

THE CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

An Awakening of Faith!

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THE DECLINE IN Sunday Mass, the shortage of clergy and religious and sexual scandals raise concerns around the dinner tables of committed and/or disappointed Catholics as they gather in their friendship groups. As the discussion deepens, however, their concern develops into questions of faith: not their faith in God, that is made clear, but how faith affects their relationship with the Church. Many express disaffection with the Church for the matters above, but more deeply they feel excluded by priests and bishops in participating in the life of the Church. They are not recognised for their own areas of expertise or their advice sought and acted upon in significant areas of parish and church life, particularly those that impact on daily life.

Morris West, a noted Catholic author when interviewed on ABC TV by Geraldine Doogue as long ago as 1998, restated his love for the Church, but noted his opposition to the 'arbitrary nature and disrespect shown by Roman authorities to those they have been called to serve'. He expressed his frustration, also in his book *A View from the Ridge*, (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1996).

The disaffection among laity, and also among religious and priests, has been deemed a 'crisis of faith' brought on by the advance of 'secular' attitudes. The logic for this follows the line that particular issues of faith will be resolved when those who doubt put their trust in the guidance of those who are privy to the 'true faith'. It is to be noted that the traditional exercise of leadership in a society where education has been the privilege of the few took a similar stand with the 'less endowed'. The ordinary people needed the guidance of those who knew better, particularly in the face of changing circumstances of life and society. The general population therefore was to rely on

those of superior education to make the decisions for them.

The current 'MySchool' debate in Australia is an example of the tension and frustration that arises in society when change is presented. In this case, one wonders if the politics of the media or the parliament give any credence to the wisdom of parents who ultimately have to make decisions for their children. Despite its limitations MySchool has been promoted so that parents have the data to assess the development of their children's education. In this scenario they are given the opportunity to become more closely connected to the task they have of rearing their children in the world of education where there are many, many choices. Being 'sent off to school' no longer provides a sufficient education for a child to achieve the knowledge that will bring maturity and stability to their lives; the style of discipline, the social environment, the course choices are factors that have to be considered.

This exemplifies the broad response to changes in today's world. The model of earlier generations, typified by the gentry or 'ruling classes with superior knowledge', is inadequate to engage the people involved in the complex social or educational issues of the moment.

In the 1960s John XXIII challenged the Church to engage the world in the significant changes happening across all levels of human endeavour and experience. He called the church to identify and take heed of the 'signs of the times'. In establishing the Second Vatican Council, the task he set for all members of the church and people of good will was to open themselves to the Spirit of God to be found in the changes of social, national and international importance. (Alberigo *History* I, 18f.) This required the followers of Christ both per-

sonally and communally to enter a process of renewal that would reach into their everyday lives. It was a task to reflect and discern the way forward as families, communities, nations face the disruption and difference that an engagement with the world involved.

The challenges to life and faith presented in ‘the signs of the times’ for John XXIII are similar to those that arise in the wider society as it absorbs change and adapts to new situations and circumstances. As people around the dinner table discuss their concerns about the issues in the Church they use the same processes of debate and reflection and decision making that they use to address in daily challenges. The ‘authorities’ they choose to listen to, be they persons or institutions, begin the search for more information that will help in decision making. The process of sharing their reflections with others is an environment of ‘shared wisdom’ and often leads to decisions that have meaning for them. As the media and politicians are the ‘authorities’ that provide information in social, commercial and educational matters, so the *magisterium* of the Church provides information for its members to consider in the realms of faith and morals.

The *magisterium* of the Church is concerned with the handing on the traditions of the Church and guiding decisions in the human expression of faith and morals. Its task is to assist ‘the faithful’ to live a life of faith and shared moral values together. Although the definitions of *magisterium* originate in earlier eras, Vatican II pointed to a change in exercise of magisterial authority: it called for personal renewal of faith and morals in each of its members, as well as in the liturgical and administrative structures of the church (*Gaudium et Spes* n.12). John XXIII expressed the ‘predominantly pastoral character’ of the role of the *magisterium*:

The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a *Magisterium*



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which is predominantly pastoral in character. (Alberigo, *History II*, 366-7)

This questioned the ‘top down’ method of making decisions. *Magisterium* authority in these terms was to work with communities, to deepen faith, to promote justice and respect in fractured societies. In the experience of John XXIII this was not happening. In fact his concern for the quality and direction of the pastoral care of people in the Archdiocese of Rome was brought home to him during the visitation of the parishes of Rome in 1958-9. Hence, his mythic challenge to the *magisterium* to ‘open the doors and windows of the church to allow the Holy Spirit blow through’. He saw that to be ‘open to the signs of the times’ was an act of faith...it called *all* members of the church to look to each other, listen to each other, listen to those around them, to take note of their reflections in sharing with each other—to learn about faith and morals from each other. This would break though the barriers of their own limited worlds and open them to the inspiration discovered in the goodness and wisdom of others.

This sharing of wisdom had been described as the *Sensus Fidei* (the instinct of the people for the faith) in times past. It had its origin in the doctrinal and liturgical disputes of the early Church and in the period of the Fathers. It expressed that God’s continuing revelation could be found in the lived experience of the ‘faithful’ as they interacted with the cultures and in varied situations they found themselves, as the world around them changed. It enabled Christ’s mission to reach out to all people. Cardinal Walter Kasper explained it as the third dimension in the authoritative expressions of the

church: ‘in decision making one has to take into account the communal dimension; that is one has to listen to the witness of the faithful and their *sensus fidei*’. (Kasper, 2003, p 13)

The engagement of the ‘faithful’ in discussion, reflection and discernment on their journey through life is prayerful experience. This means for those involved they begin with the inspiration of the gospel ‘where two or three are gathered in my name I am there’, rather than respond to the imposition of wordy prayers and rituals. Catholics have a long heritage that expresses and confirms the presence of Christ as they gather in prayer. It is the basis of their ‘spirituality’ and their method of reflecting, sharing and praying together: this is a heritage to guide them. John XXIII reminded Catholics of the importance of the spiritual dimension in his personal life, before and during his time as pope. He was a leader who went out of his way to engage with others as the motivation of his ministry. He showed this in the close relationship he had and has with the people of Rome; the courage and openness he displayed in the face of the disputes and debates of the Council (see Flynn 2003 p. 59f); his welcome to all people of good will. Similarly, an effective pastoral response will acknowledge others, address their disaffection and enter into a dialogue with them.

Instead of addressing a ‘crisis of faith’, John XXIII engaged in a dialogue that saw an opportunity to awaken the faith in people’s lives, or the desire to express the presence of God more meaningfully in their daily life. As with John XXIII, this is not without risk for the individuals and church structures, rules and

regulations today. It calls for a process of discernment that is based on respect for the presence of the Spirit in the commitment of the other, rather than a judgement of their efforts or doubts.

The disaffection of many of the ‘faithful’ confronts the Church because it has its roots in the ineffectiveness of the pastoral responses to the renewals of the Council. The Church was called to acknowledge the influence of the changed circumstances in which people live and to interpret the teaching and practice of the Church accordingly. However, those at dinner express their disaffection because this has not happened. For them it is not a ‘crisis of faith’ because of their deep relationship with God, their prayer and their desire to share their reflections. Rather it is a deep hurt because what was promised through the experience of Vatican II has not engaged them and their daily experiences in the life of the Church. The resolution of this dilemma requires a response by the *magisterium* that acknowledges and respects the lived faith of the people. It requires that the *magisterium* be open to the transformation that Vatican II called for by all involved and to offer a choice of two goods both of which offer fulfilment and happiness.

The task ahead will acknowledge the faith of those committed to Christ and awaken in them a sense of mission to reach out to bring God’s love to the world in which they live. The teaching church enlightens, rather than imposes faith. The people around the dinner table seek respect, understanding, engagement and inspiration to live lives that are valued and engage in the life of the Church.

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