

Parish on Mission: A Reflection on a Renewed Sense of Parish Leadership and Ministry in the Present Realities of the Church in Australia

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Abstract: *In this article the author examines some of the factors conditioning the context of parish life in Australia today and proposes some fundamental priorities that should shape a parish's sense of mission in response to that context. A wide range of issues is listed, from globalisation to the dramatic downturn in church attendance in recent times. Cause for hope and courage in responding to such diverse challenges, it is proposed, is to be found in focusing on Jesus' own primary concern, the reign of God; finding inspiration in biblical more than secular models of leadership; and avoiding the temptation to turn inward.*

Key Words: signs of the times, reign of God, mission of the church, parish ministry, parish leadership

What might a renewed sense of parish leadership and ministry look and feel like in the present realities of the church in Australia?¹ I want to begin with the last part of that question: "in the present realities of the church in Australia". It was the methodology of Vatican II's pastoral constitution on the church in the world of today, *Gaudium et Spes*, to start with *present reality*, to interpret it, and then to work out appropriate responses in the light of the Gospel. So, following that injunction, this article will first address the end part of my sub-title, "the present realities", and *then* move to the first part: "a renewed sense of parish leadership and ministry".

THE PRESENT REALITIES OF THE CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

What are the present realities of the church in Australia? Using the metaphor of a scan, such as taking an MRI scan or doing a radar sweep, let us scan the present realities. Once again, following *Gaudium et Spes*, let us call this a search for "the signs of the times".² What

¹ An earlier version of this article was first presented as the keynote address at the Augustinian Parishes Symposium, 23-25 October 2008, at the Chevalier Centre, Kensington, Sydney.

² See *GS*, 4: "To discharge this function [i.e., to continue the work of Christ with the guidance of the Paraclete Spirit, referring back to the previous sentence in *GS*, 3]), the church has the duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, so that it can offer in a manner appropriate to each generation replies to the continual human questionings on the meaning of this life and the life to come and on how they are related. There is a need, then, to be aware of, and to understand, the world in which we live, together with its expectations, its desires and its frequently dramatic character." Tanner translation. Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:1070.

we want to do is “scan” contemporary Australian society in all its dimensions (religious, social, cultural, political, economic). Such a scan will hopefully give us a picture of the salient features of the landscape in which we are conducting our daily ministry. I see at least fifteen major features blinking insistently on the screen, after my own very selective—and certainly not comprehensive—scan. I am sure there would be many more which you, the reader, could highlight. I have chosen a few symbolic percentage figures as a way of naming certain groups or issues on the radar screen.

- (1) *The 87%*. (Those baptised nominal Catholics who no longer attend mass, presuming regular mass attendance across Australia is around 13%). This symbolic figure of 87% is simply meant to capture the phenomenon of a significant downturn in mass attendance in recent decades. Some would claim that Vatican II and its changes are the cause of this downturn. If so, then why has the same been happening to all other Christian churches in Australia? We will examine below some of the possible wider causes at work in Australian society. But here the key question is raised: How do we reach this 87% of Catholics who do not come? A parish that is genuinely trying to reach out to this 87% in some way should at least be trying to hear their reasons why they say they no longer come. Research such as the National Christian Life Survey,³ or the *Research Project on Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass: Final Report* from February 2007, go some way to telling us how they think.⁴ Many things they would want changed perhaps we cannot change, at least not immediately, but we cannot ignore their perspectives in our pastoral planning for reaching out to them.
- (2) *The 13%*. (Those who come regularly to mass). Although variously committed, these are Catholics with deep faith, albeit with a wide range of theological understanding of the faith. This group is increasingly elderly; it includes fewer and fewer youth; it is becoming more and more multi-cultural/multi-ethnic/multi-racial; many of the 13% are bewildered and disillusioned—among other things, with the vacant pews around them, with child abuse in the church, and with a perceived narrowing of ecclesial perspective after Vatican II.
- (3) *The 99%*. (The lay people in the church). These are the laity in the world, working for the mission of the church “at the coal face”. These are our “strike bowlers”, “the troops on the ground”. However, in recent times I sense that this vision of the church is *de facto* being downplayed or forgotten. What ever happened to Vatican II’s vision of “the apostolate of the laity in the world”?
- (4) *The 1%*. (The priests and religious). This figure captures the significant downturn in vocations to the priesthood and the religious life over the last several decades. Highlighting the utter significance of the role of those whom I call the 99% is not to be seen as an emergency response to this downturn; but that downturn is making the participative role of the 99% ever more urgent, as well as raising issues regarding the future leadership of parishes.
- (5) *The Generations and the Youthless Pews*. The low number of youth in the pews highlights the urgent need for pastoral planners to tap into sociological

³ See <http://www.ncls.org.au> [accessed 5 December 2010].

⁴ Robert Dixon, Sharon Bond, Kath Engebretson, Richard Rymarz, Bryan Cussen, and Kathrine Wright, *Research Project on Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass. Final Report February 2007* (Fitzroy, Victoria: Pastoral Projects Office. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2007).

research on the generations, such as *The Spirit of GenY Project*).⁵ And what of those who follow GenY, “Generation tXt” (“text”, as in the ubiquitous mobile phone texting), as someone has called the emerging generation of youth.⁶ Just in terms of numbers in our pews, there is a massive generation gap, let alone a gap in worldviews.

- (6) *The Great Dividing Ranges*. These are the great divides in Australia and in the world between: the advantaged and the disadvantaged; those in poverty and those well-off; the homeless and the housed; the Indigenous and non-Indigenous; “the dinky-die Aussies” and the new comers. Jesus abhorred Great Dividing Ranges. How does the church flatten these mountains?
- (7) *Our Postmodern Condition*. This vague but accurate term attempts to name a cluster of characteristics of our age. Some of those characteristics are well expressed by Cardinal Carlo Martini:

a spontaneous preference for feeling over the will, for impressions over intelligence, for an arbitrary logic and the search for pleasure over an ascetic and prohibitive morality... there is an absolute right to be singular and to affirm oneself. Every moral rule is out of date. There is no more sin, nor pardon, nor redemption, nor self-denial... the refusal to accept anything that smacks of centralism or a desire to direct things from on high.⁷

Preaching the Gospel within such a culture presents new challenges for the church.

- (8) *Secularisation*. The sociological phenomenon called “secularisation” needs little explanation. Since the Enlightenment (but particularly since the 1960s), public religious practice in the West has plummeted; there is likewise a general expectation that religion is a private affair and should have no place in the public square. However, scholars are less inclined these days to say, as they used to, that the more the scientific and Enlightenment worldview gains acceptance throughout the world, the less religion will be significant in people’s lives. In some ways, this does not seem to have happened.⁸ Something much more complex seems to be occurring.
- (9) *De-traditionalisation*. Our church is not immune to the phenomenon (related to secularisation) named by sociologists as “detraditionalisation”. This term refers to the generational gap in handing on traditional and once-authoritative religious and cultural stories, knowledge, values and practices.⁹ Some say we in Australia are living in a post-Christian society. There is an alarming lack of religious literacy among many of our youth, who oftentimes no longer know even the basic elements of the Christian story and vision. However, what they highly value can also be inspiring!

⁵ Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Vic.: John Garratt Publishing, 2007); Philip J. Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Fairfield, Vic.: Fairfield Press, 2007).

⁶ On the previous generations of baby boomers and Generation Xs, see, for an American perspective, Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁷ See Carlo Maria Martini, "Teaching the Faith in a Postmodern World," *America*, 12 May 2008 2008.

⁸ For one approach to this debate, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁹ For example, see Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris, eds., *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

- (10) *Spirituality vs Religion*. Related to phenomena such as secularisation and detraditionalisation, is the phenomenon that, despite a distrust of institutional religion (and a perception that it is part of the problem of violence in the world), there is nevertheless a perduring popularity of so-called “spirituality”, often vaguely expressed as an awareness and response to the perceived deeper dimension of being human.¹⁰
- (11) *Globalisation*. Once again, this requires no expanded explanation. The planet today is truly a global village in so many ways, shaped by myriad forces such as scientific and information technologies, international trade, increased migration of peoples, converging political forces. The effects on the local parish of these forces of globalisation are oftentimes difficult to gauge, but they are real nonetheless. Some elements, such as the vastly-increased mobility of peoples around the globe, are quickly changing the tapestry of our local Sunday congregations (for example, in the parish where I celebrate eucharist, there are former-citizens from four other continents). Other globalisation forces, such as the global financial crisis, have not left our parishioners untouched; to take but one example, in 2009 many retired parishioners would have found their superannuation funds to have been halved. The local and the global are merging categories, leading to the creation of the words “glocal” and “glocalisation”.¹¹
- (12) *Information and Communications Technologies*. This is yet another aspect of “glocalisation”. The world is now a web where anyone can cause a vibration along the line.¹² The full social and cultural (read: religious) impact of the internet, the web, social networking and social media is yet unknown, but what is certain is that it is radically reshaping the imaginations and ways of thinking of those to whom the Gospel is to be made relevant.¹³ How do we preach eucharistic community to a young generation for whom the cyberspatial virtual “community” of social networking and social media sites such as MySpace or FaceBook are dominant and dominating realities of their lives?¹⁴
- (13) *Inter-religious Awareness and Tensions*. Perhaps it is too glib to say “the world changed on 9/11”, but somehow things are different now. The church must preach its own claims to divine revelation, without appearing to be just another one of the fundamentalisms on offer. How does it preach tolerance without indifference? Furthermore, in Australia, there has been evidence that religious intolerance, based on sheer ignorance, can so easily lead to racial and cultural intolerance.
- (14) *The Risk Society*. We live in times of deep uncertainty and lack of security on many levels. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck calls our age “the risk

¹⁰ See, for example, David J. Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

¹¹ The terms seem to have been first used by Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).

¹² See Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: How Digital Networks Transform Our Ability to Gather and Cooperate* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008); James Harkin, *Cyberurbia: The Dangerous Idea That's Changing How We Live and Who We Are* (London: Little, Brown, 2009).

¹³ For an insightful examination of the way human consciousness itself is being “re-wired” by our use of the web, see the recently screened BBC four-part series on SBS, *The Virtual Revolution: How Twenty Years of the Web Has Reshaped Our Lives*, presented by Dr Aleks Krotoski.

¹⁴ See Mike Hayes, *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007).

society”.¹⁵ We live in an age of terrorism, ecological crisis and the recent memory of a global financial meltdown. Even A380 engines now give us pause before international flight. The financial stability of the world is still shaky, with the memory still fresh of people’s superannuation funds plummeting to half during the global financial crisis of 2008-2009. We preach the Good News in a risk society.

- (15) *The Ecological Crisis*. Finally, the ecological crisis is an increasingly frightening fact contributing to the fear of “the risk society”. It is not too long ago that some Australian cities and towns were running out of water. Whether it be caused by human beings or not, the climate patterns of the world are changing dramatically. Pope John Paul II certainly saw it as an issue demanding a faith response, calling for “ecological conversion”.¹⁶

These are *but a few* of the features of “the present realities of the church in Australia.”¹⁷ Although many of them seem negative signs of the times, many also present new opportunities. Of course there are many clearly positive signs of the times, as demonstrated in the vibrant parish life around Australia. Oftentimes these signs are tiny but highly effective signs, mustard seeds of hope in a fearful, “risk society”. In highlighting the negative aspects above, I was attempting to bring to the fore perplexing issues that feature in the background of our current attempts to be church today in Australia. All of these are “signs of the times” that require critical discernment. Many are positive; many are negative; many are ambiguous. The positives give hope; the negatives call for a positive response, in the sense of demanding a commitment to working to address the negative impact; the ambiguous ones call for discernment and wise caution.

None of us can get a solid handle on these complex issues, but we must at least be aware that they are issues and forces which are shaping the context in which we are all daily ministering the Gospel. They all affect the people to whom we minister face-to-face; and they are affecting all those to whom we are called to minister—but they no longer come, either through loss of faith or disaffection with the church, for whatever reason. All of these groups and the massive forces in their lives should be on our radar.

Keeping in mind these complex issues and forces shaping “the present realities of the church in Australia”, and being in no doubt that they are impacting on our parishioners and the 87% we wished *were* our regular parishioners, let us now move on to the second part of this article’s sub-title: a renewed sense of parish leadership and ministry.

A RENEWED SENSE OF PARISH LEADERSHIP AND MINISTRY

It would require a book to consider appropriate responses to the above fifteen factors. In stimulating reflection on parish mission and ministry in such a complex world, however, there are some fundamentals which I believe should guide a local parish as it works out its

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Malden, Mass: Polity Press, 1999); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1992).

¹⁶ See, for example, Pope John Paul II’s General Audience Address, January 17, 2001. For a collection of quotes from John Paul II on ecological conversion, see http://conservation.catholic.org/pope_john_paul_ii.htm.

¹⁷ A good summary of these and other challenges shaping the present realities of the Catholic Church worldwide can be found in the book John L. Allen, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

own particular local responses. I wish to restrict myself to three points: (1) Do not forget the main game; (2) Look to being inspired more by biblical than secular models of leadership and ministry; (3) Do not turn inward.

Do Not Forget the Main Game

Firstly: do not forget the main game. What is the main game? What it was for Jesus: the reign of God. It is God's power at work in human history. God's mission in the world is to reign in the hearts of men and women and to bring to fulfilment God's purposes at the end of time. To promote that reign is the mission of the church.

The reign of God was Jesus' abiding passion; he was driven by it; it alone explains what he was on about, how he saw his mission, and who he was perceived to be. He told parables about it, he sought to embody it by the way he acted, in his table fellowship and in the primary focus of his ministry, the outcasts, the marginalised, the sinners. The reign of God likewise, for the church, should be the main game. Everything we do must be related to helping God reign in the world. All we say about leadership and ministry is only secondary to and a function of the mission of the church. And that is? To be on about the reign of God.

And let us not forget: that reign is not equivalent to the church. We are not meant to be a little suffocating salvation club solely concerned about our own members, no matter how vital and utterly important that is. We do not contain God within our boundaries; God is at work beyond the walls we tend to set up around our churches. We, the church, are but the sacrament of God's reign. But the church is like the broader reign of God to the extent that we too are meant to be like leaven in the midst, seemingly only tiny, insignificant mustard seeds, a community full of weeds and wheat.

All of this is a cause for deep, deep *hope*. Firstly, God is doing the work. We are co-workers *with God* in all this. It does not all depend on us, even though God needs us to work on the divine project. A corollary of this is that the number of people coming to church is not really, in the end, the ultimate criterion of success or progress. Success is when human beings care for and forgive each other and live in justice, peace and love. As the Eucharistic Prayer for the feast of Christ the King states, God's kingdom is a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, peace and love.

So, as it faces all the contemporary challenges and opportunities listed above, what does a parish look and feel like when, for it, the main game is the reign of God? What does a parish look and feel like when it is distracted from focusing on the main game?

Biblical Models of Leadership and Ministering

The title of this article mentions two terms "leadership and ministry". I want to restrict my remarks to the role of *leadership* in the broad sense, of applying to anyone in the parish who has the responsibility of marshalling and organising and enthusing others. I also use the terms "minister" and "ministry" in their broad, generic sense, not to refer only to people who technically are ordained ministers (as in priests deacons and deacons), or even formally and publically commissioned for a task and function. Rather, including all of

those, is the notion of leadership and ministry as a function of *mission*: there is one mission, and many ministries and ministers and leaders.

Bookshops have shelves and shelves of oftentimes helpful books offering secular theories of leadership. However, Dr John Chalmers of Australian Catholic University, who teaches a unit called "Power, Authority and Leadership", structures the unit around what he calls: "the fundamental conviction that our leadership practices must be intentionally theological, rather than the mindless adaptation of 'secular' leadership theory." There certainly are secular models of leadership which may resonate in some ways with the Gospel. But what biblical models should primarily guide us?

A key aspect of leadership is one's "style" of operating and relating with those whom we lead. How do we relate to one another? On every page of the New Testament there are injunctions which touch on to how to relate to others. Jesus speaks of love and compassion, of being a servant, of not lording it over others as the pagans do. St Paul says: always think of the other person to be better than yourself. Vatican II gives us three trinitarian images of church which should guide leadership style at the parish level (The People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit).

The *People of God* image of the church, and therefore of the parish, reminds us that we are pilgrims on the road together; if you have ever been camping, you get the idea; do not be a slacker; do your bit around the campsite. We are all pilgrims on the way together. Secondly, the parish is the *Body of Christ*. St Paul does not use this image (with its image of "the head") to highlight that some people are top dog over others; but rather the exact opposite. No one person, including the parish priest, or the parish secretary, or the chief organist has the divine right of kings or queens, let alone has all the goods needed; it is all about co-dependence, in a positive sense; we all need each other and no one has it all. Thirdly, the implications of the image of the parish as the *Temple of the Holy Spirit* reinforces the christological image; everyone has been given something special by the Spirit; the role of the leaders is to discern what those gifts are, and to be a broker for the Holy Spirit by creating opportunities for utilising the specific charisms of people gifted for a specific need in the local church. Leaders are good scanners of talent; they are talent scouts for the Spirit; they are not the ones who do it all and know it all. A little bit of humility helps!

Do Not Turn Inward

One way of getting a handle on the prioritising of energies in a parish where the main game is the reign of God is to see how communion and mission are balanced.¹⁸ Communion speaks of union with God, with one another, with all other Christians throughout the world, other parishes and dioceses. We are one in faith and the eucharist is our powerhouse. Communion names (but not exclusively) that dimension of church life where the community is gathered to be inspired, resourced, empowered. That generally happens in liturgy, above all the eucharist. If the main game is *God's* reign in the world, and it is *God's* work, then we need to gather together to allow *God* to resource us. It is only through *God's* grace that we will achieve any kind of success in mission. Without being

¹⁸ For example, see Richard Lennan, "Communion Ecclesiology: Foundations, Critiques, and Affirmations," *Pacifica* 20 (2007): 24-39.

grounded in communion with God, and through that with one another, then we end up thinking it all depends on us. Despondency, despair and opting out will eventually win out.

Communion, although the foundation, is not so much the end-point, but rather the beginning point of mission. The forces of communion are both centripetal and centrifugal. The “going out” bit, the moving from “the church gathered” to “the church scattered”, is the point of it all surely, if the reign of God is the main game. This is when church is most church, when it is on about the main game. The end of the mass is always a sending out. And here, the 99% is the key, as leaven in the midst of the world.

It is not easy getting the balance between putting your energies into the church gathered (communion) and into the church scattered (mission), the first being concerned with matters like the liturgy committee and parish groups looking to the needs of a vibrant parish life. The second looks outward, beyond the visible faces to those whom we at the local level may never meet face-to-face. This concerns parish involvement in wider social justice issues, indigenous causes, project compassion—getting people in the parish to broaden their imaginations to take on God’s perspective on the world. If we are only or mainly concerned about the first bit, then we are turning the church into a little salvation club. Parish is not just about serving the people in them.

Another way of describing the need to maintain this balance between communion and mission is the need for parishes to nurture both “the mystic” and “the prophet” in their parishioners. It is as *both* mystics and prophets that lay people will be most effective as agents on mission. A prophet who is not a mystic can be a dangerous beast; a mystic who is not a prophet does not really feel the pain of God and want to alleviate it, and is happy to just feel “holy”. A parish which balances communion and mission will be nurturing mystics and prophets. How we do that at least includes having good liturgies, regular opportunities for prayer and Scripture study groups, adult education on a wide range of issues, among other things, which embolden them for mission.

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We live in dramatic times, and maybe at times we feel we are unique in the great sweep of church history in having to face issues so challenging. If all of the above seismic shifts in human affairs seems a bit daunting and even depressing, spare a thought, as one example, for someone like the great St Augustine and his traumatic times. It would be an interesting exercise to look at his reading of the massive changes taking place in his world in the fifth century, as the barbarian tribes moved south across Europe, changing the religious, social, cultural and political landscape of the world of his time. The Visigoths sacked Rome in 410. His work *The City of God* attempted to bolster the faith and hope of Christians in the face of such a challenge. The Vandals were besieging his hometown of Hippo in North Africa in 430 as Augustine lay dying. Any parish today, I imagine, probably feels no less daunted by similar global forces, but also hopefully feels no less equipped and no less hopeful in interpreting and responding to them. We have to find our own creative responses to the signs of our times.

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