

***Evangelii Gaudium* and its Challenge for the Australian Church**

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8 July 2014

National Catholic Lay Movements Meeting
Bishops Commission for Church Ministry
Anderledy Lodge, Mary MacKillop Place

This morning we reflect together on the challenges and possibilities presented by Pope Francis' first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. I want to approach this landmark document through two lenses in particular: first, the pastoral reality of the Australian Church at this time and, second, the potential of lay movements in which many find a compelling charism and new forms of spiritual living.

The Australian Church

In my work in pastoral planning I have had the opportunity to focus on the state of the Australian Church, particularly its dioceses and parishes, with the aid of research from the ACBC Pastoral Research Office and by listening to the experiences of laity, clergy and religious orders at the coalface of our mission. Before speaking to the possible applications of *Evangelii Gaudium* in our context, it is important to have a firm grasp of the ecclesial landscape in which we find ourselves and to which Pope Francis' words can speak with power and urgency.

We know that Catholics account for a quarter of the total Australian population, 25.3% of some 21.5 million Australians (a total of 5.4 million Catholics). Of that 5.4 million, only 662,000 or 12.2 per cent are likely to join us for Eucharist on any given weekend. Almost a third of these Mass attenders are aged over 70 while of all Catholics aged between 20-34, only 5-6% attend.

It is not surprising to learn that migrants account for over 40% of our Mass attenders. While we are indebted to and sustained by the participation of these diverse ethnic communities in our parishes and movements, we also know that second generation Australians, that is, the children of Catholic migrants, are far less likely to practice than their parents.

13,000 Catholics stop attending Mass each year, and across all age groups more than 20,000 Australians each year cease to identify themselves as Catholic, no longer ticking the Catholic box on census night. Alarming, the number of dioceses with Mass attendance rates below 10% rose from 2 to 14 between 2006 and 2011 and this will worsen to 23 of the 28 territorial dioceses in Australia by 2016. It is no wonder that statisticians are often characterised as 'prophets of doom'.

The prospect that this situation raises is that of ongoing Catholic institutions, including universities, schools, colleges, hospitals, nursing homes and aged care facilities but *fewer parishes* where the worship of God enjoins a community of intentional believers. The related concern is that the Church in Australia will be reduced to a form of non-government organisation, a provider of services including healthcare and education but whose religious dimension is associated more strongly with their historical origins rather than their prevailing spirit.

Having outlined these challenges for the Australian Church, it is helpful and instructive to contrast this situation with the American and European contexts as they serve to draw attention to the potential that ecclesial movements may well exercise in our own milieu.

Learning from Experience

The parallels between the Australian and American contexts are stronger than what might first be assumed. In both countries, the Catholic Church established itself within a predominantly Protestant settlement that was the result of British colonisation and saw the oppression of an indigenous population. The Catholic Church then thrived in each nation through the development of parallel infrastructure to the State (e.g. schools and hospitals) and grew with subsequent waves of migration. Both countries have large rural contexts which can be sparsely populated and are shaping the exercise of pastoral ministry in the Church; both have seen increasing structural change in Catholic parishes and dioceses over the last decades, have been impacted by the scandal of abuse crises, and are experiencing increasing disaffiliation with religion and Catholicism in particular (the disaffiliation rate in Australia is around 20,000 people a year, 20,000 who choose to no longer identify as 'Catholic' at all).

However, one significant *difference* I would suggest is that the development of ministry in the United States is two to three decades ahead of the Australian Church. While there has been significant institutional support for the development of lay leadership in the U.S., including the emergence and training of pastoral life coordinators/directors in parishes and specific theological treatment of lay ecclesial ministry in the USCCB's *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, as well as strong growth in the diaconate – the U.S. has some 15,000 active deacons serving 17,000 parishes – the Australian Church is yet to make significant forays into these possibilities.

The result is that the American Church is some twenty years ahead in the development of ecclesial ministries which has buoyed the life of their parishes while the Australian Church is some twenty years further down the track in terms of *decline*, with an attendance rate that makes the U.S. weekly participation rate of 30% seem (almost) a success.

The European story also differs from the American one. Parishes are largely moribund in Europe and this has explained to a great degree the growth of the ecclesial movements which have flourished ever since the Second World War. Many of these groups owe their existence to the well of lay participation in the Church initially fostered by Catholic Action and then given further energy and legitimisation by the Second Vatican Council and then the pontificate of John Paul II.

The bottom line is that with the development of lay ministry and the diaconate lagging in the Australian Church and our parishes in a more immediately dire position than in the U.S., our future may look decidedly more European than American with the upshot that lay movements will find only greater opportunities for growth and perhaps stronger official backing in the years ahead.

Unless there is an unprecedented influx of Catholic migrants into Australia or the development of lay ecclesial ministry surges forward with programs of training and formation, all of which demands funding and organisation, our parishes will continue to experience decline and in some cases their very existence will be at risk, opening up possibilities for other forms of Christian community which the ecclesial movements represent.

This may present as sober even confronting news but I would suggest it is not a cause for despair. Indeed, as Pope Francis reminds us in his apostolic exhortation, the Gospel mission with which we have been entrusted is an enduring cause for joy, even and especially in those circumstances not of our choosing,

I realise of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved (*Evangelii Gaudium* 6).

Pope Francis' words remind us of Jesus himself whose mission leads to an encounter with suffering, whose mission brings him into the experience of isolation and even into the shadow of death but whose joy never leaves him owing to his awareness of the Father's love. So we are called to respond to our changing circumstances with Christian joy, not a superficial optimism which denies the responsibilities of the present but with a serious sense of expectation and commitment to receive God's grace with faith, no matter where that grace may lead us.

The Ecclesial Movements

What the Australian research certainly makes clear is that there is a significant disconnect between what is understood to be 'going on' in our parishes and people's larger lives, struggles and aspirations. That is, there is a gap between faith and life that fuels declining commitment and participation.

To bring attention to this separation of faith and life, I am aware of many parents who think nothing of waking up early each Saturday morning to take their children to soccer or to dance school but do not make the connection between Sunday Mass and the flourishing of their children. The benefits of the local soccer game appear more obvious – there are the benefits of physical exercise, learning the skills of team work, learning to win and to lose, there is an experience of a community or team working towards a common goal. The connection between our Eucharistic gathering and human flourishing is *less* apparent and sadly less compelling for most and yet, as Pope Francis affirms, the Eucharist is no less than "the life-giving gift of himself" (*Lumen Fidei* 44). It is an irony that when asked, Catholics who have joined Pentecostal communities report that they have left our Eucharistic Church because they felt they were never 'fed'.

How might ecclesial movements play their part in bridging this gap between the life and faith? First of all, precisely because members of ecclesial movements are immersed in the everyday conditions of life – professional work, family life and so on – they can offer themselves as credible and leading Christian witnesses to the way in which faith can take hold of life and life can take hold of faith. Even in the midst of a challenging and undeniably secular culture, lay movements and their members can demonstrate that the world is not antithetical to the experience of God but the very place in which such an experience becomes possible.

It is also notable that many movements have arisen out of specific historical circumstances that have required a Christian response and therefore movements are no strangers to a world-engaging mission that connects creation with redemption, nature with grace, and the historical with the transcendent. *If* the movements are able to adapt and carry their original charism or genius into social and cultural circumstances that are altogether new, these movements can well support the Church in preparing laity to take their place in the contemporary world as disciples, in that world-transforming mission which Pope Francis promotes with urgency.

We know that many ecclesial movements emerged in the wake of the world wars and crises of the twentieth century, calamities which saw not only an uncharacteristic surge in priestly and religious vocations but new forms of lay association as well. For example, the Focolare Movement emerged from service to the poor and deprived in the bomb shelters of post-war Italy, while closer to home the Knights of the Southern Cross finds its origins in the struggle to ensure Australian Catholics had access to jobs and were free from discrimination on return from the First World War.

Lay movements may be especially well placed to offer appropriate resources, a life of prayer and programs of lay formation directed toward Christian engagement with the world because they themselves have arisen in response to specific needs and hungers in human society and culture.

A Collaborative Future

In his treatment of mission in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis underscores with relevance to ecclesial movements that the Church's identity comes about by its focus on something other than itself – its focus on Christ whose body it is and is called to be, and the world for whom that sacramental body exists as a sign and reality of hope.

Endowed with a charism or compelling narrative of holiness, ecclesial movements are called to look outward for their identity can only grow through an expanding engagement with others within the Church and beyond it. Pope Francis insists,

[Charisms] are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safe-keeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church, drawn to the centre which is Christ and then channelled into an evangelising impulse (*Evangelii Gaudium* 130).

As part of this “integration into the body of the Church”, ecclesial movements might well explore creative forms of collaboration with dioceses and also with one another in order that their charism or spiritual vision can extend beyond the one or two generations of leaders that have sustained their groups to date. It is a truism that institution without charism grows weary and mundane, while charism without institution and structure risks eccentricity or parochialism. Lay movements can work together with dioceses and provide much needed inspiration and creative forms of spiritual living while dioceses can support movements in their access to parishes which remain, notwithstanding the reality of decline, the experience of the Church for the vast majority of Australian Catholics.

It is true that some movements have gained a reputation for drawing members away from local parishes, especially when they insist on celebrating separate liturgies or else absolutise their own spiritual experience to the exclusion of others forms of Christian life and prayer. These practices or attitudes can be a source of conflict if they are not negotiated and mediated by leadership. It is no secret that whenever the new ecclesial movements are addressed by popes, the risks of spiritual elitism, isolation from parish communities, and the challenge of inculturating their charism and service in new contexts are raised. If they are to flourish, movements will need to mature in their ecclesial integration.

In his own treatment of the movements in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis notes with gentle encouragement, “it will prove beneficial for [movements] not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish and to participate readily in the overall pastoral activity of the particular Church” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 29). In my experience, many members of movements, including Catholic Charismatic Renewal for one, have often assumed leading roles in parish life and ministry and can be particularly effective in their outreach to those who are on the margins of faith. It is a great sign of hope when such collaboration becomes not only possible but tangible in the life of local communities.

Conclusion

Ecclesial movements, predominantly but not exclusively lay in membership, have been the one of the outstanding developments in the life of the Church in the twentieth century and may well present as a significant form of Christian community in the decades to come if they are able to align themselves for growth in a changing ecclesial situation.

The insufficiencies and unclaimed potential of the present will suggest, in its prophetic utterance, the ‘more’ of the future for the Australian Church. The movements may well take their place in that future with the dynamism, practical intelligence and spiritual gifts of their past. Let us move towards that new possibility with a spirit and the confidence of joy.

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