

A LONG WAY FROM ROME

Why the Australian Catholic Church is in crisis

Edited by Chris McGillion


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Index by Russell Brooks

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For Brian Cosgrove

FOREWORD

In the course of my work at ABC Radio National and ABC Television, many commentaries on our modern predicament cross my path. Of variable quality, they range from the chronically pessimistic to the newly fearful (in the wake of Bali and September 11) to the outright aggressive. Regrettably, there is not much chutzpah these days.

I find the wise old souls coming into their own. They don't often spring from the bosom of Holy Mother Church. People like Donald Horne, a confirmed atheist who has virtually made Australia his 'religion', admirably tries to assemble a modern ten commandments for a pluralistic society like ours. Above all, he is constructive. He always *imagines* possibilities, based on his abiding love for the country combined with deep historical knowledge. He thinks outside the square. He emphasises his hope and pride in the quality of our democratic community, established so far from its cultural roots. Though relentlessly secular, he models the very imagination Fr Paul Collins, in this collection, sees so lacking in the modern Australian Catholic Church. Horne's is a seductive vision, whether or not the wider

political system takes it up. And so welcome, amidst so much other gloom.

Another contributor, the market researcher Hugh Mackay, constantly searches in his columns and books for ways forward. Indeed, he is becoming something of a modern Australian prophet. Recently he remarked on the shallowness of much contemporary discourse: ‘The United States critic Sven Birkerts,’ Mackay wrote, ‘has described as his “cold fear” the possibility that “we are, as a culture, as a species, becoming shallow; that we have turned from depth—from the Judaeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery—and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness”.’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2–3 November, 2002)

Bullseye! For several reasons, this hit the mark. This was the magic phrase that opened other doors. Of course, growing up Catholic in 1950s Perth, I was surrounded by allusions to the ‘great mystery of faith’. But I was young and the life-as-a-mystery message somehow didn’t seduce. Now, in my middle years and with hostile times beckoning, it re-stated a profound truth towering over all others. It was invitingly open-ended and counter-cultural in the ideal way. This is surely the sort of symbolism so acutely needed by modern Western citizens, for whom materialism is both ubiquitous but arguably starting to lose its lustre.

Mackay had so easily distilled this gem from our tradition, partly because, I would argue, he listens so carefully to the signs of the times. That is his job of course. But so it is—or should be—for Church men and women, even if merely to know how to stand aside from its blandishments. Why is it so hard for Church people to find the appropriate words that tap into Australians’ search for something more? Why, too, would their words not be listened to, if they were game enough to try? Why, as Chris McGillion writes in this excellent collection, is the Church not more confident of contributing to that grand effort

to better meld the sacred and secular aspects of our nation, to ‘synthesise our own artistically elevated expression of that deepest sense of ourselves’? You won’t hear that sort of language from the mainstream political or sociological world. In fact, my industry scorns any effort at rhetoric yet simultaneously fails to recognise the results of this neglect—a stripped-down, bonsaied public culture which leaves so many wanting; creating the lethargy that sociologist John Carroll refers to (trapping the young in the contemporary West) ‘struggling to live in the present without vision of any future, or connection to even the organic tissue of being, their own personal past’.

An Australian Catholic Church that was less obsessed with defending the institution-as-we-know-it would surely free up energy to engage more effectively with the culture’s groans. If it seeks to be of genuine service to Australians as opposed to broader Roman Catholic needs—sadly not a given in my judgement—wouldn’t the Church seize all opportunities to discern then contribute to a uniquely Australian discussion? Wouldn’t it see as vital the need to develop new artistry, authentic to us, as John Carmody writes in this collection? It has been achieved in the past through writers like Richard Connolly and James McAuley, and via composers like Nigel Butterley and Moya Henderson. To be fair, our post-Enlightenment establishment means that a grand tradition of religious music has been harder to create than in the Old World. No one should delude themselves that any of this is easy. Neither overt success (and influence) nor glory is assured. But the ground in Australia may not be as fallow as is generally imagined.

I’m with Thomas Berry, the American Catholic thinker whom Paul Collins quotes, having sought his views in late 1991 on what faith and belief meant to him. His intense response to Paul’s question about the meaning of ‘religion’ is another of those prophetic moments outlined in this collection. ‘Religion is poetry or it is nothing,’ he told Collins. ‘How can a person

be religious without being poetic? Certainly God is a poet—it is God who made rainbows, butterflies and flowers. It is the most absurd thing in the world to think of dealing with religion in any other way...Take St John of the Cross—all the great mystics have been poets.’

Beauty, Collins believes, is often spectacularly lacking from many modern manifestations of Catholic life and worship, a theme echoed by various contributors to this collection. It is surely the antidote to what I have come to see as a modern dodgem-car trifecta. These all contribute to *distract* Westerners from looking within, to ‘up-skilling’ on an interior life, though every other dimension is encouraged. These are my three Distractors (with apologies to Harry Potter): cerebral fixation, sporting triumphalism and quick-fix-emotion—that is, a good quick cry over loss, with the grief counsellors following in short order. Wham, bam, thank you Ma’am, introspection all over now without much insight. Ultimately, it is a poor excuse for a rich life modelled by the Gospel, where the risk of existence is given some sort of framework, enabling both the humble and the lofty to make some sense of the day-to-day...maybe.

The Dean of St Mary’s Cathedral, Fr Tony Doherty, recently spoke with me at a Spirituality in the Pub gathering at Engadine in southern Sydney, the day after bushfires had roared through the area, claiming several houses in their wake. Still, 150 or so Engadiners turned out, in order to talk about things beyond the tangible. Fr Doherty referred to an address given by an American priest, Fr Wally Burkhardt, back in 1973, as he received a young woman into the Church at St Paul’s Chapel, Columbia University. Burkhardt said, in part:

I have seen more Catholic corruption than most Catholics read of.
I have tasted it. I have been reasonably corrupt myself.
And yet I joy in this church
This living, sinning people of God;

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I love it with a crucifying passion.

Why?

For all the Catholic hate, I experience here a community of love.

For all the institutional idiocy, I find here a tradition of reason.

For all the individual repression, I breathe here an air of freedom.

Replete with both beauty, hope and, in my view, realism, this is the sort of invitation that is hard to resist. I wish we had more of it.

*Geraldine Doogue,
journalist and broadcaster*

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THE CONTRIBUTORS

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THE CONTRIBUTORS

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INTRODUCTION

Until recently, Catholics in Australia had good reason to be proud of the achievements of their Church, and its leadership showed every sign of confidence that it would continue to play a vital role in the social life of the nation. By the mid-1980s, Catholics had eclipsed Anglicans in terms of sheer numbers, to become the largest single religious group in the country. The Catholic Church was employing more people than any other enterprise outside of government, it was the major private-sector player in the fields of welfare, education and health, and it had become the most identifiable voice of institutional Christianity. For their part, ordinary Catholics had shed their largely working-class background and were occupying prominent positions in politics, business, the law and media. Many were making the running on important debates of public concern, including the recognition of the rights of indigenous Australians, social justice issues and the push towards a republic.

The outward success of both the Catholic Church and community was clearly demonstrated during the visit to Sydney by Pope John Paul II in January 1995. The Pope had come for

the beatification of the founder of the Josephite Order of religious sisters, Mary MacKillop, and in this way to mark the local Church's coming of age internationally with what amounted to the declaration of Australia's first saint. John Paul II was greeted on his arrival by four of the most influential men in the country: the then Governor-General, Bill Hayden; Prime Minister, Paul Keating; Premier of New South Wales, John Fahey; and leader of the National Party, Tim Fischer, representing the Federal Coalition. Each of these men, to one degree or another, was Catholic.

Even the secular media treated the visit with untypical enthusiasm, giving it far more coverage by many more reporters than any other religious event in the country before or since. During a Mass celebrated by the Pope before 170 000 people at Randwick Racecourse, the TV networks took the unusual step of interrupting prime-time viewing to catch what they could of the Pope's actual declaration of Mary MacKillop's beatification 'live'. Even more unusual was the way newspapers virtually seemed eager to promote the religious messages of the occasion: the Murdoch press offered its readers a keepsake medallion to commemorate the Pope's visit; the *Sun Herald* ran a competition with prizes of *The Rosary CD*; and, in full hyperbolic mode, the *Australian* emblazoned its front page story of MacKillop's beatification with the headline, 'A Nation Consecrated'.

Matters of religion were being treated as matters of everyday life—there to be reported and commented on along with the more typical news of the day; there to be discussed in casual conversation. More than this, however, an historical social shift in Australia was being documented, even celebrated: the era of an unofficial 'Protestant Establishment' was over, and a new 'Catholic Ascendancy' seemed to have begun.

In his 1988 book, *Australian Catholics*, the church historian Edmund Campion commented that John Paul II's first visit to

this country (in 1987) provided an opportunity to gauge the state of Catholicism in this country:

The vast crowds who turned out to celebrate Mass with the Pope in every capital city demonstrated, if nothing else, their comfortableness at calling themselves Catholics. Their presence was a rebuttal of those who had been foretelling the imminent break-up of the Australian Church. The old firm was back in business.¹

But if the ‘old firm’ was back in business, it wasn’t in particularly good shape. The trouble with using a papal visit to read the state of Catholicism is that it is generally all headline material: overgeneralised, simplistic, exaggerated, even gushing. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, there were plenty of signs for those prepared to look for them that both the Church and its members were in for trying times.

For one thing, the religious orders—whose members had long been the unpaid labour force responsible for Catholic schools, hospitals and charitable works—were continuing to experience a dramatic decline in numbers. Their numbers dropped from 15 000 in 1981 to a little over 10 000 by 1997. Similarly the ranks of diocesan priests were thinning—there are now less than 2100 diocesan priests ministering to a nominal Catholic population approaching five million. New vocations were drying up. Not one new priest was ordained in the entire country in 1997, and only 27 began studies for the priesthood in 1999. (By comparison, St Columba’s College, Springwood which, for many years, was the junior seminary to Sydney’s St Patrick’s College, alone enrolled 96 men to begin studies for the priesthood in 1966.) The average age of priests was rising sharply—it is now well over 60 years—and their workloads (and consequent stress levels) were increasing. The corresponding need for lay Catholics to take on many of the roles once reserved for the clergy or members of religious orders was unavoidable and, while this transition was progressing smoothly, it also added

to pressures from the laity for meaningful decision-making roles at every level of Church administration.

As well, more specific campaigns were being waged for greater inclusion in the life of the Church—by women (following the success of their Anglican sisters in winning the right in most dioceses to priestly ordination) and by Catholic homosexuals in particular. By the early 1990s, the proponents of fundamental reform in the Church's governance, ministry and sexual teaching could point to revelations about the widespread clerical sexual abuse of children, both in Australia and overseas, and to the repeated failure of Church authorities to deal openly and adequately with the problem, as further evidence of the moral bankruptcy of the existing clerical culture.

While the numbers actively agitating for change may have been small, there were other indications of a rising swell of disenchantment, if not disaffection, within the Catholic community. A November 1995 survey undertaken in the Diocese of Parramatta, for instance, revealed that Mass attendance among the 300 000 professed Catholics living within the boundaries of the diocese had dropped from just under 20 per cent in 1992 to under 17 per cent in 1995. The results contradicted the conventional wisdom that the desertion of Catholics from the practice of their Faith—defined in terms of regular and active participation—had bottomed out by the early 1980s. If the Catholics of Parramatta were any guide, parish life was in a parlous state, and the Church was still leaking members like a sieve.

This, in fact, was confirmed by the results of the most comprehensive study of parish life ever undertaken in Australia: the 1996 national Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS). The report of its findings, released two years later, showed an overall 10 per cent decline in weekly Mass attendance nationally between 1991 and 1996. (This compared with an average 2 per cent decline in church attendance for the same period among

Anglicans and Protestants.) CCLS figures also showed that less than half the more than 160 000 Catholics surveyed in the report accepted Church teaching on abortion and pre-marital sex. Less than half accepted without difficulty the authority of the Church to teach certain doctrines of faith and morals as true. Only 42 per cent, for example, had no difficulty in accepting the Pope's 1994 declaration that women could never be ordained to the priesthood, and 27 per cent didn't accept it at all.

More importantly, the study found that while most Catholics retained a sense of lifelong loyalty to their Church (65 per cent), a lower proportion of them than any other denomination had a strong and growing sense of belonging to their primary point of contact with that Church: their local parish (38 per cent).

This rapid erosion of regular, active Church involvement among Catholics, like the growing disregard for official teachings, was symptomatic of much more fundamental changes inside and outside the local Catholic community. Historically, the main attractions of Catholicism in Australia have been its role as a mechanism of cultural defence and its contribution to social mobility. Until the 1950s, Catholics were predominantly Irish-Australians concentrated on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Religious identity was a way of maintaining group cohesion and asserting (Irish) ethnic pride in an unsympathetic, if not exactly hostile, environment. Religion was also a focus for the community's resources, which were concentrated in 'buffer institutions' such as the parish Church and the convent primary school, designed to protect Catholic identity and transmit its cultural heritage. They also had the important secondary objective of promoting the social advancement of the community.

The great intellectual architects of the Church in Australia—Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran in Sydney, Archbishop Daniel Mannix in Melbourne, Archbishop James Duhig in Brisbane—

consciously set out to construct an independent Catholic education system that would not only impart the faith but also allow the faithful to participate fully in the life of the country. In 1917, Mannix effectively defined the Church's mission for the 20th century as building a future where 'Catholics might justly hope to secure, without fear or favour, their due and proportionate share of the good things that Australia has to offer'. The economic advancement of ordinary Catholics was the result. In 1901, Catholics comprised 40 per cent of the unskilled workers on roads, railways and construction sites, and only 8 per cent of white-collar employees in the banking and financial sectors. One hundred years later, the Catholic profile was indistinguishable from that of the population as a whole. This advancement ironically brought a decline in religious conformity and Church involvement. Once the beleaguered Irish minority had been assimilated into mainstream society, much of the appeal of its Catholic identity began to weaken as well.

As these changes were still being absorbed locally, the worldwide Church was undergoing an upheaval of its own. By demystifying a good deal of the Church's ritual, ditching its distinctive language (Latin), and encouraging a measured accommodation with the outside world, the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) challenged the sense of Catholic separateness, especially in countries like Australia where Catholics are not a majority of the population. The Council defined the Church as the 'whole people of God', acknowledged that Catholics didn't have all the answers to all the problems of the day, and called for renewal of Church structures and ritual, in line with the 'signs of the times'.² This was a radical challenge to the old hierarchic-dogmatic model of Church, which was nowhere stronger than in Australia, as a result both of a long period of Roman oversight of its affairs and the decision to vest its development in an Irish clergy.

The most immediate impact of this challenge was felt within the ranks of the ministry: in the decade or so following the Council, 400 priests and 3000 religious brothers and sisters opted to be released from their vows in this country alone. But a death notice had also been served on an expression of Catholicism that was centred on the priest, grounded in moral absolutes, and adorned with saints and sins and rosaries. The Second Vatican Council contributed to the Catholic community's disintegration by exposing its past to critical re-evaluation and raising fundamental questions about the direction of its future.

The result was best summed up by the distinguished Catholic historian Patrick O'Farrell in *The Catholic Church and Community*:

Twenty years after the Vatican Council, its Australian legacy was being revealed as not merely the challenges, discomforts and disruptions of creative change, but the dubious quality of the new religious habitation. Especially to the young and to the old, it appears as jerry-built, tawdry, insubstantial, cluttered with the shoddy, silly and second-rate; not attractive accommodation: television and a peripatetic Pope brought glimpses of God's grandeur in the world, testimony that glory still walked abroad, but it was colour that made the local scene seem the more drab.³

Since those words were written in 1992, the Catholic cultural void has not been filled so much as occupied by a variety of groups and factions, each with their own vision of what the Church is all about and where it should be heading. By the late 1990s, some of these groups were in a state of undeclared civil war in Australia. Church teachings were being openly challenged by those who rejected the Pope's decision on the permanent second-class status of women, by homosexual Catholics and their supporters, who staged demonstrations inside cathedrals, pressing for full participation in the sacramental life of the Church and, as the CCLS had indicated, by the much more

worrying vast numbers of the laity who silently ignored the ban on the use of artificial birth control methods, pre-marital sex, and access to abortion—or were simply deserting the pews. At the same time, priests were coming under the surveillance of self-appointed protectors of orthodoxy, who sought to ensure that clergy toed the line in their preaching and sacramental practice. The authority of bishops as leaders of the Church was being undermined by the practice of these same groups of ignoring official channels for their complaints and reporting their findings directly to Rome. Academics in Catholic tertiary institutions were also being monitored for their fidelity to Church teachings and traditions, and theologians were coming under investigation by Church authorities here and overseas in connection with complaints of doctrinal error. The Catholic consensus had broken down.

The Vatican's response to this has been to try to impose its own vision on the local Church. It has done this through direct pronouncements, by encouraging a shift in power (and the ideological persuasion that goes with it) within the local hierarchy, and by the subversion of efforts to deal with the most pressing problems confronting the Australian Church—whether the dis-engagement of the laity or the scandal of clerical sexual abuse.

As this collection details, these problems cannot begin to be addressed until the Church resolves one fundamental issue. It is whether a Catholic should be considered as someone who uncritically accepts dogma as doctrine, who adheres to a rigid division of labour between the various clerical and lay members of the Church, and who obeys a disciplined chain of command that flows from the Pope through his bishops and priests to the people in the pew. Or whether it is possible—even desirable—to remain a Catholic and yet believe that Church teachings and traditions must respond to a changing world, that spiritual integrity is more important than blind obedience to rules and

that when it comes to faith, insight, like truth, permeates all levels of the Church.

Rome gave its answer to that question in 1998 in the form of a document entitled the *Statement of Conclusions*, which purported to find serious ‘weaknesses’ in the Australian Catholic Church that amounted, it was said, to a ‘crisis of faith’. The *Statement* identified a number of key concerns, some of which were said to be common to the Church worldwide—for instance, the tolerance of different views and perspectives on the truth to the point where all opinions are regarded as equally valid, and a growing tendency to confuse the nature of the person of Jesus—while others were put down to specific national conditions. These include a ‘blurring’ of roles between clergy and laity, a lack of discipline within the religious orders, and even the ‘Australian sense of equality’, which was said to be having a corrosive impact on the authority and status of priests.

The *Statement* also offered solutions to these ‘weaknesses’, which amounted to a blueprint for the Australian Church. It encouraged, for instance, the strengthening of hierarchical authority as a panacea for what was ailing the Church. It urged the revival of traditional roles for priests, religious brothers and sisters, and the laity. It warned against the ‘culture of secularism’ and urged the encouragement of pious practices among the clergy, such as recitation of the Rosary and devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and a greater recognition of a ‘sense of sin’ among the laity as antidotes to this culture. Lastly, the *Statement* completely ignored the issue of clerical sexual abuse and dismissed the pastoral problems a number of Australian bishops were insisting needed urgent attention—more opportunities for women to participate in the life of the Church, more sympathetic treatment of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, a review of the requirements of priestly ministry, to name only three—as if both were matters of small concern that

would disappear under a general regime of more faithful obedience.

In these ways, the *Statement of Conclusions* undermined the credibility of the local hierarchy and disappointed, indeed angered, large numbers of lay Catholics. Nevertheless, the document continues to be the official strategy for the Australian Church and continues to have a major impact on it. As a result, as shown in Chapter 1, local initiative has been frustrated, attempts to deal comprehensively with clerical sexual abuse have been hamstrung, and a compliant leadership has been promoted in place of a much-needed prophetic one. Rather than a vision of the Church in Australia comparable to that which Archbishop Mannix conceived in the early years of the 20th century, the *Statement of Conclusions* is a recipe for the increasing irrelevance of the Catholic Church in the 21st century.

A key reason is that the *Statement* betrays a way of thinking on the part of its authors—and, in particular, the most senior leadership in the Vatican—that views the Church as a kind of club with an inflexible set of rules, to which all its members must subscribe. Those who don't—proponents of women's ordination, practising homosexuals, divorced and civilly-remarried Catholics—are made to feel unwelcome; those who question the rules are asked to leave or forced to go. Damian Grace argues in Chapter 2 that Rome's response to the questioning of Church structures and teachings that followed the Second Vatican Council has been to seek conformity rather than searching for a new consensus. But the Vatican's appeal to authority to impose conformity is ignored because it increasingly seems like empty moralising that is divorced both from the actual experience of many Catholics and from the insights that all but the most trusted and compliant senior advisers to the Pope can bring to the subject. This is not a new phenomenon: Pope Paul VI's decision in 1968 to ignore the majority report of the medical and ethical experts he had commissioned to advise him on an

appropriate response to the development of the oral contraceptive and his reaffirmation of the ban on Catholics using artificial forms of birth control was the most celebrated example of this kind of institutional deafness. What has changed is that under the pontificate of John Paul II, such tests of faith have been extended to all manner of subjects over which the Church has no particular expertise.

For this reason, key sections of the Catholic faithful are likely to remain alienated from their Church. The most obvious are women. In Chapter 3 Morag Fraser analyses the experience of Catholic women and their responses to the clerical culture they encounter. She shows how the 1999 report of the Australian bishops' inquiry into the participation of women in the Church found not only widespread discontent by women at their second-class citizenship, but also evidence of the sorts of conditions that allow sexual pathologies to thrive within the Church. Yet Fraser also finds a reluctance among women to walk away from their Catholic faith. Instead, many of them are taking positions of faithful defiance to Vatican pronouncements and injunctions. One such was the decision by the head of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Sister Christine Vladimiroff, to 'decline the request' made to her by the Vatican to withdraw an invitation to her fellow Benedictine sister and American scholar, Joan Chittister, to address the June 2001 Women's Ordination Worldwide Conference in Dublin. In explaining her decision—which was supported by the other members of her community—Sister Vladimiroff explained that she was trying to remain faithful to a monastic tradition to be 'a prayerful and questioning presence to both Church and society'.

Other less dramatic acts of defiance and resistance continue at the local level, particularly concerning the 1994 instruction of Pope John Paul II that all debate about women's ordination should cease. These acts by women demonstrate a courage,

steadfastness and commitment to dialogue that helps sustain the vision of a more inclusive and participatory Church.

More generally, creativity within the internal life of the Church has been stifled in recent years. One of the documents of the Second Vatican Council declared worship to be the ‘metabolism’ of Christian life. But in Australia, this metabolism has atrophied under the dead weight of liturgical correctness. As John Carmody demonstrates in Chapter 4, the great public demonstrations of Catholic tribal identity in Australia in the 1950s were intellectually shallow, but they could have a powerful impact on shaping and sustaining the cohesion of the tribe. Now, by contrast, worship and ritual are dull and arcane. Rather than drawing on the symbolism and experience of its native environment, the Church is cut off from both. One result has been a decline in attendance as the emotional appeal of Catholic worship wanes; a more serious result has been the steady failure of the Catholic Church to promote an attractive, much less compelling, testimony of its creed to the wider society.

In other ways the Church has withdrawn from any serious engagement with the more intimate needs and aspirations of its members. Juliette Hughes argues in Chapter 5 that the Church essentially disconnected from the lives of ordinary Catholics in the 1960s when Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the ban on artificial birth control methods. From that moment, the religious culture of the Church and popular culture developed along separate tracks. The guardians of the first regard the products of the latter as essentially hostile and often damaging—which they can be. But popular culture has also become the medium by which many people work through complex issues, particularly of a sexual kind, where the Church only offers platitudes and prescriptions.

These days people’s values, she writes, can thus depend as much on the cues they take from the mass media as they do on their confessional belief systems. Hughes also shows that popular culture is anything but the unabashed expression of a secular

materialist world. It is, in fact, attuned to religious themes and messages—only chaotically so and in ways that do not encourage discernment among those who consume these messages. Rather than acknowledging this and exploring ways to use this evident interest in the magic and the mystical as a way of connecting with a thirst for the divine, Church leaders tend to assume a censorious posture, which only makes the false gods on offer in movies, television, celebrity pop charts and the Internet seem even more attractive.

Young people pose a particular challenge in this regard. Studies in Australia show that each new generation has less and less involvement in religious activities of any kind, and Catholics are no exception. In Chapter 6 Michael Mullins develops the theme that by and large, the Church response to youth, repeats the mistakes of past missionary activity, which required people to surrender their cultural identity in favour of the wholesale adoption of a new and totally alien set of principles and precepts. The lessons of inculturation—that is, respecting people's culture and adapting the Christian message to it in ways that speak to their experiences—have been largely lost when it comes to the Church's appeal to the young. There are, of course, young people who find Pope John Paul II himself something of a celebrity and, over the years, large numbers of them have turned out to demonstrate their Catholic faith at the Pope's World Youth Day rallies. Many more no doubt commit to the kind of comprehensive religious lifestyle promoted by the Vatican. How much of this behaviour, though, is a retreat from the complexities of the constant flux of modern life—and thus ultimately unfulfilling and unsustainable—is another matter.

For what the Church no longer seems to offer is an imaginative and genuinely counter-cultural view on existence. A sense of the sacred, of the transcendent, of beauty and goodness has been reduced to a set of dogmas people are invited to take or leave. This, argues Paul Collins in Chapter 7, reflects

the current self-absorption of the Church rather than its openness to and engagement with the world. Ironically, he argues, this trend within the Church actually parallels the narcissism of Western civilisation. By failing to nurture and cultivate a distinctive Catholic imagination, the Church has allowed its metaphysical and spiritual insights to take a backseat to what can only ever be posed as yet another set of ethical prescriptions for living. Why, then, choose Catholic ethics over those of the New Age? The Catholic faith, warns Collins, is in danger of losing its very purpose and with it the insights it has to offer for dealing with the personal, social and global problems of the age.

Catholicism in Australia is at a crossroads. In one direction lies a less clerical, more inclusive form of Church moving judiciously with the times. In the other is a notion of Church which is closely linked to a Vatican worldview, is nostalgic and leads through dogma and discipline to the fortress Church of the pre-Second Vatican Council era. Bishops, priests and laity are pulling in different directions. The result is to halt all progress towards an authentic articulation of the faith in contemporary Australia.

1 | VISIONS, REVISIONS AND SCANDAL: A CHURCH IN CRISIS

Chris McGillion

Two issues above all have absorbed the internal energies of the Catholic Church in recent years. The first involves the Church's institutional integrity (requirements of obedience, orthodoxy and conformity); the second involves the moral integrity of certain of its members (the scandal of clerical sexual abuse). These two issues have concerned senior clergy and the common laity in almost inverse proportion. Pope John Paul II and his advisers within the Vatican bureaucracy (the Roman Curia) have been at pains to strengthen the structures of the Church and the acceptance of the authority of official teachings among the faithful, and their efforts have impacted on the laity to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the latter's involvement in the sacramental life of the Church. The laity, for their part, have been primarily affronted by revelations about abusive clergy and the inaction of those in positions of responsibility in bringing the culprits to account. These revelations have eroded the faithful's trust in priests as ministers and pastors and their

confidence in bishops as managers, but only slowly, even reluctantly, has the problem of clerical abuse engaged the Church's leadership.

Both issues are linked, of course: as the Vatican sees it, the Church is under challenge from the surrounding secular culture, and most of its internal problems are traceable to the influence this culture wields over laity and clergy alike; for many Catholics, by contrast, clerical sexual abuse is proof of the need for a fundamental renewal in the Church that embraces at least some of the secular world's standards of equity, accountability and participatory decision-making. Nowhere have these two quite different responses clashed more dramatically as they have in Australia, and nowhere has the outcome been as damaging to ongoing initiatives for dealing with abusive clergy, for responding to pastoral needs and for identifying the leadership of the Church with the aspirations of those it is meant to serve.

THE SYNOD FOR OCEANIA

In November 1998 two separate meetings, involving Australia's Catholic bishops, sought to investigate the challenges facing the local Church and what might be done to meet them. One of those meetings, the Synod for Oceania, had been planned for years and was public knowledge. Beginning in 1991, Pope John Paul II had called in turn on the bishops of Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa to gather for discussions in Rome that would prepare the Church for the new millennium. The Synod of Oceania was the last such meeting, and 38 Australian bishops attended, far outnumbering the contingent from New Zealand and the Pacific. Although the agenda for the meeting had been prepared in advance by Vatican officials, the free-wheeling discussions and presentations that the synod process allowed provided an opportunity for the leadership of the Australian Church to exchange their concerns with the Pope and Vatican

officials, to identify with the hopes and frustrations of ordinary Catholics back home, and to explore in a frank manner how their Church might respond to its changing circumstances.

During the synod, which opened in Rome on 22 November, bishop after bishop spoke bluntly about the need to respond to the signs of the times.¹ More openings had to be found for women to participate in the life of the Church, Parramatta's Bishop Kevin Manning told the synod, because they are 'struggling to maintain loyalty' in the face of teachings on issues such as birth control and women's ordination which have not been explained in a way 'consonant' with their experience. The auxiliary bishop of Sydney, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, was even blunter about what the Church must do to repair the damage of clerical sexual abuse. 'Victims of abuse and the whole community,' he declared, 'demand that all aspects of the life of priests and religious be studied and that all attitudes to power and authority be carefully reviewed.' Bishop Pat Power, auxiliary bishop of Canberra, argued that the Church must be made 'humbler, less clerical and more forgiving'. He urged the synod to consider the plight of divorced and civilly remarried couples, of homosexuals and priests who had left the ministry—all of whom, he said, feel excluded from the Church.

Other bishops criticised Vatican efforts to shut down debate and enforce inflexible rules. 'The dialogue of salvation needs to be kept open,' said Toowoomba's Bishop William Morris, and this required the creation of 'a forum in which people can talk'. Bishop Peter Ingham, then also an auxiliary bishop of Sydney, told the synod that ordinary Catholics 'are suffering at the hands of zealots making their voices heard through the Church's authority structure' and thereby stifling 'legitimate diversity'. Several suggestions ran counter to recent Vatican rulings. Again Bishop Ingham, for example, said that 'unnecessary tension' had been caused by the Church's refusal to adopt gender inclusive language, and he championed the New Revised Standard Version

Bible, even though the Vatican had outlawed its use in the United States in 1994. Some bishops even questioned publicly whether the vow of priestly celibacy was still appropriate in all cases and especially given the declining number of priests and new vocations—which already resulted in some Catholics not having regular access to the sacraments.

The Reverend Michael Curran, Superior General of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, who had been invited to give a special presentation to the synod, even called for another Vatican Council to consider issues of Church order and governance in the years ahead.

Church rules on priestly celibacy, which Pope John Paul II insists must continue in spite of the serious shortage of priests in many parts of the world, came under challenge as well. Four of the six working groups into which the bishops attending the synod were divided indicated some openness to the possibility of a married priesthood. Indeed, Sydney's then Archbishop, Cardinal Edward Clancy, told the influential London Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*, that 'all the synod fathers would acknowledge that [the decline in the number of priests is] a real problem and there is merit in the argument about ordaining married men'.²

Collectively, these comments delighted many Catholics back home in Australia who had been making precisely these same kinds of arguments for years, and the synod thus raised an expectation that after years of inaction, indifference and at times open hostility to change, a momentum was building in the hierarchy for fundamental and genuine Church renewal. But this was not to be because the fate of the local Church had been decided before the Synod for Oceania had even begun.

ROME'S ALTERNATIVE VIEW

The other meeting held in Rome that November was not advertised in advance, not even among the local hierarchy. It

would produce a vision for the local Church completely at odds with the one that began to take form during the synod and, on Rome's insistence, would be imposed on the faithful. The subsequent complexion of the Australian Church, the priority of its concerns, its stance on key contemporary social issues, and its response to the scandal of clerical sexual abuse all stem from the outcome of this meeting. In turn, much of the continuing disillusionment and division within the Catholic community can be traced to the contradiction between what so many of its bishops said at the synod and what they eventually all put their names to as the consensus view of their Church.

At the meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference the previous April, Cardinal Edward Clancy, in his capacity as conference President, advised the members of the key policy-making Central Commission that the Roman Curia had requested a meeting to discuss the Church in Australia. News of the proposed meeting was not made public beyond the small group of bishops who comprised the commission. Eventually the gathering was held over four days, beginning on 17 November. On the Australian side, the participants were the seven metropolitan archbishops, together with the chairmen and secretaries of the Bishops' Conference committees for clergy and religious, liturgy, education, evangelisation, and doctrine and morals. In all, 13 of the 38 Australian bishops who were in Rome for the Synod of Oceania were party to the dialogue.

The Vatican was represented by officials responsible for matters involving doctrine, clergy, worship and the sacraments, bishops, religious orders and Catholic education. Three weeks after the meeting, a summary of its deliberations, known as the *Statement of Conclusions*, was circulated among all the Australian bishops who were in Rome. In a hastily arranged consultation before their scheduled meeting with Pope John Paul II, the bishops were asked to assent to the document. All did so and it

was made public on 14 December as an official view of the state of the Catholic Church in Australia.

The *Statement of Conclusions* began on an encouraging note.³ It acknowledged with gratitude the laity's 'vital commitment' to the mission of the Church in Australia. It said the increase in active participation of the faithful in liturgical celebrations, the Church's extensive charitable works, its educational institutions and its willingness to be a prophetic voice on social justice issues 'are all positive factors that enliven' both Church and society. But the document also found weaknesses in the Australian Church, and these were its essential concern.

A 'crisis of faith' exists in Australia, the *Statement* declared, and it involves the discernment of truth. 'The tolerance characteristic of Australian society naturally affects the Church also,' it argued, and while this influence can be positive, it can also lead to indifference and the uncritical acceptance of any opinion or activity as long as these do no harm to others. This openness to all perspectives gives rise to specific problems for the Church. First and foremost is a problem in Christology. Not just in Australia but throughout the world, the *Statement* alleged, there is evidence of a weakening of faith in Christ and of a distortion of doctrines based on the Scriptures and the early councils of the Church. These distortions take two directions: 'in the first, a re-fashioning of Jesus into a great prophet of humanity who, for example, questions the rules of religion; in the other, substituting a [spiritual] economy for the flesh and blood reality of Christ'. In other words, the nature of Jesus as both man and God is being split in two and the resultant half-images are being exaggerated to the distortion of the whole picture.

According to the *Statement*, 'some aspects of feminist scholarship' were responsible for this development, and it warned that, left unchecked, the faithful could be encouraged to misunderstand the very nature of God. Another problem,

also in part said to stem from ‘certain forms of feminism’, was a tendency to challenge classical anthropology in a way that elevated individual conscience to the level of an absolute authority. When subjectivity takes the place of objective reasoning, conscience has no point of reference beyond itself and the sense of sin is eroded, the *Statement* warned. This can lead to moral problems such as ‘indifference to the poor, racial prejudice and violence, abortion, euthanasia, the legitimization of homosexual relationships and other immoral forms of sexual activity’. A triumph of subjectivity also poses an ecclesiological challenge in that many people become persuaded that the Church is a merely human invention and, as such, can and should be reorganised to suit the circumstances of the day. The great fallacy and imminent danger in all this, the *Statement* concluded, is that ‘truth is no longer discovered in a Revelation already given, but is based on the shifting sands of majority and consensus’.

The rest of the document outlined a strategy for dealing with this allegedly serious situation. It focused first on the responsibilities of the bishops, who were reminded that the faithful look to them for leadership ‘now more than ever in these confusing and increasingly secularised times’ and ‘have a right to receive authentic and clear Catholic teaching’ from those who represent the Church. Consequently, the bishops were urged to exercise ‘continual vigilance’ in order ‘to safeguard the integrity of the faith’ and ‘not to tolerate error in matters of doctrine and morals or Church discipline’. As guardians of the sacraments, they were also to take action against the introduction of ‘spurious elements’ in the liturgy.

A ‘blurring of the lines’ between clergy and laity had been allowed to develop, with negative consequences for both, it was claimed. The *Statement* called for greater clarity in this area to preserve the authentic identity of priests and in the interests of encouraging vocations. The ‘many attempts’ issuing from a

‘culture of secularism’ to remove the figure of the priest from the centre of the lives of believers had to be resisted. This resistance begins in the seminaries with ‘inspired discipline’, and a nourishment of the important relationship between celibacy and the priestly vocation. Priests themselves must play their part by affirming their special identity. One way to do this is through greater attention to Marian devotions, the recitation of the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, and other ‘pious practices’; another is by retrieving for themselves those tasks entrusted to the laity but rightly belonging to the ordained clergy and withdrawing from involvement in areas that should be attended by better-informed lay persons. No details or examples of what the authors had in mind in either respect were provided.

According to the document, ‘several difficulties’ had emerged with respect to the religious orders. Again no details were given, except indirectly. The bishops were requested to open a dialogue with the leaders of the orders about deepening the assent of their members to Church teachings, especially regarding the non-ordination of women to the priesthood, the theology of the sacraments, and moral issues. The orders were reminded directly that their conferences ‘are not organs of parallel pastoral authority’ and that they must integrate their activities with the pastoral priorities of the bishops. Individual priests and religious brothers and sisters were put on notice that, in matters of faith, there is no such thing as ‘loyal opposition’ or ‘faithful subversion’—in other words, exploring interpretations. Priests, brothers and sisters who are prominent in the eyes of the faithful and/or the secular media were called upon to offer ‘a more evident fidelity’ to the teaching authority of the Church than would be expected of other Catholics.

Priests and religious brothers and sisters were advised that the good example they give in living consecrated lives is the best way to inspire vocations. To this end, and also to avoid the fragmentation of the community life of the religious orders,

those brothers and sisters who worked in secular occupations and lived outside religious houses were urged to return to communal styles of living and traditional forms of work. A caution was sounded about the recent trend among religious orders (including the Jesuits) to encourage lay associates: these should never be considered an alternative to the decline in vocations and must never be encouraged in ways that could harm the internal life of the order. The 'Church does not create her own ordering and structure', the *Statement* insisted, 'but receives them from Christ himself'.

To address the alleged diminishment of a sense of sin among the laity, there was to be 'renewed and energetic catechesis [teaching]' aimed at instilling a 'true sense of contrition' and 'authentic sorrow' for wrongdoing in the hearts of the faithful. The laity were warned that individual confession is the 'sole ordinary means' by which one is reconciled with God, and the bishops were told that the Third Rite of Reconciliation (also known as communal confession), which had become extremely popular in Australia, was 'illegitimate' and must be 'eliminated'. The *Statement* also called for a 'pastoral response' to the problem of declining Mass attendance, although it made no suggestions about what form this should take.

The bishops were encouraged to be active in ensuring the doctrinal soundness of the theology taught in Catholic universities and theological centres. And they were urged to ensure that Catholic school teachers are properly formed in the faith and that school administrators employ a significant proportion of practising Catholics in their teaching staffs. In general, Catholic education should lead to 'full participation and involvement' in the Church, the *Statement* said. Students should know 'as soon as they set foot in a Catholic school' that they are in a different—that is to say, a religiously inspired—environment with its own 'unique characteristics'. Increasingly, many non-Catholic parents are sending their children to Catholic schools

in response to the perceived decline in educational standards in government-run schools. While this is permissible and these children are to be made welcome, the *Statement* says that their accommodation is not to compromise the religious identity of the school.

Lastly, it posed several guidelines to ensure an authentic Catholic identity pervades Catholic schools—including attention to regular prayer and the celebration of the Mass—and suggested that all pastoral work with the young should aim, at some level, to encourage new vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

THE BACKLASH

Privately, many bishops were angry at the way their visit to Rome had ended in controversy over the *Statement of Conclusions*, rather than in reflection over the debate at the Synod for Oceania. One bishop described the brief consultation that was held prior to the release of the document as a ‘parody’, and another commented that ‘anyone with any honesty would say there was a lot of duplicity involved’ in getting their assent. Those bishops who were not party to the Vatican meeting in November, including many who had spoken out most vociferously on the need for fundamental Church reform at the synod, were given little time to read or comment on the *Statement* before it was made public with their concurrence. Many bishops felt the effect of the document was to undercut much of the good that had come out of the synod.⁴ One, Rockhampton’s Bishop Brian Heenan, who, as chair of the Bishops’ Committee on Clergy and Religious, had attended the Vatican meeting, went so far as to state publicly that the *Statement* ‘does not reflect sufficiently the positive contribution the Australian bishops made to the dialogue’.⁵

A large number of clergy were also dismayed by the *Statement*. Following a meeting in Sydney in February 1999, 75 priests and religious brothers and sisters signed a letter to the bishops rejecting what they saw as the Vatican's 'overwhelming negative estimation of Australian Catholicism'. The 'tone and some of the content' of the *Statement of Conclusions*, they said, caused them 'distress'. It passed over complex moral and social problems that afflicted many Catholic families and completely ignored the 'deep shame' of clerical sexual abuse. The document omitted serious consideration of the problem of the shortage of priests and, in particular, the repeated calls from bishops around the world to address the criteria for ordination, among them the celibacy requirement. Its characterisation in pejorative terms of some of the challenges facing the Church was less helpful than would have been a call to scrutinise these for what they said about the understanding of and receptivity towards the faith. By re-emphasising the individual nature of sin as distinct from structural injustice and immorality, the *Statement* would make it difficult for the Church to contribute to critical issues concerning national reconciliation, particularly between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, the priests and religious argued.

They also said that the *Statement's* call to eliminate the general use of communal confession would be a disaster and close off a 'profound and transforming' experience in the life of the Church. Finally, the letter urged the bishops to 'broaden the dialogue of faith' by including clergy and laity and suggested that, in the light of the *Statement*, this might be a good time to convene a synod of Australian Catholics.

Lay Catholics were confused and divided by what they read in the *Statement*, not least because it seemed diametrically opposed to so much of what had been expressed by their bishops about the concerns and frustrations of the faithful at the Synod for Oceania. Many people saw the document as an extremely blinkered view of the reality facing the Church. Others simply

expressed their anger at what they saw as the impertinence of Vatican officials pretending to know what was best for Australian Catholics. At the extremes, conservative activists were delighted by the document; progressives were outraged.

In April 1999, the Bishops' Conference issued its first response to the *Statement* and the reaction it had generated. In a letter addressed to 'the Catholic people of Australia', the bishops accepted that 'by most measurable criteria' the *Statement of Conclusions* was right to argue that 'secularisation is making great inroads in Australia [and that] this indicates a crisis of faith'. The bishops acknowledged that different understandings of the person of Jesus Christ, competing claims about the nature of the Church and the role of conscience, and disputes about the appropriateness of the Church's moral teaching were all matters of grave concern. They also acknowledged a certain ferment within the local Catholic community, as some elements pushed for change and others recoiled from it. No-one, however, should be unduly worried by this, the bishops advised. 'Clergy, religious, and laity are all going through a period of profound change and it should not cause wonder if tensions arise,' they wrote.

One source of these tensions was division within the worldwide Church over how far the Second Vatican Council vision of a more inclusive, lay-centred Church should be embraced; another source of tension was the ongoing transition at the local level from a predominantly Irish Catholic tribal grouping to a more pluralist and culturally diverse community of the faithful. As leaders of the Australian Church, the bishops recognised that it was their job to oversee this change and 'to correct errors, not by the blunt use of authority, but through dialogue and persuasion'. With that in mind, the bishops used the opportunity to label as unacceptable the practice of some groups—that were not named—that had set themselves up as watchdogs of orthodoxy and were spying on priests and reporting

to Rome any pastoral or liturgical innovations of which they disapproved.

The bishops' letter, however, failed to soothe the unease generated by the *Statement*, even within their own ranks. As one bishop confided at the time: 'Some of the hardliners themselves are having second thoughts about the way we were treated [in Rome]'. When it came to thrashing out a response, he said, 'the degree to which we would make public our concern and anger at the way we were treated over there' was the major sticking point. The bishops also recommended public discussions be held to help deepen the understanding of the issues facing the Church, but they were slow, if not reluctant, to take the initiative in organising them.

Within a week of the release of their letter, however, a meeting of Catholics was organised in Sydney's Town Hall by a largely lay moderate group called Catalyst for Renewal. More than 3000 Catholics attended, the overwhelming majority of them giving vent to their concern about what they saw as Rome's assault on their Church.

Why this reaction? The *Statement of Conclusions* was the first overview of its kind of the Australian Church. But it was not the product of any dialogue with the local Catholic community and completely, almost arrogantly, ignored its main concerns. On his return from Rome, the President of the National Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Clancy, blamed 'ill-informed' media reports for the confusion and disillusionment he confronted.⁶ But his account of what happened in Rome did not challenge the essential veracity of those reports. Some of his fellow bishops were already making their ill-feelings about the *Statement* known, and even the cardinal eventually conceded, in an interview with the US-based *National Catholic Reporter*, that the document he had signed in Rome presented a 'more jaundiced view' of the Australian Church than was deserved. In the same interview, Clancy also acknowledged that the 'suddenness' of Rome's

actions in eliminating communal confessions in particular was 'sort of jarring'.⁷

In fact, the *Statement's* overall picture of the Australian situation was recklessly unbalanced. It completely failed to acknowledge, for example, the most pressing problem facing the Church, namely, the alienation from it of so many Catholic women because of their exclusion from genuine decision-making roles, the negative attitudes towards sex and gender within the Church, and the refusal even to debate issues of importance to them, such as women's ordination.

A major report released in August 1999 on women's participation in the Australian Church (see Chapter 3: 'The report on women's participation') left no doubt about the degree or seriousness of this alienation. Among weekly mass attenders, women outnumber men by a ratio of three to two. Women are also over-represented among Catholic teaching, hospital and administrative staff and comprise the bulk of students enrolled for theological studies. In crucial ways, the future health of the Church depends on them. The report, however, documented the 'pain and anger' Catholic women felt at their sense of subordination and dismissal within official Church structures and noted that, as a result, many of them had left the Church or were contemplating leaving it.

This report was based on a two-year consultation the bishops had held with women around the country, starting in 1996. All of the Australian bishops who attended the Vatican meeting that produced the *Statement of Conclusions* had to be aware of the urgent problem they had on their hands to contain, let alone ameliorate, this sense of alienation. Yet, incredibly, no mention of the women's issue even appeared in the summary of the Vatican meeting, much less suggestions about how to deal with the problem.

By contrast, the 'crisis of faith' the *Statement* identified was described in such rarefied terms, its leaps of logic were at times

so difficult to follow, and its causes—whether ‘aspects of feminism’ or the ‘culture of secularism’—were so general as to be meaningless tools for understanding the Australian situation. When the *Statement* focused on particular complaints about the Australian Church rather than sweeping critiques of the failings of contemporary Western culture and scholarship, it was clear that the authors were being heavily influenced by a small group of disgruntled but well-organised and highly vocal conservative Catholics who had managed to give the impression of the general faithful being led astray by rogues in clerical garb.

In fact, the judgment that there was a ‘crisis of faith’ in Australia seemed to be little more than a blanket extension of a worldview that had developed in Rome under the pontificate of John Paul II and was most clearly articulated by him in his 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis Splendour* (The Splendour of Truth). There he had argued that all around one sees ‘contempt for human life’, not simply because of the failure of economic or political systems, but because of the corruption of the modern intellect. When people examine their consciences these days, he argued, they no longer enter a dialogue with truth, but instead study social science data to see what other people do in similar circumstances. In this way, objective moral principles (such as respect for human rights) become liable to subjective (that is, cultural or personal) interpretation. Morality, in other words, loses all meaning. This presents a ‘grave danger’, he had written. It is that democracy, allied with ethical relativism, that will forever ‘remove any sure moral reference point from political and social life and on a deeper level make the acknowledgement of truth impossible’. It was a warning he would issue even more forcefully two years later in *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), where he charged that a ‘culture of death’ had overtaken the 20th century.

Other negative assessments of the Australian Church bore an uncanny resemblance to comments Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger,

head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had made in an article in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's official newspaper, earlier in 1998. Australia, he wrote, was a country where there were 'abuses in the lay faithful's participation in the sacred ministry of the ordained'. How these 'abuses', like how the more general 'crisis of faith' differed from the situation in other countries such as France, Britain or Italy—which were arguably much further down the road to secularism than Australia—was never explained. Indeed, Rome's assessment of the Australian Church seemed a sleight of hand by which institutional Church shortcomings had conveniently been blamed on the faithful.

The *Statement's* blueprint for Australian Catholicism was ill-conceived. It undermined the credibility of the bishops by making them appear totally out of touch with the realities facing the local Church. It promised to hobble the religious orders—from which have come the more creative responses to the needs and challenges of ordinary Australian Catholics—and force them into roles ill-suited to the times. It also removed pastoral options from the smaller and smaller pool of priests—not only communal confession, for example, but also flexibility in sharing roles and responsibilities with the laity.

IMPLICATIONS OF ROME'S BLUEPRINT

For these reasons, many Catholics hoped that the *Statement* would die a quiet death even though the bishops had again genuflected to it—and to Rome—in their April 1999 letter to the faithful. But there was little chance of that being allowed to happen, given that the document had essentially been imposed on the local bishops by the Vatican. In Adelaide, then Archbishop Leonard Faulkner led a rear-guard action against the decision to ban communal confession on the grounds of its pastoral value. This, however, prompted two follow-up instructions

(in 1999 and 2000) from the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments (the Vatican's liturgical watchdog) to bring everybody into line. Two Catholic intellectuals, whose writings had begun to attract the ire of Church officials long before the *Statement of Conclusions* had been prepared, were left with even less room for manoeuvre once the *Statement* appeared, urging bishops to exercise 'continued vigilance' against possible doctrinal errors. The two were Father Paul Collins, whose book *Papal Power* came under investigation by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in late 1997 for allegedly questioning the infallibility of the Pope, and Father Michael Morwood, whose book *Tomorrow's Catholic* was banned from use in Catholic schools and parishes by Melbourne's Archbishop George Pell in March 1998 because it was said to contain ambiguous statements about the divinity of Christ and about the Trinity. Neither Collins nor Morwood was ever given an open hearing to defend the charge that their books contained 'doctrinal problems', and both subsequently resigned from the priesthood.

More than anything, however, the *Statement* effectively put a stop to innovative and imaginative responses by bishops, priests and religious to the problems confronting the Church and the wider society. The document had set the parameters on Catholic behaviour, and everyone was expected to work within them.

This included the country's most senior hierarchy, Sydney's Archbishop, Cardinal Edward Clancy. In October 1999 he received a letter from Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, ordering him to discontinue plans for the involvement of the Sisters of Charity in the trial of a legal heroin injecting room in Sydney's Kings Cross. The idea of trialling a medically-supervised injecting room had been approved by the NSW Government, following a drugs summit earlier that year. After considering that element of Catholic moral tradition that affirms harm-minimisation

strategies—even illegal acts—are ethically appropriate under specific conditions, the Sisters of Charity announced their decision to manage the trial in July. The announcement was greeted in most Catholic circles as an heroic, indeed Gospel-inspired reaction to the problem of the increasing number of avoidable deaths due to unsafe heroin injection. The order's decision was even given a ringing endorsement by *The Catholic Weekly*. In an editorial published on 8 August, the paper said of the trial: 'For their part, the users will be recognised as what they are—victims, rather than perpetrators, of evil. Redirecting the blame for drug abuse in this manner will represent a great step forward for human dignity. The decision is consistent with the Church's teaching that human life must be respected in all its stages and conditions.'

Since the *Catholic Weekly* is the official mouthpiece for the Archdiocese of Sydney, it is inconceivable that the editorial would have been run without at least the tacit approval of Clancy. But some within the wider Catholic community vehemently opposed the Sisters' initiative. These included conservative lay Catholics and powerful figures in the hierarchy. Two weeks after the *Catholic Weekly* endorsed the decision to manage the trial, its Melbourne counterpart, *Kairos*, carried an article by Father Anthony Fisher, the episcopal vicar for health care for the Melbourne Archdiocese, attacking Church involvement in the project. Fisher, who was described by one Church source as '[Archbishop George] Pell's right-hand man', wrote that no program set up to facilitate or condone drug abuse could be ethical—let alone acceptable for a Church agency'. His article was the first sign that the decision taken by the Sisters of Charity—and, at the very least, initially not opposed in any active way by Clancy—was under serious challenge.

Ratzinger claimed in his letter that the prospect of Church involvement in the trial had 'deeply disturbed the faithful [in that] such an initiative is proposed by members of a religious

congregation [who] bear a greater responsibility to give a clear gospel witness'. His reasoning, which was not based on any moral argument, was entirely consistent with what the *Statement of Conclusions* had said about the role of priests and the members of religious orders. In its section on consecrated life, the Statement argued that it 'is not enough that religious [brothers and sisters] engage in any work whatsoever, even if they do this "in the spirit of the Founder"'. It had also warned that because priests and religious brothers and sisters had a public profile, 'a more evident fidelity to [Church teaching]' was expected of them.

Whatever the pastoral needs the Sisters of Charity had identified and chosen to respond to in terms of the victims of drug abuse, managing a heroin-injecting room was far too removed from the traditional role of nuns for the Vatican's comfort. To Clancy's embarrassment, and the Sisters' frustration, Rome had intervened to ensure that no trial would go ahead with Church involvement, and management of the injecting room was eventually taken over by the Uniting Church.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS: CLERICAL SEXUAL ABUSE UNCOVERED

An indirect, but ultimately more urgent, casualty of the *Statement of Conclusions* was the integrity of the Australian bishops' response to the issue of clerical sexual abuse. Over a period of more than ten years (from 1988 until 1999), that response would evolve from a virtual protection of abusive priests and religious brothers and sisters, through damage control, to a recognition of how a clerical culture itself could help produce abusive clergy. The *Statement*, however, dashed any hopes that the bishops might feel free to act on this last insight and so would fall short of a comprehensive response to the problem. Similarly, in responding to the abuse scandal, the bishops were eventually forced to recognise that they had a responsibility to

exercise collective leadership over the entire Australian Church and that their national conference was the best instrument by which to do so. But again, the *Statement* undermined their leadership in the eyes of priests, the members of religious orders and the laity and effectively accorded the bishops only the role of dutiful underlings compliantly administering Rome's blueprint for the Church. Not surprisingly, when issues involving clerical sexual abuse again surfaced in 2002, an ailing Church structure was left to repair what many Catholics and non-Catholics alike, by then, saw as a terminally ill clerical culture.

In 1988 the bishops had set up a special committee, under the direction of Melbourne's then auxiliary Bishop Peter Connors, to examine the issue of sex abuse in the Church and to prepare a set of principles to govern the appropriate response to the problem. Four years later, in conjunction with the peak body representing religious orders in Australia (the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes), the bishops issued a pastoral letter in which they acknowledged that mistakes had been made in dealing with sexually abusive clergy in the past. They also said Church authorities were being brought up to speed on the problem of child sexual abuse by the work of Connors' committee. But haste was not an imperative. In 1993, the bishops and the leaders of the religious orders widened the focus of the committee—now the Bishops' Committee on Professional Standards, with Bishop Connors as its secretary—to include consideration of adult survivors of child or adolescent sexual abuse and issues relating to women and men who were victims of sexual misconduct by priests, religious and Church workers. Yet it was December 1993 before the Connors' committee made public even a draft document.

Although a long time in coming, the draft report did make some courageous admissions. Sexual abuse, it stated, 'will not be stopped in a climate of deception, hypocrisy and lies'. Consequently, the Church should commit itself to 'a spirit of

openness and truth' in dealing with allegations of abusive treatment. In cases where children were involved, the Church should 'co-operate fully with child-protection agencies and the judiciary, not claiming preferential treatment for one of its personnel when suspected or formerly accused' of sexual offences. Action must be taken to rebuild trust in the community affected by abusive clergy. To this end, the draft contained an unequivocal warning that 'priests, religious and Church workers need to be aware that sexual abuse or misconduct on their part is not compatible with on-going ministry in the Church'. The document concluded by arguing that 'it is simply intolerable that we should degenerate to the extent of closing [the Church's] eyes to the injustices which are destroying the foundations on which people build their identity'.

For all these encouraging signs, however, the draft document revealed that the tension within the Church about whether the emphasis of its response to sexual abuse should be placed on a pastoral approach to victims or on an institutional approach of crisis-management and damage control remained unresolved. A good deal of the text sought to excuse the slowness in dealing with abusive priests and religious in the past:

Until quite recently the extent and the effects of child sexual abuse in our society have been relatively unappreciated and unresearched. Usually, the abuse has been kept secret or known only by a few family members or close friends. Because the abuse had often been hidden, most people had very little awareness of the serious trauma which sexual abuse causes its victims . . . [A]s a society, we are only beginning to deal with [child sexual abuse], and we still have much to learn. This historical context helps to explain why very few cases of sexual misconduct with children and adolescents were reported. The response of Church leaders also needs to be understood in this historical context.⁸

While that much was true, the fact remained that the sexual abuse of children was always recognised as a criminal offence, not to mention a serious moral one. The document also suffered from a tendency to view victims of abuse as ‘the weak’ and ‘the poor’, as if they were really seeking consolation and compassion from the Church, instead of justice. Moreover, the document tended to regard sex abuse as a kind of virus some of the clergy had caught from outside the Church—not an illness that may stem from within it. By December 1993 that kind of reasoning had become untenable.

Six months earlier, in July 1993, the Christian Brothers in Western Australia issued a public apology to victims of physical and sexual abuse in their care. In an advertisement published in the West Australian press, the Brothers expressed their ‘heartfelt regret for the failings of the past’ and begged ‘the forgiveness of those who suffered’ among the 4000 boys sent to Church institutions in the State between 1901 and 1983. Forgiveness was one thing, compensation another. Lawyers representing alleged victims of physical and sexual abuse in the Brothers’ care in Western Australia had compiled a list of accusations against 93 Brothers—20 of whom were still living. As well in Victoria, the Christian Brothers had set up a ‘hotline’ to take allegations of abuse against members of the order and to provide counselling to the victims.

The same year a Canadian drama, *The Boys of St Vincent*, which was based on the scandal involving a Christian Brothers orphanage at Mount Cashel in Newfoundland, was broadcast nationally. The drama showed how a generalised environment of physical abuse and rigid authoritarianism within the institution could throw up cases of more specific sexual abuse of children. The effect of the program was to add to publicity about clerical abuse. And the more publicity, the greater the number of allegations being raised against priests and brothers. Some people, especially Church officials, explained away this

snowballing effect as opportunism in the light of possible compensation payouts or as simply a case of dumping on the Church for want of anyone else to blame for personal traumas and predicaments. Others, especially those representing victims' rights groups, explained the rush of allegations as a chain reaction in which victims were realising for the first time that they were not alone in their pain or personally responsible for their misplaced sense of shame.

One of the biggest class actions in Australian legal history was mounted in 1993 when 240 writs were filed in the NSW Supreme Court claiming damages for alleged sexual and physical abuse by Christian Brothers and lay staff employed by the order at Church-run colleges and institutions across the country. But the Christian Brothers were just part of a grim picture that was emerging. Allegations were being raised against other priests and against members of other religious orders. In Parramatta, for example, a secret inquiry had been launched by the local bishop into the sexual impropriety of an order of teaching priests and brothers based at Greystanes. Inside, if not outside the Church, it was fast becoming obvious that clerical sexual abuse was not an isolated problem that could be dismissed as the failing of particular individuals, but rather a pattern of behaviour that required a much more comprehensive response.

In October 1993 Wollongong's *Illawarra Mercury* broke the story of six young men who claimed to have been sexually abused as children by the headmaster of the local Christian Brothers college, Brother Michael Evans, and by a local parish priest and chaplain to the college, Father Peter Comensoli. According to the men's account, Father Comensoli was in the habit of inviting boys to his presbytery, where he would entertain them with alcohol and pornographic videos before molesting them. It was also common practice for boys to stay over at the presbytery at night and for Evans to visit them there where, it was claimed, he would wake them in the night, pin them to the bed and

molest them. In 1984, one of the boys, who was then 18 years old, reported just such an incident to Bishop William Murray, then head of the Wollongong diocese, but no action was taken against either Comensoli or Evans.

Two years later, the complainant approached Evans' superior in Wollongong, Brother Bill Hocking, and Brother Laurie Needham, then deputy provincial of the Christian Brothers. The two said that they were aware of allegations of sexually abusive behaviour by Evans and would investigate the complaint. But again no action was taken. (Hocking was himself convicted of aggravated assault on a youth the following year.) Soon after, three of the victims took their story to the police and lodged a complaint against Evans. But there they were told that the alleged offences had occurred too long ago and, anyhow, the evidence was too thin to warrant charges being laid.

In 1991, Brother Julian McDonald was appointed provincial of the Christian Brothers. He was given no briefing about the allegations against Evans nor about the 1984 meeting with Bishop Murray. After a visit from the mother of the man who had approached Murray with the complaint against Evans, McDonald travelled to Wollongong and learned from the local police about the 1990 complaint. In 1992 McDonald removed Evans from the Wollongong college to a retreat centre in Sydney. Apart from this, no action was taken against either Evans or Comensoli until the *Illawarra Mercury* published its investigation into the story in October 1993. The ensuing scandal reactivated the police investigation. The following October Peter Comensoli pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting two boys, aged 11 years and 16 years, and was sentenced to 18 months in jail. Two months later, Michael Evans committed suicide on the day he was to be charged with similar offences.

The matter, however, was raised again before the 1996 Wood Royal Commission into Police Corruption in New South Wales. The reason was the commission wanted to know why it had

taken so long to bring Evans and Comensoli to account and whether questionable connections involving the police may have played a part in protecting the two by covering up the complaints against them. What the commission found was less a dereliction of duty on the part of police than one on the part of the Church.

Explaining the Church's position to the commission were Father Brian Lucas, then secretary of the Sydney Archdiocese and its official spokesman, and the Christian Brothers Provincial, Brother Julian McDonald. Both denied that the Church had been involved in any cover-up of the sexual impropriety, and each insisted that the Church had climbed a sharp learning curve in its understanding of paedophilia in the previous ten years. Still, their testimony confirmed what many people already felt: that in dealing with allegations against Evans and Comensoli, Church authorities had been reckless, if not legally culpable.

Father Lucas, for instance, gave the commission a potted account of how the Church might have dealt with child sexual offenders in the past. Often, he said, it would have been considered sufficient that the offender was confronted with his wrongdoing. 'He would be then deeply ashamed,' suggested Lucas, 'and very, very embarrassed and then would become suitably contrite and then with a period of psychological and spiritual counselling that "problem" . . . would have been addressed.'

But often the 'problem' was 'addressed' without the alleged offender having to confront anything more upsetting than a change of address. Complaints about Evans, for instance, first surfaced while he was teaching at St Patrick's College in the Sydney suburb of Strathfield. Rather than confronting Evans, Church authorities moved him to Wollongong, where he subsequently became headmaster of Edmund Rice College. Four years after one of Evans' victims approached Bishop Murray with a complaint, Evans was allowed to set up a centre for homeless

children and to continue a high public profile life as a local radio celebrity and newspaper columnist.

Even after Brother McDonald moved Evans out of Wollongong, he was still permitted to work at a retreat centre in Sydney. And no attempt was made to inform authorities at the University of New England about why Evans had been stood down as headmaster of Edmund Rice College when he successfully applied for a position with the university, supervising the construction of a new campus at Coffs Harbour on the New South Wales north coast.

Questioned about the institutional culture that could allow suspected offenders simply to be shunted around in this fashion, Brother McDonald told the commission that more could scarcely have been done, since nothing substantial had been proved against Evans. The fact that no proper investigation of his behaviour appeared to have been undertaken either by Church authorities or by the Wollongong police remained a moot point. Moreover, McDonald said, the Church had learned much about the nature of paedophilia in a short time. Child molestation by priests and brothers was no longer considered a moral problem, but rather an illness requiring treatment. 'Only in recent times we have come to understand psychosexual dysfunction and we have come to address it more directly and get therapy for offenders,' McDonald informed the commission. Still, evidence of a more direct approach remained hard to find.

A week later Bishop Murray, only days into his retirement as the Bishop of Wollongong, appeared before the commission. His testimony would indicate precisely what the Church's priorities were. Counsel assisting the commission, Ms Patricia Bergin, asked Murray about his 1984 meeting with the man who alleged he was violently assaulted by Evans and who was, at the time of the meeting, training for the priesthood:

Bergin: Were you worried if he made a formal complaint his journey to ordination would be in fact a very rough one?

Murray: Yes.

Bergin: And it would be a rough journey for the Church as well?

Murray: Yes. I have to admit that I moved fairly slowly in the matter.

Bergin: In fact, you didn't move at all, did you?

Murray: Not at that stage.⁹

Nor at any other stage either. But then things had changed—or so Church officials were insisting. By 1993, Father Lucas told the commission, the Church had become worldly-wise about sex abuse. It had learned that a policy of covering up abuse was the 'very worst way of approaching it'. If the Evans–Comensoli matter had been brought to the Church internally in 1993, he suggested, there would have been 'less sense of a closing of ranks'. The only trouble was that in 1993 and well into 1994, Church authorities were still doing precisely that.

On 4 May 1993, Parramatta's Bishop Bede Heather wrote a circular letter to all members of the Society of St Gerard Majella, a small religious teaching order of priests and brothers based in the parish of Greystanes in western Sydney. 'The contents of this letter,' Heather wrote, 'are for the information of the members of the Society only.' What he said was that in 'view of written and signed information that has come to me from members and former members of your Society, and after taking canonical advice, I have decided to institute a Special Enquiry into the Society'. Among the issues to be addressed were 'the observance of the discipline of religious life in the Society' and 'the sexual impropriety which is alleged to have taken place' within it.

In September the inquiry reported its findings to the bishop, and a second letter was sent to members of the Society on the 22nd of that month. 'As a result of the Report,' wrote Heather

on this occasion, 'I have made a number of decisions about the Society and about several of its individual members.' These included the replacement of the Society's Superior General; the resignation from all offices in the Society of its founder, Brother John Sweeney; an order that two members were not to live in community or to make themselves available to exercise priestly ministry; and the suspension of the constitution regarding governance of the Society. A three-member council would be appointed to administer the Society and its formation processes for new recruits would be reviewed. Heather continued to express his confidence in the Society and the 'authenticity of the inspiration' that had led to its founding. But whatever information his enquiry had turned up was sufficiently serious in its implications to warrant his intervention on a grand scale.

The following March (1994), Heather and his replacement as Superior General of the Society, Brother Maurice Taylor, jointly put their signatures to a circular to the Parishioners of Our Lady Queen of Peace, Greystanes. The circular announced that 'the service of the Society [of St Gerard Majella] to the parish must come to an end'. Its contract, Heather and Taylor pointed out, was for ten years and, in the final year of the contract, the Society was deplete of the resources of ordained personnel necessary to staff the parish adequately. 'Over the past year the Brothers have had to deal with a number of issues related to the "internal life" of their Society,' the circular continued. 'Brothers have left . . . and others are on temporary leave. The Society has been forced to cut back on its apostolic work.' But there was no hint of the enquiry Heather had instituted, no mention of its report and no suggestion of the actions he had felt forced to take only five months earlier. Moreover, the circular pointedly assured parishioners that the 'issues of the Society have not adversely affected the pastoral work of the Brothers in the parish'. Yet in December 1994, Bishop Heather dissolved the Society, amid allegations of sexual abuse within the order, and

a police investigation into suspicions of the abuse of some children, which had by then become public. Some months later, two members of the Society were charged by police and a third was being sought for extradition from the United States.

Evidently not all members of the hierarchy had reached the same point on the Church's sexual abuse learning curve by 1993. Or by 1994. And the protocol drawn up by Bishop Connors' committee had still not been finally approved and accepted by the bishops. Nor was it finalised the next year. The collective instincts of the bishops still seemed to balk at an approach that was completely open to the problems of sexually abusive clergy. They were confident that the secular justice system was the best place to sift the fact from the fiction and bring offenders to account.

THE BELATED RESPONSE

The publicity generated by the NSW Police Royal Commission, however, concentrated the bishops' minds in a way that mere allegations popping up in one diocese after another—followed, in many cases, by charges and convictions—could not. According to Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, who had been appointed to the Professional Standards Committee in 1994, a meeting between the bishops and the committee to discuss 25 recommendations the latter had drawn up on dealing with abusive clergy had been planned well in advance of the April 1996 Bishops' conference. The fact that the conference itself had taken place at the same time the royal commission began its investigation of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church was purely coincidental.

However, Robinson did concede that 'the royal commission helped to create an atmosphere in which the 25 recommendations were accepted by an overwhelming majority' of the bishops. It was an atmosphere in which the Church was under siege and losing ground fast. It was also one in which the morale

of all priests and religious brothers and sisters was suffering badly, and their standing in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics alike was taking a nose dive. Nothing less than a dramatic and decisive response could hope to reverse the situation.

The vote on a 'plan of action' incorporating the 25 recommendations—including finalisation of a set of principles and procedures to govern the way Church authorities would deal with complaints of clerical sexual abuse—was 36 in favour to none against, with one abstention.

That vote was significant for several reasons. It meant that the old closed ranks and crisis management approach had been dropped. It also meant that those bishops who had been inclined to tough out the publicity generated by the Royal Commission into Police Corruption, as well as the wider controversy generated by the sexual abuse issue, had been talked around by other bishops who felt the need for urgent and decisive action. And it meant that the Bishops' Conference had finally accepted that it had a role to play in issuing authoritative directives on behalf of the entire Church in Australia.

'We cannot change what has happened in the past, undo the wrongs that have been done, or banish the memories and the hurt,' the bishops said in a subsequent pastoral letter expressing 'deep regret' for clerical sexual abuse—a significant advancement from the bishops' 1993 acknowledgment that clerical sexual abuse had occurred in the past. 'In seeking to do what is possible, our major goals must be: truth, humility, healing for the victims, assistance to other persons affected, an adequate response to those accused and to offenders, and prevention of any such offences in the future.'

The plan of action accompanying the bishops' apology promised the preparation of codes of conduct for priests, members of religious orders and other employees of the Church, in consultation with the victims of abuse; these were eventually approved and made public in December in a document entitled

Towards Healing: Principles and Procedures in Responding to Complaints of Sexual Abuse Against Personnel of the Catholic Church in Australia. Significantly, the bishops stated quite clearly in the introduction to *Towards Healing* that this new way of dealing with abuse would ‘become credible only to the extent that it is actually put into effect’ and that ‘if we do not follow the principles and procedures of this document, we will have failed according to our own criteria’.¹⁰ The plan also promised a study into the factors inside the Church that might produce abusive clergy.

The bishops had not only agreed to a refreshing ordering of priorities but, more than that, had implicitly acknowledged that the problem of clerical sexual abuse went to the core of the Church’s institutional culture. If their follow-up study produced anything like the findings of similar studies in the United States and Canada, it conceivably might open discussion about the Church’s internal organisation, its processes of priestly formation, its uses of patriarchal and sexist language, and other traditional taboo subjects.

Which is precisely what the report, when it was presented to the bishops in July 1999, made imperative. Entitled *Towards Understanding: A study of the factors specific to the Catholic Church which might lead to sexual abuse by priests and religious* [brothers and sisters], it found that clerical sexual abuse was a ‘direct consequence’ of the failure of the Catholic Church to treat men and women equally in the Church. ‘A clear and resounding message received in the course of this research study centred on those elements of the “culture of the Catholic Church” which contribute to a lack of respect for women, and subsequently their subservient role in the life of the Church,’ the report said. ‘A direct consequence of this cultural attitude is the ready victimisation of women through sexual offence. As long as the culture of the Church does not put men and women on a basis

of true equality, then women and children will remain vulnerable to abuse.¹¹

The report noted that a 'denial of the feminine' remained a significant factor in the Catholic Church culture, including the notable absence of women in Church structures and positions of responsibility. 'It seems probable,' the report said, 'that the enshrining of power, position and superiority in a male priesthood through the structures and culture of the Church contributes to a climate in which sexual offences against women can more readily occur.'¹²

The report found no evidence to suggest that the incidence of sexual abuse by priests and religious brothers was any higher than it is for males generally. But in the case of clergy who do abuse children, the pattern was the 'complete opposite' of that found in the general community, with boys more likely to be victims than girls. This was put down primarily to occupational factors (many offences against children are committed by clergy engaged in ministries which involve male environments) rather than irregular psychopathology (although the report did acknowledge a consensus among those consulted in the study that 'the arresting of human psycho-sexual and psychological development accompanied entry to the seminary or religious life directly from secondary school').

The report also ruled out celibacy as a significant factor in contributing to child sexual abuse. But it did concede that attitudes towards celibacy may be a factor. Because celibacy is mandatory for Catholic clergy, many candidates for the priesthood simply regard it as 'part of the package', rather than a considered choice, the report said. As a result, the commitment to celibacy can become disassociated from actual behaviour. It was clear from the responses that certain offenders believe that by engaging in sexual offences with children they have observed the rules about adult women with respect to celibacy, the report noted.¹³

It also found that celibacy was inappropriate for a ‘considerable number’ of clergy. The report argued that images of God that emphasise notions of lordship and control rather than community, participation and love were factors conducive to clerical sexual abuse, and that the ‘hibernation’ of seminarians from psychological growth and authentic social interaction also contributed to emotional immaturity and, in this way, to abuse among some priests. It criticised the all-male environment of seminaries and community living arrangements for religious brothers as ‘conducive to a homo-erotic sexual development which does not adequately deal with sexuality in general, or the feminine in particular’.¹⁴

By implication the report was saying that the culture of clericalism warranted fundamental attention in terms precisely opposite to those required by the *Statement of Conclusions*. Not surprisingly, no action was taken on *Towards Understanding* and the report itself was never released publicly. In June 2002, when the Church was again at the centre of a clerical abuse scandal—this time over the practice of some bishops to tie confidentiality clauses to compensation payouts for abuse victims, in contravention of the revised guidelines incorporated into *Towards Healing* less than two years earlier and in direct challenge to the statement the bishops had made in the introduction to that document about being judged ‘according to our own criteria’—the Archbishop of Sydney, George Pell, admitted to a *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist that he couldn’t locate his copy of *Towards Understanding* and had ‘no clear recall of the contents’. Like a similar report into the priesthood—with similar findings—commissioned by the US bishops in 1971, *Towards Understanding* had been buried.

Ninety priests and religious brothers have been *convicted* for sexual offences in Australia since 1992. According to the Church’s Professional Standards Office for NSW and the ACT, *complaints* of sexual and emotional abuse were made against

81 priests and 78 religious brothers in that specific jurisdiction in the five years to 2002. Complaints, of course, can be unfounded but, in the case of those raised in NSW and the ACT over this period, the majority (190 out of a total 230) were substantiated. As for convicted clerical abusers, their numbers represent a small proportion of all priests and religious brothers and sisters, but enough of a proportion to discredit not only themselves, but the Church as well, in the eyes of many believers and nonbelievers alike.

CHANGES AT THE HELM

The *Statement of Conclusions* continues to impact on the Church in other, no less dramatic, ways. The most notable of these has been the pattern of appointing clerics comfortable with its vision to dioceses around the country. Significant among these was the unprecedented appointment of Melbourne's Archbishop George Pell to Sydney in May 2001. In his five years at the helm in Melbourne, Pell effectively shut down what had been the intellectual heart of the Church in Australia: he made it clear that he would not tolerate innovations in theological or ecclesiological reflection; he revamped the local Corpus Christi seminary in ways at odds with the findings of *Towards Understanding*; he co-wrote and introduced a new, more orthodox text of the Church's moral teaching into Catholic schools; and, as a parting gesture, he gave a parish base to the conservative Opus Dei movement—something his predecessor, Archbishop Frank Little, had resisted for years. In a May 2000 interview with the American monthly *Catholic World Report*, Pell said of the *Statement* that it was a 'fair and accurate description of what's going on in Australia—but a bit understated'. This was in marked contrast to the assessment given by Cardinal Edward Clancy in an *ABC Radio* interview prior to his retirement and, with Pell's appointment to the most senior

archdiocese in the country, it showed the direction in which the hierarchy of the Church was heading.

Clancy had said Rome often failed to understand the ‘openness and sense of inner freedom’ of Australians, and he repeated a warning that secret reports from disgruntled Catholics to Vatican authorities had an ‘undue influence’ on their views of the Church in this country.¹⁵ This was an acknowledgment that the *Statement* had only encouraged extreme elements in the Church and that Rome remained receptive to their complaints.

Pell’s replacement in Melbourne was his close colleague, Bishop Dennis Hart. As Archbishop, Hart’s appointment promised a change of style, but not of substance, from the days of Pell. His appointment also meant that the two most important dioceses in the country are now in the hands of conservative churchmen. The same breed have been appointed to Armidale and Lismore, prompting accusations from within the Church that the local bishops have not been sufficiently consulted and that a secret selection process is in play. As well, Wollongong’s Bishop Bruce Wilson was moved to Adelaide—breaking a trend of more liberal appointments in the archdiocese. Given Perth’s Archbishop Barry Hickey, who in 1998 offered the Church’s assistance to women wanting to sue abortionists, only Brisbane of the major dioceses remains in relatively liberal hands under the leadership of Archbishop John Bathersby.

A radical overhaul of the leadership of the Australian Church has been set in train. Bishops who, for good reasons, have dragged their feet on implementing the *Statement of Conclusions* have been sidelined or overlooked for promotion. Meanwhile, conservative organisations such as Opus Dei (an ultra-orthodox clerical-lay group with an alleged penchant for excessive secrecy) and the Neocatechumenal Way (a pietistic lay movement) are being encouraged in major archdioceses—the former especially in Melbourne and Sydney, the latter in Perth. Under Pope John Paul II, both Opus Dei and the Neocatechumenal Way have

been given a juridical status within the worldwide Church that makes them substantially independent of local bishops. (The Neocatechumenal Way was actually banned in several dioceses overseas, following disputes with local bishops, before it was given the Vatican's formal blessing in 2002). Not surprisingly, their encouragement by particular local hierarchs has led even some priests to allege that a parallel church—one somehow more orthodox, more disciplined and more obedient to Rome than the Church familiar to most people—is being encouraged at the highest levels.

Such developments, like the Vatican's prescriptions in general, have left the Australian Church more divided than at any time in its history. The bishops are divided over their priorities and responsibilities; they, in turn, are divided from many of their priests, religious brothers and sisters, and the laity; and the latter are divided over which model of Church—one that is inclusive, participatory and engaged with the world or one that is exclusive, highly regimented and cut off from the broader environment—is appropriate to the times and the spirit of the gospels. As well, while none of the changes that were mooted in the *Statement of Conclusions* have so far reversed the decline in vocations in any sustainable way, boosted regular Mass attendance figures, or led to more acceptance of controversial official teachings, they have had the effect of marginalising the Church within Australian society. Unable to speak with one voice, the Church's political impact has been reduced, and its contribution to public debate has been muted.

The suffocation of some of its more innovative and creative personnel has severely restricted the Church's ability to respond to social problems. The leadership's refusal to deal comprehensively with sexually abusive clergy has undermined the Church's moral credibility. While the struggle is far from over for the Catholic Church in Australia, the course of battle in recent years points to its continuing internal slide into irrelevance.

2 | WHY PEOPLE DON'T LISTEN TO THE POPE

Damian Grace

The Pope is the Vicar of Christ on earth, in whose hands are said to be held the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. He is the head of the world's one billion Catholics, the heir and guardian of the Church's 2000-year-old tradition that is said to extend back to the Apostles. He is an absolute monarch with the power to speak infallibly on issues of faith and morals. And yet what the Pope has to say is regularly ignored by Catholics and his teachings are dismissed by the very people who should take them most to heart. Why?

The answer to this question lies in a paradox at the heart of the Catholic Church. While connecting its members in a common destiny with all of humanity, the Church is also a kind of exclusive club. Catholic apologists often insist that the Church is not a club, but the regular reminders to the wayward to conform with its rules or leave quietly gives the lie to this. The rhetoric of this position is striking: 'We are not a club, but we can throw you out.' Here is the truth of the matter: the Church

is like a club—in fact, exactly like a club. It is a community whose common interests have been promoted for almost two millennia through a bureaucracy with a hierarchical ordering of offices. If you disagree with the rules of the club and will not leave quietly, then you will be tossed out. The denials of the apologists about this are belied by the recent restatements of orthodoxy in faith and morals in the Catechism and by John Paul II's encyclicals, notably his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendour of Truth). They are belied locally by confrontations between homosexuals and clergy at Mass in Sydney and Melbourne. It was ever thus. St Paul wrote to correct the behaviour of the Ephesians, Galatians and the Corinthians. Successive popes have done the same thing. Yet, in the face of such continuous evidence, some continue to deny that the Catholic Church is a club.

AUTHORITY AND DISSENT

So what does it matter whether the Church is a club? The short answer is that it is a question of authority. Authority is a matter of structure, heritage, power and, above all, legitimacy. It is a highly volatile commodity in today's world and even more difficult to handle if an organisation claims not to be of that world while yet operating in it as a recognised state. The authority of the Pope is peculiar, but immensely significant for Catholics. That fact alone would make it significant also for non-Catholics, but the popes of the past century have clearly believed that their authority and that of the Church is important for the good of the world, even as they lamented its decline. 'That the State must be separated from the Church is a thesis absolutely false, a most pernicious error,' wrote Pius X in the early part of the 20th century about this development in France.

Those who deny that the Church is a club do so because Christ did not found a club. Rather he began a community that

survived and grew against all expectation. The Church-as-community, mediating God's grace, is an older model than the club model. Hence there are many who, in preferring the community model, deny that the Church is like some association for the promotion of hiking or genealogy.

In Australia, the denials of such people received a most forceful rebuttal in the *Statement of Conclusions* drawn up in Rome prior to the Synod for Oceania in November 1998 (see Chapter 1). The *Statement* reached the Australian public in full the following year. Its reception was generally hostile—so hostile, in fact, that the bishops issued a letter of clarification over the name of the then President of the National Bishops' Conference, Sydney's Archbishop Cardinal Edward Clancy. There were regrettable—even offensive—views in the *Statement*, it is true, but that is hardly the point. Australian Catholics have not bridled at Rome's religious suzerainty before, so why on earth should they suddenly be amazed when Rome made known its displeasure with the practice of the faith in this country? When did Australian Catholics start believing that their Church was not a club?

Any club should review its performance, and the *Statement* concluded from the indicators that this club, the Australian Catholic Church, was in trouble. Church attendance, vocations, and marriage in church were down. Irregularities in doctrine and practice had gone unchecked. The Third Rite of Reconciliation continued to be used in Australia in contravention of the Church's Canon Law and despite repeated directives from Rome. The Vatican office which regulates such things—the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments—had laid down the law about the Third Rite, but it continued until the Pope personally intervened to stop it. The *Statement* declared that views held on other matters by Australian Catholics, such as the role of conscience, morals and the person

of Christ, were not in accord with authoritative Catholic teaching.

In response, the *Statement* directed the bishops to correct errors in matters of doctrine, morals and Church discipline. The Australian executive, in other words, was instructed by the president to do something about their branch, whereupon the local members launched attacks on the instruction, the president, club headquarters and those running the Australian operation. What could they have been thinking?

One thing they were not thinking about was the way authority works. Breaches of club rules are not the worst of moral failures: that distinction is reserved for disagreement with the rules or with the nature of the club or for leaving it and slamming the door. One could get the impression from the media that the Catholic Church is not very good at managing sinful behaviour—this impression is, of course, largely due to media obsessions with all things sexual—but a little probing would show that the Church is actually quite good with individual sins and sinners (though it seems to have a case of chronic depression about sin and the decline of the world). What it is habitually bad at managing is dissent.

For instance, it is the denial of the existence of sin, or denial of other Church teachings or denial of its authority to teach at all, that causes Vatican pulses to race. Pius X, in *Communium Rerum* (On St Anselm of Aosta, 1909), warned of ‘the seeds of dissension and error’, which arise from attacking good discipline and heaping ‘contempt on venerated customs’. Departure from tradition, no less than open dissent, according to St Anselm, is a type of heresy. While everybody commits sins, dissenters are a dangerous few. Unity is everything.

If we go back to St Paul and after him, St Augustine, we can find the roots of current doctrines and attitudes in the Church. For both, belief is prior to understanding. In order to understand the word of God, it is first necessary to believe. The problems

of the philosophers are dissolved by Scripture, and the meaning of the Scriptures is determined by the Church. Error comes from outside. So religion can no more be a matter of private judgment than the laws of physics. If one wants the truth, the Church is necessary to finding it. The Church, as an institution, is necessary to salvation and, as a repository of truth, it is singular. That is the message of many centuries, so what has changed?

Not the Church's claims to authority in faith and morals, which look very much the same as they did 1500 years ago. While it is undeniable that the world has changed, even it resembles, in many respects, other times and places where appetite and wishful thinking got the better of reason, and the desires of individuals became the measure of worth. What *has* changed in the modern era is that authority in all its forms has come under question, and the teaching of the Church on matters such as politics, the family and freedom of inquiry has had to face competitors.

One competitor lies within Catholicism itself, namely an interpretation of the Church based on the Pauline rejection of law as salvational in itself, in favour of faith. Catholics who adhere to this view no longer identify the rules of the club with either faith or morality. Many reflective Catholics continue to have faith in God, to practise Christian values, to have strong ties to the Catholic community and to believe in much that the Church teaches—while dissenting from some teachings that bear the stamp of traditional authority. These teachings—birth control, conscience, the use of embryonic stem cells, to name a few issues—then become proof tests of Catholic fidelity. A failure of belief on these teachings is not just about their substance—though that is not unimportant—but also reveals an inability to accept authoritative teaching about them. Dissent from teaching is very different from infraction of the rules. Dissent implies a position that denies the authority of some of those

rules, and this is a serious challenge for the club-like conception of the Church.

It is not surprising, then, that dissenting Catholics believe that even if the Church is a club, it ought not be. For them the Church is more spiritual than visible, in a way that a club cannot be. A spiritual member of a football club might be conceivable, but the visible signs of commitment are what really count. For Catholics who adhere to a spiritual model of the Church, paying dues does not take the form of recognising the Vatican's version of reality. The Vatican, of course, has seen it all before and is as dismissive of merely spiritual membership as any football club would be.

It is clear from the *Statement of Conclusions* that the Vatican has two problems: people leaving and people staying. It wants more people in the pews, more confessions, more vocations and more marriages blessed by the Church. It wants members of religious orders to be more identifiable by, for instance, returning to more traditional forms of work and communal living arrangements; it wants children to be educated consistently in the sound doctrine; and it wants orthodoxy in belief. At the same time, it wants to be rid of the distraction, discontent, indiscipline and disruption of those who seemingly wish to contest authority at every turn, yet persist in calling themselves Catholics.

One can sense in Vatican documents a frustration that the people who stay are not sufficiently steeped in the club laws and traditions and do not speak its approved languages. This seems to make them incorrigible and defiant, and the Vatican can barely conceal its impatience with novice theologians and their faux scepticism. It issues encyclicals and other directives in the manner of memos from head office to 'our venerable brethren the patriarchs, primates, archbishops, bishops, and other ordinaries in peace and communion with the apostolic see', but

cannot seem to speak to those uncomfortable with clubbish authority.

And so leadership is transformed into management and, in the hands of the Roman Curia, even administration; and teaching is transformed into directives to obey. After World War I, Pius XI stated that if only everybody did what they were supposed to do, then war and turmoil would cease. The disorder of the world is the disorder of original sin writ large, he argued. The way to address that disorder is not to have a conversation with the wider world, but to urge greater discipline and obedience in the faithful. Essentially, that has been the message of the modern popes.

THE RULES OF THE CLUB

The Vatican insists that to be a member in good faith, one must follow the rules. In other words, the authority of the club is used to back the rules, but many members want to know how those rules advance the purposes of the club. On the whole, this remains one of the mysteries of authority. Take the Third Rite of Reconciliation (popularly known as communal confession). For various reasons not fully understood and documented, participation in auricular confession has declined in Australia. The numbers entering the small box to confess and receive absolution from a priest have greatly diminished. It may be that the role of the priest has changed; it may be that people are no longer comfortable participating in the sacrament in this form; it may be that well-educated Catholics find such uni-directional moral instruction inappropriate. Whatever the reasons, the traditional form of the one-on-one confession is less used.

By contrast, the Third Rite has been embraced enthusiastically. Here was something intelligible and acceptable to Australian Catholics. In this rite, the sense of contrition was backed by a sense of atonement to others in a congregation. It

was a uniting ritual, not one in which an individual personal encounter regulated forgiveness. Banning the Third Rite—as the Vatican has done—will get some people back to auricular confession, but it is also possible that some people will make their own judgments about sin and forgiveness or that some will leave the Church altogether.

The Pope stated his concern that the Third Rite could lead to a loss of a sense of sin and the need for forgiveness. This is plausible: if people do not have to reflect on their own failings, how are they to be honest with themselves? Reconciliation could become a bit like going to a car wash, where all the work is done without much participation from the driver. Such indifference to the details of car care could lead to a lot of rust repair down the track. The same could easily be true of the Third Rite.

But this is pessimistic speculation. Such a conclusion should be supported by other reasons, for it does not follow from people's preference for the Third Rite over the traditional one-on-one form of the First Rite. It is a point to reflect upon. The commonsense view would be that those who do not seek forgiveness through either First or Third rite are most at risk of indifference to sin. No empirical investigation was launched to discover whether those using the Third Rite had lost a sense of sin or personal responsibility. As for consulting with the people to see what their view was, this would have been inconceivable to the club executive in Rome.

Instead of persisting with past practices and a narrow interpretation of personal responsibility, the Pope might have dealt with this issue by seeking to enhance the Third Rite. This could have been done by recognising in the motivations of those using it an opportunity to educate about responsibility, sin and forgiveness. Instead, the view from Rome has placed another hurdle in the way of people trying to be Catholic in a difficult world.

Vatican pronouncements have increasingly created a series of such proof tests for modern Catholics. The definition of the Assumption—that is, the idea proclaimed as dogma in 1950 that the Virgin Mary was preserved from death and assumed bodily into Heaven—is a minor example (though it makes a claim that defies any understanding informed by science); the banning of contraception is a major one. The reassertion of the teaching on contraception in the face of its widespread rejection by the laity has been couched in increasingly severe terms: it is not merely justified under the ordinary teaching authority of the Church, but allegedly approaches the status of an infallible doctrine. Pastoral approaches to the problem—a 1970s euphemism for priests telling people to go away and make up their own minds—are not to compromise this teaching.

The banning of the Third Rite adds to the list of obstacles to Catholic faith. Like the other pronouncements, it contributes to the privatisation of judgment on the state of one's soul. It makes the Church's guidance less effective and its instruction less authoritative. Why? Because if one's convictions fail the proof test placed upon them by the Vatican, one will seek spiritual succour elsewhere.

So the effect of saying to the members, 'accept the authority of these rules or get out', is to increase private judgment and thus to reinforce the position of those Catholics who identify more with the invisible Church than with the club. It puts Catholics in the position of their Protestant brethren five hundred years ago—that is, communicating directly with God without the Church as intermediary. And that is, of course, exactly the opposite of what the Vatican wants. What it really wants is to increase the membership of the club and for that membership to be happy with its leadership. Neither of these things will happen for a reason that the Vatican will not recognise. It does not have the authority it thinks it has.

The question of authority is really at the centre of the conception of the Church as a club. Part of the definition of a club is membership. The Catholic Church has long maintained that it is the one true church founded by Christ on the rock of Peter. While salvation is not restricted to Catholics, authentic sacramental, teaching and ecclesiastical authority has resided in the successors of Peter and the Apostles. Rome has now urged its case for obedience for longer than any institution still in existence. Certainty and age brought with them an institutional conceit, which the pressures of secularism and modernity turned into triumphalism.

For some years after the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), triumphalism declined, but it has reasserted itself in more muted tones during the reign of John Paul II. Claims to certainty and truth are now softened with admissions of error and apologies for past wrongs—committed against Jews, indigenous peoples, pioneering scientists, and so on—but these are always errors committed by the members of the Church, as distinct from the institution itself.

The institutional Church often expresses its frustration with a failure of the flock to answer to its teaching authority. On the other hand, many who cannot pass the succession of proof tests, but still adhere to the Church in a more or less private way, feel resentful at being instructed from Rome about the conduct of their lives. Those obedient to Vatican directives cannot understand why those who dissent from the teaching authority of the Church wish to remain Catholics—or are not booted out. Both of these groups confuse types of authority.

To be in authority can mean to be an authority, but the two are not always coupled. Hence, when the Pope defines the Assumption, prohibits contraception, or canonises a contentious candidate for sainthood, he may invoke the political authority of his office—he has the right to do these things—but he cannot, by the exercise of this right, make people believe them. And

these definitions can only be right because they state some truths: that is, the Assumption did happen; contraception is objectively wrong; a candidate for sainthood really did lead an exemplary and heroic life. Belief is not the same as faith, though the two words are often used synonymously, and the fact that Catholics continue to have faith without subscribing to all the beliefs of the Church is something that the Vatican will not accommodate.

THE INTERNALIST MENTALITY

Indeed, it never has. This is clear in the encyclicals of the past century. The internalist thinking of the Church—what I have called its club mentality—is not just a reaction to modernity. It is as old as St Paul. St Augustine put the position clearly: ‘Unless you have believed, you will not understand.’ By this he meant that unless one has faith, Christianity does not make sense. Given his tour de force against the erroneous beliefs of his day in his major work, *The City of God*, Augustine had the credentials to handle any objector. In the present age, no less credulous than its predecessors, we are nonetheless inclined to suspend belief until we understand. And that attitude requires a new approach from Rome.

The Council of Trent, which began its deliberations in 1545, affirmed the intellectual authority of the club against the Reformation. The First Vatican Council (1869–70) went one better by defining the infallibility of the Pope. This truly muddied papal teaching authority, although the claim to infallibility was an old one. In the new and threatening context of modernity, however, it was simply the wrong defence strategy. Pius IX, for example, obviously learned no lessons from the Galileo affair 300 years earlier. He declared that ‘all faithful Christians are forbidden to defend as the legitimate conclusions of science those opinions which are known to be contrary to

the doctrine of faith, particularly if they have been condemned by the Church’.

The problem with such declarations is obvious. By the middle of the 19th century, the Church had long since lost credibility to pronounce on matters of science. The pre-scientific world that had sustained the beliefs of the Council of Trent had passed away. Faith persisted, but for people living in pluralist societies in an industrial age, this kind of internalist thinking with its prefabricated solutions to all possible questions was unpersuasive. It is not just that the context of the Council of Trent was pre-scientific and that modern physics and biology were to introduce notions of time and human evolution that contradicted biblical accounts. It is also that the freedom of inquiry that went with the growth and domination of scientific knowledge was—and is—at odds with the discipline that popes since Trent have tried to impose. This is obvious in the struggles of modern theologians over the past century to reconcile dissent with obedience. They have had to finesse their views about a complete range of questions, from original sin to the ban on artificial forms of birth control, reaffirmed in Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* (The Transmission of Human Life).

Yet modern popes in their encyclicals have continued to speak with confidence about all manner of problems, including those based in empirical inquiry and not just in theoretical or scriptural reflection. A moral critique of economics is no doubt a blessing to critics of the dismal science, but Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Workers), is not that critique, and the time is long overdue for a thorough reappraisal of it and of other much-praised social encyclicals: Pius IX’s *Quadragesimo Anno* (Forty Years After [Rerum Novarum], 1931) and John XXIII’s *Mater et Magistra* (Mother and Teacher, 1961). It is not that these encyclicals do not contain wisdom, but that this wisdom belongs with an ethic of ultimate ends, rather than an ethic of practice. Dire warnings and reproaches come

perilously close to empty moralising when they are based on airily abstract notions and the authors never have to take responsibility for trying to implement them. Thus Pope Pius IX pronounced with all the conviction of a Trotskyist: 'Free competition is dead; economic dictatorship has taken its place. Unbridled ambition for domination has succeeded the desire for gain; the whole of economic life has become hard, cruel and relentless in a ghastly measure.' Leo XIII declared that he approached the problem of social justice 'with confidence and in the exercise of the rights which belong to Us. For no practical solution of the question will ever be found without the assistance of religion and the Church'. John XXIII was aware of population pressures, but from the vantage point of his day declared that 'God in His goodness and wisdom has diffused in nature inexhaustible resources'.

It is somewhat unfair to quote out of context and to seize upon individual passages, but the chronic problem for the popes is that their reliance on a different dimension of reality, which is timeless and continuous, makes them more ambitious in their authority on a range of matters than they have a right to be. They undermine their teaching authority by relying so heavily on tradition, and by pronouncing on issues in which they have no expertise, or on which the wisdom of the time is neither timeless nor continuous. The constant references in encyclicals to illustrious predecessors can undermine authority rather than enhance it. Take the case of Pius XI, who invokes the authority of Leo XIII in *Casti Connubii* (On Christian Marriage, 1930) to support the proposition that a Christian wife is to be subject to her husband. This was a bad call, especially at a time when women were asserting their rights to equality. A little recognition of contemporary realities and some foresight about their direction might have been of more use than a restatement of the views of a predecessor made 50 years earlier.

Of course, if the Church does not speak, it is criticised; and if it does speak, it is still criticised. The problem arises in this form, however, only because the right to speak for the Church has been reserved to the Pope and bishops. This is not a recipe for success in the highly technical areas on which the Vatican pronounces and in which lay Catholics have genuine expertise. Apostolic authority and continuity are not persuasive in a world in which technical knowledge frequently substitutes for moral authority, but the reverse does not apply. The fact is that lay people are few in the top circles of the Vatican and are subject to clerical veto. More to the point, however, is not so much the availability of expertise among decision-makers, but the latter's failure to consult regularly with the laity as members of the Church whose views matter.

None of this is to deny the genuine expertise of the Church in morals. Popes have made pronouncements upon many issues that would have been heeded with profit. Pius X's condemnation of the treatment of Latin American Indians in 1912 and Pius XI's condemnation of Nazism in *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Burning Anxiety—On the Church and the German Reich, 1937) number among them. The authority of the Catholic Church does not reside only in its authority for the faithful or in traditions of worship and practice. Alan Wolfe, a professor at Boston College and a Jewish nonbeliever, wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in May 2002, that he had moved from a secular university to Boston College because of its Catholic intellectual legacy. 'Among Catholic intellectuals, as well as some who are not Catholic,' he writes, 'the most important Catholic inheritance is the natural-law tradition'.¹ Natural law is the universal moral law given by God for all creatures and knowable by reason alone. One could add to it the tradition of Catholic moral theology (the examination of responsible behaviour involved in the practice of Christian living) and casuistry (the intellectual process of applying moral principles to particular

situations), which are a wonderful source of riches for the Church and non-Catholic philosophers and moralists alike.

A QUESTION OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Yet the thinking that dominates the Church today does not engage with the world. Pope John Paul II is a case in point. He is the most travelled pontiff in history, yet the argument of *Veritatis Splendor* is not made to unbelievers or Catholics who have misconceived their autonomy (although it is about these things), but to those who already accept the doctrine of the new Catechism, the true believers. John Paul II quotes from the Second Vatican Council that the Church is an 'expert in humanity' and, as such, has 'contributed to a better understanding of moral demands in the areas of human sexuality, the family, and social, economic and political life. In the tradition of the Church and in the history of humanity, [the popes' and bishops'] teaching represents a constant deepening of knowledge with regard to morality'.

One can think of many instances where the Church's views in a controversy have prevailed without effect in practice. The recognition that native peoples in Latin America were fully human did not prevent their enslavement and exploitation, but at least the Church did not accept the proposition that these peoples were sub-human and without souls. On the other hand, the regularity with which the Church has set its face against democracy—condemned famously by Pius IX, for instance, in his 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*—hardly represents a deepening of humanity's understanding of politics. In short, the Vatican is too self-assured of its positions on too many issues.

This is apparent in the subtext of *Veritatis Splendor*. The argument below the surface reads like this:

The moral law is written in our human nature, but is offered anew in the Ten Commandments and again in the teachings of Jesus. The moral law transcends the familiar kinds of moral rules because it has been fulfilled in the love of Christ. Nevertheless, this love does not annul the Ten Commandments, as Jesus made clear in responding to the rich young man in St Matthew's Gospel. The young man asks what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the Commandments. The interpretation of the Commandments and of Jesus' teachings in concrete situations was entrusted to the Apostles. By Apostolic succession—the historical continuity between the present leadership of the Church and Jesus, through the Apostles—that trust is retained by the Pope and bishops of the Church today. In virtue of being in authority, they are an authority on matters of morals. Authorities should be obeyed, so the faithful should be obedient.

That is the argument of *Veritatis Splendor*, just as it is (in more rudimentary form) the argument for St Paul and the argument for St Augustine, the Council of Trent, the First Vatican Council, the 20th-century popes and the *Statement of Conclusions*. And still some Catholics are taken by surprise.

Perhaps they were bluffed by the Second Vatican Council. If so, it is time for rethinking. The tide of renewal announced by that Council is receding. The receptiveness of the Church to the discoveries of the natural and social sciences seems to have lessened in recent years. Thinking is reflected in practice. An attitude of rejection towards the change that is ubiquitous elsewhere in the world has made the Church seem remote and unauthoritative for Australian Catholics, as for most others.

This remoteness of the Church from the realities of the world has come at a terrible price, and it is a price that horribly exemplifies the loss of the most basic authority among the very people entrusted with it. Clerical abuse of the faithful, particularly minors, is simply the most obvious example of

ecclesiastical clubbiness separating the Church from reality. The Church's valuable traditions in moral theology should have made it more, not less, aware of its responsibilities in the area of sexual abuse, but in many countries, including Australia, the hierarchy has proved incapable of dealing properly with the problem. This has called into question the very core of the Church's authority to teach on faith and morals. Even a divinely inspired tradition lies in the hands of those charged with its care and transmission, and their incapacity can destroy its authority.

The laity might well infer that those priests who have abused children were to all intents and purposes practical atheists. Where was their 'sense of sin'? The Church's undoubted knowledge of the cartography of the soul seems to have deserted it in this crisis. The eventual condemnation of abuse fits ill with the deceit that has attended the handling of complaints. Eminent American historian, Gary Wills, examined the evasions of the American Church in the *New York Review of Books* in 2002. He noted that conservative Catholics in the United States have taken up dubious allies like Philip Jenkins and Harris Mirkin.

Jenkins, a defender of pornography, has argued that allegations of sexual abuse are the latest moral panic promoted by coalitions of anti-Catholic elements, such as greedy lawyers, feminists, therapists trawling for clients, sensationalist newspapers and career-conscious public prosecutors. Mirkin is an advocate of paedophilia and believes that just as homosexuality became accepted, so too will child love.

What, asked Wills, could have driven Catholic authorities into the company of such unlikely allies? His answer is that their apologia offers the Church a defence to the charge of paedophilia. 'It looks like a step up for priests to be having sex with "consenting" partners, not helpless children. They are still doing something wrong. But they are not monstrous.'

And there is something else that Wills does not mention: writers like Jenkins and Mirkin are like guests in the club,

welcome because they do not share the hostilities of those outside it. Such apparently expedient strategies are not consistent with a principled stand on moral issues, but they are also a retreat from real responsibilities and accountability.

This lack of contact with reality has afflicted the Australian Church, too. According to a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in June 2002, a former employee of the Australian bishops alleged a senior cleric said to her that ‘you cannot blame priests for sexual abuse after all, we all know what little girls are like. You know, sliding up to you, wanting to sit on your lap’. This allegation is mirrored in a statement of Father Robert Rahlkemper of Dallas, whom Wills quotes as saying of victims of child abuse: ‘They knew what was right and what was wrong. Anybody who reaches the age of reason shares responsibility for what they do. So that makes us all responsible after we reach the age of six or seven.’

The sins of the abusers are compounded by those in authority. They have not used that authority well, and they clearly are not authorities on sexual matters at all. Secular society is not responsible for stripping such men of authority: they have stripped themselves of it with the very people who have been faithful and remain so, but who no longer accept that the future of the faith lies with priests and bishops.

The parallels between the conduct of the Church and that of other closed or unaccountable bodies are everywhere to be seen in social institutions. At the time that sexual abuse by priests, especially in Boston, was making news in 2002, so too was the disintegration of Arthur Andersen—one of the biggest accounting firms in the United States—due to their failure to audit the Enron energy corporation properly. Enron had been the seventh largest company in the Fortune 500 list before it became subject to the biggest bankruptcy in history, in January 2002. When Andersen’s liability became known, it wilfully destroyed documents linking it to Enron’s collapse.

The Boston Archdiocese may not have gone quite that far, but it reacted similarly to Andersens over the crisis of clerical sexual abuse. Denial, the shifting of responsibility, cover-ups, blaming the victims, reluctance to co-operate with civil prosecutors and dishonesty at the top were strategies it, too, employed. The problem in both of these cases can be traced back to a lack of accountability, a lack of transparency and—given the encouragement of these conditions—a lack of responsibility.

And all the while individuals—shareholders and laity—are told that it is their responsibility to be prudent—or to be conscious of a sense of sin. While shareholders and members of the Church will make mistakes from time to time, both will have to live with the consequences—something that serial fraudsters and serial abusers have frequently been able to avoid.

Accountability is normally a condition of authority. When accountability is absent, there is opportunity for authority to be misused. That was the case with Andersens. It was the case for the Archdiocese of Boston and, as became clear through 2002, with other dioceses in the United States as well. It is the clubby nature of corporate relations in both cases that permits gross ethical failure. Ironically, the fact that Andersens could not point to a higher mandate for its clubbiness puts it in a better position than the Catholic hierarchy, which continues to exempt itself from accountability to the people of the Church in the name of authority derived from Apostolic succession.

For Australian Catholics, the issue of authority has probably grown stale. Participation in the life of the church and regular reception of the sacraments has fallen away. Most Catholics seem content to make their own accommodations to authority and are not much troubled by it, unless it is made an issue in some way. The Vatican's *Statement of Conclusions* acknowledges this, but does not examine the implications of this indifference towards the authority of its authors. At bottom, there is an issue

of accountability for modern Catholics that simply does not seem to arise for members of a hierarchical structure with a monarch at the top. And it is this lack of accountability that undermines claims to authority and spurs challenges to it. The civil law is now being used in suits against abusive clergy and their deficient superiors to extract the kind of accountability that the Church at club headquarters remains reluctant to give.

Ironies abound in this situation. No doubt the *Statement* was intended to reform clergy and laity alike. Practically considered, how could it? Any Australian Catholic who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s would have been imbued with the importance of the virtues of chastity and sexual purity. To find that the clerical abuse of these virtues was not a figment of the fevered Protestant imaginations of the old sectarian days might have been enough to wreck the authority of priests and bishops for good. It no doubt drove many good people from the Catholic Church. At the same time, we are told by the Vatican's Australian advisers that it is the Australian ideal of equality that is the danger, because it erodes the distinctive status of priests. Attacking the political values and social instincts of a democratic nation is a curious tactic. It will not recall people to the practice of their faith, and might even persuade some that they can practise it better without the help of Roman hecklers.

THE ONE-WAY DIALOGUE

So, why do Catholics fail, by and large, to respond to the Pope's prescriptions and injunctions? The simple answer is that many of them have wearied of the club, its government and its ideology. The hostile response to the *Statement of Conclusions* showed that to be the case. Australian Catholics still retain a cultural association with the Church that might become something more—but not while the central message from the Vatican is to obey and be silent, not when it and its local branch

remain unaccountable, not when communication is one way only.

Why then, it could be asked, does the Pope not listen to the faithful? John Paul II is carrying a legacy of papal deafness that stretches back over centuries. He has made many personal attempts to engage with the world at large—in fact, he has met with more people, including more bishops, priests and Catholic laity, than any other pope in history—but his energies are divided. Wider engagement takes him towards ecumenism, social outreach and an appreciation of the Church's failings over two millennia. Sustaining the Church and its structures takes him in a different direction: towards affirmations of truth and authority and the importance of traditions that fail to answer the needs and aspirations of the present. This is not a criticism of the personal style of John Paul II. The challenges facing the Church are not primarily those of style, and any future pope will have to work with the same legacy of entrenched institutional interests.

Institutional deafness, the inertia of Vatican traditions, and a monarchical rather than inclusive and participatory model of Church help to explain why the Pope is not heeded. This is not the whole story, however. The changes that have buffeted the Catholic Church have weakened all forms of authority—even science. Cultural and historical relativism and political equity have made traditional authority difficult to sustain. If, say, the Jews are viewed by historians as a collection of tribes who found strength against their enemies under one God—the God of unity—then their special place in history disappears, and God is explained away as an anthropological necessity. If all cultures are regarded as having equal worth for their members, then who is the Pope to declare on faith and morals to the world? And if all people are entitled to choose their own government, then democratic sentiment will secularise states and displace the special relations that the Church maintained with countries like

France and Spain, which is exactly what happened over Vatican protests in 1906 and 1937.

The Gospel message of love is still striking after 2000 years, but the rhetoric of the Pope makes it conditional on obedience. At the very beginning of *Veritatis Splendor*, his encyclical on fundamental questions about the Church's moral teaching, Pope John Paul II writes of 'obedience to truth'. Like St Paul, the Pope wishes to correct and recall, but this is an opening claim made as much for conformity with traditional Catholic teaching as for faith in Jesus Christ. The point is driven home by repeated links between morality and faith and by this explicit declaration:

An opinion is frequently heard which questions the intrinsic and unbreakable bond between faith and morality, as if membership in the Church and her internal unity were to be decided on the basis of faith alone, while in the sphere of morality a pluralism of opinions and of kinds of behaviour could be tolerated, these being left to the judgment of the individual subjective conscience or to the diversity of social contexts.²

Veritatis Splendor is a remarkable document. The fingerprints of a philosopher—and John Paul II was a professor of philosophy before he became Pope—are all over it. But it is a document that does not capture the mood of a world in flux. The Church moved in pluralistic ways after the Second Vatican Council, and the Pope's message is difficult to understand, let alone accept, to generations formed under that dispensation. The Council moved the people, but then the momentum built, and the people too often found that Rome had failed to keep up with them.

The Second Vatican Council brought the Catholic Church into the 20th century, but it was a rationalist enterprise and not without cost. There was jubilation in casting off fatigued rituals and a mentality beset by the minutiae of sin and its atonement. Gone, too, were the superstitions about saints and relics; gone

was the Latin Mass and the mysterious liturgy that went with it; gone were the liturgical niceties, the feast days and days of obligation; gone were traditional architectural forms for church buildings. The Church had—belatedly, but at last—moved with the times. The hostilities to science and progress; to democracy and human rights; to other faiths and to dissent within Catholicism were to be things of the past. Catholicism had at last embraced the insights of the Protestant Reformation.

Most of this made sense, but there was a price in dumping the tangible assets of tradition. There was offence caused to the pious by the ditching of the symbols and devotions that had sustained them for decades. The change was rapid and unrelenting, and backsliding objectors who mourned the loss of the Latin Mass or old forms of prayer and worship were marginalised and often confused—where not embittered.

Ironically, in obeying Vatican decrees to conduct services in the vernacular, to rearrange altars and to participate in the liturgy, most of the laity found a more independent way of thinking and acting. They began calling parish priests by their first names, but gave up going to regular confession. They became ecumenical and worried more about social justice and less about Communism. Vocations for the priesthood and the religious orders of nuns and brothers fell off, but the demand for them increased, because what they offered was valued. The problem was supply, not the mass disaffection of the faithful. Of course, having been the dutiful subjects of changes that required difficult adjustments, the faithful now took upon themselves the right to decide some questions of morals that previous generations would never have questioned. In a sense, this was forced upon them: *Humanae Vitae* presented them with their first big test—to obey the Vatican or their conscience or simply expediency. A decline in traditional authority was inevitable from that point.

The threat to authority has been internal in other ways, and the Pope is right to recognise it. Anybody can call themselves a

Catholic, but if the moral identity of the Church is to mean anything, then some Catholics need to answer a few questions. David Lodge captured the essence of the problem in the title of his disturbing novel, *How Far Can You Go?*

There is the American neurosurgeon actively pursuing head transplantation as a therapy for severe spinal injury; the Italian doctor enabling ageing grandmothers to bear children; the torturers and murderers of Latin America who have supported military juntas against their own people; those in Ireland using bombs among the innocent to make their point. What difference does the Church make to the lives of such people, and why do those of them who are Catholic continue to call themselves Catholic? What can a Church be without the authority to comment or correct the errant? If the answer is 'not much', then this authority is crucial to its future.

Pope John Paul II grasped this issue at the very start of his pontificate, and used every public occasion to reiterate it. He has promoted orthodoxy, banished dissenters and issued encyclical after encyclical defending a traditional interpretation of authority in faith and morals.

ORTHODOXY VS MODERNITY

Of course, such a doctrinally strong position has traditionally been very much a part of the assertion of Roman authority and the extensiveness of Vatican governance, and a centrally determined orthodoxy has been John Paul II's response to the urgent issues at hand. But, as indicated earlier, those who believe that it is just a matter of changing popes are profoundly mistaken. No effective president would let his club go to the wall without a fight, and no-one not sharing that attitude is ever likely to be made head of the Catholic Church. John Paul II's successor, in all probability, will follow in his path—if not in his footsteps—

just as John Paul II himself took his direction from his predecessors.

John Paul II is fighting many of the same issues as Pius IX in the 19th century and Pius X and his successors in the 20th. Modernity (for Pius IX) or modernism (for Pius X) or contemporary culture (for John Paul II) is the enemy, and the popes have tried to deal with it by reaffirming ancient certainties. Pius IX, with his strings of anathemas against those who did not conform to his canons, was only the most obvious in failing at the task. If ever there were a case of bad timing, it was in the declaration of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council, which he called. While the Anglican Church was trying to come to grips with the problem of evolution, Rome sought to dispose of challenges through the definition of infallibility. This left Catholic opinion leaders at the time, like Lord Acton, shaking their heads.

One hundred and thirty years later, Catholics in the US and Australia are similarly struck by the lack of reality within the hierarchy. For all the good work done by John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council to change its mindset, the institutional Church has never really embraced the program. Scientists are taking apart the mysteries of the universe, searching for intelligent life elsewhere and considering how journeys might be made to distant stars. Meanwhile, Pope John Paul II declares that there will be no further discussion of the possibility of ordaining women to the Catholic priesthood. Such declarations have always been risky, and popes should know better than to risk their authority in making them. The Pope might be *an* authority on the question of women's ordination, but that was not the authority he summoned for this directive. He spoke as one *in* authority, as the successor to Peter, with a right to direct what goes on inside his Church, irrespective of whether experts agree with him or not.

Early in *Veritatis Splendor*, the Pope calls attention to the situation of Catholics who profess belief in the Church, but reserve to themselves questions of morality. Indeed, he begins his encyclical with the question of obedience. Of course, obedience is writ large in the Christian mentality: disobedience is the primordial sin, the rebellion that made our salvation necessary. It is a touchstone for all that is significant in Christianity. It is at once the origin of the Fall recounted in the Book of Genesis and source of our redemption through Jesus Christ. Both the faithful and the Church have strayed from the word of God. So there is nothing new in the Pope's emphasis on obedience. What *is* new is the kind of audience to whom his message is directed.

In the West, mass society has a well-established set of preoccupations linked to material success and consumption. Egoism, subjectivism and relativism have become the tacit norms. Incomprehension, if not derision, greets those who question these norms and dare to suggest that any objective morality might be plausible. And what is true of the West is rapidly—through trade, investment, advertising, and communications—becoming more and more true of the entire world, as distinctive cultures and their traditions crumble under the weight of globalism.

This presents a challenge for the Church. Tradition is a large part of authority in the Catholic Church, yet it is little understood by the beneficiaries of Vatican II. Tradition was probably never understood by most Catholics at any time, but it was a living part of their religious lives. It was manifested liturgically in the Mass and sacraments, in the symbols and music of the Church, which gave presence to intangible and often incomprehensible aspects of Catholicism. Tradition was authoritative and known to be so. It was so authoritative that sometimes it had to be invented. The unbroken thread of apostolic succession was a guarantee of authenticity against rival claimants, and

conferred an authority to teach in the name of Jesus. Tradition is more claimed than lived, and this has had an impact on the authority of Pope and bishops alike.

In the new global mass society, tradition carries less authority than autonomy, choice, and rationality. This is often accompanied by a sceptical disposition to all propositions that do not have a price tag or can deliver results instantly.

It is hardly the fault of the Vatican that tradition carries so little authority with Western peoples, but its responses to cultural flux have not been encouraging. It wants dissent to stop. It believes that the faithful in the secular West have adopted distorted notions of freedom and responsibility. It wants to overturn the very autonomy and participation of the laity that it instituted a generation ago. It wants to do this by imposing a discipline upon the faithful as though nothing had happened in the meantime. As though, for example, those who preached against the contraceptive pill and then sexually abused children still symbolised authority. As though the term 'Father' still carried the resonance of former times. Too much has changed for any simple kind of restoration of old forms. Significant numbers of Catholics would prefer to take their chances with God rather than the Vatican these days.

It would be glib to claim that if one can swallow papal edicts, then the rest of Christianity is easy. It is not that the Vatican is wrong or that one dissents from teachings on the basis of their source. The problem is one of inflated claims based on an internally justified theology linking faith, morals and authority in a way that leads to obedience to Rome as a condition of faith. This obedience is asked for unconditionally, without accountability. How long this unique type of governance will be able to exert its hold on the world is difficult to predict, but the pressures upon it show no signs of relenting.

While other Christian churches with different styles of governance seem to be faring no better than the Catholic Church,

their members are not beset in quite the same way by the question of whether to remain in the club. These Christians must surely be justified by faith alone for, unlike Catholics, they have no Vatican to reproach them.

3 | THE SILENCED MAJORITY

Morag Fraser

It's only a few weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The place, Brisbane. The occasion, a National Catholic Education Commission conference. It draws women and men, religious and lay, from all over Australia. Hundreds of them. They roll in from schools in Far North Queensland, from Tasmania, from Aboriginal communities in the northwest of the Northern Territory and Education Commissions in Perth.

In the military precision of the conference organisation, you catch a whiff of Catholic tribal gatherings of the 1950s. There are teams of men who look like your uncle to see to the seating, the name tags, the advertising on and inside the conference satchels. 'Put your bags behind here, love, they'll be perfectly safe with us.' And they are. There is a nun masterminding the music, the liturgy and the digital sound recording. She's mastered omnipresence. Sometimes she's upstairs in the control box, earphones clamped over her glossy hair, eyes darting everywhere.

Then she materialises onstage. Next she's conducting, next stage—managing. (Can this woman really be a nun?) Everything goes off perfectly. There are processions of students in pressed uniforms and women and men who know exactly what to do with the dozens of carefully laid-out bowls and candles and leaves and tapers. The power point and slide projections are faultless. No-one even trips over the hundreds of metres of cable that a production like this requires.

It is the kind of model of community and discipline that might have careful parents of whatever faith thinking about the advantages of a Catholic education. What but good could come to your daughter in this kind of atmosphere? You can hear the calculations out there in the ether.

QUESTIONS OF INCLUSION

And yet the occasion is also fresh, responsive to its immediate surroundings, and alive. There are no dim festoons of tradition botching its vivacity. It is overflowing with the local, the immediate, things of the antipodean earth. A certain egalitarian humour. When the ceremonies begin at dusk in the late warmth of Brisbane's tropical spring, you walk into the great wood-panelled hall of Queensland University, co-opted for the occasion, and find it hung with tropical colour. Turquoise, bougainvillea, emerald. The perfume of frangipani drifts in from the huge trees outside—a different incense.

The liturgy is grand, but subtly attuned to time and place. No triumphalism here. The music is local. Some of it Aboriginal, most of it written in Queensland. It's catchy, rousing, never banal. Those who loathe the saccharine mash of vocal and instrumental improvisation that followed Vatican II's translation of the liturgy into the vernacular do not have too much to complain about this night. Rather, you are brought up sharp by just how invigorating it is to have music crafted, really crafted,

to fit a liturgical occasion. To have professional musicians and good singers, including good amateur singers, of course, match their art to the precise celebration, and to have the people take up the antiphonal shape of the music with spontaneity and enthusiasm. What must it once have been like to learn that new cantata each week when you shared a congregation with the cantor of St Thomas' Leipzig—Johann Sebastian Bach? I am reminded, again, of how powerful music is, how effortlessly it evokes the numinous, the ineffable, how it partners, then extends, emotions. Reminded also (an edgy, by-the-way thought) of how dangerously stirring music can be: music as a call to arms—religious and secular.

But there is no Nuremberg here. And no sectarian battle songs. Only joy. Halfway through the second day, the Anglican sceptic who stands beside me feels happy to sing. And sometimes he is just as happy—as are we—to smile and keep his own space.

I am reminded of one of the better ecumenical moments in my own life. Years ago, one Sunday morning in Devon (no Catholic Mass for miles), I went with the Anglican wife of a close friend to a tiny church (of England) in the village near their home. I was welcomed, shown the notable tombs, made part of a discussion about the elaborate flower arrangements—all orange and tiered. My guide and hostess was witty, loving, very English and profoundly undemonstrative. When we came to the sign of peace, she turned to me and whispered (*hissed* is closer), 'If you touch me, I'll scream.' It was the most intimate, memorable thing she has ever said to me, and the confiding that I treasure most.

But this Brisbane hall is not English. Trust here takes a different form. The warm weather relaxes inhibitions that once made a Latin Mass seem appropriate, and a remote priest muttering as he turned his chasubled back on you seem austere, holy even. (Just try to imagine Jesus giving the Sermon on the

Mount in a foreign tongue with his back to the people gathered to hear him.)

The conference welcoming speech, made by Fr Tom Doyle, for so long head of the Melbourne Catholic Education Office, strikes a note that is neither triumphalist nor embattled. He says simply, and plainly, that education, teaching and learning are a form of service. He doesn't mean 'service' as the debased usage of modern economics would have it. He doesn't conceive of teachers as part of any 'service industry', or students and parents as clients of that industry. Nor does he see education as a ready tool of narrow evangelism. Education, as he uses the word, is part of a much older religious imperative—of serving your neighbour. An enlightenment and an intellectual drawing-out, yes; an individual thing, but also a collective boon to be put, ultimately, to work for others. And not just to work for one religion or one denominational group. Not just to the service of the Church. Tom Doyle's eyes are turned outwards, towards the world.

It's an occasion that could be milked for the opportunity it presents for a Catholic rallying cry. But that is not what happens. It would be a risky move in any case (though not an unthinkable one in the current climate), because Catholic teachers are no longer as biddable as they were in the days when the bulk of the education work was done by religious brothers and sisters. But even then teachers were never a uniformly biddable lot. Mary MacKillop is just one early model of the kind of hardy, dogged independence that has characterised the best of Australian Catholic teaching. In the 1950s, during 13 years at a Brigidine convent which gave flesh to many a nunly stereotype, I had teachers as good as teachers ever get, women who inspired and led and demanded that their girls did likewise.

In the days that follow Tom Doyle's welcome, people eat together and lounge in the Brisbane sun. Speaker after speaker adds his or her piece. Irish priest and sociologist, Diarmuid

O'Murchu, opening the formal sessions, gives an outline of his keynote address. His headings, under the rubric, 'deconstructing false idols', include the following:

Religion's 'unique but flawed' humanity. Patriarchy's masculine hero. Technological man. The two-thirds world—humanity struggling to survive. The Feminine soul—condemned to invisibility.

He is not uncontroversial. One priest in attendance goes away extremely exercised by O'Murchu's Christology. But no-one complains about lack of scope. No-one feels constrained or manipulated. The theological exchanges are positive and ongoing. Women in the audience ask many of the questions. Discussion leaks over the available days. And as O'Murchu unpacks the role of women over the ages, it becomes simultaneously apparent that women have been indispensable in the planning, organisation and management of this complex event. There is no fanfare about the fact. It is simply obvious. *Sine qua non.*

FAITHFUL DEFIANCE

When my turn comes I talk, among other things, about the kind of robust integrity I've seen and experienced in many Christian and Catholic women—so many of them teachers, some of them mine. Often their faithfulness took the form of scrupulous dissent. Hierarchies and authority have a way of melting into relative irrelevance when one is forced to make decisions of conscience on behalf of others. Schools and convents present many such decisions.

Not long before I came to Brisbane, I was sent, by my one time parish priest, a statement made by the superior of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, concerning the attendance by her Erie Benedictine sister, the American scholar Joan Chittister, at the Women's Ordination Worldwide Conference in Dublin in

June 2001. The generic subheading on the email read as follows: 'Benedictine Prioress Declines Vatican Silencing Directive. Importance: High.' The statement had clearly circulated right through the electronic networks and had been assessed for impact. Perversity made me initially suspicious. 'Importance: High'? Bah, humbug. But one reading was enough. The statement, so firm in its very modesty, struck me as such a remarkable example of the integrity-in-dissent (one potent model for teaching and learning) that I had been thinking about for this conference talk that I decided to use it. On the day, I read it out in full to the packed hall.

Hildegard of Bingen, after all, wrote pithy declarations to popes and kings, and history has vindicated her stand. Mary MacKillop had such skirmishes with the ecclesiastical authorities who wanted to control the nature and manner of her education enterprise. Now they own her as a saint.

That afternoon the photocopiers ran hot and, by next morning, everyone had their own copy. This is what they heard and read.

STATEMENT OF SISTER CHRISTINE VLADIMIROFF,
Prioress, Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

For the past three months I have been in deliberations with Vatican officials regarding Sister Joan Chittister's participation in the Women's Ordination Worldwide Conference, June 29 to 31, [2001] Dublin, Ireland. The Vatican believed her participation to be in opposition to its decree (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*) that priestly ordination will never be conferred on women in the Roman Catholic Church and must therefore not be discussed. The Vatican ordered me to prohibit Sister Joan from attending the conference where she is a main speaker.

I spent many hours discussing the issue with Sister Joan and travelled to Rome to dialogue about it with Vatican officials. I sought the advice of bishops, religious leaders, canonists, other prioresses,

and most importantly with my religious community, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. I spent many hours in communal and personal prayer on this matter.

After much deliberation and prayer, I concluded that I would decline the request of the Vatican. It is out of the Benedictine, or monastic, tradition of obedience that I formed my decision. There is a fundamental difference in the understanding of obedience in the monastic tradition and that which is being used by the Vatican to exert power and control and prompt a false sense of unity inspired by fear. Benedictine authority and obedience are achieved through dialogue between a community member and her prioress in a spirit of co-responsibility. The role of the prioress in a Benedictine community is to be a guide in the seeking of God. While lived in community, it is the individual member who does the seeking.

Sister Joan Chittister, who has lived the monastic life with faith and fidelity for fifty years, must make her own decision based on her sense of Church, her monastic profession and her own personal integrity. I cannot be used by the Vatican to deliver an order of silencing.

Vladimiroff then went on to say that she did not see the participation of Chittister, an internationally-recognised speaker and author of 20 books, as a ‘source of scandal to the faithful’ as the Vatican had alleged. Instead, she suggested, ‘the faithful can be scandalised when honest attempts to discuss questions of import to the Church are forbidden’. Valdimiroff also recounted that, when she presented her decision to her fellow Benedictine sisters and read them the letter she was sending to the Vatican with her response, 127 of the 128 members of the community put their names to it as well. Her statement continued:

My decision should in no way indicate a lack of communion with the Church. I am trying to remain faithful to the role of the 1500-year-old monastic tradition within the larger Church. We trace our

tradition to the early Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th century who lived on the margin of society in order to be a prayerful and questioning presence to both Church and society. Benedictine communities of men and women were never intended to be part of the hierarchical or clerical status of the Church, but to stand apart from this structure and offer a different voice. Only if we do this can we live the gift that we are for the Church. Only in this way can we be faithful to the gift that women have within the Church.

The ‘news value’ here, as the email trumpeted (‘Importance: High’), lies in a Benedictine Prioress defying a Vatican directive. (For her part, Chittister herself defied Vatican threats of serious penalties if she attended the conference and delivered an address in which she posed the question: how could it be that the Church ‘can call other institutions to deal with women as full human beings made in the image of God when their humanity is precisely what the Church itself holds against them in the name of God?’) And there is a certain frisson in a prioress defying the Vatican—who would deny it? But the larger significance of the statement lies in its scrupulous and considered argument, its faithfulness, and its directness.

In a Catholic education conference where ‘honest attempts to discuss questions of import’ are the litmus test for the success of the gathering, Sister Christine Vladimiroff’s statement becomes a symbol. This is not a conference of Catholic rebels. This is a meeting of professionals, of lay and religious teachers and administrators who desire nothing more nor less than to be able to do their jobs, to teach and nurture their students with maximum help and minimal interference from authorities whose agenda may or may not be the open one of education.

Between sessions there is some discussion of the structural impediments they face. But whinge is not the prevailing mode. In their own sphere many of these women and men have power and exercise it. ‘The Church’ is only one influence in the many

they must balance, and because of necessity they are practical people, they manage their balancing acts with a certain adroitness and resilient humour. Not all of them, of course—I won't idealise a group of human beings who are, in any case, much more interesting with their warts displayed. There are some narks and some malcontents. But mostly they are egalitarian, energetic, shrewd about their institutional and personal limitations, most of them, and characteristically on the front foot.

When Brisbane's Archbishop, John Bathersby, turned up in the middle of the conference to celebrate Mass and have morning tea, there was a clear air of concerted effort. Whatever battles might be going on in Rome or Boston over episcopal collegiality and the extent to which bishops are permitted to exercise power in their own dioceses, this was one isolated example of the whole kit and caboodle coming together and working perfectly. I got the distinct impression that the Archbishop even enjoyed the ritual morning tea, enjoyed talking to women and men as friends and colleagues.

One conference, one brace of days in the long life of the Catholic Church in Australia. Typical? Relevant? Prophetic?

It was not typical and not meant to be. This was a shot-in-the-arm conference, a highly engineered occasion with all (or nearly all—thank God for randomness) contingencies anticipated and allowed for. It worked with the panache and obsessive eye for detail that generates events of the Sydney Olympics kind. And it *was* an event. The National Catholic Education Commission doesn't have conferences like this annually, and you wouldn't ask teachers from all over Australia to cobble together the fares to come for three days of more of the same.

Relevant? Yes. It scanned in broad terms and in fine detail the intellectual and pastoral worlds that teachers inhabit every day. It gave those assembled an opportunity to see the social

justice tradition of Australian Catholicism honoured in the inclusive structure of the event itself and examined in the conversations which were an integral part of each day's workings. It looked at environmental issues with unusual seriousness and precision. The historic circumstances (September 11 still raw in everyone's mind) made insularity impossible. In Brisbane Islamic girls had been attacked. Schools and Churches responded. We had, as it were, local case studies of intolerance and some ways of mending it.

There was also, in the prevailing air of good will and practical good sense, an infectious energy. If you can send a pack of Australian teachers home enthused, then something close to a miracle has happened. This was no miracle (though you might, if it were your bent, say something about the spirit suffusing the event). It was an instructive working example of what can happen when you take off the bits and braces of authority, when you create circumstances in which competent people genuinely committed to a task that extends way beyond their own individual advantage are allowed to thrive in the company of their peers.

Prophetic? Well, it is not often that you take away from a Catholic event the image of a woman holding the platform, a woman standing next to a man and the pair of them introducing and directing every session. This looked, for a brief moment, like the Church that so many people in Australia want and the Church that so many in institutional authority feel bound to thwart.

APPLYING THE GAG

In 1987, nine years into the pontificate of John Paul II, the lay theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether published an article entitled 'John Paul II and the Growing Alienation of Women from the Church'. It appeared in a volume of essays edited by

Hans Küng and Leonard Swidler. The title was *The Church in Anguish*, and the subtitle, *Has the Vatican Betrayed Vatican II?* Other contributors included Bernard Häring (a Redemptorist priest and moral theologian), Eugene Kennedy (professor emeritus of psychology at Loyola University), Charles Curran (a moral theologian at the Catholic University of America), Leonardo Boff (one of the leading lights of the allegedly left-leaning Latin American theology of liberation that emerged in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council), Paul Collins (the Australian priest and historian) and Andrew Greeley (a priest and leading sociologist in the United States).

When I bought the book in America in 1988, I read it and was shocked. Fourteen years later it retains its capacity to unhinge one's complacency. Many of those whose names are listed above have been officially silenced by the Church. What you read in their writing of 1987 is anguish, indeed. These are not men or women (Radford Ruether, Arlene Anderson Swidler and Madonna Kolbenschlag are the only female contributors) committed to the overthrow of the Church. What characterises most of them is an agonised faithfulness. In some, particularly when they are writing about the case and cause of another theologian, friend or colleague, there is a steeliness in their argument, born out of desperation. Clodovis Boff, brother of the silenced liberation theologian, Brazilian Leonardo Boff, is all too aware of the ironies of geography and history in his brother's case. He writes of Boff's silencing by Rome in these terms:

The measures taken by the two cardinals [Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Jérôme Hamer, Ratzinger's opposite number at the Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institute] caused a great deal of scandal in Brazil, in view of the political context of the early months of 1985 [the year in which Leonardo was silenced on the grounds that his

writings were turning faith into mere politics and challenging the authority of the Church], when the country was emerging from a military dictatorship characterised by all manner of arbitrary procedures, the abolition of the right of free speech, and the most severe censorship. The Church had performed its prophetic role, criticising this state of affairs and helping to create a spirit of democracy. Then, at the very moment that the Church had at last won back its liberties, it had to witness the painful spectacle of Rome's utilization of the very methods used by the military and criticised by the Brazilian bishops.

Clodovis Boff concludes, in an end-of-the-line tone: 'What remains open is the challenge to conversion, not only of persons in the Church, but of the structures through which the power of the Church is distributed and exercised.'¹

From this distance, half a world away in Australia, it has been too easy for the ordinary Catholic to forget about the Leo Boff and Charles Curran (he was ousted by the Vatican from his tenured position at CUA in 1986 over his views on sexual ethics), unless one is a theologian or intimately involved in Church politics. But occasional scandals, priests and theologians 'disciplined', and earthquakes like the sexual abuse revelations, bring everything back into mind and contention.

And even in the polite intervening period, there were warning signs of an institutional tightening in Australia and an adoption of new modes of scrutiny. I remember, as my fellow parishioners also will, being horrified when our parish priest announced from the pulpit, in his artfully disingenuous way, that he didn't really mind if certain people were sitting quietly in our church taking notes on the canonical propriety of his Mass-saying, and the doctrinal orthodoxy of his sermons, as long as they disturbed no-one. Of course, we all minded. We minded profoundly. Such sneaking was a betrayal of the trust that brought us to this Church in the first place. It was not Australian Catholicism.

I didn't much care either for the figures that lurked around the edges of Third Rite of Reconciliation occasions and made their reports to Rome. That felt even less like Australian Catholicism.

And when Australian priests and bishops were chided by Rome's 1998 *Statement of Conclusions* for their excessive egalitarianism, that seemed such a wilfully ignorant judgment on one of the sustaining strengths of the Australian priesthood. I wondered what the man who taught me to drive and who married me, the priest who was the first to make it down to the Westgate Bridge to look after the men who were mangled and killed in its collapse, would make of a judgment that he was too egalitarian. Should he have called an ambulance instead? When my mother first met him, he was rescuing a serial drunk from the Werribee River. The drunk would throw his bike over the bridge and into the water and then go in after it. Fr Leo Curran would climb down and bring him and his bike back. Over and over again. Call the police, Father. Don't get your hands dirty. It might lead to democracy.

MISSED OPPORTUNITY

The men who contributed to the Küng and Swidler essay collection were diagnosing, in the most part, the consequences of faint-hearted implementation of the decrees of Vatican II. But Rosemary Radford Ruether looks at a much older impaction. The Council certainly gave impetus to the move for recognition and change in the role of women in the Church. It also gave it at a crucial moment, as women's movements, especially in the Western world, were gathering the kind of energy and momentum that brooks no absolute reversal. Madonna Kolbenschlag flags that moment when she writes in her essay in the collection ('John Paul II, US Women Religious, and the Saturnian Complex') of squandered opportunity:

It is sad to contemplate a lost moment of grace and possible transformation. John Paul II might have been the first pope to harvest the gifts of women for the Church. The critical mass was there—in 1978, when he was elected to Peter’s chair, women were entering the public sectors in unprecedented numbers, particularly in North America. In 1978, John Paul II had access not only to the energies of increasing numbers of lay women prepared for leadership in the Church and society, but also to the extraordinary capabilities and human resources of religious women in community. In the wake of the reforms and socialisations that the Second Vatican Council generated in religious orders, women in religious communities in the United States—by 1978—had reconstituted their way of life with remarkable developments in consciousness, lifestyle, and mission. They were being described by some sociologists as the largest single group of educated, articulate, bonded women the world had ever seen.²

During John Paul II’s pontificate, there are some pivotal moments for American women religious. Kolbenschlag points to the humiliation and disciplining of Mercy Sister Theresa Kane, the woman who ‘gently confronted’ the Pope during his visit at the National Shrine in Washington DC in 1979. (Kane, then president of the United States Leadership Conference of Women Religious, had told the Pope that the Church ‘in its struggle to be faithful to its call for reverence and dignity for all persons must respond by providing the possibility of women as persons being included in all ministries of the Church’. John Paul was annoyed by Kane’s remarks and let his annoyance be known publicly.)

Kolbenschlag points also to the subsequent harsh treatment of other Mercy Sisters, including Agnes Mansour (who in 1983 was ordered to resign as the director of the Michigan Department of Social Services because it handled abortion funds; her three immediate predecessors, all lay Catholic men, had

encountered no criticism) and Elizabeth Morancy (who in the same year was ordered to resign as a representative of the Rhode Island legislature). Both women subsequently left their religious order. In the debates and investigations that followed these actions, what emerged were some judicious processes of enquiry and dialogue, like the one conducted by San Francisco's Archbishop John Quinn, but also a backlash of misogynist aggression and fear from other churchmen in positions of power.

Kolbenschlag concludes that 'the "Church fathers" have chosen to use the emerging influence of religious women as the lightning rod for a neo-orthodoxy rather than free the energies of women to nurture a new ecclesiology'. And like Clodovis Boff, she notices a terrible irony:

'... it was the hierarchical Church . . . that called the sisters forth from their convents to the world, to the poor and powerless, and nourished their consciences to justice. Now that awareness, vision, and zeal have become the mirror reflecting back to the hierarchical Church the neurotic fear of women and patriarchal violence that appears to be a growing characteristic of this papacy and magisterium. The hierarchical Church seems to be affected by a kind of "Saturnian complex"—reminiscent of the Greek deity who swallowed the children of his own loins, fearing they might displace him one day.'³

Rosemary Radford Ruether is less figurative in her analysis and less dramatic. But her historical scan of women and the Church is wider; she is, in many ways, less surprised by what she sees. 'Is this perception that Catholic Christianity particularly suffers from a deeply ingrained misogynist pathology fair?' she asks. And then proceeds to answer. She's right in her initial analysis—that the pathology does not start with Christianity. The Church did not invent patriarchy, but Christianity did, as she notes, 'inherit and absorb traditions from both Judaism and Greco-Roman culture that justify male domination over women'. Her anthropological case is thorough, and familiar. We know

how Augustine and Thomas Aquinas wrote of women and out of what patriarchal biology notions of women as ‘misbegotten males’ arise. Depressing to reread, but nothing new. But knowing does not solve the behavioural and institutional deformities that have followed from such misconceptions of the nature of women. Of more recent grounds for disaffection of women from the Church, Radford Rueuther is brisk. She nominates three areas: ‘(1) reproductive rights, (2) ordination of women, and (3) inclusive language and symbols’.⁴

THE REPORT ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

When the Australian Catholic Bishops in 1996 launched a research project into the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, they were not licensing an onslaught by feminist theologians and Church historians. And when the report, called *Woman And Man, One in Christ Jesus*, was published, in 1999, that is not what they got. Not exactly. What the report (from the largest research project ever undertaken by the Australian Catholic Church, and larger also than any comparable Government enquiry) does contain is a democratic dossier of what women and men, lay and religious, Catholic and disaffected Catholic, honestly think about the position of women and the effect of their current status on the welfare of Church as a whole.

The volume, all 496 pages of it, was published commercially by HarperCollins and has had wide distribution. You have to wonder how hot a potato it must feel in the hand of any cautious bishop with his eye on promotion and Rome.

The authors of the Report are carefully orthodox. About the ordination of woman they couldn't be clearer: ‘In the apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, released by the Vatican on May 30, 1994, Pope John Paul II declared that the Church did not have the authority to ordain women as priests and this teaching was

to be definitely held by all the Church's faithful. It is important to note that the issue of this apostolic letter on ordination had much significance for the project. The position of Pope John Paul II on the issue is very clear and it was the intention in undertaking the research project to be true to the Pope. The ordination of women was not the focus of the research.⁷

It might not have been, but when you undertake a research program with methods that allow for extensive, nationwide interviews and written submissions, then the issues that will repeatedly come through will be those about which people care most, not those ordained as appropriate by either the ecclesiastical authorities or the architects of the project.

And come through they do. In voices that are recognisably the voices of Australian women and men who understand their own world, have a clear sense of the significance of their own experience and who do not pull their punches. In a Church world full of codes and generic phrasing, their words have a clarion intensity. Here's one signal example, from a woman in Victoria:

Whilst I believe that many priests work very hard and long hours, and genuinely wish to 'do good', embedded centuries-old practices of power and control which they exercise over the life of the laity mitigate against their development in self-knowledge, self-forgetfulness and a deep prayer life. All too often they operate out of unexamined mindsets which are frequently patronising to women, particularly women who have stepped outside the Catholic woman stereotype. Most men, when confronted with the changes in the gender such as we have seen in the West in the last thirty years, are fearful. My experience has been that men change in their behaviour to women when someone they love or work with demands that they change. The integration of this at deep attitudinal level comes much more slowly.⁵

It's the tone of this woman's remarks that is most striking. She is not telling us how she has been wronged. Instead she is offering a new pattern of behaviour, giving something positive to the old, neuralgic debate. 'My experience has been that men change in their behaviour to women when someone they love or work with demands that they change.' How many women (and men) understand the weight and authority of that claim? How many marriages and relationships survive and thrive on exactly the willingness to flex, shift and grow that is signalled in those words?

The Report had, in all honesty, to conclude that even though there were different views on the question of women's ordination, there was much agreement that 'there should be open discussion of women's ordination'. It also laid open a great deal of pain and alienation among women in the Australian Catholic Church. The remarkable thing is that the alienation that is expressed does not always, or even often, equate to a wish to shake the dust of the Church from women's feet. Leonardo Boff's silent loyalty of 18 years ago has its equivalent still in an Australian Church and among Australian people, women and men, who are not suffering anything like the social oppression that Boff's theology sought to address, but who still want to contribute, still yearn to see justice done. Here, as in Brazil, people are conscious of waste, of lost time and opportunity, of energies turned back on themselves and rendered destructive. The Bishop's report documents all of that. It also documents conditions in the Church under which sexual pathologies can and do thrive.

If you read *Woman And Man* carefully when it was released in 1999, you could not have been surprised by the sexual abuse scandals that have been given revived prominence after the exposure of the American ecclesiastical cover-up and related revelations at home. And you could not be unaware of the difficulties being experienced by local bishops who, with the help of religious brothers and sisters and the laity, devote their

energies to establishing protocols and procedures, only to have their best efforts blunted by interference from Rome.

I called the Bishop's Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church a democratic document. It is, but only insofar as it allows the voices of a broad cross-section of the Australian community to be heard. It is not an instrument for implementation of the participatory bids made by the people who took part in the process. And it gives little if any voice to the many disaffected Catholics who had nothing to do with the process at all—the Catholics who won't have been at the churches to pick up the survey forms or in parishes to catch wind of what was going on. They are the ones, and there are many of them, for whom Church involvement ceased with the issue of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, forbidding the use of artificial contraception. Or they are the ones who find the Church's focus on matters of sexual morality disproportionate and disturbing in a world that has much else to contend with. Or they are the children of Catholics, children who find no point of connection with their own lives in the rituals and restraints of a Church that has so predictably rejected so much of the science that they are taught in school or the popular culture of which they are inextricably a part.

A CHURCH OF ALL THE PEOPLE

But democracy is nonetheless a word to conjure with in both Church and the world at the moment. We pay it lip service in both, while we grow privately and even publicly anxious about the way in which the democratic principles are bypassed or flaunted in the secular state and ignored or repudiated by the Roman centre of the Church. But the sexual abuse upheaval in the United States, at least, is showing signs of a tendency in Church governance that we may call more collegial, if not strictly democratic. Local bishops making rules for their dioceses and

sidestepping the dictates of Rome. The centralised appointment policy for bishops has, for many years now, winnowed out many of the brave and the exceptional men who might see this change through. But who knows what may happen in the next year or so, as desperate measures have to be taken to right grievous wrongs. These are wrongs—abuses of power and trust—that go to the heart and self-identity of the very clergy who have for so long wielded power in the Church, or who have themselves been infantilised and stunted by regimens of arbitrary authority that sit so obliquely in our Christian notions of human dignity and our 21st-century conception of human rights.

The Catholic Church and sexuality: work in progress. But the work is made so much more difficult because one side maintains a head-in-sand pietism and an anthropologically inappropriate Mariology—Mary as the perpetual virgin, docile and ever-obedient Mother of God—while the other faces an accelerated task of psychological readjustment and socio-sexual rethinking that is exactly the task secular men and women have had to face, with varying success, for most of the last century.

In 1959, halfway through the 20th-century sexual revolution, my Proficiency grade was taken to see a film about Maria Goretti. At fourteen, I was ludicrously innocent (culpably ignorant, say my daughters). Such ‘proficiency’ as I could muster was schoolgirl academic, nothing worldly. Little wonder, then, that the scuffled scenes in which the young Maria Goretti is attacked by a knife-wielding rapist, but avoids a fate-worse-than-death (or not—in the censored *mêlée*, who could tell?) went over my head in a whirl of jump-cuts and anatomical incoherence. What a pity, I thought at the time: she’s missed some sort of romantic opportunity with that luminous-eyed young man. (Lorna Doone was my standard of sensual abandon.)

Twenty years later, in the staffroom of a sound and sensible girls’ school run by the Sisters of Charity, the stock portrait of

Maria Goretti (dark dewy eyes and kerchief) was routinely shoved into the staffroom knife drawer by the school principal. Some well-meaning (new) staff member would occasionally rescue Maria and stand her up beside the toaster. But by morning tea she would be back in the knife drawer. And the same principal would then walk back to her office to deal with routine school matters: absenteeism, unscheduled pregnancies, discipline, drug problems, poverty, domestic violence and the behavioural pathologies that are the fallout of unhappy homes. Sometimes she had simply to find lunch, or breakfast, for a girl who had come to school hungry.

Maria Goretti was not a model she could meaningfully have invoked to help young women whose out-of-school dress code and aspirational norm was more likely to be a pop star like Madonna Ciccone (see Chapter 6) than any Italian virgin peasant, even one approaching canonisation.

Sometimes, living in the Catholic Church is like contemplating a painting by Chagall. The Church and the town and the fixed points of reference are all there, but your eyes and mind are floating with the lovers, the painter, the musician or the animal, following the spirit, not the formula.

In America recently, in a beachside town on the California coast, I pick up in the local Safeway supermarket, a 'Limited Collector's Edition' of a glossy magazine called *Pope John Paul II, A Celebration of His Service to the World*. It's printed in the USA and marketed as an 'Enquirer Special' by American Media. The cover shows the Pope in papal white, with side-bar black-and-white photographs of him as a young child, as a young man in the army (looking oddly like Moshe Dayan) and as the fresh-faced parish priest—Bing Crosby to a tee. Or that's what the marketers would like you to think, I guess. The full-page photo inside of John Paul II and President Ronald Reagan is captioned thus: 'The bond between John Paul II and President Ronald Reagan was instrumental in the fall of Communism in Poland

according to a book co-written by Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein.’ Also according to Bernstein—the ‘Enquirer Special’, it should be noted, is not a deeply investigative publication—the Pope and President formed an informal alliance: ‘Reagan cut off funding for abortion programs overseas, and the Pope did not publicly comment on US attempts to install cruise missiles in Western Europe.’

The Pope is not responsible for the use to which his image and prestige is put by publishers wishing to pick up a quick US\$4.95. He has no more control of the distribution of visual material, I imagine, than had Princess Diana. Yet some of the deals we know were done, some pressures were applied—on this program here, that clinic there, particularly where reproductive practices that the Vatican (or a Reagan administration) did not condone were concerned.

That is world-stage Catholicism, strutting its power and influence, seemingly heedless of individual decisions, individual consciences, individual circumstances. It sits so oddly, that kind of international political and pontifical dealing, with the kind of Catholicism you can see daily in any school, in the work of young men and women on the streets, in shelters, or up at Kings Cross, where the congregation is literally on the street. It also sits awkwardly with the aspirations for justice and self-determination held by Catholics who work in Australia with people of other faiths, people from countries in the throes of independence struggles, like the West Papuans, and the East Timorese before them; people displaced; people denied refuge or livelihood in their own countries and increasingly in ours. It sits even more oddly with Catholics who in their professional lives must deal with a plurality of beliefs and value systems and who must make just decisions every day that are no longer guided by a centralised clerical authority—if they ever could have been.

Institutions are sticky things. You might think they are mere encrustations on the pure idea and all that's needed to strip away the dross is a stout barnacle knife; or a hammer with which to nail your protest through the wood of the institution's door with a resounding 'Hier steh ich. Ich kann nicht anders.' ['Here I stand. I can do nothing else.'] But Martin Luther's intent was not to sever himself from the institution. All he wanted was that most dangerous and elusive double: change and reform. And *he* wasn't too enlightened about women either.

Many women and men in the Australian Catholic Church want to see changes—and not always the same ones. What is clear is that without some shift, some closer and more loving accommodation to the lives that people live, and the spiritual aspirations that they cherish, the Church that remains for the children of this generation will be an atrophied and diminished thing.

John Carmody

In June 1951, many thousands of Brisbane Catholics turned out for the visit of the Pilgrim Statue of Our Lady of Fatima. It was a powerful act of public veneration that was wholly a reflection of the times: not only in its numbers and in the willingness of the Catholic tribe to make such public statements of its faith but, also, in its reflection of our simpler ways in those years. The icon was collected at Eagle Farm Airport and then transported to St Stephen's Cathedral bolted to the tray of a camouflaged dark-blue Dodge utility from Nudgee Junior College. The clouds of the heavenly domain of this apparition were simulated by masses of lightly coloured spun glass, while the earthly site of the miraculous events was represented by three ten-year-old boys from that school, got up in headscarves and whatever else their parents could collect as an Australian impression of Portuguese peasant costume.

I was Lucia, and my family still think that I look sweet in the photographs of my only cross-dressing appearance, apart

from a performance as a cassocked priest in a Synge play. My own principal recollection, however, is of weeks of discomfort, especially when kneeling, from the fragments of glass in my hands and feet.

THE PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS OF THE TRIBE

Such public events were typical of Australian Catholic life in the 1950s. The really big occasion in Brisbane was the annual Corpus Christi Procession, first at Nudgee College and later—as that venue was outgrown—at the Exhibition Grounds. The schools, the sodalities, the guilds, the clergy and religious brothers and sisters—all in full regalia—were there in force; the Catholic Daughters of Australia (the ubiquitous CDA) staffed the refreshment stalls, and the Brisbane Excelsior Band provided the amplified accompaniment to the hymns and a suitably euphonious and reverential background to the Archbishop's Benediction.

For Archbishop James Duhig, it was always 'this magnificent d'monstr-air-sh'n', the numbers invariably increasing each year. 'The Arch. counted the shadows again,' was my father's standard comment. For us youth, it was an experience of mixed motives: a pleasant parade in the sun (until the shadows cast by the grandstands lengthened and the air became chilly), the tribal thrill and solemnity of the massed occasion, and the chance to chat with our sisters' schoolfriends for a few precious moments when it was all officially over.

The hymns always seemed better in the crisp, open winter air than in parish church, schoolroom or chapel. They really were second-rate, sentimental stuff. Gregorian chant was all but ignored (the monasteries were, perhaps, another matter, though I'm sceptical—in general, Australian men sing reluctantly and poorly). The hymns were *faux*-Irish (*Hail, glorious St Patrick*); puffed-up, tub-thumping ecclesio-patriotic (*Faith of our fathers*);

emotionally paradoxical (*O Mother, I could weep for mirth*); or they were dilute and derivative 19th-century pietistic fragrances (*To Jesus' Heart all-burning*). The more that I learned about music in late adolescence, and came to love modern concert music, the more they alienated me. Picking up on the title of a popular contemporary musical show together with a ubiquitous devotion, I facetiously decided to compile the quintessentially Catholic musical: *Stop the Perpetual Novena! I want to get off!*

Little did I realise that far, far worse was to come. Some of it would seem to stem from the delusion that the liturgical action was an American campfire, other junk sounding as if the church had transmogrified into a nightclub—making the old *Jesus, my God, behold at length of time* sound like the epitome of good taste.

Those grand public devotions were massed and unmissable declarations. Not only were they unequivocally liturgical, they were really cultural and religious statements as well. Semi-public devotional activities left even less scope for defaulters, yet they, too, provided the paradox of an admiration of personal 'meditation' with encouragement of the routine of a group ritual, as in the formulaic recitation of the Rosary. This was at its most enthusiastic during the month of May (traditionally regarded as 'Our Lady's month'), when there was a grand tradition at my Christian Brothers school, and at many others, to have the competitive ceremonial (though it was hardly acknowledged so baldly) of the May Altars. Each classroom expressed itself ornately. It was one of the few occasions when such 'art' was encouraged in boys, through florid decoration of the large Pellegrini plaster Virgin in its care—mostly, these were Our Lady of Lourdes or the Immaculate Conception.

On one cold night in that month, families in their hundreds would promenade through the school buildings: admiring, comparing, ranking. It was a great event. What—and we already knew the answer—did the Protestants and the 'States' (as the

pupils in the government schools were known to us) have to match it? Indeed, what tradition, what liturgy, what story, what moral certitude?

The most regular and obligatory public ceremonial—though it was (except early on winter mornings or during the cyclone season in Brisbane) mostly considered a sweet obligation—was attendance at Sunday Mass. Repeatedly, we were told, ‘It was the Mass that mattered’, as a shorthand clue to Irish history—our special story, of which we were taught remarkably little, but of which we were somehow an inseparable, almost heroic, part.

‘Apart’ was the more correct word for that liturgy, however. It was ‘celebrated’ (a paradoxical word, to be honest) by a priest with his back to everyone, including his loyal servers, the Sanctuary guarded and palisaded by the Communion Rails. In my experience, most participants jabbered in poorly paced, articulated and phrased Latin. I loved that language from the moment when I began to learn it for the liturgy, though few priests sounded as if *they* did, and its use pretty thoroughly excluded the congregations, which were enormous on Sundays and scant on weekdays.

It is true that a legitimate liturgy may just as well evoke emotional responses as intellectual ones, but this kind habitually failed because, commonly, the congregation ignored the action and practised their own private devotions, except for those souls who diligently followed the ritual with their Missals. Furthermore, because of the arcane language, the Epistles and Gospels had to be read again in English, from the pulpit. These texts were, it needs to be recalled, mostly taken from the New Testament; we pre-Second Vatican Council Catholics had shamefully little exposure to the Old Testament, except on Good Friday and during the Easter Vigil. Those Sunday readings had the advantage that they sometimes obviated the need for a sermon, which was just as well because, as often as not, these would be harangues against the Labor Party (for its alleged Communist

sympathies) or—unforgivably insensitive—readings of the lists of contributions to the current quarterly or seasonal collections. It remains an arguable point whether the essence of the sermon has been significantly altered by the declaration of the Second Vatican Council that ‘the homily is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself’.

WINDS OF CHANGE

That was 1950s Australian Catholicism, and it all seemed so terribly successful, with overflowing congregations, publicly successful schools, full seminaries, influential (indeed, knighted and ‘Establishment’) bishops. There was, however, an unacknowledged and unrecognised worm in the fruit. It was all genuinely counter-cultural, though not in the proper sense of the Church’s mission to be a creative and living critique of the mores and values of the secular society. There was, instead, a pervasive failure to recognise what was happening in that society: a tectonic shift, not an evolution, induced by World War II. No recognition; no engagement. No recognition; no critique.

As a consequence of that war, science had taken over with, at the same time, a radical transformation in education and in its importance. Covertly, parts of the Church *must* have recognised this, but seemed to have looked away. In 1950 the Vatican took two related but ultimately vain actions. Clearly affronted by the effects upon Italian women and society of the invasion of handsome and affluent American soldiers (Hollywood incarnate) near and after the end of the war—nylon stockings, cigarettes and chocolates were powerfully alluring—Pope Pius XII canonised Maria Goretti (that saint of mis-praised chastity who was stabbed to death at the age of twelve in 1902 while resisting a would-be rapist) and declared the Dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

These declarations occurred precisely when Gregory Pincus and his colleagues were working on the orally-active contraceptive steroids: the field trials were about to begin in 1950, and the world was poised to change forever. Part of that change would be an irresistible assault on Vatican power. Soon enough, when confronted with scientific evidence and advice, Paul VI countered with his futile attempt to sustain that Roman power. Someone should have told him of the wisdom of King Canute or warned him that, metaphorically speaking, the Huns had crossed the Rhine.

That type of Catholicism was epitomised by Pius XII as the austere head of a centralist, male bureaucracy. It was an atavistic remnant of the old Imperial model, refracted through renaissance royalty, which seemed to operate through stifling thought and imagination and was, in its public and private practices, a religion of archaic and decayed formulae: the repetitiveness of Litanies and the Rosary, the salvational promises of the Nine First Fridays and the Five First Saturdays, the wearing of clusters of medals and scapulas, green and brown. Was it remotely placed to face post-War modernity, let alone to have some hope of survival?

And here at home, did the Australian Catholic Church show much understanding of these socio-political changes? Did it, with its tradition of Roman training and curialist orientation, see the philosophical kernel of those developments and encourage in its members—either those fleeing to become ‘Cultural Catholics’ or those remaining—a disposition to re-examine the essence of Catholicism? Or did it, rather, try to stoutly adhere to the conformist habits and the essentially totalitarian model of old?

The outcome of all of these sociological and moral forces—specifically, of education and prosperity—is to be seen in Australian census data. In 2001, ‘declared’ Catholics constituted 26.4 per cent of the Australian population (about 5 million

people) but, given that other surveys, confirming what partially filled churches portend, show that more than 80 per cent of these are not truly ‘practising’ (that is, Mass-going), the reality is that ‘Cultural Catholics’ (about 4 million) represent the largest denomination in the country. Many of these people, nonetheless, remain ‘interested observers’, if rarely participants, of developments and activities in their alienated Church.

Thus, important as it indisputably was, the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s really came a decade too late. Though it required the clear-sightedness of John XXIII to recognise its pressing importance, few had that perspicacity in the Australian backwater. Nevertheless, it galvanised the developing and better-educated young Catholic intelligentsia, a striking product of which was the influential document, *The Incarnation and the University*, which Vincent Buckley and his colleagues produced at Melbourne University in the early 1950s. The schism between the young group of Catholic Australians and the more cautious, and mostly older, priests and laity—a division which had its counterpart in ALP politics and the wider Australian society—generated significant tensions. There were, from many pulpits, regular denunciations of universities as threats to students’ faith.

All of these squalls were clearly understood by an increasingly informed media, itself a reflection of the altering society, whether as simple observers and reporters or as more active agents. As the 1950s gave way to the more vigorous 1960s, newspapers were less and less disposed to report clerics’ sermons each Monday as if they were serious news. The ABC changed, too. Under the Reverends Kenneth Henderson and John Munro, both establishment Anglicans, the national broadcaster had been cautious and conservative in its presentation of religion. Its speakers were asked to ‘commend their faith’, and sceptical broadcasts were rare. The crusading Methodist clergyman, Rev Alan Walker, could say in 1953, ‘In the quickening of the

Christian faith in this country, which is surely coming, the ABC will have played a real part'. Prophecy is fraught, indeed.

The advent of television in 1956 had an energising effect on the somnolent radio medium. Thereafter, the ABC Religious Affairs Department, as well as telecasting liturgical events with greater directness, especially to the house-bound, could hardly escape responding to the increasing popularity of current affairs and commentary programs with its own activities on both media. One such television program had a remarkable fall-out when, in late 1966, Dr John Challis, a former Dominican priest, interviewed a visiting American *Sacré Coeur* nun, Mother Margaret Gorman. In *X = God*, she spoke as a psychologist about the importance for every age and culture of creating appropriate symbols for the mystery of the numinous and the transcendent: the unknowable demands apt symbolic representation to permit its comprehension.

This enraged Dr Thomas ('Bull') Muldoon, Auxiliary Bishop to the Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Norman Gilroy, immediately he heard about it (when, as he put it in an infamous letter, 'news of some of the things she was saying reached our ears'). His language was as intemperate as it was authoritarian. He referred to her 'erroneous views' and 'stupidities' and characterised her as 'this female deceiver who is so puffed up with her own arrogance and pride that she no longer has any room left for love of the Church. As St Paul would say, "Her end is perdition".'

When it was first revealed in the 10 December issue of the fortnightly magazine, *Nation*, and later in the daily press, Muldoon's brutality distressed many Sydney Catholics. What equally disturbed numerous others was the narrow and closed mentality demonstrated by his letter: 'Mother Gorman has no permission from ecclesiastical authorities to speak of any doctrinal matters in the Archdiocese . . . It has been made known

that (she) is not welcome again in this Archdiocese. Both she and her stupidities are in fact banned from this Archdiocese.²¹

All of this provoked a strong defence—of the person and character of the nun and of her right to operate as a public thinker—first of all, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by the renowned Roger Pryke, parish priest in the beach suburb of Harbord. Stemming from his days as the Catholic chaplain at Sydney University, and later in the adjacent St Joseph's (Camperdown), he had a legion of friends in the city's professional and intellectual circles, many of whom had been galvanised by the Second Vatican Council and the flood of paperback editions of the books by such liberal and innovative theologians as Yves Congar, Martin Buber, Karl Rahner, Hans Küng and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They rallied in support, not only of Fr Pryke and Mother Gorman, but also of 'the freedom of enquiry among Catholics in this Archdiocese'. At the urging of their chaplain, Fr Ted Kennedy, a protest meeting was convened by four young intellectuals at Sydney University, and the auditorium of Anzac House in College Street was packed on the evening of Sunday, 18 December 1966.

Some leading Catholic figures were listed as speakers at the protest meeting, but proceedings did not begin quite as planned. As it was about to start, Muldoon himself strode in, accompanied by a number of muscular supporters carrying a statue of Our Lady of Fatima, which they quite deliberately placed right in the middle at the very front of the stage. To do Muldoon credit, he had the courage to face his critics and make what the *Herald*, in its report the next day, called a 'qualified apology': 'If you think I have gravely offended against charity, I apologise sincerely,' he said, in a significant public concession to lay opinion. In extremely formal language, he revealed the anti-quarian nature of his own thinking with, for example, the comment, 'For the clear Catholic doctrine [she], so it seemed

to a great many people and to me, substituted an experimental subjectivism which is close to modernism.’

He did, though, add one serious point, which had deeply riled him. As the *Herald* noted, ‘He had used the word “error” because Mother Gorman, in interviews on birth control, had contradicted the Pope.’ Here was a double problem—a challenge to Vatican authority that came from a woman.

The Bishop left when he finished speaking (though the statue remained), and four resolutions were passed, one of which supported the nun ‘in her quest, but not necessarily her specific attempts, to express a vital faith that can be communicated to contemporary men’. *Vital* was the key word. The *Herald* described the meeting as seeming ‘concerned to resolve the controversy without personal bitterness’, but *The Australian* described it as a ‘noisy meeting’ during which Muldoon ‘was frequently interrupted by shouts from the crowd, groups of whom at times angrily clashed with each other’.

In his ‘Religion Today’ column in that newspaper, Graham Williams astutely noted, ‘The incident has done more than anything else to drive together the progressives in this very conservative archdiocese. Until now they have been no force at all. This may well prove a historic incident in the archdiocese, from more viewpoints than one.’

Even though it had a congregation, a statue and a bishop, that Anzac House event was hardly liturgical, but it was an impressive public Catholic action. It showed that the days of an easy assumption of episcopal right, of control and freedom from accountability, were over; that edicts and *Diktats* were no longer to be accepted silently by a compliant or complaisant laity. Eventually, the laity will speak longest, even if not, initially, loudest.

This was also shown in a spectacular way when Paul VI dashed so many expectations on that kernel issue of contraception. Around Australia, there had been an abundance of

seminars and colloquia at which thoughtful priests had contorted their logic in trying, simultaneously, to be rational yet not disloyal on that question. Roger Pryke had received some tough questioning at a symposium at the University of NSW when he argued the case for theology as a legitimate discipline in the modern university: the very topical sticking point was the assertion, from the audience, that some religious matters were deemed beyond dispute or demolition—which was, accordingly, an essentially anti-intellectual (and thus, as it was put to him, an ‘anti-universitarian’) position.

The rage of the women at the Pauline interdict was not concerned with such niceties: it was unforgettably demonstrated by a dazzling photograph of Meg Gilchrist (who was also active in the Catholics for Peace movement), with waist-length hair and sassy mini-skirt, all down the front page of the *Daily Mirror* (a now defunct afternoon paper in Sydney), accompanied by the headlined declaration that she would ‘take “the Pill”’.

It was the sign of what became another enormously significant Catholic action, a determination to follow Section 3 of the Council’s *Declaration on Religious Liberty*:

In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God, for whom he was created. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious.²

The local hierarchy, taking their cue from a Roman bureaucracy that sought to be selective in the application of the Council’s declarations, was (and remains) deeply opposed to any such authority passing to the laity. In the absence of the power to execute—excommunication having lost much of its force in Australia—the bishops could only watch, even if they seemed not to acknowledge or regret it, a flight of thousands from the Church, many of whom were its ‘intellectuals’.

SPEAKING METAPHORICALLY

A result has been a clear dichotomy—in Catholicism as well as secular Australia—between the intellectuals (often demeaned as the ‘chattering classes’) and those who, no matter what their training, are less educated (or who deliberately separate themselves from the intellectuals). This is a dispiriting aspect of Manning Clark’s classification of Australians into the ‘straighteners’ and the ‘enlargers of life’ or, as he called one chapter in Volume V of his great *History of Australia*, the ‘friends of Mammon and prophets of Eden’. He further acknowledged these divisions by placing some heartfelt lines by Henry Lawson at the beginning of Volume VI:

Sons of the South, make choice between
 (Sons of the South, choose true)
 The Land of Morn and the Land of E’en,
 The Old Dead Tree and the Young Tree Green,
 The Land that belongs to the lord and the Queen,
 And the Land that belongs to you.³

Such divisions of ideology or wealth militate against grand public assemblies and proclamations; those which do nowadays unite people tend to stem from secular causes and concerns. I think, though, of those past public occasions in Brisbane in the same breath as ‘liturgical’ events, because of my insistence on considering liturgy, from the Greek origin of the word, not only as a *public* spiritual action, but as one, fundamentally, involving the *entire* assembled people. Put another way, if a reformed and revived liturgy is to have more than mere promise—especially for the multicultural and egalitarian Australian temperament—it must be declericalised and democratised. Furthermore, liturgical pluralism is essential if Australian Catholicism is to survive.

Catholic liturgy and ritual are diverse activities but, traditionally, the Mass is the centre of gravity of it all. It has long been characterised as ‘the same sacrifice as that of the Cross’, which should immediately draw attention to the intellectual and emotional significance of the Incarnation—the appearance of the long-promised Messiah—but to the psychological issue of sacrifice as well. As children, the significance of the Crucifixion was explained to us (in part, at least) as a perfection of the older Israelite sacrificial rituals, of which the story of Abraham and Isaac—the willing sacrifice of an only and much-beloved son—was seen as a potent and fearful archetype. Though Abraham was to have made a burned offering of the boy to Jahweh, it would first have involved cutting his throat and the ritual spilling of blood. When the father, under last-minute Divine instruction, substituted a conveniently available ram, this represented a still-imperfect blood sacrifice that would eventually be idealised on Calvary, also with the shedding of blood.

The element of slaughter was crucial. The outflow of blood, traditionally seen as the life-force, has an ageless history within ritual, most spectacularly, perhaps, with the Aztecs—as part of the deepest religious ceremony. The psychology is as immanent as it is mystifying and was clearly part of Christ’s injunction, at the Last Supper, that his Apostles and their disciples commemorate Him in a ceremony that recalled not only Him, but also the one described in the Book of Exodus. There, the covenant between Jahweh and Moses, endorsed by his itinerant Israelite people, was sealed with the blood of sacrificial bullocks: ‘This,’ Moses said, ‘is the blood of the Covenant that Yahweh has made with you.’ Christ, centuries later, said, ‘This is my blood of the New Covenant, which is to be poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins.’ Thus, although He would next day, in the Gospels’ account, become for later generations a salvational blood-sacrifice, this action left scope for a perplexing commemoration when a myriad of perceptions of spirituality abrade against one

another. With Christianity these have included the numerous divides of the invader and the subjugated: after all, the religion was founded in the midst of a Roman–Jewish cultural conflict, a schism that has continued between those inheritors of the New and the Old Covenants, despite Christ’s intention that they be reconciled. Comparable divisions followed as European colonialism flourished.

So not only has the metaphor of the blood sacrifice been transfigured by the symbol of a different red liquid but, specifically in Australia, that image ought to give great point to contemporary and future liturgical philosophy.

Several notions should coalesce at this point. Notwithstanding that the first Australian Catholics were, themselves, terribly oppressed, they were a part of the Christian conquest of this country. Those settlers (convicts and soldiers alike) brought alien secular and sacred values to New South Wales, to a land where—as in our eucharistic celebration—there is so little water to dilute the redness. Perhaps one of the biblical metaphors to which we should attend much more is that notion of desert and isolation, because European Australia is arguably the most anti-intellectual (and hence unspiritual) culture in the Western world. We are an utterly, perhaps irredeemably, secular society. We urgently need prophets to emerge from that desert.

Perhaps the optimist would assert that there really is a plenitude of the spirit in Australia, just as there is an abundance of water in the Great Artesian Basin, but it is all underground, difficult to access. So we have the dried-out, blood-red soil, with the hard, brooding monoliths of Uluru and the Olgas, and the water—separated, needing to be mixed. Each is important for genuine vitality, as we also need the male and the female to be miscible, for the world of the spirit to be authentic and blessed. Will it—can it—ever happen?

THE NEED FOR RENEWED RITUAL

If Catholicism is ever to leaven and enlighten the secular culture, if its liturgical celebrations are to be real and transfiguring, we need to abandon—thoroughly, irrevocably and honestly—the misogyny that has been traditional in that religion, to probe its roots and extirpate the malady. Just as our liturgy is a metaphorical purification and elevation of old blood rituals, we must ask if that blind anti-female ideology has its origins in a perversion of blood sacrifice, in the old idea of ‘bad blood’. Antique medicine believed that bad blood needed to be let out; I wonder if there is, in the Vatican’s obsession with a male and celibate priesthood, some pervasive atavistic (but subconscious) fear of menstruation as an incurable outflow of just such bad blood.

Such a mind-set is closed to logic, yet those attempts at persuasion have been enduring: in 1562, the Emperor Ferdinand I wanted the compromised re-convened Council of Trent to legalise marriage of the priesthood, but Pius IV and his apparatchiks spiked the Imperial guns.

Our Catholicism has developed from a long and vexed tradition. Like our parallel secular civilisation, it has grown out of, but never completely away from, the Roman Empire; it has flourished as a limb of the extraordinary Holy Roman Empire; it has been a not-always wise or charitable counterblast to the Reformation and the Capitalism which that spawned, with its rapacious view of property. In Australia, all of that has been grafted onto our New Earth (which is yet so old). Our own circumstances uncannily replicate those origins and history of Christianity: invaders, property theft and a tenacious adherence to the past.

‘Our roots are not deep in this land’, was the wise observation of the eminent musical scholar, Rev Dr Percy Jones; our development of spiritual affinity is slow. I well remember, by contrast,

during one Sunday Mass at St Vincent's in Redfern, hearing the redoubtable Shirley Smith—'Mum Shir'l'—tell the congregation about the profound Aboriginal understanding of and connection with the land: 'The red dust between their toes is the spirits of their ancestors,' she said.

Modern science has debunked antique psycho-physiological notions of the power of the blood and so should Catholicism, especially Australian Catholicism, which was born in the Enlightenment, like our secular society—for all that this was, in its earliest years, dominated by Protestant clergymen. After all, while Mary the Mother of Jesus—so paradoxically revered by the misogynist Church—may or may not have been a virgin, she would certainly have menstruated. If we accept her, it has to be the entire person, her femininity and physiology included. Furthermore, we Australians should draw comfort and inspiration from the fact that our first saint, Mary MacKillop, was a woman, just as we should draw inspiration, too, from the fact that the liturgy for her beatification Mass, which was held at the typically Australian, quasi-sacred site of Randwick Racecourse in January 1995 with 170 000 in attendance, was devised principally by a woman, Dr Carmel Pilcher, and included significant references to Aboriginal spirituality.

Chris McGillion reported it in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Pope John Paul II's Mass at Randwick Racecourse last night was arguably the most significant religious event in this country in the past 200 years. But most of us won't see it for what it was for maybe 20 years. Its significance owes less to the beatification of Mother Mary MacKillop than it does to the Aborigines' smoking ceremony. When the Pope visited Australia in 1986 he told Aboriginal leaders that 'the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life'. Most people interpreted that in strictly social justice terms. Perhaps that is what the Pope intended. But within 12 months of

the Papal visit, a handful of priests had begun incorporating Aboriginal ritual into their Catholic ritual. The smoking ceremony—a purification ritual among Aboriginal tribes which draws on the key role of fire in their social and religious life—was one of the chief imports.

Significantly, McGillion went on, ‘In order to perform the smoking ceremony last night the idea had first to be approved by the local hierarchy and then a written case had to be submitted to the guardians of liturgical correctness in Rome. The idea of including the smoking ceremony passed both hurdles without fuss.’⁴ In fact, Curial objections were over-ridden when they discovered that its inclusion had been approved by the Papal Master of Ceremonies in the Vatican. The *Herald’s* reporter continued:

The keen observer at the Randwick Mass, would have seen that this ancient ritual actually substituted for the penitential rite (itself a prayer of purification in which the worshippers acknowledge their sins before each other and before God to prepare themselves for the coming of Christ in the Eucharist). This is extremely significant for two reasons. First, it means that instead of trying to be some sort of substitute for Aboriginal culture, the Catholic faith is to find its place within it. Enculturation, as this is known, is not new. But whereas in the past among Aborigines it was largely conducted on the fringes of the Church and out of the public spotlight, it now bears the imprimatur of the Pope.

Second, and more importantly, last night’s breakthrough signifies the Church’s acknowledgment that it has much to learn from Aboriginal culture and spirituality. Indeed, the smoking ceremony was a dramatic way of introducing a distinctly Australian spirituality which draws heavily on the Aboriginal attachment to land and acknowledges the acute sense of the

physical elements—soil, sun, sea—buried deep in the Australian psyche.

This commentary carries implications for the wider secular society as well as, specifically, for Catholics. A society whose political leadership finds it impossible to discover the generosity of spirit to acknowledge the depth of the wrongs done to Aboriginal Australians as a result of two centuries of white immigration and to apologise for them (notwithstanding that this would be a legitimate and genuinely human thing to do), or which can attack so bitterly, *Bringing Them Home*, the report of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on the question of the ‘stolen generations’ of Aboriginal children, or which can be so harsh in its attitudes towards asylum seekers, is a society which has lost its moral way. A role for Catholicism—and for its public liturgical practice—is to re-discover that way for all of Australia, both secular and religious. And then to demonstrate it publicly.

Our liturgy can—like the society within which it occurs—surely never be definitive. If, as the Second Vatican Council documents assert, the faithful should ‘take part knowingly, actively, fruitfully’; if ‘the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity . . . rather, she respects and fosters the spiritual adornments and gifts of the various races and peoples’; if the faithful are to ‘grasp by deed what they hold by creed’; then it follows irrevocably that the liturgical signs and rituals cannot but be diverse in a country like ours.

One example will show the scale of that challenge. In the Sydney parish of Smithfield, Catholics represent over 45 per cent of the total population, almost twice the national average; furthermore, almost 50 per cent of them were born outside Australia, compared with 28 per cent for the nation as a whole. To weld them into a coherent family, even a secular one—let alone a religious one—through their liturgy, is a formidable task.

One contemporary commentator on the Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* declared,

Worship is the metabolism of the Christian life. In the liturgy, through the Word of God and the sacraments, the Church receives the grace of God by which she lives; in the liturgy, through prayer and sacrificial action, she offers herself to God for His service in the world.⁵

Utilising that metabolism (to sustain the physiological analogy) is a complex, demanding and dynamic responsibility.

With the Lutheran Reformation there came an enormous change in the cultural understanding and practice of European Christianity. The Second Vatican Council essentially completed that Reformation, so the 20th-century Lutheranism of Catholicism, especially in the affirmation of the significance of individual conscience and the widespread use of a vernacular liturgy, offers enormous opportunities—though, artistically, they have been essentially ignored, or poorly communicated to our finest creative spirits (leaving the field to those with skimpy gifts). In Australia, therefore, our creative people need to come to terms with a historically comparable question: whether or not to use (or ‘appropriate’, as some prefer to term it) Aboriginal elements in their artistic work—again, for secular or sacred purposes. That MacKillop liturgy appears to have given the creative nation a wonderfully important lead in finding honest and imaginative answers to that conundrum.

The liturgy is—far more than Wagner imagined and sought for his music—a complete and universal work of art. It is, however, emphatically not the exclusive property of Official Rome. The participants should not, according to the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, ‘be there as strangers or silent spectators’, but rather ‘the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamation, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures,

and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence'.⁶ In Australia, it has to be said, the effect of the Council has been lamentable in many respects, especially with art and music.

When I re-read the anthologies of Australian religious poetry which Les Murray and Kevin Hart have compiled, I am again struck by the huge contrast between what we habitually say in our liturgy and what we *could* say. We are, largely, a literate society, but we need poetry to strip away the 'coating behind the eye', as James McAuley described aridity of the soul.

We must also surround ourselves with the finest attainable Australian art. The Council described the fine arts as 'among the noblest expressions of human genius' and also significantly declared that the 'Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her own; she has admitted fashions from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples and the needs of various rites'. It also affirmed the belief that 'the number (of sacred images) should be moderate and their relative location should reflect the right order'. The 16th-century reformers, notwithstanding their own zealotry and destructive excesses, were rightly concerned by a Golden-Calf-like idolatry among their contemporary Catholics. Some of this survives, even in Australia, with near-worship of relics (as the 2002 tour of the bones of St Therese revealed). We need to follow the rigorous precepts and creative possibilities offered by the Council.

The Council further declared—vain hope that it seems to have remained, at least in Australia—that 'during their philosophical and theological studies, clerics are to be taught about the history and development of sacred art, and about the sound principles underlying the production of its works'. The vexed history of our Blake Prize, with its schism between those who wanted pious art and those seeking a spiritual artistic expression, shows the importance of that sort of education and commitment to the deepest aesthetic and moral principles. Some of the

pictures of the Blake's earliest years are among the finest in Australia's artistic treasury; more recently, it has attracted the banal, the platitudinous, the mediocre—all to be rigorously excluded from our liturgical space, though commonly we fail in that requirement.

ART AND EXPERIENCE

If much of the visual art and architecture deployed for religious purposes in Australia has been uninspired, post-Conciliar music has, mostly, been execrable. Its texts have, largely, been insipid and halting, its music tawdry. The parallel tragedy is that, in Australian secular education, music has been so unforgivably neglected—and taste thereby so degraded and rudimentary—that one cannot reasonably expect anything better in our churches. Without education people are doomed to be stuck in their adolescent enthusiasms. Listen to music on the radio and then step into an Australian church: what you hear from both is mostly derivative, false to our own selves and limping in its attainment.

As an edifying contrast, go to Germany and hear—in both Protestant and Catholic churches—music which splendidly reflects the Lutheran chorale tradition; or cross the Rhine into France and hear the harmony and flow of the music follow the timbre of that language. Australia has yet to develop anything comparably authentic. We must discard the imported, the crass, the false; we must encourage our own finest musicians, not the composers *manqué*. As the splendid, if unpretentious, achievement of Richard Connolly and James McAuley shows (inspired in the 1960s by Frs Roger Pryke and Ted Kennedy), it *can* be done admirably. Nigel Butterley's noble 1960s hymn, *Hail, True Victim* and Moya Henderson's lovely recent motet, *In Paradisum* (written for her brother's funeral), emphasise my point. Good

liturgy follows from good music no less than from poetic language.

If science and religion have, throughout the 20th century (and even earlier), been at each other's throats, or at least kept a suspicious and sullen distance, that schism should be of particular significance to this country. After all, European Australia was a product of the Enlightenment, of the urge to test the geographical philosophers' notions about the great undiscovered South Land. Captain Cook's expedition was, in truth, a voyage of scientific discovery. Sent to observe the transit of Venus from a Pacific Ocean vantage point, he had with him on the *Endeavour* a substantial intellectual complement in Joseph Banks, Daniel Solander and their seven colleagues and assistants.

When they reached this continent, they encountered a biologist's paradise, an *El Dorado* of entirely new plants and animals. What they brought back to London, several decades before Darwin even began to think about evolution, played an important part in preparing scientific European minds for what Darwin would propose. In several respects, therefore, the outcome of Cook's voyage was an example of Hamlet's wisdom: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' With our history, we should strive to sustain the open-mindedness which that implies.

That scientific beginning has exerted some influence on the Australian psyche, though it is probably mostly subconscious. The harshness of our natural world, with its droughts, floods and bushfires, has affected our temperament enormously, in ways which we have yet to acknowledge adequately. Like the materialist impulse of the gold rushes, it has bred a pragmatic and prosaic Australian who is now largely indifferent to poetry, abstract thinking and artistic creativity: to be admired and valued, our skills must be utilitarian. This is not a rich anthropological landscape for old European religion and liturgy; it is redeemed, though, by our concomitant suspicion of authority,

our unwillingness to be fenced in. After all, fences of the personality ought to be as readily swept away as those of the landscape.

This leads us to be misunderstood (even, at times, by ourselves). Unlike many people in other societies who take themselves, as well as their work, extremely seriously, Australians (though every bit as professionally skilled and self-demanding) tend not to take *themselves* terribly seriously. As clippers of tall poppies, as cynics about police, judges and politicians, we are suspicious of the exercise of authority. This is a nettlesome problem for Vatican Curialists: they are the inheritors of a long Imperial tradition from both Roman Empires, from the medieval and Renaissance princes and potentates. That is why the notorious and anti-democratic *Statement of Conclusions*, which was forced upon the Australian bishops by the Vatican in 1998, was so egregiously ill-judged, particularly with its doctrinaire attitude to the liturgical formalities of Reconciliation and its insistence that liturgical ‘practices foreign to the tradition of the Roman Rite are not to be introduced on the private initiative of priests’, and that ‘any unauthorised changes, while perhaps well-intentioned, are nevertheless misguided’.

Back in the 1950s, when we Australians still lived as if the Lateran and Tridentine Councils occurred only yesterday—when the scientific and educational revolution had hardly affected us, when we still suffered from a pervasive cultural and religious cringe, when we ignored or suppressed everything Aboriginal, when we had little care for the natural world or love of our unique landscape, when we sought to subordinate what we disapproved of—we could avoid, or thought that we could avoid, coming to terms with our deepest spirituality and what we needed to understand and do in order to give authentic expression to our own Australian appreciation of the numinous and transcendental.

We felt, in our unenlightened youth—with a triumphalist religious complacency which reflected our political smugness in the misapprehended certitudes of the British Empire—that little more was needed than mass tribal demonstrations and fastidious, pedantic rubric.

Those days of innocence and ignorance should be long behind us, though the behaviour of Church ‘authorities’, both at home and in Rome, indicates that they have yet to learn the lesson of democratic Australia. Some members of the wider hierarchy must be credited with showing signs of recognising contemporary reality, however. Early in 2002, as part of an address on *Evangelising the Young* given to the Symposium of European bishops, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor (Archbishop of Westminster) said,

We all live in societies which exhibit the symptoms—to varying degrees admittedly—of a post-modern culture. The old consensus is gone . . . old certainties are questioned . . . truth is no longer received . . . your truth is yours, mine is mine . . . [it is] the logic of consumption . . . [with post-modernism] we are talking about a culture increasingly dominated by choice, personal preference and immediacy.

All of these phenomena are at profound odds with the essential concerns of religion. That plethora of choice, of material riches, is no satisfaction. We need more: as John Carroll put it, in the subtitle to his recent book, *The Western Dreaming*, ‘The Western world is dying for want of a story’. Carroll is most taken with the revelation narrative of the journey to Emmaus in St Luke’s Gospel. ‘If the story is told in the right way,’ he writes, ‘then the very foundations of being may be illuminated by the light of Truth. That is what culture does. It may be the thing that saves, that taps the sacred rage.’⁸ He elaborated this point:

The Western world is in the process of being thrown back onto its deepest resources. The stories are close by, ready to lift us out of our lethargy. Some have unwittingly found them, their lives driven, as it were, by a hidden god or demon. Even they, however, the fortunate ones, would gain a poise and a fortitude if they knew. For the rest, it is a question of life itself. The spirit cannot breathe without story. It sinks to a whimper, deflating its housing characters and condemning them to psychopathology—literally, disease of the soul. So it is for the young in the contemporary West—teenagers, those in their twenties, the hope and pride of their societies—and with them swathes of their seemingly more assured elders. A malaise holds them in thrall, struggling to live in the present without vision of any future, or connection to even the organic tissue of being, their own personal past.

Such a story is essential to our communal spirit, because we are essentially communal people. It can validly be told through the ceremonial of a gripping liturgy. Murphy-O'Connor recognised that important truth, too, seeing community as central to the challenge for the Church to regain the young; for all its virtues, he saw post-modernism as a threat to that communal sense. He quoted John Paul II who wrote that we need to promote a spirituality of communion that ‘implies an ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother and sister who has received it directly, but also as a gift for me’.

Our challenge in Australia—while achieving a better melding of the sacred and the secular aspects of our nation (an ambition, I suspect, of the ‘Green Movement’ also, with its appeal to the young)—is to synthesise our own artistically elevated expression of that deepest sense of ourselves, the magnificence of the world and the immensity of the universe.

5 | POPULAR CULTURE'S NEW HIGH PRIESTS

Juliette Hughes

There is a photograph of a little girl at her First Communion. I can recognise her face because her eyes and nose have not changed much, even in 47 years. Her dress is short and ivory-white, a somewhat old-fashioned colour for the times. I cannot remember what she was thinking of the sacrament she was about to receive, but I do remember she was quite disappointed that her simple dress was not as amply petticoated or as blue-white as the floor-length paper-nylon frothinesses of some of her classmates. They billowed into the First Communicants' front pews as miniature brides, their little crinolines fashioned from the latest ideas in the women's magazines of 1956.

The boys were not noticed much—well-scrubbed faces and slicked-down hair and dark suits were about it, unless you were to look beyond the altar rails and see their slightly older brothers bedizened in lacey cassocks, swinging censers and holding the communion plate firmly under the chins of the communicants. It was very important not to let the host touch your teeth; that

was disrespect to the body of Our Lord and, therefore, a sin. If the wafer stuck to the roof of your dry, fasting mouth, you were not—repeat not—to attempt to scrape Him away with your impudent finger. Only a priest could do that.

FASHION LEADS, MORALITY FOLLOWS

So we took our fashions of the quiescent 1950s, before the ruckus caused by the Second Vatican Council a decade later, up to the very altar rails where, as Catholic women, we still remain halted at the beginning of the 21st century. The Church's main concern was to cover the body modestly, and fashion's concern has always been to display it to best advantage. But there is an enormous gulf between the daring décolletés of the fifties, the miniskirts of the sixties, and the assumptions about sexual activity that imbue the most ordinary advertisements for shoes, clothes and cosmetics in magazines, on TV and on billboards now. These days the fashion industry mines Catholicism for its aesthetic, and its language is used for fun and profit—as with the New York label, *Imitation of Christ*, and the Italian brand name, *Jesus jeans*.

While fashion played with our surfaces, the Church was ever working in our depths, fighting its war against the flesh. To own a bikini, we were told by the nuns in the early '60s, was not only to commit the sin of immodesty, but to be an occasion of sin to men. It would have been easy to assume that the only sin that was important was unchastity. The sacraments, said the catechism, were outward signs of inward grace, but a bikini, said Mother Basil to our Form Three in 1964, was an outward sign of inward disgrace. Later this kind of experience became material for entertainment. Catholics, lapsed and practising, flocked to shows such as *Once a Catholic* to laugh (often angrily) about our upbringing: 20 years after what was supposed to have been our formation in a two-thousand-year-old tradition, this was a

potent sign of the distance that had grown between us and the authority figures of the Church.

Up to the 1960s, it was still possible to say that the morals promulgated by the Church were very much those of the wider culture when, until a generation ago, the fate of an unmarried mother was to be shamed, masturbation was treated as a behavioural disorder, *de factos* were ostracised and gays persecuted and even imprisoned. The greatest foes of the Church in those days were Communism and unchastity; it was possible to conclude that a majority of Australians thought the same, since they kept voting Bob Menzies back into government and were content to keep abortion and male homosexuality illegal.

But there were changes blowing through the Church and all our lives. The Second Vatican Council would, under the genial aegis of John XXIII (a pope who looked as though he read a few newspapers and enjoyed life a bit), open a door for a while, and while that door was open, a good deal of a rapidly changing popular culture flowed in from outside the Church. The Church changed as the culture changed; the two things were connected, but messily, unevenly. When change occurred outside, it happened inside as well, brought in by the same people who had received the teachings of the Church quite unquestioningly before. But the effect on the Church was similar to the effect on many households as a new generation rejected obedience, purity and the need for regular Mass attendance: discussions became heated, positions were taken, revised and retaken.

In the end, the Church changed many outward signs, some not for the better. There was terrible vandalism done to churches as pipe organs were tossed out, old high altars dismantled to become landfill. The damage was comparable to the destruction of many examples of Australia's beautiful Victorian and Federation architecture—a destruction that was going on at pretty much the same pace, as iron lace was pulled off verandahs and balconies and replaced with ugly wrought iron, and graceful

wooden frame windows became simply functional aluminium ones. As in the Catholic (never Anglican, for they are far too appreciative of the need for beauty over comfort) churches, everyone was covering beautiful wooden floors with that decorating mistake of the 1960s, fitted carpet, although churches did balk at the shagpile horrors of the 1970s. But the outward signs of inward confusion were all there. The Church is getting more comfortable, like your lounge-room, said the new furnishings; sit on the floor and play guitars if you want, ran the message.

One message that hasn't really filtered through to the broader culture over the last 30 years is the change in clerical dress, although the television series *Ballykissangel* occasionally allowed young Father to wear casual clothes. European priests are much more likely to be in clerical garb, particularly as they get close to ground zero in Rome. I have not seen a soutane worn in an ordinary Melbourne parish since the 1970s, although St Patrick's cathedral still has a few neat, youngish chaps black-swanning around, ready to throw on a cassock at a moment's notice in case a sudden exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is required. They are known to the impious as 'The Spice Girls'.

Nuns have been treated somewhat differently from priests in the media. In the real world they have become invisible, as all middle-aged women do, since doffing their ancient habits. Enclosed orders might still keep the traditional wear, but the religious sisters who now engage with the world, often in a courageous and critical way, are dressed much the same as a middle-class grandmother. It is still rare, however, to see nuns portrayed in movies as they really dress now. In *Dead Man Walking*, Susan Sarandon, as Sister Helen Prejean, wore simple modern clothes, and at formal times, a modernised habit. *Dead Man Walking*, of course, is based on actual events, and Prejean is an actual nun. By contrast, the movie *Sister Act* and its sequel, *Sister Act II*, are entirely creations of popular culture. While their

subplots carry a very simple message of the Catholic Church finding relevance to people's lives by getting into the gritty pop culture, both movies have Whoopi Goldberg floridly bewimped and berosaried along with the other fake nuns. Movie producers find it much more convenient to show an historic stereotype of nuns than to explore their real jobs, for such an exercise might end up having to be subtle.

As lay people we found that aspects of the Church kept changing, particularly the liturgy. The shift from solemn hymns to popular varieties was a definite loss, and it was a pity that the Latin Mass became the property of fundamentalists. But for a while it was exciting to be young and Catholic because, while the Second Vatican Council was going on between 1962 and 1965, you started to think that the world was a good place, full of hope. The ban on contraception was going to be relaxed and would spearhead a whole new world of positive change—and we were going to be the ones to benefit. Who knew what might happen next? Priests might marry, for heaven's sake! As we grew we found that God was not only to be found in the Church, or even in our prayers: God was showing up everywhere. If you are not a convinced atheist, it is very hard to find a place where God isn't.

Not everyone would agree with that last sentence, and some would reject it. In this commentary I am very aware that one person's view of a culture is, in the end, only one view. And now the culture I inhabit has in living memory become a great polymorph, a myriad-aspected thing that is in constant struggle to define itself, so that I must take a foothold on something and work from it, or remain a gobsmacked observer, unable to synthesise anything under an unending avalanche of new things to include. That gives a filter, and some things must be missed perforce, but there are filters with very narrow meshes, which I will be looking at for what they allow through. An observer may

change the event by the very act of observation, but the event surely does change the observer.

My standpoint is of a cradle Catholic who still goes to Mass, but who has great difficulties with what has happened to Catholicism's attempt in the 1960s at opening up to the world and the way people actually live their lives. Many middle-aged Catholics live as I do, in the world and of it in many ways. Western culture's freedoms have sharpened our perceptions of the Church's limitations, but the converse is also true. Resistance to some things in popular culture comes as part of our Catholic equipment: a conscience alive to injustice, selfishness, exploitation and materialism. So we reject pornography because it exploits, not because we think that sex outside marriage is a sin. And the sense of reverence for all human life that was instilled in us is more likely to be expressed in opposition to racism and capital punishment than to contraception or even abortion. Rigour was the key. We were all trained to be suspicious of our initial reactions to stimuli that might be temptations. But it would be vacuous to ascribe all virtue in public life to a Catholic upbringing. One of the key documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), which was released in 1965, said that revelation is ongoing; God is not limited to one tradition. Catholics would no longer be apart from the culture that they inhabit.

John Langan, a Jesuit priest and writer, in *Political Tasks, Political Hopes* (1986), said that what is most remarkable about this document is the way it expresses 'a moment of hope and desire', reflecting a time of 'supreme fulfilment and aspiration' that nearly all those who helped shape the conciliar age in Catholicism had lived through. But it was also and equally a moment, he insisted, that spoke to believers and nonbelievers around the world of 'the extraordinary revitalisation of an institution long perceived as obdurate in its rejection of the

central features of modern culture and in its continuing embrace of antiquated notions in theology, in philosophy, in the social sciences, and in political action’.

What the Church offered, however, was becoming harder to define. For those of us still going to Mass, but not necessarily agreeing with everything the Church taught, it was like standing with one foot on either side of a widening chasm. The contortions required of the Catholic who also participated fully in the culture were getting more and more strenuous. But we kept going back for the Eucharist; it was surely not the encyclicals that called us.

Teilhard de Chardin, the French philosopher, palaeontologist, and Jesuit priest, had made an extraordinary contribution to helping with this challenge and had been firmly suppressed for his pains during the 1940s and 1950s. He died in obscurity and rejection a year before my classmates and I fronted up to take First Communion. Chardin made it intellectually feasible to believe in both God and evolution, and his theories went beyond the physical world to the spiritual, in ways that foresaw the global culture that we now participate in, that develops with and through us, and to which the official Church is merely one contributor. Perhaps the formation of people is now as much dependent on the choices they make from what the general culture has on offer as it is on their stated choice of belief system.

CULTURE'S MIXED OFFERINGS

In 2002 the radio station Triple M Melbourne announced a competition entitled ‘Indecent Proposal’. The announcement on the website ran thus:

On Valentine’s Day in the Morning Madhouse the topic of conversation with many listeners and couples was Indecent Proposal style: whether they’d let their partner or be willing themselves to sleep

with a stranger for all sorts of amounts under \$100,000 . . . which, given the moral dilemma it poses, really took the Madhouse team by surprise.

So the Morning Madhouse have decided to put Indecent Proposal to the test and put up the cash to a couple who are willing to push the boundaries of their relationship as they now know it and let either partner sleep with a member of the opposite sex, a complete stranger.

Entry forms and conditions are available . . . basically we want to know for what amount of money less than \$100,000 you'd be willing to do it and what 'relationship style' you've got to lose . . .

Triple M's Indecent Proposal, Melbourne's Ultimate Moral Dilemma.

The Morning Madhouse had three presenters. One of them, Rachel Corbett, walked out of the studio when the competition was being advertised by her colleagues, saying it was 'tacky'. It was a surprise, and the consensus was that she was 'brave' to take such a 'risky' stand. The risk was her career, but many people called up and emailed to support her. The competition fizzled out: only two couples went through the intense screening process, which threatened polygraph tests and DNA samples, presumably to make sure that the act that was promised had taken place. Then one couple withdrew, leaving the field to a pair who had valued their fidelity at \$45 000. The 'complete stranger' never eventuated: the station put out a later statement saying, in effect, that it had been bluffing, that no sex act was in fact demanded or had taken place, but there was a strange feeling around Melbourne pop radio for a while afterwards. Something had been won—or lost, depending on how you look at it.

Where Rachel Corbett's courage was formed remains a question. The answers she gives about her beliefs on the Triple M website reveal a girl who nominates her father as her hero, and who summarises her beliefs as 'Everything happens for a

reason' and 'What goes around comes around'. Desk-calendar stuff. But the desk calendars that bear exhortations and comforts to us are a healthy industry. People will keep buying daily reminders of the need for hope, courage and hard work, of the desirability of self-esteem, the rewards to be gained from kindness to others, and so on. It is a morality without obedience—post-modern girls do not 'do' obedience unless it is for fun in a sex game, in which they may well not be the subservient one.

So in our culture, virtues need to be rationalised by popular, even fashionable consensus, not commanded by God. Chastity in this dispensation is equated with fidelity, which is about loyalty, rather than continence, which is much more difficult to justify if there is not a sense of one's body being a temple of the Holy Ghost.

Of course, officially in Catholic teaching, ludicrous as it sounds to a 21st-century non-fundamentalist, that is still the case, however many light-years it is from how people really live and love. The Church was not merely demanding virginity before marriage: the genitalia of the unmarried had to be kept in suspended animation if their owners were not to be in constant sin and in danger of divine retribution if they died unabsolved.

Psychology was informing Catholics through diverse ways that this attitude was not only unattainable, but unhealthy. The Vatican put its fingers in its ears, where they have remained, despite the clamour of lay Catholics for a hearing. Adopting this position meant the Vatican could only act as an extreme in the public argument, and Catholics were left to feel transgressive and rebellious when we also knew we were acting wisely and healthily. Increasingly, then, discussions about sex excluded God, unless you were talking about Hindu spirituality or those awful Catholic marriage manuals. Commonsense about sexual issues was more often to be found in the advice pages of magazines;

agony aunts kept up with psychological and sociological research and advised the lovelorn accordingly; television soap operas and movies brought a sympathetic perspective to human problems, frequently breaking new ground and encouraging tolerance.

But not all that has happened in the wider culture sexually is good news: the current rejection of continence wholesale as a concept, transferring its strictures solely to activities such as gluttony and sloth (and these only because they make you fat), has brought with it a huge disadvantage, in that there is very little limit to how grossly women can now be dealt with (and how far men tolerate assumptions about their own debasement in the process). There is scant dignity left to women in 21st-century popular culture. The struggle with women's portrayal as sex objects is far from over, and the new licence has made our objectification much cruder, even at times brutish—look at *MTV*, *V-Channel* or *ABC's Rage*, particularly at the rap and hip-hop videos. The British comedian Ali G and his gyrating harems may be ironic send-ups, but are hardly exaggerating: Busta Rhymes' rap song, 'Break Ya Neck' (shown at midafternoon on cable), has the usual herd of pretty young girls thrusting their groins at the camera, but also contains added refinements. There are several shots of Rhymes and his co-singer each being straddled by a squirming girl, surrounded by the gang and the harem. They are all fully clothed, which is why it gets onto TV, but the degradation of those girls is total in that they are disposable. When they tire, there are others waiting to take their place. At the end, the herd image is reinforced by some clever computer effects that show Rhymes charging a huge black mountain ram. (He wins, of course.)

Rap and hip-hop music convey an authentic voice that is difficult to control, and its angers and limitations have become a potent part of Australian youth culture, dependent as that culture is on American entertainment. Attempts to moderate or direct its energies are ineffectual. They tend to come either from

the religious Right or from the much quieter and less-heeded voice of feminism. One feminist, Ife Oshun, on the *About Rap* website, writes passionately:

So what's there to be said about the sexualization and blatant misogyny that runs rampant and unchecked in mainstream Rap today? What sort of personal values do little girls in our hip-hop nation develop when they are constantly bombarded by images of their future selves as little more than rumpshakers?

The Church is, in effect, mostly silent here. Whatever it does say (despite all the anti-lust rhetoric in its online teen magazines), has no effect on the financial success of rap music. There are plenty of Catholic boys all over the world buying the CDs and watching the big-booty videos on the music programs. There are tiny pockets of resistance, but they all come from a conservative perspective. US Franciscan Fr Stan Fortuna is part of the lucrative Christian popular music scene (the Newsboys, an Australian Christian rock group, outsold most secular bands in 2001, but are much better known in America). There are lots of pop, metal, rock and country bands catering to this market, but very little rap, which is telling, because it is still, despite the distortions and exploitations, the voice of the street. Fortuna has released two CDs, *Sacro Song One* and *Sacro Song Two* in an attempt to fill the gap, but Christian attempts at being cool are so often dreadful. The album includes a song about chastity entitled 'Zipper Zone', which will probably make it into a hall of some sort of fame one day when we all recover our composure. The answer to the question 'Why does the devil get all the good music?' is evident here. Most of these attempts to co-opt the forms of popular culture don't get anywhere near authenticity. Rock and pop were about us, our story, as we grew in the wider culture. And the Church opted out of that story in 1968.

SEX: THE GREAT DIVIDE

The Second Vatican Council was an attempt to open up the Church, to make it listen to its people and to the rest of the world, rather than just talk at both. But when the encyclical that banned the use among Catholics of artificial birth control—*Humanae Vitae*—was promulgated in 1968, rejecting enlightened perspectives and research brought from secular scientific culture by humanist psychologists, it signalled a turning away from the insights of *Gaudium et Spes*. These insights were not just an expression of trust that divine revelation was to be found everywhere, but an affirmation of what was already happening. Despite the Vatican backlash against this, Catholics have continued to look outside the Church for wisdom that was not available in the Church, even while still retaining their self-identification as ‘Catholic’. *Humanae Vitae*’s effect on most Australian Catholic people’s sexual practices was minimal—about as useful and effective as Nancy Reagan’s ‘Just Say No’ campaign to combat drugs in the 1980s.

A few worried individuals adopted the soul-and-body-wearying practices of ‘natural’ family planning techniques, comparable to being in constant IVF; the rest of the Catholic population, baby-boomers who had made love not war, kept taking the Pill, having vasectomies and abortions and divorces when these were necessary to their functioning, health or happiness—and kept turning up at the altar for the Eucharist, the one thing that the wider culture couldn’t give.

In turning its back on the sexual revolution, the Church left us alone to struggle with the real-life messiness: the realities of the moral questions. Guidance and encouragement were needed desperately from the Church, but it put itself out of the equation and left us to the mercies of vested and very destructive interests. The horror felt by some non-Christian, non-Western cultures at the licentiousness of Western culture could perhaps have been

moderated by a Church that fought for human dignity and genuinely free choices against the hard-core libertarianism sometimes thrust upon the young. A Catholic Church that regarded adult, consensual sexual expression as sacred—I'd like to see that!

It is probably safe to argue that our sexual morality is now taught and moderated mainly by the entertainment industry and its sibling, advertising. If the curriculum benefits us, it is only by chance. Advertising, that missionary of the merchants, conflates the icons of popular culture with religion. There is the recent campaign about a Magnum chocolate-coated ice-cream that comes in flavours named after the seven deadly sins; the 'Lust' version has a TV commercial highly referenced to the scene in the movie *Basic Instinct* where Sharon Stone's character kills a man with an icepick at the point of orgasm. In a culture where warm, loving sex is called 'vanilla', 'chocolate sex' becomes transgressive and risky, with its frisson of gluttony (the real social solecism being the risk of obesity) and therefore desirable.

Yet there are many virtues to be persuaded into by the wider culture, even as it invites prurience and voyeurism: like Channel Seven's ludicrous *Temptation Island*, Triple M's Ultimate Moral Dilemma was offered to us as a morality play, inviting judgment, the conflict of values and the testing of character. Other 'reality TV' shows layer the subject even more, testing a person's popularity as well as their ability to live up to their own stated expectations. *Big Brother* and *Survivor* have their contestants making alliances, forming relationships, only to undermine them, manipulating each other and their huge audiences. The voters tend to punish those seen as too sneaky or selfish. The power of judging others is a potent feeling for consumers not used to having much personal impact on things.

This argues that a largely unchurched Australia still carries its own moral values, but where do they come from now? Morality such as Rachel Corbett's 'what goes around comes

around' does not happen in a vacuum: there is ample support for such positions in the great world grocery shop of spiritual traditions. Bookshops bulge with self-improvement manuals, each one finding its target market: women who love too much; women repressing anger; men going through mid-life crisis; food and body shape concerns; money worries; abuse survival; addiction management—the list is large and various. The many faces of human pain and confusion may exceed its grasp, but not its reach.

However, the kind of ethics inherent in the self-help industry are somewhat athletic. Without an authority structure to enforce compliance, they, like the desk-calendar ethics, must persuade us by offering something to make us feel better. The talk is all about personal bests, public recognition, the utility of good behaviour, and not about sacrifice or obedience to divine will mediated through a church's authority to teach. The self-help industry gurus would say that all of this smacked of co-dependency and victim mentality, and they would be right. But in the time of joy and hope that marked the early 1960s, there was a nascent vision of sacredness and transcendence and communion operating in a completely healthy adult way.

PICKING THROUGH THE PIECES

There were advantages in the ways we were taught religion in the days when the Second Vatican Council was still churning out hope. There was, obviously, the examination of conscience, which gave a kind of detachment from your own instant response. If there was a price to pay in not always trusting your gut, there was a gain: one acquired a very good bullshit detector. The training was to make us conservative critics of a licentious world. We kept the tools and used them against what a growing public consciousness told us was wrong: injustice, racism, war, repression. We brought to the humanist universities what we

had learned in the Catholic schools. The humanist universities' insights into psychology, sociology and culture were then applied to our own lives. And we all, in our turn, influenced the wider culture. In the age of liberation and civil rights, we often left behind the dogma, but kept the spirit.

But while such liberal Catholics may resist part of the world—such as various oppressions, including those encouraged in the wider culture—they are not the only group to do so. Their contribution to the struggle may be significant, but, is not unique, except in that they often find they also come up against the Vatican and the increasing pressure of those counter-reformists who always feel beleaguered, no matter how ascendant their star in the Holy See.

If one feels particularly overwhelmed, one way of coping is to allow trusted authorities to filter what comes to one's attention in the maelstrom. We all must filter the information that daily beats down on us—not for nothing does meditation demand an emptying of the mind from distraction. But there are pockets of resistance to popular culture everywhere, even within the belly of the beast itself, as a cursory look at the Internet shows. And the things resisted are the things that are sought out, welcomed, by more liberal mindsets. Fundamentalists, whether Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Jewish, are certainly not afraid of the Internet, which they use to recruit members, publicise their views, and offer support and encouragement to far-flung fellow devotees.

Some such groups filter the wider culture very carefully, often opting for home-schooling to protect their children from contamination. *The Simpsons*, that inexhaustible mine of cultural reference, has Ned Flanders, the daggy Christian neighbour, protecting his two sons in the same way. Ned has cable television and happily states that he has over 200 channels blocked. His children's education and their playthings come from Christian commercial resources, whose eagle-eyed designers and product

developers trawl the wider culture for commodities that can be adapted for safe use by today's elect.

Ned's behaviour is no mere fiction: the *Simpsons'* creators are making a sharp observation. Just consider what the Internet *Catholic Family Catalog*, an American merchandiser to the devout, has on offer: 'Catholic' games and toys, including Catechism-based interactive computer games and CD-Roms, David and Goliath 'battle figures', a 'full armour of God' playset (based on a passage in Ephesians 6) that includes 'helmet, breastplate, shield, belt, sword, and shin guards' and a 'fully poseable' Jesus doll.

The range of the products is not surprising, nor is the taste—I have witnessed with my own eyes a bead curtain of Raphael's *Madonna* in Gaffney's, a wholesaler of pious items in Kew, Melbourne. There were other objects no doubt as extraordinary, but that one, and its artistic, semiotic, even spiritual implications, fascinated me most. Just the act of walking through Raphael's conception itself, coming from behind it, parting its fibres (as Teilhard de Chardin tells us, suffering parts the fibres so that God can infuse into us more), and those fibres mass-produced—are these intimations of the noosphere? (The noosphere is a concept originating in the amazingly prescient mind of Chardin, who imagined a universe of infinitely complex connections and interactions composed of countless individual consciousnesses linked by electronic communications.)

Tom Wolfe's collection of essays, *Hooking Up* (2000), talks about this in a paean to both Chardin and, oddly, Marshall McLuhan, a devout Catholic who, Wolfe claims, cribbed his whole theory of everything from poor Chardin's neglected noosphere, whose time is fast upon us.² What the fundamentalists like Ned Flanders or his real-life imitators don't realise is that trying to filter out the messages they don't want is itself playing the game. As McLuhan and Chardin warned,

we are too late: the medium is the message and you're soaking in it, baby!

Shortwave Radios are also offered in the *Catholic Family Catalog*. I wondered why, until I realised it was important to its pious clients to pick up broadcasts from the Vatican. But two items keep drawing my attention: the 'full armour of God' play set and the poseable Jesus doll. Posing Jesus is something all Christians do to greater or lesser extent. Saying 'Thy will be done' is a whole lot harder.

It is useful to refer to the passage in Ephesians 6:14–17 to compare its list with what is on offer in the first commercial adaptation:

Stand, therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.³

The picture of the play set shows grey plastic armour very similar to those kids' play sets sold to the less godly, except that on each item, there is emblazoned a large red cross. The shin guards are a bit of a worry, since they are an unconvincing replacement for the scriptural shoes. Can it be that the manufacturers have simply plonked a cross on a secular play set? And a question forms and remains: whom will the child fight? Perhaps he (it would be a boy: fundamentalists stick to gender signifiers pretty firmly) is expected to fight alone: 'Take that, Satan!' the little one pipes as he stabs at his own shadow.

Yes, the symbolism gets quite rich here—maybe one should inform the child protection authorities. And if there is another child similarly equipped, delicious possibilities arise of sectarian strife played out in the nursery. 'OK, Michael, we'll do St

Bartholomew's Day today.' 'Aww, Mum! Damian's making me be a Huguenot again!'

As for the Jesus doll, the symbolism of its full poseability overwhelms irony. The statue of the Sacred Heart that presided over my family's kitchen was stern of expression, yet we never doubted that its pious reference was to enormous love and sacrifice. This heart was not worn on a sleeve, but bang in the middle of the chest. Its stiff fragility meant one didn't play with it. That meant, too, that its immobility was reinforced. Something about immutability was suggested that was no bad thing to have in a concept of God. But a toy Jesus, a doll Jesus—this is a different matter altogether. Posing its head, arms, legs, bringing it into imaginative play, it becomes a thing that does whatever you want.

One might have thought this could worry the pious. It certainly worries some who don't claim piety but do hold that some significance needs to be attached to God that is independent of our small, sequential consciousnesses. Certainly we pray to God, and ask God for things but, most of all, we need to ask for the ability to know and accept God's will for us. That is, if we believe that God is anything more than an agency for providing us with worldly success. All the pop divas thank God for their Grammys. Their theology tells them that their prayers for success were obviously heard more than the prayers of the losers. Imagine Jesus jogging the arms of a workable majority of Grammy or Oscar voters, whispering in their inmost hearts: 'Not Madonna! Alicia Keys! Alicia Keys!' and, 'Anyone but Sean Penn!' A poseable toy Jesus is not an aid to piety; it is more a training in wish fulfilment.

MYSTERY RESURFACES

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.⁴

Tides return, as Matthew Arnold knew when he wrote these lines from his poem *Dover Beach* in 1867. Now in the early years of the 21st century, Arnold's sea is full again, but it carries much flotsam and jetsam that challenge our definitions of faith. Faith is a difficult thing to describe in a vacuum. Detach it from a tradition of orthodoxy, teaching authority and ordered hierarchically mediated revelation, and we are left with little to distinguish faith from belief, and little to distinguish belief from credulity. In such a climate, scepticism is reserved largely for established doctrines that may well deserve it, but the same keen critique is rarely applied to the myriad vehicles for credulity and superstition that are all around us.

There are ample definitions in dictionaries and certainly in catechisms, but the movie *Miracle on 34th Street* bobs up in the swirling eddies and gives us: 'Faith is believing in things that commonsense tells you not to.' And in *Keeping the Faith*, made 50 years later, Ed Norton—as that rare being: a trendy young priest in New York—tells his congregation that faith is a sort of hunch. And while that might apply very well indeed to Santa Claus, the doctrine of the Assumption, the Shroud of Turin or even the liquefying blood of St Januarius, it doesn't give a sense of what Matthew Arnold was grieving about: the loss of the seamless connection of his culture with Christianity.

Such a connection was something that Australia's Indigenous population had when their culture was their religion. They lived it; everything was contained in the Dreaming: their work, their recreation, their art, their language, their history were all

connected with their spirituality. We all pick up so much spiritual material from the culture around us now that it could be said we are headed back to the sea of faith, except that it is now a sea of hunches, wishes and good relationship advice.

Sometimes the sea casts up treasure, as any beachcomber knows, but while much of the stuff you find on a beach is fascinating, it is not always what you might want to pick up and take home. What kind of revelation, for instance, do we find in the culture around us? There is the kind of civic celebration that we have all come to expect: the secular liturgies such as the opening of Parliament and the ceremonies of Anzac Day, which has become more important with every passing year; and the liturgies of sport, seen particularly in tribal team allegiances and in Olympic opening and closing ceremonies.

Peter Corbett (no relation to Rachel), the eventual winning contestant on *Big Brother* in 2002, said during a discussion with his housemates that the Olympic opening ceremony ‘made him wake up to himself’. He was grieving the loss of his parents at the time and was drinking to drown the depression. The ceremony was a ritual of who we are as Australians—the sight of the pageantry was true liturgy for him, as it was for many. It acted as religious experience, and even seeing the athletes made him regret that he had not tried hard enough to be an athlete himself. Seen through an old Catholic filter, you could say (if somewhat patronisingly) that he had experienced repentance, spiritual uplift and a firm purpose of amendment.

The Olympic opening and closing ceremonies were a powerful reminder of who and what we are. And not just the ceremonies. When Cathy Freeman won her gold medal, she was carrying her whole people with her. If religion in its etymological roots is seen to tie people together, then her 400-metre win was a religious experience for everyone who saw it. Freeman was

more than a celebrity at that point: she had been temporarily raised to a higher level of consideration.

'Dulia' was the worship that the catechism told us should properly attach to a saint; 'hyper-dulia' was Our Lady's extra-special kind, while actual adoration was reserved only for God. Freeman reached hyper-dulia for a little while, as Our Cathy (Our Lady?).

Celebrity does that—it provides us with a Pantheon, an Olympus. We read the gossip about the famous, and their exploits are not dissimilar to the domestic difficulties of Jupiter and Juno, of Venus and Vulcan. Princess Diana was Juno, but wanted to be Venus. Bathed in hyper-dulia and just plain hype, she was the sacrificial victim, the patron saint of first wives, the goddess of rejection and glamour and aspiration. Since her death, there have been minor deities, but none near her clout. These include Ivana Trump, Jerry Hall, Liz Hurley, Nicole Kidman, but all these are strictly dulia types.

The new images and information constantly being generated might flood us, but certain themes are recurrent, and the main means by which a sense of the numinous (or mystery beyond rational explanation) is conveyed to ordinary people is horror. The horror genre confronts the rational mind by giving shape and word to deep fears. In better works of horror such as Stephen King's books, or even TV series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the moralities and spiritual needs of the characters are played out in a very informed arena. King is America: he reads and consumes and participates in that culture more fully than most people do in theirs. His best novels are very unsettling, full of the possibility of damnation as well as redemption.

Buffy commentary has become an industry in itself. The story, of a teenage girl with the power to be a slayer of vampires is, unlike the older Dracula and Hammer horror movies, fully in the present. Margaret Simons, in one of her much-more-than-gardening columns in *The Age*, wrote recently that she

often muses about possible Buffy plots while she is weeding. A priest friend of hers, she says, told her that that was, in fact, prayer.

Joss Whedon, the Buffy series' creator and overall director, brings in love (of course), death, spirituality, good, evil, sex, loyalty, betrayal, duty, self-sacrifice, and deals with these big themes in ironic and intelligently complex ways. Buffy is as close to religion as many people get nowadays and, for the most part, the viewers are in safe hands, at least aesthetically and philosophically. They will be forced to consider moral choices and take positions that are far from simple. Fundamentalists hate the series because it is not explicitly Judaeo-Christian in its approach, and its characters make the same sort of life choices that almost any group of early-twenties, middle-class Western people would make. There are lots of love affairs—not all of them heterosexual—but nothing in Buffy is sleazy, unless it has decided to consider sending up sleaziness.

The Center for Studies of New Religions site on the web, run by Massimo Introvigne, prominent Italian commentator on culture and comparative religion, has a whole section devoted to the vampire genre, and a good deal of that is about Buffy.⁵ Vampires and horror seize the attention of our culture because our psyche still holds atavistic fears of the dark. Horror lives there, and we visit to give a jolt to something, whether it be faith or credulity or superstition.

Many priests now preach to their congregations in various combinations of biblical scholarship and attempts to detect, analyse and synthesise something from contemporary literature/culture, to find a thread that pulls in the hearts of their congregations. But few do it well. When priests talk about social justice, they are much more comfortable, even eloquent; but the language of the encounter with God usually comes out as stumblingly from them as it does from the rest of us.

THE GODS ON OFFER

The religion teachers of the '60s, while seemingly comfortable with Communist threats to their person, were less confident about exposure of their belief systems to rigorous intellectual inquiry. A faith that could withstand rack and thumbscrews was feeble, it seemed, against a spot of Voltaire or Berkeley. So we were warned in our senior secondary years against doing Philosophy when we went to university, because it endangered faith. Science, on the whole, was fine. With Louis Pasteur and (rather daringly) Chardin, one was merely uncovering the wonders of God's creation. In my convent school, a chart depicting the order of creation in Genesis set beside the order of evolution was up there in the science lab.

But if the religious education faculties in the Australia of the time of the Second Vatican Council were reasonably comfortable with science, and rather uneasy with philosophy, there was absolutely no truck with the paranormal. This toughness, when twinned with openness to scientific inquiry and philosophical honesty, led to a rather healthy position that one could take. One's faith in the existence of God did not need props such as apparitions, relics or ignorance to keep alive. Such Catholics can sit comfortably next to James Randi as he debunks psychic charlatans. We sit less comfortably beside other Catholics who talk of mortal sin, the magisterium, the need for the priesthood to remain male and celibate, and mysteriously powerful.

Mystery breeds strange things, things that live under stones, and clerical paedophilia flourished there without challenge until that particular stone got rolled away. When, in May 2002, Richard Carleton interviewed Sydney's Catholic Archbishop George Pell on *60 Minutes*, it was troubling for many Catholics. The subject of the interview was his response to victims of clerical sexual abuse. Why was there such a disparity between what the victims wanted and what the Church was prepared to

offer? Offers of compensation were parsimonious and accompanied by threats that any attempt to pursue the matters through Australia's secular legal system would be 'strenuously defended'.

In practice, these strenuous defences concerned themselves more with getting off the hook on technicalities: how did one define the Catholic Church when one was trying to sue it for damages? It seemed that the Australian Catholic Church had no existence as a legal entity; its hierarchy didn't own anything you could distrain upon. The real estate, the bank accounts—all were owned by no-one and everyone. You could end up like Billy Connolly in *The Man Who Sued God* (where the Catholic representative was quite sympathetic, ironically enough). Except that Billy won; the movie, after all was only a bit of a fairytale.

The *60 Minutes* interview was almost as bad a moment for Archbishop Pell as the disastrous interview on the ABC's *Australian Story* had been for the Governor General, Peter Hollingworth. Hollingworth's situation had similarities with Pell's. Hollingworth had been the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, and his handling of a sexual abuse case was being questioned. Both men went on those programs willingly, confident that they were setting the story straight, telling it from their own viewpoint. That the reaction they got from the public was overwhelmingly negative proves that television does not always show you to the audience in the way you would like it to. The medium became again the message, no-one could hide from it.

The question that many of us asked was: why did the Church give itself permission to have lower standards of moral and intellectual rigour than those obtaining in the wider culture? Our Australian polity at least tries to be democratic; the Church is explicitly locked in dictatorial autocracy. Our Australian polity (however imperfectly) recognises the rights of women—there is at least a dialectical ground to work on. The Church, by contrast, actually forbids debate about women's position in its power

structures. Our popular culture has loosened the strictures over the private activities of one's own body, but the Church still designates all non-marital genital activity as gravely sinful, adding that all marital sexual actions must be open to conception. Unhappy with this? We apply to the wider culture.

It could be argued that as public understanding of moral dilemmas and personal predicaments became common currency in movies, soap operas and popular novels, attitudes changed. No-one is stoned for adultery in the West, or even designated as 'the guilty party' in divorce. We don't have the Church to thank for that.

Ending of the Church's authority in Catholics' personal lives, particularly their sexual lives, has paralleled a general muting of the spiritual Christian voice in the wider cultural conversation. The Christian Church can be heard confidently pronouncing on matters of bioethics, social welfare, human rights (even if it is conflicted and divided about the rights of women and children) but it has lost the ability to talk about God. As Glenn Robbins said, commenting on the Dalai Lama's Australian visit in May 2002 on Channel Ten's *The Panel*, there's a vacuum where Christianity used to be. The main organiser of the Dalai Lama's tour, Dr Alan Molloy, a Catholic (Western Buddhism seethes with current and ex-Catholics), would probably agree. On the eve of the tour, Molloy was quoted in a *Sunday Life* article as saying: 'If happiness were a car, a house, a job, the suburbs would be filled with enlightenment.' All the things that the adverts tell us give meaning to life. The Dalai Lama's aim, he says, is not to create more Buddhists, but to preach compassion and spiritual growth within the traditions he visits. The Dalai Lama is one of the positive things in the big sea of hunches, but there are other things that are less benign.

In the vast, multifarious potlatch of our culture, everything becomes relative; a law of the marketplace rules. The tendency is all about increase, acceleration, proliferation, and American

ideas gush into the landscape, bringing some good religious things, notably liturgical music (every city has its amateur gospel choirs, peopled mainly by agnostics, who know a good aesthetic when they see it), and quite a lot of horrible TV evangelists. But American ideas also include the gigantic secular entertainment and information industry, and this gets us daily, hourly, minutely, where we live; right where we live. Yet this juggernaut of secularism that can't even say 'Happy Christmas' (one must say 'Happy Holidays' in America so as not to offend—whom?) is seamed, saturated and soaked through with religiosity of the most crude, the most mechanistic kind imaginable.

So much of the supernatural is included in American culture, and we in Australia consume it, that there is a real danger that Australians are as demon-haunted as they. We buy angels, as lapel pins or greeting cards or calendars. We buy crystals, Native American dreamcatchers, and avidly watch films and TV programs filled with demons, aliens, witches, vampires and ghosts. There is little ambiguity or uncertainty in these dramas, no questioning about the authenticity of the experience. Yet *Scooby Doo*, the cartoon series detested by so many parents on Saturday mornings, is the antithesis of this. Every single manifestation of the supernatural is always unmasked at the end as being a fraud. The message to our kids is that there are no monsters under the bed. But the converse of this is the mechanistic nature of the miraculous, the spiritual, that we get in *Touched By An Angel* or even *The X-Files*.

The latter has as its mantra 'I Want To Believe', and though Dana Scully's ex-Catholic agnostic scientific debunking was supposed to balance the X-factor, the plots have loaded her rationalism way below the Plimsoll line. Scully's scepticism is now made empty, a denial of the obvious. In this dead literalism there is no restraint—the kind of restraint that still chills one in *Wuthering Heights*. When the narrator drags the wrist of the ghostly Cathy over the broken glass of the window sill, we are

really unsettled, as much by the fear that the narrator is having a terrible hallucination as the fear that Cathy's ghost is 'real'.

Late 20th-century and early 21st-century American cultural expressions bounce us straight into the numinous, with no correspondence entered into, and very little if any philosophical foreplay. Why is restraint so important? Perhaps it is because there is a point where words fail, where definitions only reduce, and perhaps that is what is going wrong: our Church in Australia has lost much of the silent awe that was a vehicle for religious experience. Maybe we are talking everything away. And when the tradition is gone, we are left without maps.

Neil Gaiman, an extraordinary English novelist now living in America, in *American Gods* (2001) puts in the mouth of one of his characters a statement that just as easily applies to Australia:

I can believe in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny and Marilyn Monroe and the Beatles and Elvis and Mr Ed. I believe that one day White Buffalo woman is going to come back and kick everyone's ass and that thousands of years ago in a former life I was a one-armed Siberian Shaman. I believe that there's a cat in a box somewhere who's alive and dead at the same time (although if they don't ever open the box to feed it it'll eventually just be two different kinds of dead) . . . I believe in a personal god who cares about me and worries and oversees everything I do. I believe in an impersonal god who set the universe in motion and went off to hang with her girlfriends and doesn't even know that I'm alive. I believe in an empty and godless universe of causal chaos, background noise and sheer blind luck. I believe that life is a game, life is a cruel joke, and that life is what happens when you're alive and that you might as well lie back and enjoy it.⁶

Gaiman's books are sensitive, moving through the dreams of our civilisation. He can allude to Schrödinger's cat as easily as Santa Claus. His premise, one that is used frequently by another

highly popular English writer, Terry Pratchett, is that gods are created by belief, and vanish when their believers do. It is the Tinkerbelle Principle: in *Peter Pan*, every time a child says it doesn't believe in fairies, one fairy dies. The Church was capable of admitting previous error: in the 1960s it tinkered away Limbo and a whole shopful of doubtful saints. I still remember the chagrin of a friend who had taken Philomena for her confirmation name, and the shock as Catholic family cars lost the St Christopher statuette from the dashboard. It has more difficulty admitting its errors now.

Unchurched, we are unsatisfied by the uncomfortable prospect of having no divinity, no transcendence; so the folktales, the archetypes of old have formed the basic material of fantasy, and this feeds the hunger. Now we make, or consume our own myths, consciously, and then we half-believe them.

If we are to see the fare available for consumption in popular entertainment as evidence of this need, the thirst for heaven, hell, gods and devils is never-ending. Hollywood has moved away from the reverential treatment of the Church that is found in those old black-and-white movies such as *The Bells of St Mary's*, *Going My Way* and *The Song of Bernadette*. But the more detached fare is no more sophisticated. *Stigmata*, *The Craft*, *End of Days*, *Dogma*—the supernatural movies keep on coming. The last four named all work in the arena of the Catholic Church and pit its power against occult forces. In each of them the Church is seen as, at best, benign and ineffectual and, at worst, deeply involved in what is wrong. The evil forces can be defeated only by a brave, well-intentioned outsider.

We see in popular culture a fascination amounting to obsession with the supernatural, the spiritual, the magical, the mysterious, the transcendent. But the Church does not engage with any of this and, in fact, is deeply suspicious of it. It may have stopped burning witches, but its attitude to what my 1950s school catechism called 'charms, omens, dreams and suchlike

fooleries' has not changed. Consequently, as with the Church's detachment from our sexual lives, it fails to engage meaningfully with our need for transcendence and the need for a felt encounter with God.

There is no way that the Church educates people in discernment about the kind of material they consume in popular culture. (In an interesting contrast, the then Archbishop of York, Dr David Hope, praised the ethics of the Harry Potter books and of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in July 2002, saying each brought spirituality into the lives of young people far more effectively than the Church of England was managing to do. Likewise Carey's successor, Archbishop Rowan Williams, can deplore the exploitation of children through the values much of the entertainment industry pitches to them but, at the same time, discriminate enough to appreciate that *The Simpsons* is actually a morality play in instalments.)⁷

In the meantime, *Star Wars* fans have started the Jedi religion, which is available (where else?) on the Net. Australians may have rejected the Church's authority over their personal lives, but they have not lost the dreaming, the need to reach out beyond themselves. And there are countless shelves in the spiritual supermarket for them to trawl through. Astrologers in publications of every kind, feng shui columns in women's magazines and in the *Herald Sun* Home supplement on Saturdays, crystals, Reiki, tarot, I Ching, runes, kabbalah, shamanic healing, Bach Flower remedies, Internet chain letters urging you to send this message to at least five other people in order to get good luck, *The Celestine Prophecies* (which most readers believe to be the history of an actual spiritual quest instead of what it is: an awful novel), channelling, dolphin therapy, wicca, scientology, Medjugorge, amulets, past-life recovery, rebirthing, creative visualisation, aura readings, palmistry—the list is as long as the vanity of human wishes. And so is the need to control one's life. Magic shops are

booming, fuelled by programs like *Charmed* or movies like *The Craft*.

In the interests of research, I decided to try a phone psychic, but my motives were not pure. There was a guilty little thrill of dabbling in the dark side, and the half-ashamed realisation that I actually wanted to do this naughty thing. Perhaps I would even be learning something. I studied the three pages of psychic ads in *Women's Day* and chose one with an ad that said, in effect, 'Don't tell us, we'll tell you.' The rate was not cheap: around \$5 a minute, charged to my phone bill. I soon learned that despite the advertisement's exhortation to 'say nothing', the actual technique is to draw out the customer to tell her (it is always her, I think) own story so that the 'psychic' can then say something along the lines of, 'You will have good news in six months' time about this thing.'

The psychic with whom I was talking fished for info with such phrases as: 'I feel that you have had a significant upheaval in your life in the past 12 to 18 months, one that perhaps left you financial problems.' The most likely scenario being trawled for here was marriage break-up; it's safe to punt on the possibility that a middle-aged woman ringing up will have relationship or financial problems. When I said no, this wasn't the case, but didn't expand, it caused a number of expensive silences.

It was patent that these highly popular services are for people who would in another age have gone to a pastor of some sort, perhaps even confession—and that's an important distinction to be made: between therapy and the sort of advice that brings in the numinous. In Australia we are well serviced with therapists, counsellors, self-help groups. There are plenty of proper psychological services available to troubled people, so why the success of the psychics?

Their customers want to feel that the force is with them, that magic or supernatural wisdom will give them a break. Some of the psychics offer curse-breaking, spells to cast to make money

or keep a lover interested. In the old days it was novenas, patron saints, although the personal classifieds in the *Herald Sun* still have entries thanking Saint Jude (patron of hopeless cases) for a favour. The fringe pieties of the Church bear a strong resemblance to the services offered in the spiritual marketplace. A transaction is entered into, and you sense divine intervention. There is a logical basis to such thinking: Saint Jude comes through with a cure or some money, and you pay him back with publicity. It's a simple transaction, one that recalls devout Irish Catholic mothers praying to Madonna statues, lighting candles: I give you praise, honour, in fact faith; 'now please do this thing for me'. Basic economics. It makes more sophisticated Christians very embarrassed about the prayer of petition. Some take the non-theistic way out, which translates as: there isn't really a personal God who answers prayers, just some vague divine fog that you try to crane up into while you appreciate the fine aesthetic and ethical tradition of Christianity in a comfortable, de-godded fashion.

The mechanistic pieties of the fundamentalists are the Janus face of atheism. Both believe in the material only, and neither can explain spirit in non-corporeal ways. The curious pilgrimage of the bones of St Therese of Lisieux around the world, visiting Australia in 2002, was an example of the need for physical connection, however irrational. Whatever was Therese had fled those pieces of bone many years ago. What was it about her skeletal remains, the dead discarded house of her soul, that made people want to go and look at them? Some Catholics, very conservative ones, are hooked on relics. There are, for instance, sites on the Internet devoted to the collection of relics in ways similar to those sites that deal with collecting celebrity paraphernalia—and, one suspects, for the same reason: the urge for contact, even at second, third or fourth hand, is the key.

The hierarchy of the Church, for the most part, has disengaged from such deeply held desires. It can still use excommunication,

of course, and the denial of the sacraments, to pull dissenters into line. That just such drastic action has been used against people who challenge the gender discrimination in the Church—as, for example, when Bishop Geoffrey Mayne, Catholic bishop to the Australian Defence Forces, in September 1998 refused communion to a woman parishioner in Canberra who publicly supported the ordination of women priests—but not against priest-paedophiles remains a scandal. Beyond that, however, the hierarchy has failed to respond to the signals in popular culture about the need for some kind of direct experience of God. And so we wander unguided, mapless for the most part, among the alternatives popular culture does have to offer.

Little girls front up to the altar for First Communion at my parish this year. They wear a variety of clothes, some in little midriff tops and bright colours. One or two are in white. They take the host in their hands and eat it, chewing the dry wafer. They at least are not afraid to touch it.

6 | HAS THE CHURCH A FUTURE? THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

Michael Mullins

In May 2002, Pope John Paul II condemned a range of celebrities, ranging from Britain's former 'Spice Girl' Victoria Beckham, to model Naomi Campbell and actors Jennifer Anniston and Catherine Zeta-Jones, for wearing crucifixes as fashion accessories. The practice, the Pope was reported as saying, contradicted 'the spirit of the Gospel'. Victoria Beckham's English soccer star husband, David Beckham, who was fond of sporting a diamond crucifix worth more than \$50 000, came in for special criticism. 'Is it right,' the Vatican statement asked, 'to spend thousands on a sacred symbol of Christianity and then in a non-Christian manner forget those who suffer and die from hunger in the world?'¹

The answer is probably not—the hesitancy in this answer is a concession to those who would regard the treasures of the Vatican in a world of desperately poor people as a similar, non-Christian, indulgence. But the issue here is that the question is raised at all in this context. What does it say about the

relationship between the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and those generations to whom celebrities such as the Beckhams are people to be admired, even emulated? If this illustration is any example, it says that this relationship is abrasive and that there is a gulf in understanding, if not an outright conflict, between the two.

This should be a concern for both parties: for young people who, at some stage in their lives, might see the need for the insights of religious practice to help them through personal tragedy or simply to supply some satisfying answers to questions about human destiny; particularly for the Church, the concern is because it needs the young to embrace its message simply to survive in the face of dwindling and ageing congregations.

Yet the Vatican continues to speak in terms of absolute truth to generations arguably suspicious about claims concerning the existence of such a thing. It demands total commitment from young people who, in most other areas of their lives, demonstrate a reluctance to commit to anything much at all. It offers ready-made answers and a lifelong identity to people more attuned to view reality as provisional and unfolding and for whom the answer to the question 'Who am I?' is a constantly negotiated, never fully redefined one. In its dealings with the young and their culture, the Church is dealing with much more than cheeky fashion statements and negligent moral sensibilities.

A POST-MODERN POTPOURRI

When it comes to the young, the Church is confronted with a way of viewing the world which it shows few signs of understanding and many of actually loathing. This is the world view commonly referred to as post-modernist. Post-modernism is hard to define, in part because it is a concept applied to a wide variety of disciplines, including art and literary criticism, architecture and sociology. Broadly, however, it signifies an approach

that rejects boundaries and rigid rules and prefers to dabble with a pastiche of styles, images and understandings; instead of genuflecting before what others claim to be fixed points of reference, with hard-and-fast rules and absolutes of any kind. Where chaos and incoherence are regrettable to many people, for post-modernists they are reasons for celebration. The world may be meaningless, the latter say, but let's not dwell on the subject or lament it or try to impose meaning where it won't adhere for long. Instead, let's go with the flow and try to make the most of it.

The effect of this world view can be seen in young people's habit of living their lives independently of structures of any kind. The Church is no exception. And what this suggests is that those who seek to offer religious and moral structures to the young simply fail to understand their perceptions and experience.

One doesn't have to embrace post-modernism as a theory or ideology in order to appreciate the pervasiveness of the world view it describes. In a 1996 article in the Australian journal of the National Association for Drama In Education (NADIE), an academic specialist in drama and sociolinguistics, John Carroll, wrote that young people increasingly inhabit a 'world of surface', as distinct from the world of depth of older generations. The nature of the individual is undergoing change, he argued, in which the young

reject the idea of one unitary self, one career path, one job for life, one definition of self, one gender division, one kind of drama, one notion of the body. This is a postmodern view of the decentralised self, one that is culturally constructed and continually recreated using the images of the new [global] media to provide role personas.²

Carroll seeks to expose a generational predisposition rather than a universal characteristic of each and every one of that generation's members. His comments echo what Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society*, argues is the wider cultural

consequence of the new era of instantaneous global communication—a radical transformation of perceptions of space and time that are fundamental to our understanding of human life. Writes Castells:

Localities become disembodied from their cultural, historical, geographic meaning, and reintegrated into functional networks, or into image collages, inducing a space of flows that substitutes for a space of planes. Time is erased [when] past, present and future can be programmed to interact with each other in the same message.³

The erase of time, in turn, leads to a heightened sense of ephemera or what has been called a ‘culture of moments’. In the new global communications age, people are no longer socialised into established roles and behaviours—indeed, these are considered a break on progress, an obstacle to coming up with ever more novel ways of doing things. Rather, they are encouraged to live in a present, understood as a chain of moments, constantly renegotiated to suit the circumstances of the instant.

The displacement of lived experience by the kind of vicarious amusement provided by a flow of images may already be contributing to a decline in religious practice in the West. Church services are repetitive and typically downright boring. This is especially the case for young people, whose attention spans have been shortened and attuned to the kind of rapid-fire entertainment provided by television, computer-based games and the Internet. But an image-induced disengagement from physical activity has far more profound consequences than discouraging people from attending church on Sunday. One such consequence is the erosion of traditional sources of social and psychological grounding and the impact this must have on religious identity.

Another consequence of this new instantaneous communications environment is historical amnesia. Memory no longer

serves as a resource for living and so it is forgotten or ignored. Religion, it should be noted, is essentially about memory. It seeks to convey absolute truths and eternal teachings about the good life. Through ritual great moments in the life of the faith community—the giving of divine laws, the coming into being of a people under God’s covenant, the sacrifice of Jesus for the salvation of the world—are recreated and their lessons renewed in each generation. But when the past has no value as a guide to the future, ritual observance no longer has a purpose, and so ritual itself has no power to enthrall.

In this brave new world, fashions change, trends and styles come and go, and the past becomes a recycling bin for reconfiguring new meanings. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the experience of Generation X—those people born between 1961 and 1981, and Generation Y—those born after 1981. And nowhere has it been given greater demonstration than in the life-in-progress of that quintessential Generation Xer, the pop star Madonna.

Madonna has caused a storm of controversy on numerous occasions over the past decade or more as she has played with, exploited, and assaulted the symbols older generations have revered. Back in 1989, for example, the video of her hit song *Like A Prayer* showed her in front of burning crosses apparently intent on seducing an actor in priestly garb. Because she is so thoroughly self-styled, and one of the most significant role models for young women in the past decade, Madonna’s antics have caught the attention of a large range of commentators. *New York Post* columnist, Ray Kerrison, once described her as ‘the quintessential symbol of the age: self-indulgent, sacrilegious, shameless, hollow’.⁴ However US music critic, Mort Allman, pointed out in an essay (in an undated issue of the Internet magazine *Sparks Online*) entitled, ‘Is Madonna Good Art?’ that there was something substantial in the ‘play between her coy

catholic accoutrements and choreographed sex princess dancing style'.⁵

Clearly the Vatican does not agree. After the release of the video of *Like a Prayer*, Pope John Paul II threatened to excommunicate Madonna if she performed the song in Rome during her Blonde Ambition tour. As far as the Church is concerned, Madonna violates all that is sacred. By contrast, to her fans Madonna is everything a post-modern girl could ever want to be. As Jeffrey Katzenberg, former chairman of Walt Disney Studios, once remarked, Madonna 'is always evolving: she never stands still. Every two years she comes up with a new look, a new way of presenting herself, a new attitude, a new act, and a new design. And every time it is successful.'⁶

Part of her attraction has been her perverse flirtation with the Catholic faith and symbols. Madonna sets out to exploit these in her performances but, at times, it seems she makes such a concerted effort to use religious symbols that they must hold significance for her, and her use of them seems to border on a kind of homage.

British Christian analyst of pop culture, Jock McGregor, from the Protestant evangelical tradition, writes for a website called *Facing the Challenge* (www.facingthechallenge.org), which aims to equip Christians to critique popular culture, particularly its post-modernist elements. *Facing the Challenge* takes as its theme the assertion that 'Truth matters'. One of McGregor's main contentions is that in the post-modern world there is 'no overarching truth, no single narrative'. According to him, Generations X and Y plunder existing traditions in order to create moments of truth. To them, the Bible represents one truth among many, not *the* truth.

In a commentary on Madonna, McGregor regarded her as highly significant because successive surveys have revealed that she is an important, at times the most important, role model for young women. McGregor argues that what matters to

Madonna is image, and not truth. He describes a telling moment in the film, *In Bed with Madonna*, which he believes reveals that she is a ‘victim of her own image’. In a warts-and-all sequence, Madonna declines an invitation to speak to her doctor off camera. Then boyfriend Warren Beatty comments: ‘Why would you say something if it’s off camera? What point is there in existing?’ Truth, he’s asserting, is always relative to image. In true post-modernist fashion, everything is in flux.

McGregor portrays Madonna’s stance as ‘playful indeterminacy’ in a society which has ‘lost one set of values and not yet found another’. In the world which Madonna inhabits, no-one knows truth. Everyone is resigned to ‘living [playfully] in his or her own image subculture’. McGregor regrets that it’s a ‘despairing sort of playfulness’, and equates it to ‘laughing in the face of emptiness’. To him, emptiness is nihilism, and it is part of a tradition of hostility to Christianity. McGregor’s Protestant tradition is not moved by suggestions of irony that bestow any religious significance on Madonna.⁷

By contrast, Tom Beaudoin sees Madonna—like other celebrity representatives of her generation, including Sinéad O’Connor, who once tore up a picture of the Pope in one of her music video clips—as potentially profoundly religious. Beaudoin, a thirty-something Catholic author and academic, is one of the few people who have attempted to study the religious culture of Generation X from the inside. His ground-breaking 1998 book, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, earned him a reputation in the United States as a theological spokesperson for his generation. In a February 2001 interview with the *National Catholic Reporter* in the US, Beaudoin referred to the belief of 19th-century English Catholic icon, Cardinal John Henry Newman, that ‘deep blasphemy can be evidence of an encounter with a deep truth’—what Newman called the paradox of our ‘intercommunion with divine faith and human corruption’.⁸

For Beaudoin, Generation X lives with this paradox. The emptiness of the age, he says, is not to be found in the apparent sacrilegious behaviour of pop stars—this can be seen as their reaction to the perceived hypocrisy of Church authorities or inauthenticity of Church teachings—but rather in the way institutional Churches try to relate to their young admirers.

To Beaudoin's generation, the Churches are largely, if not entirely, irrelevant. They fail to communicate truth to young people, because young people don't believe that doctrines and dogmas can represent any more than mere glimpses of the truth. According to Beaudoin, the truth which a Christian church *can* talk about, if it wants to, is that of brokenness. He told the *National Catholic Reporter* of a sermon to a largely Generation X audience in a Baptist church which had as its theme 'the brokenness of the church as a model for the brokenness of [their] lives'. The Xer who told Beaudoin about this sermon said: 'It wasn't Jesus I had a problem with. I've simply never heard a description of the church I could trust until I heard that sermon.'⁹

The clergy sex abuse scandal, and the manner in which the hierarchy reacted as it was played out in earnest throughout much of 2002, is likely to deepen this kind of scepticism young people harbour towards the Church and what it proclaims. After all, if the Church was not telling the truth—or at least the whole truth—about clergy who abused children, how can it claim to represent the truth? And if it can't, why bother with it at all?

CULTURES IN COLLISION

What critics such as Jock McGregor see as narcissistic or nihilistic is presented as distasteful by other Church leaders, including Catholic ones. They speak of the richness of the tradition of Christian art and music. They contrast it with what they regard as the inherently poor aesthetic value of youth culture which,

in their view, works against the promotion of religious values. The Archdiocese of Melbourne's then newly appointed head of Catholic Education, Monsignor Peter Elliott, for instance, gave an interview to *The Age* in 1997 in which he indicated that he found youth culture distasteful, if not evil. He went on to speak of its 'grunge and scunge' as the most significant obstacle to the spread of 'the richness and power of orthodox Catholicism'.¹⁰ In the same interview Elliott also predicted that 'an international Catholic revival was set to sweep across Australia'; six years later, we're still waiting for any sign that his prediction is correct.

Elliott's assessment of youth culture, nonetheless, brings to mind a centuries-old debate in Catholic missionary circles about the most appropriate way to promote the faith in the New World—a debate depicted with all its tragic impact in Roland Joffe's 1986 film, *The Mission*.

The Mission was about the rivalry between older-style missionaries who believed the indigenous peoples of South America had to adopt European culture along with the Christianity they were preaching to them, and the Jesuit missionaries who believed in a method that's now termed *inculturation*. The Jesuits' technique involved studying the culture of the Indians concerned (the Guarani) before presenting the Christian message in a form that harmonised as far as possible with it and so with their experience.

The more traditional missionaries had sought to convert the Guarani not only to Christianity, but also to the European cultural values from which Christianity had emerged. They saw that they had to 'civilise' the Indians. This would protect them from their own primitive, not to mention evil, culture. The Jesuits, by contrast, gained a foothold among the Guarani through music. They aroused their interest by singing hymns. Then they fascinated the Guarani with European musical instruments they produced. Eventually, the Indians were encouraged to use their natural talent for singing complex

harmonies as a form of catechesis or teaching. In time the Jesuits gained their trust and respect, and the Guarani became Christians without turning their backs completely on their own culture.

What the Jesuits depicted in this film had realised in the 17th century was that the way to the Indians' hearts and minds was through their music. In a somewhat similar manner, Beaudoin suggests that music is the obvious way for the Church to engage with young people today. Listening to music, he argues, is fundamentally a religious experience, 'and doing theology is reflection on religious experience'. It is possible, Beaudoin asserts, to respect their music and superimpose Christian symbols and tradition on it. This is an approach that contrasts sharply to that of Monsignor Elliott and others like him whose preference is to eliminate 'grunge and scunge' music in order to replace it with Church-sanctioned music and culture. This may be aesthetically pleasing—even a religious experience—for clergy and like-minded older generations. For young people it is more likely to be a turn-off.

Beaudoin's suggestion builds on the proven success of Protestant churches in attracting young people through music, including even Christian music that resembles 'grunge and scunge'. The Australian bishops' resident statistician, Bob Dixon, affirmed much the same thing in his analysis of the most recent National Church Life Survey figures quoted in Sydney's *Catholic Weekly* in May 2002. Dixon acknowledged the role of music in the success some of the Pentecostal churches are having in attracting young people. This, he added, was something the Catholic Church 'could look into'.¹¹

Beaudoin, however, goes further, by suggesting that music not only reflects truth, but needs to be considered as a form of truth—of authentic expression—to the young. That is, God may reveal himself to Generations X and Y through music, much more so than through the more common forms of Church

teaching and ritual. But this is a learning curve too few in the Church seem intent on climbing in any committed and insightful way.

GROWING UP WITH UNCERTAINTY

Madonna also gives dramatic expression to another characteristic of her generation: the embrace of values that don't fit together logically. Her match is often absurd, giving witness at one and the same time to both Christ and the anti-Christ. Likewise, the Beckhams' penchant for diamond crucifixes is a sign of their contradictory values. They want the trappings of celebrity and the affrontery of fashion, but they also want some of the things that go with the faith, like Catholic schooling for their son Brooklyn.

This kind of behaviour is something the Pope can't tolerate—the idea of people playing with the accoutrements of Catholicism without wholeheartedly committing themselves to the faith. It's hard for him to accept that something has replaced total commitment as the way in which Generations X and Y relate to ideologies and sets of beliefs. It's clearly not what the Pope and the hierarchy have in mind for young people, even if it might be in their interest to recognise that the fragments of a Catholic faith encountered in this behaviour may leave the door open to more serious religious commitment. What is significant is that young people do not take a stand *against* religious belief—as many of their elders did—even if they also don't take a determined stand *for* religious commitment. Their openness to it, however, shows itself in fascination with traditional forms rather than an interest in submitting unreservedly to Church teaching and models of behaviour.

Living within a variety of moral universes isn't easy. Many young people are wrestling with demons of all kinds and yet seeking to be happy. Divorce rates in the United States doubled

in the 1960s and 1970s and 40 per cent of Generation X Americans have now spent some time in a single-parent household. Thus, primary social institutions the Church promotes—such as the nuclear family—have failed many young people. Why, then, would they relate to such promotions? One result of the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family has been an intense attachment among young people to their peer group associations and a suspicion of permanent commitments or arguments that the latter are somehow the ideal to which all should seek to conform. The shifting intimate relationships one sees in high-rating prime time soap operas—and their real life equivalent in casual partnering arrangements—are closer to most young people's experience.

Another result of the complexity and uncertainty that young people face in the world is anxiety and depression—not to mention the kinds of harmful behaviours each gives rise to. Atlanta-based psychologist Robert Simmermon, commenting in the September 1999 edition of the online magazine, *Business Wire*, on the results of the Durex Global Sex Survey for that year, revealed an alarming downward trend in the age of first sexual experience. This, he suggested, was directly attributable to the amount of anxiety and fear experienced by teens on a daily basis. Similarly, in Australia, National Drug and Information Centre manager, Paul Dillon, told the *Weekend Australian* in July 2002 that his organisation is being asked to turn its attention to 14-year-olds as the age of initiation into the drug culture becomes younger.¹² Many of today's latchkey youth have been required to grow up much earlier than their parents. Many don't make it, as the rise in youth suicides in Australia in recent years sadly attests.

The anxious, restless quality of young people was commented on in the 1960s. In 1967 *Life Magazine* commissioned US sociologist, Daniel Bell, to write a series of articles on the state of American society, and in particular the discontent among

young people seemingly preoccupied with sex, drugs, rock and roll and protest. Bell argued that the particular generation of young people, the baby boomers, was the first to emerge into a world without fixed structures or reference points. He blamed consumer culture for its ‘hedonistic affirmation of sensory pleasure over the strictures of self denial imposed in the sphere of work and public responsibility’. The baby boomers, as one commentator on Bell’s observation put it, were ‘hungry for sensations without moral lessons but also given to passionate displays of sentiment grounded not in public commitments or collective responsibilities’.¹³ This tendency has been summed up, pejoratively, in the description of the baby boomers as the ‘Me Generation’. But the economic and social trends that contributed to this famed self-centredness have only accelerated in the experience of subsequent generations.

THE POPE’S SOLUTION

Pope John Paul II struck at the heart of the experience—and the world view it encourages—in his address to young people in Denver, Colorado, on the occasion of the 1993 World Youth Day gathering. People are increasingly ‘confused about what is right and what is wrong’, the Pope said and he expressed his sadness to think of young people ‘at the mercy of those with the power to create opinion and impose it on others’. He was speaking, at least in part, about celebrity role models such as pop stars and movie idols and sports personalities. The Pope added that he regretted that phrases such as ‘intrinsic good’ and ‘universally binding’ no longer have resonance. As a result, he told his audience, even human rights have been devalued because there is no longer any reference to an objective truth that would give those rights a solid basis.

What message that audience took from these remarks—and what effect it had on their lives or their faith—is impossible to

determine. Certainly the Denver World Youth Day was a success—at least as far as the numbers who attended are concerned. Like other such occasions that have been held on the Pope's insistence every two years since the mid-1980s, it gave hundreds of thousands of young Catholics a sense of belonging to the Church. It bonded them with each other and, in some fashion at least, with members of the hierarchy.

Some people argue that the success of the World Youth Days over the last two decades is a sign that the Catholic faith still has significant pulling power with youth. Others are more circumspect. The events can be regarded as little more than a Catholic equivalent of a rock concert—something young people attend in order to feel a part of a collective experience—and the impressions they leave just as superficial.

There is evidence to support both views: the World Youth Day in Rome in 2000 drew the largest crowd of young people (estimated variously at between one and two million) ever to assemble in the one place in history. A triumph of the spirit—the Holy Spirit, that is—perhaps. But a 15-year-old girl attending the Toronto gathering in 2002 confided a more mundane explanation of her motives: 'He is holy and he's, like, awesome,' Samantha Durovec of Minnesota said of John Paul II to a *New York Times* reporter. 'It's like the last time you're going to see him.'

This last World Youth Day in Toronto, Canada, failed to attract the numbers many people had been anticipating.¹⁴ Whether the novelty had worn off or the Pope had lost his pulling power is hard to judge, but certainly the organisers were faced with a serious financial deficit resulting from the number of young people who failed to show up.

Still, the hierarchy lauds such public demonstrations as a sign of a healthy relationship between youth and the Church. Maybe so. But a caution should have been sounded by the huge turnouts that greeted John Paul II on his visits to Poland during

the 1980s and the fate of the Catholic Church there since. When Poland managed to shake off its Communist dictatorship, many assumed that the Church would emerge as the predominant institution in the country. This was considered especially likely in view of John Paul II's efforts in bringing down the old regime. It soon became clear, however, that the Poles did not want to replace a political tyranny with anything that might smack of a religious one. They were happy enough to embrace elements of the Catholic tradition, but it was a freedom from the institutional strictures of the Church that they were seeking. This was a reality the Pope learned, to his obvious displeasure, on his visits to Poland in the 1990s.

This resistance to doctrine in Poland also fits a larger European and international pattern that indicates organised politics and organised religion are suffering similar fates—especially among the young. What is more, according to French sociologist, Yves Lambert, these fates are entwined—political ideologies and religious institutions have *together* lost ground in recent decades. The values they represent, he says, have been replaced not by indifference, but by a more flexible and pragmatic attitude to notions of liberty, equality and fraternity. These core values continue to be regarded as moral reference points, but not in the way in which they have been interpreted by political parties and churches. Lambert argues that this move away from ideologies is reflected in the preference given by adolescents in opinion polls about efforts to combat inequalities and defend human rights. They seem to have less to do with generalised principles than with pragmatic considerations of what's achievable and desirable.

The Church, by contrast, is consistently uncompromising in its upholding of principle and in its determination of what is right and wrong. This may be one of its virtues, as well as one of its responsibilities to give witness to the Gospel. But that is also not the point at hand. This attitude can lead the Church

to propose ideals to young people rather than realistically achievable goals. And the result is a dialogue with the deaf. For example, large numbers of Catholics are not marrying until around the age of 30. Many find it difficult, if not impossible, to abstain from sex until that age. The role models the Church holds before young people are often figures of uncompromising (and hopelessly unattainable) purity and chastity—the Virgin Mary not least among them. Or else they are ‘born again’ types who are said to have ‘seen the light’.

Rugby league international Jason Stevens is a case in point. Stevens has been portrayed as a ‘chastity champion’. In 2002 he published his views on why virginity should remain sacred before marriage in a book entitled *Worth the Wait*. Stevens was 29 years old at the time and, in common with many of his generation, not then married. He told Sydney’s *Catholic Weekly* in July 2002 that he hadn’t had sex for seven years, and that past relationships had left him feeling ‘frustrated and discontented’.¹⁵ These statements echo the views of the Pope himself, who that same year urged young people to follow a path of chastity, because human beings are ‘not fulfilled by following the impulses of pleasure’.

Perhaps what Stevens is aiming at is admirable, but it’s hopelessly unrealistic. Moreover, promoting people like him as some kind of role model for young people has proved risky in the past. Many such role models have fallen short of their own high standards eventually, and some have ended up giving negative witness to the faith. One example is Gary Ablett, an Australian Football League star, whose witness to a pure form of Christianity ended in disgrace when it was revealed that he had been involved in a drug-and-alcohol fuelled party that resulted in the death by overdose of a 20-year-old girl.

An even more dramatic example is the late South African cricket captain, Hansie Cronje. For a time Cronje was hailed as a ‘born again’ Christian whose life had been turned around and

made a success by his faith in Jesus Christ. But eventually—after repeated denials—Cronje confessed to match-fixing cricket games and to having dealt with bookmakers over a long period, including being a go-between in attempts to bribe team-mates to underperform.

It's no different with a number of the Church's in-house chastity role models, the priests and members of religious orders who've been found guilty of sexual abuse of young people. Models of purity are by definition set up for a fall, given that human nature is, as Christian doctrine asserts, itself fallen.

Some people, of course, do withdraw from the stresses of their fragmented world with a view to radically reorienting their lives according to a value system that promotes wholeness. They set out to give their lives a grounding that it doesn't appear to have had. So they give themselves to Christ and pull out all the stops to follow his teachings and those of his Church. But, before too long, they may come to realise that their lives *were* in fact grounded more firmly before, and that they've actually removed what ground they once had from under their feet. Then they can discover that the wholesome new life they've embraced isn't sustaining them, and that a necessary re-grounding will take some time. They may even come to judge their new faith as ground-less compared to the various beliefs, ideas and friendships that had once sustained their old life.

SELF-DENIAL AND DISCERNMENT

This is the difference between a value system based on mere self-denial and one based on discernment. Beaudoin, for instance, argues that the attempts of recent converts to distance themselves from their 'sinful past' often reveal how closely their former lives remain with them. He suggests that in Christian terms, there should be no need to attempt to reject absolutely one's former life after conversion, but only to discern out of it what were

some graced patterns of living, and separate them from the ‘sinful patterns of living’.

Starting an entirely new life, Beaudoin believes, is a recipe for disaster, and quite possibly disgrace. Instead, he recommends that young people be encouraged to rectify their behaviour by working out where God is in their existing lives. This idea is hardly new, although it may seem novel in view of the Church’s approach to youth ministry these days, which still bears traces of the old inclination to create exclusive and protective environments in which Catholic young people can associate with their like and not be challenged by anything much at all. The alternative Beaudoin recommends is, in fact, an idea that echoes the approach of the Jesuits’ founder St Ignatius Loyola, in a section of his *Spiritual Exercises* known as the ‘Discernment of Spirits’.

Like Stevens, sexual conquests had featured prominently in Loyola’s ‘former life’. After scrutinising their pasts, both chose chastity—but they did it in radically different ways. Stevens went cold turkey. He made an act of self-denial: no sex until he’s married. Loyola went in another direction. He chose to indulge in a lifestyle of ‘higher pleasures’ (that is, a life of saintly virtue) that happened to exclude sex. The difference is that for Stevens God wants us to fall in love, but ‘has set us some boundaries’. For Loyola, on the other hand, God wants us to enter into a love that knows no bounds. Loyola’s love goes beyond lust. It’s so deep and sustained that the temptation of premarital sex won’t enter his mind.

Both Stevens’ abstinence technique proposed in his book *Worth the Wait* and that of Loyola in the ‘Discernment of Spirits’ aim for happiness and wholeness. That is the selling point of Christianity and the Church. It is also arguably something that could fix much of the unhappiness and fragmenting of young lives. One person who is keenly aware of this is Sydney’s Archbishop George Pell. Archbishop Pell accompanied youth

pilgrims of his then Melbourne archdiocese to the World Youth Day in Rome in 2000. He was also in Toronto in 2002. There is no doubting Archbishop Pell's determination to nurture and minister to youth.

And many young people respond favourably—so favourably, in fact, that some of them came to his rescue after he had publicly criticised Channel Nine's *60 minutes* program before it broadcast an interview with him in June 2002 on the way he and others in the hierarchy had responded to complaints of clerical sexual abuse. Pell's young supporters protested outside the TV station's studios in an attempt to prevent the program going to air, and after it did, they organised a 'Support Pell' petition to counter criticism levelled at him. Similarly, when he lectured a group of 500 young people at the Toronto World Youth Day on the evils of abortion, he received a standing ovation. Back home, however, he was criticised for seeming to want to detract attention from the moral ills of clerical sex abuse.

To Pell's youthful supporters, this is another example of his being misunderstood—even unfairly treated. To them, he is a hero who is prepared to stand up for the faith. But how many of 'them' are there? And how representative are 'they' of other members of their age group? The website of the youth ministry agency in the Archdiocese of Sydney (www.cys.cathcomm.org/cys/about.htm) pays tribute to Pell as a 'big man in the faith' with 'a great heart for young people and a desire to reach out to the youth of Sydney with the Catholic faith'. What is interesting in that description is its final words: 'with the Catholic faith'.

Archbishop Pell, in common with most appointments to the hierarchy during the pontificate of John Paul II, is prepared to accept only total commitment to the Catholic faith. The Sydney youth he makes connection with are those 'with the Catholic faith'. He's not interested in those whose commitment is partial or incomplete. This has been demonstrated most dramatically in his response to demonstrations mounted by practising

homosexuals and their supporters from the Rainbow Sash movement. The first such encounter occurred in 1998 when Pell was Archbishop of Melbourne: a group of gay and lesbian Catholics and their supporters donned rainbow sashes (a symbol of unity in diversity) and presented themselves for Holy Communion before Pell in Melbourne's St Patrick's Cathedral. The Archbishop refused the members of the group the Eucharist, offered them a blessing, but also rebuked them for orchestrating such a blatant challenge to Church teaching and authority.

In 2002, Pell confronted a similar challenge as Archbishop of Sydney. Members of Rainbow Sash on that occasion fronted for Holy Communion at St Mary's Cathedral and Pell again refused them, saying 'I can't help you'. As a bishop of the Church, as he understands this role, Pell has a responsibility to uphold Catholic teachings—especially when they are publicly and so obviously challenged, as on these occasions. But it is the manner of his doing this which is the issue. Shortly after the confrontation in St Patrick's, for example, a similar protest was held at St Christopher's Cathedral in Canberra. On this occasion, Bishop Patrick Power also refused to dispense the Eucharist to those wearing the rainbow sash, but he made a point of welcoming the group into his church, urged his congregation to do the same, acknowledged the pain the Church's sexual teaching has caused so many people for so long, allowed himself to be photographed shaking hands with the protesters after Mass, and established an ongoing dialogue with representatives of the group to discuss their grievances.

The contrast is one between a dogmatic approach and an empathetic one; between a bishop who sticks to the letter of the Church's law and one who seeks to pursue its spirit. As far as Pell is concerned, the members of Rainbow Sash are not interested in the Catholic faith as he presents it, and so he is not interested in them.

The members of Generations X and Y to whom Archbishop Pell has successfully reached out are those prepared to accept the whole package of Catholic teaching. They have pledged to do their best to live their lives according to that teaching, and they seem prepared to reject anything not compatible with that teaching. Archbishop Pell and others like him regard these young people as the future of the Church. But they also seem to be a tiny, ever diminishing and increasingly unrepresentative minority on which to build that future.

The charisma that gives Pell significant pulling power for these *loyal* Catholics does not work for the vast majority of Generation X and Generation Y *would-be* Catholics. It's conceivable that Beaudoin has clerics like Pell in mind when he speaks of the 'unbearably patronising and ineffective' way in which religious and political elders often reach out to 'young people'. A 1998 column on Beaudoin and his thoughts by Jon Katz, a columnist in *Wired* magazine, agrees that there is something compelling about those members of Generations X and Y who challenge churches to preach and practise 'not from a position of power and righteousness, but from a sense of humility and weakness in the world'. This, he suggests, is a radical departure from the 'pious and hectoring stance taken by most religious leaders'.¹⁶

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES OF FAITH

An analysis of his speeches and writings suggests Pell is a confident man who believes firmly and unequivocally that he has truth and God on his side. Can such conviction ever lead to pious and hectoring stances? Even the apology to victims of sexual abuse, issued jointly with Archbishop Denis Hart of Melbourne in June 2002, appears to have a tone of triumph more than contrition. About half the document is taken up by an explanation of the 'good protocols [in place to deal with

clerical sexual abuse] in Australia for the past six years'. If Beaudoin is right, Pell has no hope of seriously tapping into the minds of Generation X and Generation Y until he projects an image that suggests humility rather than arrogance, certainty, and pride.

Some people may say that such an eventuality would be no great loss, and they might dispute the assertion that young people drawn to a traditional Catholic practice are a tiny, diminishing and unrepresentative minority. But the evidence clearly suggests otherwise. The 1998 Australian Community Survey, for example, which was undertaken by the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) in conjunction with Edith Cowan University and the results of which were released in 2002, showed that each succeeding generation has less and less involvement with churches generally. (Catholics are no exception.) In the 20–29 age group, only 59 per cent of respondents had any exposure to church activities in their childhood (compared to 70 per cent of respondents overall). The younger the person, the weaker was this exposure. The results led NCLS researcher Dr John Bellamy to comment that 'it is likely that the current generation of primary-school-aged children will be the first where the majority will have no memory of church involvement at some stage in their upbringing'.¹⁷ Other researchers involved in the study thought this was a conservative estimate and that the same could be said for the current generation of high-school students.

Much the same result was found in the major European Values Study undertaken by the University of Tilburg in The Netherlands and released in 2002. What the study showed was that young people are becoming more religious, but also less churched. The results showed that more young people believed in God, in spirituality and in life after death in 2001 than they did 20 years before. But fewer believed in the Church or attended services in religious establishments.¹⁸

Generations X and Y's un-churched spirituality can show itself in an unconscious fondness for the signs and symbols of the Catholic faith. For example, a young woman might observe her grandmother praying the Rosary, and delight in having a set of Rosary beads in her own possession. But she'll tend not to have the staying power or grasp of the complexity of the devotion to pray it herself.

Baby-boomer Catholics typically have written off the Rosary and similar devotions as superstitious. Their grandparents will maintain a steadfast devotion to the Rosary while their children will be curious and inclined to experiment with such devotions, or sometimes just the hardware associated with them. The difference between the pre-boomer beliefs and practices and those of Generations X and Y is that the former's devotion tends to be unswerving, while that of the younger generations is just part of a myriad of stimuli that makes up their world view. It is this behaviour which also expresses itself in young people switching between several TV channels at once, or 'surfing' Internet websites. The young are restless and scan what's on offer, while their grandparents have been brought up to make a selection and focus on or commit themselves to one particular offering. Loosely speaking, it's a post-modern attitude at work.

The part that religious images play in this behaviour has not been lost on the advertising industry. From time to time, it too exploits elements of the Catholic faith because market research says that such elements are attractive to young people. The image of the Pope kissing the ground was used to promote the launch of Foxtel pay-TV football channel in 2002: 'One of the great religions is coming to Foxtel . . . The only devoted AFL channel. Your team. Every game. Every week. Amen.' Enough said.

This, together with advertisements like that one a few years ago which depicted a statue of the Virgin Mary shedding crocodile tears because she couldn't hit the slopes of Thredbo, amount to free advertising for the Church. On the one hand

they trivialise the sacred but, on the other, they offer a lifeline to symbols which are dying like an archaic language, because nobody understands or recognises its meaning anymore. Such uses put the Catholic faith firmly in the public consciousness. The Catholic hierarchy and a number of the faithful, however, cry foul and complain to the Advertising Standards Bureau, because they believe the Church has lost control over the very imaging of the faith.

The Church regards the use of sacred symbols in advertising, and as accoutrements in fashion, as corroding their value and meaning. Church leaders are put off when they see young people wearing objects of Catholic devotion one day, and objects of Buddhist devotion the next, or perhaps even wearing a crucifix along to a Buddhist meditation session. By contrast, Buddhist authorities are more comfortable with this kind of thing. While they point out that Buddhist practices can never fully be understood without a knowledge of Buddhist beliefs and teachings, they are happy for people to use them to deepen their own faith commitment or simply to explore their personal spirituality. Perhaps this has something to do with the phenomenal growth of Buddhism in Western societies. At the very least, it seems to stand in marked contrast to the document entitled *Dominus Jesus* (The Lord Jesus), released by the Vatican in September 2000, which denied that other religions can offer salvation independent of Christianity and insisted that making converts to Catholicism remained an 'urgent duty'.

The point is that members of the younger generations are reluctant to sign up for anything that appears so definitive and permanent. This may seem a superficial attitude to outsiders but, to young people, questions of superficiality and depth belong to older generations—their world views, their concerns. Unless the Church can speak to them where they are, it risks not speaking to them at all. But this is something which seems not to overly concern the Vatican. Take its approach to the Internet.

In February 2002, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications issued two documents which, in a manner of speaking, gave the imprimatur (or official approval) to the Internet as a medium of communication. One was a document entitled 'Ethics in the Internet', and the other, 'The Church and the Internet'. Presenting each document to the media, the council's president, Archbishop John Foley, summarised the underlying message of both when he said that the Church felt it should recognise this new medium as 'an opportunity and a challenge, and not a threat'.¹⁹

It had taken the best part of ten years, in other words, for the Vatican to make up its mind on whether the Internet was a good or a bad thing—and approval had not been a foregone conclusion. Young people, and in particular the members of Generation Y, who are more computer literate than previous generations, were clearly not waiting on word from the Vatican before deciding to embrace the Internet and live more or less of their lives online.

And what, in any event, was the Vatican trying to achieve? In the end, not even totalitarian governments trying to censor ideas, or multinational media companies seeking to protect copyright, can stem the flow of all-powerful images and words on the Internet. It is like Madonna's spite for the Church writ large. Agents of control can like it or dislike it. The point is that it is in many ways more powerful than they are. French bishop Jacques Gaillot was one cleric who appreciated this when, in 1995, he established a diocese on the Net after being banished by the Pope to a depopulated and abandoned diocese in North Africa on account of his liberal social views. 'On the Internet there is no question of someone imposing rules on the way people communicate,' Gaillot said in explanation of his initiative to set up a virtual diocese. 'The Net has no centre from which will can be applied.'²⁰

Neil Postman, an American author of numerous books on the media, has taken the implication of Gaillot's comment much further than the bishop himself chose to do: 'If indeed [the Net] takes power away from the centre and gives it to the margins we can anticipate not tomorrow but in a hundred years the Vatican will be far less important in determining proper Catholic liturgy, theology and so on.'²¹ This argument can be applied more generally to the role of the Vatican in regulating the religious lives of Generation X and Generation Y.

7 | IMAGINATION ABANDONED

Paul Collins

In late 1991, ABC radio sent me to interview Thomas Berry, the Catholic thinker and ‘geologian’, as he calls himself, at the centre he then ran at the northern end of the Bronx in New York City. As our discussion progressed I began to wonder what belief and faith meant to him. So I thought I’d choose a neutral word and ask him what he meant by ‘religion’. I still vividly remember the intensity of his response. He said: ‘Religion is poetry or it is nothing. How can a person be religious without being poetic? Certainly God is a poet—it is God who made rainbows, butterflies and flowers. It is the most absurd thing in the world to think of dealing with religion in any other way . . . Take Saint John of the Cross—all the great mystics have been poets.’ John of the Cross is, of course, one of the greatest lyric poets in the Spanish language.

Yet many people would be confused or even suspicious of Berry’s explanation. They would have experienced religion as a set of precepts and rules, a constellation of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’, a

psychological mishmash of guilt and innocence. Many people today still harbour anger and resentment about their religious formation. For them faith has been more about obedience than creativity, blind acceptance rather than imagination. As a result they have turned away from the Church and its liturgy. Many of them have found nurturance for their spiritual needs in places other than Catholicism.

FROM THE SACRED TO THE BANAL

Many of us also have been intensely caught up for the last three decades in debates about the structures of the Church and its exercise of power over peoples' lives. Given that I have devoted a lot of time to writing about these issues myself, I am not saying that they are not important. But they have to be kept in perspective. In fact, beyond all the structural issues facing Catholicism, there lurks the pivotal challenge pointed to by Berry's definition: the recovery and maintenance of the sense that faith and belief are essentially poetic and that genuine spirituality, relevant theology and effective worship require a profound activation of the imagination.

Sunday Mass in the local parish is the place where most Australian Catholics usually encounter the Church in action. With some notable exceptions, liturgy is in a parlous state across the country. There are many reasons for this. The most important is the loss of the sense of the sacred.

While not pretending that the old Latin liturgy was particularly well celebrated in the past in most Australian parishes, traditional pre-1960s worship did have the potential to conjure up some suggestion of the sacred and some feeling of intimacy with the transcendent. I vividly remember an older man, who was conservative but by no means reactionary, saying to me: 'Since the Latin Mass has gone, I have lost my ability to pray, and I no longer have the feeling that God is somehow close.' In

the late 1960s, when the liturgical changes were first introduced, I remember hearing the late Joseph Campbell, an American professor of comparative mythology, saying that Catholics would come to regret the loss of the 'old' Mass. His argument was that we had replaced an essentially sacred ceremony, an entry into another realm, with a banal, familiar, everyday show accompanied with bad music.

Of course, Campbell was idealising the past and pretending that every Mass was somehow a transforming experience. But, much as I hate to admit it, there is some truth in what he predicted. This is not to say that well-celebrated, post-Vatican II worship cannot also transport the believer out of the conventional and everyday into the transcendent presence of God. But that is not the experience of most Catholics most of the time these days.

Nowadays some priests feel that the most important aspect of worship is relevance. So the emphasis is on either the 'personal', or the 'communal' aspects of the liturgy and everything else is sacrificed to the development of an intimate, almost club-like atmosphere. Other celebrants feel that they can turn the liturgy into an opportunity for them to chatter on at length about what they think is important and hold dearest, or else they hector people about their supposed failures and deficiencies, both theological and moral. The very banality and conventionality of their comments completely exclude the possibility of any sense of the sacred being achieved.

It is obviously too easy to blame the clergy for the failure of the modern liturgy. The core of the problem actually lies much deeper, in a widespread loss in our whole culture of any sense of the sacred. As a result, prayerfulness and the feeling that within the experience of a liturgical celebration the presence of God can be encountered is replaced with a verbose emphasis on 'accessibility', or 'orthodoxy', or whatever. As I argued a decade ago in *No Set Agenda* (1991), what we need for good liturgy is

a sense of ‘commonality’. By this I mean that we are a group of different people who come together for a common public purpose—the worship of God and a sense of communion with other members of the Catholic community. In order to achieve this we need a specific place to ‘do’ worship:

There has to be a feeling of stepping outside everyday reality to enter into God’s presence. Homes and classrooms might be the right places for prayer; they are often not the right places for liturgical worship, which requires a sense of entry into the numinous [or a sense of awe in the presence of the divine] . . . For genuine worship people need a sacred space, a place with some distance from common reality, which releases within participants the power to contemplate a Reality that transcends and expands our understanding and ordinary human experience.¹

Commonality is also assisted by good music. Singing together brings people closer. Yet many of the hymns that have come to predominate in the local church are tuneless and difficult to sing. The music is cliché-ridden melodically and the lyrics grossly sentimental. As a result the absence of the sense of the sacred is often palpable in contemporary Catholic liturgy. The atrophy of the imagination can also be seen in the Church’s failure to respond to contemporary needs with a creative approach to ministry. The hierarchical Church is clearly intensely preoccupied with the maintenance of its own power, control and traditional ways of doing things. It has lost any sense of creatively adapting ministry to the needs of the time.

A failure of the imagination can also be perceived in the withdrawal of a sizeable minority of Catholics into a kind of sectarian and fundamentalist approach to belief and practice. This shows that these people prefer the security of spiritual stultification to the excitement of the religious imagination. One sees this in the so-called ‘new religious movements’ and in certain aspects of the charismatic movement. While claiming to take a

creative approach to ministry, these groups in fact are extraordinarily hidebound, traditionalist and spiritually superficial. Tragically, they have been given an enormous amount of ecclesiastical support and patronage over the last two and a half decades in Australia, as much as elsewhere.

THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION

I have been talking a lot about a kind of ‘Catholic imagination’ here. What do I mean by this term?

For a committed believer in any religious tradition, faith is grounded, shaped and lived out through a specific set of symbols and beliefs that have evolved over time to create a unique meaning-structure which, in turn, provides the filter and framework through which the person committed to this particular religion perceives and arranges their view of the world. Such symbols also provide a pattern of moral, ethical and social response to all that happens. This symbol system is given external articulation through the doctrines, stories and rituals that are the component parts of the theological superstructure of the particular belief system. At a deeper, personal level, these symbols and beliefs form and stimulate the religious imagination.

The religious imagination is actualised and comes into play through its ability to perceive the connection between particular experiences of the beautiful and the good in everything that happens to us—in all the people and realities we meet, in all the places we go, and in all the things we do—and the profound pointers within these experiences towards that Ultimate Personal Reality which both cradles and transcends them.

Each belief system gives shape to a specific and particular view of the meaning of nature and the world, and humankind’s specific place in it. Thus the American priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley is right when he says in his *The Catholic Myth* (1990) that there is a distinctly ‘Catholic imagination’ that

underpins the perceptions, attitudes and responses of all of us who belong to that reality that we call 'Catholicism'. Catholic belief is almost as much a culture as it is a faith. However, the Church today faces the distinct danger that the Catholic imagination might slowly atrophy. For its survival it requires the constant nurturance of a community living out its commitment through beauty and goodness. But beauty, particularly, is often lacking from many modern manifestations of Catholic life and worship.

The atrophy of the 'Catholic imagination' is part of a broader problem. For there is a widespread failure of creativity in contemporary Western culture. There are many manifestations of this, and one of the most obvious is our self-obsession. To be fully human is to recognise that we are not complete in ourselves, that our existence is not, *per se*, self-explanatory. We only make sense to ourselves within the broader context of that which is different from us, that which 'transcends' us. But once self-consciousness transmutes into self-obsession, it becomes well-nigh impossible for the individual to perceive or experience the individuality of the other, let alone any deeper resonance that otherness may suggest. Whole industries are constructed around our intense concerns about our mental and physical health, weight, appearance, relationships, sex life, rights, fitness, self-fulfilment, financial security and retirement 'nest egg'. It is true that all species are species-centric, but modern self-absorption runs the risk of so atrophying any authentic sense of the reality of the other that our imaginations will be trapped in a corrosive intellectual narcissism.

Even modern religion has become quite self-obsessed. The most obvious examples of this are many aspects of the so-called 'New Age'. A casual check of the bookshops under the category 'Religion' or 'Spirituality' will reveal that much of this is concerned with 'self-realisation', the 'discovery of the inner-self',

the actualisation of so-called 'past lives', or the foretelling of the future.

But self-obsession has also invaded mainstream Christian spirituality. This can be demonstrated by checking the way in which renewal programs and spirituality centres advertise and present themselves. They focus strongly on the need for psychological fulfilment, and they emphasise the reconciliation between spirituality and contemporary psychology, particularly the Jungian variety, which is perceived as being more sympathetic to religious faith. Carl Jung himself in *Memories, Dreams Reflections* (1961) says that his psychology is fundamentally about 'the self-realisation of the unconscious'. There is a sense in which religion is used in the process of the actualisation of the self. In other words, it does not really move beyond the self, whereas traditional Catholic spirituality has usually been concerned with the loss of the self in the search for the transcendent.

The current trend towards self-obsession does not mean that we are wiser, nor that we have greater insight. It is just that we are involved in ourselves and our inner processes to an extent that previous ages never were. We turn to psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists as the 'high priests' who give us insight into the meaning of our perceived inner experiences. This is not fertile ground for the development of the creative imagination. It is in this context of self-absorption that Theodore Roszak, Professor of History at California State University and author of such books as *The Cult of Information* (1994) and *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (1995), rightly describes our contemporary culture as 'toxic'.

There are three reasons for this obsession. Part of the problem is that we are trapped in a triple alienation that has forced us to abandon our old beliefs and meaning systems, and turned us inward towards our own subjectivity. First, post-modernism has made us profoundly suspicious of the over-arching, generalised

words and concepts that we used to use to articulate our broader perceptions of meaning. Second, we are alienated from the natural world, which is the biological root and foundation of our being. Third, we are cut off from reality itself, for we increasingly view everything through the prism of technology.

We need to recover what author and critic George Steiner calls, in an obvious theological (and liturgical) reference, 'real presences' (see his book *Real Presences*, 1989). Catholics believe that in the real presence the body and full personhood of Christ is in attendance in a transforming way in the celebration of the Eucharist under the sacramental symbols of bread and wine. This presence continues in the consecrated form of each. In other words the material elements of bread and wine conjure up and point beyond themselves to a powerful personal presence that far transcends the limitations of the symbol. Steiner argues that literature, art, profound human communication, and especially music, act in a parallel way. The artistic symbol takes us 'beyond' into a further, deeper, more transcendent world of meaning.

Both Steiner and Roszak argue that in modern Western culture we are alienated from the perception of the deeper levels of our inner lives and selves; our atomised, individualistic, post-modernist view of reality simply cuts us off from seeing the significance of our experience. Roszak has called this the 'anaesthetised eye and ear' (*Where the Wasteland Ends*, 1973).

ADRIFT FROM REALITY

Our first alienation is from the broader and 'universalist' words and concepts that make it almost impossible for us to articulate any generalised meaning structure at all. Thus we are thrown back into purely subjective, limited and personal 'searches for meaning', which may or may not lead anywhere. Steiner points out that contemporary speech, media, public life and political

debate, as well as economic, philosophical, ethical and legal discussion are so permeated with intentional or unconscious lies and so much emphasis on what we now call ‘political correctness’, that half-truths, distortions, trivialities, clichés, euphemisms, jargon and propaganda render it almost impossible for us to sort out significant truth from the superficial and mendacious.

What he calls the ‘leviathan rhetoric’ of the media is a never-ending and confusing flood of the trivial and the significant, the relevant and the banal, the true, half-true and the false, all cobbled together without the slightest discrimination between what matters and what does not. The Internet is another example of this complete lack of differentiation. Advertising is particularly malicious in that it often takes primal words and images and twists them to represent totally unnecessary consumer products.

The irony is that in a world full—as Shakespeare has Hamlet tell Polonius—of ‘words, words, words’, we have actually lost our ability to communicate. While we continue to develop an increasing number of diverse means of communication, we seemingly have nothing significant to say. So our reaction is to retreat into a deep, alienated subjectivity that has become our refuge in a world of disintegrating meaning. Here we feel safe in a known world, and our imaginations are never challenged.

This debasement of language and speech points to what Steiner calls a ‘rare fundamental break’ in the whole history of human communication. This has serious consequences, for he argues that the recognition of the value of art, and even the possibility of coherent human dialogue, presupposes and actually conjures up a transcendent presence that underpins it. In other words, when genuine communication occurs, when true meaning is conveyed, when beauty is expressed in art, literature and music, when genuine love and affection is offered and received, there is always at hand a pointer towards the transcendent, a hint of the presence of God.

The clearest symptom of this alienation of speech and human communication is the dominance in our educational and cultural institutions of post-modernism and ‘deconstruction’. Rather than being a harbinger of the new, this movement is really the twilight of 20th-century modernist, industrial society. It takes the themes that were working themselves out in the post-Second-World-War world, especially in the obsessive, arcane world of the French school of Marxism, to their logical conclusions. It is basically a cluster of ideas that centre around the impossibility of perceiving and maintaining any coherent or over-arching theory of knowledge or meaning structure. Taken to its logical conclusions, it renders any value-laden, objective and rational discourse almost impossible.

Deconstructionists, such as the literary critic, Jacques Derrida, and the historian, Michel Foucault, assure us that the ‘meta-narratives’—the old, dominant, over-arching beliefs, metaphors and critical standards—are gone. They deny the possibility of universal claims or ideas, or the general applicability of moral or artistic norms, or canons of taste. All that is achievable are subjective, parochial visions that characterise particular groups and individuals and their specific experiences. Everything is relative: the individual becomes their own reference point. This movement finds expression most vividly in contemporary art and culture through the abandonment of broader, universal values and ideas, the loss of any sense of reverence and, therefore, of any possibility of intuiting the transcendent. It has led to the burgeoning of courses in ‘popular culture’ and ‘media studies’ and to a widespread denigration of ‘high culture’. The comic book has become as important as Shakespearian comedy, and the Beatles as significant as Beethoven.

Our second alienation is from the natural world. We think that we are independent of nature. It is rare that natural forces ever threaten or frighten us. Being caught in a storm at sea, or a cyclone in the tropics, or turbulence in an aircraft, might

occasionally remind us of our vulnerability, but we usually live in the cosseted, concrete world of the city. We have none of the terror that our medieval ancestors had as they faced nature, especially as represented by the dark forests and strange beasts that surrounded their cultivated and constructed world. Even in the 19th century, our forebears faced the mountainous and terrifying seas of the Southern Ocean and the 'roaring forties', as they came to Australia in sailing ships. In contrast to people in the past who had not lost their organic connection with nature, we have objectivised the world and see its value largely as a source of raw materials that we consume without concern for the future.

Our modern alienation is vividly illustrated by the South Australian artist, Jenny Clapson. She paints on Kangaroo Island, and there has been a fascinating recurrent theme running through her work. Dominating the foreground is an animal or bird, usually a kangaroo. It is very large and overshadows the scene. In the background on a beach are two people, focused in on themselves, posing and taking photos of each other. They are strange, stick-like creatures, curiously alien to and cut off from their surroundings. They are so self-absorbed that they do not see the large animal that dominates the scene. This is a vivid illustration of our alienation from nature; we are so cut off from it that we cannot even see it. We have divorced ourselves from our biological roots.

The third manifestation of our modern alienation and self-absorption is the way in which we view all reality through the prism of technology. Significantly, the people in Jenny Clapson's paintings do not actually look at each other directly, but rather view each other through the medium of the camera, a product of technology. Email also illustrates this. While it is obviously a very useful tool, it can replace direct communication and the need to talk face to face. There are even those who believe that somehow computers will eventually be endowed with some kind

of personality, and artificial intelligence will outstrip human genius. There is a kind of schizophrenia involved in this view of the future that is quite frightening.

No-one has commented on the dominance of technology more perceptively than the great German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who has also had a major influence on modern theology, especially on the Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, and the Anglican, John Macquarrie. Heidegger's view is that technology does not just refer to the process of particular technological applications that can be studied and measured. Nor is it just a way of looking at reality. At the deepest philosophical level, technology objectifies and materialises the whole of reality. In the technocratic world view, everything is viewed from a utilitarian perspective, and even nature itself is seen fundamentally as an exploitable source of raw materials, to be used and consumed as required by technological processes. Everything is valued in purely economic terms or, to put it more bluntly, nothing is sacred.

Even human beings become 'human resources' to be used and discarded as the technological needs of the workplace dictate. Heidegger calls this an 'unworld' where an economic, calculating logic is applied to everything, and the original meaning of the Greek word *techné* is completely lost. *Techné* originally referred to the skill of the craftsman and artist. The work of these people revealed something of the natural potentiality, the 'thisness' inherent in particular matter. For instance, Chartres Cathedral reveals something of the inner potentiality of stone; Mozart, of the potentiality of sound; the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the potentiality of paint and colour.

By saying that technology is a form of being, Heidegger ultimately means that we are so dominated by it and its particular applications, and we have become so involved with it, that we have lost our sense of the reality of the actual world that lies behind it. The computer has become reality. Our

concentration on our own inventions is so complete that we can no longer recognise or get in touch with real being-in-the-world. Thus, for Heidegger, the ecological crisis that results directly from the dominance of technology is metaphysical rather than merely or even initially ethical.

So how are we going to deal with this alienation from nature and recover our imaginative potentiality? In an article published in *Der Spiegel* shortly after his death in 1976, Heidegger gives a cryptic clue as to how we might recover something of our connection with reality. He says, in his typically convoluted, arcane style:

Only a god can save us. The sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare for a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetising, for the appearance of the god or the absence of the god in the time of foundering, for in the face of a god who is absent, we founder.²

Heidegger argues that we are already in the time of *verfallen*—of ‘foundering’ or ‘falling’ or ‘sinking’—the time of technology gone mad, of horrendous environmental destruction, a period in which genuine individualism and creative eccentricity is lost, when the same attitudes and prejudices dominate our lives, when original thinking is blotted out by *mass* media, and ‘political correctness’ is imposed by self-appointed elites. The English word ‘foundering’ is also quite suggestive in this context: ‘to founder’ is to sink, to go to the bottom, to be drowned. And this is precisely what is happening: our imaginations are being drowned, foundering under the destructive weight of the trivia and irrelevancy that dominate so much of our lives.

But in the *Der Spiegel* article, Heidegger also gives us a clue as to a way out: he says we can prepare for the liberating God by ‘thinking’ and ‘poetising’. These words indicate that the time has come for us to attempt to conceive of reality in a radically different way. By thinking outside dominant or currently fashionable categories, we begin to break away from the sterility

of post-modernism and understand something of our metaphysical predicament. By ‘poetising’ we begin to conceive of reality in a different, non-technological way and open ourselves to other possibilities. It is only when our imaginations are liberated that we will be able to perceive again the intimations of the presence of God in the world and escape *verfallen*—drowning. Thus the task facing us is not just ethical, but metaphysical, and ultimately spiritual.

Heidegger also argues that to achieve liberation we need to evolve a new *gestell*, a new ‘framework’, through the prism of which we can begin to encounter nature and reality from a different, non-technological perspective. Near the end of his life, he seemed to be suggesting that this *gestell* would be explicitly theological and even mystical. In developing this framework, the ability to poetise will be just as important as the ability to think. In this process, imagination becomes our most important faculty.

But the imagination does not exist and develop in a vacuum. It needs nurturance and a context in which to develop. Here again, we come to the importance of the natural world. Some years ago the Australian Tourist Commission focused its advertising campaign in Germany on this continent’s ‘wilderness’ areas. The commission realised that Germans might be attracted to come all the way to Australia because they have no wilderness of their own left at home, but are still influenced by the imaginative idea of ‘wilderness’, which is a continuing theme in the European romantic tradition. Wilderness can be defined as one of those rare places in the world that still remain natural, that have not been manipulated, exploited, or ‘developed’ in some way by humans. Australia is one of the few places left on earth with any areas like this remaining, so it is one of those locations where people come to connect with the human need for untouched nature.

What nature does is to provide the imagination with the potentiality to experience the 'real presences' that surround us. That is why its survival is so important and the environmental crisis so metaphysically central to our future. For the natural world is the only place where our imaginations can be nurtured and expanded through close contact with that which is not human, that which is literally 'Other'. This is precisely what Heidegger meant by the ability to 'poetise' and to develop new frames of reference. For without the natural world, of which wilderness is an essential part, our imaginations become stale and stultified.

Paradoxically, while it is our extraordinary ability to adapt ourselves and to act in new and creative ways that actually separates us from the rest of sentient reality, our imaginative faculties still require contact with a world that is different and beyond our control for their development and nurturance. The reason for this is that we are biologically intimately related to the rest of living reality. Without our wider biological context, we will wither up and die in a myopic and mad world of our own construction. The acute danger we face is that we are already within an ace of destroying the remnant of what is left of the natural world.

If this happens we will be in a disastrous state. Without imagination there will be no art, no religion, no spirituality, no possibility of discovering meaning and the transcendent in our lives; we will be without hope, for we will not be able to picture other possibilities and alternatives. We will become simply and clinically mad, fixated in a paranoia of our own making.

SPIRIT OF PLACE

So what can we do? Is there a way of reinvigorating the religious and Catholic imagination as part of what might be called a rescue plan for humankind? The answer lies in the fact that there

is already increasing evidence that a new form of ecologico-religious sensibility is emerging in our culture, and that this is even now providing a form of nurturance for the imagination. You find this sensibility across a spectrum of religious responses. It exists in a relatively primitive form among some of those who espouse the 'New Age', and in a more developed form among some environmentalists and those committed to social justice. There is also evidence of it in parts of the Catholic community, even though the official Church has been slow and at best ambivalent about encouraging and developing a commitment to ecology. Actually, it is not so much the discovery of a 'new' form of religious sensibility as the revival and recovery of a very traditional apprehension of the transcendent.

This sensibility is much more than the kind of 'peak experience' described by the psychologist and theorist of human personality, Abraham Maslow; he is totally focused on the psychology of the healthy and motivated individual and sees no transcendent element in it. What I am referring to here is an explicitly 'spiritual' and religious experience, the type of thing about which the great mystics have spoken. In the Bible the desert and the wild mountains play a key role in the process of testing the chosen people in their encounter with God. Jesus himself was tested in the desert and he seemed to have a predilection for 'lonely places' for prayer and for primal encounters with God, such as in the transfiguration.

This is a subject Pope John Paul II addressed in an important homily during his Mass in celebration of the beatification of Mary MacKillop, at Sydney's Randwick Racecourse in January 1995. Taking his cue from the Book of Isaiah (40: 3–5) and from Matthew (6:25–34), the Pope said that Australians' struggle with a harsh environment had much to teach them about the struggle in the 'spiritual wilderness' of our age. Sadly, this theme has essentially been ignored ever since, except by priests and religious brothers and sisters working in Aboriginal ministry,

where a deep appreciation of the numinous quality of the Australian landscape is unavoidable. As such, it is a theological imagination available to all Australians, but one that remains marginalised from the mainstream Church.

This same wilderness tradition was taken up by the 4th-century men and women hermits of the Syrian and Egyptian deserts. One also finds this desire for wilderness among the Irish saints. One of the most striking examples was Saint Columbanus (c.543–615) who, after a long training in Ireland, wandered through eastern France, founded a monastery at Annegray near Luxeuil (nowadays a middle-class health resort!) and eventually died at Bobbio in northern Italy. His life was written by Jonas of Bobbio, who outlines the role that the wilderness played in the life of Columbanus:

He went into hidden places in the forest so that he might . . . be wholly free from disquieting cares, devote himself to prayer, and might be ready for religious thought. He was so attenuated by fasting that he scarcely seemed alive. Nor did he eat anything except a small measure of herbs of the fields or the little apples. His drink was water . . . [A monk reported that] . . . he has often seen Columbanus wandering about in the wilderness . . . calling the wild beasts and the birds. These came immediately at his command and he stroked them with his hand. He often called a squirrel from the tops of the trees and put it on his neck.³

Jonas also says that Columbanus spent a lot of time talking to bears and, when attacked by a pack of wolves, his attitude was so calm and natural that they desisted and walked calmly away. Columbanus returned from the wilderness refreshed and at peace, his tenderness towards people enhanced by his contact with the animals.

But the wilderness is not all peace and light. There is also a palpable sense of fear and vulnerability in confronting the forces of nature. One can experience something of the terror or 'fear

of God' that pervades the Hebrew Scriptures' sense of entry into the presence of the transcendent. A good example is Jacob's dream of a manifestation of God at Bethel. Jacob says (in the Latin Vulgate version): *Terribilis est locus iste: hic domus Dei est et porta coeli; et vocabitur aula Dei* ('How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven' (Genesis 28:16–17)). The Latin word *terribilis* here connotes terror, fear and trembling and points to the awe and trepidation required of one who is in the presence of God. It emphasises the fact that God is wholly other, not anthropomorphic, not domesticated. God is ultimately a *mysterium* in the sense that the divine is a phenomenon to be explored, not a reality to be possessed or defined.

The great Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, picks up this notion of God and prefers to speak of the divine as 'absolute mystery'. When we enter into the presence of the numinous transcendence of God, we experience several feelings. First, there is a deep sense of acute vulnerability. This is an expression that explicitly describes an existential state of reality; it is not a qualitative judgment about one's personal self-valuation. In fact, it is really only the integrated person with a strong sense of self-worth who can begin to experience the acute vulnerability that characterises one who begins to perceive something of the mysterious presence of God.

Second, there is the sense that God is *terribilis*—awe-inspiring. This is the biblical notion of the 'fear of God'. But the word 'fear' here is ambivalent in English, and probably a word like 'wondrous' comes closer to the meaning of the Latin word. The sense of the word is conveyed by Job when he prays: 'Do not let dread of you [God] terrify me' (Job 13:21). There is a certain resentment about this among those of us who treasure the autonomy of the individual, but the simple reality is that we are the product of the constant, ongoing creative act of God. It is not so much about self-depreciation as an almost mystic

consciousness of the sheer creative potency of God and of our total dependency upon that divine capacity. It is also a recognition of the unreality of so much of human existence.

Third, there is an element of energy or urgency. The mystics experience God as vitality, passion, force, movement. For them God is not the ‘philosopher king’, but a seething morass of dynamic and passionate creativity. Elements of this are vividly expressed by the later German idealists: Johann Gottlieb Fichte sees the Absolute as a ‘gigantic, never-resting, active world-stress’, and the German pessimist, Arthur Schopenhauer, as ‘Will’. Perhaps the greatest artistic expression of this passionate, urgent energy in Western culture is in the music of Beethoven, especially the final quartets (Opus 127 to 132), where he dialectically explores the outer reaches of the struggle with transcendence.

This notion of God as energy is closely related to the daring descriptions put forward by the 6th-century Syrian mystical writer, Pseudo-Dionysius, in *The Divine Names*. He speaks of God in terms of Eros, of a capacity to go out of the self in complete ecstasy. In this context the divine is the creative movement, restless desire, the capacity to effect unity, alliance and co-mingling—a notion of divine and cosmic eroticism quite foreign to the pages of the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and yet inherited from the early Christian theologian and controversialist, Origen (185–254 AD), in his Commentary on the Song of Songs.

There is a sense in which I might seem to have strayed from the idea of developing the imagination. But I don’t think this is the case. For it is precisely by exploring some of these mystical experiences that the imagination is re-activated. What is most important is that you do not have to retreat to the past to realise in your own life something of the Catholic spiritual tradition. It can happen here in Australia and, in fact, our experiences are usually more modest and less likely to assume pseudo-mystical

overtones. As an example of what I mean, here is what I wrote some years ago after an experience in the bush in Tasmania:

As one walks alone deeper and deeper into an Australian cool temperate rainforest, strange things begin to happen. Your perception is sharpened, the usual human defence mechanisms seem to slip away and often strong sexual feelings surge to the surface. I suspect that this has more to do with an unconscious sense of biological connectedness with the surrounding than with sexuality as such.

As you continue deeper into the forest, you can suddenly come upon one of those mystical places whose unique unity and significance far surpasses the sum total of its parts. I will never forget coming once to a place like this in Tasmania. It was an extraordinary myrtle beech forest. As I moved into it I entered into another time dimension. I suddenly realised that I was both vulnerable and afraid. There was nothing threatening me except the profound otherness of the place. Yet, paradoxically, at the same time I felt deeply 'at home' and the acute juxtaposition of alienation and belonging was held together in a strange tense resolution. One gradually begins to perceive a kind of lurking presence in such places that is both personal and remote at the same time. The experience is oddly ambivalent, yet deeply confirming. I am more and more convinced that you cannot conjure this up at will. It comes when it comes and it cannot be manufactured. It takes you out of yourself, yet it gives you a sense of self that is profoundly confirming. It reveals the depths of personal vulnerability, and yet one emerges from it more at home with oneself, more aware of our profound biological and spiritual unity with all that is. It reminded me of the American liturgist Aidan Kavanagh's provocative definition of a sacrament as an 'Unsettling encounter between living presences, divine and human, in the here and now' [*On Liturgical Theology*, 1984].

I came back alone to the car that day both much more at peace with myself and more passionate than ever to stand beside and defend the natural world which had given me everything. There is something

akin in these types of experiences to religious conversion. The fruit of the experience should be action: a determination to preserve the parts of the natural world that have not been destroyed, almost at any cost.⁴

Environmentalists and bushwalkers understand the last sentence very well. There is a deep paradox in the Australian bush. It is a strangely fearful place, yet there is absolutely nothing to fear from the shy and reticent creatures who live there. (This is even true of our venomous snakes, who retreat from us much faster than we from them!) Yet the bush retains a deep and integral sense of its 'otherness'. It somehow stands there in its vast timelessness seemingly ready to absorb you into itself, like the young women in the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. There is a sense of the permeability of time, especially when one comes upon, usually suddenly, those cool-temperate rainforest remnants of Gondwana, the pockets of cool clarity filled with myrtle beech, sassafras, climbing vines, ferns and even ancient palms.

Places like this immediately put you in touch with a time long before our remote human ancestors emerged. Somehow time past and time future are brought together in the present. The many shades of green and the shafts of light create extraordinary contrasts. These are complex, living cathedrals that far outshine the likes of Chartres and Notre Dame. In other, drier places one comes upon those micro-environments, the deep gorges with waterfalls and crystal-clear rock pools, places of coolness and peace in the searing heat. They conjure up a sense of the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods, when the dinosaurs dominated the landscape. It is in these kinds of places in the bush that spirituality is being renewed and the Catholic imagination reactivated. Often in Church history, change and renewal begin right outside the institution, often among people with nothing to do with Catholicism, and then make their way slowly back into the Church community.

If we accept this, the question occurs: If our primary encounter with transcendence occurs in the natural world, why do we need organised religion, let alone Catholicism?

I don't know that I can answer this comprehensively, except to say that our mystical tradition has much to offer those who espouse environmental spirituality, both as a way of talking about their experience, and of providing some form of critical theological context in which to assess it. More than that, we have a clear understanding of the fact that spirituality is not an isolated, individualistic endeavour, but is always lived out within the broad context of community and the need for a social justice component. The Catholic tradition also understands what sacraments are and how they work, although perhaps we could recover the notion from the Orthodox that God is not limited to seven sacraments. Both the Biblical and Christian theological traditions have long had a deep sense of awe and wonder at the transcendent sense of presence that pervades the natural world. This is not a form of 'pantheism', as some critics of ecological theology argue, betraying a gross misunderstanding of our theological inheritance.

For instance, Saint Thomas Aquinas, following Augustine in the *De Trinitate* [Book VI], says that every creature is a *vestigium Dei*, a 'footprint or trace of God'. Thomas goes even further to say that 'every creature . . . *demonstrat Personam Patris*'—'shows forth the personality of the Father' (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 45, 7). Regularly he refers to God as the *artifex*, the 'artist' or 'crafts-person' of the entire world. 'Just as an artist's work proceeds from an idea conceived in the mind and from a love which bends the will to that work, so God . . . produces creatures' (I, 45, 7). This same approach is mirrored in Book I of the *Summa contra Gentiles* (I, 95, 5) where he says: 'All artists love what they give birth to—parents love their children; poets love their poems; craftspeople love their handiwork. How then could God hate a single thing since God is the cause of everything.'

From these metaphors we can argue that all of creation poetically conjures up something of its creator. This is illustrated by an extraordinary statement in which Thomas says *in creaturis omnibus invenitur repraesentatio Trinitatis per modum vestigii*, which Timothy McDermott translates rather beautifully as ‘all creatures bear traces of the Trinity’. Note well that Thomas says ‘all creatures’, not just ‘human creatures’. In other words, the whole of creation is an icon or sacrament of God. So we can perceive the Trinity in rainforest and mountains and sea, in the sulphur-crested cockatoo, the Bengal tiger . . . everywhere. Thomas re-enforces this in the *Summa contra Gentiles*: ‘Since God is the universal cause of the whole of being . . . it must be that wherever being is found, the divine presence is also there.’²⁵

Contemporary Catholicism so misrepresents itself. It so often comes over as an institution concerned only with moral rectitude and dogma, dominated by an infallible pope and sometimes arrogant hierarchs. The rich, sensitive traditions represented by the words of Thomas Aquinas are forgotten. It has allowed its poetry and beauty to be ignored and the space they once occupied in the minds of both the faithful and sympathetic observers, to be filled with the superficially attractive messages of exotic religions or New Age fantasies. Its long and creative spiritual tradition has been replaced at best with the psychological ‘insights’ of Freud and Jung, or at worst with psychobabble. As a result, the Church has seemingly abandoned the task of developing a mature faith in Catholics themselves, much less contributing a religiously-inspired imagination to the world. Instead, it offers the dull and sterile perspective of the administrator concerned with policing the boundaries of orthodoxy and ensuring institutional maintenance. It seems more concerned with sex and bodily functions than with the integrity of life on this planet.

The loss of its distinctive imagination is the real tragedy of contemporary Catholicism.

AFTERWORD

On 20 August 2002, Dr George Pell announced that he was standing aside as Archbishop of Sydney until an independent inquiry established by the Church's National Committee for Professional Standards under the *Towards Healing* protocols investigated allegations that he had sexually molested a 12-year-old boy while a seminarian more than 40 years earlier. Labelling the allegations 'lies' and 'a smear of the most vindictive kind', Pell explained that he was nevertheless taking leave 'for the good of the Church and to preserve the dignity of the office of Archbishop'.¹ The ranking auxiliary bishop of Sydney, Bishop David Cremin, was appointed to manage the affairs of the archdiocese in the interim. As much as the truth or falsehood of the allegations against Pell, this reaction testified to the changed climate in which Church officials dealt with abuse allegations. No more dismissiveness, no more evasions, no more blanket appeals to authority. The credibility of the Catholic Church, of its leaders and of their response to the clerical sexual abuse scandal was on the line.

One month earlier, the President of the National Catholic Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Francis Carroll, acknowledged

this general challenge facing the Church and what would be required to meet it once and for all. In a pastoral letter to the people of his Canberra–Goulburn archdiocese, Carroll again expressed his ‘deep sense of shame and sadness whenever priests and others commit abuse’ and said that some honest soul-searching on the part of the Church was needed. ‘This means being open to asking whether there are factors in certain forms of Church and clerical culture that increase the possibilities of such an abuse of power and betrayal of sacred trust,’² he said. Carroll made no mention of the 1999 study, *Towards Understanding*, which had done precisely that, but there was little mistaking that something like that document’s confronting analysis of everything from the Church’s gender-specific liturgy to its seminary formation programs for priests was what he had in mind.

Also in July, the auxiliary bishop of Sydney, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, addressed a gathering of largely lay Catholics at St Joseph’s College, Hunters Hill, to mark the 40th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Robinson too spoke of the need for a more forceful response from the Church on the clerical sexual abuse issue:

I would like to see a massive request from the Catholic people of the whole world to the Pope, asking him to put in motion a serious study of any and all factors within the Church that might foster a climate of abuse or contribute to the covering up of abuse. I would like to see an insistence that obligatory celibacy, attitudes to sex and sexuality, and all the ways in which power is understood and exercised within the Church at every level be part of this study.

I would like to see a massive request/demand that the collegiality the Vatican Council spoke of be used to the full in responding to this crisis. If collegiality is not fully used in an issue so important, so down-to-earth and so crucial to the effectiveness of the Church, then the Vatican Council is truly unfinished business. This surely

means the Vatican listening to the needs of each country and not imposing solutions.³

In the aftermath of the dramatic events surrounding the allegations made against Archbishop Pell the following month, the auxiliary bishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Bishop Pat Power, also weighed into the debate about the future of the Church with a very public appeal for ‘much-needed reform’. Writing in the *Melbourne Age* on 29 August 2002, Power called for ‘a more human, humbler, less clerical, more open church, a more inclusive (and therefore more Catholic) church, a church that finds unity within diversity, that embraces the whole of its tradition and truly reflects the person and teaching of Jesus’.

The extent of the overhaul Power had in mind was then laid out. He called for an examination of compulsory celibacy as one element in the reform needed in light of the clerical sexual abuse problem but also in consideration of the diminishing number of priests and vocations. He expressed his conviction that the Church needed to revisit its teachings on sexuality, including homosexuality. He said more opportunities must be found for women to participate in Church decision-making at every level, further reform of the liturgy was needed, and the climate of secrecy that allowed abuse to flourish in the past must be removed from other areas of Church life as well. Lastly, he called for ‘empowerment of people at the grass roots’ in fulfilment of the Second Vatican Council’s vision of the Church.⁴

How representative the thoughts of Carroll, Robinson and Power were of the feeling within the local hierarchy as a whole could not be known. But it was clear that the issues concerning institutional renewal and reform raised at the Synod for Oceania, and summarily ignored in the *Statement of Conclusions* signed in Rome almost four years earlier, were firmly back on the agenda. Archbishop Pell’s exoneration, in October 2002, by the inquiry investigating the allegations against him was not about

to change this.⁵ The whole affair has merely drawn attention to these underlying tensions within the Church—it had not generated them—and, gratifying as the result may have been, it was no substitute for a resolution to the problem.

But from where would such a resolution come? Clear also from the comments of Carroll and the others was the frustration of at least some local bishops at the Vatican's top-down management of their Church, and their sense that without more forceful agitation for reform from ordinary Catholics (what Robinson had called a 'massive demand/request') nothing was likely to change in the foreseeable future.

In the United States, the clerical sexual abuse scandal that broke in Boston in early 2002 and then spread to virtually every diocese in the country had spawned precisely this kind of grass-roots militancy. Lay Catholic groups such as Voice of the Faithful—small but growing in numbers and extremely vocal—were demonstrating outside churches and cathedrals, organising petitions demanding reform and urging the withholding of donations to Church funds until demands for greater accountability, openness and a willingness on the part of the hierarchy to invite meaningful lay participation in the running of the US Church were met.

In Australia, however, there was no comparable lay movements of any significance pushing a reform agenda. Catholics continued to give witness to their faith on public policy issues including the treatment of asylum seekers, Aboriginal reconciliation and social justice. But they did so largely as individuals or as long-standing members of disconnected advocacy groups. The vibrancy that once marked the Catholic community as a whole seemed to be a thing of the past. Most Catholics had apparently simply switched off discussions about the internal life of their Church. Who would turn the lights back on and reveal a vision for Australian Catholicism for the 21st century remained an unanswered question.

Chris McGillion

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