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Our Say – Our family conversation

As the Second Vatican Council drew to a close at the end of 1965, eleven of the final sixteen documents were promulgated. Among these, as we have noted in this publication already, was the visionary document, *Gaudium et Spes*. Another was *Nostra Aetate* (“Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions”). If *Gaudium et Spes* committed the Catholic Church to conversation with all people of good will, *Nostra Aetate* was quite specific in challenging us to develop an ongoing conversation with our sisters and brothers from other than Christian religious traditions. (*Unitatis Redintegratio* [“Decree on Ecumenism”], promulgated on November 21 1964, had already challenged us to seek ongoing conversation with other Christians.)

It is probably fair to say that, in Catholic circles, the commitment to conversation focuses more on people who are not Catholics than those who are. We are in

danger of forgetting that “all people of good will” includes other Catholics.

A recent edition of *The Tablet* noted the meeting of hundreds of theologians in Rome to mark the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. *The Tablet* also noted another meeting in Rome about the same time, the secret and surprising meeting between Pope Benedict and the estranged Fr Hans Küng:

The meeting with Professor Küng highlights the urgent need for a continuing conversation not just with other Christian denominations and other faiths, but within Catholicism itself. (*The Tablet*, October 1 2005, 1.)

Pope Paul VI, in his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 1964), heralded the spirit and vision of *Gaudium et Spes* when he said our conversation

should be potentially universal, i.e., all-embracing and capable of including all, excepting only one who would either absolutely

reject it or insincerely pretend to accept it. (#76) Pope Paul then goes on to highlight the importance of the conversation within the Catholic Church:

It is our ardent desire that this conversation with our own children should be full of faith, of charity, of good works, should be intimate and familiar. We would have it responsive to all truth and virtue and to all the realities of our doctrinal and spiritual inheritance. Sincere and sensitive in genuine spirituality, ever ready to give ear to the manifold voice of the contemporary world, ever more capable of making Catholics truly good people, men and women wise, free, serene and strong; that is what we earnestly desire our family conversation to be. (#113)

It is strange that we might be more explicit about, and more dedicated to, conversation with those outside the Catholic tradition than those within it. The better course is not to reverse that order, but rather, to seek positive relationships and good conversation with all, even other Catholics. ■

This journal is one of the works of
Catalyst for Renewal Incorporated.

THE HUMAN FACE

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The following is its Mission Statement:

We are believers who are attempting to establish a forum for conversation within the Catholic Church of Australia. Our aim is to prompt open exchanges among the community of believers, mindful of the diversity of expression of faith in contemporary Australia. This springs explicitly from the spirit of Pope John XXIII and Vatican II: "Let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case". (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.92)

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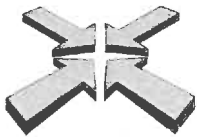
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The Four Arrows and the Cross symbolise diversity giving rise to communion in and through the Paschal Mystery. Those who are diverse by nature and culture, in and through Christ find life-giving unity.

Catalyst for Renewal Incorporated publishes *The Mix* as one of its forums for conversation. All reasonable expressions of opinion relevant to the renewal of the Church are welcome. The Editor reserves the right not to publish a submitted text. Names must be supplied though, for good reason, the Editor may publish a submitted text without the writer's name being made public. Not all the opinions expressed in *The Mix* are those of Catalyst for Renewal Incorporated.

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My name is Daniel Wooi-Kheong Ang and I was born at Blacktown Hospital in 1979. 'Wooi-Kheong' means 'great and strong' though this name has yet to yield any special advantages. My father, Kheong Heng Ang, and my mother, Kah Chin Chong, met at a community dance hall in Taiping, Malaysia, in 1964 and came from Chinese families with Buddhist and Taoist roots (my maternal grandparents later converted to Christianity). While small red shrines, filled with oranges and candles, were found in almost every home, my parents did not take up the religious practice of their parents. Instead, like many, their energies were directed towards school and work. These were the means of escaping the poverty of Taiping and discovering new opportunities and a new life abroad. My parents migrated to London in 1966, the city where they lived for over ten years and where my older brother, Desmond, was born. The move to Australia came in October of 1975, my father noting in his small pocket diary 'New life starts today'.

I grew up in the suburb of Toongabbie, in Vianney Crescent, before we moved to nearby Kings Langley. My fondest childhood memories include splashing around in a small tarpaulin pool that Mum would fill under our carport. Both Desmond and I were sent to the local state primary school with our mother's one great insistence being that we were to play with children of all nationalities, without exception. Though religion was never spoken of, simple encouragements such as these undoubtedly nourished us both towards openness without fear, to possibilities beyond our preferences. I was given my first Bible in grade four, as a prize from my scripture teacher for memorising the Ten Commandments. I brought it home, proudly showed it off to my parents and put it on the book shelf where it remained, untouched, for more than a decade.

I attended Baulkham Hills High School and as I grew into my adolescent years conveniently discovered an interest in Buddhism as a means of avoiding scripture classes each Thursday morning. Of course, I knew little of Buddhism at the time except that it had some place in my family's history. At the very least, it seemed the natural path to follow if I ever came to religious faith. I had entertained the idea of religion at various points but ultimately judged it to be impractical and even archaic. In the final years of high school I suffered from depression, brought on by habitual drug use and a chaotic lifestyle that continued well into university. It was, in reality, the symptom of a much deeper hunger.

It was in 1999, at the baptism of a close friend, that I first discovered the beauty and sacredness of the Mass. It has been a discovery that has continued to unfold over the years. My initial cynicism towards the seemingly moralistic face of Christianity was overturned by an experience of deepening Mystery. The ritual and symbolism of the Mass revealed to me the intimate presence of a loving God.

It was a few days later, while driving home in the early morning, that I stopped my car and, in tears, prayed for the first time. The words were: 'Thank you for waiting so long.' Too afraid to announce this change to my family, I informed them of my decision only the day before I was baptised at St Bernadette's Parish, Castle Hill, by Fr David Maguire. While they were unable to attend, it was also a time of change for my parents as I have since seen them grow in their openness to faith through conversation and a sharing of life-long questions.

Soon after my baptism, I left for Canada on a university exchange program and then returned to complete my Bachelor of Arts and Commerce degrees. I started work in the advertising industry as a media buyer and also became involved in parish youth ministry. I became increasingly unsettled in my career.

I resigned from my media job after a few months and began looking for work within the Catholic community. I began working for the Daughters of St Paul as the marketing officer for their Internet publishing arm. I have been working there for almost three years now and savour the challenge of bringing marketing and faith together in creative and life-giving ways.

I am currently completing a Masters of Arts in Theology at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and have a great interest in the works of Thomas Merton. I live in deep gratitude to my family and friends, for their love, inspiration and forgiveness, and look forward to the path that lies ahead.



Daniel Ang

Your Say – Letters from readers

Gary Townsend, Pat O'Connell and Adrian Bellemore

GARY TOWNSEND
(Mayfield, NSW)

I have just read the "Your Say" page in *The* of October 2005, and the Editor's response. I could be too simple, but wouldn't Michael Whelan, the etymologist, give short shrift to: 'con / science' not having 'groupy' notions.

I reckon Adrian Bellemore's letter could have begun with his quote from Keenan, and then developed the notion of 'prudence.' Peter Coleman's essay tends to impress me as fitting conscience into an ideology. I would also refer him to Fr Ed Campion's in the previous *Mix*. (See "The Human Face" and Ed's thoughts on the Church being for 'failures'). How Peter Coleman can separate Christ and the Church (last sentence) is beyond me.

Finally, my thoughts turn to Hebrew and Aboriginal notions of social obligation. ■

PAT O'CONNELL
(Melville WA)

I read Michael Costigan's excellent article "*Gaudium et Spes is forty years young*" in the October MIX and I thought I should read the document to find out if it warranted Michael's positive comments.

I dusted off my 1967 "*Documents of Ican IP*" edited by Walter M Abbott. The pages have yellowed somewhat and the book's spine has been broken in one or two places where I had obviously paid more attention to some documents than others.

The first thing that struck me was surprise that this document was never on the Council's original agenda. To my mind the way in which the Catholic Church relates to the world at large is a fundamental issue that the Church has been grappling with for centuries. Today that struggle is even more relevant and important.

While *Gaudium et Spes* is evidence of an outward looking Church demonstrating understanding of the human condition, when the Church is actually confronted with the human condition and has to deal with the reality of contraception, abortion, divorce, homosexuality and sexual abuse, it struggles with these manifestations of our humanity and turns inward, more often than not retreating behind the safe, legalistic inflexibility of Canon Law (drafted by very human people).

I agree with Michael's claim that "... *the document in its final form is so magnificently positive*". I would go further and say that, in some places, it is also magnificently idealistic. Consider for example the following statements:

The distribution of goods should be directed toward providing employment and sufficient income for the people of today and of the future. (#70)

If an economic order is to be created which is genuine and universal, there must be an abolition of excessive desire for profit, nationalistic pretensions, the lust for political domination, militaristic thinking, and intrigues designed to spread and impose ideologies. (#85)

Sadly the gap between the idealism of such statements and the reality of contemporary society 40 years after Vatican II is so wide as to be almost impossible to close. For example, how would the Federal Government's current industrial relations reforms reconcile with the statement, "*Among the basic rights of the human person must be counted the right of freely founding trade unions (#68)*"? Or profit-driven multinational corporations with, "*The fundamental purpose of ... productivity must not be for the mere multiplication of products ... profit or domination ... rather it must be the service of man (#64)*". I can just see Rupert Murdoch adopting those sentiments in a mission statement!

I had high hopes that the recent Synod in Rome would provide an opportunity for the Church to gain a better appreciation of the human condition in the 21st century and concede for example, that there is a place for married priests and women in the clergy. Disappointingly, it would appear that there has been lack of courage to make a difference and provide leadership on these issues. Instead there has been a retreat into the traditional (safe) teaching of the Church on these matters. An opportunity lost!

We read in the Gospels where Jesus challenged the contemporary leaders of the Jewish church about the inflexible legalism of many of their practices. Sadly they missed the point! I wonder what Jesus would make of current Church laws that exclude people who, due to circumstances over which they often have no control, find themselves transgressing the "laws of the Church"? I wonder what He would make of a Church that espouses inclusiveness yet formulates rules and laws that are discriminatory and exclusive? Have we also missed the point?

Jesus understands the human condition. He showed His understanding, for example, with the Jewish woman caught in adultery and about to be stoned to death in accordance with the law. He told her to "*go and sin no more*". The Church would tell us that she deals with people in a similar manner but there are aspects of the human con-

dition that she fails to recognise, understand and acknowledge, often marginalising and excluding those who demonstrate certain behaviour. Sometimes the Church just does not get it!

Gaudium et Spes still has much hope to offer to an increasingly troubled world and to a Church that continues struggling to relate to it. ■

ADRIAN BELLEMORE
(Sydney, NSW)

Thank you for your interest in my article on freedom and conscience and for your question i.e whether there is a need for clarification having regard to what was said on the subject by Thomas Aquinas.

I think not; firstly, my article was intended to deal only with the concept of some that "Freedom of Conscience" means doing what one pleases.

Secondly, I did not deal with the matter raised by Thomas Aquinas as I believed that this was dealt with adequately in your own article and, in particular, with your reference to the words taken from *Gaudium et Spes*, that in the depths of our consciences we detect a law.....which holds us to obedience. Also when quoting from the Official Communication of the Sacred Congregation of the Clergy you made it clear that no one is forced to act contrary to conscience.

Richard Gula in *Moral Discernment* puts it well when he recognises that in conscience '*we meet God's Spirit leading us,*' that the command of conscience comes ultimately from God's authority and that it '*is the place where God speaks to us.*' If this be so, and I believe strongly that it is, then even were the judgment of conscience to be fallacious, nonetheless the commission of any '*sin*' would follow from a failure to follow God's speaking.

And who is to say that the judgment is fallacious or not? If the conscience has been formed appropriately, then any validation of a criticism that the action following on that formation was wrong, could only be founded on 'new' material that was not available to the maker or alternatively, on matters of judgment which would, hopefully, have been properly dealt with in the process of formation and thus could not be made the subject of asserted invalidation.

Where the person is acting unaware of being wrong and is unaware of such wrong, then the error does not make what is wrong right, but neither does the error compromise conscience (See Gula at pp 24-26). ■

Adrian Bellemore, Sydney NSW

Essay – End of the clerical church?

Peter Price

This is the text of a Catalyst Dinner talk, Sydney, October 14, 2005. Peter Price was part-time Pastoral Planning and Lay Leadership Development consultant to the Melbourne Pastoral Planning Office for ten years, until its disbanding at the end of 2004. Peter holds a Masters Degree in Ministry and is working on a PhD Dissertation on Laity in Australia

Good evening and thank you very much for the warm welcome here among you. For me it's a homecoming to the city where I spent the most formative years of my life. They were the years of ferment that led up to and culminated in the Second Vatican Council. I was twenty-one and living in this city in the year the Council began. I am a child of the Council. It was parent of the approach to faith that I live by.

I want to preface what I say this evening using three simple statements by way of context. Firstly, what I share with you comes from a deep love of the Church, for we who are Church here and now, for all those who have created the living memory of the Church and continue to be part of who we are.

Secondly, I want to make it very clear that the leading title of this evening's conversation, "End of a Clerical Church?" is in no way intended to denigrate the priesthood or any person in Holy Orders. The title is aimed at an error, a false way of thinking about the Church, a way that divides the Baptized into two separate classes; a way that dismembers the Body of Christ. A way of thinking that defines membership of the Church by reference to structure rather than mission.

For we are a whole people called and gifted and given to the saving mission of God, not a subject people, for whom our clergy create a church in which we can hide or feel comfortable.

Thirdly, by way of historical context, and as one struggling with our present times, I find it calming to note that the Council of Trent, whose tendrils still cling to our walls, took 150 years to find its ultimate reception among us. I also find it reassuring to read John Henry Cardinal Newman writing after Vatican I, that "after an ecumenical council, there is invariably great confusion." He didn't know the half of it!

It's reassuring because I know that what we are going through presently is transition stuff. It's not an end point, it's a way station. We can expect pendulum swings, conflicts between conservative and radical thinking, we can expect discouragement when the swings don't move in our chosen

direction. We can expect moments of ecstasy. We can expect the snuffing out of the prophets of a different future, and we can expect a continuing struggle in the search for truth.

The job is to hold on; to keep heart; to hold firm to the truth in which we stand, to dialogue with each other, and to trust in the Holy Spirit who is given to us all, to bring us all to wholeness.

And now to the core of our conversation - what question is the title really asking? Is it seeking to define a role for laity in the Church? Is it a question of Clerical versus Lay Church? Frankly, this is a language I would like to see disappear forever from our conversation.

It was four years after Vatican Two (i.e. 1969) when Theologian Richard McBrien was asked by the American Ecclesiastical Review to write an article entitled, "A Theology of the Laity." He opened it with the hope that he would never again see that title, nor ever hear again the question, "What is the role of the Laity in the Church?"

For McBrien, and for me, it is entirely the wrong question. It assumes a clerical church, essentially hierarchical and theoretically capable of existing without the vast mass of the baptized. It assumes that kind of "third person" reality comprised of Papacy, episcopacy, sacraments, deposit of faith, and the real presence of Christ, as defining the Church. To ask what the role of people not on that list is, presumes a subject, secondary and derivative function for them. It suggests a two-class church. So that's not the question here tonight, or for me, evermore.

"Is it a question of Clerical versus Lay Church? ... this is a language I would like to see disappear forever from our conversation."

The real question is, what is the Mission of the Church? The real question is why were we called together as a people? Richard Lennan suggests that we are called, gifted and given to the Mission that existed in the heart of the communal God from all eternity, and has been worked out in human history - that of drawing all being into communion. And if we start with that mission and work backwards, only then can we see how we can become a whole people dedicated to it, and what structures we will

need to enable us to fulfil it. And that's the question: How can we become a whole Church in Mission?

So I am not juxtaposing "clerical" versus "lay." I am juxtaposing "clerical" versus "whole church." A Church where we all, on equal terms, enter into both dialogue and decision, where we collaborate together, using our respective and distinctive gifts of the Spirit in the service of Gods Mission.

It speaks of a Church where we form real community in the image of the "indiscriminate hospitality of god." But this whole church perspective needs significant liberation, because we are hooked on looking at Church from the opposite direction - structure first, and only then asking about what Mission is given to us. It locks us into a monolithic view of Church, rather than allowing, let alone enabling, exploration of its infinite mystery. "Big C" Catholic, but not "small c" catholic, because not everyone is welcome!

Not long before his death, Yves Congar noted that in previous times of crisis, the response of the Church was to reform the clergy. Now, he suggested, the time for that was long gone. The world he said is running headlong into disbelief and it will take all the People of God working together to stem the tide. The task for the Church in these times, he said, is to awaken the priestliness of the whole Church.

I want to suggest this evening, that there are three things standing in the road of this awakening. Three things are standing in the way of becoming a whole Church in mission.

1. The false but clinging dualism between sacred and secular, between grace and nature, stands in the way of people recognizing the sacredness of their lives and the redemptive, paschal nature of their joys and hopes, pains and sorrows.
2. The several hangovers from past sociologies of hierarchy having assumed unchangeable and dogmatic status in the Church, bars real exploration of what hierarchy actually looks like when it sits within a communion for mission rather than a perfect society organized by the ordained for the benefit of the lay.
3. A chronic unwillingness or inability to unleash the full power of the Spirit in

the world, by being open to her voice wherever she speaks outside of the very narrow framework presently recognized as the orthodox channel.

I believe, with Karl Rahner, that there is an innate predisposition towards the divine, the sacred in each of us. Our search for this sacred knows no rest until we rest in its presence, until we find the sacred in ourselves and in the world around us. But ever since the age of monasticism in our church drew the search away from God's creation into spaces declared sacred by human invention, we have come to think of the sacred as separate, apart, transcendent. And we have raised up a distinction between sacred and profane, between grace and nature, a false dualism that has robbed us of our birthright as the pilgrim people of God.

Not even the wonderful Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World has been powerful enough to restore the sacred in all reality to us, so strong and deeply-ingrained is our conviction. The age of monasticism grew because holiness was only to be found apart from the world, and those hardy souls who went monastic made allowances for us poor weaklings who continued on in the evil world, because the way of poverty, chastity and obedience was too much for us. I met a man recently who had not long left a religious order. He told me with a wry smile, "I took a vow of poverty when I entered religious life, and only kept it after I left."

In the wake of being reinvigorated in our search for the sacred by Vatican Two, our most significant movement has been towards the sanctuary, towards ministry. It's not unreasonable. That's where all the symbols of the sacred are presently vested. The language, the mystique and the images – all point to the sanctuary as the place of the sacred. It's the place apart, the holy place.

Please don't misunderstand me. It is and has been a wonderful urge of the Spirit that so many people have been called to ministry. The shame is that the search for the sacred has not taken even more of us with renewed vigour into our homes, our workplaces, our social life, our society, where the sacredness of God's creation lives, and where the redemptive mission of the incarnate Word is being worked out. Our instincts and all the symbols tell us all that is profane – not sacred.

We will never be a whole Church until we see our role in the world as sacred, redemptive action and passion. We will continue to look to the sanctuary where the "sacred ministry" of priests is transacted, above the "secular" sphere of our mission, while we feel deep down there is a dichotomy between the two.

omy between the two.

The image of God is here, in us, in community which is the essence of God, and in the creation by which God is revealed. The sacred is among us. Our priesthood is exercised on the altar of the world. And the sanctuary awaits our sacred offerings to become the whole Body of Christ, for it is incomplete without them.

The vestiges of sociological structures that range back as far as the fourth century still define what hierarchy means today. Centralised power and control, decision-making power vested in a few, concentration on the power of office and the power of jurisdiction, and the pyramidal structures of leadership. The centralised structure of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century drew in our Bishops as imperial bureaucrats as well as leaders of the Christian community. The vestiges of this reality are very much still with us.

During the Middle Ages the Princes and Nobles assumed into their courts Bishops who in turn took on the trappings and the titles and the structures of nobility. Some of these remain today. And in the wake of the *Enlightenment*, to shore up a failing base of temporal and spiritual power, the Church re-engaged the structure of a monarchy, whose power was based on the political structures of the day and buttressed by the indefectibility of the Church.

"The centralised structure of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century drew in our Bishops as imperial bureaucrats as well as leaders of the Christian community."

These trappings and others like them seem to have become immutable, givens, in the definition of hierarchy. Hierarchy has come to mean centralized pyramids of power and control, the hegemony of the few empowered over the subject many.

But the image of Church as communion, *Koinonia*, image of the loving communion of equality and interdependence that exists within the Godhead, cries out for exploration of new ways of being hierarchy. New ways based on an interdependent, mutual and collegial model of a pilgrim people. A collegiality proclaimed by our present Holy Father, albeit many years ago, as a reality that should permeate every level of the Church. All it takes is for another Leonard Faulkner to establish a shared, collegial model of leadership, and an ongoing openness to the Holy Spirit.

Outdated pyramidal notions of hierarchy and the collegial, communal nature of the

Church are in tension with one another. Hanging on to those relics of past societies and ignoring the opportunity to re-define hierarchy within a *communio* concept of church is a barrier to a whole church in mission. Please note I am in no way denying the hierarchical nature of the Church. What I am questioning is a limited, superficial definition of hierarchy taken on, not from Christ, but from Constantine et al.

The wartime Cardinal Archbishop of Toulouse, Jules Saliège, was reputed to have once cried out in frustration, "Those wretched theologians! They have forgotten the Holy Spirit and the Laity!" And we are still doing it! The truth of the matter is, once you respect the universal working of the Spirit in all of us, once that belief travels the short distance from your head to your heart, you can only follow logically to believe in a whole Church, rather than a two-class church. And if you take the time and effort to enter into dialogue with that whole church, you will hear the voice of the Spirit, the wisdom of the Spirit, the fire of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit lives in all of us, is not fenced in by the walls of Roman Congregations or Episcopal Palaces. But where are the accessible mechanisms for all the Church to enter into dialogue, so this Spirit may be heard? Where are the participative structures that enable all of us to exercise our gifts of prophecy in the sharing of our wisdom, and of kingship in the sharing of decisions and determinations that affect our lives? Whole Church needs full, participative membership for all of us.

Resisting the Spirit or, worse still, oppressing the Spirit in the prophetic voices of all the baptized and listening only to the few who walk in the narrow corridors of inside knowledge is Gnosticism.

I want to leave you with two alternative sets of challenges for the future; firstly, Denis Edwards, that wonderful Adelaide Theologian, declares that there are three great challenges for the Church of the 21st Century: the formation of warm and inclusive community; full participation by all the baptized in the life and mission of the Church; and real solidarity with the poor. If you think about it, his three challenges are not unconnected from the removal of these three barriers.

And secondly, American corporate analyst, William Bergquist, posed three requisites for survival in a post-modern era – Loving Community, Synthesis (a coming together of people and ideas in dialogue), and Sanctuary – that quiet reflective place in the inner self where we discover who we are and what we are about. Sounds pretty right to me! ■

The Bible – The disciple points

Words for a Pilgrim People

"A man came, sent by God. His name was John. He came as a witness ..." (John 1:6-7)

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"The Lord will never ask how successful we were in overcoming a particular vice, sin, or imperfection. He will ask us, Did you humbly and patiently accept this mystery of iniquity in your life? How did you deal with it? Did you learn from it to be patient and humble? Did it teach you to trust not your own ability but My love? Did it enable you to understand better the mystery of iniquity in the lives of others? Did it give you the most typical characteristic of a truly religious person—that you never judge or condemn the sin and imperfection of others? If we are authentically religious, we know from our own lives that the demon of evil can be stronger than us even in spite of our best attempts; we know that it is the patience, humility, and charity learned from this experience that count. Success and failure are accidental. The joy of Christians is never based on their personal religious success but on the knowledge that their Redeemer lives. Christians are those who are constantly aware of their need of salvation. Acceptance of the mystery of iniquity in our project of existence is a school of mildness, mercy, forgiveness, and loving understanding of our neighbour." (Adrian van Kaam, **Religion and Personality** (Revised Edition), Dimension Books, 1980, 14-15.)

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"Maybe the burning bush was burning all the time and Moses didn't notice. Maybe the miracle is when you stop and pay attention." (Francine Prose, **Household Saints**, St. Martin's, 1981), 220.)

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"I am what I am or I am nothing. My first elementary lesson of duty is that of resignation to the laws of nature, whatever they are; my first disobedience is to be impatient at what I am, and to indulge an ambitious aspiration after what I cannot be." (John Henry Newman, **A Grammar of Assent**, Image Books, 1955, 272f.)

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The Bible opens with the dramatic statement: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth ..." (Genesis 1:1). The Gospel of John opens with a similar statement: "In the beginning was the Word ..." (John 1:1). They are telling the same story. The drama of God creating "heaven and earth" goes on and on, always "beginning." The chapter of the story written by John announces a definitive moment in this ongoing process of creating "heaven and earth." "The Word became flesh" (1:14). Through Him there will come into being a "new heaven and a new earth" (see Revelation 21:1).

The stunning thing is ... it is never too late to join the story. It is always beginning.

On the Third Sunday of Advent (Year B) we are asked to meditate on John the Baptizer's part in this story as told by John's Gospel (see John 1:6-8 and 19-28). And the Baptizer's part urges us to reflect on a more personal question: What is my part in this story? This is the fundamental question of identity and vocation.

The Greek word meaning "witness," "testimony" or "evidence" is used four times in this passage to refer to the Baptizer. We are left in no doubt that "he was not the light, he was to bear witness to the light" (1:8). His whole life points, everything he does and says, points beyond him to the One. The identity and vocation of John the Baptizer is found through Christ, in Christ and with Christ. His place in the great story is found by reference to Christ.

John the Baptizer is a true disciple. He points. He is transparent. Our attention does not stop with him. In his presence we are present to something – some *One* – more than himself. His is not an ego-centred life. He "prepares a way for the Lord" (1:23).

In the Bible, the greatest sin is always idolatry, in one form or other. We all have a deep seated tendency to get in the way. We become opaque. To see us is, well, just to see us. We too easily lose the ability to point. Our presence is heavy with our ideas, our wishes, our anxieties, our fears, our, our Too busy creating a false self, we miss the new creation that can only blossom when we allow ourselves to become part of God's story. The stunning thing is, however, that it is never too late to join the story. It is always beginning. ■

The Tradition – Identity and vocation

In Catholic circles we have grown accustomed to using the word vocation to apply particularly to the vowed life of priests and religious. There is another way of speaking of vocation. If we link it with the idea of identity, each of us can say, "I am my vocation." In this case, the choice of lifestyle or work and so on, is in service of becoming who I am. Such an interpretation fits the tradition of the great Catholic guides who emphasize the need for self-knowledge. In true self-knowledge, we discover ourselves in discovering God and vice versa.

In our being there is a primordial yes that is not our own.

Thomas Merton exemplifies the best of the tradition: "We find in ourselves a simple affirmation which is not of ourselves. It simply is. In our being there is a primordial yes that is not our own; it is not at our own disposal; it is not accessible to our inspection and understanding; we do not even fully experience it as real (except in rare and unique circumstances) and we have to admit that for most people this primordial 'yes' is something they never advert to at all. Basically, however, my being is not an affirmation of a limited self, but the 'yes' of Being itself, irrespective of my own choices. Where do 'I' come in? Simply in uniting the 'yes' of my own freedom with the 'yes' of Being that already is before I have chosen to choose." (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Image Books, 1968/1989, 266.) Again: "We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. But we cannot make these choices with impunity. Causes have effects, and if we lie to ourselves and to others, then we cannot expect to find truth and reality whenever we happen to want them. If we have chosen the way of falsity we must not be surprised that truth eludes us when we finally come to need it!" (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, 1962, 34-35.) ■

Bulletin Board

Catalyst Calendar

(Info: Pauline on 02 9816 4262)

SIP Meetings

SIP Promoter – Terry O’Loughlin on (02) 9816 4262.

Email: terry_catalyst@hotmail.com

www.catalyst-for-renewal.com.au/news.htm

NSW and ACT – 7.30-9.00pm unless specified:

◦ **Albury** New Albury Hotel, Kiewa St **Survival Today** December 13 “Language & Communication” tba (Info: Joan 6021 6880).

◦ **Alstonville** Pioneer Tavern (Info Cathy 6628 5168)

◦ **Batemans Bay** Mariners Hotel **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Viviane 4471 1857).

◦ **Bowral** The Grand Bar and Brasserie **Recommencing 2006** March 1 “Prayer” Bishop David Walker (Info: Julian 4861 4649).

◦ **Campbelltown** Campbelltown Catholic Club **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Rosemary 9603 2975).

◦ **Engadine** – Engadine RSL **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Elizabeth 9520 0617 or Annette 9548 2475).

◦ **Five Dock** The Illinois Hotel, Cnr Paramatta Rd & Arlington St **Recommencing 2006** (Info: (Susanna 9212 7968).

◦ **Goulburn** Soldiers Club **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Tony 4822 2636).

◦ **Jamberoo** The Jamberoo Hotel **Recommencing 2006** (Info Gabrielle 4232 2735).

◦ **Kincumber** The Kincumber Hotel, Avoca Drive **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Clair 4333 7117 or Sue 4334 3174).

◦ **Newport** – Newport Arms Hotel **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Terry 9973 1192).

◦ **Northern Sydney** Union Hotel, Pacific Hwy & West St, North Sydney, **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Michelle 9958 5963).

◦ **Paddington** Bellevue Hotel **2006 Theme The Getting of Wisdom** (Info: Marea 9387 3152).

◦ **Penrith** Golf Club **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Sue 9760 2324).

◦ **Rouse Hill** The Mean Fiddler on Windsor Rd **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Maria 9680 2220 (H))

◦ **St George Kings Head** Tavern South Hurstville **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Greg 9546 2028).

◦ **Waitara** – The Blue Gum Hotel **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Carmel 0418 451 7).

Victoria

◦ **Alphington** Tower Hotel, 8pm-9.30pm

Recommencing 2006 (Info: Charles 0417 319 556).

◦ **Ballarat North** Midlands Golf Club, Heinz Lane, Second Wednesday each month 12.00-2pm (Info: Kevin 5332 1697).

◦ **Bendigo** Foundry Arms Hotel 8pm-9.30pm (Info: Helen 0409 212 009).

◦ **Clayton** The Notting Hotel, 8pm-9.30pm **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Jo 9807 1912).

◦ **Colac** Central Hotel-Motel **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Clare 5236 2091).

◦ **Darebin** Olympic Hotel, Cnr Bell & Albert Streets, Preston **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Gordon 9895 5836 & Margaret 9471 1410).

◦ **Fitzroy** Pumphouse Hotel, 128 Nicholson St, 8pm-9.30pm **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Denise 9816 3001)

◦ **Goulburn Valley** Terminus Hotel (Shepparton) 7.30pm-9pm (Info: Kerry 0408 579 904).

◦ **Mornington** The Royal Hotel, Victoriana Room, 770 The Esplanade, 8pm-9.30pm, **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Colleen 9775 2163 or Carole 5976 1024).

◦ **Southern** Finbar’s Irish Pub, Cnr Bay & New Streets, Brighton, 7.30pm-9pm **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Kevin 9776 2705).

◦ **Western** Victoria on Hyde, Yarraville 7.30pm (Info: Anne 9312 3595).

◦ **Woodend** Holgate Brewhouse-Keatings Hotel (Info: Marg 5429 5907).

Other States

◦ **Devonport (TAS)** Molly Malone’s Irish Pub, (Info: Graham 6424 8286).

◦ **Hobart North – Health of Body, Mind & Spirit** Moonah Café Bar & Bistro December 11 “Entertainment & Spirituality” Richard Leonard (Info: Mary-Anne 6228 6000).

◦ **Perth (WA)** The Elephant and Wheelbarrow, cnr Francis & Lake Sts, Northbridge 7.30-9.10pm **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Deborah 0419 939 864).

◦ **Verdun (SA)** Stanley Bridge Tavern, Onkaparinga Rd **Recommencing 2006** (Info: Gerald 8388 5957).

Other Matters and Events

◦ **St Mary’s Towers Retreat Centre**, Douglas Park, Dec 9-11 prayer weekend; Dec 9-15 guided retreat (Info: 02 4630 9159).

Forum with Bishop Michael Malone
Tapes available \$10



Give thanks for our world, for every breath you breathe, for your friends and enemies, for the voice of the poor.

Pray for peace - peace in war-torn lands, peace in our land, peace in our homes, peace in our own divided hearts.

*You are in Love. Rejoice!
This is what it means to be a Christian. It is both gift-given and work-to-be-done.*

We are one. Our union through Him, with Him and in Him is more real than any divide we might make. Know it!

*May you enjoy a wonderful celebration of Christmas with your family and friends.
Thank you for your support.*



Recommended

Frances Sheridan Goulart, *God Has No Religion: Blending Traditions For Prayer*. John Garratt Publishing, 2005, 252 pages, pb, \$32.95, Resources (websites), (Tel: 1300 650 878), ISBN: 1-893732-74-6.

Don't be put off by the title of this book which might seem to be heresy to some. It is an anthology of prayers from many faith traditions: Catholic, other Christian, Hindu, Native American, Feminist, Hindu, Pax Christi and many more. Included in the Catholic prayers are some by Patrick, Newman, Merton, Augustine and Mother Teresa. Each prayer is given its origin or source and is accompanied by an optional use. There is information about a range of methods for praying: lectio divina, mantras, beads, prayer journaling, labyrinth and meditation; in other words, ideas to get people out of a rut in their prayer experiences. They have a number of suggestions that might lead them into deeper contact with their God. The prayers cover a variety of occasions: prayers of the day, prayers of healing, of hope, of contrition, blessings, litanies, prayers for the earth and prayers for peace and justice. In all, there should be something for all people's spiritual nourishment, occasions for deeper focus on one's relationship with God. This is a useful resource for individuals and also for groups wanting to add diversity to their ways of speaking and contemplating their relationship to God through an enriched prayer life that embraces different faith traditions.

Kevin McKenna, *You did it for Me. Care of your neighbour as a spiritual practice*. John Garratt Publishing, 2005, 190 pages, pb, \$27.95, Notes and Further Reading, (Tel: 1300 650 878), ISBN: 1-59471-039-2.

The first chapter, on the sacredness of all creation, is solid and challenging. The second chapter onwards is not for the faint-hearted. Kevin McKenna, an American priest who has written extensively on social justice, challenges us at every part of our daily living to be just people. There is no escape from the scriptural, papal and episcopal injunctions to care for each person in all aspects of life. The chapters deal with the dignity of each person, family, participation in community, responsibilities of the person, work, unions, the option for the poor. Fundamental to all this is the sacredness of each person, and as John Paul's writings on the rights of the unborn and the evil of euthanasia are here in the context of a holistic respect for life in all its expressions. This book is hard-hitting and has many examples of ordinary lives devoted to justice. It also will give heart and solid intellectual support to all those engaged in social justice. The chapters give examples of the US bishops' letters especially, and one has to admire the detail and attention they have given to the Gospel demands for justice. The book offers prayers and times to stop and reflect on the ideas presented. Each chapter has a set of questions for private or group reflection and discussion.

Don Rooney, *Journeying with the Bible*, John Garratt Publishing, 2005, 114 pages, pb, \$24.95, (Tel: 1300 650 878), ISBN: 0-8146-2896-6.

The wisdom of this book sneaks up on you. The writing seems to be about a likely liturgical scenario and then the reader finds oneself immersed in a related scriptural passage that helps make sense both of the situation and of scripture. Don Rooney relies on everyday examples and then relates scripture to such situations. The plan of the text is to demonstrate the relevance of scripture and demonstrate a sensible method of reading passages. The introductory chapters discuss the texts recognised in the Catholic Church and then move on to discuss ways of reading that lead to better understanding and reflection. The chapter titles: Interpret, Discover and Interpret, tell the reader what to expect as theme. What they very successfully do is use both Testaments to illustrate the suggested methods of getting the most from the reading. This is a simple text where the last chapter on reflection highlights just a word or two within a scriptural passage and then assists the reader to understand what God might be saying and further leads to how that might apply in the reader's life. It is very easy to read but if used properly, it takes a long time to read this brief book because of the reflection and prayer that are implicitly demanded. It could be used successfully for groups as well as for private meditation on scripture.

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INTERCHURCH FAMILIES

Many of us have had family experience of pre-Vatican II days when marriage for a Catholic to a person from another Christian denomination could not be performed in the church. Presbyteries and sacristies were all that was offered, while wedding guests stood on pavements outside or sat in the church alone. Some parents and grandparents from both denominations boycotted the wedding. The pain from these shocking experiences has passed down to younger generations in many families, where it still echoes today.

The name 'interchurch' families was coined when a movement began in England and also in France in 1972 in which some mixed marriage couples, as well as some considering such a marriage, sought mutual support from each other, as well as from understanding clergy. Today, this international association offers help to families, clergy and those considering this type of marriage. Usually, though not always, one of the spouses is a Catholic. As well as dealing with helpful, practical issues, it also produces theological statements which are considered at the highest levels within the Church.

There is a great deal of information about Interchurch Families at www.interchurchfamilies.org.

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