

## Six men in a leaky boat

An opinion piece about where the Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand might head, in the light of recent challenges.

David Mullin

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*Over the past week or two there have been public statements coming out of America in particular about sexual abuse by priests and others in the Church. Cover-ups allowed this behaviour to continue. Catholic and secular media are awash with commentary.*

At the heart of the storm has been findings in Pennsylvania and a testimony from a former Vatican Ambassador to the USA, Archbishop Viganò. The testimony from Archbishop Viganò implicates Pope Francis, a number of cardinals, and many bishops in inaction. Media commentators, both in and out of the Church, have taken sides and delighted in finger pointing and blame. Many American bishops accuse others of knowing something or not doing enough, Catholic commentators have added a side show of conservative versus liberal debate, most lay people here in NZ don't know what to think, and victims demand more.

It is all very painful to read. Proud to be Catholic? At the moment – not so much.

- **There is a temptation to turn current realities into more statements or personal bandwagons that fail to engage or change anything.**

I find much of the framing of the issue strange, illogical, and ill-advised. The comments churn the stormy seas into a series of frenzied whirlpools that rock the Church about, but what does it change?

Trust in the institution, and the sense of hope that the Church should provide, are further undermined when the response to crimes seems to be public statements that sound, to me at least, like individuals grandstanding and acting in a self-serving manner or trying to protect their club; look at me, I will be the one to sort this out; I've done nothing wrong; look at them, they are worse than us.

Unless we pause and think deeply, in order to change our culture, we will betray the victims of abuse once again.

- **First, we must simply acknowledge and accept that individually and corporately there has been failure.**

Failure of personal integrity, failure of hierarchy, failure of governance: a failure in all respects. All these failures make people angry, ashamed and frustrated. I am dismayed that individuals abused children and others in their care. I am angry they were allowed to abuse others, even after abuse was known to superiors. I am angry that the abusers and those who covered it up are people who were trusted – priests, bishops, and others.

Various commentators are blaming the issue on their pet topic, unacknowledged paedophilia rings, gay-culture in seminaries, homosexuality, clericalism, celibacy, pursuit of power...etc. It is true that all of these exist but no single one of these factors is the sole cause. Finger pointing doesn't help victims or change culture. We need to go deeper.

- **We must recognise that looking backwards for the scapegoat changes nothing.** Endless analysing and bureaucratic responses can become a crutch for changing little.

We can become too busy navel-gazing rather than evolving. Rather than trying to blame this disordered set of events on a particular symptom, what can the Church do to move forward and create the environment that will ensure systemic abuse will not occur again?

- In my view, **the way forward is a radical reshaping of Church governance.** This reshaping needs to be implemented immediately.

Bishops and clergy hold the major governance strings. Any theological, ecclesial, or canonical argument that aims to continue the status quo strikes me as being self-serving nonsense.

For example, soon there will be another Synod of Bishops in Rome – this time on young people – where about 80% of the participants will be Bishops and only Bishops have any real say. Pope Francis himself has called for young people to be engaged in *every* level of Church governance. Why then do we continue with archaic models of ‘consultation’? The fact that it isn’t changing I find, quite frankly, ridiculous.

Should the Vatican’s Synod process be reframed as ‘Synods of the Church’ rather than Synods of Bishops? Would that change of emphasis begin to challenge modes of operating and set the sails towards a new course?

So I ask myself – would having a diverse range of people acting in positions of ‘real’ governance in the local, diocesan, national and international Church weaken or eradicate the negative culture I describe? Would having women, young people and older people, people from various ethnicities, married and single, people who agreed and disagreed with those in leadership, and people from all economic strata on parish councils, diocesan boards, seminary councils, and the curia do anything to make a difference? Would ensuring that diverse governance groups have real canonical clout make any difference?

I believe, unreservedly, yes. Would they have made a difference in the past? - Probably.

We do need to keep the hope in front of us. In New Zealand we do have significant governance groups which are balanced at national, diocesan, and parish level. We probably could show many others around the world how to develop in this regard.

- **Part of the problem is the fact that, historically, governance has been tied, theologically and canonically, to ordination.**

Ordination is ordination for service. That ordination is orientated toward leadership is entirely acceptable but surely not exclusively so, especially when it comes to governance. For a start – how does their formation prepare seminarians for future governance roles?

On 31 August 2018 the Australian Catholic Bishops and the peak body for Catholic Religious Congregations in Australia released their response to the report of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse. Many of the recommendations of the Royal Commission relate to changes needed in Church Governance. The most general and the most far reaching of the Commission’s recommendations states:

***Recommendation 16.7*** ACBC [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. This review should draw from the approaches to governance of Catholic health, community services and education agencies.*

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia. (2018). *Response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, p8, retrieved from [www.catholic.org.au](http://www.catholic.org.au)

It is interesting to note that the recommendation was “Accepted in Principle” by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia.

Current revelations, worldwide, point to a current Church governance model that tried to protect the public image of order in the face of deep chaos. The leaders tried to keep the ship afloat by ensuring that their officers stayed publically strong so the rank and file would continue to march in step. It was based on a model of Church that reinforced order over care for the community.

Yet, as Cardinal Tom Williams said many years ago:

*“... the most telling image of the Church is an untidy caravan struggling across the desert, not a regiment of infantry marching in perfect step across an immaculate parade ground. We are after all the People of God. And people are imperfect and contradictory. To know it, we have only to look at ourselves.”*

Cardinal Thomas William (1989). *Homily for the closing Mass at the Synod of the Archdiocese of Wellington 1988-89* [Homily text]. Archdiocese of Wellington Archives

More recently, Fr Tom Roscia, a well-known Church communicator, adds this:

*“I recently did a little study of Pope Francis’ homilies and texts to find all of the places where Francis talks about the devil, and one of the interesting things he says is that diabolical works are about monologue. The works of the Spirit are about dialogue. Monologue is all about people speaking to themselves about themselves and speaking about others, not speaking with others. Works of the Spirit are those based on solid dialogue.”*

Fr Thomas Rosica CSB (2014, July). *The Future of Catholic Media* (Sean Salai SJ). *America Magazine*. Retrieved from [www.americamagazine.org/](http://www.americamagazine.org/)

The culture that developed and allowed for the abuse that occurred was highly ordered, structured, bureaucratic and full of monologues or “insider-ologues”.

This culture was self-serving, talked itself up, spoke to itself about itself, and expected everyone else to follow. Bishops and religious orders shifted their own men about, sometimes after they committed horrendous crimes, with no conversation with anyone else. No one from outside the club could influence the club.

Building and reinforcing the club through grandstanding and public statements, it seems to me, is a big part of the particular culture that needs to stop. This culture didn’t take hold following Vatican II or because of the sexual revolution or because of the LGBT movement or because Catholics rejected *Humanae Vitae*. It is not a liberal or conservative issue. It is simply wrong.

A community of faith, a Church, when it becomes a club or network that only speaks from on high, is no longer of the Holy Spirit and becomes something which less and less will follow.

- **The current Church governance models I see at national, diocesan, and parish level seem to have got stuck somewhere between a corporate, public sector, and confused notional Church governance model.** Doing none particularly well.

A model to describe the differences when they do work well:

Corporate	Public Sector	Catholic
Do the will of ownership	Do the will of the people	Discern the will of God
A function of Board of Directors	A function of Elected Representatives	A function of the communio
Decisions through exercise of power according to bylaws	Decided by majority vote and consensus	Discerned through Ignatian discernment
Consultation of experts and ownership	Consultation to know the will of the people	Prayer, meditation, contemplation, dialogue with and among the communio, expert consultation
Success is dominance in the market	Success is dominating the political agenda	Success is salvation of souls

*Adapted from*

*Jim Lundholm-Eades, Jim Rice, Mary Beth Koenig (May 2018); Governance and Diocesan Committees – Insurance Committee, Finance Committee etc. Workshop presentation presented at the 2018 AJG Convocation, Minneapolis, USA*

I believe that we need to move to revised Governance models that start to look more ‘catholic’ or faith filled. That doesn’t mean that we can’t learn from corporate and public sector governance – in fact the opposite. It is just that principles from other sectors have different starting points and different ends in mind. This needs to be *fully* understood.

So, how do we start? A set of questions I received from the workshop source above asks:

- Do we have the right people at our governance and consultative tables?
- Are our consultative boards and committees paying attention to their primary purposes?
- What perspectives are missing or (conversely) overwhelm other perspectives in our Catholic governance, boards, and committees?

*Ibid*

Of course this list is not definitive. We might add:

- Are we principle or personality driven?
- Are our primary purposes actually clear and agreed?
- Are we perpetuating the same old names and ideas, or evolving?
- Who is heard, who contributes to policy, direction, decision making and governance?
- But the overriding question is: who responds to all of these questions?

Caritas Aotearoa states on its website that the “*Catholic social teaching principle of Subsidiarity is about empowering communities. Taking account of subsidiarity - mana whakahaere - means ensuring decision making happens at the most appropriate level so all those affected can contribute*”.

- Leadership is needed but **it cannot be asked of local communities to do something that their leaders are not doing themselves.**

So our six diocesan bishops of the dioceses in New Zealand need to ask, how is their leadership shared, enhanced, and strengthened through the participation of others?

Leadership, rightly and understandably, is not always by committee. At the same time, our 'six men steering a leaky boat' need a bigger, more diverse, crew. Our bishops need support, in a meaningful forward thinking way. In a way that actually helps with plotting a course, not just riding the waves.

Crucial questions, I think, are along these lines:

- How are the views and stances which lead to decisions, local and national, evolved?
- Who is involved in decision making?
- Who is involved in forming and being accountable for our bishops?
- Where is theology actually happening in New Zealand and who is formed and renewed by it?
- Who governs the seminary, who manages the seminary, and how?
- Do we, whom our priests serve, have a real say in their formation and placement?
- What can be done to unleash freshness and vitality in local parishes and help parishioners serve the communities they live in?
- Where is the voice of the (thousands of) educated Catholics who have moved away from the Church, bored by poorly prepared or irrelevant homilies, or repulsed by misogyny, or put off by patronisation at the local parish governance level?
- Do our bishops take the issue of clericalism seriously enough to ensure that there is systematic pastoral accountability?

Yes, these questions are offered partly out of frustration, but most significantly from a deep desire for our children to desire to be part of a universal community of faith we call the Catholic Church.

I recognise that I am in a position where I will need to be part of the change. I am aware that my words might just become just another monologue floating meaninglessly on the high seas. I am prepared to jump on board and be part of change that is required, recognising that any view I hold or idea I propose will need refining through discussion and dialogue with others who can influence.

I hope this happens. I want to be proud to be Catholic again.

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