

**“WHY IS OUR CHURCH NOT TOUCHING SOME PEOPLE?
WHERE *are* PEOPLE FINDING GOD?
WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES & IMPLICATIONS FOR US AS
LEADERS IN THE CHURCH?
*The future belongs to those who can bring together the parts”***

Paper prepared for Mixed Commission – March 2000 - + P J Cullinane

Introduction

In formulating this theme for our meeting, the executive of our Mixed Commission has put its finger on the core questions of evangelisation in the modern world. Why indeed do some of our contemporaries claim to find God more easily outside their experience of the Church if, as we believe, the community of Christ’s disciples is where Christ himself is especially present? What has happened since the days when the gospel was experienced *as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction....* (and the people) *took to the gospel with the joy of the Holy Spirit?*

(1Thes.1:4-6)

To answer these questions we would need to do several things: e.g. we would need to

1. reflect on changes which have taken place in society and on how they impact on the Church.¹
2. reflect on events within the Church’s own sphere of influence.²
3. include in our reflections those things which justify the Second Vatican Council’s claim that Christians share some responsibility for the non-belief of others (cf G.S. n.19).³
4. Even the negative experiences of the Church would need to be interpreted theologically, not just sociologically. This is the way of faith as it seeks understanding, especially when it looks to salvation history to see God’s ways of dealing with us. The surprise is not so much our unfaithfulness, but the fact that our hope doesn’t depend on things not going wrong. Instead it derives entirely from the power and mercy of God which is made more manifest in human weakness.
5. We would indeed look to see where else people are finding God, but we wouldn’t neglect to notice the daily miracles taking place before our eyes in the midst of the Church.⁴

Perhaps at the end of such a broadly based reflection we might come to the healthy conclusion that it isn’t really about how the Church looks. It’s about how well it loses itself in what it was sent to do.

....(The) Church will suffer the loss of its shape as it undergoes a death, and all the more so, the more purely it lives from its source and is consequently less concerned with preserving its shape. In fact, it will not concern itself with affirming its shape but with promoting the world’s salvation; as for the shape in which God will raise it

*from its death to serve the world, it will entrust (that) to the Holy Spirit. (Hans Urs von Balthasar)*⁵

“Connectedness”

Did you notice the little sub-heading given to our topic by the Executive: *The future belongs to those who can bring together the parts?*

I think the main reason why the Church doesn't touch some people is that religious faith can seem to be an adjunct to their lives – a kind of “extra”.

In its Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the Second Vatican Council said:

*This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.*⁶

This is true not only in the sense that inconsistency between what we profess and how we live can scandalise others, but also in the sense that sooner or later any sense of unconnectedness between people's religious practices and their “real” lives will be experienced as an unnecessary burden. Today, people don't feel obliged to carry what they don't seem to need, and then don't miss.

If religious faith is not to seem like an “add-on” to people's “real” lives, they will need to see its **intrinsic** connection to real life. So we need to be able to show how faith is connected with what is most deeply **human**; indeed, with what it means **to be human**.

This is what St Irenaeus saw so well when he said:

*The glory of God is the human person fully alive, but the life of humans is to **see** God.*

He is not talking here about our future with God in heaven. As Cardinal Ratzinger explains it:

*Saint Irenaeus is saying that ultimately, true adoration of God is our very life... but life only becomes true life if it is given its form by turning one's gaze towards God. Worship exists for no other reason than to make this gaze possible and to enable a life to become glory to God.*⁷

Notice how true life and true worship are really one and the same. After all, Jesus didn't come to set up another religion separate from life; he came to sanctify the whole of life; to make our lives an *offering acceptable to God*.

Seeing God as St Irenaeus intended, is a matter of *seeing* created existence for what it really is, viz. gift. We don't really know ourselves, or God, until we know that God never needed to create anything. We know ourselves, and God, even more when we know that the God who didn't need to create *wanted to*. Living out of this awareness means *receiving* our life as a gift is received. In this way, every detail of life can become a reason for wonder and thanksgiving – and the hint of more to come. In other words, in this way we ourselves “come alive”. This is the *life* that comes from *seeing God*, and makes us into the *glory of God*. That is when we are most truly ourselves.

We come alive then through this way of *seeing*. And so a heightened awareness of the giftedness and sacredness of all creation needs to be at the core of faith formation. This is how some find God even without the Church. We are really speaking about “transcendence”. This doesn’t mean distance! It is what Pope John Paul II calls *the extraordinary side of the ordinary*. How’s that for connectedness!!⁸

But this sense of the mystery of life is precisely what has been lost to our Western culture (though not yet to the Maori way of life), and the whole of life is thereby diminished.

The Diminishment of Social, Cultural, Political and Economic Life

Those who are satisfied with easy assumptions assume that the political and economic systems we are used to need only to be fine-tuned *in order to solve ‘technical problems’, assuage ‘environmental concerns’, and satisfy ‘sophisticated consumer demands.’*⁹ Political manifestos are all about making these adjustments.

Others will look deeper and see that no amount of fine-tuning can make life more human if there are misunderstandings about what it means to be human. This is why the present Pope goes beyond any mere application of traditional Catholic social teaching to the political and economic order. He focuses on that level of life – the moral/cultural level – which forms the people who in turn plan the social, political and economic systems.¹⁰

That is why John Paul II recurringly calls for a sound anthropology. Underlying all his teaching is a perception of *what it means to be human*. This humanism of John Paul II (and of Paul VI before him) is a *theological* anthropology because it depends on divine revelation for its understanding of what it means to be human.

Political, social and economic structures – not to mention bio-technology - can have no other legitimate purpose than to make life more human. For John Paul II, starting with his very first encyclical, even the Church has to discover its way by looking at *what it means to be human* in the light of divine revelation.

The Pope’s own experience under Communist and Nazi regimes must have had a lot to do with this underlying perception. In fact, Communism’s failure was predicted by Catholic intellectuals decades before it collapsed because they saw that it was based on a false anthropology. Frank Sheed’s book on this subject was called *Communism and Man*. Communism turned out to be *economically inefficient, technologically backward, culturally stultifying, politically cruel.*¹¹ But these were only the symptoms of a false understanding of **what it means to be human**.

The Western world’s forms of liberal democracy are also in trouble, and for the same reasons. All the ways in which people are subordinated to other people’s ends are the symptoms of a deep malaise. The underlying problem is again a false anthropology. The false ideas of freedom and of pluralism that are nurtured within our liberal democracies are the viruses that could kill them. Mere fine-tuning of our social, political and economic institutions won’t be enough to prevent this.

How far has the disease progressed? Well, in 1992, a US Supreme Court formulated this false anthropology in these words:

*At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.*¹²

Note that freedom in this anthropology has no reference point beyond itself and what the individual chooses. There is no obligation to truth or meaning beyond what the individual determines.

On this understanding, democracy is reduced to being *merely an ensemble of procedures, largely legal, by which we regulate the pursuit of our personal satisfactions.*¹³

If there is no meaning to life and the universe beyond what the individual chooses to make of it, then there is no point in talking about a common good to which the individual has any obligation. So Parliament itself becomes another forum for the pursuit of individual and sectional interests – in effect, an extension of the marketplace.

Even the Courts are at risk of becoming just an extension of the arena in which individuals contest with each other, in the pursuit of their own interests. (Litigation becomes an industry, and even a form of entertainment – cf the Judge Judy show).

But could these distortions of public life happen in Godzone? Well, why not if the basic flaw is at the moral/cultural level which underlies the social, political and economic systems? In my brief paper on Faith and Reason at our last meeting, I reported a religious broadcast in which Noel Cheer and Maureen Garing were applauding the fact that the internet gives people a way of discussing views where *nobody is in charge*, i.e. no one has authority to say what is right or wrong; *people can take responsibility for their own souls*. There is no such thing as anyone being led astray *because there is no one right position to stray from*. There is no *centre* of touchstone or orthodoxy, and so no one's views can be judged wrong.

This kind of talk comes out of a wide-spread perception that religion is a “structure and system” that inhibits the right of individuals to think and to choose for themselves. Legitimate concern. But it spills over into subjectivism and relativism at their worst.

Our philosopher Pope traces these confusions within our culture back to the separation of faith and reason. That is surely the ultimate in disconnectedness, because we depend on both for knowing what a human person is. Reason without faith cannot know the transcendent dignity of the person, and so a person's worth is ultimately their usefulness to themselves and to others. The consequences are huge. Conversely, faith without reason lacks the infrastructure it needs even to account for itself, and is ultimately defenceless against the barbarities of fundamentalism.

This separation of faith and reason has its origins in Enlightenment. Prior to the Enlightenment people's ways of thinking were largely determined by authority, custom and tradition. Custom and tradition were often accepted uncritically, and authority sometimes used wrongly. Pre-Enlightenment culture, too, was based on an inadequate anthropology; e.g. the right to “participate” which belongs properly to the dignity of personhood and to democracy was not yet properly perceived. A reaction to feudalism and to tutelage had to come. But the Enlightenment tried to dispense with faith; it substituted reason for tradition and utility for authority. Here we have the origins of a purely secular understanding of human progress.¹⁴

Within a short while there was a revolt against the excessive claims made on behalf of reason, and there started what became Romanticism – the “cult of the heart” and of individualism. It became a person’s sincerity that mattered, more than the *meaning* of their actions. The Catholic Church still has a hard time convincing people that morality is based on the *meaning* of their actions, as well as on their intentions.

By a kind of fateful progression, the post-Enlightenment Modern era itself collapsed into post-Modernism, which involves a kind of despair of knowing any objective truth, and feels no need for continuity or consistency. The experience of plurality and the way all knowledge is contextualised seem to lead to unlimited relativism. So, in the end, what matters? Nothing, really. Hence the nihilism and pragmatism that the Pope critiques in his encyclical *Faith and Reason*.¹⁵

He also critiques those forms of scholarship that ask every sort of question about author, text and context except whether the author’s statements are actually true. That question is deemed unscholarly and meaningless. This seems unbelievable, but it is what has been happening in some influential sectors of philosophy.¹⁶ John Paul II simply and courageously pits himself against this radical scepticism and affirms the capacity of human beings for knowing truth.¹⁷

To use a metaphor of Cardinal Ratzinger, we are not trapped in a hall of mirrors of interpretations of interpretations. We are able to break through to know what is actually true.¹⁸

Pope John Paul II’s leadership has been a service to humanity, recognised by those who see the implications of these errors. These errors are not innocuous abstractions. They impact on ordinary people’s lives. They bring about a kind of re-definition of meanings. For example, the role of conscience used to be to measure one’s conduct against norms that were not of our own making. Now conscience *decides* what shall be right and wrong (cf *The Splendor of Truth*, n.32). Sometimes this seems to mean merely personal preference

The terms “tolerance” and “pluralism” are misused to justify a kind of indifference to differences, and an opting out of responsibility for judging between true and false.¹⁹

The idea is also spawned that people can have a right to be wrong and to do wrong. In fact, there can be no such right, because rights exist only for the purpose of enabling us to fulfil our responsibilities, the very first of which is our obligation to seek what is true and to do what is good (cf *Faith and Reason*, n. 25). A supposed right to be wrong or to do wrong pre-empts that search. It implies that there is no need to seek truth and goodness.²⁰

Terms like “honesty” and “authenticity” have been redefined. If once they included a commitment to certain ideals that one might fall short of, now they seem to imply dropping the commitment if one is struggling to live up to the ideal. None of this is good news for any of the vocations that are premised on commitment. And there is huge potential for havoc when counsellors and even spiritual directors are themselves unwittingly influenced by the culture of Romanticism.

There has been a shift in what people think constitutes marriage. It used to be the *commitment* a man and a woman made to each other. Now it is thought to be their

relationship, understood as the feeling they have for each other. And it can vanish just as easily.

When Pope John Paul II insists that freedom can survive only so long as it is related to truth, and that truth involves moral norms that are independent of individual choice, he is not even trying to impose some denominational version of truth. He is only arguing for the conditions that give a purpose to public debate and that make democracy and civilisation possible. These presuppose a common grammar on which a consensus can be built across our differences, and genuine pluralism achieved. Only if we are all equally obliged by the truth can we reach out to one another across our differences. (*Faith and Reason*, n.92).

These are the themes of some of John Paul II's greatest encyclicals²¹. If it seems incredible that such teaching should be needed, or if it seems already obvious that to disconnect freedom from objective truth is to bring about freedom's own undoing, then let's note that the US Court's decision referred to earlier was actually *celebrated* by those who claim to be the champions of freedom – *the prestige press, the elite culture, most of the Academy, and many religious leaders*.²²

These errors have also reached right into younger people's ways of thinking. Victoria University's Professor Paul Morris has described to the NZ Listener (December 25, 1999) today's students of Religious Studies - "the first generation without elementary biblical knowledge, and ignorant of Christianity's customs, images and stories". He says

There is a tremendous increase in interest in religion, a very broad interest in the meaning of life, in questions of spirituality, in ecological concerns which have spiritual dimensions....

They come in with a highly developed sense of their own radical individualism. They're looking for religion. They don't necessarily want someone else's. They're opposed to dogma. They don't want to be told about it, they want to discover it. They're very open to talk about the spirit. Sixty-seven percent (of responses to a survey) said they believe in miracles, and thirty-five percent claim to have experienced one! They certainly believe in religious experience.

There is an uncritical interest in self-actualisation, in a feel-good spiritual dimension... to discover Christ Within resonates very closely to the Self Within...

*Nine students (out of 162 replies) identify "love yourself" as a commandment.*²³

The good news is that there are other young people – Catholics – who are looking for something different from this rampant individualism and relativism. Earlier this year, 57 young women and 65 young men, aged from 16 to 43 years (and averaging 26 years) gave up a week of their summer, and paid \$365 each to nurture their faith and their knowledge of the faith at the Hearts Aflame Catholic Summer School. Others have done so over the last six years, and others again do so through similar kinds of events. Our reflection on how the Church is "touching people" must also include them. But they are a counter-cultural minority within our secular individualistic culture. To survive in that environment, they need to experience a Catholic culture in which they develop a sense of security and confidence in their Catholic identity. Our parishes and schools are supposed to provide that experience. Does this need account for the emergence of the "new communities"?²⁴

So what is the challenge, and the opportunity, for us?

Clearly there is a huge battle of ideas going on, and it impacts on people's lives and well-being. The stakes are so great that the Pope has dedicated some of his most important writings to these issues.

But it is a battle of **ideas**. Therefore there is a danger that in the spirit of kiwi pragmatism and intellectual apathy we might just look for other things to do; just carry on as if these issues made no difference. If in fact they don't make any difference to what we are doing, then we might wonder how important is what we are doing. Can religious faith and practices really prescind from the deepest levels of human well-being? Is it enough to be ambulances at the bottom of a cliff? What is the point even of preaching the Christian faith if its difference from other religions is only cultural and if the categories of true and false don't apply?

First we can realise how much we have to offer. We are they who have the fullest, clearest picture of what it means to be human. We who profess the Nicene Creed have the greatest reason of all for knowing the dignity of persons. What we have to offer is the very thing that needs to undergird all social, political and economic life.

We certainly have much more to offer than does the cavalier agnosticism that even admits to not knowing whether the human person has transcendent value!

We are those to whom much has been entrusted. This is wonderful; it's a privilege. And, of course, a responsibility.

Secondly, we need to find new ways of communicating with people who are culturally resistant to hearing about the difference between true and false, right and wrong. If truth and goodness are having a hard time of it, what might be the prospects for beauty? (cf *Faith and Reason*, n. 103). The beauty we find in nature, the beauty we create in music, song and dance, and the beauty that belongs to love, family, loyalty and faithfulness can all touch people deeply and kindle the powerful suggestion that "all this is not for nothing". Even the hardened and the brazen can succumb to the miracles of life and love. At times it can take a bigger act of faith to believe there is no God than to believe there is. Can the gospel (which already proclaims justice, peace and development) also be promoted as the gospel of beauty, which is ultimately one with what is true and good? Do we ourselves need to be more proud of our Church's teaching that the connection between love and life is sacred and that breaking this connection leads to trivialising everything?

Thirdly, we could help to create a new way of thinking and speaking about why we gather for liturgy. I have suggested that people more easily shed religious practice when it seems unconnected, or only extrinsically connected, to their "real" lives. And I have explained how a contemplative way of *seeing* brings us to life, making our worship of God and our ordinary lives one and the same thing. It is in the liturgy that this *intrinsic connection* between faith and life is most clearly focused and intensified.

That is why it is so self-defeating for us to speak of religious practice in the language of merely *extrinsic* connection. The language we use is heard by others through their culturally

conditioned filters. The secular culture in which they live and think and choose derives from the Enlightenment's rejection of tutelage, tradition and authority. That's why people's reasons for not practising so often carry the overtones of "who are they to tell us how to live?", "what do they know about it anyway?" In a culture whose dominant motif is "I'm free to make up my own mind", even the word "preaching" has very negative connotations. Being "told" isn't how people meet their need for individuation.

Our language about the liturgy needs to correlate to people's legitimate aspirations, which is the only way it can ever be recognised as "good news". It needs to be the language of **connectedness**.

For example, let us think of the Eucharist as our own Emmaus story; we are participants in the drama of salvation history. In the liturgy we rehearse our own lives in the light of its wonderful outcome. We take our place.

The scriptures read in the assembly can be perceived as a kind of mirror where we see ourselves in the light of God's revealed purposes. In the liturgy, the Church holds this mirror up to us. In the different feasts and seasons of the liturgy the mirror is held at different angles – always reflecting the way God is present in people's lives. To walk out of the mirror-frame where we are revealed to ourselves is effectively to walk out on ourselves.

Instead of sermons, which by definition tell us what *we* should do, we need homilies which put the spotlight on what *God* is doing in salvation history, which includes our own lives. Noticing how God is present in everything ordinary leads to wonder, thanksgiving and the *obedience of faith*.²⁵

In the liturgy we *do* find ourselves, not through self-absorption, but through the deep experience of becoming *one body, one spirit in Christ*. (Eucharistic Prayer III). In being "for others" we find ourselves.

That is what happens to tens of thousands of young people who go to Taizé every year. In listening to God's word, in chants, and in periods of deep silence, they experience what the liturgy is meant to be – **a deep contemplative experience in which each surrenders their self to become *the body of Christ***. It is this "community" that enters the sanctuary of God's presence and is transformed by the experience. We come out of that experience empowered to *live no longer for ourselves but for him*. (Eucharistic Prayer IV).

So good liturgy *does* touch people's lives, profoundly. But is that what our people are getting? The liturgical renewal was never meant to stop at "making the changes". What I have been describing is what the Council meant by "full, conscious and active participation" (S.C. n.14). Perhaps as the Mixed Commission we could make a joint commitment to insisting on the deeper renewal of the liturgy in all our parishes and communities. This would be our best response to the questions that are the theme of this meeting and of this paper.

Endnotes

1. For example, the natural influence of dominant cultures (e.g. the secular culture and the culture of individualism); the impact that historical, psychological and sociological studies have had on the credibility of religion; democratisation; the secularisation of the cultural elite and of life generally; the influence of a secular media; the changing roles of women; the commercialisation of Sundays; loss of a sense of the sacred; shift from societal support to antipathetic peer pressure.
2. e.g. the breakdown of denominational walls; greater “tolerance” and less “passionate identification” with one’s own denomination; the demise of apologetics; the seeming loss of the “marks” of true religion; a shift to a broader Catholic identity, less tied to ethnic solidarity; unsureness and lack of clarity in catechetics; the higher ratio of mixed marriages; the decrease in vocations to priesthood and religious life; tendency to entrust leadership to pious but cautious, or safe, people....
3. e.g. the historical slowness of the Church to accept some social changes, and even some scientific discoveries; the scandal of division among Christians; moral scandals; fundamentalism; exclusion of women from positions that do not require ordination; clericalism; the autocratic use of authority.
4. e.g. the far greater ratio of weekly communicants; lay involvement in prayer groups; involvement in the causes of justice, peace and development; the considerable extent of lay involvement in theological education, in lay ministries, and in parish and diocesan councils; interest in spiritualities; ecumenism, healthier attitudes in place of repression and fear; the constant stream of people coming to weekday Masses, etc.
5. *The Three Forms of Hope*, quoted in Weigel, George, *Soul of the World*, Washington DC, 1995, p.184.
6. G.S. n. 43.
7. *Liturgy and Power*, 30 Days, n.12, 1998, p. 37.
8. cf also P Berger’s book on the *signals of transcendence* that are rooted within ordinary human experience but which point to a fulfilment beyond our lives in this world. (*A Rumour of Angels*, Penguin, 1970).
9. Weigel, op. cit. 125.
10. cf *Centesimus Annus*, nn. 24, 36, 39.
11. Weigel, ibid. 126
12. Quoted in Weigel, p. 127.
13. Weigel, p. 127
14. cf *History of the World, The Last 500 years*, Chapter 17, The Age of Reason.
15. cf nn. 5, 45-47, 55.
16. In a critique of Prof. L Geering’s book *The World to Come*, (Wellington, 1999), Bishop John Mackey says:

... the Professor Emeritus is captivated by the virtuosity of the intelligentsia and academics as they play their word games. Logic can be a good servant but a bad master when it flies in the face of reality and common-sense. It may be fashionable to espouse post-modernism, but is it wise? As the author remarks with approval, “Post Modernism is indifferent to consistency and continuity. It questions whether we can have strong beliefs in anything at all, for nothing lasts forever. All our social structures, like so many artefacts are here today and gone tomorrow.”
17. cf nn. 81-91, 95, 102.
18. *Culture and Truth*, Address in San Francisco, 1999.

19. This also shows up in a superficial understanding of what it means to respect cultural differences.
20. The right to “follow one’s conscience” presupposes a “good conscience”, i.e. that the person is looking honestly for what is true and right, even if in fact they are mistaken.
21. *Redemptor Hominis*, (1979), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Veritatis Spondor* (1993), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), *Fides et Ratio* (1998).
22. Weigel, p. 127
23. Speaking about a shift in where people locate “the sacred”, Nathan Mitchell puts it this way:

... with the rise and development of modern industrial cultures, our sense of the sacred has shifted location. The sacred is no longer situated “outside”, in the large public celebrations of a community; it is located “inside”, in the personal history and geography of the self.

(In our secular culture) the sense of the sacred is something private, personal, interior, and intimate; the sacred is closely attached to the self, not to rituals celebrated and shared in public. Ritual has become a forgotten way of doing things; its power to mediate the sacred is, consequently, diminished...

The high priests of our culture are not people who work for civil rights or social justice or the liberation of minority groups, but the therapists who can offer self-help, self-improvement, self-actualisation, self-awareness, self-realisation, self-fulfilment and self-esteem. Attention to social reality has been replaced by transcendental self-attention...

*The “age of anxiety” ushered in with nuclear brilliance at Hiroshima in 1945, has yielded to the “age of intimacy”, the “age of sharing and caring”, the “age of meaningful relationships”. We look for the holy to reveal itself, not in the awe-inspiring rites of baptism and eucharist, but in the awesome precincts of the self. (cf *Sense of the Sacred, in Parish, A Place for Worship*, Liturgical Press, 1981, pp. 65 ff).*
24. cf also “plausibility structures” in Berger, op.cit. pp.58 ff.
25. cf Second Vatican Council, Revelation, n.4.

Proposed Discussion Questions:

1. Are there ways in which you have experienced “unconnectedness” between religious practices and ordinary life?
2. How might we make the social teachings of Pope John Paul II better known?
3. In what ways can we promote a Christian anthropology among those who plan our country’s social, political and economic life?
4. How might we promote beauty as a sign pointing beyond itself to God?
5. How might we promote deeper liturgical renewal?