

Animating Leadership in the People of God

As I began to think through this topic, I realised just how large and complex it is. So at the outset I'd like to warn you that I am not offering any quick solutions. What I hope that I can offer you is an exploration of some of the issues as thoughts for further reflection. The title of this session could simply have been, animating lay leadership. However, I have deliberately chosen the rich scriptural image of the people of God as an inclusive image of who we all are, to focus specifically on animating lay leadership.

We are all perhaps too well acquainted with living in a time of unprecedented change in all facets of society and in Church. I came across the following little reflection from Yves Congar that really brought home to me something of the magnitude of that change: "*On this Ascension Day in the year of grace 1958, people are more interested in Sputnik III than in the Lord whom Christians worship*"¹ I can clearly recall my father taking me into the backyard to look for Sputnik III. Yet in July this year, I could watch on my laptop the launch of the Endeavour space shuttle heading for the International Space Station (ISS) that now constantly orbits 220 miles above us. The ISS involves the collaboration of fourteen nations, with staff that represent this diversity and it has been visited by people from more than thirty five different countries. It is a remarkable example of advances in science and of human collaboration. This event was in the news of course, but it competed for media space with many other items, particularly the almost global concern with swine flu. We live in a world of enormous choice that becomes just so explicit when we enter the virtual milieu of the internet.

One of the Russian astronauts on the ISS is quoted as saying: "This is the best partnership that human beings have ever had. . . . in space we work things out differently."² Perhaps there are some learnings there for us who are earth bound. As Timothy Radcliffe so realistically observes, "We hear wonderful stories of a new collaboration, but it usually appears to be happening somewhere else, and not where we are!"³

With full consciousness that we are standing in the last years of being a post Vatican II church, that is, that in a short time the actual living memory of Vatican II and its exhilarating immediate aftermath, is gradually passing into history. It's an interesting experience for many of us to be living as historical bridges from a recent dynamic history into a future that we are still part of shaping, but whose ultimate outcome we won't be here to witness. It seems that all too quickly those of us who were the enthusiastic vanguard of a church who was so energised by the intake of

¹ Paul Philibert OP, *The Priesthood of the Faithful*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005, 83

² www.msnbc.msn.com

³ Timothy Radcliffe OP, *I Call You Friends*, UK: Continuum, 2004, 212

fresh air from John XXIII's open windows, are now the somewhat wistful, but hopefully, wiser elders.

And yet for many of us our experience of church now is often that,

We have beautiful documents from Vatican II proclaiming the dignity of the lay vocation. . . . We have a new vision of the Church, as the pilgrim people of God. But sometimes we may feel that nothing much seems to have changed. In fact, sometimes the Church seems even more clerical than it was before. And so for many Catholics this is a time of mixed feelings: of hope and disappointment, of renewal and frustration, of joy and anger.⁴

As a layperson I feel that I can credibly comment from experience on the perpetuation of a clerical culture in church that is in many ways kept alive by lay people. As leaders we know all too well the power of modelling leadership. I wrestle with both compassion and anger whenever I encounter a leader in church who is locked into a form of leadership that draws authority only from the office or title they have been given. This is so often eons away from gospel leadership and also from contemporary understandings of leadership.⁵

There are of course many current signs of hope within Church, but in reality we live with quite a degree of ambiguity and an increasing polarisation that saps the energy out of aspiration to lay leadership. At a recent parish assembly I was facilitating, in response to dreams for the future, the spokesperson for one group declared that 'we are over church politics and scandals, we just want to get on with living the gospel'. He was voicing a widely held weariness and frustration that is alienating even those who are choosing to stay connected with Church. For those who have already walked away, for varied and sometimes complex reasons, Church has a credibility problem.

In times of great transition, such as now, there is a tendency to want to safeguard and fortify identity. This seems to be the impetus behind the current quest for explicit Catholic identity, particularly for Catholic schools.⁶ But it is proving to be problematic because of polarised understandings of what it means to be Christian and Catholic. One writer describes a response to these times as;

The churches themselves react with uncertainty. They rigidly retreat . . . back to their legal and doctrinal positions, positions which they then try to assert and defend with authoritarian or fundamentalist tactics.⁷

It is not only a recent observation. Rabbi Abraham Heschel offered a similar observation during the early 1950s.

⁴ Ibid., 212

⁵ For example, Kouzes & Posner *The Leadership Challenge* and Robert Greenleaf *Servant Leadership*

⁶ For example, the NSW Bishop's *Catholic Schools at a Crossroad*

⁷ Ingolf Dalferth in Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, (Eds) , *The Future of Theology Essays in Honour of Jurgen Moltmann* Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006, 127

The fact is that evil is integral to religion, not only secularism When religion speaks out in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless.⁸

As Eamon Duffy puts it,

A sense of identity cannot be supplied by the exercise of authority Tradition is not orders from above, or the status quo, a code of law, or a body of dogma. It is a *wisdom* a way of life which has to be practised before it yields its light⁹

Perhaps one of our most urgent tasks as Church right now is to be able to work from a shared exploration of a common inheritance and the shared pursuit of a common hope. That may go a long way towards creating a climate that inspires leadership aspiration in lay people.

The secular media rarely reports a good news Catholic story, but it certainly adds to the disillusionment of both disconnected and connected Catholics. In a time of declining participation in parishes, stories of Church in the media are perhaps the only connection some people have with Church. It takes quite a toll on the consciousness of lay people. As Duffy goes on to say,

To recall the Catholic community to the shared labour of living the tradition, attentive to its wisdom, open to its fresh possibilities, seems a good item on a Christian agenda for the twenty-first century.¹⁰

This of course begs a few questions, not least of all is how.

Colleen Griffith uses the Burren in County Clare, Ireland as a pertinent metaphor for these times. If you have been to the Burren, you will know that it is hard to imagine a more bleak and stony landscape. However, rainwater penetrates lines of weakness in the limestone and gradually vertical cracks known as grikes form in the rocks. Ironically these cracks give rise to some rare and amazing wildflowers. This has proven to be a surprise to archaeologists, botanists and ecologists. She says, "I suspect that our present ecclesial time will prove a surprise as well. There is after all much that is flourishing in our grikes, the cracks in the rocks of a bleak-looking ecclesial landscape."¹¹ As Charles Taylor reflects, ". . . we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee."¹² William Johnston is another voice of hope as he describes, "Beneath all the confusion a greater power is at work, and something new is coming to birth."¹³

⁸ Harold Kasimov, *Prophetic Voices*, April 2009 www.interreligiousinsight.org

⁹ Austin Ivereigh (Ed) *Unfinished Journey The Church 40 Years After Vatican II*, New York: Continuum, 2003, 64

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65

¹¹ Colleen Griffith (Ed), *Prophetic witness: Catholic Women's Strategies for Reform*, New York: Crossroad, 2009, 4

¹² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, USA,: Harvard University Press, 2007, 535

¹³ William Johnston, *Arise My Love*, New York: Orbis, 2001, 240

For those of us involved in Catholic school education, animating lay leadership may on the surface seem not to be an issue. From one perspective, the movement to lay leadership of schools looks as though it has happened seamlessly. From another perspective, there are real concerns about how sustainable this really is into the coming decades. As recent research shows, the reluctance to take on principalship tends to centre around the expectations associated with being a spiritual leader.¹⁴ I wonder if we began with spiritual leadership that drew authentically from our Catholic tradition as the central motif, just how all of the complexities of Catholic education leadership might be arranged.

So here we are nearly at the end of the first decade of the third Christian millennium, perhaps somewhat scarred by the efforts to hold on to a dream that seemed to so deeply resonate with the dream of Jesus for those who would continue his mission as church. Fifty years ago who could have predicted what all of humanity has experienced in that time? Fifty years is such small time in our two thousand year history as church. It's roughly the time from the death and resurrection of Jesus to the time of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica.

The Year of Paul that has so recently come to conclusion, was a brilliant initiative for these times. My experience is that people came to know Paul the man and something of the difficulties Paul addressed in his letters, and that these have deep resonance with many of the issues that are part of church of this third millennium. I am not at all suggesting that the era of the very early church is some halcyon time that we should return to by imitation. We know from Paul's letters that all was far from perfect!

It is now crucial that those of us who are in leadership positions are able to take an informed long view of who we are as church and know that things have been worse, and that things can be better. To quote Timothy Radcliffe again, "crisis is part of who we are as church, it is our *raison d'être*". That's a sobering reminder that our origins lie deeply within the crisis of Christ crucified and a disappointed discipleship as described by Luke's story of the journey to Emmaus and Mark's constant portrayal of the disciples of Jesus who, in colloquial terms, simply didn't get what Jesus was on about. Mark's own ending of his gospel has the women at the empty tomb seized with terror and amazement and very afraid. An ending so shocking that it was expanded into something more hopeful around the second century.

It is not helpful to label the secular world in which we all live as the enemy. While this is not to deny that there are aspects of our secular society that need to be challenged, it is simplistic and alienating to label the complex reality of secularity in this way. To do this carries an assumption that living in the world is somehow detrimental to spirituality; it places limits on the grace of God.

¹⁴ For example, *Principals in Parishes: A Research Report*. 2005 www.acppa.catholic.edu.au

Secularity should not quickly be demonised or divinised. It is neither simply a “culture of death,” nor is it simply “a culture of life.” Morally it is ambivalent. It is full of grace, even as it is full of many things that make grace, faith, and a moral life more difficult.¹⁵

As Ron Rolheiser points out, secularity is the child of Judaeo - Christianity. There is, however, a form of secular fundamentalism that exists as an ideology, but this is not what most of us usually encounter as we live our daily lives in a secular society. One obvious benefit of a secular society is the freedom of religion that allows choice, particularly in school education. Although the Australian Government’s articulation of values for schools caused controversy, it’s difficult to argue against values such as compassion and the others that clearly echoed those of Christianity on the Government posters.¹⁶ The real issue was the imposition that threatened the freedom that accompanies living in a secular society. In our wider church scenario it is imperative that we can publicly define who we are by saying what we are for rather than what we are against.

The fifth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* invites us to think creatively about what it could mean to live a full Christian life in the midst of the challenges of contemporary life. I wonder how well we have responded to that invitation. That is, what meaning does the universal call to holiness actually have for most people? Quite often the meaning is associated with being very pious and somewhat separated from the realities of everyday life. In other words, something quite impossible in the midst of a busy contemporary life. Yet, If we recall the wisdom of Irenaeus of Lyons, “the glory of God is humanity, fully alive” echoing Jesus’ statement in John’s gospel, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly”, the way of holiness is a real possibility for all of us. The following quote from Dewitt Jones comes from a DVD Sheila Flynn OP shared with the Dominican Education Council earlier this year. It has stayed with me because it says something quite profound about creatively living the ordinary so that it becomes extraordinary.

Creativity involves having the right lens and the right focus; accepting that there is more than one right answer and continually asking, why do we do it this way? How could it be better? This is the way of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary.

The questions are vital. Why do we do it this way? From my experience many people are totally unaware that through their baptism they are called to mission. That this is their vocation as Catholic Christians. Mission is another problematic word, still often only meaning overseas mission. Just as confusing is the understanding of vocation. For many people this is equated with a state of life, most usually to ordained ministry or religious life. I looked with interest at the web site for the recent National Vocations Week and found just this reinforced yet again. A descending

¹⁵ Ronald Rolheiser, *Secularity and the Gospel Being Missionaries to our Children*, New York: Crossroad, 2007, 41

¹⁶ www.valueseducation.edu.au

order for women: Sister, Consecrated Virgin, Canonical Hermit, Laity. The list for men of course includes Diocesan and Religious Priest. How different and so much more encouraging this could be if number one was listed as the vocation to the mission of God to which all of us are called through baptism. After all, this doesn't change for any of us, regardless of how we are called to live this, either as vowed religious, ordained ministers, or in the married or single life. Or, as it is for some, a lived experience of two or more of these states of life within a lifetime. A limited understanding of vocation delivers just that – limits. Living a prophetic faith is an invitation to all of us.

Ron Rolheiser quotes Jim Wallis, the founder of *Sojourners* on this:

Prophetic faith does not see the primary battle as the struggle between belief and secularism. It understands that the real battle, the big struggle of our times, is the fundamental choice between cynicism and hope. The prophets always begin in judgement, in a social critique of the status quo, but they end in hope – that these realities can and will be changed. The choice between cynicism and hope is ultimately a spiritual choice, one that has enormous political consequences.¹⁷

Here I will borrow from a recent presentation by Fr David Ranson where he used the following quote from Peter Berger.

It is through [*the central animating stories of an organisation*] that people are lifted above their capacity in the ordinary, attain powerful visions of the future, and become capable of collective actions to realise such visions By definition, [*central animating stories*] transcend both pragmatic and theoretical rationality, while at the same time it strongly affects them.

Our animating story is the story of the grace of God. Beginning deep in the life of God and flowing out as both Breath and Word of God, as the mission of God into all of creation, inviting all of us into the God's mission of transformation. It is the mission that Dominic preached – the theme of our conference – Dominic Preacher of Grace.

I am grateful to be living in a time when the retrieval of our animating story of a triune God is opening the way to fresh understandings of mission, church and leadership. As Catherine LaCugna states,

The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for the Christian life . . . it is a theology of relationships.¹⁸

There is something wonderfully captivating about Andrei Rublev's now very familiar icon that we have come to name as an icon of the Trinity. It is perhaps worth contemplating why this wonderful icon emerged early in the 20th century after centuries of becoming somewhat muted by the smoke generated by innumerable candles and even at one point in time, being partially

¹⁷ Ronald Rolheiser, *Secularity and the Gospel Being Missionaries to our Children*, New York: Crossroad, 2007, 47

¹⁸ Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us the Trinity and Christian Life*, San Francisco: Harper, 1991. 377

covered by a silver oklad. The emergence of this icon seemed to herald a shift in spiritual consciousness with which we are still grappling. The fourth place at this divine table somehow engenders invitation and inspiration that touches us deeply beyond the rational.

I would like to conclude by returning to Colleen Griffiths' Burren metaphor. These times are, I think, a uniquely blessed time. Through wonderful scholarship, the full richness of our tradition is being opened up to us as an enticing banquet. Far too much to be fully savoured by quick 'take- aways', where one might fleetingly taste something wonderful, but have no idea what it exactly is or who to ask to help you in finding it again.

I wonder if at times, church offers only a banquet for the well versed 'gourmets'. Something that may in itself present as a barrier to others who are still tentatively seeking tastes. Henri Nouwen asks the 'so what' question, as do contemporary Catholic educators, in a diary he kept during a year long retreat at a Trappist monastery. It offers I think an honest point for reflection about formation.

For the past few weeks we have had a Friday night lecture by a visiting seminary professor. He has been speaking about the doctrine of the Trinity and especially about the Holy Spirit. For me these lectures are a special experience . . . I like the lectures, I am intrigued, I don't want to miss them – but at the same time I feel dissatisfied on a level I did not understand in the past but is now closer to my consciousness . . . I kept saying to myself, "How interesting, how insightful" – and at the same time I said to myself, "So what? What do all these words about God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have to do with [people] here and now?" As soon as I step outside the circle of this terminology, which is very familiar to me, the whole level of discourse seems extremely alienating.¹⁹

Perhaps you may remember the film *Babette's Feast*. Its resonance with Eucharist was quickly recognised when it emerged during the 1980s. I recently sought it out again to revisit just how it sparked the religious imagination. Yes, after twenty plus years the resonance with Eucharist was still clearly there for me. But in 2009 it also said more to me about how to invite, by those who have the responsibility to invite. Babette knows just how delicious each item of her feast is; she also knows how to bring all of the items together into the one wonderful experience for the people at her table. While some of us may have had the experience of being intimidated by an arrogant waiter, Babette simply offers exquisite food to her guests that she has lovingly prepared. Her hope is nothing more than that through the desire for her guest's enjoyment of wonderful food, there might be created an awareness of something beyond their constant diet of dried fish; a taste for more. She echoes the invitation of Jesus to "Come and see"²⁰ and the invitation of Psalm 34, to "taste and see that the Lord is good".

¹⁹ Paul Philibert, *The Priesthood of the Faithful Key to a Living Church*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005, 81-82

²⁰ John 1:39

In these current challenging times for church, I am convinced that Catholic schools are carrying the church to a new place. I was recently enormously heartened by two HSC students in a discernment for parish pastoral council membership. They were typical northern beaches young people who enjoy all that life offers them, but were filled with a passion for what their church could be and who are ready to contribute to making their vision a reality. Their articulation of their faith was way beyond piousness. They were for me an embodiment of hope for the future of who we all can be as church. As I listened to those two young people, I recognised that they are the result of many years of both vision and struggle. The struggle continues in many ways, but the fruit of that struggle is blossoming and about to bloom in ways that will surprise us and gladden our hearts.

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