The old institution is tumbling headlong into a dark hole. Any bishop or experienced parish priest who thinks the situation will repair itself and we will all return to normal, that the repercussions of clerical sexual abuse and of the protection of offenders have not penetrated deeply into the fabric of their institution, is living in cloud-cuckoo land.

(Quoted from Chris Geraghty: On behalf of victim-survivors: the church has to own this worldwide scandal)

It would be hard to refute Chris Geraghty’s wise summary of the current situation in the Catholic Church. Certainly the closure of the churches during the pandemic has provided the time and the perfect opportunity for all to reflect on what is important in life. Having been a dutiful Catholic all my life, perhaps I should be feeling that something was missing now. But I wasn’t. It was almost a relief to enjoy a lie-in on Sunday mornings followed by listening to the ABC’s Radio National 9.15am program, The Year that Made me, where Australian heroes (our modern saints) talk briefly about their achievements – these people are awe-inspiring and inspirational in ways that few biblical readings or homilies nowadays can match.

Which brings me to Chris Sidoti’s article Will I go back to Mass? (see page 4-5). Does he reflect the feelings of many ARC members? Will others follow his lead—or have they already done so? We are told that only 10% of Catholics are still attending Sunday Mass. It would be helpful to hear if some of the 90% could tell us what brought about their exodus.

The sad news that Susan Ryan is no longer with us is a reminder of her proudest parliamentary achievement: the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984. This declared illegal all discrimination based on gender, marital status or pregnancy. She later sponsored the Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunities in Employment) Act. Because of Susan Ryan, we now have women working successfully in trades and professions previously reserved for men. What could be more just (or more Christian)? Yet our Church sought and (presumably) were given exemption.

Changes such as the above and similar ‘equality creating’ advances in our society show up our institutional Church that prefers to simply resist change rather than dialogue with reasoned argument. While other Christian faiths (apart from Sydney Anglicans) have had ordained women priests for many years, the Catholic Church continues to maintain a very ‘un-Christian’ ‘boys club’ ethos. It is little wonder that many Catholics are leaving in frustration. In addition to the scandal of sexual abuse, it is obvious that outdated rituals, vague scripture readings, reactionary pontifications, and the unjustified exclusion of women from the priesthood now present the image of an organisation that is difficult to identify with.

Will the Church repair itself sufficiently? I hang onto hope. But I won’t hold my breath!

Margaret Knowlden
Editor
The Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation (Dei Verbum) is, to my mind, perhaps the least appreciated document of Vatican II. It emphasises that the Bible teaches religious truth rather than literal or historical truth. It points out that, although inspired, not all scripture is revelation and to interpret it accurately we need to take into account the culture of the writers, their purpose, and the literary forms that they used.

The New Testament writers did not attempt to establish the biographical facts of Jesus life but wanted to illustrate that the events of his life were in continuity with sacred history. These events were continually shown in relation to the Old Testament by the writers of the New. The writers used the literary forms of their time: Jewish Midrash, a method of storytelling that often exaggerates or entirely invents narratives to teach a lesson or illustrate a deeper truth; the Pesher, which shows the events of the present as a fulfilment of past prophecies; the Apocalypse, which shows events as pre-existing in God’s plan. Why are these points particularly significant at Christmas time?

The accounts of the birth and infancy of Jesus are attempts through Midrash and Pesher to interpret the impact of the adult Jesus. There was a need in that culture to include something about the origin of such an important, yet humble, person. Mark and Paul, the earliest writers, make no mention of Jesus’ early life; their focus is on his teaching as an adult. Matthew and Luke fill it in with accounts that do not match up. Open each of them side-by-side and have a look at the significant differences. Amongst a range of variances, each has a different reason for Joseph and Mary being in Bethlehem – Matthew because of prophecy, Luke because of the census. Matthew describes them as residing in a house, then fleeing to Egypt after the visit of the Magi. Luke’s story is of shepherds and the manger, with no mention of Magi and fleeing to Egypt, etc. There is no point in trying to reconcile them since the recording of history is not their purpose.

Matthew is writing for Jews using a lengthy genealogy (that of Joseph) to show the legitimacy of Jesus through the Jewish tradition. We might find this curious since we understand that Joseph is not Jesus’ father. As a result of persecution, Jews were still seeking their true religious identity and fulfilment but Matthew introduces the thought that now they can embrace someone who draws in foreigners as well. The Pesher literary form features strongly in the first chapters of Matthew.
Luke is speaking to the Graeco-Roman world, the gentile converts. He traces Jesus’ genealogy back to Adam, the ‘father’ of the human race rather than to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. He presents Jesus as a teacher (with reference to John the Baptist) who as teacher has mixed up the social strata (woman at the well, etc.) Hence, through the Midrash literary form we have shepherds, the lower class, attending his birth; ‘no room in the inn’ because they are not of this area; the swaddling clothes and manger (usually made of stone) link to the binding cloths and stone tomb Luke will bring into his gospel later.

We do not even know if Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Many scholars think that it is more likely that he was born in Nazareth where the family lived. But archaeology and other research gradually allows us to know more about the culture of the people of Galilee and Jesus’ environment. An acceptance of this enables us to concentrate on the real messages that the Gospel writers are attempting to convey. Both Matthew and Luke want to cement Jesus in history, not write history. They are looking backwards in order to take their readers forward. The lengthy genealogies and the needing to deal with the census anchors Jesus in the real world of the writers who are Jewish and to ensure that their various followers are aware of that.

The truth of the scriptures is contained in their religious meaning that is wrapped up in the literary forms used by a particular culture. Would we criticise a piece of modern poetry (one of our literary forms) of being untrue because the scene it may be describing is not literally accurate? Would we accuse the poet of not telling the truth? And what about the child who comes in enthusiastically from school with an exaggerated account of a sporting victory? Is a lie being told even if the trophy is in his hand?

When I use the word ‘demythologizing’ I mean the attempt to deal with our understanding of what a story means for us and its underlying truth. Myth is a very important form of storytelling. We tend to misunderstand it because we don’t use it in our western culture.

The frustration for me at Christmas is that so many features of the liturgical celebration seem to miss the mark. The carols give joy to people singing them but the words confuse. Man will not ‘live forever more because of Christmas Day’. This applies to the resurrection. Some other carols come from traditions unrelated to Jesus’ birth. I try to rid my mind of the white Mary in immaculate clothes and replace her with a heavily pregnant, dark-skinned woman dealing with an ordinary birth in probably primitive conditions. Why cloak her in an image that says that any sexual contact would render her unfit to be the mother of Jesus. There are many ancient accounts of important people being born to virgins, but why do we not accept that in this instance it is probably just inaccurate translation?

Matthew and Luke are writing for adults. Do we miss the richness of the message by having our liturgies mostly completely dominated by having children act out nativity plays that emphasize a literal interpretation? Yes, engage the children, but surely, we can reflect and gain much more from what Matthew and Luke are writing. Do we largely go away and allow the occasion to be somewhat re-mythologised into a holiday period of eating and drinking?

The religious truth conveyed by the two evangelists is very clear when we understand the purpose in their two approaches:

♦ Jesus completes a picture for their readers;
♦ The message of Jesus that will follow in their gospels is universal;
♦ The foreigners who discover and embrace the child Jesus cut across religious and social barriers and this can bring peace in the world that their readers are experiencing.

The onus goes back onto us, the adults, especially if we are passively watching the nativity play. What do I do that helps to promote peace, at least just around me, to create a more just and equal society? How do I welcome or relate to those not like me, the Muslim, the refugee, and those who cannot get into the inn?

John Buggy is the spokesperson for Australian Reforming Catholics
Will I go back to Mass?

Chris Sidoti

Now that the lockdown has eased and public worship is resuming, a prominent Catholic in Australia wonders if it's really worth going back to church

For almost 70 years I went to Mass virtually every Sunday. The only times I can remember when I didn't were when I was in a conservative Islamic country where churches were either non-existent or very hard to find.

All that changed in March, when the COVID-19 lockdown closed churches in Sydney. I haven't been inside a church since then. Now they are open again and the number allowed to attend makes returning possible. So, after more than seven months, I am confronted with the question: Will I go back to Mass?

The first thing I need to say is that my absence seems to have made no difference to God whatsoever. God is neither happier nor sadder that I haven’t been there. I acknowledge that I have been going for years and years for my own sake, not for God’s.

The second question, therefore, is what has been the effect on me of going? I firmly believe that I need to worship God as part of a worshipping community. The problem is that the experience of worshipping in community is so bad.

That abominable English translation of the Roman Missal

The ‘celebration’ of Mass is rarely uplifting, rarely celebratory. It’s been far worse since 2011. That’s when the Vatican imposed a new English translation of the Roman Missal, a terrible translation carried out by the ‘Vox Clara Commission’ and its chairman, Cardinal George Pell.

This translation is an abomination before God. It was supposed to be a close translation of the Latin original. But it is not. In some places it omits words that are in the Latin. In other places, it adds words. It was supposed to be more elegant. But it is not. All those interminable sentences without ever seeing a full stop! It is also riddled with heresy. For example, there is the frequent prayer that we may merit salvation.

For the last nine years now, I have gone to Mass each week and not said an audible word, apart from the Our Father, which, though archaic, has not been subjected to a new bad translation. I mumble the words of the 1973 version of the people’s parts under my breath. I can’t bring myself to utter a word of the ‘Vox Clara’ translation, not even the great ‘Amen’ at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer that affirms all the awful language that has gone before it.

I have not experienced the Eucharist as the summit and source of Christian life. Each Sunday I am angrier and more alienated at the end of the Mass than I was at the beginning. Is this what I go to Mass for? Do I want to go back to this? Can I go back?

One question leads to another.

A crisis of ordained male leadership

The institutional Roman Church is like a failed state, hollowed out from within and imploding on itself. The sexual abuse crisis has been revealed to be widespread, affecting every country and every diocese and at every level. It seems that the most catholic characteristic of the Catholic Church is pedophilia. The sins of commission and omission can no longer be described as the work of a few bad apples. The institutional church is a pedophilic institution.

Then there is the crisis of leadership. The most defining quality of the episcopacy is mediocrity, at least in Australia. It’s hard to find a bishop in this country who is capable of leading. What most of them say and do is totally irrelevant even to most Catholics. The thought of them evangelizing the world is laughable. Most diocesan priests in Australia are men totally out of their depth, expected to lead two or three parishes – alone, unequipped and unsupported. And they seem too frightened to empower their parish laity to take over the responsibility.

I remember when the new translation of the Missal was introduced and every priest I knew expressed disgust at it. I said, ‘Then don’t use it. In this priest-starved diocese, what can your mediocre bishop do to you? Sack you?’

They all hated the horrible translation, but none was prepared to refuse to use it. Sad men struggling to sustain a sad institution. The crisis in ordained leadership is not a crisis of quantity, but a crisis of quality.
The refusal to entrust women with real Church leadership

Then there’s the misogyny. Not even the lack of male priests can induce a change of heart towards women on the part of the male leadership. If clear self-interest won’t produce change, then what will?

Women constitute well over half the remaining church-going population. Without doubt, there are extraordinary leaders among them who could get us out of the mess our male leaders have put us in. But they are not permitted to do so. A failed institution is one that resolutely refuses to grasp the ways forward that God gives it.

Then there’s the corruption, the product of the total absence of transparency and accountability. There are no clear procedures for decision-making, no due process or natural justice – and, of course, no financial responsibility. Even as the Bishop of Rome struggles to pry open the hidden finances of the Vatican, diocesan and parish finances in the Australian church remain opaque and secret.

None of these is a new issue. All of them have been issues for decades. But the context for me has changed. Before the pandemic, when I went to Mass every week, the default position was to continue going. Stopping would have required a decision to stop and there were many reasons not to decide.

Now, having not gone to Mass for seven months, the default position is to continue not going. Now, I have to make a decision to return if I am to go back. And a decision to go back to Mass is necessarily a decision to affirm and to assent to belonging to a Church that is characterized by pedophilia, mediocrity, misogyny and corruption.


CHRIS SIDOTI is a lawyer and international human rights consultant. He served as Australia’s Human Rights Commissioner and is a former member of now dismantled Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace.

Endemic secrecy in the Catholic Church

Francis Sullivan

Throughout the child sexual abuse Royal Commission the inquirers regularly asked why institutions not only tolerated child abusers but actively concealed their crimes. Secrecy was endemic in the culture of these institutions.

Those in position of power and influence chose to abide by the mainly unspoken rule that scandal had to be avoided and the truth not revealed. When it came to the Catholic Church this overt hypocrisy has undermined the community’s trust and fuelled the increasing cynicism that now confronts its leaders.

For those of us who have worked within the institution and remain loyal to its faith community, living with the culture of secrecy is not new. In many ways it has been ingrained into the clerical/lay divide. From the sacrament of reconciliation to the ‘clerics only’ advisory committees, there has been an aura of secrecy that somehow has been deemed acceptable as part and parcel of Catholic culture. The assumption was that clerics knew best and would always work in our best
interests. Secrecy was too easily confused with confidentiality, as was concealment with prudence. That is why the Catholic community itself has been complicit in perpetuating an opaque culture, where calls for accountability and transparency have been marginalised by those obsessed with control and ‘issues management’.

Frankly it comes as no surprise to find the same secret approach being adopted for the Plenary Council. Take for example the recent concern about the preparation of the official strategic working document for the Plenary Council, *Instrumentum laboris*.

The fact that its contents remain secret raises questions of trust. Can the laity be trusted in a genuinely open dialogue? Why else would such a central document not be shared with the Catholic community in the spirit of solidarity that is meant to underpin the Plenary Council? Is it because the Plenary organisers don’t wish to declare that they are not placing on the table all the issues raised during the consultations? Does the document reveal the drafting of recommendations that in turn demonstrate a nuanced, less even-handed interpretation of the issues? Again, how will we know? One thing for sure, we will be left in the dark over the changes made by the Vatican to the document before a public version is circulated. Is this to protect the image of the Vatican, and in turn that of the Holy Father?

For bishops and those who aspire to higher clerical posts the Plenary Council poses a cocktail of challenges. Some see it as the last shot in the locker to generate enthusiasm for an increasingly irrelevant institution. Others shy from the prospect that traditional church teachings may be publicly challenged. Still others are simply non-plussed as to how to negotiate the ‘non negotiables’ with an ever evolving out-spoken laity. No wonder the default is to control any aspect of the process that canon law enables.

From the outset the restraints of canon law on the prospects of a democratic and representative Council were recognised. Whether it was exactly who would and wouldn’t be eligible to vote at the Plenary, through to who could chair the proceedings, canon law set the rules. Consultation and participation of the laity have been encouraged, though novel ideas like a ‘people’s congress’ alongside the formal Plenary have not. Even the appointment of a lay woman as co-chair of the Plenary seems to be a bridge too far. Why? Is it canon law or is it ideology? Is it inertia or has it never been realistically considered? We don’t know because no-one is saying. No-one in ‘the know’

That is why the Catholic community itself has been complicit in perpetuating an opaque culture, where calls for accountability and transparency have been marginalised by those obsessed with control and ‘issues management’.

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FRANCIS JOHN SULLIVAN AO is a teacher, administrator, and leader in health care organisations, who was CEO of the Catholic Church in Australia’s Truth, Justice and Healing Council. Article published in *Pearls & Irritations*, 13.8.20
Recovering the ‘True Church’
Paul Collins

There is increasing frustration regarding the 2021-2022 Plenary Council among Australian Catholics committed to renewal. Hedged in by the constraints of canon law and the need for Vatican approval, no action on its decisions can be expected before 2024. This probably suits the majority of bishops who show little or no enthusiasm for the Plenary. It also promises to be a largely in-house exercise with, according to Peter Wilkinson’s calculations, only around 26 of the 265 people ‘called’ to attend not directly employed by the church.

Australian Catholicism can’t wait until 2024 to act, not least because already 90% or more of self-identified Catholics have abandoned faith practice. We have lost our ability to speak meaningfully of Jesus, the Gospel and the genuine Catholic tradition. The church is publicly identified as an abusive, secretive institution obsessed with sex and gender issues, closely linked to our culpable failure to protect vulnerable children in our communities.

The result: Catholicism is largely ignored, even despised by our culture and fellow citizens. Understandably, early-on in the process, we thought that the Plenary was ‘the only game in town.’ But sad experience has taught us that that’s true if you accept that the only game a Catholic can play is the bishops’ game. But this game was invented by the hierarchy who set the rules, pretty much umpired/referreed the process, decided who kicked a goal or scored a try, and retained the right to change the result if it didn’t suit them.

Jesus’ words ‘Let the dead bury their own dead’ (Luke 9:60) have resonance here. He had just challenged a man to leave all and follow him, but the man said that he had to bury his father first. Jesus’ response is a paradoxical play on words, because the Hebrew word for ‘dead’ can also mean something that is now irrelevant. His message is that if you follow him, you have to leave everything, especially the irrelevant, behind. Perhaps this includes ‘dead’ episcopal games.

This is not as revolutionary as it sounds. It is precisely what Pope Francis proposes when he calls us to leave behind the mustiness of ‘sacristy faith’. ‘I prefer a church,’ he says, ‘which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.’ Francis is a revolutionary, as the encyclical *Laudato si’* (2015) demonstrates. Much more important than his repudiation of much of the politics, economics, technology, capitalist theory and denialist rhetoric of the post-modern world, is the theological, philosophical and ethical revolution that he points towards in the encyclical.

In the light of Jesus and Francis’ words, Australian Catholics need to leave the bishops to ‘bury their dead.’ Many of them think—to adapt the words of Louis XIV—L’église, c’est moi, ‘I’m the church!’ A small minority of them support renewal and the rest have rendered themselves irrelevant by their inability to articulate a coherent spiritual and faith response to the needs of the times. They are also going to be very preoccupied with financial problems resulting from abuse pay-outs and civil cases against them. While we are thinking accountability, transparency, responsible governance, the rights of the baptized, they are trapped in their own absolutism, leaving us no option but to begin to live out our baptismal commitment to live and preach the gospel, to evangelize. Endless negotiation with bishops over internal issues like governance does nothing for evangelization in contemporary culture, but it does trap us in an episcopal game that is going nowhere. The real challenge facing the renewal movement is to assume ministerial leadership and articulate a new vision.

Where do we find that vision? The first two chapters of the Vatican Council II’s document, *Lumen gentium,* sketched out the New Testament vision of the church as a local community of the people of God, drawn together by God’s Spirit, and gifted to minister as representatives of Christ in the world. But there was a significant failure after Vatican II, especially during the long papacy of John Paul II, to incorporate that vision into pastoral practice, church structures and the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

Even though Pope Francis clearly favours a more community based, synodal model of church, the bishops’ game still operates out of a hierarchical, clerical mindset under Vatican control. The disjunction between models means that Catholics are caught between two different ecclesiology, two understandings of church that are incompatible, leading to the toxic disjunction that we live with all the time.

It is the people of God model that reflects the
New Testament and early church’s self understanding. The notion of hierarchy is an import from late-Roman administrative structures that the church adopted in the fourth century, post-Constantine (d.337AD). This was re-enforced by the revival and application of Roman law to the church in the late-twelfth century. Neither of these imports have any resonance with Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God.

The specific hierarchical model that we operate out of nowadays was borrowed from the theory of the divine right of kings in the late-sixteenth/early-seventeenth centuries, which was the prevailing secular model of governance at the time. Think again of Louis XIV. It received its definitive form in the ecclesiology of Jesuit theologian Robert Bellarmine (d.1621) in his Disputations against the Protestants. According to Bellarmine, Christ intended that the church be a monarchy with Saint Peter and successive popes as its monarchical rulers.

This is the church enshrined in the decrees of Vatican Council I (1870) in which the pope has ‘the absolute fullness of supreme power.’ All teaching authority lies with him through inflated notions of papal infallibility. This ecclesiology has, at best, a tenuous relationship with the New Testament.

Most contemporary Catholics operate out of the Vatican II model. They think of themselves as baptized members of a church community on pilgrimage, searching for God and transcendence in and through the world and other people, and committed to discipleship and ministry. As Christians they are incorporated into and are ‘all one in Christ’ where there is ‘no longer Jew or Greek…slave or free…male or female’ and, Paul might have added, ‘bishop or layperson’ (Galatians 3:28).

Contemporary Australian Catholics must take the people of God model as the theological foundation for their communities and ministries. This is not a divine right, hierarchical vision, but one of an outward-looking people journeying toward the kingdom of God. This is an und tidy, non-linear vision, one that is going to have to be built from the bottom up by communities of believers. These communities will pray and celebrate liturgy together, but are also outward-looking, intimately involved in ministry. Their leadership would emerge organically from the community, as happened in the early church. Many contemporary Australian renewal movements are strategically well-placed to begin to operate as these new communities; a couple of them are already well along the way to realizing this. The Cyber Christian Community asked us in a letter in early-August: ‘Is the current Church culture ‘fit for purpose’ in the 21st century? Does it actually meet the spiritual needs of thinking adults today? Does it clearly express the mission of Jesus to contemporary society?’ These are the questions we should be answering ourselves, rather than referring back to the bishops. The ACCCR* Call Statement urged Catholics ‘to act now in ways that reflect the values of the Gospel, the vision of Vatican II and the best values of Australian society.’ That is, renewal movements should be engaged in actions to build the church, not patching-up superannuated, dead church structures. What am I saying in practice here? What would these communities do in practical terms in response to the crisis facing the church?

First, renewal groups would build themselves up as communities through celebrating liturgy, prayer and biblical reflection together. From that foundation, they go out to ministry. They are not discussion, or self-help groups. They exist to serve by living-out the basic meaning of liturgy. ‘The word is derived from the Greek λειτουργία (‘leitourgia’) which basically refers to ‘public service,’ ‘work for the common good.’ But it also refers to the service of God, what we once called ‘divine service.’ Worship and ministry are intimately linked; you can’t have one without the other. The ministry of these groups would be structured around the gifts of each member.

The challenge is to build-up the church on the basis of the guarantees set-out in the Letter to the Ephesians: ‘You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the cornerstone’ (2:29). As citizens and members of God’s household, the Spirit has given ‘gifts’ so that ‘some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ’ (4:11).

These groups need to maintain strong contact with each other, which we’ve already achieved through ACCCR and our signing-on to the coalition’s Call Statement. Also, if groups are focused on ministry to the community rather than special interest ‘causes’, it’s less likely they’ll take stances that lead to conflict with other Catholics.

In summary, Catholic renewal movements need to question their focus on Plenary processes and reforming church structures. I think the time has
come when we have to contemplate another game, one grounded in the New Testament and the early church and that was articulated in the first two chapters of Lumen gentium. This is where we should be re-focusing our energy. Even if, in the unlikely event that playing the bishops’ game persuaded them to give some ground, we would still be operating out of a superannuated model that has no future. Given the crisis that the church faces, we have little time for that.

Some fear that a more community-based church with an emphasis on the equality of all believers is somehow ‘heretical’ and non-traditional. Actually, it’s the recovery of a profound tradition by going back behind Vatican I and the divine right monarch/popes/bishops and the medieval application of legalism—as Saint Paul says, ‘We have died to the law through the body of Christ’ (Romans 7:4). It is a return to the early church and the New Testament. ‘Tradition is not static,’ Pope Francis says: ‘It is dynamic. It is the guarantee of the future, not the custodian of ashes.’

As baptized Catholics we are already equipped and authorized to form communities to minister, to build-up the church and to proclaim Christ to the world, but we have lost our way in episcopal games and forgotten our call to ministry.

Our world is increasingly like the Roman world that the early church faced and our primary ministry is to enter into dialogue with that world, so that we can communicate the message of Jesus and bring something of the richness of the Catholic tradition to our culture. Let’s not waste time playing the bishops’ game of minor adjustments of old structures, but build new communities that are more attuned to the signs of the times and the needs of the culture, with Laudato si’ as the basis for evangelization. That is the real challenge facing us.

PAUL COLLINS is a former practising Catholic priest, a writer, a historian, an environmentalist and a broadcaster.

* Australasian Coalition for Catholic Church Reform

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Grieving for the Lost Parish - an institution on its knees

Eric Hodgens

Some church groups are pressing for a post-pandemic opening up; others, who have already opened up, are sounding a lament as they find it is not business as usual. There are signs of grieving for the parish – an institution on its knees.

World War II changed Western history. The post-war Catholic parish was an institutional wonder. It took off with the baby boom, reached its peak in the 1980s, started its decline in the 1990s and may well be mortally wounded by the COVID epidemic in the 2020s.

The parish of my wartime infancy appeared timeless. It was an identifiable part of the wider culture but, for Catholics, it was a mainstay of life. Baptisms, marriages and funerals happened there.

Most Catholics started formal schooling there. That is where you ritualised being a Catholic. Life-long personal and family friends were made. It had its social oddities such as not eating meat on Friday, the practice of confession and regular Sunday Mass. Adherence was tribal.

Post-war reconstruction for Catholics brought new vitality to the parish. With population growth came new parishes and schools. The baby boom brought not only a large new generation of members but increased vitality and vision to the whole of society. ‘The times—they were a changing....’

Vatican II was in tune with that change. The fortress church lowered its drawbridge and out streamed the People of God on a march towards establishing a new Kingdom of God—a new world order marked by identification with the hopes and joys, the griefs and anxieties of all, mutual respect, the discarding of bygone enmities, diminished sectarianism an improved life for everybody and a fairer society.

Parishes implemented that new vision. The laity moved into active mode. There were youth groups, senior citizens groups, social justice groups, parent groups, social groups sporting groups. And all had
their formal coming together in the parish liturgy which, while led by clergy, was no longer a clerical preserve, and was in a language all could embrace and understand.

Lay action and leadership became a top policy in the renewed Church—especially with the youth. The Young Christian Worker movement (YCW) formed a whole generation to see, judge and act. Loads of young priests who were mentors of this movement.

The parish was a scene of action and vitality.

But an undertow was forming under this enthusiasm. Paul VI went along with the awakening vision but was still a product of the Ancien Regime of Christendom and a lifetime operative of its clerical bureaucracy. He feared that the new enthusiasm would get out of hand. So, he put on the brakes. He reaffirmed priestly celibacy and condemned contraception. His technique of moderating the exuberance was by appointing conservative bishops.

Ten years later, Restoration became the official church policy with the election of John Paul II.

By the end of the 1980s fault lines started to show in the church. You noticed them in the parish. The earliest pointer was a drop in Mass attendance and affiliation. Adult parishioners in their day had found their social life in the parish. But, now, the new generation found their social stimulus in a wider world. Once they reached adulthood, they dropped Mass. No longer compelled to set an example, their parents started to drift away themselves.

As society became more secular, the Church hierarchy grew more rule-insistent and less pastoral. Rather than re-discovering the core of the Jesus message and re-contextualizing it, the hierarchy, supported by revisionist Catholics, chose to stick more tightly to their guns only to be left irrelevant and increasingly alone. The bishop in mitre and crosier – once an image of authority – became a curio from the past.

The numbers tell the tale. Already by the time the pandemic hit, Mass attendance had dropped to about 10%. Catholic school enrolments are not as solid. Locally-born clergy are dying out. Foreign priests are struggling. Parishes are being closed or amalgamated. The ranks of committed supporters are ever thinning. The institutional decline is clear to all.

And now COVID lockdowns have hit. Large areas have not had a church gathering for months. Where religious gatherings have been resumed, only a fraction of the former congregations seem to have come back. Social distancing results in unrecognisable liturgies. It’s not the way it used to be.

At a practical level, income has dropped— perilously—and with no signs of reversal. There is a critical level of income below which you cannot run a parish.

The institutional parish as we knew it is on its knees. Hence the grieving for lost glory days. Mind you, it is an institution that is being mourned—not the central vision articulated by Vatican II. The church as institution is in trouble but not the church as the People of God.

All institutions rise and fall. Visions endure and can find new institution vehicles. There are millions of true believers out there. They just find the current institution not fit for purpose.

What is the shape of future Christianity?

Synods and regional councils are institutional attempts to address the challenge.

A German synodal assembly seems to be making progress. The Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMENCE) is doing its own soul-searching on the problem. An Australian Plenary Council is in preparation but getting mixed support. Some, including many bishops, don’t want it. Others, browned off by past efforts which went nowhere, are cynical.

One hopeful sign is the emergence of small groups of well-informed Catholics with church renewal as their shared objective. They are not well received by the institutional leadership but are persistent in their wish to re-invigorate Catholic Christianity. They are active in synod and council preparations but do not rely on them for their future. Groups of them meet regularly to remember and celebrate the Lord as the first followers did.

The institutional parish may have run its course, but the Christian spark is not extinguished. It is just taking new forms.

ERIC HODGENS is a Catholic priest of Melbourne living in retirement. This article was published on Pearls & Irritations - 2 October 2020
The Role of the Priest
Eugene Stockton

The time has come for us priests to re-invent ourselves. The Royal Commission into the Sexual Abuse of Children has shown up a clerical culture that can perpetrate and cover up shameful crimes. What can be done now? To do nothing is to acquiesce silently in what has gone before. The Gospel injunction is a start: ‘Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand’ (Matt. 3:1-2, 4:17). Repent does not mean breast-beating but a change of heart and mind, opening up to what is new, recognising the signs of the times.

The shock of the Royal Commission is one such sign. So also the sad realisation that most Catholics have turned away from the Church, many blaming the faults of priests: instances of clergy scandal, poor preaching and theology, seigneurial standing, aloofness, consumerist lifestyle. There is too the sign of the shortage of vocations: if God is the One who calls, is the message to us now that a different kind of priest is called for. Or has the once noble ideal since lost its savour?

As seminarians we learnt that Ordination imprinted on the recipient a special character or mark which lasts forever. Some imagined this made the priest ontologically distinct from others. He is the alter Christus, special above the rest of humanity. The adulation he received at Ordination and thereafter reinforced the difference. Distinctive attire, titles, abode added to his special standing in the Catholic community. The feudal structure of the parish in the diocese, with the ‘Lord of the Manor’ owing allegiance and accountable to the ‘Sovereign’, and not to the ‘peasants’, gives the parish priest a leadership which holds back leadership among the laity. The old image of the priest has been shattered by the recent revelations and now he is more often the object of suspicion.

I experienced a different kind of priesting in my involvement with urban Aborigines. The Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, modelled on local Aboriginal Medical and Legal Services, was managed through elected officers by the local indigenous Catholics, who might seek outside expertise (priests, religious) for the services on offer. My designation was changed from Chaplain to Priest Assistant to the ACM. Personally my main objective was to foster Aboriginal leadership in various fields. Later as Parish Priest of Riverstone I experimented in applying this experience to parish ministry, with notable success.

I propose that now the ideal is that the parish community be run by the parishioners through an elected Pastoral Council and Management Team. Rather than heading the parish, the priest may rather see himself as a missionary (as in parish missions or overseas missions) coming in to challenge and stir, announcing the coming of the kingdom. He is the wise Elder (presbyter), disceming and guiding those who are active in the parish, counselling those in need. At the invitation of the community, his particular task is teaching doctrine and administering the sacraments, where possible with the cooperation of lay ministers. The ideal is that the parish, the local church, be the Body of Christ in this place, with all its diverse members fully exercising the charisms imparted to them by the Holy Spirit.

EUGENE STOCKTON is a retired Catholic priest and archaeologist in the Blue Mountains region of New South Wales.

The Bureaucrat’s Prayer

source: Gideon Goosen: Clericalism

Although it is the prayer of the bureaucrat, it could well be the prayer of the laity pre-Vatican II

Oh, Thou, who seest all things below
Grant that thy servant may go slow;
That we may study to comply
With regulations till we die.

Teach us, O Lord, to reverence
Committees more than common-sense;
Impress our minds to make no plan
And pass the baby when we can.

And when the Tempter seems to give
Us feelings of initiative,
Or when, alone, we go too far
Recall us with a circular.

Mid fire and tumult, war and storms,
Sustain us, Blessed Lord, with forms,
Thus may thy servants ever be
A flock of perfect sheep for Thee.
The Catholic Church: Who needs reform?
Gideon Goosen

There are many aspects to reform in the church. Different people and different reform groups, have their own take on what, or who, needs reform the most urgently. I must admit the recent article by Antonio Spadaro on Pope Francis has prompted me to think more about it. I would like to share some of those thoughts with you.

On the personal level, reform in the church touches both the mind and the heart. On the institutional level it concerns a very wide range of aspects like doctrinal, moral, spiritual, liturgical, structural and attitudinal.

Much of the effort of reform groups worldwide in recent times has been directed at the pope, bishops and ‘the Vatican’ since they are the decision-makers. That is the politics of the issue. And we can now, after the sexual abuse scandals, include priests in that list.

Let us stand back for a moment, and take a look at the demographics underlying the whole question of church and reform. I have to speak to my own experience, conscious that others from different age groups, different cultures and different countries will have their own specific take on it. The percentage of those involved in reform groups in Australia (and NZ?) is, at a guess, about 5% or less. In the church the hierarchy is less than 1%. That leaves about 90% of the church to think about. An unspecified percentage of these are older pre-Vatican thinking and acting people who have no interest in changing themselves and no interest in the topic of changes in the church. And in their case, change might be impossible, so they will probably go to their graves with their current beliefs and practices.

The rest, perhaps 40-45% might change how they think and what they do, if they were given good reasons to do so. There are many influences that have brought this about. One obvious one is that they have been neglected since Vatican II, because of the lacuna of adult ‘growth in faith’ programs, and perhaps too neglected in our current focus of reform.

Antonio Spadaro’s illuminating essay on the pontificate of Pope Francis is helpful in many ways. It is a great help in understanding Francis’ approach to change or conversion. Francis sees conversion applying to everyone in the church. He is reluctant to move forward in synodality until there has been time for discernment. This explains why when he became pope he did not call for the resignation of those who opposed him but wanted to give all a time to discern.

The analogy that Francis used referring to his method, which caught my eye, was that of litmus paper in a liquid. When the liquid is acid/alkaline throughout, the colour of the litmus paper will change either red or blue depending on its acidity or alkalinity. To artificially change the litmus paper is pointless. One has to wait for the whole liquid to change. To change to married pastors, to ordain women, to welcome LGBTIQ persons into the church, will of itself not bring reform to the church. Change has to permeate the whole church.

So it is with the Church. Francis wants the church to change. He rejects cutting off heads and making dictatorial changes because this will be superficial. Simply ordaining married men and women or making other structural changes will not, of itself, bring conversion. So with synodality we have to be patient. But as the church is a human organization it will always fall short of the ideal. History shows that sometimes those who cannot change, or who disagree with authority, will form their own church. Two classic historical examples are: The Old Catholic Church, formed after Vatican I and the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX) founded by Marcel Lebebre in 1970, after Vatican II. Yet the ideal that we wait until all are aboard remains attractive, even if humanly unattainable.

My point is that any reform group should turn some significant attention to the 40-45% of parishioners who might change if things were explained to them. Perhaps reform groups have focused too narrowly on the hierarchy and neglected the laity. I have always felt that changing the hierarchy is going to be a huge challenge, but an even greater challenge might well be changing the passivity of the laity. The image of trying to quickly turn an aircraft carrier around comes to mind. The

laity, after all, have been told for centuries that their job is to ‘pray, pay and obey’. Or, as someone else has expressed it: the laity have been ‘parked’ for centuries.

My gut feeling is that we have neglected them. By our words and actions we could try to re-orient the parish to what is essential. This would be conversion from the ground up. There is little to stop us doing this now, not waiting for the Plenary Council or other events.

Francis has given us all the information on that score: Return to the gospels and modify structures that block a return to the gospels (Evangelii Gaudium). Take time to prepare liturgies, introduce bible studies, form book clubs on spiritual reading, form meditation groups, form groups that visit the sick, and imprisoned, invite people to discussion groups on burning issues and current church issues, take action regarding refugees and other social justice issues. Let qualified lay people look after the financial aspect of a parish. Reject clericalism in what we say and do, and call no one ‘Father’. These are all things that could be done locally with or without the pastor. This will turn the litmus paper.

The problem is that today we tend to sit back and wait for others (bishops) to take actions because that is the clerical way we have been brought up. While certainly not giving up on approaching our bishops we must become proactive in things we can do at parish or diocesan levels.

Having said that, we are impatient beings. We live in a world where change is happening more quickly than in other eras. We are reluctant to wait endlessly for bishops to act. There is an episcopal inertia that infuriates all. We all know examples of this.

We can appreciate that a synod is not a political parliament and that discernment is necessary. For each person to make a speech promoting his/her point of view can mean that neither side is listening to the other. I think this is what Francis meant when he said there was no discernment at the synod on the Amazon regarding the ordination of married men.

In short, we must keep pressure on the hierarchy but simultaneously attend to our own conversion and that of the laity around us. Reform is more than politics, it is inclusive conversion.

GIDEON GOOSEN is a Sydney-based theologian and author. His latest book is Clericalism: Stories from the Pews (Melbourne: Coventry Press, 2020). He is a member of the ARC Secretariat.
More scandals at the Vatican
Keith Suter

The Roman Catholic Church is the world’s oldest continuous political institution. It has often been surrounded by scandals and allegations.

The Italian media are now following a tangled controversy which also includes Australia’s Cardinal George Pell. Pell is the most senior Catholic cleric charged with child sex offences. He has since been cleared and has returned to Rome.

The allegations in recent days do not involve child sex allegations but are about the more traditional financial scandals. Pell in this context is seen as more of a hero being treated badly by the Vatican’s ‘deep state’ covering up its financial misdeeds.

Italian media are currently reporting on Cardinal Giovanni Becciu’s alleged financial misdeeds. Becciu was a rival to Pell, who apparently was investigating Vatican financial misdeeds before being summoned back to Melbourne in 2017 for the alleged sex offences hearings. With the legal proceedings out of the way, Pell is now back in Rome.

The Italian media are fascinated by alleged financial misdeeds committed by Becciu. Over a millennium ago in AD1031, Anglo-Saxon England began collecting money for the Pope’s charitable projects: the Peter’s Pence fund. It is alleged that in recent years, the fund has been used to help finance the Vatican’s operating expenses (balancing the budget) rather than helping the needy.

Cardinal Becciu is alleged to have provided some funds to his three brothers and to have made unwise investments. Becciu lost money investing in luxury property in Chelsea, London (though property consultants did very well from the dud investment). He also helped finance the Elton John ‘Rocket Man’ bio-pic movie which celebrated values that are contrary to traditional Catholic teaching.

Investigations in the last few days have now allegedly shown that a sum of 700,000 Euros (over A$1 million) went from the Vatican to Australia. Who received it? Pell’s defence team (unlikely to have received any help from Becciu) said they didn’t get it. The victim’s solicitor has also denied receiving the money. Where did the money go? Did it go to some of the witnesses? For what purpose?

When Francis became Pope in 2013 he was well aware of various allegations concerning the Vatican’s finances and the high living of some people. He has tried to set an example of humble living but most Vatican officials continue to live well in their princely mansions.

His predecessor Benedict began the work of sorting out the Vatican’s finances. But he mysteriously suddenly quit office before that work (and other investigations) could be completed.

Pell was appointed to clean up the Vatican’s finances. He soon ran up against Vatican officials – the ‘deep state’ – who were allegedly mishandling funds, including Peter’s Pence.

Cardinal Becciu was effectively sacked by the Pope last month. Becciu gets to keep his red hat and title but has no role now in administration. By retaining his cardinal status (albeit in reduced status) he cannot be called before an Italian criminal court. The investigations into his use of the money continues.

The Vatican has what police forces call ‘form’. In other words the current allegations are similar to previous allegations.

DR. KEITH SUTER is a futurist, thought leader and media personality in the areas of social policy and foreign affairs. He is a prolific and well-respected writer and social commentator appearing on radio and television most weeks. He is a member of ARC.
Clericalism
Stories from the Pews – a workbook for the Parishes

Clericalism: Stories From The Pews records Catholic's experiences of clericalism and responds to those encounters in the light of the Gospel witness, the nature of priesthood, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and the constant teaching of Pope Francis. It also explores issues such as seminary formation, appointment of bishops and attitudes to women in church.

Clericalism is a workbook for parishes where priests and people together can consider the mission and structure of the church and plan for ways in which grown up Catholics can be formed as Christian disciples with adult faith and integrity.

On the eve of the Plenary Council of the Australian Church, his book could not be more timely. – John D'Arcy May

Firmly grounded in Catholic theology and history, this is an authoritative call to action for the elimination of what Pope Francis terms ‘an ugly perversion.’ – Trish Hindmarsh

Gideon Goosen holds doctorates in philosophy and theology and lives in the Blue Mountains near Sydney. He is the author of many books and articles and has taught theology for over thirty years at Australian Catholic University, Trinity College Dublin and many other institutions. His two most recent books are, Hyphenated Christians (Peter Lang, 2013), and Saving Catholics (Morning Star, 2018). He is a member of Australian Reforming Catholics and served on the NSW Ecumenical Council for many years.

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The Editor
ARCVoice
Unit 68/28 Curagul Road
NORTH TURRAMURRA NSW 2074

OR (preferably) email:
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Tel: 02 9488 7927

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ARC Secretariat

Rob Brian 02 9371 8519 robertfbrian@gmail.com
John Buggy (Spokesperson) 0419217543 jbuggy@ozemail.com.au
Rob Butler 0419 207 943 butlershore2@bigpond.com
Alan Clague 07 3376 3879 clague@aapt.net.au
Gideon Goosen 0425 351 334 gcgoosen@gmail.com
Don Humphrey 0418 248 246 kdhumphrey34@hotmail.com
Margaret Knowlden (Editor) 02 9488 7927 mknowlden@bigpond.com
Shirley Lohman 02 9484 4718 shirley.lohman@live.com.au
Peter Meury 0243 884 809 petermeury@bigpond.com
Maureen Ryan 0403 931 782 roberter8@gmail.com
Noelene Uren 0402 923 601 wlmur5@bigpond.com

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