



Rethinking CHURCH GOVERNANCE

BRENDAN DALY writes about the Church's need to explore governance structures that promote transparency and accountability.

The global sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has resulted in calls for change in governance in the Church. There are some efforts being made to bring this about. It is the moral authority that the Church vests in the priest that makes the sexual abuse by the clergy so egregious. The consequences of poor governance practices within the Church have impacted on the integrity of the Church and the well-being of the People of God in instances of fraud and financial misconduct in dioceses

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and parishes and of inappropriate relationships between clergy and other Church personnel and vulnerable adults.

Only one third of Australian dioceses have Diocesan Pastoral Councils. Only one Diocesan Finance Council has a woman as chairperson and most members of these Councils are men. Many parishes don't have functioning parish pastoral or finance councils. The failure to utilise the knowledge, skill and expertise of lay women and men has been a significant contributor to poor governance practices.

Many women in the Church have experienced inequality and exclusion. Increasingly young women assume their participation is unwelcome. This

growing disaffiliation of women from the Church is an urgent issue that needs to be heard, understood and addressed. Large numbers of people under age 60 are disillusioned by what has been happening in the Church in many countries.

Beginnings

After the sexual abuse crisis broke in the United States in 2001, the Leadership Roundtable was established in Washington to promote best practices and accountability in Church management, finances, communications and human resources development. Since the further crisis surrounding bishops in 2018-2019, there have been renewed efforts to bring about change in the United States. A second leadership summit was held this year. The Church in Germany is also making efforts to bring about change in how the Church makes decisions.

Royal Commission Recommendation

I am involved with the Australian Church Governance Review. People in Australia rightly point out that if mothers had been involved in meetings about reassigning predator priests, these men would never have been reassigned or allowed to minister. The final Report of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) commented adversely on the lack of responsibility, transparency and accountability within the Catholic Church's practices in respect to decision-making as it impacted on the protection of children and responded to concerns about, and allegations of, child sexual abuse.

"In accordance with contemporary standards of good governance, we encourage the Catholic Church in Australia to explore and develop ways in which its structure and practices of governance may be made more accountable, more transparent,

more meaningfully consultative and more participatory, including at the diocesan and parish level."

The Royal Commission criticised the failures of Australian bishops to give moral leadership in the sexual abuse crisis and recommended:

"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."

It is important to be clear about what we mean by "governance". Governance encompasses the framework of rules, relationships systems and processes within and by which authority is exercised and controlled in an organisation. Governance includes the practices by which leaders exercise authority and control. Governance describes what actually happens at present and, in an aspirational sense, holds out a model that an institution should have as a blueprint. In the broad perspective, governance is about accountability and stewardship.

Need for Lay Involvement in Governance

The revelations of the Australian Royal Commission have had a devastating effect on the Church in Australia. Sunday Mass attendance, once over 20 per cent, is now 9 per cent of Catholics. The financial giving has plummeted. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of "nones" (no religion) and the "dones" (was a practising Catholic, now done/finished with religion). Many people are disillusioned with episcopal dishonesty and the lack of inclusiveness.

Need for Lay Involvement in Governance

Some people respond to the dislocation and despair by desiring certainty and a return to a "golden age" – a past that no longer exists. Theologian Richard Lennan said recently: "The Church is made up of human beings. If you want a perfect Church, then start your own Church.

Don't let anyone else join it and most importantly don't join it yourself." We accept that institutions involving human beings will never be perfect. The Gospel calls us to conversion – conversion for the institution and for ourselves as disciples.

The "normal" has gone. We now have a lack of trust and commitment in institutions and politics in many countries. Mistrust of organisations is high and widespread. We see, for example, media personalities raising more money for victims of disasters than aid agencies.

The Church can learn procedures and standards for governance from society. The Royal Commission certainly thought that parishes, dioceses and religious institutes could learn governance practices from some well-run agencies in the Church as well as in other areas of society.

Concerns for Governance

The question then is: What do we see in wider society that would be best practice in the governing the Church? We must discern and commit to what can be changed and move forward. Discernment is about listening to where God is calling us from the future. This future is different to our past.

Some of the areas of a change in governance include:

Many are asking for lay involvement so that all members can

live fully their vocation as members of Christ's faithful and the people of God.

They want a Church more in tune with people in society today.

They want the full expression of the human person involved in Church governance. This means that members in their diversity – gender, age, culture, etc – have full involvement in Church decision making and management. Change to best practice is needed in the Church.

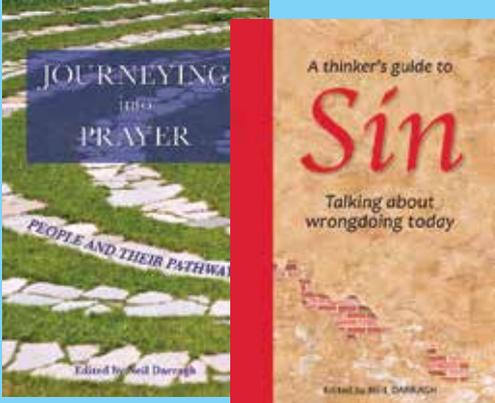
For the Church to proclaim the Gospel effectively we need to build trust again. No one will listen to the Church until it has cleaned up its act and has moral integrity especially in its leadership.

The Church cannot solve the problems with laws alone. It is not possible to legislate for holiness. Likewise, government legislation cannot change the culture in the Church or anywhere else.

We can hold the critic's position – pointing out what needs changing – but to bring about real change we have to be involved. We know that God is the future of the Church and the God of the future meets us now. The Church is never finished and is always becoming. And as Pope Francis said, authentic holiness "is the most attractive face of the Church". 🙌

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