



# arcvoice

A Report from Australian Reforming Catholics  
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## Editorial

In this issue of *arcvoice* you will find several pages devoted to our 'full house' conference held on 14/15 October in the Dougherty Centre in Chatswood NSW.

Most gratifying for us was the presence of Bishop Pat Power of the Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese who has alerted the Australian Bishops Conference to the significance of ARC and its aims (pages 2 and 5). This should give ARC a legitimate place among Catholic organisations in Australia.

This view was already shared by Prof. Leonard Swidler in Philadelphia, president of the ARCC (Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church) from whom the Chairman of our Conference, John Buggy, received an email on 11 October. Prof Swidler congratulated us on our existence and on the conference focus on 'Conscience needs Courage'. He proposed that ARC and ARCC should explore the possibility of collaboration.

More comments from and in relation to our great event are on pages 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 9. The papers presented by Fr Michael Fallon and Prof. Wolfgang Grichting can be obtained from our editor, Margaret Knowlden, through email or a self-addressed stamped envelope.

A key word used in the various workshops was *responsibility*. If we want to justify that, as the People of God, we are Church and all committed Catholics are responsible for its life. Thus, all the members of ARC share in the responsibility for the direction of the Catholic Church in Australia.

At the AGM held on 15 October, eleven persons were elected to form the Secretariat for the ensuing year. Their names are listed on the back page.

Alan Holroyd and Ted Lambert have 'returned' to the secretariat.

Toni Adler, representing the younger age group, identifies with the growing disenchantment of Catholics within the Church that has 'sidelined' Vatican II.

Therese and Gerry O'Neill have experienced the exit of many out of their own parish since a new priest turned the clock back to a previous century.

All three became members of ARC at the conference before they were elected to the secretariat.

In addition, several others volunteered to assist in the Secretariat's work on an ad hoc basis.

The new Secretariat held its first meeting on 13 November.

The Secretariat operates on a consensus basis and each meeting is chaired by a different person. This year Alan Holroyd will be the Minutes Secretary. John Buggy continues as Spokesperson. ARC's address remains c/- Jim Taverne, who is also the Treasurer. Margaret Knowlden is the Editor of *arcvoice*, but all Editorials are not all necessarily written by the same person.

An important item discussed at the meeting was the formation of local groups. This is more or less along the lines of what Barbara Campbell had in mind when she first formulated ARC's aims, six years ago. Adelaide is the first cab off the rank, to be followed by groups in Melbourne, Sydney and the NSW Central Coast.

We agreed that the Minutes of the Secretariat meetings should be available to all ARC's members who only have to ask for them.

*Jim Taverne*

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## Letters

### Extracts from a letter from Bishop Pat Power

Thanks for all you did in the organization of a great conference .....

When you get a chance you might send me a few points or issues which the participants wanted taking up with the bishops. I'll also encourage them to be responsive to any ARC people who wish to speak with them personally.

Renewed thanks .... to all who did such a service to the Australian Church last weekend.

Peace and blessings

*Pat Power*

## Bishop Power's Letter to the Australian Bishops

(printed with permission)

Dear brother Bishop,

Four weeks ago, I attended the annual conference of Australian Reforming Catholics in Chatswood (Sydney). As you will see from the program, I was invited to speak and to celebrate Mass in the course of the gathering.

My overall reactions to the conference were extremely positive. About 150 people attended from right across the spectrum of the Catholic Church in Australia. They were people with a great love for and loyalty to the Church. The speakers were of high quality and easily understood. They inspired their hearers to a greater participation in the life of the Church as well as witnessing to their own personal and ecclesial faith. I sensed very little bitterness or anger among those present. Most are quite involved in the Church at all sorts of different levels.

Moreover, like me, they share a deep desire for the Church today to be its best self in regard to its own members and the wider community. Never in my lifetime have I seen the need for the Church to proclaim the message of Christ with greater urgency, deeper love and compassion and in a way which touches every creature. So often we make statements which make us feel good but which have very little impact within or outside the Church. For that reason, I found Pope Benedict's encyclical, *God is love*, a breath of fresh air, precisely because it sought to speak in a way which was relevant and intelligible.

So, I can say that I shared very much the hopes of the ARC participants for a Church always in need of reform. It saddens me that in so many ways we have walked away from the opportunities Vatican II gave us to be a light to the world, truly engaging with our contemporary society, listening to people's questions and responding to their quest. I never lose hope that we as Church will reclaim our lost opportunities to spread the message of Jesus more effectively. That spirit of hope was very much part of the ARC conference.

The organizers wondered how the outcomes and the spirit of the Conference might be conveyed to the Bishops of Australia. I offered to pass them on to you with my own reactions and reflections. I did not endorse every word spoken at the meeting just as I would not be enthusiastic about every utterance made at our own bishops' meetings. However, I did experience that same spirit of communion with my ARC sisters and brothers as I do with you, my brother bishops. That all may be one.

Yours fraternally in Christ,

*Pat Power*

I thought I'd just send a line or two to say how much I appreciated the ARC conference and the work put into making it such a success by yourself and the secretariat as a whole.

What impressed me most, in addition to the quality of the speakers, was the cheerful and buoyant atmosphere of the whole group, despite the general conclusion that it is difficult to see what we can actually do to change the structure of the church as it stands.

I think it was partly the opportunity everyone took to speak frankly and openly about what they really think about it all, and found understanding and agreement from others. I think it was also that basically it was a very good-humoured crowd – there really was a lot of laughter.

It was one of the few conferences after which I have felt quite perky instead of tired and irritated!

*Moya Crowe*

I would like you to pass on our many thanks to the ARC Exec. for the recent Conference. We haven't stopped talking about bits'n pieces since that weekend. Mind you, that wouldn't be hard, given the topics, titles, content and the fact that so many of us attended (about 20-25% of the regular members of our St. Vincent's Community attended at least for some of the time – maybe the most of any group at the ARC!). We each really enjoyed some particular aspect, and trust that your lives are resuming a sense of normality, given the amount of time and effort that MUST have gone into the preparation.

So, looking forward to the NEXT one, and what goes on in between.

Please pass on very best wishes to each member of the recent ARC Executive.

Kindest regards and best wishes,

*Clare Maguire*

NOTE: Copies of papers given by Michael Fallon and Wolfgang Grichting at the Conference can be obtained on request from the Editor: knowlden1@bigpond.com

# St Teresa of Avila

Kerry Gonzales

presented during the Mass at our recent Conference

Sunday 15 October is the feast day of St Teresa of Avila. Less than twenty years before Teresa was born, Columbus opened up the western hemisphere to European colonisation. Two years after she was born, Luther started the Protestant Reformation. Out of all of this change came Teresa, pointing the way from outer turmoil to inner peace.

Rather than marry, Teresa joined a Carmelite convent.

At the age of 43, she became determined to found a new convent that went back to the basics of a contemplative order: a simple life of poverty devoted to prayer. This doesn't sound like a big deal, right? Wrong. When plans leaked out about her first convent, Teresa was denounced from the pulpit, told by her sisters she should raise money for the convent she was already in, and threatened with the Inquisition. The town started legal proceedings against her – all because she wanted to try a simple life of prayer. To Teresa, spiritual life was an attitude of love, not a rule. Although she proclaimed poverty, she believed in work, not in begging. She believed in obedience to God more than penance. If you do something wrong, don't punish yourself – change.

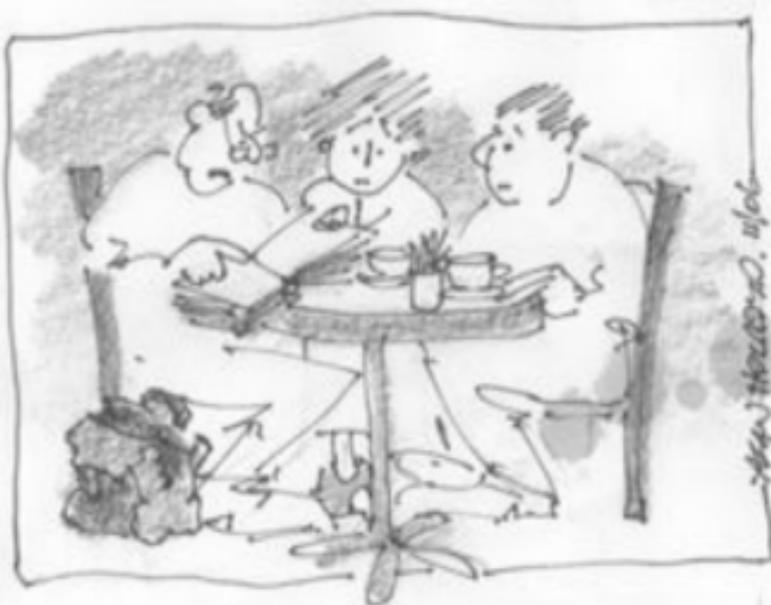
Once she had her own convent, she could lead a life of peace. Right? Wrong again. Teresa believed that the most powerful and acceptable prayer was that prayer that leads to

action. Good effects were better than pious sensations that only made the person feel good.

At 51, Teresa felt it was time to spread her reform movement. She braved burning sun, ice and snow, thieves and rat infested inns to found more convents. But those obstacles were easy compared to what she faced from her brothers and sisters in religious life. When her former convent voted her in as prioress, the leader of the Carmelite order excommunicated the nuns. A vicar general stationed an officer of the law outside the door to keep her out. The other religious orders opposed her wherever she went.

Teresa looked on these difficulties as good publicity. Soon she had postulants clamouring to get into her reform convents. Many people thought about what she said and wanted to learn about prayer from her. Soon her ideas about prayer swept not only through Spain but all of Europe. She was canonised in 1622. Teresa is the founder of the Discalced Carmelites. In 1970 she was declared a Doctor of the Church, one of only two women to be honoured in this way.

Sadly Teresa's struggles still echo in our church today. As we gather this morning to participate in this sacramental encounter let us pray that we have the strength of St Teresa to continue seeking much needed change. □



Now, is latte from the Latin or is it just Sydney speak for being behind the times?

In places where there are a number of members, coming together for a cup of coffee seems like a simple way of making a start to personal contact. Was coffee around in the days of Jesus? Who knows, no biblical record? All cultures have simple ways of meeting up and sharing a story, having a joke and chewing the fat, so there is little doubt JC would have been well known at the local.

Following C of E (Church of England), the Macquarie Dictionary (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition 1999) lists 20 entries for coffee! *Latte* – Italian, latte macchiato eg stained milk. *Leite*, meaning milk – Portuguese, pronounced “late” eg café late.

Alan Holroyd

# No porters, no interpreter, no taxi

Kate Englebrecht

I want to share a story about learning to surf. For years I had sat on the beach watching the surfers, but didn't actually get into the activity on the waves until one day my 18-year-old son, William, said, 'Come on Mum, it's not hard – look at all the women surfing'. That was it. I was determined to learn. The first time I tried was a total catastrophe. I got sand everywhere and came up with seaweed in my ears. So I bought a book on surfing which tells exactly what to do. I learnt the rules: how to stand, the degree, the angle, the perfect stance, the wax that works best. I knew it all. I've got the theory down pat and I struggled in the white water area for weeks and got more and more wilfully determined that I was going to manage this damn surfing thing, and it got harder and harder.

Will watched me, laughing himself silly every weekend. Finally he said, 'Why don't you get out-the-back? You are always here in all this white water; if you go out-the-back, it is so much nicer for a start.' I don't know about you, but out-the-back there are big white pointers, you never know what is going on and, besides, those waves are enormous. I am having a bad enough time where I am ankle-deep. What will it be like when I'm out there?'

But eventually one day I swallowed my fears and paddled – under one wave, under the next, and eventually I got out through the last one and was out-the-back, exhausted, empty, thinking that the lifesaving guard would get to me eventually if they saw that I was heading to New Zealand. So I sat there and, by the time I had re-gathered my heart rate and felt a little calm, it was actually quite beautiful and very still. Even the waves are only little gentle rolling hills to decide whether to get on them or not. I sat out there, watching everybody else, looking at the coastline, the open sea, the white water – the most beautiful space on the planet. The moment I started to get up on my board, it felt a lot easier out-the-back than it is in the white water out-the-front. I did manage to stay up for a little while, before I fell down. But it was not in that tumultuous white water surf.

Hold that story. It might sound completely irrelevant but I hope to use that metaphor for how I think we need to grow in order to be the people who have the confidence to be people of conscience.

## From the Republic of Conscience

Seamus Heaney

When I landed in the republic of conscience  
it was so noiseless when the engines stopped  
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.  
At immigration, the clerk was an old man  
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat  
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.  
The woman in customs asked me to declare  
the words of our traditional cures and charms  
to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.  
No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.  
You carried your own burden and very soon  
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.  
Fog is a dreaded omen there but lightning  
spells universal good and parents hang  
swaddled infants in trees during thunderstorms.  
Salt is their precious mineral. And seashells  
are held to the ear during births and funerals.  
The base of all inks and pigments is seawater.  
Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat.  
The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,  
the hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye.  
At their inauguration, public leaders  
must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep  
to atone for their presumption to hold office –  
and to affirm their faith that all life sprang  
from salt in tears which the sky-god wept  
after he dreamt his solitude was endless.  
I came back from that frugal republic  
with my two arms the one length, the customs  
woman having insisted my allowance was myself.  
The old man rose and gazed into my face  
and said that was official recognition  
that I was now a dual citizen.  
He therefore desired me when I got home  
to consider myself a representative  
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.  
Their embassies, he said, were everywhere  
but operated independently  
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

'From the Republic of Conscience' from *Opened Ground: Selected Poems*  
1966-1996 by Seamus Heaney. Copyright © 1998 by Seamus Heaney

So why the surfing story? Why the poem? When I have faced major decisions, I have sought the counsel of people who I thought would know how to help; I have sought church teaching and tried to understand the teaching and to live it; I have sought the community's guidance and support, their counsel and possibly correction – although I haven't always taken it. I have read a lot about marriage, separation and living alone and about the decisions we make at various times of our lives. And I have felt as the moment which Seamus Heaney reveals in his poem, *The Republic of Conscience*, those wonderful lines: '**No porters, no interpreter, no taxi. You carry your own burden and very soon the symptoms of creeping privilege disappear.**' One thing I think I know better since that particular time of my life is that there are moments when there are no porters, there is nobody to pick it up for you, no one to carry it for you; there are no interpreters, no one to make sense of it for you, nobody to actually say 'This is what it means'; and no one to get you out of there – no taxi to cruise through and just be off and away. For me that is where conscience is. □

NB: These are extracts from a transcript of the verbal presentation given by Kate at the recent ARC Conference

## ARC's Proposal to the Bishops of Australia

Part from dealing with and discussing some very important issues already in the minds of ARC members, this year's conference provided the opportunity to draw together a level of consensus about those issues from an enthusiastic and committed group of participants. As ARC grows it is most important that the bishops of Australia are informed of the views of a significant number of Catholics who seek to have the spirit of Jesus Christ more reflected in their Church's teaching and practices.

We have prepared the following statement drawn from the mood of the conference and Bishop Pat Power will send it to all the bishops along with his very supportive letter that we are also able to publish. (See Page 2)

The following are statements that reflect the sentiments of the participants from all States of Australia at this fully subscribed conference and of other members who were unable to attend. They wish to present these sentiments to the bishops of Australia as committed practising Catholics vitally interested in the future of their Church. They request that the bishops of Australia take account of the concerns in these sentiments and take them into account in the exercise of their leadership responsibility and their pastoral ministry.

- ◆ Priests should be informed and encouraged to present the Scriptures as being consistent with the spirit of the teachings of Jesus, rather than giving them a literal meaning or treating them as historical accounts. In-service training should be provided to priests to enable them to preach more effectively in a manner consistent with this spirit.
- ◆ The primacy of the individual informed conscience requires greater emphasis in preaching, in pastoral counselling, and advice so that Catholics are assisted in shaping their belief and moral behaviour in an environment of increasing complexity and diversity.
- ◆ Liturgy and the language that expresses it should be related to the way mature adults speak and express their thoughts in prayer rather than in the language of cultures and practices that are now largely irrelevant.
- ◆ Human sexuality and its value should be seen and expressed in the context of loving relationships and what they consist of, rather than in terms of condemnation against practices that tend to stereotype, isolate, and cut off people from the love that would empower them as followers of Jesus.
- ◆ It must be accepted that divorce is a fact of modern life and necessary in many instances of marital breakdown if the parties involved, especially women and children, are to receive justice and support. People should not be encouraged to go through annulments

when they believe they had a valid marriage that has irrevocably failed just so that they can gain access to a sacramental life if they remarry.

- ◆ People who have divorced and remarried and wish to practise their religion in good faith should be encouraged individually when being pastorally counselled to receive the sacraments and share fully in the life of the Church.
- ◆ The Church, as the People of God, consists of men and women with equal rights and abundant gifts to be used to build up the Body of Christ. The clergy, with similar gifts, exercise their authority as those who serve. We consider it abhorrent when clergy impose their wills against the majority of those in a parish or community, when clergy are appointed in situations that antagonise a community, and when there are no viable decision-making structures through which the people in a parish or community can influence what is important to them. We strongly request that the bishops of Australia seek out such abuses of authority and take steps to remedy them, regardless of whether the abuses exist in their own dioceses or not.
- ◆ We ask that the Australian Bishops take positive steps to facilitate at every opportunity life-giving dialogue in relation to the ministry of women in all its forms in the Church. The pain and sense of alienation and subordination expressed continuously by large numbers of Catholic women challenge a largely patriarchal Church, which at the same time claims faithfulness to the inclusive ministry of Jesus and to Gospel values.

We make these statements motivated by a love of our Church and Jesus Christ and our concern for the mission and the viability of our Church for future generations in Australia.

Yours in the love of Christ,

*John Buggy*  
ARC Secretariat  
on behalf of its members and conference participants

# Informing/Reforming Conscience:

A personal reflection on a challenging subject

Ted Lambert

I find I have within me an untested presumption that a minor fraction of the Catholic Church's members are far better able to correctly form their consciences than the rest of us. I suspect that the vast majority of the faithful hold the same view. After all, the traditional magisterium, made up of the Pope and the Bishops, have taught our consciences with unqualified certainty what to believe and how to act from day one of our lives, within the three sanctuaries of home, school and Parish Church. The first article for the adherence of our conscience has been that they know more, better, than we do, and with a guarantee. It was within the lifetime of half of us that one pope told us that our only duty was to listen and obey. Reality check please!

Jesus seemed to have a passionate devotion to the 'little ones'. One of them, Pat Power, was at the ARC Conference and said Mass for us, as well as giving a talk. I have always been of the opinion that Bishops are given an impossible task, and I am emboldened to ask 'Is it for real? I know the theory about descent from the Apostles. Only recently have I thought to ask them to prove it.

To found the Church on Jesus is a safe bet. Jesus attracts disciples by the billions through matchless word and example which is also transparently divine, while being humanly attainable. But didn't it start in the synagogues and the houses of the believers? We are talking of a few hundred or, at most, a few thousand people. Foundation on the twelve apostles would now seem to me to be the credal development of the later monolith rather than a reasonable interpretation of the early facts. What trace in history has half the twelve left, where is half the Foundation? We've got the Peter and Paul bit, and Paul was a self-styled interloper – where are

the rest? I really prefer to learn of Jesus, and bring back into focus the 'little ones' who held Eucharist in each other's houses. As far as I know, no 'priests' have been identified in the early church.

Again, Jesus seems to have loved 'the poor'. How sad and incongruous, then, that the Church is so devoted to mammon. The building is blinding and the scandal is recognised everywhere. The faithful are seriously handicapped as Christians because of this. Wealth is a drag and Jesus is my witness. If it is difficult for a rich man to enter into life, can those who have built up the Church's 'patrimony' rest easy?

Bricks and mortar feed no-one. In fact, they hardly shelter anyone in many cases. Think of our churches locked for much of the day and all night while park benches, telephone boxes, culverts, etc. shelter the poor. To throw open the churches would be a turning point in the Church's relationship with mammon, a reaching out instead of a closing out. Freedom from property preciousness beckons as a blessing, not least to the poor!

We as Australians have become involved in some pretty dodgy deals recently. I think I am right in saying that I have heard more voices raised as conscience-pointers from the people than from those who teach the people from their position of better formed consciences. There have been exceptions.

This article, which will continue next Issue, is a reduced text of an Article published in *Online Catholics* in Issue 128, 1/11/06

## Some wisdom from the Conference Workshops

- Conscience leads us into not agreeing with the views of the 'majority' and having to resist;
- Conscience is also about politics and collective responsibility (environment, economy ...)
- Conscience is an informed choice but not necessarily by the hierarchy.
- Conscience is linked to a sense of personal sin in our relationships with other people.

# Here I Stand

Maree Kennedy

I have been a lector in the parish for five years and my family and I have been very involved with the parish for fifteen years. I also teach in the parish primary school.

Recently I was told by my Parish Priest that I could no longer read at Mass if I continued to read in inclusive language. He said that he had had 'several complaints'.

I was told: *Quite a few people get upset when they see/hear words deliberately being changed or omitted to make them more inclusive. They feel, and rightly so, that we have no right to change the words as they are printed.*

The priest believes that *'changing the gender of God to a neutral is a bit much for many people and that most people who worship in the parish do not have a problem with the continual references to God as Father/Him'*. I am at a complete loss to see how substituting God for He could in any way change anything about the reading. Even George Pell in his Sunday Telegraph column recently stated that God has no gender!

As I have explained to the priest, I have no problem with calling God 'Father', but I do have a problem with always calling God 'Father'. The priest can accept the addition of 'brothers and sisters' etc. but not the word God to substitute for He/Him.

Every time I have read at Mass, I have been very careful in my preparation never to change the significance of the text. I have always prepared the reading before Mass, spending time to make sure any adjustments I make are simply inclusive of the word printed. The only words I have ever substituted are God, Lord, Parent, Creator, people, ones, children, child, humankind, sisters and brothers. I have been very careful not to change phrasing but rather to simply use an inclusive word rather than an exclusive word.

Language is very powerful in the way that it creates images in our minds. As Joan Chittister says, 'By naming God everything that makes God God, we are able to see God differently and more wholly. We are able to see God as present and active in all people, in all places in all times. Even more so, by naming God the total of created goodness, rather than repeatedly emphasizing and developing one image of God (Father/He), we also come to see the rest of life differently too.'

No one image or term to describe God will ever be adequate. To cling to one just because of our tradition is, I believe, limiting God. When we continually preach one quality of God, we suppress others. This is not the only image of God that I want my children to have. By substituting the words 'God, Creator, Lord or Parent' for 'He' or 'Father', I fail to see how this could possibly do anything except open up the word/image for the Spirit to move in the individual's interpretation, rather than to restrict it.

Like Michael Morwood, I worry about the future of the Church 'if the aim of insisting on absolutising the Father/He image of God is to preserve a "tradition" which is under pressure from new insights and a different worldview'. I worry that, in the endeavour to maintain what is often perceived as fact, some are risking much more important dimensions of the faith. If we, as church, continue to do everything 'our tradition' has always done, then we will become irrelevant in a world of educated people.

Some may argue that Jesus called God 'Father'. Perhaps he did, but surely we need to be cautious of biblical literalism. Like Marcus Borg in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, I see the Bible as the product of two historical communities: ancient Israel and the early Christian movement. Therefore it is a human document – a response of these two ancient communities to their experiences of God. As a human product it is not 'absolute truth' or 'God's revealed truth' but relative and culturally conditioned. One can list the parts of the Bible which were once condoned (e.g. slavery, women as property) but would now be seen as 'unchristian'. If we choose to see the Bible in this way then most of the problems people have with the Bible disappear, as do claims of any one group holding the 'absolute truth'.

This is an attempt to explain some of the reasons why I cannot stand and continually emphasise what I see as a limiting of God. I take my ministries seriously, and believe when one stands and proclaims, they have the power to influence others. To be my authentic self I cannot do in this case, what I have been told I must.

I no longer feel I can continue to attend Mass in the parish knowing there are 'several' people who have complained about me. I would have hoped that they might have had the courage and honesty to approach me respectfully, where I would gladly have explained my reasons for doing as I did. I now feel too uncomfortable to attend Mass at this parish and feel I need to find somewhere that is life-giving to me, where I can be accepted as I am. This saddens me deeply, as I have many friends in the parish and there are many wonderful aspects of the parish that I will miss. It has also been a difficult situation for our family. Both our teenage boys still attend Mass and I will encourage them to continue to do so as this has always been their parish.

I have tried to teach our boys that you should stand up for what you believe in by articulating respectfully that which you see as unjust. I have told them that, if you remain silent, nothing will change. Perhaps I should have encouraged the 'several' people who gave me positive feedback about my reading to talk to the PP.

I am eternally grateful for my husband, sons, family and good friends who continue to encourage me to be who I am. I am equally grateful for the many wonderful, wise women and men of WATAC who have shared their wisdom and experience, and who have given me courage, through their example, to speak out when I feel I must. □

# A Church going backwards?

Carol Brunton

Reading the Conference brochure and noting the quality of the speakers, I thought: this is what I am looking for. 50 years since Vatican II, the church is seemingly standing still or even, in some areas, going backwards. I felt and experienced the spirit and energy from that time, but it appears the will to reform has dissipated.

And so to the Conference:

The first speaker, Michael Fallon MSC, a well-known, long-time student of the Scriptures, gave a PowerPoint presentation on: *The Hebrew Scripture – an Inspired Guide for Conscience*. He concluded: ‘When read intelligently and humbly, the Scriptures, especially those that reflect on the revelation given to us in Jesus, are an inspired guide to conscience. They cannot, however, replace our obligation to be attentive to the data of our experience, to search for meaning, to check our insights, and to respond from a heart that is inspired by God’s love.’

After lunch, Wolfgang Gritching, an emeritus professor at ACU, spoke on *The Formed and Informed Conscience* and put it simply: ‘While a mature and responsible believer will never betray his conscience, he will be ready to live and work within imperfect cognitive and moral structures while striving for better ones. As a consequence the Church’s teaching is and remains an important source in our search for moral maturity. But only one source. Other sources that we use to arrive at beliefs in general and at moral maturity in particular are a broad mixture of experience, cognition, intuition and emotion of the mature believer’s interaction with the many people, organisations and institutions of this world of ours. For this very reason we cannot assume wooden consensus among people of goodwill acting in tune with their individual consciences.’

In the afternoon, Pat Power, Auxiliary Bishop of Canberra/Goulburn told us of his work in Canberra, his commitment to freedom and social justice, to the people he sees daily struggling with life and his encouragement to them to trust in God and their conscience.

Kate Englebrecht was the first speaker after Mass on Sunday. She spoke of her own faith experience, converting to Catholicism from a strict Anglican background. Surrounded by family who disapproved, she felt she had no choice but to follow her conscience. The cost was her marriage. She now works in Catholic Health.

The last speaker, Frank Brennan SJ, presented a paper on *Faith and Moral Judgment Issues for Complex World* and stated: ‘The formed and informed individual is the primary means for the believing community arriving at the truth in novel and uncertain circumstances. The committed Catholic cannot be satisfied that his conscience is properly formed and informed by pledging adherence to Vatican declarations.’ He spoke about governments making laws which in a Christian context are, for the ‘informed’, unjust.

Workshops followed and we were given the choice of joining one of the following:

- √ Our approach to conscience
- √ The position of women in the Church
- √ The exercise of authority in our Church
- √ Our approach to sexuality
- √ Reception of the Sacraments following divorce and remarriage
- √ Liturgy and the use of language
- √ Towards a spirituality for youth
- √ How the Scriptures and Dogma should be presented to adults

The conference was an engrossing and enriching experience for me, among informed and intelligent people who desire to learn more about an informed conscience and the questions of a modern world.

Is the Church meeting the growing needs of the people, who, after all, are the Church? □

**CAROL BRUNTON** is a retired Hospital Welfare Worker mainly involved in Aged Care. She was the inaugural chairperson of the Social Justice Group at St. Anthony-in-the-Fields Parish, Terrey Hills, and is currently organising the Wraps-With-Love knitting group. She is a member of the Passionists’ Companions, Sydney branch.

# The Stem Cell Debate

Transcript of Frank Brennan's response to a question  
during the Conference Forum

What do we see as the moral way forward as we are confronted with vexed issues? Let me just give this example from my experience this morning. I was at Mass at one of our parish churches at North Sydney and at the end of the Mass I made the observation that this week my brief happens to be down in Canberra talking to some politicians about Stem Cell research. What do they think about Stem Cell research?

Well, it was fascinating to hear the views of various parishioners during the course of our morning tea. For example, someone said: 'I represent the alumni of my school. We are on the National Council for Women who wanted to support stem cell research but I expressed my objection'.

Another woman came to me and said, 'Father, I find this a vexing issue; I have eight children but I have three grandchildren who are born as a result of IVF'. She was aware that there is the Vatican document which says that IVF under no circumstances is permissible. (Instruction on respect for human life in its origin and in the dignity of procreation replies to certain questions of the day – issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 22 Feb 1987.) But she was full of admiration for her daughter who had familiarised herself with the moral arguments about IVF and had found a doctor who would produce absolutely the minimum number of embryos which was necessary in order to produce one suitable for implantation, and the couple had decided that they would not allow their excess embryos to be used for experimentation or destruction. What she was saying implicitly was that, in good conscience, her daughter had engaged in a process where she and her husband had exchanged vows where they were open to the bearing of children. They had engaged the scientific process which was available and to the greatest extent possible they ensured that excess embryos were not created and they were not agreeable to the destruction of embryos.

Basically, I would say this: the Vatican declaration is very comprehensible within its own mode of moral argument. Any of us, in a pastoral situation, know many people who

have had IVF children and who have had them for what they regard as the most conscientious of reasons.

Having said that, I then spoke to another parishioner who told me she migrated from another country where there is no restriction whatever on stem cell research. In the laboratory in which she worked in her own country when people had sex changes she told me – I have never heard this sort of thing before – the uterus would be kept and embryos would be planted in it and permitted to thrive well beyond the 14 days now being spoken about for the purposes of experimentation and destruction. Now these are truly awful prospects that have to be conceded.

On the one hand, we might say the moment we depart from the Vatican line which would prohibit creation of embryos, we are on a slippery slope. Or, are there moral dividing lines that can responsibly be drawn within our society and which we, as conscientious Catholics, contribute to, not on the basis that we are the Loony Catholic Fringe but on the basis that we are prepared to engage reason in its full rigour?

So, as you contemplate conscience needing courage, faith and moral judgement issues for a complex world, I simply bring you back to those two quotes by Benedict XVI, last month:

'The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason and not the denial of its grandeur, in which we would include a church intellectual reflection on the lived experience of people, this is the program with which a theology grounded in biblical faith enters into the debates of our times.' How is this to be done? As he has told us: 'The true rule of God is not an external matter'.

It is not simply what Father says it is. It dwells within us. It is the inner direction of our lives which is brought into being and established by the Will of God. It speaks to us in our conscience and we do need thinkers as acute as John Henry Newman to help us through this. We can't simply take the line that primacy of conscience means following any Vatican declaration, no matter where it comes within the Vatican hierarchy. □

## Recommended Reading

*Acting on Conscience:  
How Can We Responsibly Mix Law,  
Religion and Politics?*  
Frank Brennan SJ

This book, launched in early November 2006, considers the questions:

- Is there a place for personal beliefs in public life?
- Is a Catholic health minister in a fit position to legislate on women's issues such as the right to an abortion pill?
- When the prime minister invokes church leaders' support in going to war with Iraq – and those church leaders tacitly approve this – is there a moral issue at stake?

*His arguments defy categorisation as generally Left or Right and he crosses party politics in a refreshing way. He is the quintessential reasonable man.*

John Warhurst

Pope John Paul II has sometimes been called 'The Saint Maker' because of the excessive number of canonisations carried out during his papacy. However, the Catholic Church needs to acknowledge that it **does not have an exclusive monopoly on saints, martyrs, miracles and good works and it is timely to reflect on miracle workers in other faiths** – this time, two remarkable Muslims. It should make the Catholic Church re-examine its own attitude towards women. By persisting in excluding them from their rightful place as ministers of the sacraments and from all decision-making positions, it does so at its peril!

## The Grameen miracle

Margaret Knowlden

This article first appeared in *National Outlook* Vol.19 No.3 May 1997 (before the death of Mother Teresa). It is reprinted to celebrate Professor Yunus' recent award of the Nobel Peace Prize. He is an extraordinary visionary whose unshakeable belief in the power of people to help themselves escape poverty has become a rallying call across the globe. Today, the experiment he launched in 1976 with a mere \$26 has swelled into a movement that has reached almost 100 million poor people with financial services. By bestowing this award on Professor Yunus and Grameen Bank, the Nobel Prize committee is sending a powerful message that you cannot have world peace while billions live in abject poverty, and 1,200 children die each hour from preventable diseases. Microfinance is not the panacea for all that ails the world, but it is a critical step in helping millions of poor people, especially women, take their first steps to a better life for themselves, their families and their communities – and isn't that a universal need of which Christianity is just one of many manifestations?

When it comes to nominating candidates for sainthood, Mother Teresa often scores high in the popularity stakes. But the unarguable reality is that, for all her reputation and the millions of dollars which flow her way, the poor in India are still with us, and with her. While she and her Sisters gallantly 'rescue' the dying from the gutter, there is no publicised evidence that she has done anything to ensure they didn't get there in the first place. Nor do we hear of her speaking out against the appalling rates of infanticide in India, mainly of girls, and the evil effects of the dowry system.

Whether he sees himself as the new Messiah, my vote for future canonisation would have to go to Dr Mohammed Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, with its staggering population (mostly malnourished, illiterate and desperate for work) and its location a target for every possible natural disaster, had been dubbed the *Fifth* World and labelled an 'international basket-case'. With a graveyard of hundreds of costly failed 'development projects', only a miracle could save it.

The much publicised story goes that in 1976 Dr Yunus, an economics professor, met a village woman trying to support herself by making bamboo stools. Always in debt for supplies to an unscrupulous money-lender who also purchased the final product, she was left with barely enough to cover her costs.

Yunus' first instinct was to give her the money she needed. Then he thought: 'Why not give her a loan?' With the help of his students, he discovered 41 other self-employed people, equally trapped, whose combined need to purchase materials added up to only \$26. 'I felt extremely ashamed of myself

being part of a society which could not provide \$26 to forty-two able, skilled human beings who were trying to make a living.' He lent the money, enabling them to sell their products to the highest bidder, and they gradually repaid his loan.

The story of the Grameen Bank and the idea that is helping the poor to change their lives is inspiringly documented by David Bornstein; a Canadian journalist, who between 1992 and 1994 researched the progress and day-to-day running of the bank – its highs and its lows. His book *The Price of a Dream* (Bangladesh: The University Press Limited; 1996) makes compelling reading. It tells of the many obstacles Yunus experienced: from the established banks whom he saw as 'anti-poor, anti-landless, anti-illiterate and anti-women'; from the Mullahs who said the bank worked against Islam; and even from the suspicion of the very people he wanted to help. And it also describes the activities of individual people whose lives have been so dramatically transformed by the realisation of Yunus' dream.

Yunus began building this bank by rejecting the age-old notion that poor people are not credit-worthy because they have no collateral. With over two million borrowers (in 1994) and a 98 percent success rate in loan repayments, his point has been well proven. The effect is best described by Bornstein as 'bubble-up' economics which promises: '...modest but measurable improvements for the poorest segment of society: better food, shelter and clothing; some basic health care; opportunities for education; more control, less anxiety; and the ability to plan, within a limited range, for a future...Bubble-up seemed infinitely more attractive than trickle-down for the simple reason that it started with, rather than ended with, the people who needed assistance

most. Moreover, it provides opportunities for self-employment in the villages where the people live. There are no branches of Grameen Bank in the cities.

But what makes the Grameen Bank even more exciting is that now 94 per-cent of loans go to women who, being landless, are often the poorest of the poor. According to Yunus, 'Men were peacocks – given money, their priorities would be a watch, a good shirt, a radio'. But 'When a woman brings in income, the immediate beneficiaries are her children'. Women have proved that they can make responsible use of the loan money and keep up repayments. There is a visible change in the women themselves as they grow in confidence and self-esteem and, it is claimed, 'Grameen' children are better behaved!

Compulsory weekly meetings of borrowers include a regular chanting of 'The Sixteen Decisions' which range from: 'Prosperity we shall bring to our families' to 'We shall plan to keep our families small' and 'We shall keep

the centre free from the curse of dowry. We shall not practise child weddings'. Some might call this brain-washing, but clearly the Grameen Bank's concerns go way beyond the loan, and the implications for a better society are limitless.

Models of the Grameen Bank have sprouted in Malaysia, in the Philippines, in Malawi and in dozens of locales in Africa, South America and even North America. Donations to the Grameen Bank are now tax-deductible and supporters are also welcome to make a deposit which will earn interest and can be redeemed at any time.

The formal canonisation of saints requires manifestation of miracles. In the irrefutable evidence of miraculous achievements which have helped to address the disease of poverty and have changed millions of lives for the better, Dr Yunus has, for me, all the qualifications to be declared a 'living saint'. In his own words, perhaps 'one day, poverty can be placed in museums'. That indeed would be a miracle!

For more information on the Grameen Bank, the Grameen Trust, joining the Support Group, or investing in Grameen, contact: Grameen Bank Support Group/Australia, Tel: (02) 9552 2380 Fax: (02) 9457 8805  
gf\_oz@hotmail.com or www.grambangla.com  
Donations to the Grameen Bank are now tax-deductible.

## Safia Amajan

### Trailblazer in a man's world

Robert Kluyver *The Guardian* (extract from obituary in *Sydney Morning Herald* 19.10.06)

**T**he killing by the Taliban of Safia Amajan, the head of the Department of Women's Affairs in Kandahar, has plunged Afghanistan into despair. It was the first contract killing of an older woman. The 63-year-old was respected among Afghans and foreigners alike as a leader of Pashtun women's emancipation.

Outside Afghanistan one cannot imagine how hard the road of self-fulfilment is for an Afghan woman: the criticism of her parents or their family who blame her for upsetting time-honoured tradition; the insults hurled by street urchins for venturing outside without male accompaniment; the discriminatory work environment; the resentment of other women who have not followed their calling.

Safia suffered the social opprobrium bravely, but also intelligently. She did not confront the oppressive male establishment head on: as a Kandahari woman she knew better. Change comes piecemeal. For most Pashtuns, their tribal code prevails over religion or law. The woman is considered a male possession, to be married as an infant, given to the family of a victim in compensation for crimes committed by her relatives, beaten when rebellious.

Safia was kind, disciplined and principled. Her ability to convoke large gatherings of politically active women was impressive, given that in other less conservative parts of the country women had not raised their heads yet. These women had never participated in politics, but Safia had prepared them well. In 2002, when elections were held in Afghanistan, they gave speeches and elected their representatives by secret ballot.

Quietly but effectively, Safia led one program after another: donations to the poor, support for women in prison; income-generation for war widows; literacy classes for rural women; and political awareness courses.

Rather than a women's rights activist, she was a true public servant, rare in today's Afghanistan. That earned Safia deep respect among Afghans. But for the Taliban she committed three grave faults: working for the Afghan Government, emancipating Pashtun women and fighting for the right of girls to go to school. She was shot in front of her house as she left for work. Her husband, who heard the gunfire, and 19-year-old son were at home. □

'Most of us would not have heard of this great woman. After reading of her life and death, surely people of all beliefs should regard her as a martyr and a saint.' (Andrew Wood: Letter in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20.10.06)

## Have your say!

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(maximum length:  
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## MINUTES

of Annual General Meeting  
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15<sup>th</sup> October, 2006 from 3.15 pm to 4.30 pm,  
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