

## **PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT: PATHWAYS TO A JUST SOCIETY**

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The role of the Catholic welfare sector has long been important not just for the people it serves or the members of its many organisations, but for the Catholic Church as a whole. For the Catholic social service agencies directly embody a central mission of Christians to care for the disadvantaged and suffering. Few words of Christ resonate more profoundly in our beings than his exhortation to feed the hungry and care for those in distress. 'As long as you did this to the least of my brethren, you did it for me.'

Unfortunately however, the need for the services of our agencies is not diminishing, and many if not most agencies are stretched to meet the demands on them. What has made recent years even more difficult comes from several directions.

First, there has been a dramatic shift in government philosophy to endorse what in Australia has been loosely called 'Economic Rationalism', but is referred to overseas as neoliberalism. As you know, this is the underlying philosophy, closely patterned on views developed in the United States, which is driving the changes in so-called 'welfare reform' in Australia.

Secondly, there has been a crisis of leadership in the Catholic Church, particularly because of the sexual abuse scandals. This has not only consumed a great deal of the bishops' time, preventing them from attending to other urgent issues, but has generated a sense of dismay and outrage in the wider community. The credibility of Church authorities has been damaged, and is not helped by sometimes hostile media.

Thirdly, our agencies have developed out of the Catholic tradition with a strong sense of identity and mission nurtured by that tradition. Over time, however, more members of our agencies have joined us from other Christian, and even non-Christian traditions, or have no specific religious allegiance. How do we develop our Catholic identity in a way which is genuinely inclusive of other religious traditions but at the same time respectful of differences? How do we articulate our core values in a way that members of other religious traditions can comfortably embrace without sacrificing key aspects of our identity?

In short, while the context today has become difficult, I believe we must set our own agenda and not let it be set for us. How then can we act less reactively and more creatively? I would like to organise my thoughts under two key words, as banner headlines almost: *participation*, and *engagement*.

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### **Leadership through participation**

The leadership crisis in the Church, I believe, is not simply a result of the sexual abuse crisis, though it has been aggravated by it. For historical reasons, the Catholic Church had long developed a pattern of leadership concentrated in the clergy, and particularly the bishops, in a somewhat authoritarian religious culture.

However, with the changes in modern culture and the increasing education of lay people, we have been outgrowing these cultural patterns. Especially since the Second Vatican Council ended in 1965, the Church has recognised the *right to participate* as a key new principle in its social teaching, and been advocating greater participation even in the running of the Church. Though the right to participate has been clearly articulated in Church documents, we still have to develop ways to embody it in Church practice.

Nevertheless, there has been a quiet revolution in the Church. Without too much fuss and bother, consider how much of the day-to-day running even in many parishes, not to mention schools and health care, is now in the hands of lay people. Almost without us noticing it, lay people have been exercising key leadership roles in all these various organisations, as administrators, in the public forum, as policy advisors etc.

In point of fact, the leadership in so many fields of Catholic endeavour has been assumed by lay people. This is entirely appropriate, of course, not just because these lay people possess the requisite professional expertise, but it reflects the recognition of the right of increased lay participation in Church organisations.

It is important that we realise how historic and decisive is this shift. There is no going back to a past pattern even if we wanted to. It requires, of course, good, collaborative relationships with the bishops as the pre-eminent religious leaders in the Catholic Church. And the bishops, for their part, have been fostering this leadership in Catholic organisations. Yet we are breaking new ground here, and still searching for better structures of participation so that our Church leadership and welfare agencies can closely coordinate their service delivery, public advocacy and policy development.

In his recent book, *A Church Adrift: the Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), Peter Steinfels has given a perceptive overview of how such changes are reshaping the US Church, including its educational, health care and welfare agencies. His final chapter on leadership depicts the Church still struggling to negotiate this historic period of transition.

He does not see a return to the clericalised pattern of the past as a solution to our current difficulties, as it would mean a retreat from the great overarching issues of our time, into a sectarian ghetto, isolated and devotional in style, catering to a much smaller assembly of devotees.

As Cardinal Walter Kasper said in an address, ‘The Future of Christianity’, during his recent visit to Australia, ‘a retreat to the ghetto is no longer possible... we can only go forward, not backwards.’ ‘Thus Church leadership must look for a means of communication, consensus building and reception, and for participation – as much as possible – of all believers. There should be expression of public opinion, open

discussion and debate in the Church.’ Kasper is President of the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, and a senior figure in Rome.

### **Engagement**

The second key word for the Church today is *engagement*, meaning engaging with the great issues in a constructive conversation with our contemporaries. The late US Cardinal Joseph Bernardin highlighted this word, ‘engagement’, as a key one for the Church’s new relationship with the world and society. Engagement is not separation, but it implies a rightful autonomy of the Church and the secular world in relationship with each other. Engagement recognises that the Church’s role is not purely a private one, but also public. Nor does the Church simply help shape the values and consciousness of its adherents, while being faithful to its essential vision, it also adapts with the changes in mentalities and cultures in a discourse that continues to influence the historical narrative of our culture.

At the same time, Bernardin recognised that not everyone can be expected to share our religious convictions, and our style of engagement must respect their convictions. Hence, he wrote, we should be ‘ascetic in our use of explicitly religious appeals’, and must ‘accept the responsibility of making our religiously grounded convictions intelligible to those who do not share the faith that yields these convictions.’

Our conversation should always be civil. ‘Vigorous pursuit of our deepest convictions – even those involving life and death – should not involve questioning the motives of others, or their character’. We should prize a reputation for ‘fairness, respect, restraint and a search for common ground among contending positions.’<sup>1</sup>

In short, our conversation should be based on civility, respect for different views conscientiously held, and a reasoned discourse in a common search to promote the wellbeing of everyone.

Such a conversation is not helped, of course, by the occasional views of some far-off minor Church official who violates these sensibilities, speaking with overstatement or lack of awareness of cultural differences, and contravening the principle of subsidiarity – that decisions should not be made at a higher level of organisation than is necessary. Such statements can be embarrassing and exasperating if they concern issues where our agencies have considerable expertise, and may make the Church look unreasonable or ridiculous in the media. Hopefully our conversations within our agencies are of such a quality as to manage any such misadventures sensitively. Church organisations are not spared the human foibles of its members.

You might reply that it is self-evident that the Church should be engaged with such a conversation about our common future. But it is worth recalling that the Catholic Church in particular has emerged from a long period of *disengagement*, in some senses, from contemporary secular developments.

There are many reasons why this culture of disengagement developed, but they are too complex to explore here. Suffice it to recall the ‘ghetto’ style of the Church, sometimes called the ‘fortress Church’, which took a resolutely counter-cultural stance, with its

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, ‘The Public Life and Witness of the Church’, in Thomas Massaro and Thomas A Shannon (eds). *American Catholic Social Teaching* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

Counter-Reformation theology. Sociologists call this ‘reaction formation’, when in a sectarian age the Church adopted these defence strategies against hostile political and cultural forces. These strategies had their strengths, maintaining high levels of religious observance and identity. But the weakness was that they were not able to influence significantly the world beyond the sharp religious boundaries of the Church.

Yet it is obvious that despite the ghetto strategy, the Church still developed other responses, particularly in the areas of social welfare, and offered services on a non-confessional basis. The Gospel, of course, demanded it.

Nevertheless, it is worth remembering how profound was the change the Second Vatican Council inaugurated. The opening words of the great 1965 document, ‘The Church in the Modern World’, insisted on a fresh engagement with the contemporary world:

‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.’

Some of you may recall what a tour de force that document was at the time. Re-reading it recently, I was surprised again by its immense power, and deeply moved by how it touched our deepest yearnings for justice and freedom. I was amazed at how fresh and contemporary it was, even after the passage of nearly 40 years. I could not help feeling that this document is more captivating than even the best of the social encyclicals, and I resolved to use it once more for my prayer and meditations.

Here was sketched our ambitious program for engagement with the world, springing from an inspiring Christian vision of what it means to be human, of our responsibilities to one another, and how we might transform the whole world to sustain the flourishing of all human beings.

The document encouraged our engagement with issues supporting family life, the development of culture, socio-economic life – notably to develop an ethic by which economy serves everyone and distributes resources and opportunities more fairly. Particularly did the document direct attention to the problems of the developing world, and called for action in areas of international security; war, peace and disarmament; and to build a stronger system of international governance.

The whole document is a *manifesto of engagement* with our contemporary world. We could not do better than to make it a constant bedside companion, giving a sharp contemporary focus to how we should live the Gospel today. But I wonder how many younger Catholics have read it, or even heard of it.

Pope John Paul II, in his 2001 letter *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, echoed this plea to exercise our social responsibility in terms of ‘shaping history’: ‘Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God’s plan’ (par. 33).

In the Church as a whole, we are still struggling to reorient ourselves with a renewed sense of engagement. We have not yet overcome a deeply dualist influence in our theology, which often privileged an internal or private religiosity over social action, instead of seeing our social responsibility as integral to our response to God.

We have a long way to go yet before we are articulate and informed enough to play our full part in the big-picture debates, as over war and peace. For instance, why were we so slow to speak as a Church in Australia against the military intervention in Iraq, despite the strong stand of the Pope and bishops' conferences around the world?

An even greater question looms over the direction of globalisation and the fate of much of the developing world. Despite the efforts by the schools, Caritas and social justice agencies, and the strong lead given by the Vatican, we are practically speechless about such issues in Australia. Should we not have something to say about the recent collapse of the trade negotiations at Cancun in Mexico, the effects of which may cost the lives of many people, perhaps even millions? Why are we not mounting a national campaign to marshal support for the UN Millennium Goals to minimise hunger and the worst forms of poverty?

These issues do not directly concern the Catholic welfare agencies of course. Nevertheless, this call for a new engagement should reinforce the Church's concern and interest in the work of our agencies. It also supports our efforts to focus not just on immediate service provision, necessary as it is, but to pay close attention to the wider social context and suggest policy interventions to obviate the need arising for your services in the first place.

What do we need to do to undertake this engagement more effectively? To stimulate our conversation I would like to suggest some possible responses.

First how might we improve the extent of our *research* about our service provision and the needs we are trying to meet? Some agencies have made significant research contributions and are continuing to do so, and the Catholic Social Welfare Commission itself produced a valuable series of publications on key issues. Are we doing enough of our own research, and how can we draw on the work of others?

Secondly, I do not think we have done enough serious work in *developing our social philosophy*. This is a major deficiency since the changes in government welfare policy are being driven in considerable part by the neoliberal philosophy imported from the USA. If we are to play our proper role in helping shape welfare policy in Australia, we must clearly identify and critique the philosophical assumptions behind the 'welfare reforms', and if necessary be able to contest them in the public forum.

Fortunately, we have an immensely rich tradition of social philosophy to draw on in the Catholic tradition, but it is little developed in this country. The Catholic tradition offers a reasoned discourse about social justice, equity in distribution, and of the common good, all supporting a communitarian alternative to the competitive individualism of neoliberalism. It is also more attuned to our Australian sense of egalitarianism and a 'fair go'.

I am not suggesting that we try to resurrect an antiquarian philosophy, but to critique and develop our tradition of thought in a fully contemporary way, in lively debate with

other philosophies. It must also be done in a fully ecumenical way. Indeed one of the most encouraging developments in recent years has been the lively conversation that has sprung up not just among the Christian traditions, but with secular contemporaries as well, and increasingly with members of other religious traditions. Out of this conversation we might hope for a new consensus to emerge in support of social justice and human rights worldwide. Again it is an historic moment.

For us to be more closely involved in this conversation, I would suggest that the Catholic welfare sector as a whole needs more consciously to develop its resources, by

- fostering closer links with philosophical centres, theological colleges and universities,
- sponsoring research on key topics, perhaps through industry partnerships,
- funding scholarships and prizes for work in this area,
- developing publications and forums for debate,
- and hopefully opening up career paths for lay people with these skills and expertise.

Once we would have looked to clergy and bishops to provide leadership in these areas. Undoubtedly some will. But in an increasingly sophisticated and complex world, I think it is time for us more vigorously to foster lay leadership in this area too. We need to provide a culture and context for many more *lay 'public intellectuals'*.

I spoke earlier of a 'conversation' with our culture. I like the word 'conversation'. It allows respect for differing views, and avoids any perception of a finger-wagging moralism that in the public forum only invites ridicule. 'Conversation' also implies a reasoned discussion, based on evidence, experience and critical evaluation. It allows room for differing religious and philosophical traditions, encouraging openness and transparency, as well as an ability to look at matters through the eyes of others.

In short, a number of key questions arise for us: how might we find better ways of participation within our agencies and a leadership style that supports these? And how can we develop our resources to engage more fruitfully with the issues confronting us now?