



arcvoice

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Looking to the true spirit of Christmas

Some Christians are overjoyed that a fragment of wood believed to be from the manger of the baby Jesus is back in the Holy Land for Christmas. It has been transferred from the Vatican to St. Catherine's Church adjacent to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It has been reported that many Christians there say that it represents the very essence of their faith.

Most people would view such an event, along with the emotions it evokes, with mild amusement. While some believers need tangible items to support their faith, it does nothing for the vast majority of people, even many other believers, who know that the nativity story is a myth. Most scholars today consider that Jesus was most likely born in Nazareth.

Although it has some shortcomings, James Fowler's theory entitled 'Stages of Faith' could be used to shape a perspective on the above (as outlined by J A Dick in this edition on page 10). Using his theory, we could conclude that those who are devoted to questionable relics are most likely locked into Stage 3 of faith development, namely Synthetic Conventional Faith. They need the tangible and what they held to as a child, unable to move beyond it. But does this provide them with the real meaning behind the original event which should influence their response to it as an adult?

Perhaps some other traditions less related to the nativity story itself have enabled much of the spirit of Christmas to be sustained. Almost universally, children have been led to believe in Santa Claus. Through this they experience a giving without reciprocity. The value of giving without necessarily expecting a return is enculturated and held long after belief in Santa has passed. If we look closely though, we may come to the conclusion that, for most of us, the generosity does not extend much beyond those that we like or see as deserving.

However, the full spirit of the Christmas message comes through in the actions of those who do the selfless giving without discrimination of any kind. These are the people who make no judgments about those they give out to, no presumptions about worthiness or background. They are found in hospitals, refuges, nursing homes, etc. They correspond to Stage 5 and possibly Stage 6 if we refer to Fowler's faith model,

whatever that faith may be. They are undeterred by contrary values around them.

This past year, in particular, has revealed so many scandals of abuse across Church, State and large private organisations that credibility in what is said and taught publicly is severely eroded. It is the dedication of people with mature faith and conviction demonstrated in their actions that sustains the spirit of what Christmas means and ultimately the viability of any Church itself.

John Buggy

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Hope for Reform?

Rob Butler

The Yarra Theological Union hosted a conference in Melbourne, entitled ‘**Voices of Hope and Challenge**’, over the weekend of 15-17 November. The venue was packed and the participants were full of enthusiasm as they looked forward to hearing from an impressive list of talented presenters.

The conference began with an address from Bishop Vincent Long. He spoke of the need to confront the issue of clericalism and include women in Church governance. He rejected what he said was the old patriarchal and monarchical Church, saying we must look for new ways, focussing on people and building relationships rather than empire. Pope Francis had led by urging change to a humble, serving and inclusive Church and reclaiming the spirit of Vatican II. Francis has spoken of the need for a synodal, collegiate structure with an inverted pyramid of governance, incorporating listening to the *sensus fidei*. It should be a Church of the baptised, not the ordained. He rejected the old rigid paradigm of the ‘hermeneutics of continuity’ and, in a humorous aside, said reform would be like ‘rolling back the GST’. There was a need for re-founding rather than renewal, going back to our roots. Interestingly, on several occasions, he referred to the example of Rosa Parks, the African-American woman who played an important role in the US civil rights movement when she insisted on retaining her seat on a bus in favour of giving it up to a white passenger. Vincent urged us that we must ‘take our seat on the bus’ and a number present took these as encouragement for more direct involvement over and above the mere expression of opinion.

The first speaker the next morning was Noel Connolly, a Columban priest involved with the Plenary Council Facilitation Group, whose topic was the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*, delivered with several entertaining anecdotes, and often directed into a strident criticism of clericalism. He spoke about a church which utilised the ministry of the baptised, not confining this function just to the ordained. Indeed, he referred to the example of Pope Francis who, when a well-wisher remarked to him that his election to the papacy must have been the proudest moment of his life, responded in the negative saying that he regarded his day of baptism as being far more important.

John Warhurst, a member of the Australian Bishops Governance Review Panel, told of the recent sudden restructuring of the body by the Bishops without consultation with the members. He spoke of the need for governance which is transparent, accountable and responsible and not secret, elitist and authoritarian. Perhaps, the bishops were unhappy with the direction being taken by their Review Panel? He also spoke of the need for financial accountability and transparency.

Robyn Horner, an academic from ACU’s Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry, presented statistics on religious adherence in answering the question in the lecture title ‘Will Our Faith Have Young People?’ and amplified them with reference to her own experience as the mother of teenagers. She examined the merits of four approaches to the threat to the church of an increasingly secular world. Both resignation to the situation and battling the secular world were dismissed as useless. She warned that the approach of trying to make the church relevant to the young and their secular environment was also doomed to failure as research showed that, in compromising, it was Christianity that would suffer. Her recommendation was the approach of making the practice of our faith meaningful to the young and warned of the problems which arise in cultural Catholicism.

Andrew Hamilton SJ, Editorial Consultant of Eureka Street, spoke about the toxicity of clericalism and saw the Church today as a flower growing in the rubble with the need to nurture the seeds and encourage new growth. He saw these valuable seeds in several areas: the commitment of older Catholics; migrant groups; Catholic outreach groups in schools, health services and social services and; those ‘caught’ by the Gospel who go on to share it.

Alicia Deak, Social Justice Coordinator, St Ignatius College, Geelong, presented with a background in theological training and the enthusiasm of one who’d just celebrated her thirtieth birthday. She spoke of the challenges facing the young people in finding their place in the Church and also a personal challenge in trying to answer the queries of her students on a number of social issues.

The speakers on the second full day were led off by a stimulating presentation from Mary Coloe, a Presentation nun and well-qualified and published New Testament Scholar. She gave numerous examples of women in leadership roles in early Christian times from Scripture and early historical documentation. These women were given titles

including deacon, presbyter and even episcopos. Indeed, there are two women ‘*episcopa*’ buried in Rome, the memorial of Theodora giving her the aforementioned title. Tertullian (150-220 AD) was the first to refer to ‘cleric’ as distinct from laity although he also referred to men and women in clerical orders. The subjugation of the role of women was said to have originated from Aristotle who saw their role in reproduction as just the nurturing of the male seed. An illustration of a biological diagram of early times showed a completely developed foetus within a spermatozoa and it was this biological ignorance which underpinned some teachings of Thomas Aquinas and others. At YTU, Mary teaches scripture and theology at a tertiary level to seminarians, priests and the occasional bishop but, under canon law, because she is a woman, is not permitted to preach a homily during a Catholic service!

Rosie Joyce, a Brigidine, canon lawyer and a member of the Victorian Marriage Tribunal, explained the position of canon law, giving examples of how it has been changed, a recent example being the endorsement of the death penalty in certain circumstances by John Paul II and it being described as ‘inadmissible’ by Pope Francis. So, it is quite possible for impediments to reform by virtue of canon law to be overcome by changes in this law. She endorsed the qualification for governance to be by baptism rather than ordination and called on the Plenary Council to make it compulsory for the establishment of diocesan and parish pastoral councils, the former being extant in less than a fifth of Australian dioceses.

The experience of the establishment of a diocesan council in Adelaide, immediately following Vatican II, served as a model for other jurisdictions. Pat Fox, a Mercy nun, illustrated the experience of successive archbishops in Adelaide who ensured that government at the highest advisory level was inclusive of women, both lay and religious. The small leadership team to advise the Archbishop in the work of governance and function as an executive of the diocesan pastoral team included a lay woman and Pat herself.

Paul Bongiorno, an experienced political journalist who, incidentally, has a Masters Degree in Theology from the Pontifical Urban University in Rome, looked at the position of the Church post the royal Commission. He endorsed the principle that there could be no justice without truth and condemned the expenditure of millions of dollars in defending the reputation of the Church and the employment of the

egregious Ellis defence to avoid the legal claims of victims. He saw hope in the vision of Pope Francis for a humble rather than a monarchical Church. He also felt that there had been manipulation of the membership of the writing groups for the Plenary Council, with exclusion of those known to seek reform and strong representation from Church employees, not to mention the clergy including two bishops.

The Conference included a number of sessions of informally arranged break-out groups to aid in discernment and outcome formulation. In the final forum led by Bernadette Keating pbvm, a large number of suggested outcomes were displayed. Many related to the recognition of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, the eradication of toxic clericalism and the need for more inclusive participation of the laity and women in governance. There was also a call for the Plenary Council to begin with a lament and for the Council to ask for forgiveness from the victims of clerical abuse. It was clear that the ‘voices of hope and challenge’ had had enough of the current situation and were prepared to consider ways of more direct action in ‘taking their seat on the bus’.

The papers presented are being posted on the website of the Yarra Theological Union www.ytu.edu.au and are commended for reading.

Rob Butler is a member of the ARC Secretariat.

More on Indulgences

In Martin Luther’s day, the Church promised its followers some very enticing deals indeed. If you sinned, and feared eternal damnation in the afterlife, all you had to do was open your purse and buy an indulgence. In the early 16th century the Church employed professional ‘salvation peddlers’ who wandered the towns and villages of Europe and sold indulgences for fixed prices. You want an entry visa to heaven? Pay ten gold coins. You want your dead grandparents to join you? No problem, but it will cost you thirty coins. The most famous of these peddlers, the Dominican friar Johannes Tetzel, allegedly said that the moment the coin clinks in the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory to heaven.’

Quotation from
Yuval Noah Harari *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*

