

Signs of the times down under

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JUDGED BY ITS EXPANSION, ACHIEVEMENTS and the contribution it has made to the wider society, the Catholic Church in Australia has been a remarkable success. From its humble origins among Irish convicts transported to the penal colony of New South Wales after 1788, the Catholic Church has grown into the largest (and most powerful) church in the country. It is the biggest non-government employer, the major private sector welfare-service provider, and a significant force in education and health. About 27 per cent of Australia's almost twenty million people are professed Catholics and theirs is now a predominantly affluent middle-class church. Once actively if not officially discriminated against, Catholics now occupy prominent positions in politics, business and the professions, and it is they who have made the running in recent years on important issues of national concern including recognition of the rights of indigenous Australians, social justice and a more compassionate approach to refugees. Over a period of a little more than 200 years the 'Protestant Establishment' once so firmly entrenched in Australia has given way to a broader and more significant 'Catholic Ascendancy'.¹

Admittedly the Church is experiencing internal problems. Weekly mass attendance has continued a steady decline throughout the 1990s from an already low base in the 1970s and 1980s. There is a critical shortage of priests and their average age is now sixty years. Vocations are drying up. The laity have assumed important leadership roles (primarily within the Catholic education system but also within parish structures), but there is a widening gulf between the attitudes and practices of ordinary Catholics and official teaching, especially on matters of sexual morality such as birth control. Many Catholics are in open defiance of the pope's 1994 declaration that women's ordination is a non-issue on which discussion should not continue; others are actively campaigning for a married priesthood, and a small number have become vocal advocates for the rights of homosexuals within the Church. At the other extreme there are conservative Catholics who view any attempt to adapt to changing times and circumstances as tantamount to a betrayal of the faith. Their actions, whether in badgering bishops to rein in progressive clergy or in ignoring the local hier-

archy and taking their grievances directly to Rome, have been a source of tension and distress. Still, the local Catholic community has weathered more serious challenges in the past, little of what disturbs it now is unique to Australia, and none of it, until recently at least, has been a cause of panic among the local bishops.

The same cannot be said for the Vatican. At the April 1998 meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Edward Clancy, in his capacity as conference President, advised the members of the Central Commission that the Roman Curia had requested a meeting to discuss the situation facing the Church in Australia. The request was unusual: why should the Australian Church be singled out for such special attention and wasn't the more inclusive Synod for Oceania, due to convene that November, meant to deal with any challenges confronting the faith in Australia and the region? These questions went unanswered because news of the proposed meeting was not made public even beyond this select group of bishops. Eventually the gathering was held over four days beginning on November 17. On the Australian side, the participants were the seven metropolitan archbishops together with the chairmen and secretaries of the Bishops' Conference committees for clergy and religious, liturgy, education, evangelization, and doctrine and morals. The Vatican was represented by officials heading Congregations or Dicasteries responsible for matters of doctrine, clergy, worship and the discipline of the sacraments, bishops, religious orders and Catholic education. Three weeks after the meeting a summary of its deliberations, called the Statement of Conclusions, was circulated among all the Australian bishops who were in Rome for the Synod for Oceania. In a hastily arranged consultation before their *ad limina* meeting with Pope John Paul II, the bishops were asked to assent to the Statement. All did so and it was made public on December 14 as an official view of the state of the Catholic Church in Australia.

The view from Rome

The Statement of Conclusions² begins on an encouraging note. It acknowledges with gratitude the laity's 'vital commitment' to the mission of the Church in Australia and the 'generous collaboration' of ordinary Catholics with bishops, priests and religious in serving the needs of parishes and dioceses across the country. It says the increase in the active participation of the faithful in liturgical celebrations, the Church's extensive charitable works, its educational institutions and its

willingness to be a prophetic voice on social justice issues 'are all positive factors that enliven both the ecclesiastical community and society at large'. But the document also finds weaknesses in the Australian Church and these are its essential concern.

A 'crisis of faith' exists in Australia, the Statement argues, and it involves the discernment of truth. 'The tolerance characteristic of Australian society naturally affects the Church also,' it says, and while this influence can be positive, it can also lead to indifference and the uncritical acceptance of any opinion or activity as long as these do no harm to others. This openness to all perspectives gives rise to specific problems for the Church. First and foremost is a problem in Christology. Not just in Australia but throughout the world, the Statement says, there is evidence of a weakening of faith in Christ and of a distortion of doctrines based on the Scriptures and the early councils of the Church. These distortions take two directions: 'in the first, a re-fashioning of Jesus into a great prophet of humanity, who, for example, questions the rules of religion; in the other, substituting a pneumatological economy for the flesh and blood reality of Christ'. In other words, the nature of Jesus as both man and God is being split in two and the resultant half images are being exaggerated to the distortion of the whole picture. The Statement holds 'some aspects of feminist scholarship' responsible for this development and warns that left unchecked it can lead even to a rejection of the Trinity and thus the faithful's understanding of the very nature of God.

Another problem, also in part said to stem from 'certain forms of feminism', is a challenge to classical anthropology by which individual conscience is elevated to the level of an absolute. When subjectivity takes the place of objective reasoning, conscience has no point of reference beyond itself, the Statement says, and the sense of sin is eroded. This erosion leads to moral problems such as 'indifference to the poor, racial prejudice and violence, abortion, euthanasia, the legitimization of homosexual relationships and other immoral forms of sexual activity'. It also poses an ecclesiological challenge in that many people become persuaded that the Church is a merely human invention and as such can and should be reorganized to suit the circumstances of the day. The great fallacy and imminent danger of all this, the Statement concludes, is that 'truth is no longer discovered in a Revelation already given, but is based on the shifting sands of majority and consensus'.

The rest of the document is a blueprint for dealing with this allegedly serious situation. The Statement focuses first on the responsibilities of

the bishops. They are reminded that the faithful look to them for leadership 'now more than ever in these confusing and increasingly secularised times' and that the faithful also 'have a right to receive authentic and clear Catholic teaching' from those who represent the Church in its various institutions. Consequently, the bishops are urged to exercise 'continual vigilance' in order 'to safeguard the integrity of the faith' and 'not to tolerate error in matters of doctrine and morals or Church discipline'. As guardians of the sacraments, they must also keep watch to ensure that liturgical norms are faithfully followed and must take action against the introduction of 'spurious elements' in the liturgy.

A 'blurring of the lines' between spiritual baptismal priesthood and ministerial priesthood has been allowed to develop with negative consequences for both, it is claimed. The Statement calls for greater clarity in this area to preserve the authentic identity of priests and laity, for good order within the Church, and in the interests of encouraging vocations. The 'many attempts' issuing from a 'culture of secularism' to remove the figure of the priest from the centre of the lives of believers must be resisted. This resistance begins in the seminaries with 'inspired discipline', and a nourishment of the important relationship between celibacy and the priestly vocation. Priests themselves must play their part by affirming their special identity. One way to do this is through their greater attention to Marian devotions, the recitation of the rosary and undertaking other 'pious practices'; another is by retrieving to themselves those tasks entrusted to the laity but rightly belonging to the ordained clergy. As well, priests are instructed to eschew associations with groups that are 'not in harmony with the mission of the church and show division rather than unity'. No particulars are given about what such groups the authors of the Statement have in mind.

According to the document, 'several difficulties' have emerged with respect to the religious orders in Australia. Again no details are given except indirectly. The bishops are requested to open a dialogue with the major superiors about deepening the assent of their members to church teachings regarding the non-ordination of women to the priesthood, the theology of the sacraments, and moral issues. The major superiors are themselves reminded that their conferences 'are not organs of parallel pastoral authority' and that they must integrate their pastoral activities within the overall plan of the diocese as determined by the bishop. Individual religious priests, brothers and sisters are put on notice that in matters of faith there is no such thing as 'loyal opposition' or 'faithful subversion'. Religious who are prominent in the eyes of the faithful

and/or the secular media are called upon to offer 'a more evident fidelity' to the magisterium than would be expected of other Catholics.

Priests, brothers and sisters are advised that the good example they give in living consecrated lives is the best way to inspire vocations. To this end, and also to avoid the fragmentation of the community life of the religious orders, those brothers and sisters who have worked in secular occupations and lived outside religious houses in recent years are urged to return to communal styles of living and traditional forms of work. A caution is sounded about the recent trend among religious institutes to encourage lay associates: these associates should never be considered an alternative to the decline in vocations and must never be encouraged in ways that could harm the internal life of the institute. Evidence that such harm is a serious issue for any of the institutes is not given. The 'Church does not create her own ordering and structuring', the Statement nevertheless insists, 'but receives them from Christ himself'.

To address the alleged weakening in the sense of sin among the laity there is to be 'renewed and energetic catechesis' aimed at instilling a 'true sense of contrition' and 'authentic sorrow' for wrongdoing in the hearts of the faithful. Catholics are warned that individual confession is the 'sole ordinary means' by which one is reconciled with God and the bishops are reminded that the Third Rite of Reconciliation (known as communal confession), which has proved extremely popular in Australia in recent years, is 'illegitimate' and must be 'eliminated'. The Statement also calls for a 'pastoral response' to the problem of declining regular mass attendance, although it makes no suggestions about what form this response should take.

The bishops are encouraged to be active in ensuring the doctrinal soundness of the theology taught in Catholic universities and theological centres. They should ensure that Catholic school teachers are properly formed in the faith while school administrators must employ a significant proportion of practising Catholics on their teaching staffs. In general, Catholic education should 'lead to full participation and involvement' in the Church. Students should know 'as soon as they set foot in a Catholic school' that they are in a different, that is, religiously inspired, environment with 'its own unique characteristics'. Increasingly many non-Catholic parents are sending their children to Catholic schools in response to the perceived decline in educational standards in government-run schools. These children are to be made welcome, the Statement says, but not at the expense of compromising the religious identity of the school. Lastly, more attention should be

paid in schools to prayer and the celebration of the sacraments and it is advised that all pastoral work among the young should aim, at some level, to encourage new vocations.

The reaction

Privately, many of the bishops were angry with the way their visit to Rome had ended in controversy over the Statement of Conclusions rather than in reflection over the debate at the Synod for Oceania. One bishop described the brief consultation that was held prior to the release of the Statement as a 'parody' and another commented that 'anyone with any honesty would say there was a lot of duplicity involved' in getting their assent.³ Those bishops who were not a party to the interdicasterial meeting in November, including many who had spoken out most vociferously on the need for fundamental church reform at the Synod which followed it, were given little time to read and comment on the Statement before it was made public with their concurrence. Many bishops felt the effect of the document was to undercut much of the good that had come out of the Synod. One, Rockhampton's Bishop Brian Heenan, who, as chair of the Bishops' Committee on Clergy and Religious, had attended the interdicasterial meeting, went so far as to state publicly that the Statement 'does not reflect sufficiently the positive contribution the Australian bishops made to the dialogue'.⁴

A large number of clergy were also dismayed by the Statement. Following a meeting in Sydney in February 1999, seventy-five priests and religious brothers and sisters signed a letter to the bishops rejecting what they saw as the Vatican's 'overwhelmingly negative estimation of Australian Catholicism'. The 'tone and some of the content' of the Statement of Conclusions, they said, caused them 'distress'. It passed over complex moral and social problems which afflicted many Catholic families and completely ignored the 'deep shame' of clerical sexual abuse – widespread disclosure of which in recent years has rocked the local Catholic community. The document omitted serious consideration of the problem of shortage of priests and in particular the repeated calls from bishops around the world to address the criteria for ordination. Its characterization in pejorative terms of some of the challenges facing the Church ('a crisis of faith' and 'certain forms of feminism', for example) was less helpful than would have been a call to scrutinize these as 'signs of our times'. By re-emphasizing the individual nature of sin, the Statement would make it difficult for the Church to contribute to critical issues concerning national reconciliation, particularly

between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the priests and religious argued. They also said that the Statement's call to eliminate the general use of the Third Rite of Reconciliation would be a disaster from a pastoral point of view and close off this option of a 'profound and transforming' experience in the life of the Church. Finally, the letter urged the bishops to 'broaden the dialogue of faith' by including clergy and laity and suggested that, in the light of the Statement, this might be a good time to convene a synod of Australian Catholics.⁵

Lay Catholics were confused and divided by what they read in the Statement, not least because it seemed diametrically opposed to so much of what had been expressed by their bishops about the concerns and frustrations of the faithful at the Synod for Oceania. Many people saw the Statement as an extremely blinkered view of the reality facing their Church. Others simply expressed their anger at what they saw as the impertinence of Vatican officials pretending to know what was best for Australian Catholics. At the extremes, conservative activists were delighted by the document; progressives were outraged. 'It is obviously good news for Australia,' commented the spokesperson for the Australian Catholics Advocacy Centre, whose members had been campaigning for stricter enforcement of church rules on matters such as the confession issue. 'It's appalling,' said a spokesperson for the renewal group Australian Networking for Reform.⁶

In April, the Bishops' Conference issued its first response to the Statement and the reaction it had generated. In a letter addressed to 'the Catholic people of Australia' the bishops accepted that 'by most measurable criteria' the Statement of Conclusions was right to argue that 'secularisation is making great inroads in Australia [and that] this indicates a crisis of faith'. The bishops acknowledged that different understandings of the person of Jesus Christ, competing claims about the nature of the Church and the role of conscience, and disputes about the appropriateness of the Church's moral teaching were all matters of grave concern. They also acknowledged a certain ferment within the local Catholic community as some elements pushed for change and others recoiled from it. No one, however, should be unduly worried by this, the bishops advised. 'Clergy, religious, and laity are all going through a period of profound change and it should not cause wonder if tensions arise,' they wrote. One source of these tensions was division within the Universal Church over how far the Second Vatican Council vision of a more inclusive, lay-centred Church should be embraced; another source was the ongoing transition at the local level from a predominantly Irish Catholic tribal grouping to a more pluralist and

culturally diverse community of the faithful. As leaders of the Australian Church the bishops recognized that it was their job to oversee this change and 'to correct errors, not by blunt use of authority, but through dialogue and persuasion'. With that in mind, the bishops used this opportunity to label as unacceptable the practice of some conservatives who had set themselves up as the watchdogs of orthodoxy and were spying on priests and reporting to Rome any pastoral or liturgical innovations of which they disapproved.⁷

The conference letter, however, failed to soothe the unease generated by the Statement. The bishops recommended public discussions be held to help deepen the understanding of the issues facing the Church but they were slow, if not reluctant, to take the initiative in organizing them. Within a week of the release at the close of the conference, however, a meeting of Catholics in Sydney was organized, but by a (largely lay) moderate group called Catalyst for Renewal. More than 3,000 Catholics attended, the overwhelming majority of them giving vent to their concern about what they saw as Rome's assault on their Church.⁸

An assessment of the Statement

Why this reaction? The Statement of Conclusions was the first overview of its kind of the Australian Church. But it was not the product of any dialogue with the local Catholic community and completely, almost arrogantly, ignored its main concerns. For the three weeks preceding its release, Australian Catholics followed reports of their bishops at the Synod for Oceania speaking freely and frankly about the need to create new roles for women in the Church, promoting the merits of participatory decision-making, and bemoaning the fact that large numbers of Catholics, including those divorced and civilly remarried, were being made unwelcome in the Church by an inflexible application of its rules. One bishop even called for a thorough review of all aspects of priestly and religious life and of attitudes to power and authority within the Church as a necessary response to the scandal of clerical sex abuse.⁹ An expectation was encouraged among ordinary Australian Catholics that momentum was building among their bishops for fundamental church renewal. Suddenly, however, and as if from nowhere because it had been kept secret, the summary of the November interdicasterial meeting swept all that aside with its call to lead in the opposite direction.

One effect was completely to undercut any sense of local episcopal leadership. On his return from Rome the President of the National Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Clancy, blamed 'ill-informed' media reports for the confusion and disillusionment he confronted among Catholics.¹⁰ But his account of what had happened in Rome did not challenge the essential veracity of those reports, some of his own fellow bishops were already making their ill-feelings about the Statement known, and even the cardinal eventually conceded, in an interview with the US-based *National Catholic Reporter*, that the document he had signed in Rome presented a 'more jaundiced view' of the Australian Church than was deserved. In the same interview he also acknowledged that the 'suddenness' of Rome's actions in eliminating the Third Rite of Reconciliation in particular was 'sort of jarring'.¹¹

In fact, the Statement's overall picture of the Australian situation is recklessly unbalanced. It completely fails to acknowledge, for example, the most pressing problem facing the Church, namely, the alienation from it of so many Catholic women because of their exclusion from decision-making roles, negative attitudes towards sex and gender within the Church, and the refusal even to debate issues of importance to them such as women's ordination. A major report released in August 1999, on women's participation in the Australian Church, left no doubt about the degree or seriousness of this alienation. Among weekly mass-attenders, women currently outnumber men by a ratio of three to two. Women are also over-represented among Catholic teaching, hospital and administrative staff and comprise the bulk of students enrolled for theological studies. In crucial ways, the future health of the Church in Australia depends on them. The report, however, documented the 'pain and anger' Catholic women felt at their sense of subordination and dismissal within official church structures and noted that many of them had left the Church or were contemplating leaving it as a result.¹² This report was based on a two-year consultation the bishops had held with women around the country starting in 1996. All of the Australian bishops who attended the interdicasterial meeting in Rome that produced the Statement of Conclusions had to be aware of the urgent problem they have on their hands to contain, let alone ameliorate, this sense of alienation. Yet, incredibly, no mention of the women's issue even appears in the summary of the interdicasterial meeting in Rome, let alone suggestions about how to deal with the problem.

By contrast, the 'crisis of faith' the Statement identifies is described in such rarefied terms, its leaps of logic are at times so difficult to follow, and its causes – whether 'aspects of feminism' or the 'culture of

secularism' – are so general as to be meaningless tools for understanding the Australian situation. When the document focuses on particular complaints about the Australian Church rather than sweeping critiques of the failings of contemporary western culture and some of its accompanying trends in scholarship, it is clear that the authors are being heavily influenced by a small group of disgruntled but well-organized and highly vocal conservative Catholics. It is they who have given the impression of the general faithful being led astray by rogues in clerical garb. This point has been conceded even by Cardinal Clancy,¹³ but not before the damage was done by way of the Statement's contrived portrayal of the local Church.

The Statement's blueprint for Australian Catholicism is ill conceived. It undermines the credibility of the bishops by making them appear totally out of touch with the realities facing the local Church. If followed to the letter, it would hobble the religious orders – from which have come the more creative responses to the needs and challenges of local Catholics – and force them into roles ill suited to the times. It removes pastoral options from a smaller and smaller pool of priests – not only the Third Rite, for example, but also flexibility in sharing roles and responsibilities with the laity. Despite the bishops' eventual criticism of the more extreme methods used by some lay conservatives, the Statement only encourages them. It shows that Rome is receptive to their complaints, even to the point of placing greater emphasis on them than on what the bishops have to say about the situation confronting their Church.

More than anything, however, the view presented in the Statement is completely devoid of vision. It offers no insights into the appropriate role of the Australian Church in Oceania, even though it is the largest and oldest church in the region. Its emphasis is on institutional maintenance, not growth, let alone on how the community of faith can engage with the wider national community of which it is a part. Australian society is portrayed as the hostile background to the internal affairs of Catholics, not their central foreground of challenge and opportunity. A defensive document, it is also an insular and unimaginative one. A return to the Catholic cultural ghetto would be the implication of embracing it fully. In this respect, it is by nature a recipe for irrelevance.

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NOTES

1 The Australian Catholic Church also provides a steady stream of missionaries, both clerical and lay, to Asia (principally the Philippines, South Korea and Japan), the South Pacific (especially Papua New Guinea and Fiji), and Latin America (including Peru and Chile).

2 All references for this section are taken from the Statement of Conclusions, a report of the Interdicasterial Meeting with a Representation of the Australian Bishops and the Roman Curia, December 1998, available on the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference website: www.catholic.org.au/nf/whatsnew/c1.htm.

3 These comments were made to the author and reported, on the condition of anonymity, in Chris McGillion, 'Bishops checked by their own timidity', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (21 April 1999), p 21, and Chris McGillion, 'Was the Synod worth it?', *The Tablet* (9 January 1999), p 45.

4 See Bishop Brian Heenan, 'Why did I sign?' *The Mix* (April 1999), p 4.

5 'An observation on the Statement of Conclusions from the interdicasterial meeting with a representation of the Australian bishops', *Letter to the archbishops and bishops of Australia* (26 February 1999), written by Sr Margaret Cassidy, president of the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, and Father Gary Russell, chair of the National Council of Priests, and 75 others.

6 Quoted in Chris McGillion, 'Double visions', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (17 December 1998), p 11.

7 *Letter from the Australian bishops to the Catholic people of Australia* (16 April 1999), signed by Cardinal Edward Clancy on behalf of the Catholic bishops of Australia.

8 Five presentations given on the night plus a summation were reprinted as *The town hall public forum on the Statement of Conclusions*, 22 April 1999, by Catalyst for Renewal Incorporated.

9 See Cindy Wooden, 'Church rules "lead to a decline in participation"', *The Catholic Weekly* (6 December 1999), p 5.

10 Quoted in Cardinal Edward Clancy, 'Synod of Oceania: Cardinal criticises media comment', *The Catholic Weekly* (27 December 1998), p 3.

11 See John L. Allen Jr, 'Cardinal says Rome had "jaundiced view"', *National Catholic Reporter* (4 June 1999), p 11.

12 See *Woman and man: one in Christ Jesus, a report on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia* (HarperReligious, 1999), especially pp 375–385.

13 See John L. Allen Jr, 'Cardinal says Rome had "jaundiced view".'