



arvoice

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Will Synodality Help to Bring About Church Reform?

This may well be the question that many Catholics seeking real reform may be asking. Will the introduction of the process of Synodality into our diocese and parishes open up a desire for genuine participation by the laity in decision-making? When Pope Francis spoke about decision-making, he used an analogy of the hierarchical pyramid of the Church needing to be turned upside down in order to illustrate a necessary radical change in influence and accountability. The 'listening' aspect of Synodality would give an impetus to support this and Pope Leo is carrying this forward.

It is interesting that we have two articles in this issue with contrasting perspectives on Church reform. John A Dick calls for doctrinal, not just structural, transformation and questions how authoritative Synodality is or can be without it. Shane Dwyer states that 'Radical attention to the Church itself . . . is what we mean by *reform*' but weakens his definition by not including teaching and doctrines. It is difficult to see how there is anything 'radical' in this when so many Catholics, including those regularly practising, have openly expressed frustration about what they are told to believe.

So, what can we expect to arise out of Synodality in relation to true reform? Already there has been a lot of activity across some Australian dioceses with various group formations involved in lengthy discussions and with some preparing for a local diocesan synod. We already know that there are some influential bishops who are not in tune with its spirit, but will go through the motions. If the bishop 'hand picks' a group, who will conduct the 'listening' and the structured meetings and is it this group who will who will prepare the documentation and recommend -dations that the bishop alone will decide upon, then who has done the listening that leads to the results? It is not unreasonable to suspect that the chosen group might lean towards what they think the bishop would

like to hear, especially if they are in his employ. And has the bishop done any direct listening in such a process?

We expect that even the bishops who want to have an effective and transparent Synodality process will struggle with setting up appropriate representation of clergy, religious and laity. And what about the large majority of Catholics who are not regular Mass attenders but whose children fill the Catholic schools? If inclusiveness is the accompanying goal, then some very careful listening will have to take place that is not generally in the culture in which clerics move.

Synodality is not, in itself, likely to bring about the reform that we need. It may, however, create a new ethos in some places where inclusiveness is followed and those involved are truly representative of others in the diocesan and parish councils that flow from it. Key issues will then be hard to avoid. For example, as progressively women have a position from which to show that refusal to ordain them is nothing more than misogyny and that others illustrate that particular aspects of what is being preached is uneducated and unbelievable, the stone of certainty in doctrine may begin to crumble.

John Buggy

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Letters

Bishop Pat Power shared his compassion across society. Refugees, world peace, justice in Palestine were all in his sights.

In the early 2000s, I began writing a column for a funeral company's magazine called *Dialogue* edited by Richard White. My personal encounters with people on the social edge caught Bishop Power's attention and he wrote to me. Our sustaining correspondence continued for some years. He recalled his Lebanese mother and, as noted, he went to Lebanon in 2008. His account of that journey moved me deeply and I sent him a copy of my memoir. We are vulnerable on the path to reclaim lost or concealed or unknown parts of ourselves but the integration is strengthening. Bishop Pat was a humble man of big mind and large heart who took the time to lift me as I fumbled across pages. He deliberately touched many of us, enriching the world by his presence.

Thank you and Vale Father Pat.

*Cecile Yazbek
Asquith, NSW*

A brief note to thank you for the ARC AGM yesterday. I was encouraged by it. Your report was informative, and I appreciated the members' sharing and comments, including on...

- Synodality, and especially the need for formation;
- Noeline's comments on the Church's refusal to fully utilise the enormous capacity of women members of our Church;
- The constructive idea of using *Laudato Si* to connect with youth.

This was my first AGM, one I appreciated.

*Kevin Wringe
Perth*

Another article on Pope Leo which would fit in well with *ARCVoice*. I receive a lot of these articles from a friend in St Louis who is an ex-nun. She supports what ARC is trying to achieve. She also really enjoys *ARCVoice*. I have not asked her to pay a subscription as she circulates each edition to her ex-community of the Sisters of Corondlet, initially a French Order of nuns. They are very forward-thinking.

*Denis Mockler
Pennant Hills*

Today I received the September edition of *ARCVoice*. I am prompted by John Buggy's article 'We Need to Discuss the Future of ARC'. It is my deepest wish that *ARCVoice* continues publication. The articles are excellent. Wonderful writers, insightful, balanced and much-needed in our times. With my strong encouragement, my deep gratitude and best wishes.

*Kevin Wringe
Perth*

Dear John, Thank you for your email. After forty years of campaigning on social justice issues, we have reached a point where we can no longer continue as an organisation, as age takes over. Therefore Catholics in Coalition for Justice and Peace is closing down. We are sure that many other organisations will continue the work of raising awareness and bringing Governments to account. Our own members, we are sure, will continue working for social justice as long as we breathe!

May we thank you and all at ARC for the wonderful work you have been doing over the years in bringing fresh ideas and reality to the Catholic community. With our best wishes,

*Cecily May
Secretary
for
Sr Anne Lane pbvm
Convenor, CCJP*

New ARC Secretariat

Elected at the AGM: Four new nominees, each supported by two seconders, were elected at the AGM on 13th November. They are: Laurie Chilko, Jim Potts, Brian Bright and Peter Albion (who will take on the role of Webmaster).

Six former members re-nominated. They are: Noelene Uren, Shirley Lohman, Alan Clague, Margaret Knowlden (*ARCVoice* Editor), Patrick Nunan (Treasurer), and John Buggy (Spokesperson and Public Officer).

A strong expression of thanks is extended to those who retired after giving most valuable service to ARC: Rob Brian, Maureen Ryan, Michael Sibert and Denis Mockler.

Not what I imagined or hoped for

Peter Albion

I approached Eugene Stockton's pieces in *ARCVoice* 97 (June 2025) with interest and hope. Three 'articles' appeared in that issue with the rest to follow in subsequent issues.

Part 1, *Times are a-Changing*, seemed to strike the right notes, acknowledging that the world had changed and our church must change in response. The observation that 'the signs of the time' are calling us to let go of the culture which used to support our faith and practice ... and, as childhood merges into adulthood, to embrace the maturing of the Church in a new age had echoes of Tomáš Halik's *The Afternoon of Christianity* which I had been reading after seeing an interview and review on *Commonweal*. Both make the point that what has worked in the past may not work as the world changes, and the Church will need to change for a different age as it has done more than once over the centuries. The critique of the present parish arrangement as a hangover from the feudal system of Christendom is apt. So too is the assessment that the corporate approach of clustering parishes is not a solution.

Part 2, *Models of Pastoral Care other than the Parish* offers some interesting historical models of leadership and ministry in the church. All of the examples offered appear to have been responsible to the local culture and needs. Those from 5th century Palestine and (given the use of present tense) contemporary Orthodox churches seemed to reflect the earliest practices of appointing leaders for ministry from a local community with limited formal preparation. Although Halik is clear that the way forward is not through attempting to recapture the distant past, I think that we can take lessons from the simplicity of the first decades and centuries to guide future development.

Having followed those pieces with hope for what might be proposed, Part 3, *Re-imagining the Parish for the 21st Century*, was disappointing to say the least. It begins by reiterating the need to move away from feudalism and focus instead on the Eucharistic community and ends with a note about Vatican II placing the Mass at the centre of Christian life, echoing the frequently quoted description of

the Eucharist as 'summit and source'. However, I found what comes between profoundly disappointing.

In my understanding the liturgical changes emanating from Vatican II, including turning the altar for the celebrant to face the community, brought the celebration of the Eucharistic meal to the centre of communal life. In Part I there was criticism of the 'service station mentality', but what is a Sunday communion service using consecrated hosts from a previous Mass if not a 'service station'. Rather than moving the church forward to address changing needs this appears to move backward to an earlier age.

The Palestinian and Orthodox examples given in Part 2 gave me hope that the way forward might be to appoint (ordain if we must) suitable celebrants from local communities. Both examples appeared to require minimal formal preparation which must also have been the case in the early Church. Does it really require six years of philosophy and theology to prepare for celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy? That learning has seldom been evident in homilies that I have heard in my 70+ years of attending Sunday Mass. Why can we not adopt the model described for some Orthodox communities and select one or more parishioners (community members) to undergo minimal training as community celebrants? If Eucharist is truly 'summit and source', how can we tolerate church communities that are unable to celebrate it regularly?

Having laid the foundations for proposing a radical path forward in the first two 'articles', the third does not build on them but simply offers more of the same. It is neither a new vision nor a radical recovery of the past. We need to recover what has been lost through centuries of clerical feudalism and propose new ways to meet current and future needs.

What did others think about the three pieces in *ARCVoice* June 2025? Do you agree with my comments or do you think I have pushed too far?

Peter has put this question for comment on the ARC website www.australianreformingcatholics.au inviting your input. Click on 'Noticeboard' then 'Have Your Say'.)

Peter Albion is Professor Emeritus at the University of Southern Queensland from where he retired in 2017 as Professor of Educational Technology. He is now on the ARC Secretariat.

No Membership Subscription – No *ARCVoice*

We have sent out reminders that subscriptions for 2025-2026 were due in July and have tried to contact directly as many ARC members as possible. Unfortunately, after this issue, we can no longer send out *ARCVoice* by Australia Post to those who have not paid a membership subscription. Please pay your subscription if you have not done so, or contact us if you are uncertain about your payment or have a difficulty. Payment details are on the back page of this edition.

Vale

Bishop Pat Power

Michael McGirr

Bishop Patrick Power never worried about being popular. As a result, he became enormously loved and respected. When the auxiliary bishop of Canberra/Goulburn was named as the ACT Citizen of The Year in 2009, everyone was delighted but few were surprised. His impact reached far beyond Catholic circles. He laughed and said they must have been scraping the barrel to get down to him.

Father Pat, as he was commonly known, was born in Cooma in 1942 but grew up in Queanbeyan, a railway town adjacent to Canberra but culturally quite distinct. The poet Les Murray used to stir the pot by saying ‘there were more notable buildings in Queanbeyan than Canberra’. Pat was not quite as outlandish, but he did like to remind people that Queanbeyan was there long before Canberra started taking over sheep paddocks beside the Molonglo. When he retired in 2012, he said:

If my mother taught me the unconditional love of God, it was my father who showed me what it meant to stand up against injustice and to be in solidarity with people who are struggling. Growing up in Queanbeyan, I never objected to it being called Struggletown because I felt that term epitomised many of the most admirable of my hometown’s qualities.

Pat was in the seminary from 1959 to 1965 and found life there difficult because ‘much of the formation seemed to be removed from the realities of life’. He became a priest in 1965 and a bishop in 1986.

Father Pat was always pushing the envelope. He developed a special ministry, visiting priests and brothers imprisoned at the Junee Correctional Centre, 230 km from his home. He told me how difficult this was. First, visits were only allowed on the weekend when he had many other duties to fulfil. Second, he was only allowed to visit one person per trip, so he had to go back and forth repeatedly. The travel was gruelling. Most of all, the sex offenders he was visiting were among the most despised people in the country. Pat was well aware of the damage they had done. He wrote vigorously in support of the Royal Commission into institutional child abuse, saying ‘the truth will set us free’. But he believed that nobody



ever stopped being human and, besides, the criminals were part of us and their crimes had been committed from within the Catholic Church. I admired him but doubted I’d ever be able to make such visits myself. He was in a different league.

He took risks for the Gospel. He memorably shirtfronted John Howard, then prime minister, about sending troops to Iraq, after a church service. A phalanx of other religious dignitaries of various denominations stood around him in their finery, shaking Howard’s hand. Not Pat. Howard was furious and took off in a great huff. I rang Pat that night after seeing the spectacle on TV. He said his legs were still shaking. Fear never stopped him. He never believed in weapons of mass destruction. He was more likely to celebrate a Mass of weapons destruction.

Every year, we waited for his Christmas letter. He never wrote much about himself, which told you more about him than if he had. The letter was full of the names and groups of people he mixed with and whose company nurtured his faith in Christ, whom he believed was to be encountered at the margins of society. From the residents of the Narrabundah Longstay Caravan Park to refugees who’d recently arrived in Canberra to those whose children died as victims of drug culture. He sat with them all.

Older people may recall the *ad limina* visit of the Australian bishops to Pope John Paul II in 1998. A small number of self-important zealots had wormed their way into the Pope’s ear. As a result, his instructions to the Australian bishops were less than warm and critical of their giving in to the relativism of Australian culture, which was hardly what the bishops had been doing. He was especially harsh about the use of what was known as the third rite of

reconciliation, which allowed a congregation to receive absolution while they were in a group. The bishops were broadsided and many were angry afterwards. A week or two earlier, at the Oceania Synod of Bishops, Pat spoke up in front of Pope John Paul, whom he deeply admired. Pat named four groups that had been marginalised by the church: the divorced and remarried, former priests, those in gay relationships and women. Pat called for change. The Pope's reaction is not recorded.

He told me about some of his interactions with Cardinal Pell. At one bishops conference meeting, Pat said that George was giving him the cold shoulder. Bishop Pat had been called into the apostolic nuncio because he was publicly supportive of LGBTIQ+ relationships, so perhaps he was in bad odour with some of his brother bishops. Pat said that he was annoyed by Pell's rudeness but then saw Pell sitting on his own at lunch and felt sorry for him. Pat never saw anybody as an enemy, only as a fellow pilgrim. He asked Pell why he seemed so angry and, according to Pat, Pell replied in his abrasive manner that he couldn't tolerate disloyalty to the pope. I thought of this when a blazing diatribe against Pope Francis was attributed to Pell and wondered if the attribution could possibly be correct because how could anybody be so brazenly hypocritical?

All this and so much more are stories for others to elaborate. Every year, we waited for his Christmas letter. He never wrote much about himself, which told you more about him than if he had. The letter was full of the names and groups of people he mixed with and whose company nurtured his faith in Christ, whom he believed were to be encountered at the margins of society. From the residents of the Narrabundah Longstay Caravan Park to refugees who'd recently arrived in Canberra to those whose children died as victims of drug culture. He sat with them all. He shared those moments.

Our personal relationship was dear to me. It was full of laughter and banter about his dogs and the Rabbitohs. He often rang when he read something I had written, always full of encouragement, often

suggesting I should send it to someone who might benefit. On radio, he often attributed his wisdom to his namesake, the Irish bookmaker Patrick Power. Like the bookmaker, he backed outsiders.

I had known Pat's name but had never met him until, at the end of 2000, I left the Jesuit order and moved to the small town of Gunning, about 70 km from Canberra. I was disoriented. Within 48 hours, Pat was on the phone, welcoming me to the diocese and offering to journey with me. I don't even know how he got my number. Then he came to visit and introduced me to a couple of families in Gunning whom he knew.

Soon afterwards, he invited me to a special dinner at the Southern Cross Club in Woden. How a club connected to the church (there was a picture of another bishop in the foyer) could run so many poker machines was beyond my understanding. That aside, it was a wonderful occasion. Pat had gathered about forty former priests with their wives. Most of these men had a very different story than mine, having been ostracised and disowned, even sometimes by their families. All this simply because they wanted to get married. Or sometimes just explore life. It was painful to hear them speak and I was grateful that my experience was so different to theirs. The group was large because, once upon a time the public service was one of the few places a former priest, banned from teaching in Catholic schools or other works, could get a job. Many came to Canberra. Pat reached out to us and many of these men were overwhelmed. The group then met a few times every year and those dinners were healing.

Pat baptised our first child, Benedict, in Gunning. We soon had three children under the age of two, and Pat told us to use his house as much as we liked when we came to Canberra. He always wanted to help. And he did. My heart aches for his kindness even now.

MICHAEL MCGIRR is the mission facilitator of Caritas Australia.
This article was published in *Eureka Street*.
It is reprinted with permission.

Pat was an ARC member and strong supporter of ARC almost from its beginning and attended our conferences in our early years. You can see him concelebrating Mass at one of our conferences in the right side of the photo on the homepage of our website.
May he rest in peace.

The need for Creeds – reimagining Nicaea

Thomas O'Loughlin

The Council of Nicaea was convened in 325 by the Emperor Constantine, which means 2025 is the Council's seventeenth centenary.

The Council of Nicaea remains most famous for producing much of the creed used in the liturgy, but the need for new statements of the creed is ever present.

If we do not reformulate expressions of faith, the formulae become empty – if solemn-sounding – words.

A short creed from Pope Francis

One such reformulation was produced by Pope Francis just a few months after he was elected Bishop of Rome in 2013.

It is short and to the point, and deserves to be better known as a memorial to him.

To believe in the *Father* who loves all men and women with an infinite love means realising that 'he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity'.

To believe that the *Son of God* assumed our human flesh means that each human person has been taken up into the very heart of God.

To believe that Jesus shed his blood for us removes any doubt about the boundless love which ennobles each human being.

Our redemption has a social dimension because 'God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between people'.

To believe that the *Holy Spirit* is at work in everyone means realising that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds: 'The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, even the most complex and inscrutable'.

Evangelisation is meant to cooperate with this liberating work of the Spirit.

The very mystery of the *Trinity* reminds us that we have been created in the image of that divine communion, and so we cannot achieve fulfilment or

salvation purely by our own efforts. (*Evangelii Gaudium* §178)

'Light from light' – one of the key images in the creed of 325. It is a metaphor that spoke directly to a culture familiar with lamps and candles in everyday life.

Nicene pattern

Like the formula adopted by the bishops at Nicaea, this statement of Pope Francis has the trinitarian shape: Father, Son, Spirit – one God.

Like the fourth-century creed, it is not a statement about a distant potentate 'in the sky' but about our life in God who had entered fully into his creation as one of us in the Christ.

Revising the creed for new times

Nicaea's creed in 325 was not perfect – it needed further work at a council in 381 (Constantinople I), and then clarifications at Ephesus (430) and Chalcedon (451).

In the same way, Francis's creed is but an 'effort' for our time.

Faith in today's language

2025 has seen a string of memorials to the Council of Nicaea, but the challenge is not recall, but to reformulate our faith in God in ways that speak today in a living language.

How would you formulate a creed?

Thomas O'Loughlin is a presbyter of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton and professor-emeritus of historical theology at the University of Nottingham (UK). His latest book is *Discipleship and Society in the Early Churches*.

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Doctrinal and structural Catholic Church transformation

J. A. Dick

August 10, 2021

Transformation most often happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart. It is change but not restoration.

Transformation is a new configuration. For the church it means a doctrinal as well as a structural transformation.

The ministerial deformity of clericalism is one of several issues that must be addressed. It is a clerical power structure that is accountable only to itself. And, as we have seen, it often ends up abusing the powerless.

The Vatican, with its proconsul-like hierarchy, is a governance structure that owes more to the Roman Empire than to the Way of Jesus. In fact, Jesus gave no blueprints for church structure. His focus was clear: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Structure he left up to his followers. The early Christian communities were charismatic and creative. Today we need a liberation from imperial structures. We can also be creative. There is nothing healthy about an authoritarian church structure of self-protection and privilege, with a climate of secrecy and limited accountability.

The church is the People of God. Transformation starts there on the horizontal collaborative people level, not the vertical pyramid authority level. Jesus was a horizontal people-person. ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name,’ Jesus said, ‘there am I in the midst of them.’ (Matthew 18:20)

A healthy church transformation calls indeed, as I said in my opening remarks, for doctrinal and structural change.

DOCTRINE: Official Roman Catholic teaching, in the books and in papal pronouncements, needs to be updated and transformed in the light of today’s biblical and historical research and understanding. We can and must learn and grow. Continuing education should be a requirement for all church leaders, starting of course with the top leader in Rome. Just like medical doctors, bishops need to be kept up to date. Perhaps they should be examined and re-certified every five years?

Examining the meaning of ordination is a good example of what I mean by updated theological and

historical understanding. The historical Jesus did not ordain anyone. We know today that ordination did not even exist in his lifetime. It was created by early Christians and was gradually introduced almost a hundred years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The apostles, therefore, were NOT ordained as the first bishops. One of my archbishop friends still says he often thinks about Jesus putting mitres on the heads of the apostles, rings on their fingers, and croziers in their hands. He has a talent for episcopal fantasy.

In the early Christian communities, men and women, as heads of households, presided at Eucharist – without being ordained. When Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, (‘Priestly Ordination’) May 22, 1994, declared that ‘the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the church’s faithful’, he was showing his own theological and historical ignorance. Pope Francis, unfortunately, repeated the error. During a discussion with reporters on November 1 2016, as he flew back to Rome from Protestant Reformation commemorations in Sweden, Pope Francis said: ‘On the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, the last word is clear.’ The definitive decision, he said, ‘was given by St. John Paul II, and this remains’.

Ordination began not as a way of passing on some kind of sacred power but as a form of quality control: ensuring that early Christian community leaders were well trained, knowledgeable, competent and trustworthy. It was only at the Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, that the church officially began to teach that only a properly ordained priest could consecrate bread and wine for the Eucharist.

STRUCTURE: The needed Roman Catholic transformation is also a structural transformation. Some things could be done rather quickly. Three structures could change immediately: (1) Church leadership could acknowledge and welcome all the ordained Catholic women who are already priests and bishops. (2) Church leadership could drop the celibacy requirement for Roman Catholic priests. Let them get married – gay and straight. (3) In a spirit of equality and fairness, church leadership could also allow the already ordained to marry if they wish.

Unlike some of my friends, I don’t want to get rid of the pope. Papal ministry, however, has to be primarily one of service not administrative power. For restructuring the papal office, much can be learned from the structure of the World Council of Churches, which has an administrative centre in Geneva and a General Secretary. It has regional

'Presidents' (supervisors) for Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, for North America, the Pacific, the Eastern Orthodox, and the Oriental Orthodox. In a Roman Catholic institutional transformation, the pope could easily become the General Secretary within the Roman Catholic Communion, ideally with a set term of office. There would also be regional supervisors – male and women bishops – around the globe. (I would love to see a woman bishop as president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.)

In the restructuring process, Roman Catholics can also learn a lot from the example and ministry of the Archbishop of Canterbury, within the world-wide Anglican Communion.

When it comes to structural transformation and the role of bishops, one could write a long article. Very briefly, bishops should be well-educated and pastorally-minded Christian community leaders. Not colourfully dressed company men with barrel vision. I do try to encourage bishops who are competent and credible contemporary leaders. I know some who are my former students and I am proud of them.

A bishop whom I greatly respected and admired was Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga (1928–2020), Bishop of São Félix, Brazil, from 1971 to 2005. He was a well-known supporter of liberation theology and a strong advocate for the poor and for indigenous peoples. In 1988 he was called to Rome to be examined by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger about his theological writings and pastoral activity. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation of Bishops found him problematic. They produced a statement for him to sign, as an acknowledgment of his dangerous errors. Bishop Casaldáliga refused to sign it. He simply replied: 'My attitude is a reflection of the view of the church in many regions of the world... I have criticised the Curia over the way bishops are chosen, over the minimal space given to women, over its distrust of liberation theology and bishops' conferences, over its excessive centralism. This does not mean a break with Rome. Within the family of the church and through dialogue, we need to open up more space.' In 1971 when Pope Paul VI had named him bishop, he refused to wear the mitre, preferring instead the sombrero of a peasant. He refused to wear a bishop's ring; and he refused to carry a crozier, preferring instead to carry an oar he

used to steer his boat along the Amazonian rivers to the churches of his diocese. He later replaced the oar with a Tapirapé Indian ceremonial stick. A wonderfully courageous and prophetic bishop.

Roman Catholics in some parts of the world like in Australia and Germany are already experimenting with what is now called 'synodality'. The term comes from the Greek word for 'assembly' or 'meeting'. It is a process of consultations between ordained and non-ordained that leads to a consensus. There have already been some positive and some awkward moments in the process. The big question is how authoritative synodality is or can be.

There are indeed a great many issues for doctrinal transformation and structural transformation. Today I have touched on just a few. Human sexuality remains a big issue. Is same-sex marriage sacramental? Does the church have a sexual hang up? Ecumenical relations? Is Catholic belief closer to the truth than Protestant belief? Who has the truth? Is consolidating parishes and having circuit-rider priests driving from place to place on weekends a healthy way to maintain parish communities? How does a church establish itself as a credible moral authority? Is abortion really the major moral evil in today's world? What about racism, poverty, starvation and genocide? How does the church deal with climate change? Are democracy, justice and equality church virtues as well?

Transformation is a big process. It is an absolutely necessary process, and the Catholic clock is ticking. I hope it will happen.

John Gehring, who is Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, understands very well the current Roman Catholic predicament. I conclude this week's reflection with one of his observations, in 'Confessions of an exhausted Catholic,' published on July 23rd in the National Catholic Reporter:

I still believe the best of Catholicism can enrich our culture, politics and search for meaning. The artists, activists and ordinary Catholics who live our faith in the shadow of scandal and hypocrisy are not blind to the flaws of our church. We persist because we search and struggle together, connected in spirit and memory to all those who did the same before us, and to future generations who will take up this difficult, worthy pilgrimage after we are gone.

What if the Eucharist wasn't about the priest?

Carmel Pilcher

If the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life, why do so many celebrations centre the priest and sideline the people?

Augustine offered a different vision, one that disrupts clericalism and calls the whole assembly into active, visible participation in the mystery we dare to become.

Imagine a Church where the people gather each Sunday not to watch something happen, but to be transformed. They come as a priestly people, recognising Christ not just at the altar but in each other. Greeting becomes sacrament; presence becomes proclamation. The seating is close, the posture communal, because this is not a room of strangers—it is the body of Christ.

The Word is proclaimed, not consumed as private inspiration but received as a call to collective conversion. It is spoken into the now of this gathered people, in this place, at this time. The homily emerges not from theory but from shared life. The presider has listened, during the week, in the world, among the community, and now speaks to the joys, wounds and cries of both the people and the planet.

Intercessions are not read from a book. A family has prepared them. They name the forgotten, the displaced, the suffering, the silenced. They speak as a priestly household, offering to God the brokenness of the world. Their voice echoes the prophetic tradition – firm, tender and unafraid.

The collection is not a routine break between parts of the liturgy. It is the moral core. Food for the hungry is brought forward alongside bread and wine, making clear the Gospel's demand: no one comes to this table without bringing the poor with them. Those chosen to carry the gifts walk with purpose, knowing they carry the lives of all gathered.

Then the great prayer begins – not spoken at the people but prayed with them. The Eucharistic Prayer is the Church's heartbeat. As bread and wine are offered, so too are our lives. We become what we receive: the body of Christ, broken and shared. This is not performance; it is surrender, communion, transformation.

The sign of peace is no polite gesture. It is a moment of reconciliation, a declaration that we will not go to the table divided. Unity is not assumed; it is forged. Then the whole Church eats from one loaf and drinks from one cup, because division has no place in sacrament.

Only what remains is placed in the tabernacle – not as leftover, but as provision for the sick, the absent, the hidden corners of our week that still long for healing.

And then silence. Not an end, but a pause before the beginning. In that stillness, the Spirit strengthens resolve. The final blessing is not a dismissal; it is a commissioning: Go. Be what you have received. Live Eucharist.

In Augustine's vision, worship and witness are not separate acts; the liturgy spills into life.

A Church that takes this seriously will look different, more loving, more unified, and always facing outward toward the margins. Because that's where Christ goes. And where Christ goes, the body must follow.

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Leo's exhortation enlists the old, and the new, in service to the poor

Michael Sean Winters

It is odd – or is it? – that Pope Leo begins his apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te* with the story of the woman who poured costly oil on Jesus' head (Matthew 26:8-9,11), only to be upbraided by one of the disciples who fretted, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.'

Jesus' reply is often seen as an excuse for indifference to the clamant needs of the poor: 'You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me', before asserting that, as long as the Gospel is proclaimed, this woman's kindness to him will be told. Pope Leo draws an important conclusion: 'No sign of affection, even the smallest, will ever be forgotten, especially if it is shown to those who are suffering, lonely or in need, as was the Lord at that time' (#4). Attending to the poor is not only about money. It is about affection. The Gospel call is no mere *noblesse oblige*; the call is to solidarity.

A theme that runs through the text is also articulated here. At the beginning: Leo points out that Jesus not only told the apostles that the poor would be with them always, but that he himself would always be

with them (Matthew 28:20). 'Love for the Lord, then, is one with love for the poor', the pope writes (#5). A few paragraphs later, recalling God speaking to Moses in the burning bush, telling him that he has heard the cry of his people Israel, Leo continues the theme: 'In hearing the cry of the poor, we are asked to enter into the heart of God, who is always concerned for the needs of his children, especially those in greatest need' (#8).

Concern for the poor demands more than any individual response, although it also requires that. 'A concrete commitment to the poor must also be accompanied by a change in mentality that can have an impact at the cultural level', the pope writes. 'In fact, the illusion of happiness derived from a comfortable life pushes many people towards a vision of life centred on the accumulation of wealth and social success at all costs, even at the expense of others and by taking advantage of unjust social ideals and political-economic systems that favour the strongest' (#11).

MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS is an American journalist and writer who covers politics and events in the Roman Catholic Church for the *National Catholic Reporter*

New book

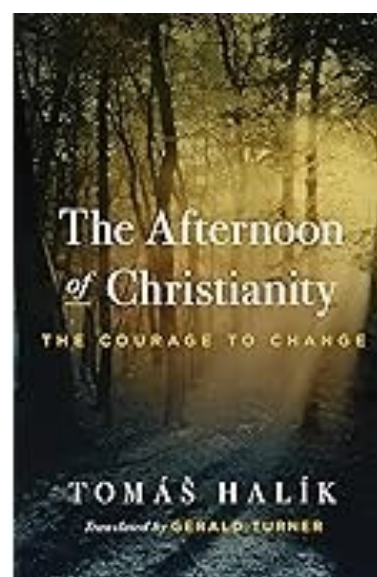
'The Afternoon of Christianity'

The courage to change

Tomáš Halík

Tomáš Halík provides a poignant reflection on Christianity's crisis of faith while offering a vision of the self-reflection, love and growth necessary for the church to overcome and build a deeper and more mature faith.

In a world transformed by secularisation and globalisation, torn by stark political and social distrust, and ravaged by war and pandemic, Christians are facing a crisis of faith. In *The Afternoon of Christianity*, Tomáš Halík reflects on past and present challenges confronting Christian faith, drawing together strands from the Bible, historic Christian theology, philosophy, psychology and classic literature. In the process, he reveals the current crisis as a crossroads: one road leads toward division and irrelevance, while the other provides the opportunity to develop a deeper, more credible and mature form of church, theology and spirituality – an afternoon epoch of Christianity.



Catholic Women's Ordination Conference

In a wide-ranging interview, Pope Leo shared his intentions to follow in the footsteps of Pope Francis by appointing more women to leadership positions at the Vatican. On women deacons?

I – at the moment – don't have an intention of changing the teaching of the Church on the topic.' Leo went on to say that he wants 'to continue to listen to people' and allow study groups to keep examining the question. 'We'll walk with that and see what comes.'

This openness from the papacy demonstrates a deep respect for the synodal process. Yet, a *wait-and-see* approach to women's baptismal equality and the fullness of our vocations fails to respond to the urgent needs of our church today. God calls women to ordained ministry. The People of God call women to ordained ministry. How long must women – and our church – wait?

As Professor Nicola Slee, inspired by the life of St. Hildegard, reminds us: "The path is not long, but the way is deep. You must not only walk there, you must be prepared to leap."

We call on Pope Leo not simply to 'walk with women,' but to make the leap toward God's promise of equality by removing all barriers to women discerning and living out their vocations to ordained ministry.

And speaking of St. Hildegard! We have just returned from a visit to Bingen, Germany, where WOC joined our partners in Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) on a short pilgrimage and working meeting during her recent feast day. On that sacred ground, inspired by Hildegard's prophetic vision, we wrote an open letter and invitation to Pope Leo. WOW's message is clear:

We recognise that the message of unity is a core tenet of your pontificate. As such, we urge you to consider that, without the full equality, dignity and inclusion of women, there can be no unity ... Meeting with women's ordination advocates will demonstrate your commitment to unity, because women are not a problem to be solved, we are the solution.

Our time in Bingen was incredibly enriching, and a heartening reminder of the 'veriditas' and vitality that flows through the women's ordination movement.

Fruits of the Spirit: Two female Archbishops in two months in Britain

Frances Knight

As someone who works on the history of Anglicanism, I've been interested in the reaction to the appointment of Bishop Sarah Mullally as Archbishop of Canterbury.

It came two months after the election of Bishop Cherry Vann as Archbishop of Wales.

Two women – both with long service in ordained ministry – and, in Mullally's case, conspicuous distinction in a previous career (she left her post as Chief Nursing Officer to work full-time for the Church) had reached the highest positions in the Anglican Church.

Breaking new ground

It's a news story, because neither Church has had a female Archbishop before, and then it isn't.

After a moment of further reflection, it seemed obvious that Mullally was the most suitable candidate. She has seniority and has successfully led the complex diocese of London, where church attendance is growing. Bishop Vann, meanwhile, is credited with healing division in the diocese of Monmouth.

Both women are capable, practical and pastoral. Both are stepping into their archepiscopal role after the sudden resignation of their predecessor.

Reading the signs

A cynic might suggest that women were being sent in to calm nerves and clear up the mess.

A less cynical person, and one who has room for the idea of an appointing process guided by the Holy Spirit, might conclude that the Holy Spirit has been particularly audible.

But let's look beyond the gender of Sarah Mullally and Cherry Vann.

First and foremost, they are ministers of the gospel, bringing a message of hope to their communities, and operating within the complexities of the ecclesial structures in which they choose to exercise their ministry.

What this means for the Anglican Communion

A journalist asked me what Mullally's appointment meant for the Anglican Communion. Archbishop Welby travelled endlessly around the globe, trying to reconcile its irreconcilable factions.

At the end of his tenure, the Communion was more divided than at the beginning, and the fact that he was a male evangelical seemed to have made little difference.

The Catholic Church should have followed St Paul on the status of women

Alan Clague

St Paul spent decades spreading the good news about Jesus to the communities around the Aegean Sea. He offered a way of life different from that of the Jewish community from which Christianity had emerged. The dictates of Jewish law no longer needed to be followed. Male circumcision was no longer mandatory (Gal 5:2-12). The strong patriarchal dominance of Judaism was replaced: not only men but also women such as Phoebe (Rom 16:1) had leadership roles in Paul's communities. A person's function in the Pauline community was determined by their gifts of the Spirit, not their gender (Rom 12:4-11).

Not all the followers of Jesus wanted such radical changes to occur. These 'Judaizers' fought vigorously to undermine Paul's teaching, but his stance was vindicated at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:19-20). Jewish rules of behaviour were largely rejected, apart from restrictions on consuming blood (which was quietly dropped subsequently) and food offered to idols (which became irrelevant).

None the less, a radical change occurred after Paul's death. We have this evidence in the text of three epistles – I Timothy, Colossians and Ephesians. I Timothy, the first of the pastoral epistles, was originally attributed to Paul, but is now almost universally accepted as being post-Pauline. Colossians and Ephesians are usually still attributed to Paul, but modern scholarship indicates that much of the text concerns changes that occurred in the decades after Paul's death, so that the author cannot have been Paul. One change that occurred was that women, who had been community leaders when Paul was alive, were now excluded from leadership roles (I Tim 2:12-15). They were ordered to remain silent at gatherings (I Tim 2:11), and to be subservient to their husbands (Col 3:18, Eph 5:22-23). (The order for women to remain silent in churches in the authentically Pauline I Corinthians I Cor 14:34-36) is now essentially universally accepted to be a later insertion, undoubtedly in support of the post-Pauline changes to the status of women.)

The situation for women changed for the worse over the centuries. In the early post-Pauline Church women could be appointed deacons, but this was

suppressed intermittently, and ceased by the end of the first millennium. Mary Magdalene, a most important member of the followers of Jesus, disappeared from the post-resurrection Church. Subsequently, she was described as a reformed prostitute, and depicted in religious art as an unkempt hermit repenting her life of sin. Descriptions of the early saints almost always gave the first characteristic of holy women as 'virgin', not so with men. Some of the early male saints would be considered today as overtly misogynistic.

The suppression of women in the Church reflected their suppression in general society, which was enshrined in secular laws. The primacy of men in marriage was the norm in society – in England, for instance, women forfeited their right to own property after marriage until 1870 and could not vote until 1918.

As secular society changed, the Church gradually emerged from its millennia of misogyny. Women can now perform many duties in the Church, and can occupy positions of power within the Church. There is, however, a strenuous reluctance to allow women to become even deacons, a situation endorsed in I Timothy, much less become priests. This would seem to be driven by arch-conservative senior clergy, and possibly by the Church in countries when emancipation of women is less well developed. Conservatives in the Church have so far been able to resist the demands of our egalitarian society, but are running the risk of alienating themselves from the mainstream. One excuse used for exclusion of women from the priesthood is the need to remain true to the traditions of the Church, but these traditions had their origin in the patriarchal Jewish society, which the first generation Church rejected, and were maintained in the equally patriarchal secular society of the first two Christian millennia... It is time for the Church to recognise that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is the last relic of the unfair society of the past, and open the priesthood to the other half of humanity.

ALAN CLAGUE is a Member of the ARC Secretariat and a long-time contributor to *ARCVoice*.

Renewal and Reform

An Introduction

Shane Dwyer

There can be no doubt that a topic that is on the minds of many Catholics today is that of ‘renewal and reform’. For this reason, it finds its place on this website.

The first thing to acknowledge is the connection and the distinction between those two ideas. How is reform connected to, yet different from, renewal?

It is a matter of intent and degree. That is to say, renewal is the ongoing change that any organism, individual, grouping or institution undergoes as it progresses through life. It is part of being alive. So much so that when it ceases to renew, it dies. In the Church context, this involves attending to those aspects of Catholic life that are no longer serving the purposes for which they arose in the first place. While not always easy, it involves identifying those aspects of faith and practice that may have grown up for legitimate reasons, but which no longer speak to Catholics in the way they used to, or (more importantly) prove an obstacle to the very people whom the Church exists to serve.

Renewal can be difficult, as Catholics can have a fond attachment to particular practices and ways of doing things. Tensions can run high as Catholics from one specific cultural, ethnic or spirituality background experience the practices, devotions etc. of Catholics from another background. Peace and harmony can be maintained if all concerned acknowledge that there are only a few things that matter: that God is loved and honoured, our neighbour is loved and served, and the mission with which we have been entrusted is attended to. Everything else is secondary and, on occasion at least, in need of renewal. To use an image provided to us by Jesus: regularly the vine requires pruning (John 15). The vine is sound; it is the branches that need attention.

But sometimes things are more serious. Again, to use an image from Jesus: there are times when the tree must be attended to at the level of its roots (Luke 13:6 – 9). Radical attention to the Church itself (i.e. not just its practices and ways of doing things) is what we mean by *reform*. It begins with acknowledging the possibility that the Church may have lost its way, at

least in some important respects. Here we are not speaking of the heart of the Church in its teachings and its doctrines. For one of the wonders of the Catholic Church is that, even in its darkest times down through the centuries, the teachings of Christ have always remained central. Even the most morally inadequate popes still taught that Jesus is the Son of God, for example. While teachings and doctrines do require ongoing clarification, that is not what is meant by Reform here. The issue is, and has always been, one of priority and application. That is to say, there are times where the Church must re-evaluate its direction, the nature of its presence in the world, and the effectiveness of its ability to attend to its mission. The message remains pure. The messenger needs work.

In Australia, and increasingly elsewhere internationally, a prime example has been highlighted by the inadequacy of the Church’s response to incidents of sexual abuse. The reasons for that inadequacy are without doubt complex, but one thing is sure: it reveals a predisposition within some in leadership in the Church to prioritise the protection of the reputation of the Church over the needs of those who had been hurt by the actions of some members of the Church. Reputation is a reasonable thing to be concerned about, within certain parameters. However, reputation is never more important than the need to respond to those who require justice and assistance with compassion and with the firm intention to make restitution. The wrong priority was, at times, attended to and, as a result, the reputation of the Church is in tatters. The Church culture that allowed this to occur, which some lay at the feet of unacknowledged and insidious clericalism, is indicative of the need for reform. Each of us is called to radical conversion. Why? Because the Church exists to reveal Jesus Christ to the world. The degree to which we fail to reveal Christ is the degree to which we fail in our purpose and mission.

Reform is a difficult concept for an institution that values continuity. Yet, the Pope’s ongoing call to Church reform cannot be ignored. As just one example we read:

I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion, which cannot leave things as they presently are. (*Evangelii Gaudium* 25)

SHANE DWYER is General Manager for Mission Integration. He is driven by a passion to support dedicated individuals navigating the complexities of contemporary service to those in need.

If the Church ignores AI, it will die as a copy

*The Church cannot step away from AI;
it must discern how to incarnate the Gospel within it*

By Jos Ho Duc Trung

Published: October 03, 2025

‘Everyone is born as an original, but many people end up dying as photocopies’

These words from St. Carlo Acutis, the first millennial Catholic saint known for his love of the Eucharist and digital evangelisation, resonate powerfully today as the Church faces the rise of artificial intelligence (AI).

AI is, at its core, a tool. Like a bicycle, anyone can use it – but without balance, you fall. Raise it to the level of an airplane or spacecraft, and the skills and responsibility required are much greater.

Technology itself is not good or bad. The real question is how people guide and direct it.

AI is essentially a copycat. It imitates human reasoning, structures language, and recombines information based on what it has been trained on. It cannot create meaning in the moral or spiritual sense, but only mirrors what has already been given. That makes it a ‘faithful apprentice’ to whoever wields it.

With vision, precision and discipline, AI can be a powerful assistant. But with carelessness or ignorance, it becomes nothing more than a loudspeaker for secular culture.

This matters for the Church in Vietnam, which has 7 million followers or 7 percent of the nation’s 100 million people. If Catholics are not proactive, the other 93 percent will be shaped by whatever dominates the online world – and many from the 7 percent will follow along.

Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, warns that digital culture can create ‘echo chambers’, where authentic dialogue vanishes and only pre-programmed voices remain.

If the Church does not enter the digital field with AI as a partner, the weeds of

misinformation and secularism will take over. Jesus’ parable reminds us that weeds and wheat grow together (Mt 13:24–30) but, if the workers are idle, the whole field risks being lost.

This makes the role of leaders – clergy, religious and lay apostles – all the more crucial. If they do not learn how to ‘give AI work,’ by crafting precise prompts, training tools for pastoral service, and building guided Catholic chatbots, they leave the mission field empty. And the digital world, unlike traditional fields of ministry, waits for no one.

Every second, billions of data points flood social networks. Where does AI learn? From what already exists. And most of that comes from commercial giants, content manipulators and ideological engineers. An AI not guided by a true shepherd will inevitably become a ‘false shepherd’, leading the flock astray.

Here, the theology of the Incarnation offers a compass. God did not reject human culture but entered it to redeem and transform it. The Church cannot step away from AI; it must discern how to incarnate the Gospel within it. St. John Paul once described the Internet as ‘a new forum leading humanity to Christ’ (*Message for the 36th World Communications Day*, 2002). The same applies today to AI.

The question is not: ‘Is AI harmful?’ The question is: ‘Do we have the maturity and faith to master it?’

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* teaches that all technological progress must serve humanity and the common good (No. 179). Technology must not become an idol. Yet neither can the Church lag behind. If left unguided, society risks ‘dying as a copy’ –

conformed to artificial values dictated by algorithms.

The Church's mission is liberation: to awaken each person's unique dignity as an original, beloved of God. If AI merely copies, then the Church must use it as a mirror to highlight the originality of the Gospel.

Secular society may absolutise AI for profit or power. Atheism may claim it proves humanity's ability to create a 'new god'. But the Catholic faith insists only God is the Creator. AI cannot generate originals. It can only produce copies. Only human beings, made in God's image, carry unique dignity.

What does this mean in practice for the Church in Vietnam? It calls for a concrete strategy. A framework of seven steps could help:

Train the 'masters' before the machines.

Priests, religious and lay leaders must be trained to use AI responsibly, including writing prompts, setting boundaries and applying ethical principles.

Create a Catholic data ecosystem.

AI learns from data. The Church must digitise Scripture, Church documents and papal teachings, and make them the foundation for Catholic AI tools.

Build Catholic chatbots under authority.

Dioceses, parishes, and religious orders can create supervised chatbots to explain catechism, guide prayer, and answer liturgical questions.

Evangelise with AI tools.

Utilise AI to produce videos, podcasts and articles that resonate with young people where they spend their time online. This is a new mission field.

Discern ethically.

AI is not a priest. It cannot replace sacraments, prayers or conscience. It must be guided by Gospel values.

Mobilise the 7 percent.

Though small, Vietnamese Catholics can use AI to amplify their witness, becoming salt, light and leaven in the larger society.

Form a Catholic council on AI and media.

A national body of clergy, religious and lay experts should guide ethical use, provide training and safeguard Catholic identity.

AI itself does not choose to be wheat or weeds. It reflects its master. Catholics must become those masters – sowing the seeds of the Gospel in digital soil. If we abandon the space, AI becomes a 'false shepherd'. However, if we step in, it can serve as a pastoral ally, amplifying the Good News to the farthest reaches of the earth.

St. Carlo Acutis lived as an 'original' in the digital world. His question lingers for us: Will the Church in Vietnam allow AI to reduce us to copies – or will we train it to become a tool for authentic witnesses of Christ?

Jos Ho Duc Trung is a layman hailing from Vinh Diocese. This commentary, first published in the Vietnamese-language publication <https://gpvinh.org>, was summarised, translated and edited by UCA News. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.

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