind, but one who listens deeply and actively champions and empowers all members to flourish.

Beyond Assumptions: Fostering Flourishing

Hance's idea that highly-educated, 'left-leaning' women will eventually find the promises of feminism 'empty' and return to traditional norms feels like a misreading of the situation. Many women, deeply committed to equality, also have vibrant faith lives. Their critique of church structures often stems from a profound desire for justice driven by their confidence in God's character, not a lack of need for God.

To counter the quiet exodus, churches must embody the goodness of God in their very structures and culture. This means:

- *Actively Listening*: Creating genuine spaces where young women's questions, doubts and critiques are heard and engaged with respect;
- *Empowering Participation*: Ensuring women are reflected in all aspects of church life, including leading, teaching and decision-making, acknowledging and cultivating their diverse spiritual gifts;
- *Demonstrating Relevance*: Connecting faith to the issues that matter to young women, living out justice and compassion in tangible ways.

The future of the church hinges on its ability to be a place where young women don't just stay, but thrive – a community that truly reflects the compassionate, gracious and empowering heart of God for all [God's] children.

CHRISTINE JOLLY studied at seminary in the United States of America and have been serving the local church and wider community in many ways since moving to Tasmania in 2007.

This article was posted on the WADR Project and arose from a project they did on June 23, 2025.. Reprinted with permission.

Stained Glass Ceiling Smashed:

Anglican women get their fair share
of God's work

Noelene Uren

This headline in a recent edition of *The Australian* newspaper caught my attention, immediately followed by the thought: 'And when are Catholic women going to get their fair share of God's work?'

The traditionalist Anglican dioceses are still holding out against involving and promoting women in the clergy, but gradually the number of women who can serve as deacons, priests and bishops is increasing. And why not? In the political and corporate worlds, women do the same jobs as men, including filling top leadership roles. However, gender remains an issue in our Church and consequently young women are leaving the Church in droves – highly articulate, strong and empathetic women who could and would enrich the Church by their leadership.

But no, we are stuck with all the biblical and historical precedents that exclude women and so we had, at Pope Francis's funeral, men lining up in their rich vestments and not a sign of a woman amongst the seemingly endless forest of men. But there are also precedents set by Christ in the way he included women, perhaps none more significant than the story of Martha and Mary. Martha is doing all the things that were then (and now) seen as women's work: serving her guests, providing food and hospitality. Mary on the other hand has taken up the position of the Rabbi's student, horrifying all those present, including Martha, left to do all the work. Jewish women at that time were not permitted to be taught the Torah, touch the scriptures or take part in

public debate. Yet Jesus defends Mary's right to be there. Did Jesus envisage and want to encourage a freedom for women not even thought of in his own day but maybe possible in the future?

If I appear negative and critical of the Church, to which I have belonged since I was baptised ninety years ago, then yes, I am, and it is because I grieve for what is being lost by the failure to include women in the ministry. I have talked to so many women, young and old, who feel as I do, aware of how the life of the Church would be enriched by women in the clergy and angry that the gifts of the other half of the human race are being so steadfastly overlooked.

In the recent movie, *Conclave*, Hollywood's take on the Papal election, one scene with Isabella Rossellini stands out. As Sister Agnes she has information that the Cardinals don't and she is aware of its importance. So she approaches the Cardinals with the opening line, 'I know that I am supposed to be silent'. She then points out that God has, however, given her ears to hear and a tongue to speak.

Yes, God has given us women eyes, ears, a tongue and a brain. The Church needs all the help it can get to do God's work in these difficult and trying times. Maybe, as a political slogan once advertised, 'IT'S TIME'.

NOELENE UREN is a retired Primary School Principal,
a member of the ARC Secretariat
and a long-time contributor to *ARCVoice*

Catholicism's future hinges on reconciling competing worldviews

(Dr) Joe Grayland

The recent controversy surrounding the awarding of the Josef Pieper Prize to U.S. Bishop Robert Barron highlights a profound theological and cultural rift within global Catholicism.

The Josef Pieper Prize is regarded as a significant honour in German-speaking Catholic academia, signifying that the recipient's work reflects intellectual depth, faith engagement and cultural relevance.

The fierce criticism from the Catholic Theological Faculty at the University of Münster is not merely about one individual. It symbolises a broader clash between two divergent Catholic worldviews – those shaped by American and German historical trajectories.

The American Catholic trajectory

In the United States, Catholicism has increasingly aligned itself with cultural conservatism and political nationalism.

Rooted in a history of religious voluntarism and individualism, American Catholic theology often prioritises doctrinal clarity, moral absolutism and apologetics aimed at preserving Catholic identity in a pluralistic society.

Influenced by the ethos of American exceptionalism and post-1960s political realignments, a significant portion of U.S. Catholic leadership has adopted positions that merge religious orthodoxy with right-wing political ideology.

This outlook is evident in support for policies that resist LGBTQ+ inclusion, advocate for traditional gender roles and blur the lines between Christian morality and nationalist agendas.

While admired by many, critics argue Bishop Barron aligns with networks that support authoritarian movements, risking a vision of Catholicism that divides believers into rigid categories of 'us' and 'them'.

Bishop Barron as emblematic

Within this context, Bishop Barron exemplifies the trend. Though intellectually sophisticated and popular among many lay Catholics, he is seen by critics as cooperating with religious-political networks that support autocratic movements in the U.S. and Europe.

Under the guise of defending timeless religious truths, this strand of Catholicism often engages in identity politics that exclude those who fall outside traditional norms – queer people, migrants and religious pluralists among them. As the Münster faculty argues, such theology risks weaponising faith, dividing the world into 'us' and 'them' under a banner of orthodoxy that is politically charged.

A German theological perspective

Criticism from Germany comes out of a very different history. German Catholicism, profoundly shaped by the traumas of the 20th century – most notably the Holocaust and the authoritarian misuse of religion under National Socialism – has cultivated a theological approach that is cautious of rigid dogmatism and wary of politicised religion.

The German theological tradition, particularly after the Second Vatican Council, has emphasised historical consciousness, social ethics and human dignity.

In this context, theology is not a battleground for ideological purity. It is understood as a pastoral and intellectual endeavour to accompany a broken world marked by exclusion, violence and complexity.

A theology of justice and inclusion

For German theologians, the God of Jesus Christ stands with the oppressed and the marginalised. Any credible theology must engage critically with the real social and political wounds of contemporary life.

This includes affirming the dignity of LGBTQ+ individuals, welcoming migrants and safeguarding democratic institutions from populist distortion.

The Church is called not to defend cultural power, but to witness humbly to justice, mercy and solidarity.

A fault line for the future

The Barron controversy, therefore, is not simply an academic quarrel. It reveals a fault line within global Catholicism.

American Catholicism, shaped by cultural anxiety and a defensive posture, often seeks to preserve what it sees as a threatened moral order.

German Catholicism, chastened by history, leans toward a theology of reconciliation, ethical reflection and openness to difference.

The Church's future may well depend on how it navigates these competing visions – and whether it chooses a path of power or of prophetic witness.

Dr Joe Grayland is an assistant lecturer in the Department of Liturgy at the University of Wuerzburg (Germany). He has also been a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Palmerston North (New Zealand) for more than 30 years. (Reprinted with explicit permission from 'Flashes of Insight', published by **Church Resources Ltd**, a charitable limited liability company registered in New Zealand)

Papal Infallibility and Cultural Relativism

Alan Clague

Relativism refers to the belief that the truth of a proposal depends on the environment of that proposal. It has been debated since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, although the word itself is of 19th century origin. It can be subdivided into different classes encompassing the nature of the proposal, including moral, cultural and factual relativism.

The late Cardinal Pell was an outspoken critic of ‘relativism’, although he really restricted his criticism to moral relativism. Pope Benedict XVI also was a vocal critic of relativism. It was blamed for the moral decline of modern society, especially Western society, and roundly condemned.

The basis of Christian morality is the Bible. Jesus named Peter as the rock on which he built his Church (Matt 16:17-19), although he also gave authority to the apostles (Matt 18:18). Thus, Catholics accept the Catholic Church as the Christ-ordained arbiter of morality and Christian belief. This ‘rock’ of Peter was the biblical basis of the papal infallibility defined in the 19th century by the Vatican I Council.

As the Church expanded and stabilised in the first few centuries, the main centres of Church authority were located at Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria, presided over by Patriarchs. The Pope at Rome was considered pre-eminent. Major decisions were made by Councils, which were convened by various patriarchs or the Roman Emperor himself who resided at Constantinople. They were not the exclusive prerogative of the Pope, and the See of Rome representatives at these early Councils were a minority group. The early Councils, such as that at Nicaea in 325 defined dogmas and condemned heresies. The Nicene Creed arose from some of these early Councils. They were held at various sites in the Eastern Roman empire. After the schism that separated the Orthodox Churches from the Catholic Church, Councils were held in Western Europe and were applicable to the Catholic Church alone.

Great damage was done to the prestige of the Church and the Papacy at the time of the election of competing Popes at Rome and Avignon. This Western Schism lasted from 1378 to 1417, and was resolved finally at the Council of Constance (1414), which resolved also that Councils had more authority than the Pope, although this was disputed

subsequently. The fifteenth century was a time of papal weakness and strength of Conciliarism, which endorsed the claim that Ecumenical Councils had greater authority than the Pope.

Pope Pius IX was initially a liberal Pope who introduced a number of reforms, but he changed when Garibaldi threatened incorporation of the Papal States into a united Italy. He convoked the First Vatican Council, the 20th Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church in 1868, and it opened in 1869. One of the main issues discussed was papal infallibility, which was passed almost unanimously after some initial dissent.

After Vatican I, Cardinal Saint John Henry Newman wrote ‘An Essay on Development of Christian Doctrine’, an in-depth analysis. He considered development of doctrine a consequence of social development. In particular, he also documented the early acceptance of the seniority of the Bishop of Rome.

The purpose of this truncated account of the creation of Catholic doctrine is to illustrate that the early Church had a different understanding to the nature of the seniority of the Pope to that defined in 1870. What was considered appropriate, when the centre of secular power was at Constantinople and the Church itself had multiple centres of authority, was found to be inappropriate in modern times when much of the Eastern Church had broken from Rome. This seniority was developed to its final expression in Vatican I. To claim an over-riding Papal authority to define doctrine for the Church today requires acceptance of the changing role of the Pope with the changing human environment. This is a definition of relativism; in this case, cultural relativism.

Over the two millennia of its existence, the Catholic Church has been involved in many activities that we now find abhorrent. Some things are inexcusable, but in many cases we are looking at the influence of different times. In other words, our justification of what we would consider now to be Church failings invokes an argument of relativism.

There are dangers in a blanket condemnation of relativism by conservative elements in the Catholic Church. In practice, even moral relativism is relevant to explain some of the spectrum of human behaviour, and its changes over the millennia. Would the Church accept the morality of the torture and execution of the Inquisition? In particular, cultural relativism must be invoked to explain the development of Papal authority over the millennia with its final flowering 150 years ago into Papal Infallibility.

We Need to Discuss the Future of ARC

JOHN BUGGY

When Australian Reforming Catholics began in the year 2000, so many of its members were in the broad category we generally call ‘middle-aged’. As ARC grew, largely because we held face-to-face conferences in those early years, the cohort of new members tended to mainly be of that same age bracket. Now, twenty-five years later, we need to reassess our situation.

We sent emails out just recently to everyone that we have in our records asking if we still have their correct contact details, along with a gentle reminder about membership subscriptions until June 2026. Only a handful of members replied about the contact details (perhaps, if they were still getting *ARC*Voice**, most considered that a reply was not necessary). But the more concerning issue is that, up to this point, only a little over half of those in our records have renewed their membership for the coming year. We continue to send everyone copies of *ARC*Voice** and only a few are ever returned to sender.

The result is that we do not actually know how many are, or wish to be, financial members in a situation where costs are constantly rising. More than half of those who are financial are very appreciative of ARC and are very generous in the adding of donations. The ARC Secretariat can only conclude that many members have moved, not

realising that they are no longer receiving *ARC*Voice**, have lost contact owing to a changed email address, or have become incapacitated or passed away with no one informing us of this fact.

While financially ARC could continue as it does now for a few years, the time has come to consider its viability. Can the amount of work required be justified for a diminishing number of members? Could fewer members achieve or gain something in a different way? Could ARC as an organ for Church reform effectively continue? Or should we be winding down, using our remaining resources to archive our published contributions in the push for Church reform as other reform organisations have done recently?

These questions must be addressed at our next Annual General Meeting. The meeting this year will be held on **Thursday the 13th of November, 2025 at 4.30 pm (AEDT)**.

Please mark this Zoom meeting in your diary to ensure it is not forgotten. Given the above, we must make some very important decisions in the months following this meeting. The ARC Secretariat is very open to you, the members, to help determine how we should decide.

JOHN BUGGY is the Spokesperson for ARC Secretariat

The Parish as a Prophetic Community

Extract from:

Eugene Stockton: *Reflections Parish Reform*

Talk of prophecy may seem to be out of this world, hardly of practical concern in the day-to-day life of a parish. Yet St. Paul in 1 Cor.14 speaks of prophecy as part of the ordinary experience of the church community, indeed one of its vital functions. Paul describes it as the gifted service by which the Holy Spirit makes use of certain disciples to speak to other people.

He who prophesies speaks to men for their up-building and encouragement and reassurance. (v.3)

This 'up-building' not only builds up the person but also the community: He who prophesies builds up the church. (v.4)

Even the unbeliever can be caught up short in his tracks by prophecy:

He is convicted ... and called to account
The secrets of his heart are disclosed and so falling on his face he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. (vv. 24-25)

That is how the prophet mirrors to the uncommitted the secret yearnings for God they hardly admit to themselves, and why a prophetic word in a gathering can bring to shared consciousness what has been stirring subconsciously in the hearts of all.

Prophecy is not a rare occurrence or something which belonged to the far-off infancy of the Church. All the time, and in the most ordinary ways, God speaks to us through a friend, a minister, a teacher, a parent, a spouse or a total stranger, in order to build us up, to encourage, to counsel, to confirm what is deeply stirring within us. Sometimes the one who speaks is surprised at what comes from his/her mouth, for it may not be this person's normal manner of thinking and speaking. Most often he/she will not notice. Yet there should be no surprise that prophecy is a commonplace gift in the Church. We are children of God, right within the family circle of the Trinity, and functioning members (i.e. limbs and

organs) of the Body of Christ. Like thin wire carrying a powerful charge of electricity or a telephone call, so extraordinary power and words from God are coursing through us, as we interact organically in the Body. As we minister to each other, we are charged and tingling with the Spirit of God. This should make us alert to prophecy (as well as to the other charisms of the Spirit) and ready to be carried along by it. The tragedy for the Church is when this sparkling gift is ignored or dampened:

Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying but test everything. (1 Thes. 5:20)

The early Church was aware of the danger of false prophecy, as Israel had been before it (Deut. 18:20-22; Jer. 28). There has always been a temptation for persons claiming to be prophets to seek their own ends, engaging in self-promotion, political power play or hysterical denunciation. It was soon recognised that, if the Spirit of God was truly at work in a prophet (or any other charismatic), the person and work should display the 'fruit of the Spirit', the rounded package of Christlike qualities:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Gal. 5:22)

Earlier, Jesus had warned against 'false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. By their fruit you shall know them' (Mt. 7:15-16).

Paul, continuing his classic treatment of prophecy in 1 Cor. 14, seems to imply that prophecy is a gift to the whole community, not just to the individual. Its exercise is to be regulated, as are other charismatic gifts, by the harmony of the community:

Let two or three prophets speak and let others weigh what is said ... (for) the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. (vv.29-32)

I interpret that to mean that the whole community is prophetic, some being graced to give (active prophecy), others to receive and verify (passive prophecy). Reception and discernment of prophecy is just as important as its delivery, for if a prophetic word is not heard, it is ineffectual and lost. Fruitful reception is equally as prophetic as delivery, and God's grace is working in both. The caller needs to be alert and faithful in discerning God's call and expressing it. The one called needs to be alert and welcoming, discerning whether the call is from God and affirming it. True prophecy includes both the

original call and its affirmation by the prophetic community. As Paul concludes: So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy. (v.39)

We can expect prophecy to occur in parish assemblies, parish councils, management committees, and further when the parish reaches out and witnesses to the broader community (e.g. ethical investments, solar panels, collaboration with civic and interfaith bodies, publications, entertainment, etc).

Grace welcoming Grace

In the early Church, prophets sometimes wandered from community to community, helping to build up the local church (Ac. 11:27; 21:10-11). Hospitality to such wandering prophets was a valued service (Matt. 10:40-41; Ac. 16:15; 18:27; Rom. 12:13; 3 Jn. 58). In 1 Pet. 4:9-11 we seem to catch a glimpse of this interaction:

- Practise hospitality ungrudgingly to one another.
- As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:
- Whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles (*logos*) of God, whoever renders service (*diakonia*) as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies.

As Peter speaks of gift, he seems to understand it in the same way as Paul speaks of charism, by which the Spirit speaks and ministers through us. But since he prefaces the teaching with the urging to practise hospitality, he may have in mind especially the gift of the visiting prophet, who comes to deliver God's call (*logos*) and the reciprocal gift of the host, who, serving (*diakonia*) with God's strength receives the call. *Diakonia*, already a technical word in the New Testament Church, seems to have designated not only an active ministry but a receptive one as well. Like waiters in a restaurant, the first deacons were appointed 'to serve at tables' (Ac. 6:2-3). Jesus taught that the ideal of greatness in the Kingdom is to aspire to be last of all and the servant (*diakonos*) of all, and he went on to explain that such service was to welcome little ones in his name, so welcoming him and the One who sent him (Mk. 9:33-37). Matt. 10:41, in a similar context, speaks of welcoming prophets. So, summing up 1 Pet. 4:9-11: in the prophetic encounter, one speaks and the other serves welcomingly, each under the power of God.

This is vividly illustrated in the gospel story of Jesus visiting Martha and Mary (Lk. 10:38-42), a story which may have been preserved precisely because it underlined a common happening in the Church. Jesus on his journey was welcomed by Martha into her home. Her sister Mary 'sat at his feet and listened to his word' (*logos*), while Martha 'was distracted with much serving' (*diakonia*). At Martha's complaint, Jesus gently rebuked her for being

'... anxious and troubled about many things; only one is needed and Mary has chosen the better part.'

So, when the prophet comes, the best reception, the proper service, is to listen.

For Consideration

- Real conversation is a dialogue that goes back and forth between a point deep within you and the deep centre within your friend. A conversation, though it may seem light and informal, can be a graced occasion in God's terms. At any time, He may be speaking through one or other of us, even in a most carefree atmosphere. Be alert not only for the bombshell of prophecy, which is probably rare, but more often for that series of prophetic pinpricks which add up to something you need to hear at the moment. If you are drawn to say something important to a friend and desist, perhaps through fear of rejection or ridicule, your friend may be deprived of a special grace. If in conversation you 'hog' the airwaves, you may be deprived of a prophetic word meant for you at the time and now lost forever.
- A prophetic word may make little sense to the speaker. Such words can be like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, bizarre in shape and colour, but together they all add up to a complete picture. What I have to say may fit in with what others are saying at the time and with the current, often hidden, circumstances of the hearer.
- If it enters your head to drop a line or call a friend on the telephone, go ahead. You never know what might happen.

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Rerum Novarum

Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII

Capital and Labour

15 May 1891



Pope Leo XIII (Italian: *Leone XIII*; born **Gioacchino Vincenzo Raffaele Luigi Pecci**;^[a] 2 March 1810–20 July 1903) was head of the Catholic Church from 1878 until his death in 1903. He had the fourth-longest reign of any pope, behind those of [Peter the Apostle](#), [Pius IX](#) (his predecessor), and [John Paul II](#).

R*erum Novarum*, issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, addresses the social and economic issues arising from the Industrial Revolution, particularly the plight of the working class. It establishes the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching by emphasizing the dignity of work, the rights of workers, and the responsibilities of both employers and the state. The encyclical rejects both socialism and unregulated capitalism, advocating for a just society guided by Christian principles. Here's a more detailed breakdown:

Key Themes and Principles:

Dignity of Labor:

Rerum Novarum affirms the inherent dignity of human labour and the importance of work as a means of earning a livelihood and contributing to society.

Rights of Workers:

It defends the rights of workers to form trade unions, to a just wage sufficient to support their families, and to safe working conditions.

Responsibilities of Employers:

The encyclical emphasises that employers have a moral obligation to treat their workers with respect, provide fair wages and ensure safe working environments.

Role of the State:

The document acknowledges the role of the state in protecting the rights of workers and promoting the common good, but emphasises that state intervention should be limited and follow the principle of subsidiarity.

Rejection of Socialism:

Rerum Novarum rejects socialism, particularly its emphasis on class struggle and the abolition of private property.

Affirmation of Private Property:

The encyclical affirms the right to private property, but also emphasises the social responsibility that comes with ownership, requiring individuals to use their property for the benefit of others.

Preferential Option for the Poor:

Rerum Novarum highlights the need to prioritise the needs of the poor and vulnerable in society, calling for a just distribution of resources and opportunities.

Importance of Family:

The encyclical stresses the importance of family as the foundational unit of society and emphasizes the need to protect its rights and well-being.

Rejection of Unfettered Capitalism:

Rerum Novarum criticises the excesses of unregulated capitalism, particularly its tendency to exploit workers and prioritise profit over human well-being.

In essence, *Rerum Novarum* provides a framework for a just and equitable society based on Christian principles, addressing the social and economic challenges of the Industrial Revolution and laying the foundation for Catholic Social Teaching.

. (Source: *Wikipedia*)

Rerum Novarum was the encyclical referred to by John Buggy in his Editorial in *ARC*Voice* 97* and in this issue's article by Michael Sibert.



Shining bright Living loud Standing together

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ARCVoice is a report of news, opinions and reflections on the renewal and reform currently experienced in the Catholic Church.

Your contributions, letters, articles or comments are most welcome.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or of ARC.

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