

REFORMING OUR PARISHES

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Intense discussion about reform in the Catholic Church has accompanied the first weeks of Pope Francis' pontificate and finds additional impetus here in Australia with the commencement of a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

There are varying opinions as to what 'reform in the Church' ought to look like, about the priorities that should occupy the Church's present and future energies and the limits or extent of change. Some interpret ecclesial reform as a return to a past condition or purer ideal; others conceive of reform as a development of what already exists; while yet others promote versions of reform which near on 'revolution', a movement toward a future altogether new with scant connection with what went before.

The variety of responses to the issue of reform can be expected because the question of change always engages a particular understanding of the Church's identity. Despite developments in the Church's self-understanding at the Second Vatican Council, including the retrieval of the Church's identity as mystery-sacrament and its eschatological character as 'pilgrim', it is clear that a rather juridical, one-dimensional and institutional view of the Church remains pervasive. Fifty years after the Council, the idea of the Church as sacrament, an organism 'unfolding in history and already breathing within the eternal', is yet to be fully appropriated by clergy and laity. The consequence is that contemporary talk of reform usually centres on ecclesial structures and not very much else.

As said before, this focus on hierarchy is understandable to the extent that failures in Church governance and moral leadership stand at the heart of the Church's present woes. However, an exclusive focus on structure can be rather naïve in that it assumes that change needs only take place in the 'head' and not in the 'body' of the faithful. What ultimately sustains the Church's holiness and mission is not good administration and policy, as essential as these are, but the conversion of disciples, a common calling that makes a demand on each and every member of the communion.

Indeed, reform that restricts itself to the overhaul or remodelling of bureaucracies 'out there' can fast develop into a means of evading self-reflection closer to home, including a neglect of the ordinary Catholic parish. It is the parish, after all, which remains the primary experience of the Church's communion for most Catholics and is the surely the most immediate opportunity for the new evangelisation. For many, the parish *is* Church and so these communities warrant attention on the question of reform.

The 2006 National Count of Attendance revealed that just 13.8% of Australia's Catholic population attended a weekend Mass and showed a disproportionate number of women and older attenders among these.

The 2011 figures are expected to be released any day now. We are unlikely to see any improvement in Mass attendance though the good news may be that we have at last ‘bottomed out’ and arrived at the so-called ‘faithful remnant’ that sustains our Church in and out of season. In a word, the data may tell us that things can only get better.

While decline in parish participation can be partly attributed to clericalism and maladministration, it can also be ascribed to a weakening of the ecclesial fabric within parish community itself and to stagnation in the *imagination* of what such communities can offer its members and those beyond it.

In my experience, one of the underlying factors that seriously impedes the ability of our parishes to achieve their potential is a lack of focus on what is, at bare minimum, a two-fold mission – to facilitate the growth of discipleship and the making of new disciples.

To address the first commitment, our parishes are rarely understood, organised or experienced as *communities of learning* and so are not always organised to enable lasting growth. There is of course the sign value and grace of sacramental encounter as well as the hearing and preaching of the Word, the latter of which varies in quality and focus. Apart from these, however, the primary exposure of most Catholics to the content of faith can be, quite alarmingly, the parish bulletin.

To my knowledge, far too few parishioners engage in any form of spiritual reading outside the context of liturgy and while many lay men and women are experts in their own professions and fields of study they may never read a work of Christian theology in any given year. Without practical initiatives to cultivate an adult, learned faith, one cannot expect an increase in commitment or passionate outreach to others.

To grow in discipleship also means to grow in prayer. However, once again, we find few opportunities in parishes where the ways of prayer are actively taught and can be learned. If our parishes and homes are to be ‘schools of prayer’, a notion vigorously promoted by John Paul II, then we need to recognise that many, including ourselves, ‘do not know how to pray as we ought’ (Rom. 8:26). Learning to pray, as even the first disciples of Jesus did, presupposes effort on the part of the faithful and witness and teachers of prayer in each of our local communities.

Taken as a whole, parishes can often *assume* their people are growing in faith and so be occupied with maintaining a fixed schedule of groups and activities while the reality may be that no growth is actually taking place. If communities are growing the faith of their people, their relationship with Christ and his body, the Church, then one could reasonably expect to find evidence of such growth.

Indicators of parish growth would include an overflow of laypeople capable and trained for ecclesial ministry, the growth of missionary outreach including proclamation, service and faith-based advocacy for justice in the wider community, increasing numbers of young people and adults seeking to be baptised into the life of Christ and his ecclesial body, and our

existing disciples maturing every year in biblical literacy and in their familiarity with tradition.

Without attention to the effectiveness of our parishes in nurturing this kind of adult faith, and without taking seriously the changing demographics and emerging needs in our midst, it is possible that our parishes are offering programs and activities for people that no longer exist. Organisational memory can be a gift, reminding a parish of its identity and the best of its traditions. However, such memories can also be a liability and stifle growth if they are allowed to slip into nostalgia for parish practices that were helpful in quite a different time for altogether different people.

It is clear that if our parishes are truly growing the faith of their disciples, they will soon begin to attract more disciples into its communal life in Christ. When disciples experience growth they will go on to become better witnesses and attract others to the same faith that they have received and lived. Evangelised disciples, then, are the baseline for any evangelising Church.

While Church reform must touch upon the universal structures that shape, organise and facilitate the life of a universal Church, it must also challenge and find practical expression in the life of our local communities, including our Catholic parishes. Without that change, talk of reform can tend to remain only at the level of abstraction and blunt the radical edge of conversion and missionary discipleship that stand at the heart of the Gospel.