

**Clericalism.**  
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Thank you for the privilege of talking to you at this meeting, so important for the future of the Australian Church. You have asked me to talk about clericalism, presumably because I am a cleric and so might be expected to know all about it from the inside.

I shall begin my talk by outlining a number of attitudes and practices which are often identified with clericalism, and outline briefly my take on it. I'll illustrate my argument by considering these traits associated with clericalism as displayed in two periods in the life of the Australian Church. I'll conclude with some scattered reflections on the Catholic Church today to spark your own reflections.

1. Attitudes and behaviour associated with clericalism.

When people describe clericalism, these are some of the traits that are usually mentioned. They do not add up to a definition, but only to one description among others.

a. In clericalism the focus is placed on internal relationships in the church – to church buildings, ceremonies, customs and practices, and not on its mission to the world at the boundaries of the church and outside it. The operative image of the church is that of a home or a fortress, as opposed to Pope Francis' image of the church as an army field hospital.

b. Consistent with these images is a preoccupation with the aspects of Catholic faith and life that mark the difference between the church and the world outside it. So an insistence on the detailed observance of liturgical rubrics, church regulations, doctrinal instructions, clerical dress etc. These things mark the boundary between Catholics and others, and that boundary needs to be patrolled.

c. Central to clericalism is a strong emphasis on hierarchy, understood in a way that stresses the difference between lay people and priests, and the authority of priests over lay people in matters pertaining to church life. This is translated into the restriction of decision-making to Pope and communicated to Bishops and priests; it is accompanied by confidentiality in church governance.

d. The difference between clergy and laity is expressed in the exclusion of lay people from governance and from liturgical roles. The boundaries between men and women are policed by regulation of women's participation in liturgy and other aspects of church life.

e. These traits of clericalism find expression in insistence on a formality of address between priests and laity, and sometimes between priests themselves.

When people, including Pope Francis, speak of clericalism they do not describe it neutrally as one phenomenon in church life. They see it as something undesirable, even toxic. It is significant that few people would admit to clericalism. It is always an affliction or a sin of others. For that reason to do no more than describe and criticise its aspects is like flogging a straw man.

Clericalism has to do with relationships in the church, and any useful account of it must include the relationships between the traits attributed to it and their context, including the culture and society. Those contextual relationships will help decide whether particular attitudes and behaviours are toxic or not.

I shall now illustrate and test this abstract argument by considering the traits ascribed to clericalism in the parish in which I grew up in two decades forty years apart

## 2. A Parish in two decades.

### a. The late 1940s

At the time the late 1940s seemed the beginning of an age of growth in the Catholic Church. In retrospect they marked the end of an era. Seen through the lens of the traits associated with clericalism, the parish ticked all the boxes. As the Bishop made all decisions about the archdiocese, so the parish priest made all the decisions about the parish and mother superior all the decisions about the primary school. The style was formal – clerical dress always and soutane in the church grounds, the parish priest always addressed as Father, the liturgy conducted with rubrical exactitude in unvarying form, women excluded from the sanctuary except when on their knees to clean it, weekly mass attendance an obligation, and expectation. The Catholic Church, too, seemed a complete world of its own where young people could go to a Catholic school, play Catholic football, Catholic tennis, and go to the Catholic snow in a Catholic bus. All the boundaries were clearly delineated.

But were these traits toxic? To decide this we must set them in the context of the broader culture and the place of the Catholic Church in the society of the time. At this time the style of dress and address in schools, workplaces and public life were formal – everyone wore hats or caps in public. Sunday, too, was a church day, free from business and work.

Perhaps more important, the Catholic Community had been made up of immigrants struggling to find an equal place in society. The Catholic Church was the visible expression of its hopes, embodied in splendid churches built with the pennies of the poor. The reputation of the Church and its Clergy were a source of public pride, if of private grumbling. In particular the Church provided education for children at a considerable cost to the Religious teachers who

staffed the schools and the parish priests who paid for them. And for young women it offered one of the few opportunities for an alternative future to home and family. If the parish provided a self-sufficient world, too, it was not introverted. It also encouraged Catholics to look beyond their local world to support the missions, and also through the YCW and other groups, to encourage social reform.

Though the culture of the time and the working relationships within the parish were as shonky and as much in need of reform as in any other age, the important features of the traits associated with clericalism were that they were then part of a given public culture and that they reflected relationships in which there were mutual, tangible benefits for clergy and lay people. That underlay the mutual respect and acceptance of inequalities.

This is not to say that the qualities associated with clericalism were ideal, but only that in context they were not toxic. What went unnoticed, however, were the changes in the society and the place of Catholics in it.

b. The parish in the 1980s

By now there was another Parish Priest. The church had been handsomely restored in traditional style, complete with altar rails. The altar boys were handsomely garbed as was the choir, and the liturgy was lavish with regular high Masses. Latin was heard in the air. The Parish Priest was formal in his dress and address and took all decisions about the parish. The parish school was now staffed by lay teachers as well as Religious. As part of the outreach to young people boys were invited into the presbytery.

To judge whether these qualities were toxic we also need to set them against the changes in society and the relationship of the Catholic Church to culture. By now Catholics had an equal place in society. Education in Catholic Schools was now supported by the State. Consequently, the church was not a central institution for people's betterment. Styles of dress and address in society were becoming more informal, and women's struggle for equality was bearing fruit with the result that Catholic women were beginning to be alienated by evident inequality in the Church. Pride in the Church and its reputation with the deference that attended them were now a survival rather than an expression of mutual benefit.

The most significant change in the context over forty years was that the traits associated with clericalism had changed from being a given to become largely a matter of choice. The priest's sole role in decision making could now be modified by a choice to introduce a pastoral council. Levels in formality or informality in dress and address were also a matter of choice. The style of church arrangement, the conduct of liturgy and to some extent the involvement of

women were also a choice, as was the style of working with young people. And finally, whether people went to church and where were also becoming a matter of choice.

Where practices and attitudes are a matter of choice, the judgment of toxicity will depend on the reasons why the choices were made. When Pope Francis talks about clericalism he constantly returns to motivation. He asks whether the choices, consciously or unconsciously, were motivated by self-gratification or concern for the people, by mission to people at the margins or comfort for the devout few.

These things are hard to gauge, but in the case of the parish in these years, the traits attributed to clericalism were clearly part of a toxic culture. Boys were abused, later died and suffered mental illness, and elderly ladies were treated viciously. Whether this toxicity is best named as clericalism is an open question. I would see it rather as psychopathic manipulation of church structures and relationships for self-gratification. The central question posed by the experience, one with which we still grapple, is why Catholics at every level were open to manipulation.

#### 4. The Catholic Church today

I shall conclude with a few random comments on the Australian Catholic Church today in the light of my talk. They are designed to prompt your reflection rather than to argue a case.

First, the changes evident in the 1980s have intensified today. The residual respect for the clergy and church leadership then evident has been shot to pieces by the evidence of child sexual abuse and its cover-up. It will not be restored for generations, and then only if Catholics have reached out effectively to people who were sexually abused as children stand. Styles of dress and address and of parish leadership are a matter of choice. So is whether and where to go to church. In this world clergy can win trust only if their lives embody the Gospel.

Second, in this world trust cannot be rebuilt by emphasising the difference between clergy and laity and marking out the boundaries between them. Rebuilding processes like those on display at the Amazon Synod need to be part of local churches. The initial processes of the Australian Pastoral Council in which people were asked to talk together about their hopes and fears, pride and despair in the church embodied this process which emphasised listening and readiness to consider all options. No questions can be taken off the agenda, even if they lead to dead ends. The immediate task is to create the conditions under which mutual responsibility and trust can be reestablished.

Third, because the ordering of the life of the Church rests so much on personal choice by clergy and lay people, the reasons why those choices are made must be open to discussion and challenge, particularly if they are made by clergy for the people. That openness or lack of it is the area where toxicity falls and rises. Pope Francis has framed clearly the question to be asked about choices: are they made for self or for others, about the Gospel or about ourselves, about the hungry or the satisfied? To ask and answer these questions requires self-reflection and the readiness to be challenged.

Fourth, the rebuilding of the church is not identical with rebuilding the past. It is more like nurturing the flowers that grow through rubble, of gathering seeds for planting, about capture by the Gospel sparking small conversations and initiatives.

In today's church there are seeds ready to be watered. Among them are the commitment of older Catholics, always likely to be ignored in planning. The people involved in Vinnies, prayer groups and other commitments, as well as those living heroically in challenging domestic circumstances are the seed bed of the future church.

Immigrant groups will be the basis of the emerging church, with their variety of styles of liturgy and address. For them the difference between the new English translation and the old, between Aussie-born and foreign born priests, is simply a difference between different versions of the foreign. Their styles and faith cultures must find expression in the traits of the emerging church.

Central, too, are the Catholic outreach organisations, including schools and universities, hospitals and health care institutions, and social service agencies. For many people these are the only church they know. They are significant both because they embody the mission of the Church to the margins through their work, and because they include within themselves those margins. In their staff they include people of all religions and none, Catholics at home with their church and those alienated from it. They also include lay Catholics, women and men, in positions of leadership. The organisations need to be nurtured and future leaders who 'get' their spirit encouraged so that the values of the Gospel continue to guide their planning and their way of working. This will save them from the endemic risk of subsiding into an unreflective and self-perpetuating bureaucracy.

Finally, and most important, are the small interactions that spark the Gospel for people and lead to boisterous life. An observer in Paris would never have noticed encounters that helped shape the Australian church of my childhood. Sr Rosalie Rondu encouraged the young Frédéric Ozanam to bring firewood to a poor family. And young Irish socialite Nano Nagle, when going to a party, was inspired by seeing destitute people to conceive a plan to return to

Ireland and defy English laws against schools for the Irish poor. Out of these encounters the Vinnies and the Presentation Sisters, so influential in the parish I grew up in were born.