

## THE PROTESTANTISM OF CATHOLICS FOR RENEWAL

*Almighty Father, your Son was born as a man that men could be born again in you. As you nourish us with the bread of life given only to your sons fill us with the Spirit who makes us your children...*<sup>1</sup>

For Protestants a Church is a contrivance of men. If its members are perceived as having shortcomings, these are shortcomings in the Church they constitute. If they have established it, they can change it. An attitude such as this marks the criticism of the Catholic Church by the organisation *Catholics for Renewal* in an open letter to the Pope and bishops of Australia published last month<sup>2</sup>. The letter's opening stanza expresses the burden of its complaint—

*The Church no longer adequately inspires many of our communities. It has alienated too many adults who were born of Catholic parents, attended Catholic schools, and lived a sacramental life. It has become disconnected from, and irrelevant to the lives of too many of our children...*

The letter is testimony to decades of episcopal negligence of formation in the faith. In priestly sermons, in teaching in Catholic schools and in adult education, the bishops have permitted Modernist and semi-Modernist theologians to promote their heterodox theories among the faithful so that what great numbers now think they practise as the Catholic faith is but a pale reflection of that ineffable reality.

The Catholic Church was not founded by men, but by God. The Head of the Church is the man who is God, Jesus Christ; as the soul of the Church is God the Holy Spirit; and as the end of the Church is God the Father, and the believer's union with Him in heaven. The Catholic Church is not, as other Churches are, amenable to alteration at the whim of this or that believer, or this or that *synod* of believers. The Catholic Church is the spotless Bride of Christ; infallible and indefectible.

In contrast, her ministers and members are both fallible and defectible. It is with these, and not with the Church, that blame lies for any wrongful conduct.

Consistent with the preconception under which its members labour, *Catholics for Renewal* appeals, as if to an ultimate truth, to democratic principle to solve problems among the faithful, overlooking the fact that democracy is a form of government *faute de mieux* with no place in an institution perfectly governed. The Catholic Church, in spite of its fallible and defectible ministers, is such an institution.<sup>3</sup>

The organisation's lament over the removal of Bishop Morris of Toowoomba is naïve. Every barrister takes an oath of office. If he breaches his oath, he cannot complain if he is disbarred. Every bishop takes an oath of office. If he breaches his

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer after communion, *Sts Joachim and Anne*, 29<sup>th</sup> July.

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced in the Appendix below

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the views of the faithful are to be ignored in non essential matters, for the Church's members are, after all, men. The principle is—*In essentia unitas; in dubia diversitas; in omnia caritas.*

oath he cannot complain if he is removed. Bishop Morris's breaches are well documented. Had he been removed when his disobedience was established in 2007 the harm occasioned to the faithful by his bad example would have been limited. Procrastination has compounded it.

The organisation's complaint is rooted not so much in the objective as in the subjective. The Church does not meet its members' expectations. The Church did not meet Martin Luther's expectations either; nor those of Henry Tudor.

Yet the fault for the predicament in which the members of *Catholics for Renewal* find themselves is not entirely theirs. While the proximate cause of the etiolation of their faith is the negligence of Australia's bishops,<sup>4</sup> its remote cause is the error of the bishops of the Second Vatican Council in licensing the access of the secular to the realm of the sacred<sup>5</sup>, an influence reflected in the charge that—

*[a]s an institution [the Church] does not yet embody the vision of Vatican II for a truly collegial Church in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances...*

As it is reflected in the insistence that the Church should defer to worldly ideologies and the demands of political correctness as, for instance, in the stand—

*[w]e can no longer accept the patriarchal attitude to women within our Church...*

What the members of *Catholics for Renewal* cannot see is that the Church never will follow Vatican II's embrace of the secular. The retreat from that folly has already begun<sup>6</sup>, and the day is approaching when the Church will submit that troublesome Council and its determinations to rigorous inspection and correction.

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What lies ahead for the members of *Catholics for Renewal*? Unless they submit themselves unreservedly to Christ's Church, that is, unless they submit themselves to Christ *on His terms* rather than on theirs, their tenuous adherence to the Catholic faith will be severed. The claim that they are no longer prepared to accept certain attitudes "within our Church" has about it a sense of prophecy: the end will be the establishment of a Church of their own devising, yet another Protestant sect.

Their letter will certainly assist at the coming *ad limina* of Australia's bishops to Rome, but not in the way they intend. The Pope and the heads of the relevant Vatican dicasteries will be less than impressed by a conference of bishops which has demonstrated so clearly the heterodoxy of its members and their inability to exercise needful discipline among the members of the faithful.

Michael Baker

6<sup>th</sup> August 2011—*Feast of the Transfiguration*

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<sup>4</sup> There is hardly a Catholic school where the loss of faith of the children taught is not certain.

<sup>5</sup> 'Remote' is not used chronologically here, but ontologically. Had the bishops of Vatican II not acted as they did, the bishops who followed them would not have paid such respect to the secular.

<sup>6</sup> Witness the recent correction of innumerable errors in the translation into English of the text of the Mass, and the remarks of Cardinal Llovera, Prefect of the *Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments*, of the need for the faithful to return to receiving communion on the tongue whilst kneeling to show the necessary deference to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

## APPENDIX

### OPEN LETTER TO POPE BENEDICT XVI AND THE BISHOPS OF AUSTRALIA

Dear Pope Benedict and Bishops of Australia

We, the undersigned Catholics of Australia, write to you regarding our concerns for the Church. We ask that you consider these matters during the 2011 *Ad Limina* visit.

As Christ's faithful, we must speak out. Under Canon Law we have a right and a duty in keeping with our knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to our pastors our views on matters which concern the good of the Church (Can. 212 2, 3)

The Church no longer adequately inspires many of our communities. It has alienated too many adults who were born of Catholic parents, attended Catholic schools, and lived a sacramental life. It has become disconnected from, and irrelevant to the lives of too many of our children. With fewer priests, its ability to provide regular Eucharist in our parishes, especially in rural areas, has become increasingly limited. As an institution it does not yet embody the vision of Vatican II for a truly collegial Church in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances. Rather, it appears as an institution focussed on centralism, legalism and control, with few effective structures for listening and dialogue, and often more concerned with its institutional image and interests than the spirit of Christ.

Our Church has been tainted by injustice and blemished by bad decisions. We still reel from the sexual abuse scandal where the Church's initial response was manifestly inadequate and where some authorities, in their attempts to protect the institution, exposed innocent young people to grave harm. We were shocked at the lack of due process in the way Bishop Morris, a dedicated pastor, was removed from his diocese. We were dismayed by the failure to consult properly on the new English translations of our liturgy. We can no longer accept the patriarchal attitude towards women within our Church, and we fear that an extended claim to infallibility is stifling discussion on many important issues. These issues include some teachings on human sexuality, as well as new forms of ministry for women and married men; the latter an anomaly for a Church committed to equality, and which welcomes married ministers from other Christian traditions. These concerns undermine confidence and trust in you our leaders.

We want and pray for a renewed Church that follows Christ more closely in every way. We need a Church committed to authentic collegiality and subsidiarity. We seek an open, transparent and accountable Church, which respects due process, rejects every form of discrimination, listens to its people, promotes co-responsibility in every facet of its mission and ministry, and is compassionate to its core. We call for an outward-facing Church totally committed to justice, peace, ecumenism and dialogue with other faiths, and which advocates unequivocally for the rights of the oppressed and disadvantaged while tending practically to their needs. We need and want a Church where we are 'all one in Christ, with no more distinctions... between male and female' (*Galatians* 3: 28) and whose leaders read well the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.

As a first step towards collegiality and subsidiarity, we call on each diocesan bishop to convene at an early date a synod in his diocese, under the provisions of Canon Law (Cc. 460-468), to discuss how the local Church might be a more authentic witness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We also ask that Pope Benedict allow a return to a more accountable and consultative process for the appointment of bishops, giving both priests and people a real voice as was earlier Church practice. This could commence with the appointment of the next bishop of Toowoomba.

For all of us Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. As the People of God and your sisters and brothers in Christ, who together seek the Kingdom of God, we pray that the Spirit will guide us all ever closer to Jesus in the critical task of renewal.

*Catholics of Australia*