

The Changing Face

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The Changing Face of the Church in Aotearoa-New Zealand

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1. Change in the Church even just a changing face does not flow like water off a duck's back. It actually impacts on people and can affect them deeply. And so our reflection on the changing face of the Church in A-NZ is not merely descriptive. It aims to explain why. We also need to see changes in our country in the light of changes in the Church world-wide.

2. As Catholics we are entitled to be assured that our Church is always the same as the Church handed down to us by the apostles, with its roots in the life and ministry of Jesus himself: - the same faith, the same sacraments, the same ministries.

3. Yet already in that statement we are faced with the reality of change: the way the faith has been formulated; the way some of the sacraments have been celebrated; and the ways the Church's ministries have been structured, have all undergone change without causing change to the faith itself. And what has happened historically speaking can happen again.

4. The governing factor is the mission of the Church, which is the Church's reason for existing. The point has been succinctly expressed by the Swiss theologian (and friend of Pope John Paul II) Hans Urs von Balthasar:

(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. (The Three Forms of Hope, quoted in Weigel's Soul of the World, Washington DC, 1995, p.184).

5. The reason why carrying out the Church's mission involves change is because people live in a great variety of times, places and cultures. They all have the right to express and nurture their faith in the ways that are natural to them. As Pope John Paul II put it when he arrived in Auckland in 1986:

I wish to extend special greetings to you, the Maori people of Aotearoa, and to thank you for your cordial ceremonial welcome. The strengths of Māori culture are often the very values which modern society is in danger of losing: an acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension of every aspect of life; a profound reverence for nature and the environment; a sense of community assuring every individual that he or she belongs; loyalty to family and a great willingness to share; an acceptance of death as part of life and a capacity to grieve and mourn the dead in a human way.

As you rightly treasure your culture, let the gospel of Christ continue to penetrate and permeate it, confirming your sense of identity as a unique part of God's household. It is as Māori that the Lord calls you; it is as Maori that you belong to the Church, the one body of Christ (emphasis added).

6. We would set ourselves up for disappointment if we imagined that change is now finished with and that we can settle down again. That would be a betrayal of the Church's mission in a world that keeps changing. The faith has only just begun to become incarnate in the different cultures of the world. Karl Rahner expressed it this way:

theologically speaking, there are three great epochs in Church history, of which the third has only just begun. First, the short period of Jewish Christianity. Second, the period of the Church in a distinct cultural region, namely that of Hellenism and of European culture and civilization. Third, the period in which the sphere of the Church's life is in fact the entire world. These three periods signify three essential and different basic situations for Christianity and its preaching

the coming-to-be of a world Church does not mean just a quantitative increase in the previous Church, but rather contains a theological break in Church history that still lacks

conceptual clarity, and can scarcely be compared with anything except the transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity. (Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II, Theological Studies, Dec. 1979, pp 721, 726, 727).

7. It wasn't easy for the early Church to break out of its Jewish matrix to become incarnate in the cultures of Rome and Greece, which later formed the basis of European culture. It will be no less painful for the Church of our day to reach beyond the confines of predominantly European thought-patterns to become incarnate in every culture of the world. In our country, the shapes and forms of Catholicism are really only adaptations of our European heritage, if they are even that. Inculturation, as an expression of the Church's mission to evangelise, goes deeper than that:

What matters is to evangelise man's culture and cultures, not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to the very roots. (Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Letter on Evangelisation, para. 20; also para. 62).

This involves a transposition of the gospel in the field of liturgical expression, and in the areas of catechesis, theological formulation, secondary ecclesial structures and ministries (ibid, para. 63).

8. If many New Zealand Catholics were not expecting the changes of recent times, or found them difficult to accept, it was in large measure because of an exaggerated sense of uniformity, changelessness and timelessness that characterised the pre-Vatican II Church.

[*1]

But Kiwi Catholics are also practical and adaptive. Faced with having fewer priests, they have accepted greater responsibility for their own parishes, enabling priests to serve across parish boundaries. By helping with the development of pastoral areas, they have recognised the inevitability of experimentation where there have been no clear blue-prints.

9. The need for continuity with the past and at the same time the need for openness to the future are inter-woven in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. On the day after his election in 1979, Pope John Paul II professed:

We want to insist on the constant importance of the Second Vatican Council. What was implicit should be made explicit in the light of the experimentation that followed and in conjunction with emerging new circumstances.

In such words, Pope John Paul recognised the sense in which the Council is the basis for future re-shaping, and at the same time a beginning point for renewal, not an end point.

10. The main thrusts of the Council are already bringing about recognisable changes in the universal Church and in the Church in Aotearoa-New Zealand. For example:

(a) Perhaps the most far-reaching is the Council's reminder that the call to holiness and the call to share responsibility for the Church's mission are rooted in the sacraments of initiation, and so are for all members of the Church equally, even though in different ways.

The greater involvement of lay men and women in decision-making processes (e.g. parish and diocesan councils and synods), in leadership positions and in ministries, in overseas missionary work, and their increased participation in theological, pastoral and spiritual formation, are all manifestations of this teaching being put into practice.

(b) The Council also initiated a process of decentralising the Church's authority, and recognised that by reason of their ordination, Bishops are responsible with the Pope for the whole Church.

In A-NZ, the bishops act together in the NZ Catholic Bishops' Conference, and join with bishops from other parts of the world in regional meetings and in synods at Rome.

(c) The Council's teaching on the rights, freedom and dignity of the human person is also far-reaching. It even affects the ways the Church's teachings are carried out: the faith is proposed, not imposed; and the Church's magisterium is at the service of conscience (Pope John Paul II).

(In 1998, the NZ Bishops asked the Pope to move towards ensuring women's access to all those positions of responsibility and leadership in the Church that do not require ordination.)

(d) The Council's commitment to Christian unity requires the deeper conversion of all of us, centred around the person of Christ, on whom all Christians converge.

In A-NZ, the Catholic Church participates in bi-lateral dialogues with several Christian churches, and in multi-lateral ecumenical activities.

(e) The Council's emphasis on connecting people's faith with the realities of their lives is intended to overcome that split between the faith they profess and their daily lives which is among the most serious errors of our times (Second Vatican Council, Church in the Modern

World, n.43), and to ensure the gospel reaches into all the strata of humanity (cf Apostolic Letter on Evangelisation, nn. 18, 19 and 29).

In A-NZ, Catholics participate in the works of justice, peace and development in a combined way through Caritas NZ.

(f) The renewal of the liturgy has centred around the translation of the Latin into English and Māori; the revision of the Latin texts; and the refurbishing of liturgical space and furnishings. All this is intended to facilitate people's active participation.

Having moved away from rather individualistic modes of being present at Mass (which made it relatively easy to create an atmosphere of reverence), it remains for all of us to learn how this same sense of awe and reverence is to be generated by a whole congregation acting as one body, one spirit in Christ (Eucharistic Prayer III).

11. All the changes summarised above derive from the Church's faithfulness to its mission in the world. They have all been authorised by the Second Vatican Council and recent Popes, and they are all a work still in progress.

The Church has to reach people in the world as it is, not as it used to be. This is not a matter of conforming to the world's agenda. It is simply a matter of putting into practice Pope John Paul II's reminder to us in our own part of the world that a new social reality requires fresh ways of presenting the faith (Apostolic Letter to the Church in Oceania, n.22). The task is never finished.

Many of the changes for which the Church is sometimes wrongly blamed are changes in the world around us, and are not of the Church's making.

12. The most fundamental form of change is personal conversion. The Church's life is nothing less than the risen Christ's life in us. And so renewal of the Church ultimately comes down to the deepening of each person's relationship with Christ. In this way we all contribute to the renewal of the Church.

Endnote

[*1] The Church of yesterday can be likened to a river barge. It was a large barge, with straight front and sides and a flat bottom, well built for navigating a river, and able to carry everything. There were churches on it and schools and presbyteries and convents and monasteries. There were clubs and tennis courts, YCW and CYM and the Children of Mary. The priest was trained to pilot the barge along the river. The river had many bends, and it was not always easy going. There were alligators and swamps, and now and then rapids to be negotiated. But on the whole the river was fairly predictable. The pilot could learn his job in a seminary and carry it out well enough if he followed the instruction book. (This is an over-simplification, but it does capture some of the truth).

Our problem is that in our time the river has entered the sea, with obvious results for the barge. There is nothing wrong with reaching the sea: that is where rivers are meant to go. But the barge which had done an excellent job in bringing us down the river, is not built for breaking through waves and negotiating the open sea. We have had to face up to the experience of chaos, as the waves crash against the flat prow of the barge, causing it to shudder and almost break apart, with the loss of some of its cargo.

It is understandable that those on the barge suffered shock, and many became desperate. Some tried to row back upstream, but that provide impossible. Some jumped overboard hoping to survive in small dinghies. But dinghies are too small to carry the mission of the Church, and are no better than a barge in the open sea.

Others, unable to face what was happening, sat in the pilot's cabin with the blinds down and painted river scenes on the windows, trying to convince themselves and others that they were still on the river, and that everything would be all right if everyone kept on doing what they were trained to do.

But at the Second Vatican Council, the leadership of the Church agreed that in the modern world is where the Church needs to be (Rev M Fallon MSC, Being a Catholic, what does it mean? Inform, 14).