

A LONG WAY FROM ROME

Why the Australian Catholic Church is in crisis

Edited by Chris McGillion


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Index by Russell Brooks

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For Brian Cosgrove

FOREWORD

In the course of my work at ABC Radio National and ABC Television, many commentaries on our modern predicament cross my path. Of variable quality, they range from the chronically pessimistic to the newly fearful (in the wake of Bali and September 11) to the outright aggressive. Regrettably, there is not much chutzpah these days.

I find the wise old souls coming into their own. They don't often spring from the bosom of Holy Mother Church. People like Donald Horne, a confirmed atheist who has virtually made Australia his 'religion', admirably tries to assemble a modern ten commandments for a pluralistic society like ours. Above all, he is constructive. He always *imagines* possibilities, based on his abiding love for the country combined with deep historical knowledge. He thinks outside the square. He emphasises his hope and pride in the quality of our democratic community, established so far from its cultural roots. Though relentlessly secular, he models the very imagination Fr Paul Collins, in this collection, sees so lacking in the modern Australian Catholic Church. Horne's is a seductive vision, whether or not the wider

political system takes it up. And so welcome, amidst so much other gloom.

Another contributor, the market researcher Hugh Mackay, constantly searches in his columns and books for ways forward. Indeed, he is becoming something of a modern Australian prophet. Recently he remarked on the shallowness of much contemporary discourse: ‘The United States critic Sven Birkerts,’ Mackay wrote, ‘has described as his “cold fear” the possibility that “we are, as a culture, as a species, becoming shallow; that we have turned from depth—from the Judaeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery—and are adapting ourselves to the ersatz security of a vast lateral connectedness”.’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2–3 November, 2002)

Bullseye! For several reasons, this hit the mark. This was the magic phrase that opened other doors. Of course, growing up Catholic in 1950s Perth, I was surrounded by allusions to the ‘great mystery of faith’. But I was young and the life-as-a-mystery message somehow didn’t seduce. Now, in my middle years and with hostile times beckoning, it re-stated a profound truth towering over all others. It was invitingly open-ended and counter-cultural in the ideal way. This is surely the sort of symbolism so acutely needed by modern Western citizens, for whom materialism is both ubiquitous but arguably starting to lose its lustre.

Mackay had so easily distilled this gem from our tradition, partly because, I would argue, he listens so carefully to the signs of the times. That is his job of course. But so it is—or should be—for Church men and women, even if merely to know how to stand aside from its blandishments. Why is it so hard for Church people to find the appropriate words that tap into Australians’ search for something more? Why, too, would their words not be listened to, if they were game enough to try? Why, as Chris McGillion writes in this excellent collection, is the Church not more confident of contributing to that grand effort

to better meld the sacred and secular aspects of our nation, to ‘synthesise our own artistically elevated expression of that deepest sense of ourselves’? You won’t hear that sort of language from the mainstream political or sociological world. In fact, my industry scorns any effort at rhetoric yet simultaneously fails to recognise the results of this neglect—a stripped-down, bonsaied public culture which leaves so many wanting; creating the lethargy that sociologist John Carroll refers to (trapping the young in the contemporary West) ‘struggling to live in the present without vision of any future, or connection to even the organic tissue of being, their own personal past’.

An Australian Catholic Church that was less obsessed with defending the institution-as-we-know-it would surely free up energy to engage more effectively with the culture’s groans. If it seeks to be of genuine service to Australians as opposed to broader Roman Catholic needs—sadly not a given in my judgement—wouldn’t the Church seize all opportunities to discern then contribute to a uniquely Australian discussion? Wouldn’t it see as vital the need to develop new artistry, authentic to us, as John Carmody writes in this collection? It has been achieved in the past through writers like Richard Connolly and James McAuley, and via composers like Nigel Butterley and Moya Henderson. To be fair, our post-Enlightenment establishment means that a grand tradition of religious music has been harder to create than in the Old World. No one should delude themselves that any of this is easy. Neither overt success (and influence) nor glory is assured. But the ground in Australia may not be as fallow as is generally imagined.

I’m with Thomas Berry, the American Catholic thinker whom Paul Collins quotes, having sought his views in late 1991 on what faith and belief meant to him. His intense response to Paul’s question about the meaning of ‘religion’ is another of those prophetic moments outlined in this collection. ‘Religion is poetry or it is nothing,’ he told Collins. ‘How can a person

be religious without being poetic? Certainly God is a poet—it is God who made rainbows, butterflies and flowers. It is the most absurd thing in the world to think of dealing with religion in any other way...Take St John of the Cross—all the great mystics have been poets.’

Beauty, Collins believes, is often spectacularly lacking from many modern manifestations of Catholic life and worship, a theme echoed by various contributors to this collection. It is surely the antidote to what I have come to see as a modern dodgem-car trifecta. These all contribute to *distract* Westerners from looking within, to ‘up-skilling’ on an interior life, though every other dimension is encouraged. These are my three Distractors (with apologies to Harry Potter): cerebral fixation, sporting triumphalism and quick-fix-emotion—that is, a good quick cry over loss, with the grief counsellors following in short order. Wham, bam, thank you Ma’am, introspection all over now without much insight. Ultimately, it is a poor excuse for a rich life modelled by the Gospel, where the risk of existence is given some sort of framework, enabling both the humble and the lofty to make some sense of the day-to-day...maybe.

The Dean of St Mary’s Cathedral, Fr Tony Doherty, recently spoke with me at a Spirituality in the Pub gathering at Engadine in southern Sydney, the day after bushfires had roared through the area, claiming several houses in their wake. Still, 150 or so Engadiners turned out, in order to talk about things beyond the tangible. Fr Doherty referred to an address given by an American priest, Fr Wally Burkhardt, back in 1973, as he received a young woman into the Church at St Paul’s Chapel, Columbia University. Burkhardt said, in part:

I have seen more Catholic corruption than most Catholics read of.
I have tasted it. I have been reasonably corrupt myself.
And yet I joy in this church
This living, sinning people of God;

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I love it with a crucifying passion.

Why?

For all the Catholic hate, I experience here a community of love.

For all the institutional idiocy, I find here a tradition of reason.

For all the individual repression, I breathe here an air of freedom.

Replete with both beauty, hope and, in my view, realism, this is the sort of invitation that is hard to resist. I wish we had more of it.

*Geraldine Doogue,
journalist and broadcaster*

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THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Paul Collins is an historian, broadcaster and writer. He resigned from the active priestly ministry of the Catholic Church in 2001 due to a dispute with the Vatican over his book *Papal Power* (HarperCollins, 1997). He has worked in TV and radio with the ABC, and his other publications include *No Set Agenda: Australia's Catholic Church Faces an Uncertain Future* (David Lovell, 1991), *God's Earth: Religion as if matter really mattered* (HarperCollins, 1995), and *From Inquisition to Freedom* (Simon and Schuster, 2001).

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INTRODUCTION

Until recently, Catholics in Australia had good reason to be proud of the achievements of their Church, and its leadership showed every sign of confidence that it would continue to play a vital role in the social life of the nation. By the mid-1980s, Catholics had eclipsed Anglicans in terms of sheer numbers, to become the largest single religious group in the country. The Catholic Church was employing more people than any other enterprise outside of government, it was the major private-sector player in the fields of welfare, education and health, and it had become the most identifiable voice of institutional Christianity. For their part, ordinary Catholics had shed their largely working-class background and were occupying prominent positions in politics, business, the law and media. Many were making the running on important debates of public concern, including the recognition of the rights of indigenous Australians, social justice issues and the push towards a republic.

The outward success of both the Catholic Church and community was clearly demonstrated during the visit to Sydney by Pope John Paul II in January 1995. The Pope had come for

the beatification of the founder of the Josephite Order of religious sisters, Mary MacKillop, and in this way to mark the local Church's coming of age internationally with what amounted to the declaration of Australia's first saint. John Paul II was greeted on his arrival by four of the most influential men in the country: the then Governor-General, Bill Hayden; Prime Minister, Paul Keating; Premier of New South Wales, John Fahey; and leader of the National Party, Tim Fischer, representing the Federal Coalition. Each of these men, to one degree or another, was Catholic.

Even the secular media treated the visit with untypical enthusiasm, giving it far more coverage by many more reporters than any other religious event in the country before or since. During a Mass celebrated by the Pope before 170 000 people at Randwick Racecourse, the TV networks took the unusual step of interrupting prime-time viewing to catch what they could of the Pope's actual declaration of Mary MacKillop's beatification 'live'. Even more unusual was the way newspapers virtually seemed eager to promote the religious messages of the occasion: the Murdoch press offered its readers a keepsake medallion to commemorate the Pope's visit; the *Sun Herald* ran a competition with prizes of *The Rosary CD*; and, in full hyperbolic mode, the *Australian* emblazoned its front page story of MacKillop's beatification with the headline, 'A Nation Consecrated'.

Matters of religion were being treated as matters of everyday life—there to be reported and commented on along with the more typical news of the day; there to be discussed in casual conversation. More than this, however, an historical social shift in Australia was being documented, even celebrated: the era of an unofficial 'Protestant Establishment' was over, and a new 'Catholic Ascendancy' seemed to have begun.

In his 1988 book, *Australian Catholics*, the church historian Edmund Campion commented that John Paul II's first visit to

this country (in 1987) provided an opportunity to gauge the state of Catholicism in this country:

The vast crowds who turned out to celebrate Mass with the Pope in every capital city demonstrated, if nothing else, their comfortableness at calling themselves Catholics. Their presence was a rebuttal of those who had been foretelling the imminent break-up of the Australian Church. The old firm was back in business.¹

But if the ‘old firm’ was back in business, it wasn’t in particularly good shape. The trouble with using a papal visit to read the state of Catholicism is that it is generally all headline material: overgeneralised, simplistic, exaggerated, even gushing. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, there were plenty of signs for those prepared to look for them that both the Church and its members were in for trying times.

For one thing, the religious orders—whose members had long been the unpaid labour force responsible for Catholic schools, hospitals and charitable works—were continuing to experience a dramatic decline in numbers. Their numbers dropped from 15 000 in 1981 to a little over 10 000 by 1997. Similarly the ranks of diocesan priests were thinning—there are now less than 2100 diocesan priests ministering to a nominal Catholic population approaching five million. New vocations were drying up. Not one new priest was ordained in the entire country in 1997, and only 27 began studies for the priesthood in 1999. (By comparison, St Columba’s College, Springwood which, for many years, was the junior seminary to Sydney’s St Patrick’s College, alone enrolled 96 men to begin studies for the priesthood in 1966.) The average age of priests was rising sharply—it is now well over 60 years—and their workloads (and consequent stress levels) were increasing. The corresponding need for lay Catholics to take on many of the roles once reserved for the clergy or members of religious orders was unavoidable and, while this transition was progressing smoothly, it also added

to pressures from the laity for meaningful decision-making roles at every level of Church administration.

As well, more specific campaigns were being waged for greater inclusion in the life of the Church—by women (following the success of their Anglican sisters in winning the right in most dioceses to priestly ordination) and by Catholic homosexuals in particular. By the early 1990s, the proponents of fundamental reform in the Church's governance, ministry and sexual teaching could point to revelations about the widespread clerical sexual abuse of children, both in Australia and overseas, and to the repeated failure of Church authorities to deal openly and adequately with the problem, as further evidence of the moral bankruptcy of the existing clerical culture.

While the numbers actively agitating for change may have been small, there were other indications of a rising swell of disenchantment, if not disaffection, within the Catholic community. A November 1995 survey undertaken in the Diocese of Parramatta, for instance, revealed that Mass attendance among the 300 000 professed Catholics living within the boundaries of the diocese had dropped from just under 20 per cent in 1992 to under 17 per cent in 1995. The results contradicted the conventional wisdom that the desertion of Catholics from the practice of their Faith—defined in terms of regular and active participation—had bottomed out by the early 1980s. If the Catholics of Parramatta were any guide, parish life was in a parlous state, and the Church was still leaking members like a sieve.

This, in fact, was confirmed by the results of the most comprehensive study of parish life ever undertaken in Australia: the 1996 national Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS). The report of its findings, released two years later, showed an overall 10 per cent decline in weekly Mass attendance nationally between 1991 and 1996. (This compared with an average 2 per cent decline in church attendance for the same period among

Anglicans and Protestants.) CCLS figures also showed that less than half the more than 160 000 Catholics surveyed in the report accepted Church teaching on abortion and pre-marital sex. Less than half accepted without difficulty the authority of the Church to teach certain doctrines of faith and morals as true. Only 42 per cent, for example, had no difficulty in accepting the Pope's 1994 declaration that women could never be ordained to the priesthood, and 27 per cent didn't accept it at all.

More importantly, the study found that while most Catholics retained a sense of lifelong loyalty to their Church (65 per cent), a lower proportion of them than any other denomination had a strong and growing sense of belonging to their primary point of contact with that Church: their local parish (38 per cent).

This rapid erosion of regular, active Church involvement among Catholics, like the growing disregard for official teachings, was symptomatic of much more fundamental changes inside and outside the local Catholic community. Historically, the main attractions of Catholicism in Australia have been its role as a mechanism of cultural defence and its contribution to social mobility. Until the 1950s, Catholics were predominantly Irish-Australians concentrated on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Religious identity was a way of maintaining group cohesion and asserting (Irish) ethnic pride in an unsympathetic, if not exactly hostile, environment. Religion was also a focus for the community's resources, which were concentrated in 'buffer institutions' such as the parish Church and the convent primary school, designed to protect Catholic identity and transmit its cultural heritage. They also had the important secondary objective of promoting the social advancement of the community.

The great intellectual architects of the Church in Australia—Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran in Sydney, Archbishop Daniel Mannix in Melbourne, Archbishop James Duhig in Brisbane—

consciously set out to construct an independent Catholic education system that would not only impart the faith but also allow the faithful to participate fully in the life of the country. In 1917, Mannix effectively defined the Church's mission for the 20th century as building a future where 'Catholics might justly hope to secure, without fear or favour, their due and proportionate share of the good things that Australia has to offer'. The economic advancement of ordinary Catholics was the result. In 1901, Catholics comprised 40 per cent of the unskilled workers on roads, railways and construction sites, and only 8 per cent of white-collar employees in the banking and financial sectors. One hundred years later, the Catholic profile was indistinguishable from that of the population as a whole. This advancement ironically brought a decline in religious conformity and Church involvement. Once the beleaguered Irish minority had been assimilated into mainstream society, much of the appeal of its Catholic identity began to weaken as well.

As these changes were still being absorbed locally, the worldwide Church was undergoing an upheaval of its own. By demystifying a good deal of the Church's ritual, ditching its distinctive language (Latin), and encouraging a measured accommodation with the outside world, the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) challenged the sense of Catholic separateness, especially in countries like Australia where Catholics are not a majority of the population. The Council defined the Church as the 'whole people of God', acknowledged that Catholics didn't have all the answers to all the problems of the day, and called for renewal of Church structures and ritual, in line with the 'signs of the times'.² This was a radical challenge to the old hierarchic-dogmatic model of Church, which was nowhere stronger than in Australia, as a result both of a long period of Roman oversight of its affairs and the decision to vest its development in an Irish clergy.