

SESSION

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Commitment

SESSION 8: COMMITMENT

Extract from *Catching Fire*

It is one thing to know what we are about. It is another to be committed to that with passion and conviction. Commitment gives life to the purpose we have. It is the lived out witness to the vision we carry, and the tangible expression of the deep faith we have.

The way we express our commitment is as unique as we are. But it will be nurtured in us all by a personal prayer life, and characterized by engagement with the world that is respectful, empowering and hopeful.

1. Article: The Australian Religious Landscape through Catholic Eyes, on the Eve of World Youth Day 2008 by Fr. Frank Brennan

(Published as "Ein Weltjugendtag an gottlosem Ort? – Die kirchliche und religiöse Landschaft Australiens" Herder Korrespondenz July 2008, pp. 345-9 (German abstract here))

James Denney, a nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterian theologian, described Australia as "the most godless place under heaven". The label is often taken as the starting point for discussing the religious sensibility of Australians who live in a markedly secular, materialistic society founded upon the dispossession of the Aborigines who had inhabited the land for up to 60,000 years. The British were the first Europeans to establish a permanent settlement on Australian soil. They erected a penal colony at Sydney Cove, asserting sovereignty in the name of the British Crown on 26 January 1788. No treaty was negotiated with the Aborigines. No compensation was paid for the state-authorised confiscation of their lands. It took until 1992 for the Australian courts to recognise that Aborigines had rights to land which survived the assertion of British sovereignty.

The first Australian Catholics were convicts, mostly Irish. For the first 15 years of settlement, they were denied sacraments in their own Church. It was a Church of laity. The first public mass was not celebrated until 15 May 1803 by James Dixon who was also a convict, having been deported for providing assistance to Irish rebels. Military officers were in attendance at that first mass to ensure that the Irish did not use the sacrament as a foil for seditious conversations. In March 1804, 300 Irish convicts rebelled at Castle Hill on the outskirts of Sydney. Convinced that the Mass was being used as a cover for seditious gatherings, the authorities restricted Dixon's freedom to minister to his fellow Catholics.

The first official Catholic chaplains did not arrive until May 1820, so the Australian Catholic Church was virtually without clerical leadership for its first three decades. Priest shortages are nothing new in Australia, especially in the vast outback areas. These two official chaplains were the Irishmen Philip Connolly and John Joseph Therry. They had very different approaches to ministry and soon fell out, going their separate ways. Therry developed an eye for real estate around Sydney, being able to leave fabulous bequests to the Church, including the Jesuits. Governor Macquarie laid the foundation stone of St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, on 29 October 1821.

In 1832, John Hubert Plunkett was appointed Solicitor General for the Colony of New South Wales – the first Catholic to be appointed to a significant position in any Australian colony. Later after the Myall Creek Massacre which claimed the lives of 28 Aborigines in 1838, Plunkett intervened to ensure that the white killers were duly tried, convicted and hanged for their wrongdoing – the first time whites went to the gallows for the murder

of Aborigines. In that same year, an English Catholic convert Caroline Chisholm arrived in Australia and became a tireless worker for newly arrived migrants who had to make their way overland to remote bush locations. No bushranger dared to take her on. When she died, her tombstone carried the epithet: "The emigrant's friend".

The bishop of Mauritius who had jurisdiction "over New Holland with the adjacent islands" appointed William Ullathorne, an English Benedictine, as his Australian Vicar General in 1833. Then two years later, another English Benedictine, John Bede Polding, was appointed Australia's first bishop. He was bishop for 42 years including the long years of the Irish famine and the exciting years of the Australian gold rushes. His dream of a Benedictine mission had to be replaced by a local church staffed by many Irish priests and diverse religious orders. The Passionists opened the first mission to Aborigines in 1843. In his 1856 pastoral letter, Polding wrote, "Before all else we are Catholics; and next, but a name swallowing up all distinctions of origin, we are Australians".

In 1866, Mary MacKillop, who will be Australia's first saint, established the Sisters of St Joseph who were dedicated to the education of children in country towns. She was not afraid to take on the bishops. One bishop even excommunicated her briefly for insubordination in 1871. In the 1870s, there was a very spirited debate about education in the Australian colonies. The state was committed to providing education which was compulsory, free and secular. The Catholic Church responded by setting up a comprehensive Catholic school system which was ultimately staffed by 13,000 sisters and 2,000 priests and brothers. Not until the 1960s would the battle for "state aid" be won. Now the Catholic schools are staffed largely by the laity paid appropriate salaries with significant state funding assistance. The annual enrolment in Catholic schools is 691,000 students of whom 175,000 are non-Catholic.

When the six British colonies federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901, 850,000 of the 3.7million inhabitants were Catholic. Catholics are now the largest religious grouping in Australian society – 26.6% (5 million persons). Catholic hospitals have been built in all major cities. Catholic secondary schools receive students from the Catholic primary schools which are in most suburbs. There was no move to establish Catholic universities until the 1980s. There are now 2 Catholic universities.

Often the brighter seminarians were sent to Rome for studies and Catholics were strongly represented in every new wave of migration; but otherwise there was little cross fertilisation with the Catholic Church in other countries. International Eucharistic Congresses were staged in Sydney in 1928, and in Melbourne in 1973. Pope Paul VI was the first pope to visit, in 1970. John Paul II came twice as Pope (having already visited the Polish faithful when he was a bishop), first on an extended national tour in 1986, and then for the beatification of Mary MacKillop. After World War II, Australia hosted migrants from many European countries. In the 1960s, two of the longest serving bishops who embodied the Irish tradition (Daniel Mannix and James Duhig) died, and the White Australia policy which had restricted immigration to Europeans was finally abandoned. Many Vietnamese refugees settled after the Vietnam War. Australia, and the Australian Catholic Church, is now very multicultural. Recent Muslim migrants are now those most likely to encounter the problems which used to confront Irish Catholics becoming part of Australian society at an earlier time. In May 2008, the international media reported the decision by a Sydney local council to deny planning approval for a Muslim school. The Sydney Morning Herald editorial of 31 May 2008 noted:

Schools of all kinds play a vital role in assimilating new arrivals into the Australian mainstream. Government schools have always done this well, taking in pupils from all

backgrounds and melding them into a single community while remaining as sensitive as possible to cultural or religious differences. But religious schools can do something similar.

For more than a century, Catholic systemic schools played the same role for a community which was viewed by the establishment with similar hostility and suspicion as Muslims may experience today. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Irish nationalism made Catholicism thoroughly suspect in this country in ways which today seem almost quaint.

In 1995, the Governor-General swore the oath of office in the presence of the Chief Justice, witnessed by the Prime Minister. All three had an Irish Catholic heritage.

There are now 1363 parishes in the 28 Australian dioceses. The bishops' conference consists of 41 bishops including seven Archbishops. Usually there is only one active Cardinal, the Archbishop of Sydney. In recent years, the media has tended to identify Cardinal George Pell as the de facto leader of the Catholic Church in Australia. Cardinal Pell engages in public debate about a whole range of social and political questions. His fellow bishops, including the President of the Bishops' Conference, tend to be more circumspect in the news media.

There are 1973 diocesan priests of whom 426 are retired. There are 1153 priests from religious orders. The number of priests has declined 20% between 1971 and 2005. Their median age has risen from 44 years to 60 years. This trend of ageing and diminishment is continuing. An increasing number of priests and seminarians are now coming from other countries to minister in Australia. In 1969, there were 546 seminarians in training. In 2005, that figure had dropped to 141. There are still over 6000 religious sisters and 1000 religious brothers, but with very few new vocations.

Every diocese and most religious orders have taken the opportunity of 2008 World Youth Day to prepare new programs for young Catholics. The World Values Survey conducted between 1997 and 2001 found that whereas only 7% of young Americans did not believe in God, 20% of young Australians did not believe. The same survey found that 31% of West German youth did not believe, and 70% of East German youth were non-believers. A 2007 comprehensive national study of generation Y (those aged 13-24 years) has revealed that 51% of these young Australians believe in God, 32% are unsure, and 17% do not believe. 46% of Generation Y are Christian and surprisingly the measures of their belief and practice hardly differ from their Baby-Boomer parents who are still Christian. One significant change is that young women are now no more religious than young men on many measurable indicators. 13% of Australian young people claim that only one religion is true. 31% of them believe in reincarnation, and 24% in astrology.

At Alice Springs in the centre of Australia, John Paul II met with Aboriginal Australians in 1986 and said:

The Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.

In 1992, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) was established. Through NATSICC, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have been assured greater involvement and greater representation in national church events and activities. NATSICC has ensured high profile indigenous participation in World Youth Day. Indigenous church leaders not only lead their local worshipping community with the assistance of visiting priests. They also organise the Church's local indigenous initiatives and co-ordinate national Church responses to indigenous issues.

The Pope's statement about Aboriginal involvement in the life of the church was a radical challenge. The Australian church mindset had long been one of wonderment about how much more "we", the non-Aborigines, would need to give "them", the Aborigines. Now the question has become how much the rest of us would receive, and receive joyfully, from Aboriginal and Islander Catholics. This question has stood as a haunting refrain for those many parishes which do not have many, if any, Aborigines in their pews, and for those Catholic schools which have fewer Aborigines per capita than the State schools in their areas.

With the reducing number of priests and religious, dioceses have reduced their commitment to the provision of full time chaplains to Aboriginal communities. There are now a handful of Aboriginal deacons. But the celibacy requirement for Catholic priests militates against young Aboriginal men becoming priests. At Alice Springs, John Paul II addressed the major theological challenge of contemporary evangelisation across the cultural divide:

That Gospel now invites you to become, through and through, Aboriginal Christians. It meets your deepest desires. You do not have to be people divided into two parts, as though an Aboriginal had to borrow the faith and life of Christianity, like a hat or a pair of shoes, from someone else who owns them. Jesus calls you to accept his words and his values into your own culture. To develop in this way will make you more than ever truly Aboriginal.

The hunger in the contemporary Australian church for spirituality which is grounded in the land and which is attentive to the fullness of human history in this part of the world has often been sated by those Aboriginal Christians who have shared their art, their prayer life, and their lives with other Australians. In the last twenty years, many Aboriginal and Islander Catholics have visited parishes to "tell their story" of faith.

The abiding grace of John Paul II's 1986 speech is incarnated in those words in which he revered the Aboriginal identification with country and the daily Aboriginal reality of suffering and marginalisation. With papal reverence, he touched the deep Aboriginal sense of belonging, embracing the hope in their suffering. He conceded in the spoken word and by his charismatic presence that the Dreaming is real, sacramental and eternal. He retold the story of Genesis in Aboriginal voice. He relayed the calls of the post-exilic prophets to the contemporary powerbrokers and poor of Australia. He spoke poetically of things he knew not, knowing that those listening had endured the flames:

If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush-fire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn. The time for this rebirth is now!

The Australian Church has been enduring its own bush-fire, coming to terms with sexual abuse by clergy and religious. The hierarchy responded more promptly in Australia than in most other countries. A special protocol, "Towards Healing," was established. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson was one of the key architects of the protocol. He retired early in 2004 and last year published his book, "Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus". Most of his fellow bishops were displeased and published a statement warning Catholics about the book. They chose not to detail their objections but rather to state in the lead up to World Youth Day:

We are grateful for the contribution Bishop Robinson has made to the life of the Church. We are deeply indebted to him for his years of effort to bring help and healing to those who have suffered sexual abuse and for what he has done to establish protocols of professional standards for Church personnel in this area. In responding to the issues raised in the book, we do not question his good faith. However, people have a right to know clearly what the Catholic Church believes and teaches, and the Bishops have a corresponding duty to set this forth, as we seek to do in this statement.

After correspondence and conversation with Bishop Robinson, it is clear that doctrinal difficulties remain. Central to these is a questioning of the authority of the Catholic Church to teach the truth definitively. In Saint John's Gospel, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to the disciples in order to lead them into the fullness of the truth (cf. John 16:13). It is Catholic teaching that the Church has been endowed with this gift of truth. The book's questioning of the authority of the Church is connected to Bishop Robinson's uncertainty about the knowledge and authority of Christ himself.

Many educated Catholics were disappointed that the bishops did not commission competent theologians to critique the book and then publish detailed objections thereby helping them "to know clearly what the Catholic Church believes and teaches".

The controversy has evoked memories of the 1998 statement of conclusions published after the meeting of Australian Bishops and the Prefects and Secretaries of six dicasteries of the Roman Curia. The statement, published in Rome before the bishops had returned home to explain, noted a crisis of faith "manifested in Australia by the rise in the number of people with no religion and the decline in church practice. The tolerance characteristic of Australian society naturally affects the Church also. While it has many positive elements, tolerance of and openness to all opinions and perspectives on the truth can lead to indifference, to the acceptance of any opinion or activity as long as it does not impact adversely on other people."

One prominent Australian Catholic layman, philosopher Max Charlesworth who had served as a consultant to the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Believers has just published a pamphlet *A Democratic Church: Reforming the Values and Institutions of the Catholic Church*. He asks "whether the faithful have a right to be consulted by their bishops on issues such as the shortage of priests, the possibility of women priests, the education of the clergy, appropriate measures to protect members of the Church from paedophile priests, the position of divorced Catholics, Catholic schools, the sponsorship of hugely expensive 'World Youth' manifestations? At present, letters to Roman authorities and Australian bishops about such matters go largely unanswered."

In the midst of this disillusionment, mass attendance and participation in the sacraments has declined. Only 15.3% of Australian Catholics now attend mass regularly. Whatever of the grim statistics and the contemporary challenges for the Australian Church, a priest is able to reflect on the abiding grace of church life and participation. It is at the altar and in the enjoyment of the sacraments that the Australian Church continues to find life and relevance. Liturgy and sacrament are still transformative of the most ordinary lives and of the most extraordinary moments.

In the most routine parish daily mass, there is a deep silence as the priest utters the words, "This is the cup of my blood....It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven". From the sanctuary, the priest can behold the scattered faithful who are at

that moment full of faith. When you are the priest, you know some of the stories behind the reverential postures before you. The abiding faith of these people sustains you in your own struggle for faith in a God who is with us and who cares enough to respond to our prayers, in blood.

Then we pray for peace. The silence before the prayer formula is wide enough to hold all the battles of our world and the struggles which each worshipper brings to the altar that day. As priest you see this, day in and day out, often having privileged access to those struggles.

Then come the special moments of baptisms, weddings and funerals when the churching ones are like leaven in the loaf, carrying the structure of the liturgy, while the unchurched, through their awkwardness and unfamiliarity with the forms and words, look to you to carry it through. And you look back to them to know what and who we celebrate on this occasion. It is special to be the vested one who embodies the connection between the citizens of an unchurched world wondering if there is anything more than ritual to mark the passage of life, love and death, and the parishioners of a worldly church which dares to offer the sacrament of Jesus to all comers, in season and out of season. This is the daily life of the Australian Church which is a very blessed place to be, despite the challenges of the secular, materialistic and utilitarian society and the shortcomings of a Church still finding a way to be truly Catholic and truly Australian. The Aboriginal welcome to country, and the tolerance and hospitality of the Australian Church and people will be the distinctive attributes for the World Youth Day pilgrims who come to participate in an event even grander and more friendly than the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

2. Callings by John O'Donoghue

Someone asked me recently; "What is it that haunts you?" I said: "I can tell you exactly; it is the sense of time slipping through my fingers like fine sand. And there is nothing I can do to slow it." One of the Psalms prays: 'O Lord, help me to see the shortness of life that I may gain wisdom of heart.' As we get older, time seems to speed up. The sense of transience haunts nearly every heart. You feel that you could suddenly arrive at your last day incredulous that that was it; it was all over.

From time immemorial it has been one of the deepest longings of the human heart to strain against the erosion of one's life, to learn a way of living and being that manages to find some stable ground within time, a place from where something eternal can be harvested from our disappearance. This is what all art strives for; the creation of a living permanence. It is what we are secretly doing when we become parents: endeavouring to maintain our continuity beyond our own ending. The harvesting of transience is what we also are attempting in choosing the form of life we live. When we arrive on earth, we are provided with no map for our life-journey. Only gradually, as our identify forms and we get an inkling of who we are, do possibilities begin to emerge that call us. It is one of the weightiest decisions: to decide what to do with your life. The challenge is to find a way of life that will be in harmony with your gifts and needs.

Behind each face there is a unique world that no one else can see. This is the mystery of individuality. The shape of each soul is different. No one else feels your life the way you do. No one else sees or hears the world as you do. The creation of the individual is a divine masterpiece. We were dreamed for a long time before we were born. Our souls, minds and hearts were fashioned in the divine imagination. Such care and attention went into the creation of each person. Given the uniqueness of each of us, it should not be surprising that one of the greatest challenges is to inhabit our own individuality and to discover which life-form best expresses it.

The great law of life is: be yourself. Though this axiom sounds simple, it is often a difficult task. To be yourself, you have to learn how to become who you were dreamed to be. Each person has a unique destiny. To be born is to be chosen. There is something special that each of us has to do in the world. If someone else could do it, they would be here and not us. One of the fascinating questions is to decipher what one's destiny is. At the heart of each destiny is hidden a unique life-calling. What is it you are called to do? In old-fashioned language: what is your vocation in life?

For some people, the question of their calling is very difficult to decipher; for others, it follows from an early intuition and practically unfolds of its own accord. For some, it can be the singular and exclusive direction their life takes; for others, it can change and follow new directions. Again, some people never seem to find what they are called to do; this can burden them with a continual restlessness and dissatisfaction. When you find what you are called to do, your life takes on a focus and purpose. You come into rhythm with the deeper longing of your heart. The notion of vocation is interesting and rich. It suggests that there is a special form of life that one is called to; to follow this is the way to realize one's destiny. Following one's vocation ensures that what you choose to do finds itself in harmony with your inner nature. It also means that this is the optimum way to unfold and develop whatever gifts one has. A vocation does not clear before you a smooth path through difficulties. Having a sense of one's vocation does not in any way relieve one of the travail and turbulence of being human. Indeed, being true to one's vocation can often require a level of generosity and risk that will cause great suffering, for more often than not there is no surge of light to clarify direction; the light on offer is only enough to guide the next step.

The nature of the calling can change over time, taking a person down pathways never anticipated. The calling opens new territories within the heart; this in turn deepens the calling itself. The faces of the calling change; what at the beginning seemed simple and clear can become ambivalent and complex as it unfolds. To develop a heart that is generous and equal to this complexity is the continual challenge of growth. This is the creative tension that dwells at the heart of vocation. One is urged and coaxed beyond the pale regions into rich territories of risk and promise.

It is devastating to feel trapped in a form of life where you feel utterly misplaced and all your effort is laboured; everything you do is done against the grain. You take no joy or pleasure in what you do and your heart is haunted by alternative lives you will never have. When you feel like this, it can make for a resentful and bitter life – a life where you are neither seen nor understood for much of the time – and your gifts remain locked away, never to emerge. It is clearly time to change what you are doing; perhaps sacrifice the familiar in order to find your true calling. Such change can utterly transform your life.

It is such a relief and joy to find the calling that expresses and incarnates your spirit. When you find that you are doing what you love, what you were brought here to do, it makes for a rich and contented life. You have come into rhythm with your longing. Your work and action emerge naturally; you don't have to force yourself. Your energy is immediate. Your passion is clear and creative. A new calling can open the door into the house of vision and belonging. You feel at home in your life, heart and hearth at one.