



arcvoice

A Report from Australian Reforming Catholics
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Bishops need help in facing reality

Following the very successful ARC Conference last October, a proposal was formulated to be directed to the bishops of Australia dealing with some of the key issues that are dear to the hearts of ARC members and the participants at that conference.

Bishop Pat Power, who attended the whole conference and spoke so supportively of our efforts to highlight some of the major needs of our Church, took the trouble to contact personally his fellow bishops and to draw attention to issues in that proposal that they should not ignore. Only a few bishops commented positively, but there was no indication that any steps would be taken by them or anyone else to address the concerns that would be of significance to many practising Catholics, not just those associated with ARC.

The points in that proposal were printed in the last edition of *Arcvoice*. Without going into the details of all the sentiments expressed, how could any bishop ignore the fact that marital breakdown is far from uncommon, has a variety of causes, and does not lead necessarily to a situation where a person should be cut off from the sacramental life of their believing community if they re-marry? Why should such a person be required to deny the fact of their marriage just so that they can obtain an annulment to participate in the sacramental life that nourishes them? Even if such people continue to attend their local church, judging that they cannot receive the Eucharist, how must they feel – along with so many others – when they are subjected to sermons full of fundamentalist interpretations of the scriptures that defy the learning that any average person would have obtained had they been awake for at least the last forty years?

Appeal by some bishops to the fact that the Vatican has spoken on some issues does not excuse them. The way in which individuals are to be counselled in following their conscience is within the jurisdiction of each bishop. Stating they could not ordain women if this is necessary to provide

equal rights does not excuse the many abuses of power where the wishes of whole communities are ignored by male clergy imposing their wills.

ARC desires to work with the bishops of Australia to bring about church communities that Jesus would recognise as being in tune with his spirit. We seek to continue the communication with them. As ARC members we should take the opportunity at events like school visits, confirmation visits, etc., to speak to our local bishop and express our views directly. Bishops are there to serve us in building a community of faith. Reform won't happen unless we speak to them.

John Buggy

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Letters

I just wanted to congratulate ARC on the work you are doing. I'm very sorry I missed the conference last October which sounded very successful. I was very impressed by the letter to the bishops and the well articulated points presented to them. Thank God for Pat Power! A man of great integrity.

Maree Kennedy

I have just received the ARC newsletter and am devouring it. Pat Power's letter to the bishops is marvellous. The proposals to the bishops by ARC are excellent. I completely endorse it. Would you please send me a copy of Michael Fallon's conference paper? I would like to revisit it.

Annette Milross.

Would you please convey to ARC's secretariat our heartfelt thanks for their message of sympathy over Max's death.

Yes, he was deeply interested in the welfare of the Catholic Church and had had quite a few confrontations with some of its figures of authority over the years. I always admired in him his constant search for truth and his refusal to bow to ill-founded authority: a spirit that is alive and well in ARC, too.

Imogen Kelly

I think it may have been the great Bishop Power who sent me the copy of the December *arcvoice*. It was the first time I had seen or heard of it and I devoured it in one sitting. I've been a 'reforming Catholic' all my adult life and, as I'm now 82, that's a long time!! ... I've been a fan of 'Yunus Grameen' since he first started – also a fan of Pat Power and Frank Brennan. What kind of response did you get from the Bishops of OZ?

Peg Fitzgerald

International observations

The annual conference of the Mariënburg-Vereniging held on 28 October 2006 was opened by Philippe Bär emeritus bishop of Rotterdam. The keynote speaker was the protestant theologian, Harry Kuitert, who said: 'In this day and age an authoritarian, dogmatic Church who force-feeds unwilling people with its truths is out of date. The Church has been good for the world but now we can decide for ourselves and we don't need the Church, at least not in its present form.'

The members of the workshops debated six different propositions, one of which was: 'The faith tradition is like an inheritance, not every part thereof is useful to later generations. The question is who determines what we can use and what not, what should become 'museum' and what should not?'

The Mariënburg-Vereniging has 12 local groups. (The Netherlands is 36,000 km², Australia over 7 million km²)



On 11 January I received by email a copy of the new 28 page brochure from the KirchenVolksBewegung Wir Sind Kirche (We are Church): It is about "Who are we? What do we do? Concrete steps to the Church of the future". Hans Küng has written a short foreword:

In a time when both in Rome and in the Episcopate all will to reform appears to have ceased, it is necessary that the international movement *We are Church* keeps alive the desires for reform of countless Catholics in the whole world whose voices are not heard. Be always conscious of the fact that you are supported by the Gospel of Jesus Christ himself when you make your vital demands for reform.

The five basic demands are spelt out and explained.

1. A church of brothers and sisters (not hierarchical-authoritarian)
2. Full equal rights for women
3. Free choice between celibacy and non-celibacy
4. Positive assessment of sexuality
5. A happy instead of a threatening message.

Strong support for Ecumenism and full Eucharistic sharing is also on the agenda.

Wir sind Kirche has groups in all dioceses, organises conferences, and writes to the Pope, Vatican congregations, bishops and priests. It also appears in newspapers and broadcasts on television.



The Australian priest Fr. Pat Connor was banished in 1974 by Cardinal Freeman who said he was a bad influence on the local Catholics. His parting words were 'You belong to a religious Order and so can be transferred anywhere in the world...Goodbye.' He lives now in Bordertown, New Jersey, and is happy to act as a contact person with the ARCC (Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church). Email: p.connor2@verizon.net He will be visiting Australia later this year.

Jim Taverne

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Disconnected Catholics

Summary report on **Catholics who have stopped going to Mass**

Ref: *Online Catholics* Wednesday 6 December, 2006

A perceived irrelevance of the Church to modern life, the quality of homilies, inter-personal problems with a parish priest, problems with Church teachings or personal faith, and disillusionment in the wake of sexual scandals have been given as the reasons why Catholics no longer attend Mass. There were also cultural and societal factors which meant that Mass was no longer a priority.

These are the findings of new research that was tabled, in summary, by the Pastoral Projects Office at last week's plenary of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, in Sydney. The research would be a help 'in understanding the very complex personal, spiritual and cultural factors which have seen a decline in church-going over recent decades'.

The qualitative research involved 41 interviews and was held in seven dioceses: Bunbury, Hobart, Melbourne, Parramatta, Perth, Rockhampton and Sydney. Of those people interviewed, 28 were women and 13 were men. The oldest person was aged 74 and the youngest 29. Twenty-two of the 41 had been quite involved or heavily involved in parish life, generally participating in and often helping to run a number of programs.

The two major findings of the study are:

1. A large majority of participants believe that the Church is out of touch with the current world and is not relevant to their own lives.
2. In general, participants' alienation from the Church has been a gradual process in which changing attitudes to Church teaching have interacted with negative personal experiences of Church personnel and regulation.

Another eight supplementary findings are listed.

According to the concluding remarks of the summary, the factors identified by the participants in this research which led them to stop going to Mass are also influencing people who are still regular Mass attenders. 'Except in the case of sexual abuse, where one hopes the worst is over, there is no reason to think that the impact of those factors is declining.'

It also says that the Church does have the capacity to take actions which will reduce the likelihood of current attenders joining the ranks of those who have stopped attending and increase the chances of returning of some of those who have left.

And, it seems that all it would take to get several participants to return to regular Mass attendance, or to at least give it a try, is a warm personal invitation.

In the same week, *The Catholic Weekly* (December 3) made no mention of the Australian report.

Instead they referred back to an American survey carried out in 2000. Some of the comments by Fr John Catoir have been highlighted in italics as a way of expressing your Editor's personal amazement that such pre-Vatican II thinking still exists – and, presumably, that there are some who have faith in everything 'Father' says!

Why some quit the Church

Fr John Catoir

In January 2000 the American bishops issued the results of a survey they had commissioned on 'why most inactive Catholics have drifted away from the Catholic Church'. Here are the results, with added comments of my own:

1. **Did not experience God's presence in their Catholic community.**

Why, I wonder? Had they lost faith in the Eucharist? They must have, because millions of active Catholics experience genuine comfort from the Eucharist. *Catholics who have remained in the Church can be grateful that we have the gift of faith, and we can pray for those who do not.*

2. **Did not experience warm, personal caring in their encounters with other Catholics.**

Why not? Did they make any effort? *A public event like the liturgy is for the worship of God.* Granted, parishes should have a gathering place after Mass to encourage interaction and friendship, but it is the responsibility of the individual to make friends.

3. **Saw Catholicism as too complex and unrelated to their lives.**

In terms of theology, this is understandable. But *the church is a complex structure precisely because it is an international organisation.* When Jesus said, 'I am the vine, you are the branches', he intended that we stay connected.

4. **Was hurt by a priest or sister.**

This is enough to make anyone walk away from the Church. On the other hand, if a cop does something wrong, should you reject the entire police force? *Some people sabotage their spiritual well-being by the way they react to scandalous behaviour.* We should try not to throw out the baby with the bath water.

5. **Came into conflict with Church teaching.**

The truth is not multiple. In our society individualism is exalted, but differing opinions can't all be right. The idea that two and two are five is not good math. *Faith involves a kind of surrender to the mysteries of faith.*

6. Were in a marriage not recognised by the Church.

Some are in good faith about their marriage, believing they are OK with God. I do not question anyone's conscience on this, *but such people should know that no one is excommunicated for being in an invalid marriage.* The Church is full of such marriages. There's no need to leave the Church because of this.

7. Got too busy and did not take the time to be involved with the Church any more.

This will be the feeblest excuse possible when standing before God on judgment day. *Trying to explain why you neglected your soul will not be easy.*

8. Relocated, but never reconnected with the Church.

If you never were connected, then reconnecting is not really possible. *Failing to take responsibility for your spiritual life is like turning your back on the possibility of losing your soul.* The stakes are too high to gamble. All of us in the Church have a big job to do to help our neighbours. Jesus said, 'There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one lost sheep who returns to God than over 99 who never strayed' (Lk 15). We have to do better in reaching out to them.

**The following letters are a few of the responses to
the lead article in *Online Catholics*
'Disconnected Catholics' 6.12.06**

Priorities?

The summary report to the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference on *Catholics Who Have Stopped Going to Mass* reveals very few surprises.

The report does provide, however, important *initial* qualitative research from a sample of only 41 people. Such a small sample size is often not representative of the general population and any conclusions and recommended actions should be made with considerable caution until more conclusive research is undertaken. Alarm bells ring when excited rumblings are already being heard in parishes about 'programs to entice back those who've lapsed'.

The small sample size was justified in the report on the basis of the prohibitive costs of a larger random sample. If our bishops are really serious about understanding this issue then maybe they should consider channelling some of the substantial funds allocated for World Youth Day 2008 into this critical area of research?

Paula from Hurstbridge, Vic.

Very little has been done

In his pertinent comments, Paul Collins remarks in reference to the deepening alienation of women and men particularly due to the Church's treatment of women:

*... in the seven years since then (i.e. the publication of *Woman and Man. One in Christ Jesus*) very little has been done and the alienation of women, especially younger women, grows ever deeper...*

I would suggest that the '*very little has been done*' is just as apposite to a much longer period and that the deepening alienation extends to all the laity. I contend that the Australian Church hierarchy and clergy have substantially destroyed the hopes born in Vatican II and squandered all opportunities to 'throw open the windows'.

So, it is no surprise that a study involving a trivially small sample is presented as a major effort, full results are delayed until one scholar (probably a carefully chosen 'safe' scholar) from each of several disciplines is asked to comment, and little

significance is given to the almost complete rejection of the Church by the young.

Perceptive commentators and critics such as Paul Collins have truly been voices in the wilderness. Our bishops appear content to continue neglect of the issues until their next scheduled conference. There is no sense of urgency, no recognition that current policies have failed and must be expected to continue failing. The only issue addressed is that of preaching skills – as though skill in oratory is far more important than the disconnections between hierarchy and other clergy and the 99 per cent of the Church who no longer sit in the pews.

Will the last person leaving the church please turn out the electric light and pray for illumination of the Holy Spirit?

Jim from Park Orchards, Vic.

Who? Me? More morning teas, please!

Catholics who have stopped going to Mass. Who? Me? Surely not!

'... he and many others sense that the Church is not addressing or even comprehending the real questions that they face in contemporary life'.

OK then, what exactly are 'the real questions'?

Well, contemporary life has always been important to people throughout the ages, surely, and it seems to me that such questions would have also faced Jesus, coming from numerous well educated people, many even well-meaning. So when I ponder what Jesus went on about, it seems to me he mainly talked about the imminent Kingdom of God and insisted on encouraging us not to be afraid. He wouldn't let it alone; went on and on about it.

When you say '...issues of leadership, sexual abuse and corruption, gender, reproduction, pluralism, equality, and at the deepest level, spirituality', the odd one out in that list is 'spirituality'. These material things in this list are the topics I seem to recall Judas going on about, starting with leadership.

Ah yes, leadership. Like Judas, I think many of us have lost the way and don't know it. It's all too easy to be blinded by the pace of life, TV, the share market and the pressures of

populism. I know. I have been blinded myself at times. But for goodness sake, Christians have never really been popular – and so what? The Kingdom of God is at hand and that makes me happy inside. This is surely the place to start; the heart of the matter.

‘This sense of alienation is particularly true of women.’ Well, all I can say to that is that all the Churches I have been to lately have many more women in them than men. Seems to me that upon doing a ‘reality check’, if we want to divide up Catholics by gender, it’s the men who are alienated – at least from going along on Sunday. But of course, reality is often no match for popular, strongly-held beliefs and that is easily confirmed with a quick count around at next Sunday’s service.

To me, the best thing about going to Church is the morning tea afterwards. That’s when I meet other Christians. I love that. It seems to me that the disciples liked that, too, as there are so many surviving stories of them all sitting around talking while eating and drinking. And surely, wasn’t it Jesus of all people who said, *where ever you get together in my name, there I am also*. Voila, the Church. What we need then is more morning teas.

James from Coonamble, NSW

Now the good news!

Historian, commentator and author,

PAUL COLLINS, made the following comments on the report in *Online Catholics*:

At present I am working on a book on the future of Catholicism in Australia, so the research project on *Catholics Who Have Stopped Going to Mass* could not have come at a better time.

At least the bishops have been honest enough to make public a report that is highly critical of their leadership, although I understand a couple of bishops opposed releasing it.

Australian Catholicism owes Pastoral Projects researcher Bob Dixon a big vote of thanks. This is not the first time he has fearlessly put before the community the facts about the state of the Church, even if they are not particularly palatable.

Paul's book should be a winner and *arcvoice* will certainly review it when it is published.

But will it warrant even a mention in *The Catholic Weekly*?

(Editor)

Catholic Guilt ... (pre-Vat II)

letter to *The Catholic Weekly*, December 3, 2006

(*arcvoice* editor's italics!)

Hi, I'm Peter and I'm 16. When Sunday morning rolls around, I never feel like going to Mass. Why is it so important to go to church on Sundays? Why can't I worship God at home?

DEAR Peter, I can sympathise with the sleepy feeling on Sunday morning! All of us get *tempted from time to time to skip Mass on Sunday* and do ‘bedside worship’ instead.

But, unless we're sick or physically can't get there, *missing the Sunday Eucharist is a serious omission. It hurts God deeply because we're saying 'No' to the gift of his Son*. When you were baptised, you were baptised into Christ's body – the worldwide Catholic Church – and you belong to him. *Sunday is His day, and that's why it's so important to go to church to be with Him*. He loves you a great deal and died on the cross to save you; an hour of your Sunday morning is a small but valuable gift you can give in return!

While you're right to want to spend private time with God, we also need to praise and thank God publicly by offering him the sacrifice of the Mass – the representation of Jesus' death at Calvary, which is the best and most perfect act of worship we can give him. *We also need to hear the gospel and receive Jesus in the Eucharist, if we're going to try to live a Christian life in the week ahead!*

So much stuff during the week can pull us away from God – iPods, TV, internet, school, work, social events – all of these things are good, but we need to plug out of them for a bit and ‘plug into’ time with God. *Remember, our souls need food to live as much as our bodies do*. You wouldn't starve your body by denying yourself good food and nutrition – don't starve your soul of the eucharist! *The Sunday Eucharist is truly life-giving and life-changing*.

If Sunday mornings really are difficult for you in terms of late nights studying, working, etc, ask your parents if you can go to the Saturday vigil or Sunday evening Mass instead, when you're feeling more refreshed. Don't let sleepiness take away from the priceless time you can have with Christ and his community of believers, the Church. *That time together will help you through the rest of your week and guide you through whatever problems, joys, heartaches or temptations you might be facing. Never underestimate the power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation if these temptations or challenges prove overwhelming*.

Finally, remember Jesus' words at the Last Supper, when he commanded his disciples ‘Do this in memory of me’ (Luke 22:19). *He didn't say: 'Think about doing this in memory of me, but if you don't feel like it, don't worry!'* □

Editor's Note: One wonders what 16-year-old Peter (if he even exists) made of all that! With such theology still being perpetuated, the need for Australian Reforming Catholics is becoming ever more urgent.

Informing/Reforming Consciences

Ted Lambert

Part 2: This is the continuation of an article begun in *ARCvoice* No. 22

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?

The 2006 Social Justice Statement reprised the late Pope John Paul II's Alice Springs homily. The late Ted Kennedy at Redfern Parish in Sydney was, in practice, somewhat ahead of the Pope, who made explicit for Australia's aboriginal people what various popes had written for yonks in their encyclicals on 'Inculturation'. I know a little about this because in 1982 I was the priest at Santa Teresa 'Mission' near Alice Springs with 600 East Arrernte parishioners. They all had the faith. I had Vatican II and the principles of

Inculturation outlined for me by men with better formed consciences. But I couldn't appoint one of the people as a minister, I couldn't help them develop a local liturgy, I couldn't use the local language. The consciences that saw inculturation as the true path balked at authorising anything not Roman. I'd have been sacked if I tried.

But to return to Redfern. The enlightened ministry carried out there by Ted Kennedy, with all those encyclicals commissioning him, has been overturned with great pain and confusion. Some better formed consciences have been at work here.

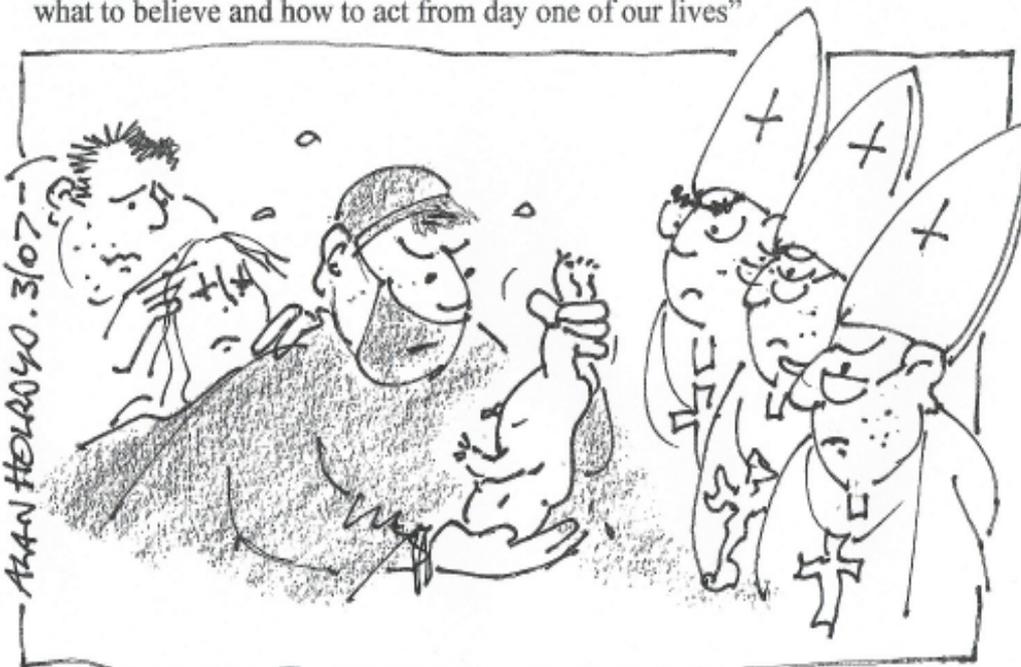
Having mentioned pain, I hear a lot about it whenever I get together with somewhat older catholics. The young, I fear, have little experience of this same pain because they, like Elvis, have left the building. But so much pain has been imposed by hierarchical edict, all after proper formation of conscience, of course. I have lived through the years when the better formed consciences have sent people to hell in droves, enumerating for them the host of mortal sins they can commit. In days not far gone, not fasting before communion, eating meat on Friday, missing Mass on Sunday,

working on Sunday, not confessing or taking communion once a year and much, much more were mortal sins.

Did they understand what committing a person to hell was? Did they ever think that with the tyranny over consciences they were exercising, the strict control of free persons they took, they were at least as guilty of hell. Jesus told a man seeking judgment against his brother 'Friend, who gave me authority over you?' Another reality check, please. Who gave you authority to scare the wits out of anyone?

Finally, the well-informed consciences have a way of being selective. The doctrine of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all the faithful is enunciated but

"After all, the traditional magisterium, made up of Pope and the Bishops, have taught our consciences with unqualified certainty what to believe and how to act from day one of our lives"



OK. Who smacks first?

then ignored. The Holy Spirit only really speaks through the Hierarchy. God gave the power to male clerics only. Where were they in the early church? Another selectivity is to name the *sensus fidelium* and then ignore it. The truth that the Holy Spirit speaks through the hearts and minds and consciences of the people is part of the doctrine of the traditional magisterium, but you would never know it.

So, to wind up. I am talking about a revolution. You and I have to begin taking responsibility for our own christianity, our own salvation. We will meet the new challenges in social relationships, in medico-moral areas, in seeking global justice, in integrating wisely and virtuously into planetary and galactic systems. We know enough to assert that the traditional magisterium is no longer capable alone of guiding these endeavours. They haven't even realised yet that Rome is passing, that there are churches in Asia and the two Americas, in Africa and even that pesky egalitarian church in Australia.

Move over, blokes and let us give you a hand. The Spirit in us asks this of you. The first step is to be accountable, to tell us what you are doing. The next step would be consultation with your sisters and brothers in Christ. If you think you are doing this, reality check, please.

Bless me, Father!

a cautionary tale

Although her family was Jewish, my 92-year old friend attended a Catholic school in Johannesburg. One Friday the pen from her treasured writing set disappeared and her best friend, a Catholic, denied all knowledge of its whereabouts.

However, on Monday the friend produced the pen – and an explanation: Because she HAD to go to Confession on Saturday but had no sins to confess, she decided she needed to commit some.

By taking the pen she was able to confess to (a) a lie and (b) stealing – and by returning the stolen goods was able to make Retribution!

It is certainly a variation to eating a meatpie on Friday!

Perhaps readers would like to send *ARCvoice* their 'Confession' stories?

Margaret Knowlden

Speaking out of turn?

Angela Searles

I thought I would share with you my experience at mass this morning. A diocese pastoral letter from Archbishop Kevin McDonald was read out in which he went into, in particular, the challenges raised by the shortage of priests. Other issues were raised but they all referred back to this main theme; he said that this letter pre-empted a major period of consultation to begin in the diocese in the spring.

The parish priest, who has recently returned after a three-month absence through illness, then spoke about how the parish had itself dealt with the absence of the parish priest both recently and in the past.

I had to say something; so I stood up, went to the end of the pew, and addressed the congregation myself. I spoke for two or three minutes about the Sundays without a priest situation both in this country and in other parts of the world, that we need our women priests and emphasised that there was an ongoing campaign for women priests; I urged everyone to write to the Archbishop supporting the campaign as part of the consultation process. You could have heard a pin drop! As I sat down again a lady directly in

front turned around and said 'Well done'. The priest, in the mean time, stood up, said 'thank you' and spoke about the common priesthood. He then added, however, that women could not be priests and said something about the sacraments to which I replied that the sacrifice of the mass was not a sexual act!

At the sign of the peace, at least six people shook my hand. People spoke to me afterward and I was invited for coffee. The priest was fine although he made it clear he was not going to discuss the issue further! During the coffee meeting people were very supportive, with one parishioner saying that he supports women priests because of work he has seen done by Anglican women priests. There was some discussion with regard to whether or not I should have actually spoken in the church but, as one woman said 'I would not have heard it said otherwise'. I said that I would be pleased to speak at any other meeting that could be arranged.

Anyway I was very encouraged. I think for these parishioners, especially who have experienced so recently the real problems caused by an absent parish priest, there was a real willingness to listen. The good thing of course is that it seems that for many, or maybe most of them, women priests is something with which they agree!

Angela Searles is 46 years old, lives in Kent (UK) and is an Academic Lawyer (by trade). She is particularly concerned with The Proclamation of the Word and feels that evangelising is an area that the Church needs to promote more fully. She is also campaigning for Women Priests.

Being a Christian Woman.....

Maree Kennedy

I am 45-years old. I am a woman, wife, mother and teacher and a 'cafeteria Catholic'. By 'cafeteria Catholic' I mean I pick and choose what I can and can't believe in when it comes to my Christian beliefs. I used to worry about this a lot. I used to worry about whether I could still call myself Catholic when I couldn't accept all the teachings that I am told I should. As I've gotten older I have come to realize, that to be true to myself, I have to discern for myself what I can and can't adhere to. Today I will try to explain how I have been forced by my own life experiences to change my image of God and my understanding of church. My understanding and experience of God and church are now very different to what they had been in the past. I still search and question but I am becoming more comfortable in my 'uncomfortableness' because I am beginning to see God 'within' rather than out there somewhere.

I believe everyone has some sense of spiritual searching. Things happen in our lives – joys, tragedies, great times and the lows. Sometimes we find ourselves asking things like: Why was I born? Why into this family and not into another? Why into this culture? Why did my baby nephew die? Why was my niece child born with severe disabilities? Why did three of my best friends get cancer? Where does God fit into all of this Why do natural disasters occur which wipe out thousands of innocent people? Why am I lucky enough to have a loving family, enough food and educational opportunities, when others have none? What happens when we die? Where are my loved ones who have died? Is this all just chance? Is this all part of a plan? Is someone or something in control of all this or is it all just random? Is there a God?

As a young Catholic girl, human responses to these questions were given to me in a neatly packaged parcel called 'Catholic Christianity' by my loving parents, grandparents, extended family, friends, nuns, teachers, priests and church community. I was taught that the Catholic Church was the holder of the truth and that it was only Catholics who were going to be saved!

In my Christian tradition I was taught as a child about a 'theistic' God. The one in heaven up there that we pray to.

The one who is everywhere. The one that decides our fate. The one who has a plan for each of us. The one who is all powerful. The one who sends 'gifts' to us. The one who sees everything that we do. The one that judges us when we die. I was taught that it was in the image of this God that we were created. I couldn't quite understand how I was made in the image of the old man with the beard. But hey, I just believed what I was told.

For many years my image of God was clear and comfortable. God was a man in heaven up there somewhere, who loved me. He got really sad when I sinned and so to teach me how to be a better person he occasionally sent a few rough things my way just to keep me on the straight and narrow. This God could do anything he wanted. He had a merit and demerit system in place. If I was good and kind and loving, good things would happen to me and mine. There were strict guidelines of behaviour for good Catholic girls and Catholic guilt and fear of punishment (especially hell) were good motivators.

I was taught that if bad things happened God always had a reason or it was part of his plan. I was told that we might not understand why things happened but they always happened for a reason

It wasn't until I got out into the world a bit that I began to notice a few flaws in these beliefs and the questions started emerging. If we praised God for the bright sunny day for the school fete, was he also responsible for the flood that killed 30,000 people in Africa? Could God have stopped it if he wanted to? How come my beloved young uncle died when I spent months praying the rosary for his recovery? Was I just one Hail Mary short? What about the good people down the road who weren't Catholic? Were they really going to go to hell just because they were not church going Catholics?

What is God doing? When we pray for peace does God change patterns of behaviour? Does God change people's minds? When we pray for a loved one's recovery does God remove the tumour, stop the bleeding, cure the disease? When we pray for rain for drought-affected areas does God change the weather pattern?

(To be continued in next issue)

Editor's Note: If Maree's story strikes a chord with other readers, then please let us know. We welcome further contributions.

You Men

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz de Asbaje y Ramirez

The poem below was written by a Mexican nun in the 17th century. It reveals the struggles of women at the hands of a male-dominated world. Sr Juana was an outspoken critic of the injustice to women and saw the displeasure of the Roman Catholic Church in her time because of this.

Silly, you men – so very adept
at wrongly faulting womankind,
not seeing you're alone to blame
for faults you plant in woman's mind.

After you've won by urgent plea
the right to tarnish her good name,
you still expect her to behave –
you, that coaxed her into shame.

You batter her resistance down
and then, all righteousness, proclaim
that feminine frivolity,
not your persistence, is to blame.

When it comes to bravely posturing,
your witlessness must take the prize:
you're the child that makes a bogeyman,
and then recoils in fear and cries.

Presumptuous beyond belief,
you'd have the woman you pursue
be Thais when you're courting her,
Lucretia once she falls to you.

For plain default of common sense,
could any action be so queer
as oneself to cloud the mirror,
then complain that it's not clear?

Whether you're favoured or disdained,
nothing can leave you satisfied.
You whimper if you're turned away,
you sneer if you've been gratified.

With you, no woman can hope to score;
whichever way, she's bound to lose;
spurning you, she's ungrateful –
succumbing, you call her lewd.

Your folly is always the same:
you apply a single rule
to the one you accuse of looseness
and the one you brand as cruel.

What happy mean could there be
for the woman who catches your eye,
if, unresponsive, she offends,
yet whose complaisance you decry?

Still, whether it's torment or anger –
and both ways you've yourselves to blame –
God bless the woman who won't have you,
no matter how loud you complain.

It's your persistent entreaties
that change her from timid to bold.
Having made her thereby naughty,
you would have her good as gold.

So where does the greater guilt lie
for a passion that should not be:
with the man who pleads out of baseness
or the woman debased by his plea?

Or which is more to be blamed –
though both will have cause for chagrin:
the woman who sins for money
or the man who pays money to sin?

So why are you men all so stunned
at the thought you're all guilty alike?
Either like them for what you've made them
or make of them what you can like.

If you'd give up pursuing them,
you'd discover, without a doubt,
you've a stronger case to make
against those who seek you out.

I well know what powerful arms
you wield in pressing for evil:
your arrogance is allied
with the world, the flesh, and the devil!

Sainthood? Okay. Priesthood? No way!

If the Church can see its way clear to making saints out of dead women, why are live women still officially prohibited from being ordained as priests?

Fred Jansohn

There are men who utter the phrase “Can’t live with ‘em; can’t live without ‘em” to describe their ambivalent relationships with women. By straining one’s ears one might also hear a similar refrain echoing around the walls of the male-dominated Vatican. Still it is interesting to note that, while the vast majority of the thousands who were canonised by the Church over the centuries are male, many, many females are represented as well. If the Church can see its way clear to making saints out of dead women, why are live women still officially prohibited from being ordained as priests?

Of course the path to sainthood is not an easy one. The Church’s approach fairly bristles with legal hurdles, checks and balances, and so it should. But what does it take to become a saint? The procedure is now contained in a document called the Apostolic Constitution ‘*Divinus Perfectionis Magister*’ of Pope John Paul II dated January 25, 1983. In brief, a candidate must have been dead for at least five years, to allow emotions to dissipate and encourage greater objectivity. A diocesan tribunal is then formed by the bishop of the diocese in which the person died. Witnesses are called to give evidence of the person’s character. At this point the deceased is called *Servant of God*. The tribunal’s findings are gathered and forwarded to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints (CCS) in Rome. The CCS issues a public copy and the document undergoes rigorous scrutiny by a panel of theologians. If it clears this hurdle it is passed on to cardinals and bishops who are members of the CCS. If they think the cause has merit the results are handed to the Pope who authorises the CCS to draft the relevant decree. The decree is then publicly read.

A miracle is then required for the person to be elevated by further decree to the rank of *Blessed* – the beatification process. For canonisation, another miracle is required. With canonisation, the *Blessed* acquires the title of *Saint*. Needless to say the entire process can take decades, if not centuries.

While all previous popes of the 20th century combined canonised nearly 100 saints, during his pontificate the late John Paul II, accused sometimes of running a ‘saint factory’, canonised almost 500 saints, most of whom had been dead for centuries. He beatified more than 1300 people. Of those canonised, at least an estimated one-third were women.

What then, one may ask, are the reasons underlying the Vatican’s persistent refusal of a place for women among the ranks of the living ordained?

Traditionally the reasons given cite the example of Christ in apparently only choosing men to be His Apostles (ignoring the overarching role played by Mary, His mother, not to speak of the emerging role of Mary Magdalen in the life of Christ); the fact that the practice was maintained by the Apostles after Christ’s resurrection; the practice of the Church over the centuries in imitating Christ’s example; the 1994 Letter of Pope John Paul II to the Faithful in which he wrote: ‘The Church has no authority ... to confer priestly ordination on women ... this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful’ (albeit this statement lacked the seal of infallibility). These were followed by a series of pronouncements from the Vatican, all in effect confirming the Church’s conservative position and the secondary role to be played by women in the life of the faithful. To be sure, those more sophisticated than I in the history and laws of the Church will see finer points of distinction but I cannot see how a human being whose existence is otherwise exemplary, one of true commitment to the Church, and a role model for the expression of Christian values, could be automatically excluded from consideration for ordination by virtue of the fact that the person does not happen to fit the criteria for being a male.

Some questions that beg to be asked, and doubtless have been asked, include: Would the Church consider as fit to be a priest a woman who had undergone a sex change operation? What steps does the Church take when it is clear a priest is unfit to continue in that role: someone who has assaulted children, murdered, stolen, broken vows of celibacy, obtained money by false pretences, or refuses to honour the vow of poverty...? As trite as it is to say ... a man is born of a woman; women and men working in harmony together promote God’s plan for humankind. Thus men and women complement each other. The obvious gender differences are nothing but a superficial element in the argument against the ordination of women.

It does seem, though, that the Church places great store in these differences and has created an entire body of learning based largely on these differences. In recent times people have been excommunicated, or threatened with excommunication, where they disagreed with these teachings. The Church promotes the idea that it has no authority to ordain women as priests, although it has managed to summon up the authority to exclude them performing the great rites of priesthood, according to a tortured line of

reasoning whose roots lie essentially within a cultural paradigm.

To the extent that Christ was a revolutionary figure, it is well known that He remained, in many respects, a person of His own time. If males tended to dominate Christ's inner cabinet this will have had more to do with an adherence to cultural expectations of the roles ascribed to the genders than with Divine Providence. The point is implied in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) at paragraph 854 which reads in part: (Missionary endeavour) must involve a process of inculturation if the Gospel is to take flesh in each people's culture. The process (of missionary endeavour) is continuous, even in those cultures where the Church is firmly established, and presupposes an on-going dialogue between faith and culture. If the moral and ethical standard of the individual is not compromised or prejudiced then, in my view, her or his position is to be judged by the cultural mores of the day. This confers an implicit duty on the Church to reflect on long-held tradition, and assess its relevance for different cultures and contemporary times.

There is no greater superiority in the male than the female for the role. Indeed Christ's first successor, Peter, denied Him thrice; and Christ was betrayed by one of His own, Judas – hardly ringing endorsements for a male-only line of succession. Being ordained a priest is certainly no prospective award for good behaviour, or a marker that the individual has led, or will lead, an exemplary life. Those views, if they exist, are naïve in the extreme and beside the point. Surely it thus follows that each of the genders has as equal a right as the other to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Arguments comparing the role of Christ with a bridegroom and the Church his bride, as another reason for the exclusion of women as priests, do not receive support from our Catechism. Nonetheless one would have to concede that the Catechism is heavily masculinised. However I would submit that relevant words need to be read in a broader

sense, as having a more catholic application. For example 'men' and 'brotherhood' were words that in former times referred to society as a whole. If political correctness is the new weapon of exclusion then it defeats its own original purpose. Who in all reason would take literally the observation in CCC's Para. 855 that: ... *divisions among Christians prevent the Church from realising ... the fullness of catholicity of those of her sons who ... are yet separated from full communion with her?* Bear this in mind when reading CCC Para.1598, which says, in part: The Church confers the sacrament of Holy Orders on baptized men, whose suitability for the exercise of the ministry has been duly recognized. Now, whether 'men' should be taken literally, as in 'male', or figuratively as in the delineation of that part of mankind that has been baptized is a central and moot point. Remember also CCC Para. 369 which reads: ... *Man and woman are both with one and the same dignity 'in the image of God'*. And then exult in CCC Para. 1565: *Through the sacrament of Holy Orders priests share in the universal dimensions of the mission that Christ entrusted to the apostles.* (author's emphasis in the above quotes)

Exclusion from the priesthood, as in the process to sainthood, should be based on the merits of each case and not on gender differences or tortured culturally-based, and thus non-contemporary, lines of reasoning. If a woman can be posthumously awarded the greatest honour the Church can bestow for having lived a virtuous life – sainthood – then she should not automatically be excluded from the rite of ordination in life or the right to share in the universal dimensions of Christ's mission. □

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Editor's Note: In our last issue, it was suggested that by persisting in excluding women from their rightful place as ministers of the sacraments and from all decision-making, the Church does so at its peril! Fred Jansohn's article is another timely warning.

Toowoomba bishop in call for ordination dialogue

Telling a Brisbane newspaper that he was grieved that he could not ordain women or married men to the priesthood, Toowoomba Bishop William Morris has expressed hope for a change in Church policy through 'dialogue'. However, Bishop Morris also said he would not ordain people against the teachings of the Catholic Church. 'If we keep dialoguing, our understanding will grow,' he said. 'I may not see it in my lifetime but the children of this age may see it. I would ordain married men as priests if I could. Most bishops in the world would agree but we can ordain only single, celibate males by decree of the church since the 14th century.' In a pastoral letter to his diocese, Bishop Morris, 63, called on parishes to keep talking about alternative models of ministry. The diocese was challenged by the ageing of its priests, most of whom would be eligible for retirement by 2014, leaving only six priests out of the full complement of 40. *Courier-Mail* 4/1/06

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