

**HOPES AND CHALLENGES
FOR THE FUTURE CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA**

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INTRODUCTION:

“Behold, I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.” Isaiah 43:19

These words of the prophet are extraordinary prophetic utterance in the midst of profound disruption in Israel’s history. The capture of Jerusalem and the subsequent destruction of the Temple as well as the exile constituted the worst crisis that the people of God had yet to face. But the astonishing reality of that ancient disruption is that the matrix of brokenness became the venue for new possibility. Against the background of loss and hopelessness, of utter humiliation and disgrace, Isaiah speaks of the new things that summon the people to a new future.

Isaiah’s prophecy enlightens and challenges us as we seek to understand and to live the meaning of our experience in the church and in the world. In so many ways, we feel like the Jewish exiles facing the monumental task of rebuilding from the ground up after the devastation of the clerical sexual abuse crisis. We witness the passing of the old and the emergence of the new in our own time.

Like Israel before the exile, the church has failed to be a place of promise and freedom, of covenanted communion and solidarity. It has not fully lived out the radical vision of powerlessness of the Servant Lord. Its dysfunctional and destructive culture of clericalism has betrayed the Gospel. There is a sense in which the church must change into a more Christlike pattern of humility, simplicity and powerlessness as opposed to worldly triumphalism, splendour, dominance and power. Christians in the post Royal Commission are like the Jews after the exile. The future of the church like the new Jerusalem Isaiah speaks of will not be revitalized by way of simply repeating what was done in the past. It will not be simply a restoration project or doing the old things better. Rather, we

must have the courage to do new things; we must be open to the Spirit leading us to new horizons even as we tend to revert to the old ways.

The church in Australia is also facing a disruption of biblical proportions. The Royal Commission, coupled with the incarceration of Cardinal George Pell, created something like “ground zero” for us. It has made sure that we cannot go on the way we have. It has exposed the Shakespearian rottenness in the state of the church. We must humbly and boldly address the biggest challenge of our time and build a healthier church for future generations. This disruption calls for deep discernment and courageous action rather than fear, intransigence and defense of status quo. Like the ancient disruption, this unprecedented crisis can catalyse the church into a new era of hope and possibility. Out of our “ground zero,” like a phoenix the church can rise again with a new life from the ashes of its old shell.

THE DEMISE OF THE OLD PARADIGM:

It is becoming increasingly evident that clerical sexual abuse crisis is a symptom of a dysfunctional, corrosive and destructive culture in the church. It is not just a question of individual manifestations of clericalism. Indeed there were and have been great priests who lived and ministered heroically even within the constraints of the old mold. Still, it is a question of clericalism inherent in the very culture of the church, which we must look at very honestly. In his letter following the Chilean scandal, Pope Francis wrote: “It would be irresponsible not to go deep in looking for the roots and structures that allowed these evil acts to happen and simply to go on.”

The culture of clerical hegemony has been solidly entrenched in the Catholic Church ever since it took centre stage in the Roman Empire. It is a by-product of the model of church, which sees itself as self-sufficient, superior to and separate from the outside world. Its security, reputation and internal relationships are the centre of attention. The church in this model becomes the church of the ordained at the expense of the baptized. As a result, the ordained becomes an exalted and elitist club that protects the interests and privileges its members. This explains the obfuscation and cover-up, which is so endemic to this club mentality. It is a far cry from the model of the Humble Servant that Jesus exemplified and this celibate clerical club provides the ideal condition for the disease of clericalism to fester.

We really need to once and for all jettison the clericalist model of church with its by-product of the exclusive elitist clerical club. It has served us well beyond its use-by date. The church as understood and articulated by the Second Vatican Council sees itself as a pilgrim People of God, incarnate in the world. It is a new paradigm - one that is based on mutuality not exclusion, love not fear, "smell of the sheep" not elitism, engagement with the world not flight from or hostility against it, incarnate grace not dualism. It is the church going out of itself as opposed to closing in on itself.

The time has come for us to embrace and implement unambiguously and decisively the vision of the pilgrim church that the Second Vatican Council entrusted to us. The time has come for the church to embrace a new paradigm based on a discipleship of equals, so that all the People of God can create a new culture of humility, accountability and service.

The model of the church based on clerical hegemony has run its course. Insofar as it is deeply embedded in patriarchal and monarchical structures, it is incapable of helping us to meet the needs of the world and culture in which we live. We have long moved out of the *ancien régime* and the age of absolute monarchs. We are on this side of the secular state and the rise of democracy. Yet it seems that the deeply entrenched patriarchal and monarchical structures of the church have failed to correspond with our lived experience.

For the church to flourish, it is crucial that we come to terms with the flaws of clericalism and move beyond its patriarchal and monarchical matrix. What is urgent is that we need to find fresh ways of being church and fresh ways of ministry and service for both men and women disciples.

It is worth noting that at the recent Synod on the Amazon, the synod bishops say they consider it "urgent" for the church to "promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner."

"It is the church of baptized men and women that we must strengthen by promoting ministeriality and, above all, the awareness of baptismal dignity," they

state. Beyond these generic statements, it remains to be seen how women can share in the decision making power and institutionalised ministries in the church.

The church cannot have a better future if it persists in the old paradigm of triumphalism, self-reference and male supremacy. So long as we continue to exclude women from the church' governance structures, decision making processes and institutional functions, we deprive ourselves of richness of our full humanity. So long as we continue to make women invisible and inferior in the church's language, liturgy, theology and law, we impoverish ourselves. Until we have truly incorporated the gift of women and the feminine dimension of our Christian faith, we will not be able to fully energise the life of the church.

NEW WAYS OF BEING CHURCH:

It is possible and indeed necessary to speak about new ways of being church as we leave behind any remnant of the Christendom. Australia was not part of the Holy Roman Empire or the Papal States. But the way of our being church has been steeped in the old paradigm of clerical order, control and hegemony. There was a reluctance to break with the past and thus for a time, there was an effort to hold on to the old paradigm. Interestingly, this holding on resulted in what was known as restorationism or the reform of the reform, rooted in traditional theology and practices. The result has been at best an ambivalent reception of the Second Vatican Council and, at worst, an attempt to re-establish the old order.

New ways of being church is grounded in a People of God ecclesiology. It is, I believe, at the heart of the Vatican II and now being reclaimed decisively by Pope Francis.

A humble, healing and merciful church: Prior to the 2nd Vatican Council, the church was understood to be on its way to becoming a perfect society in and for the world. It was a defensive, fortress church. Other Christian Churches were considered aberrations from this road map, not to speak of other religious movements. However, *Gaudium et Spes* –the guiding document of the Council - presented a new paradigm: the church is not an enclosure which protects its members against the sinful world. It is a fellow pilgrim with the men and women of our age. It is a church incarnate in the world. Therefore, it is time not of fearful

retreat, disengagement and self-referential pomp, but of accompaniment and engagement.

Being merciful is at the heart of Catholic identity. It is not simply a matter of acting with mercy and compassion to those in need with our position of power and privilege intact. Rather, it is a radical discipleship of vulnerability and powerlessness in the footsteps of the humble Servant of God. It is an existential stance in favour of the weak and the vulnerable. It is about building up people and relationships rather than profit and size. It has to do with the Kingdom mentality rather than the empire mentality.

A church that goes to the margins: Pope Francis constantly calls us to move beyond the security of status quo and take the risk of going to the periphery. The church must be the church of the poor. The church must go out of itself in order to be close to those in need.

If one can detect the direction of Pope Francis' pontificate, it has something to do with the movement from security to boldness, from inward looking to outward looking, from preoccupation with our status quo, from safeguarding our privileges to learning to be vulnerable, thereby conveying God's compassion to those who are on the edges of society and church. It is that precarious liminal space where the true cost of our discipleship is counted, because we dare to walk with the Samaritans of our time, just like Jesus did before us. The crisis of diminishment that we face allows us an opportunity to divest ourselves of all the unnecessary trappings, to focus on what is our core mission, to act more prophetically and to live more fully, more creatively, more boldly, more at the periphery.

A listening, synodal and inclusive church: As we move to a more pilgrim community model, it is also necessary to foster a culture of encounter and dialogue. Pope Francis speaks of an "inverted pyramid" which is a radical way of exercising power and authority. It is not a top-down and centralised approach reminiscent of the monarchical model. Rather, it is a synodal church at every level, with everyone listening to each other, learning from each other and taking responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel. Vatican II already spoke of the

key principles: collegiality, subsidiarity and *sensus fidelium*, all of which pointed to a more listening, dialogical and inclusive church.

The recent synods in Rome gave us a window into his vision of a synodal church. They were often marked by disruption, chaos and drama but also by a deep sense of dialogue and a boldness to strike out new pathways. In the end, it was the journey of synodality that energized the church. It was the unleashing of the energy long locked up beneath the ice of institutional security that truly matters. The energy that had been trapped in a rigid control was released by boldness, freedom and "*parrhesia*."

What the church needs is not simply a renewal or an updating of methods of evangelizing. Rather we desperately need is an inner conversion, a radical revolution in our mindsets and patterns of action. Gerald Arbuckle speak of refounding as opposed to renewal. This refounding means going to the very cultural roots and a hope-filled journey into the paschal mystery for mission under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Unless we genuinely repent of institutional failures and unless we convert to the radical vision of Christ and let it imbue our attitudes, actions and pastoral practices, we will not be able to restore confidence and trust in the church.

Pope Francis has envisioned a church where the lay faithful flock will sometimes 'strike out on new paths,' and lead the church forward. He has encouraged Catholics to, 'Assume always the Spirit of the great explorers...not frightened by borders and of storms....May it be a free church and open to the challenges of the present...'

Pope Francis has really lived up to his vision of the church daring to break loose from its comfort zone and self-referential mentality. He has challenged us to be a compassionate, merciful, open and inclusive church. He has privileged a style of leadership, which involves more deep respectful listening and collective discernment.

CONCLUSION:

There is a sense that we are being cut loose from the safe and secure moorings of the past. But that has been the pattern of the Judeo-Christian story even since Abraham and Sarah left the land of Ur to go to where the spirit beckoned. It is in their DNA and ours to read the signs of the times and follow where the river flows. It is not in yearning for or holding on to the known and the familiar but in reimagining the future and venturing into the unknown chaos like the old exodus that we shall find new life. We can react with fear, despair or denial in these unsettling times. This was the way many Israelites reacted when faced with the barren desert. I suspect many of our contemporaries do the same with respect to the crisis in the church. There is something hauntingly similar between the Israelites' penchant for certitudes of Egypt and many of Pope Francis' critics' demand for dogmatic clarity.

The time that we are living in can be likened to Holy Saturday in the Gospel. It is a liminal interval, a time in which one stands between the old and the new. Our task is to live the creative tension between the pain of the present and the hope of the future. The Catholic Church in this country will face diminishment and decline as a result of combined forces such as the secularization of our society, the institutional malaise and of course, the impact of the Royal Commission. There will be collateral damage that will impact adversely on the church's mission. But as long as we -like the midwives during the slavery in Egypt- know how to deliver and nurture new life in the face of painful transition, a better future awaits us.

It humbles us to know that God is with us in the mess and even in the perceived irrelevancy of the church. It comforts us, too, to know that the church was not at its best when it reached the heights of its power in what was known as Christendom. It was the church of the Catacombs that shone forth its best rays of hope ironically when it was poor, persecuted and powerless. Christendom and for the most part of history, we have tried to be great, powerful and dominant. This liminal time may turn out to be the best time to be part of a humble, inclusive and servant church.

May we have the courage to move from the old paradigm of triumphalism, power and splendour to the new ways of being church that will convey the freshness of the Gospel.

'I dream of a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. (*Evangelium Gaudium* 27)
