

The Catholic Church in the 21st Century

Where have we been? Where are we now?
Where are we going? Who's going with us?

Where have we been?

The word "Catholic" (*kat' holou*) means "all embracing," "universal," "in accord with the whole."¹ Our four thousand year history is a good one. We have been "salt and light." We've been faithful. We've been fruitful. Yet there have been moments when the narrative hasn't been so edifying.

Take the 19th Century. Pope Pius IX received the nickname "Pio-No-No" because he was anti-anything modern. "The Catholic Church," he said, "can't possibly reconcile itself with modernity." He died in 1878. The anti-clerical feeling was so high in Italy that Cardinal Manning suggested the cardinals set sail for Malta to elect the new pope with the protection of the British Navy. Imagine it!

But the cardinals held their nerve and duly elected Pope Leo XIII in the eternal city. He was 68 when enthroned on the chair of St. Peter – presumably to keep it warm. He did no such thing. He systematically set about the renewal of the Catholic Church until his death in 1903 – aged 93.

¹ Kelly, *Integral Ecology and the Fullness of Life*, p.18.

Leo XIII was the first truly modern pope. He was remarkable. He understood clearly that “unless we change, we cannot conserve.”

In theology he insisted on going back to the sources, paving the way for an explosion of theological scholarship in the 20th Century.

He created the “aperture” – known as the *Pontifical Biblical Commission* – in which the light of the Word of God would once again penetrate the hearts of the faithful. This, after years of catechetical dryness post Council of Trent. His teaching document – *Providentissimus Deus* (“The God of all Providence”) of 1893, reads like a “roadmap” for modern biblical scholarship and spirituality.

With a love of historical truth, Leo unlocked the Vatican archives, and as society moved from an agrarian to an industrial society, he penned the first and paradigmatic social encyclical of the modern era – *Rerum Novarum* – embracing the sweeping changes in culture, politics and economics.

Not only did he defend and promote the “just wage” – something taken up in Australia by Cardinal Moran with much verve in the 1890’s – but he delivered a masterful defence of the right to private property and its orientation to the common good. With the rise of socialism in 1917, and its collapse in 1989, we came to appreciate his prophetic utterance.

Finally, tacit approval was given to the doctrine of separation of Church and State on display in the United States.² The Enlightenment was for him an opportunity too good to miss.

If Australia began in 1688, not 1788, he would have been enthralled with the vision of our founding fathers. David Kemp's recent work – *The Land of Dreams: How Australians Won Their Freedom* (2018) – describes how Australia has achieved “unprecedented levels of personal liberty and social equality” – and without bloodshed.

Where are we now?

It is 2019. It is not our “finest hour.” It may well be our “darkest hour.” Trust is everything. And we've lost it. The rebuild will take grace and courage. The abuse of children, youth, and the vulnerable, by clergy is “everything we don't believe in.” Precisely because we believe human sexuality to be symbolic of love and life we sense the “gravity of the depravity.” The price exacted has been enormous. Victims and survivors have deep wounds - wounds that perhaps only our Divine Physician can heal. The fallout has been immense for our community – which of course includes you and me. We know it. We feel it.

But there is a “faithful remnant.” I grew up in a terrific community replete with fine, outstanding priests and extraordinary lay people. They accompanied me on my faith and vocational journey with grace, ease and joy. You, no doubt, have your stories. But these no longer form the mainstream narrative.

² Cf. Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism*, p.13.

The child sexual abuse crisis is, in my opinion, a *symptom* of a deeper, multi-layered malady that includes narcissism, an “entitlement mentality,” and clericalism.

For a variety of reasons, we have witnessed in our ecclesial communities an “overplay of the clergy” and an “underplay of the laity.” *Mutuality* has been forfeited.

“Clericalism” is rarely defined. It fits within the genre of corruption, which is best defined as the “institutionalization of power or money in the hands of a few.” Think *conservative aristocracy*. Think *utopian socialism*. Think *alienation, not participation* – to use the philosophical language of John Paul II.

Clergy are not just revered in this “world,” but put on a pedestal. It is an idyllic and dangerous fantasy. Clergy become the centre of ecclesial life, promoted at times by a transactional liturgy bereft of participation, and governance lacking transparency.

Archbishop Francis Carroll used to say that the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was not about re-orientating the Church away from a priest-run church to a lay-run church, but about focusing on the sacrament of baptism, rather than the sacrament of orders.

Whether pope or priest, bishop or butcher, man or woman, liturgist or lawyer, adult or adolescent, married or celibate, sensible or silly, each

one is called to die with Christ and to rise with him. Christ, with his “gateway grace,” is the centre of the community – not me, not you.

The *mutuality* present in the New Testament is perhaps surprising:

There are varieties of *gifts*, but the same spirit; there are varieties of *service*, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of *activities*, but the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the *common good* (1Cor. 12:4-7).

And then:

God has appointed in the church *first* apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administering, and various kinds of tongues (1Cor. 12:27-28).

We might call it a “hierarchical mutuality.” Amidst the inevitable murmurings that such a phrase evokes, we should remember that all organisations need a point of unity. The papacy is a good example, especially when weighed against other religious faiths that don’t have such a gift. Besides, without “hierarchical mutuality” the “body” doesn’t function and the common good is compromised.

We should remember what Paul says a little earlier in Corinthians:

For as I see it, God has exhibited us apostles as the *last* of all, like people sentenced to death, since we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and human beings alike (1 Cor. 4:10).

So we have here a gentle reminder. Apostles are appointed “first,” to be “last.” It was St. Hilary who said, with “tongue in cheek,” that the

“desire for the episcopacy is a noble desire, since it ends in martyrdom and martyrdom is a noble desire”!

Luke is our “mutuality specialist” par excellence. In *Luke 9* we have the commission and mission of the twelve. In *Luke 10* we have the commission and mission of the seventy-two. The intent is clear and the symbolism evocative.

Note, too, the gender mix. Luke places side-by-side two parables in chapter 13. The kingdom of God is “like a grain a mustard seed that a *man* took and scattered in his garden” (*Luke 13:19*). The kingdom of God is “like leaven that a *woman* took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened” (*Luke 13:20*).

Luke, along with Paul, gives insight into Christ and the community he bequeaths, desires and nourishes. What we have is a “mutual community,” founded on the *complementarity* of clergy and laity – men and women.

Where are we going?

The best research into ecclesial renewal highlights three pillars:

Good community

Good teaching and preaching

Good music.

In other words, Love, Truth and Beauty. We are talking here about the foundational human experiences of, Love, Truth, and Beauty.

Sensitivity to human experience has been a hallmark of the 20th Century. The influence of science with its inductive method is a contributor, no doubt. Rediscovery of the *Word of God*, with its evocative stories of peoples' encounters with the living God is significant. Creative forms of philosophy, complementing more traditional forms of thinking, are certainly leaving their mark.

Think John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. His development of three original experiences prior to original sin is, as George Weigel has noted, a "theological time bomb due for detonation sometime in the 21st Century." In an emerging age of sexual chaos, it is helpful to know that these three primordial experiences can help people discover that their bodies – and sexuality – are symbolic, spousal, free and beautiful. This will have significant impact on the renewal of marriage, family and society in the coming years.

Love

Mutuality is best served by our "mutual God" We simply must *begin* with God. We certainly will *end* with God. Baptism is the gateway to life in the Spirit (CCC 1213). Unbelievers can have a "spiritual life" and the depth of their quest often puts us to shame. But we have been granted "life in the Spirit." And this means that God's search for us surpasses anything we might muster.

God is love (1 John 4:8):

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love” (*John 15:9*).

Blessed John Henry Newman was enthralled by this passage:

Reflect and bow down before this mystery, that, as the Father loves the Son, so does the Son love you ... What mystery in the whole circle of revealed truths is greater than this?³

God is our “mutual God.” Father loving the Son, Son loving the Father and the love between them so intimate and so intense that it is a person – the Holy Spirit. God is communion of love and with this love does Jesus love you and me.

God is in love with us. He is relentless in his search *for* us. That’s why the best theologians recognise creation as the primordial covenant – the original gift. Science speaks of *nature*, but we speak of *creation* – a creation full of the Creator himself.

Now is not the time to retreat in fear or shame. Now is not the time to lose our mojo. Now is not the time for the foetal position. Now is the time to receive and stand in the truth (*1Cor. 15: 2*).

Now is the time to live *Psalms 46:10*:

Be still and know that I am God.

Silence is the prelude to stillness of body, soul and spirit. If we dare, we shall share. God is waiting, and the “fertile soil” is silence and stillness. A few moments given to God and we will come to know the love and

³ John Henry Newman, *Prayers, Verses, and Devotions*, 2000, p.339.

mutuality of God, and importantly, we shall come to know ourselves. “Be still and know that I am God.” The Psalmist is proclaiming a “promise beyond compare.”

When this spiritual dynamic gathers momentum the truth of the teaching of St. Gregory the Great comes to the fore. He used to say that “we see gifts in others that we don’t have, but if we *love* these people then their gifts become ours.” If ever there was a theology of mutuality, here it is. Communities are transformed by mutuality and love. Unity, not uniformity, is the deeply desired outcome.

Truth

The second pillar is good teaching and preaching. Remember your best teacher. Recall your favourite preacher. They communicated truth and goodness – and with relative ease.

Pope John XXIII noted that the “*substance* of faith is one thing, its *expression* another” (11 October 1962). In communicating faith the task is both faithfulness and fruitfulness. To drift from our *Creed*, *Code* and *Cult* would be unfortunate – to say the least. But then again, to stick with older forms of thought and expression would render us irrelevant. It is a balancing act that is delicate, but sticking with the *status quo* is naïve.

A school principal once said to me that the two qualities of great teachers are *knowledge* of the subject, and *passion* for the subject. James Kerr – *Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us* (2013) – notes that if we

want *culture*, we need *character*, and if we desire character we require the best of *teachers*.

Aristotle, in the very first line of his *Metaphysics*, observed that “all people by nature desire to know.” And so education is *e-ducare* – leading people “out of darkness into light.” The imperative is clear:

Content of the subject

Logic of the content

Rhetoric of the content.

Our culture and environment requires a more dialogical and patient approach. In previous generations, where authority was not questioned, truth was delivered and consumed without much indigestion. Not now. Our post-modern society demands new sensitivities that respect personal preferences and communal ambiguities.

Actually, we have, at our finger tips, the desired approach. From our tradition – the *Book of Deuteronomy* – comes this splendid vision of truth and its reception:

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

May my teaching drop as the *rain*, my speech distill as the *dew*.

Like *gentle rain* upon the tender grass and like *showers* upon the herb (Deut 32: 1-2).

In philosophy and anthropology there has been a necessary and significant shift from “the rigorously objective to a more intentionally integrated way of knowing.” We discover the full truth in and through

our capacities of sensing, imagining, questioning, pondering, responding and loving. We might see it as part of a *genuine human ecology* – much more holistic. The phenomenological subjectivity of Pope John Paul II comes to mind. What about Lonergan’s axiom that “genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity.”⁴

A lively interest in the formation, training and pedagogy of our schools, youth ministry, universities, seminaries and local Churches is very much part of our calling. We can and must get involved. Our young people – and our not so young people! – have the wherewithal to lead the charge with modern forms of media. They just need to know that we love them and trust them.

Beauty

Music is the most divine of the arts, since it is the most ethereal. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was a German Benedictine abbess, preacher to popes, bishops, priests and laity, theologian, musician, mystic it seems, and certainly botanist. She believed that “music is entirely necessary for salvation.”

Music is beauty. “Beauty is that which when *seen* delights.” Transposing St. Thomas’ eloquent definition, we can say, “Beauty is that which when *heard*, delights.”

⁴ Kelly, p.29

The power of music to attract the human heart and direct it towards the divine cannot be underestimated. This is especially so with young people.

St. Ambrose (340-397) astutely observed that “in a psalm instruction vies with beauty. We sing for pleasure. We learn for our benefit.” In other words, truth is beautiful and beauty is truthful. There are one hundred and fifty psalms and they are meant to be sung:

A psalm is the voice of assent, the joy of freedom, a cry of happiness, the echo of gladness. It soothes the temper, distracts from care, lightens the burden of sorrow. It is a source of security at night, a lesson in wisdom by day. It is a shield when we are afraid, a celebration of holiness, a vision of serenity, a promise of peace and harmony. ... What experience [emotion] is not covered by the psalms?⁵

Ambrose is making a point. The psalms give us a *language* so that we can speak with God. They give us *permission* to express our true feelings before God. In other words, the psalms grant us *liberty* to be human. We are encouraged not to pretend.

Singing the psalms would liberate and guard us from “superficial spirituality.” A contemporary realism might well descend upon the community of the faithful, giving us greater rapport with God, ourselves, and each other.

Yes, “music is entirely necessary for salvation,” for music is like God. When nature is powerful, she is destructive. But when God is powerful,

⁵ Ps. 1, 9-12: CSEL 64, 7. 9-10

he is profoundly gentle. Music and singing open the “narrow gate” to the rich and fertile pastures of God.

Who is going with us?

At the time of ANZAC (1915) ninety-eight percent of Australians believed in God. The 2016 census revealed that just less than seventy percent of Australians now believe in God. Pope Francis claimed in 2015 that we are living in a “change of era, not an era of change.” Popes, of course, are not immune from embellishment and hyperbole, but Francis has a point:

Think communications. It seems as if new born babies come out of the womb with smart phones in their tiny hands.

Consider sexuality. Who would have thought that the average age for viewing pornography would now be ten years of age and dropping?

Observe longevity. Born in 1850 you live till you are 45. Born in 2000 you live till you are 85. Born in 2050 you live till you are 100. The experts say the 200 year old man/woman has already been born!

Remember the Sabbath. Jews and Christians institutionalised rest. We once understood that rest was important for physical, emotional, and mental health. To a lesser extent, we understood that rest enabled us to “stop,” “look back” and thereby “finish” our work, thereby establishing a pattern of work and rest after God’s own creative activity.

But rest has ceased and almost disappeared from our social and spiritual vocabulary.

We pay the price: we no longer have time to “look back” and sense the “hand of God” in our daily lives.

We pay the price: our community gatherings are weakened and so we struggle to encourage one another in our Christian journey.

The pope may be right. The old order seems to be passing away. Civility is waning. Social stability is fracturing. Polarisation is proceeding.

Well may we ask, “Is there *anybody* going within us?” Are we finally “done and dusted”?

Wisdom, however, suggests that we are back at the “beginning,” where it all started. *Genesis*, with its poetic genius is rather helpful, don’t you think? Let me quote for you the first verses:

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a *formless* wasteland, and *darkness* covered the *abyss*, while the wind swept over the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (*Genesis 1*).

The “default” position is darkness, emptiness and chaos. Enter God. He speaks a Word and there is light amidst darkness, fullness rising out of emptiness, order emerging from chaos.

We began with Leo XIII. Let’s finish with him. In that famous and irrepressible encyclical he stated something that is rarely, if ever, quoted:

“Nothing is more useful than to *look* upon the world as it really is and at the same time to seek *elsewhere* for the solace to its troubles” (*Rerum Novarum*, 18).

He is referring to faith and reason. They are the two *lights* in which we see what God is asking of us. They are the two *wings* in which we fly to our brothers and sisters in their need.

What is it that we “see” and how might we “fly” as we journey to 2050?

Jesus is no fool. He chooses not one, two or three – but twelve (*Luke 9*).

Leadership is about the team and it begins with two questions:

Do I know what I don’t know?

Where are the people who know what I don’t know?

Our community of faith rightly demands robust, transparent governance. We must find our voice. We must *help* our spiritual leaders to ask these questions. We must *insist* they ask them.

Furthermore, defining *who* we are, *what* we do and *why* we do it is essential.

We are baptised believers. That’s who we are. We are in this together.

The mission is the Gospel. That’s what we do. We share the Good News.

Our motive is the love of Christ. We want people to survive. We want them to thrive. That’s *why* we do it. A mate of mine says, “If we lose our “why,” we lose our “way.”

Jesus is no fool. He chooses seventy-two to go out *two-by-two* – “hand in hand” (*Luke 10*). Most of life depends on the company we keep. There is strength in numbers. We need each other. We rely on each other. Mutuality demands that we work together to create a community which welcomes, supports and inspires. The earliest theology is insistent on this point:

Stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another (*Hebrews 10:25*).

We are left with a simple question: In *this* community, not the one next door, but in *this* community, here and now, what makes for a great Catholic community?

If mutuality, community and governance finds application at the national and local level, then so, too, does preaching the Gospel. We need a *Preaching Institute* that is fit for purpose – for men and for women, for priest and laity, for young and old, for teacher and catechist. We “live and move and have our being” in a new cultural and historical setting. We must continue to “adapt and prosper.”

The messaging at the national level has got to improve dramatically. The risk is too grave. And when we speak with a united voice on the great issues of our time, it needs to be with the feminine and masculine voice. God has designed it so.

There is no time to waste when it comes to music. The return on investment will be substantial. Parish finance committees and parish

pastoral councils must make this priority number one. Interest rates are low – let's have some debt!

Good music will surely inspire the preacher to *prepare* and *proclaim*, while the beauty and joy of the celebration will arouse “fringe dwellers” to come into the heart of the community.

We *are* living at an opportune time. This *is* a great moment. It's time for silence, stillness and prayer. It's time for “commission and mission.”

With the *light* of God and the *wings* of God we can be quietly confident as we face the challenges of the 21st Century.

Amen.