

Governance Reform

A reflection from Fr Eric Hodgens

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Governance reform at St Carthages also faces some challenging obstacles. "Governance" is the framework of people, systems and accountability that sets plans consistent with the community's stated values, and sees that the enterprise is resourced and managed to achieve those aims. Challenges here are reflected in a number of the key points made in the 23-parish submission to the 2020 Plenary Council.

Eric says:

The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RC) is one of the most thorough investigations of its kind worldwide.

The Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference and Catholic Religious Australia have made a combined response accepting virtually all the commission's recommendations. This puts them further down the track of adaptation than most countries in the world. If it works out, Australia has the chance to be showing the way for other nations, the Roman Curia and even canon law itself.

The Australian bishops have set up an Implementation Advisory Group to advise on how to implement the recommendations of the RC. A key recommendation is: the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference should conduct a national review of the governance and management structures of dioceses and parishes, including in relation to issues of transparency, accountability, consultation and the participation of lay men and women.

Agreeing to this recommendation, the bishops and religious have set up a Governance Review Project Team to develop the review project plan. This team has wide experience and expertise. Its task is helped by the experienced Catholic Church agencies, which have already set up effective governance structures in education, health care and social services.

Its task will be difficult because the existing governance structure of dioceses and parishes is monarchical and has been so for most of the Church's existence. Transparency and accountability have never been the order of the day. On the contrary, *secrecy* is strictly legislated in virtually all activities and communications. The post-Enlightenment concept of the separation of powers has never been incorporated into diocese and parish governance. The bishop is, at once, legislator, administrator and judge.

Such power will not be relinquished easily. According to canon law the Holy See cannot be judged by anybody. Furthermore, the papacy and its curia have managed to *extend* its control over diocesan bishops during the last century or two. But making bishops subject to agencies of review will be a much harder task. Consequently, the first question is how to go about reviewing this governance structure. Hence the setting up an experienced project team to work out a way.

There are a couple of things the review team needs to address before coming up with a recommended way to proceed.

The first issue is the theology of the Church. Before Vatican II the Church was predominantly viewed as a hierarchical community with two levels of membership – clerical and lay. The focus was on jurisdiction. The Pope has universal jurisdiction. The bishop has jurisdiction over his diocese. Canon law sees the parish priest as having sole authority in his parish. The source of authority is clerical ordination. The model is pyramidal.

Power once gained is reluctantly yielded.

Vatican II decreed that the Church was the People of God – a community of equals in service to one another. There are different services, but the more important the service the humbler should be the servant. The model is concentric; the source of authority is faith attested by baptism.

The second issue is the theology of priesthood. The early Church organisation and ministries evolved as sociology shows us what all human groupings do. The early Church had no priests. The earliest leadership was either charismatic, as with St. Paul, or presbyteral, like that of the synagogue. Head presbyters morphed into bishops (literally overseers), ordained to lead, with ordinary presbyters ordained to assist in leadership and other ministries.

Ordination (think 'being appointed') morphed into *consecration* turning the candidate into a sacred person — the foundation of clericalism.

This will be a curly problem for the project team. Power once gained is reluctantly yielded. Clericalism is a hard beast to kill, as Pope Francis is finding out. Seminarians are still being taught that they are *ontologically changed* by ordination (think consecration) as priests. The terms of reference of the project team are clear and specific, culminating in the charge "to recommend changes to governance and management structures to achieve the goals of best practice outlined in these terms of reference." What matters is what the bishops do with all the recommendations of this project team. The only ones who can finally do anything about it are the bishops.

The timeline assumes that they get this report before the Plenary Council of the Australian Bishops in 2020. Consultation is taking place, but when the chips are down it is a council of the *bishops*.

The four issues identified in the RC's recommendation are transparency, accountability, consultation and participation of lay men and women. Will the team's recommendations have any impact on the way the plenary council is run? Under current canon law only the bishops have deliberative rights. Canon law itself needs review. Gestures of inclusion will be made – but will they be taken seriously?

Then what about enforcement of decisions right across the 33 dioceses of the country by an authority-conscious variety of bishops? Finally, how forcefully will they present their case to a Roman Curia which has for a long time treated them as inferiors and to which they have acquiesced?

The timing is auspicious.

The Pope is about to re-organise his Curia, insisting that it be at the service of bishops, not their controller. His recent instructions on handling the sexual abuse issue in-builds episcopal accountability. Following on the Royal Commission, Australia is in pole position to contribute positively to major improvements in governance and management to the advantage of the world-wide Church. Let's see what happens.

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