

SESSION

6

Journey

SESSION 6: JOURNEY

Extract from *Catching Fire*

Our understanding of followers or believers being called the 'people of God' has its roots in the Old Testament – itself the story or narrative of the journey of a believing people – the Israelites – in their relationship with God. It has three key elements: Faith, kinship and call.

Behind the events and stories in the Old Testament, there is the movement in faith of individuals and a people. It is a narrative of growing in faith. The New Testament follows as the breaking open in faith of the reality of God's love in the being and action of Jesus Christ. There is a sense of the growing maturity of understanding that culminated in the explosive reality of Jesus' death and resurrection.

In this journey of faith, the understanding that we only make this journey in community – in kinship with each other – is central to the Catholic tradition. We do not go the journey alone; in fact, we need each other to know our own deepest truth in God.

The call to return to God is woven through all the scriptures. It was Jesus' call to us too, and it remains our call today. It is no less difficult, nor less compelling than it ever was. In answering that call we remember that we are part of a larger company of travellers that stretches back in time and into the future encompassing the great communion of saints and faithful. We are the people of God, called to find our place in the wider Church as we journey in community, in faith.

1. Change Challenges a Faith Review by Eric Hodgens (19 March 201

This talk was given to the Catholic Religious of Victoria Symposium on School Governance.

Three massive changes are challenging our Faith: changes in western culture, in the Australian Catholic sub-culture and in the Church.

Changes in Western Culture.

Western culture has experienced changes over the last few centuries. These include: the renaissance of the 16th century, the scientific revolution led by Isaac Newton, the enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the evolutionary discoveries of Charles Darwin, the psychology of Freud, Einstein's theory of relativity, astronomy discoveries including the Big Bang. Over the same period history changed from story telling to a discipline where facts needed to be quantified and verified and sources listed. This changed historical discourse from being a work of the imagination more to being factual reportage and intellectual interpretation. Science and technology have created an explosion of knowledge. The growth of universal education and the expansion of wealth have led to a world with a new set of presumptions and certainties. The whole social order has moved from that of a small privileged class with a large under class to one of middle class privilege and wealth. The American and the French revolutions are key watershed moments in replacing monarchy and nobility with liberal democracy. Authority has moved from the king to the people.

Implications.

The imaginative world of the catechism is no longer credible. The imaginative world of today's younger generation does not include a factual heaven and hell. Serving God in the sense of keeping his revealed law implies a down from the top authority which sits

uncomfortably with a democratic principle that authority comes from a consensus of the populace. The authority of a clerical hierarchy, which communicates and validates the truth of God's revelation and God's law does not fit into their imaginative cosmos. The older generation has been able to flip between the old imaginative world and the new. I suggest that the old cosmos is now simply fanciful for the younger generations.

Changes in Australian Catholic Sub-culture.

Mid 20th century Catholic identity in Australia was marked by a strong sense of affiliation in a majority of Catholics. This showed in strong support for parish life and for the Catholic school. The principal and staff were either professional religious or strongly practising Catholics. The students were Catholic with few exceptions. A majority of the school families were practising Catholics – regular at Mass and the sacraments. The schools included religious practice in the official curriculum. They participated in the initiation of students into the sacraments of Eucharist, Penance and Confirmation. Catholic doctrinal and moral catechesis was a major item in the curriculum. Evangelisation was taken as having already happened. The schools could rightly be described as *confessional* schools.

The scene is very different today. While the schools are still highly regarded for their education, and their identification is Catholic, only a small proportion of the school families are now practising regularly. Two generations of students have now passed through the Catholic school experience with a very weak sense of Catholic identity and very little interest in Catholic doctrine or morality. The schools score very well in the secular curriculum compared with State and other Private schools. The sacraments of initiation are still celebrated – but more as rites of passage than significant development of an internalised practice of faith. Broad cultural values are successfully inculcated but official Catholic morality, especially sexual morality, is often not accepted. This means that the catechesis in the schools is not being received.

If the schools are to remain Catholic aimed at forming students to be committed Catholics a new evangelization is needed. We can no longer just assume that the next generation will follow the allegiance of their parents or grandparents. And a prerequisite of effective evangelization is re-visiting the core Christian message and recontextualizing it in the light of the secular and pluralistic broad culture in which we live.

Changes in the Church.

The dramatic drop in the numbers of priests and religious is resulting in a consequent change to ministerial structures. This drop in recruiting is now 40 years on. The high rates of recruitment preceding 1968 have left a group still carrying on religious and priestly ministry. The problem is that this group is now over 60 years old and will all vanish from the ministerial work force over the next 15 years. Current recruitment rates will not change quickly if at all. While current church policy makes the drastic shortness of priests intractable, the education ministry can be and largely has been passed over to non-religious.

The departure of religious from religious owned schools is resulting in consequent changes in governance. Contemporary law and regulations demand greater accountability from our schools – administratively and financially. You are adapting to this challenge by the establishment of CRA and CRV and the creation of Personal Juridical Persons to be permanent owners of your schools when the dearth of religious peaks. This work is vital because the religious congregations and a hard core of the Catholic laity that they serve have a strong personal vested interest in making the schools educationally successful and identifiably Catholic.

Meanwhile, the Catholic sub-culture has loosened and become more open. The Catholic Church which 50 years ago enjoyed tight internal discipline and a united front policy is now multi-party with some being fractious over denied human rights, immersed in public scandals. Its leadership, still assuming monarchical entitlement, is to a large extent de-authorised.

Two Mind Sets – Classic v. Evolutionary.

The theology which underpinned the catechesis that the older ones amongst us received was the neo-scholasticism which was revived at the end of the 19th century and imposed by Leo XIII as the only theology to be taught in seminaries. It, in turn, drew on the scholastic theologians of the 12th and 13th centuries – predominantly St. Thomas Aquinas. Central to that movement was the return to the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. This theology set the climate in which other classical theologians such as St. Augustine were interpreted. One difficulty in our contemporary age is that these theologies assume a static, classic universe in which the nature of things is set at their creation. But since the renaissance and especially since Darwin's theory of evolution, Einstein's theory of relativity and the theory of the Big Bang, the universe is seen as always in motion, development and evolution. Pope Benedict XVI constantly attacks relativism in today's culture. But relativity is the cousin of evolution. There is no static nature of beings in an evolutionary universe. The pope's problem with the concept is understandable when you realize that he is a leading theologian in the Augustinian, and therefore classic, static tradition. John Paul II was thoroughly trained in neo-scholasticism. Both have called for a new evangelization in the light of the collapse of the last few decades. The theological background of both of these men explains how their vision of a new evangelization is to try to reconsecralise rather than recontextualize.

Different Modes of Discourse.

We are not very skilled at recognising the different modes of discourse in our language. We recognise that factual report is not the same literary form as story telling. Truth can be found in the correct reportage of facts; but it can also be found in the affective and imaginative impact of a good drama or story. The language of fact – logos in Greek – is distinct from the language of meaningful experience – mythos in Greek. Theology, especially when it is told through story, as in the gospels, is mythical discourse. It yields truth via the meaning of the story rather than its factuality. The scriptures can be very badly misunderstood unless we make this distinction.

Response: Confessional, Secular, Values Focussed or Recontextualized?

The Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project being run by Louvain University and commissioned by the CECV, is a rich source of research on this question. It is the basis for this analysis.

The confessional school has been described above. It had its heyday in the middle of the 20th century. By any criteria it is struggling today. A common observation is that we have lost one or two generations from Catholic belief. The policy of the newly assertive reactionary group is to *reconfessionalise* the schools. This will only be effective for a niche reactionary market. Opus Dei is developing this model but their clientele is very limited. In the broader environment of the parish and our existing secondary schools it will not work. Like it or not, we have to develop a new model. One option is to keep the school's ownership and name but to give away evangelization and catechesis and simply follow the secular curriculum.

Another option is to follow the secular curriculum but to have a strong extra emphasis on good values and good behaviour. Both of these are a departure from the primary purpose we had in establishing the schools.

The final alternative is *recontextualization*. Recontextualization is the term used for the re-articulation of Christian and Catholic belief in the light of the prevailing new realities of contemporary culture which is secular, pluralistic and liberal democratic. One takes the prevailing culture as a given. We presume that we cannot claim exclusive or even a primary right to have our faith view accepted. We have to enter into dialogue with this culture and present a case for Christian faith which we hope will be cogent.

The recontextualization option entails a total redesign of the RE curriculum. This necessitates firstly rearticulating our personal faith and theology.

Challenges entailed in Recontextualizing.

The challenges are:

- to recontextualize our own personal faith;
- to select, train and support school staff who are prepared to implement this recontextualization;
- to develop a recontextualized curriculum of evangelization and catechesis.

The Challenge to Personal Faith.

The challenge for those of us who have been formally part of the Catholic enterprise in Australia is to re-evaluate our own faith in the light of the cultural and sub-cultural changes of the last few decades. We want the Catholic Church and the whole Catholic enterprise to succeed. But this conviction must be more than just a tribal gut reaction. The prevailing outside culture is secular and pluralistic. It is only when we can self-confidently proclaim our faith in this environment that it is solidly rooted. I am convinced that it is only in a secular environment that the option of faith is genuinely free.

Contemplating God Today.

The dominant images of God as creator, provider, lawmaker and judge must be revisited and rearticulated. Otherwise they do not make sense. The button pushing, string-pulling God of the old school catechism must be replaced. One problem with this type of catechesis is that God is heavily defined. Yet we cannot define or limit God who is the ultimately unknowable, infinite transcendent mystery. Any statement we make about God is limited by our human intellect, imagination and language. Recontextualizing inclines us to return to theologies which preceded the scholastic theology of the late medieval period and the accompanying resurgence of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy.

Jesus Christ.

We need a renewed theology of Jesus Christ (Christology) and of salvation (soteriology). Christian belief centres on Jesus Christ. The path by which the earliest generations of Jesus' followers came to believe in him as Christ, saviour, Son of God can be traced by examining the New Testament documents chronologically. The earliest witness is St. Paul. His early epistles are dated to the early 50s – within 25 years of Jesus' death. He presents Jesus as the authentic Christ or messiah of the Jews. Jesus is the Risen Christ and we can live in the Spirit if we believe in him. We become at rights with God by faith, not by the former Jewish way of keeping the law. Mark's gospel is the next document 15 or 20 years

after Paul's first epistles. Mark sees Jesus as Christ and Son of God. He presents Jesus as being invested with this status at his baptism by John the Baptist. Matthew and Luke are 10 or 15 years later and present Jesus as being Christ the Lord from his conception and birth. The Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as the Eternal Word who was with God from the beginning – the pre-existent Son of God. Over a short 50 years the first two or three generations of believers had developed a very high Christology.

Faith.

The very concept of faith has to be revisited. Accepting nonsense as fact is not faith; it is stupid. Faith is not believing truths. Faith is believing in meaningfulness to life and the universe which is perceived intuitively rather than by empirical explanation. It is approaching the experience of life with a new set of eyes and articulating the resulting vision using a different mode of discourse. The logical discourse which leads to accuracy and certainty in everyday life must be replaced with the discourse of mystery to articulate the ultimate realities. Logos as distinct from Mythos. In the technical terms of this quest today we must *recontextualize* our faith. This approach was implicitly followed by Vatican II especially in its Pastoral Constitution: *Gaudium et Spes*.

Reaction.

There is a movement of strong fundamentalist reaction against this recent theological development. Some see their old certainties being attacked and want to re-group because they fear that the very basis of their belief system is likely to crumble. It is an understandable reaction – but a futile one because the changes which have made the recontextualization necessary are not going to go away. It is either change or fossilize – an ironic image since it is the observation of fossils which proved beyond doubt that our universe is not static but evolving. Fossils are the wake of evolution. For an insight into the fundamentalist reaction see Karen Armstrong's: *Battle for God*.

Other Challenges.

The remaining challenges relate to developing staff who understand recontextualization and a curriculum of evangelization and catechesis for teaching students. If we recontextualize our own life of faith in the light of a realistic embrace of the culture of the secular world we will be able to see the way forward. The task is demanding but, to my mind, essential if we are to move to successful development of Catholic Schools in our contemporary world.

2. "Who are our Heroes and Heroines?" in "What's Great about Being Catholic?" by Richard Rohr

In this chapter we shall return to the question we began with, namely, why be Catholic? When we asked that question in Chapter One, we answered it by explaining some positive aspects of Catholicism. As we turn again to that question, we shall try to answer it not by talking about generalities but by talking about individuals. We shall be talking not so much about Catholicism as about Catholics.

When most people inquire about religion, they are less interested in abstract ideas than they are in people. They are not convinced of the truth of Christianity unless they can see it being lived by real Christians. If they meet someone who is a living example of Christian faith, they can imagine how they too might live if they had such faith. If they meet a follower of Jesus who is living the gospel, they can overcome whatever intellectual problems they might have with Christianity. If they meet a group of Catholics who exemplify Catholicism for them, they can deal with the shortcomings and failures that they see in the Church.

The same can be said of us, if we are trying to understand our own Church and wondering, perhaps, why remain Catholic? One of the best ways to understand our own religious tradition is to recall that litany of individuals whom we recognize as having been great Christians. For in the end, Catholicism is not so much a history of ideas as a story of a people, and the people we call saints are the heroes and heroines of the story. They are at once the paragons of Christianity and the paradigms of Christian living.

If we read the history of Catholicism, we come across many times when the Church was beset with problems. Sometimes they were problems that came from without, such as persecutions and invasions. More often than not they were problems within, problems of malaise and ineptitude, of conflict and unforgiveness, of moral and political corruption. For a while the Church would remain deadlocked and unable to resolve the crisis, but eventually something would happen that would overcome the problem. Usually that something was a someone, some individual who could show the way to write the next new chapter in the Church's story. And such individuals were quite often saints.

Some of the greatest saints were able to envision new ways to live the gospel when the old ways had lost their power. Some were practical people who did not write much but who had a gift for trying out new things. Some were thoughtful people who perhaps did not do much except write. In rare cases some were both pragmatic and intellectual, but all of them were prayerful, and all of them lived the gospel in ways that fit their time and place in history. Their living of the gospel is what made their actions and suggestions credible. The authenticity of their lives enabled others to trust them and to follow what they said.

By and large, Catholics have followed the example of their saints more than they have the ideas in their doctrines. Ideas are abstract, but lives are real. Doctrines can be hard to understand, but actions are easy to see. People are often bored by theology, but they are always fascinated by saints. Saints fire our imagination; they stir up our hearts; they awaken our dreams. They give us new ways to image reality and new ways to envision the future. They open up new possibilities for living the gospel, for they show us how they have already done it.

Theologian Richard P McBrien, in his book *Catholicism*, helps us to understand why this is so.

Catholicism has never hesitated to affirm the "mysterious" dimension of all reality; the cosmos, nature, history, events, persons, objects, rituals, words. Everything is, in principle, capable of embodying and communicating the divine.

The Catholic tradition is one of encountering the invisible God in and through the visible world. Catholics are attuned to seeing God in people's lives and in what is going on around them, more than they are disposed to finding God in theological doctrines. To some extent, this explains the Catholic fascination with saints and the difference between the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Protestantism, with its emphasis on the preached and written word, has often had difficulty with the Catholic insistence on the visible, material and personal mediation of God. Catholicism, on the other hand, has always been comfortable with sacrament and ritual, with the Blessed Mother and the saints.

The Catholic Vision that McBrien speaks of is not just theoretical. Catholicism has always found the divine within the human. God's love is incarnated in the unconditional love that people have for one another, and God's forgiveness is mediated by people unconditionally forgiving one another. The reason for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, for example, is not so that we can be told that God above forgives us here below. We reveal our darkness to another human being so that we can honestly experience the self-revelation that is needed for complete openness to God, and so that we can experience God's love and forgiveness

coming to us through another human being. Believing that we are reconciled is one thing; experiencing it is quite another, and much more important for our spiritual growth.

Ultimately, the spiritual and the material worlds are one, for they are both God's world. For us humans, who are both matter and spirit, the spiritual realities of love, forgiveness, honesty, justice, knowledge and so on are always mediated by material realities that we can see, touch, feel and hear. If we were pure spirits, we could be purely spiritual with God. As it is, we always encounter God in and through our bodies. Even when we meet God in our private prayer experience, our very material brain is always working to make that experience possible.

For Catholics then, God's grace is always mediated through human experience of one sort or another. The grace of Jesus Christ was revealed to the apostles through their experience of him. The grace of the sacraments is mediated by the experience of the people who participate in them. In the same way the saints have always been mediation points of grace, for they make the reality of God historical and visible, tangible and credible.

The saints of every age have revealed the truth to Jesus to that age. We can see how God was revealing himself at any point in history by looking at the saints of that period. Because of their openness to God they were mediators of grace and they radiated that grace to the world around them. In the lives of the saints we can discern how God works in human life.

We need reference points like the saints because, without them, we are all too likely to make ourselves the standards when it comes to living the gospel. We can read the New Testament, but we always look at it through our own eyes. We can study the Church's teachings, but we always filter them through our own biases. Unless we ourselves are saints, we are not likely to arrive at an unbiased understanding of the gospel.

Although each of the saints had their own particular way of viewing and living the gospel, all of them were unbiased in the sense that they put their selfish concerns aside and opened themselves radically to the truth that God was speaking to them. They were in as total a union with God as it is humanly possible to be. They threw themselves completely into doing not what they wanted but what God wanted. They surrendered themselves wholly, which is what made them holy.

In the pursuit of holiness the main obstacle is the self. It is not the circumstances that we live in, the people around us, or even the devil. The self is selfish, self-centred and self-protective. It does not want to surrender, to give up, or to give in. The self that we have become stands in the way of self-transformation. The self that we believe ourselves to be does not want to be converted.

The saints are the heroes and heroines of the Christian life because they took the most courageous step of moving beyond the self to encounter the divine. They put the self aside to stand naked before the Lord. They emptied out the self in order to be filled with God. Having gotten rid of the self, they were receptive to the wholly other. Having taken the wholly other into themselves, they allowed it to transform their lives and make them holy.

In that one respect all saints are alike. In other ways, however, they are as varied as the periods in which they lived, the circumstances in which they found themselves and the personalities they had. For both reasons it is difficult to categorize the saints, since they are all alike and yet so different. Nevertheless, the Church in its liturgical calendar classifies the saints in various ways into martyrs, confessors, virgins and so on. We shall follow some of those classifications here, but we shall also use some categories of our own to show how they were all differently the same in heroic holiness.