

PRIESTHOOD IN AUSTRALIA TODAY — REALITIES AND CHALLENGES

NCP Convention Melbourne 13 May 1985

Vatican II has invited us to respond to “the signs of the times”. This week we shall be exposed to the story of Church that is trying to do just that.

I believe that reading “the signs of the times” is trickier than it first sounds.

Firstly, I believe we need to have reached a certain structural stage of faith development, a certain maturity in the way we perceive reality (as distinct from what we believe), before we are able to See the signs of the times.

Secondly, I believe that reading the signs of the times is much more than noting certain facts, their patterns and meanings. It means seeing them as they reveal the mind of God. This involves a whole sensitivity from within — an awareness of our inner experience, as well as an appropriate theology that facilitates insight and leads to understanding.

Finally, I believe that a general reading of the signs of the times is not enough. To see the action of God in his world is great, but we can't just join in where we like. We also need to listen more acutely to learn in what precise, specific way he is calling us to cooperate with him. We can't just run on to the field from the sidelines and play in any position we choose. We need to know where he wants us to play.

1. The structural stages of faith development necessary to read the signs of the times.

The difficulty is obvious. Conservative Church groups, for example, look around and see the system breaking down and judge the priority to be a return to the formulas and patterns of yesterday. The Religious Education Centres look around, see irrelevance in yesterday's formulas and patterns, and call for rethinking and new catechetical methods. Others look up, see the injustice that so many people suffer, and say we can't afford the luxury of theological arguing but need to get out on the streets and meet injustice head on. Yet others see the injustice that abounds, see the futility and corruption of much political action, feel the near infinite weight of evil, and see our need to marshal the power of God; and our priority, therefore, to be to pray.

I suppose each group would congratulate itself on its reading the signs of the times — but the result is disastrous. And it is not simply a problem of the Church out there. As a body of priests we have adherents in each group.

How do we diagnose the distressful symptoms?

Apart from temperaments, which are unique and over which we have little control, another highly significant factor is how far we have moved in our faith journey through life.

Where do we stand as priests along this trajectory of developing faith? We can settle at different stages of faith development on our journey across life; but for our purpose,

three reasonably definable ones are important. The analysis that I am to use now relies heavily on the research of James Fowler, but it is easily checked against our own experience.

Initially, our families, and our seminary training, helped us generally to be very at home within the system, and generally to be uncritically accepting of it. A lot of the study we did was geared to give us the answers to the questions others had raised. We were not helped noticeably to hear the questions that could have risen from within our own hearts.

Some priests still remain comfortably in this stage; the questions of life have somehow passed them by. Their ministry is acceptable to a large similar segment of the Church, but not to others, and certainly irrelevant to many of the young and to the world at large. However, their generosity and dedication are unquestioned and their personal holiness could be heroic.

For most of us, however, life disturbed our peace. From within came the need to establish our own identity, to be our own person. From without came a whole barrage of attitudes and actions, from friends, from the media, from the secular world in general, sometimes even from others in the Church, that attacked, that questioned, that ridiculed what we had unquestioningly held sacred.

Life does that. It provokes crisis — like the Spirit that drove Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil. The Spirit of God is constantly at work. The Spirit leads us to crisis, through the interaction of the experiences of life and the inner urges to identity, to integrity, to an all-embracing love.

Some priests felt the crisis, but opted not to move. They become the heresy-hunters, the civic crusaders, often with remarkable energy and at times, I fear, a haunted glint in the eye.

Other priests, the majority, felt the crisis – and deepened their faith in the process. I would say that for most the shift to a personally owned faith occurred gradually, and usually according to a “head” model. Suffice to notice the profound unease of so many priests at the thought of speaking in tongues. Our training formed us to distrust anything we could not understand. This was O.K. to a point. But those who have stayed “in their heads” cannot fruitfully dialogue with or motivate a large body of the laity whose conversion has followed other paths.

With time it is possible to broaden our personal experience of other ways truly to find God and to continue the way of ceaseless conversion. Genuine growth in love requires that we learn to hold polarities peacefully in tension; and with God’s grace we can learn in time. Until we do, our ministry, and indeed our own personal life, lack harmony.

An experience I had about fifteen years ago has proved to be a “cautionary tale” to me ever since. I attended as a representative of Australian Catholic Relief a weekend meeting of other representatives from the variety of voluntary aid agencies operating in Australia at the time. At first I was very impressed by the depth of knowledge and degree of commitment obvious in so many of those present. I felt quite inadequate by

comparison. But by the end of the weekend I felt greatly relieved that some of these people were not in positions of power. There was such unwillingness to listen to a contrary viewpoint, and noticeably strong currents of hatred for the identified oppressor. Where did I stand? Conversion without much love! Still so far to travel!

When former systems are seen to be not comprehensive enough, they begin to break down. This can be a frightening time, a “dark night”. We need to hang on, and to do that we need somehow to trust — to trust God. An intimate friend can help, too, but in the earlier stages of growth we haven’t been all that good at intimacy.

What is essential is that like Mary we learn to ponder the events of life in our hearts. I shall develop this point through the rest of this talk.

2. Opening to the mind of God

When we have grown to the stage where we are able to see reality without undue distortion or narrowness, the reading of the signs of the times can begin. The process is, however, more than mere perception and clear-sightedness. The experience from without needs to meet the experience from within. The signs are read, as it were, by our hearts. It is in our hearts that the action of the Spirit leads to insight and understanding.

Pope Paul VI said that the essential condition for the renewal of the Church was not primarily more information, more study, more stimulating models, but a renewal of spirituality. It does not sound so exciting, but our experience twenty years down the road from Vatican II has shown us that other avenues alone have not been enough. I wonder why the journey inwards does not seem so exciting as the action at the surface? It would seem to me that the only way to preserve our action at the surface from the risk of being a mere tilting at windmills is precisely the trust and security drawn from the journey inwards.

Jesus was not frightened of it, or of the temptations on the way. The Spirit led him into the emptiness of the desert where against the background of radical temptation he had to learn the direction of his own heart. Welling up from the depths that heart, as they had welled up earlier from the community consciousness of the Deuteronomist, came the convictions that coloured his public life, gave him energy, and gave his energy direction: *“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”*; and despite the apparent inevitability of certain failure, *“You must not put the Lord your God to the test”*; and providing the context of his whole activity and drawing it into unity, *“You must worship the Lord your God and serve him alone”*.

Prayer, that descent into the heart, was a constant factor in the life of Jesus, throwing light on the meaning of his life as it unfolded, opening him to the will of the Father. In some ways that prayer climaxed in the prayer in Gethsemane, that became for Jesus the final moment of enlightenment, and freed him to walk into his final twenty-four hours, into that cosmic conflict of good and evil, and to emerge victorious.

As well as being in touch with our hearts, we need also a theology. The faith system that we follow holds our insights together, brings them into perspective, and affects to a profound extent the experiences we count as relevant.

In other words, our theology will affect how we see our world. I believe that theologically we have been poorly served. A healthy theology of Church will let us see that the burden of the Church's mission is primarily the laity's. Our responsibility is to call forth and co-ordinate their charisms and ministries. We have taken ourselves too seriously, burdened ourselves with responsibilities that are not ours.

As well, our understanding of the process of salvation has been largely pelagian. We have been performance-dominated, frightened of failure, and have allowed little room for God to save. The mystery of salvation is too rich to reduce to any single synthesis.

As Jesus lived it, redemption lay not in structure, not in Christendom, not in the numbers game, not in attempting to protect himself or others from the encounter with evil.

In this context, I would like to reflect on what I think was perhaps the content of the terrible inner conflict of Jesus in Gethsemane and on Calvary, because I believe it central to any understanding of the mystery of salvation. We need to face the same conflict, to experience the same overturning of cherished convictions that is the meaning of conversion. Through that conflict Jesus learnt the mystery of the Father's heart.

How was Jesus' death redemptive? Jesus' death says to me that the essence of redemption lies not primarily in the "what" of our activity but in the "how" and the "why".

Firstly it was failure — failure, breakdown, the experience of futility and powerlessness. Essentially failure — because there temptation is strongest and evil at its greatest potential. Jesus knew the temptation to despair, that his path of integrity and authenticity was ultimately pointless, that somehow God and his values had failed. Jesus knew the temptation to reject and to curse his own powerlessness — he could not live the lives of others, make their decisions, protect them from their crises. Jesus knew the temptation to aggression, to vindictiveness, to hatred of those who had balked his every step and were finally making sure that any further initiative was impossible. He knew the temptation to die having lost hope. There was no further possibility now that he was dying to call people to think again, to change, to love.

He encountered evil at its fiercest — not "out there" somewhere on some exciting battlefield, but "within" as it sucked him down into itself in the utter aloneness of the encounter with the ultimate weakness, death.

And there, within, in the heart of Jesus, evil was overwhelmed. In that remorseless struggle with the evil one, Jesus learnt the Father's heart and identified with it. He met despair, levelled with it, stared it out, and responded with trust. He met the limitations of humanness with acceptance. He met aggression with forgiveness. And he poured out his life "for us and for all" because he refused to not hope in us.

The prayer of Paul was that he might *reproduce the pattern of Jesus' death* — so that he might *share in the power of resurrection*.

Jesus said that the path of discipleship was to *take up the cross and follow him* — into temptation. At the same time, it is to draw on the resources that the Spirit provides to trust the non-manipulative way of love to give life, to accept human limitation and weakness, to forgive, and to commit our lives in hope, hope in people, radical hope. Anything else, and we may as well take up politics: that is the way of power, of manipulation, of compromise, of cynicism, of survival at any price.

To see our own hearts as the battleground of the redemption is not an excuse to disengage from life, to back off from action for justice. (That is the path to the quiet life.) To undertake discipleship is to let engagement with life confront us with temptation. It seems to me then that the kingdom lies not essentially in the external activity (though that is necessary), not in an order imposed on others or done for others, certainly not in deprecating the evil in others, but in the overwhelming by love of evil as it moves from external attack to inner temptation trying to conform us to itself. No one can take another's place. We can only help each other in love.

3. Discerning where we fit into God's action in the world.

All this is lived out in life, in the network of the countless decisions, commitments, experiments, failures, betrayals etc. that make up our life.

Given that we are reading fairly truthfully the signs of the times, interpreting them rightly against the backdrop of cosmic redemption, of all the many possibilities for decision and action that open up to us, how do we know what God is asking of us? We might extend the horizon, and ask, what is God asking of the Australian Church?

During this week you will be exposed to the model of the Brazilian Church. Is God calling us to move in that direction? Obviously he could be. The question is: Is He? That raises the next question: How do we find out? We need to face the issue of discernment.

I take it as obvious that we cannot discern God's will for the Church as a whole if we have not learnt to discern his will as individuals. There lies our first priority. I believe it is important that we learn.

It is not enough that we run around doing good things for God or for others. There is no life in that. God is the only source of life. We need to do God's work. It sounds obvious, but it is not.

So many of us experience life as pressure — pressure to do an ever increasing number of things, to meet an ever increasing number of expectations, deadlines etc.. No one gets burnout doing God's work. If there is not time to do certain things, they cannot all be God's will, because he made the twenty-four hours there are in each day, he knows that we need sleep, and recreation, and a lot of time for prayer; and he also knows that in our humanness we also waste time and are not all good organizers. If it is not God's will that we are so busy, whose will is it?

I think this issue has become increasingly important as we move into more structures like parish councils and team ministries etc.. They do not decrease the workload. They increase it. More than that, they add the further pressure of team expectations.

If we are not careful, even a week like this week can finish up as an experience of further pressure, further expectations and demands. We can feel overwhelmed by the immensity of the task, our own confusion, and the ocean of inertia out there. That hurts, hurts deeply; and hurt generates anger that, if unrecognized, turns to feelings of guilt and depression. If we do not return home from this week determined to do less, then I believe we are doomed to forever achieve less. And burnout comes one step closer.

We cannot live life richly, in a life-giving way, if we do not become familiar with the voices that call within. A myriad of voices echo there — only one is God's; and God's is gentle and life-giving. The others, the strident ones, arise from our unredeemed self, our insecurities, our fears and the thousand forms they take.

We need to learn to discern these various voices, like the different instruments in an orchestra. We need to grow familiar with the voice of the Spirit, to distinguish it from the other largely destructive voices within.

This sensitivity is cultivated in silence, in stillness. It needs time, and it can only happen over time. To stop from our busyness, to deny our need for performance, to have the courage to fail the expectations, real or projected, of others, calls for real strength and real self-discipline. Many, of course, will disparage it, saying it is a luxury we cannot afford, call it navel-gazing or something similar. That's their problem.

If we are not men of prayer, our dreams might be great, our commitment unreserved, but we run the risk of simply doing "our thing" for God, rather than doing God's work, which alone gives life — though we might have to wait for "the third day". (There is a precedent!)

We need to be men of prayer, yet I realize it is not enough to say that. Given the poverty of our prayer tradition and discipline of the last three or four centuries, prayer itself may not be enough. It can too easily be a further performance to gain points, a busy activity that leaves little opportunity to hear the voice of God. We need the darkness, the struggle and the emptiness. We need to confront, not our strengths and achievements, but our limitations, our needs, our pervasive sinfulness. Then, when we have stopped our running, our activity, our busyness that tie us to the surface, God can gently speak to us the truth, the truth of his unconditional love, of his trust, and of his hopes. God calls us to contemplation, to the simplicity of 'spending time with' — and little more. For this we might need encouragement, and the guiding hand of a friend who is walking the journey perhaps a step or two in front.

Pope John believed that the starting point for all true renewal is our own selves, and specifically our own hearts. Pope Paul saw renewal of spirituality as the starting point of the renewal of the Church. Unless we are committed to growing spiritually, we are doomed either to being forever insensitive to justice and systemic change, or, what is just as bad, to a continuing infighting that enervates and destroys, or, what is worse, to a withdrawal into apathy, or, sadly, to being overwhelmed by the tyrannical demands that drive us to exhaustion and burnout.

It will be safe to move to the task of structural renewal of the Church and of action for

justice in the world only when we are determined to undertake, too, the inward journey to the heart.