

Priests Moving Forward Together

[This is the text of a letter written early in 1994 to the team members of the Ballarat diocese's Ministry to Priests Program by Fr John McKinnon in his role as Diocesan Director of the Program. In addition to being the Program Director within the diocese, John had also worked half-time at the national level. At the time of writing, John was also Chairman of the diocese's Pastoral Planning Taskforce.]

This is a personal attempt to state where I think I am at. If some are interested, we might be able to move together.

The discipline of doing some of the home-work as a member of the Pastoral Planning Taskforce has brought home to me quite forcefully a number of important messages.

There is every likelihood that by the year 2010, the shape of the diocesan church will be significantly different. Not least among those factors is the fact that there will be only between 30 and 40 priests under 75 at work in our parishes. I don't know yet the population spread, and cannot read the projections of practising Catholics. Certainly on present indications Mass-going Catholics will be fewer than they are now.

By the year 2010, if I have not died, I shall have been retired for two years. So the shaping of the future diocesan church will take part by and large during what is left of my own lifetime.

The changes confronting me I see as tremendous opportunity, as quite freeing from the habitual mind-sets and practices that, if left unchanged, will simply see us wind down. We simply cannot carry on as we have been doing without fading away.

Yet, as I look at myself, I feel a bit dis-spirited. I need to change, but I am not sure how. However, I do feel a strong something stirring in me. Apart from the usual things, some of my recent reading has thrown a lot of light on what is going on within me.

I think my starting point is a feeling of being somewhat overwhelmed by not having time to do what I vaguely feel needs to be done, of knowing that I am not doing what I know would be worth doing, and even avoiding it at times and getting involved in something else instead, a feeling of heading nowhere that I am conscious of, and certainly of not shaping the future but rather frittering away the present. I enjoy some/many of the things I do, but the fear at the back of my head is that I am not achieving much.

Whether I project my own state, or am really picking up what is going on in others, I think that many of the priests, not just in our diocese but around the nation, are burdened by a feeling of lostness, powerlessness, confusion, aimlessness, a lack of energy and of consistent enthusiasm. It would not surprise me if the bishops feel the same. Someone else's invitation to do things, for example, the Pope's call to make this decade a Decade of Evangelisation, hits me like a lead balloon and generates no interest in me at all. I don't like this.

My involvement at the national level in the Ministry to Priests program over the past ten years had me looking closely at the profile of the Australian priest, and the retreats I have been giving to priests over the same period have had me focussing my attention on the individual priest and the need for and the shape of our individual on-going conversion. I think now that my gaze has

been too restricted. At times I have discussed with another close friend what he has called the impact of the structure we live in. But I did not get onto precisely what he has been saying or know how to follow up the idea.

In recent years in my own inner journey I have been reading a bit about dysfunctional families, trying to understand some of the things that go on inside myself. An initial book that I found helpful was one by Bradshaw called *Healing the Shame that Binds You*. One of the messages from that that stayed with me was his remark that, as well as physical or sexual abuse on children, an equally significant experience is simply the absence of much expressed feeling in the family - of either affection or fear or anger or joy, etc.. It can leave a person uncertain about his own worth, his own reactions and feelings, and can lead to a whole lot of compulsions, among which in my own case is a drive to perfectionism and neatness (plus a number of other things).

Reading and thinking about the issues raised by that book set me up to read another book, *The Co-dependent Church*, by Virginia Hoffman, while I was on holidays. I found it on a bookshelf. Her approach is to see the whole Church in the light of a dysfunctional family, with similar dynamics and relationships and feelings. I thought that Hoffman herself was an angry woman. She was not impressed by the hierarchical system. Her solution in her own case seems to have been to have gravitated out of the institutional Church and to have joined a House Church. I related to many of the examples and points that she listed, was put off by her aggression, and doubted that her own practical solution was necessary.

Not long afterwards I was talking to a priest in Brisbane whose judgment I admire considerably. He was talking about an issue he was involved in and made the comment that he wondered who was more out of touch with reality, the priest he was helping or the church system that was having trouble coping with the priest. I shared some of the things running around in my own head and heart, and we seemed to have a similar outlook.

About the same time I was talking to the priest in charge of on-going education for priests in the Parramatta diocese. He had gone overseas to study with a view to equipping himself for a role in the Decade of Evangelisation. Before he had gone far in his studies, he realised that the prior need was not so much to evangelise the unchurched but to make the Church itself a missionary-, not a maintenance-, oriented body. His further studies in that direction led him to work on the Church as system, the way it operates, and the way that we who belong to it relate to each other and to our world.

He named a few books worth reading - some of them in fact had been mentioned in the bibliography of Hoffman's book.

One was *The Dysfunctional Church - Addiction and Codependency in the Family of Catholicism*, by Michael Crosby. It covered similar ground to Hoffman's book, but was written by a priest, was not so aggressive, and was more positive. He didn't see the answer as starting off a new church but working from within the one we belong to. He sees the current church system as addicted to male patriarchal clericalism under which umbrella we operate addictively and codependently. His critique is not essentially of male clerics or bishops but of the human system that we have created and within which we operate.

To appreciate better his comments I began to read more about addiction and codependency. The two books that helped me were *When Society becomes an Addict*, by Anne Wilson Schaefer,

and *The Addictive Organisation* by Schaefer and Diane Fassel. I found the second one particularly helpful. It wasn't talking specifically about the church and focussed more on business corporations, although it did recognise the Church as facing the same problems and manifesting the same symptoms.

The final book I read had nothing to do with the Church, and came out of a different stable from the books on addiction. Though it used a different vocabulary, its message pointed very much in the same direction and its different approach complemented the message of the other books. It is called *The Empowered Manager - Positive Political Skills at Work*, and is written by Peter Block. It is a much more positive book than the others, and seems to indicate a possible way forward.

In an addictive family, confusion reigns, because no one is in touch with their feelings and their interactions are stereotyped.

In an addictive organisation, confusion also reigns, but it is swept under the carpet and no one speaks out. The addictions in question are not necessarily substance addictions like to alcohol or drugs or cigarettes or food. They are more likely process addictions - addictions to control, approval, perfection, hard work, etc..

No one is to blame for anything, it is always someone else's fault - either the boss or the underlings or the peers. And no one really takes responsibility for succeeding - that is also someone else's baby.

Relationships are stereotyped. No one is truly themselves, but fall into codependent roles, reading the other and responding accordingly. People appreciate power, but can't get what they want, either because of the boss or others. As in the Church, it's the bishop's fault or parishioners or the other priests, etc.. There is no way to get at them, we have no sanctions, and we feel powerless, stymied, frustrated. And we seem to be getting nowhere, even if our little projects sometimes seem to work.

Block talks about two kinds of organisation: the bureaucratic and the entrepreneurial. For the Church, read maintenance or mission. Bureaucratic organisations start off usually as entrepreneurial, but lose their way. It is of the nature of bureaucratic organisations to grow bigger for a while, and then inexorably to wind down until eventually taken over.

The essence of the bureaucratic organisation is the patriarchal contract (sounds familiar!), the pyramid structure, with authority coming down from the top. The contract is based on four assumptions (these also sound familiar!): submission to authority, denial of self-expression, sacrifice for unnamed future rewards, and the belief that these assumptions are the only sensible (God-ordained?) way to go.

He comments that with all the energy exerted to achieve control, the unadmitted experience is precisely the opposite. In fact, the assured way for employees to ruin any organisation is to work to rules! Control relieves people from taking responsibility for their own actions, but it never assures that what is wanted is ever satisfactorily achieved.

The motivating energy for the bureaucratic organisation is self-interest, assured through advancement and promotion, salary, approval from above, safety and control.

Relationships in the bureaucracy are largely manipulative: people say what they don't mean and don't mean what they say (It can be quite confusing!). And they give away no more information than is strictly necessary. Words are a powerful weapon.

The result of all this is dependency. Everyone is watching and reading everyone else, and trying to protect their own interest. No one really levels. It might be too risky.

Remember the diocesan profile and its figures on inner/outer directedness, feeling-spontaneity, and self-actualising values. Our greatest concern was confrontation; and approval figured very highly among our deepest needs.

In lots of ways I recognise so much of the bureaucratic system in myself; and in the Church. It is what we grew up with. However, even it limps somewhat in our own diocesan situation since some of the motivating factors that other organisations have no longer exist for ourselves - promotion and salary improvement for starters. And even safety seems now at a price.

Block then talks about the entrepreneurial organisation. What he says sounds so much like a gospel vision.

Its definition comes from an emphasis on taking authority for our projects from ourselves, from within, from our own deep heart desires - doing what we are doing because we choose it and set our heart on it, not just because someone else, the bishop, asks us. Not that we don't do what we are asked, but we say our yes because we believe in it and not because someone else does.

I am a priest because I believe in it, and if others don't, or choose to leave, that's their problem - but it does not affect my choice.

It also emphasises the importance of genuine and honest self-expression. The energy to do anything comes from our feelings. Keeping them bottled up numbs our involvement. Expressing them may mean we have to face confrontations, but we maintain the energy. Absence of confrontations does not mean that everyone is truly in agreement, just that we do our own thing in an unobtrusive way, or drag our feet, or work to rules!

He sees the third element of an entrepreneurial approach to be commitment. I don't do what I am doing because I have to, in the hope of approval or whatever, but because it has meaning for me. It is my choice and I commit myself to it for its own sake. I act because I have chosen to love!

The motivating factors that support this approach are that it gives me a sense of meaning, an opportunity to contribute and serve, it respects my own integrity, and allows me to interact honestly and up front with people, letting them know where I stand and seeking to know where they stand.

That this will lead to the kind of pay-off I desire is a risk. It is also an act of faith. But the alternative is not worth the energy.

A consequence of all this is a commitment to relate authentically to others, saying what we mean, keeping them informed and helping them to succeed and to prosper the common aim.

Block believes that autonomy with compassion is the essential condition for empowering ourselves and those around us. If we wait until top management gives leadership to the change we want to see, we miss the point. We take responsibility for the success of our enterprise. For us to have any hope that our own preferred future will come to pass, we provide the leadership. We hope that the world around us supports our vision, but even if it doesn't, we will still act on that vision.

How to bring about the change? This is where he is particularly helpful. We have heard before on other occasions what he has to say, but for me I am hearing it for the first time from a consistent context and with hope.

He says there are three steps: We create our own vision. We communicate that vision to others. We then coach others to create their own vision.

In creating our own vision, he advises to choose greatness - what we can contribute, not what we can get. We give, irrespective of response. We give without expectations. He warns us from being too practical immediately - that is for mission statements, and is another matter altogether. The vision is about mind-set, rather than external goals, because the mind-set is the source of meaning and the guarantee of integrity.

The vision looks to relationships and the way we treat each other. It is a choice to love, not to exploit, to manipulate or to mould.

And on he goes!!

But if we don't choose, he maintains that we remain in or gravitate into the bureaucratic, maintenance mode. And it inevitably winds down. The statistics about church involvement are sobering; the numbers of those wanting to join us as priests and leaders in the church even more so.

This is the stage where the books about addiction and codependency come in. They would see the bureaucratic, maintenance mode as one expression of the general addictive state of society.

If we see it in that light, then we may have to face into something like the twelve step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous or Codependents Anonymous to get ourselves out of it. It is one thing to see the way forward (at least to some extent); to find ourselves moving along it is another thing.

We would need to recognise our addiction and codependency, to admit our own inability to overcome it without God, and so on. One thing that AA's have found almost indispensable is that they do not travel alone. To move out of the bureaucratic mind-set we need a couple of other recovering codependents.

What this says to me about the situation of us priests in the diocese is that it is up to ourselves to find meaning and enthusiasm and commitment in our vocation within this Ballarat Church in 1994.

We can change no one else but ourselves, and to try to change others is to waste our energy. But to change ourselves, it could be helpful if those who wanted to would work together to help

each other. I think it is too hard to do alone, even with God, and I don't think God intends us to do it alone.

If we don't work within the system and hope to turn it around, we might continue what we have done to date, but I doubt its fruitful outcome. One-to-ones and Support Groups and informational In-services may be helpful, even enjoyable, but I doubt if they are meeting the deeper needs. If we do no more than that, I fear our frustration and sense of burden will continue and will grow. Our pressing need is to recognise our mind-set and to change our behavioural habits, through clarifying our own vision and constantly evaluating our selves; and doing this together with other like-minded persons, priests or laypeople. On the other hand we can do nothing different from always and passively wait for things to happen. I don't find that a satisfactory alternative.

It doesn't matter if all the priests don't choose to move, or some even choose to oppose us. If my own survival and sense of meaning is at stake, I am prepared to take responsibility for it. My reason for writing all this is to give a sniff of what I am on about in the hope that it will resonate with some more of you who would be prepared to reflect and to work with me in moving towards recovery.

John McKinnon
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