

Spirituality for Adults

Editorial



With permission of the author, **Terry Fewtrell**, a Catholic layperson and retired former senior civil servant based in Canberra, we present this article he had published in *The Canberra Times* on 8th March 2011 as a *Catholica editorial*. In light of the recently released *Wilkinson Report* [LINK] and the review of a timely new book "*Our Fathers: what Australian Catholic priests really think about their lives and their church*" by **Chris McGillion** and **John O'Carroll** which we publish today [LINK], we believe **Mr Fewtrell's** article speaks for many of the mainstream baptised today who are extremely fed up at the way in which we have been let down by our current and recent bishops and by those who control the institutional agenda in Rome. Thanks to the foresight of previous generations of bishops, priests, religious women and men, as well as lay people the Church in Australia today is not in crisis in terms of the size, qualifications or the remuneration paid to its front-line workforce. Its physical infrastructure is in superb condition and the Church is financially strong and stable thanks to the massive flow of funds that ultimately come from tax paying lay Catholics and the recognition of the broader Australian population of the value of the Catholic Church as a provider of educational, health care, aged care and social welfare services to this nation. The only "crisis" today is a crisis of leadership in Rome and at the way in which the Australian episcopal leadership has been stacked by Rome by men who today are only interested in serving a tiny remnant minority totally unrepresentative of the broader **Body of Christ**. As **Mr Fewtrell** argues in this editorial it is an injustice that is today being inflicted on our ageing priests who have given a lifetime of service to the people of this nation by an episcopal leadership that has lost touch with reality and lost touch with the **Holy Spirit** after whom this **Great South Land of the Holy Spirit** was originally named. What **Terry Fewtrell** has to say deserves to have wide circulation in the Australian Catholic community and we urge readers of *Catholica* to print it out, or email the pdf version of this page which you will find [HERE](#), and circulate it as widely as possible in your local communities.

People power — currency of the times...

People power is the currency of the times. Daily we witness governments being shaken by the resolute action of people united in a cause. Strong motivation propels them to exercise a power that was not previously within their grasp. Australian Catholics also find themselves on the cusp of a power and influence they have never previously contemplated but must now seize.

The Catholic Church in Australia is slipping down a precipice that threatens to change it forever. While sexual abuse scandals have shaken it to the core, it is the dramatic fall in the number of priests that is hastening it to a tipping point. The problem is not new. The demographics have been plain for 40 years as the seminaries emptied in the 1970s and few have joined since.

The numbers are now drifting to the point where the critical mass required to service many dioceses, including Canberra Goulburn, is ebbing away. The impact is becoming dramatic for both the remaining priests and the people to whom they minister.

The recent unexpected deaths of two relatively young priests in the archdiocese, along with the significant breakdown in the health of two others, hastens the decline.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge wrings his hands, asks for prayers for vocations and says the faithful will have to get used to fewer masses and travel greater distances. He has also reconvened the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council to *"consider these issues systematically and creatively"*, saying it is time for more voices to be heard. Let's hope they will be listened to, not just heard.

There is nothing so far in the archbishop's approach that suggests he is really prepared to look at these challenges with a fresh, unbiased mind. If there were he would start from the truth that the people know well: that there is no shortage of vocations, there are simply a lot of silly outdated rules that prevent the vocations in the Catholic community from being realised.

Catholics in rural Australia share the no-nonsense approach of those from the bush on other issues. They are prepared to change and adapt to a priest drought just like any other drought. But they also expect the Church to face up to the realities of its situation and not live in a fool's paradise.

What Australian Catholics have had enough of from their bishops is the refusal to think creatively (and more in the spirit of Vatican II) about priesthood and Church. Canberra's [Auxiliary Bishop] Pat Power is an honourable stand-out among his peers, as a man who speaks truth, as he did in these columns last year advocating for major Church reform, despite personal cost.

The official refusal to move outside a clerical mindset is a major factor why the Church in Australia risks becoming marginalised as a spiritual force among its people. As a sacramental Church, the inability to minister those sacraments to its followers will be the final step away from community relevance.

The particular significance of the exit of women...

It will come as the culmination of the past 20 years that has seen alarming declines in congregations and mass attendance. Of particular significance in that decline has been the walking away of so many women, not in anger but great sadness, as they grapple with a male-dominated Church seemingly incapable of appreciating or properly affirming the role and rights of women within its structures.

The overall decline has not resulted from angry dispute, rather from a poignant sense of disconnection. In many ways the decline in Catholics participating in their Church is somewhat like the great "walk-offs" of our indigenous people over the years. The Gurindji and the Cummeragunja people walked off in a dignified way in protest of treatment that they knew was wrong and of which they decided they could have no part. A similar poignancy applies for many Catholics.

The passive laity...

Despite its rebellious Irish roots, to date the responses from the people has been muted and passive.

Through their failure to listen and act, the hierarchy is now inviting a much more assertive response. If the Catholic community wants to have a functioning broad-based Church into the future it needs to act now. It is no longer good enough to keep the head down and say your prayers.

If Catholics really value their Church they must be assertive now in demanding an end to a model of stewardship that compromises the future for short-term career and comfort.

The injustice to an ageing priesthood...

On a personal level it is simply unjust to look the other way to the unreasonable demands that must increasingly be made of a diminishing number of priests. To simply lament the growing burden on priests while turning away from different and appropriate pastoral responses becomes an injustice. Faced with the abdication of responsible leadership by most of the country's bishops, it is the people who must call it as it is and demand something better.

Only the people can save the Church. This applies across the Australian Church. The priests that remain are, in large measure, exhausted and battle-weary. Many feel isolated and powerless.

More significantly, a fair number of them are disillusioned with the hierarchy. This comes from the persistent refusal of bishops to consider options outside current frameworks of Church and priesthood. It also comes from a pattern of hiding behind edicts from Rome, rather than challenging them.

Many priests sustain themselves with the view that the Church needs them more than they need the Church.

What priests and some bishops seek most is for the people to be more assertive in the demands they make of their bishops. To say to them that they want them to be brave and that they will support them when they are. But only courage will earn the people's respect.

Australian Catholics need to be much more assertive in all aspects of Church life.

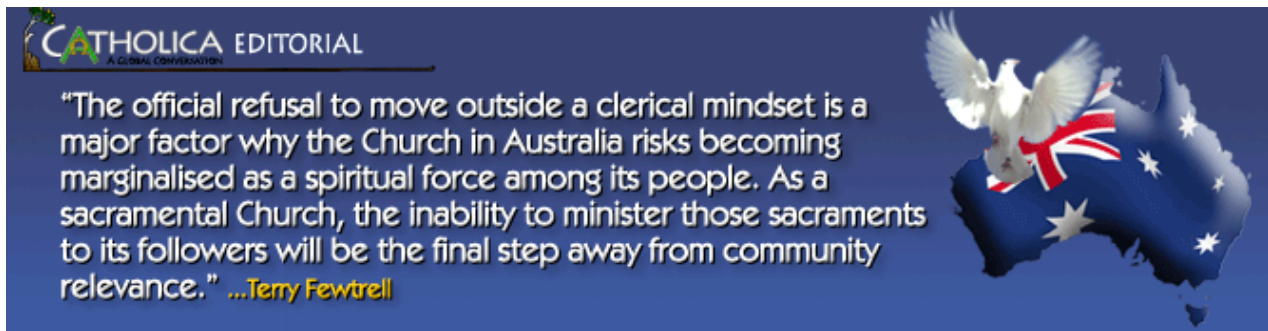
They need to challenge authority where it lacks true authenticity.

They need to question and probe where statements and actions speak more of clerical protectionism than a humble authentic theology.

And they need to be prepared to withhold their financial contributions when arrogance and ignorant bluster persist.

Time to get active...

This year is significant for Australian bishops as they undertake their five-yearly consultations with Rome on the state of the Australian Church. Recent such visits have earned the Australian hierarchy much criticism as they meekly buckled to intimidation by the Curia, seemingly encouraged by the previous pope. Australian Catholics ought not tolerate a similar self-serving performance this year. Courage will certainly be required and the people must play their part in calling out that courage.



LINKS:

Fr Daniel Donovan's review of Chris McGillion & John O'Carroll's book "*Our Fathers*":

www.catholica.com.au/gc2/dd/033_dd_150311.php

Catholica intro & Editorial for **The Wilkinson Report**:

www.catholica.com.au/editorial/034_edit_010311.php

Full Text of **The Wilkinson Report**:

www.catholica.com.au/editorial/CatholicParishMinistry.pdf

Canberra Times website (Terry Fewtrell's original article is not available online. It only appeared in the print edition of the newspaper):

www.canberratimes.com.au

PDF Version of this Editorial:

www.catholica.com.au/editorial/CatholicaEditorial_150311.pdf

Terry Fewtrell is an active Catholic and retired former senior civil servant in Canberra who laments the failure of the Church to respond to the challenges of Vatican II. This editorial was previously published as a feature story in *The Canberra Times* newspaper on 8 March 2011

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