

## Women celebrating the Spirit

Ann L. Gilroy

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Welcome to you all –Tena koutou katoa - - to our 'little eucharist', on this ground where for thousands of years before Christianity was ever thought of, the Aboriginal peoples lived, shared food, brought up new generations and dreamed their connections to this place as living with the Divine Spirit. We can give thanks that the political climate today encourages us to think of and engage with the Aboriginal peoples as people – and that we are not in the climate of even just a few decades ago which tolerated Australians despising, ignoring and robbing the Aboriginal peoples of their humanity and their place in this country. Think of that huge change of the heart in this country – from a blatantly racist heart to a more humble relational heart. It is surely the Spirit who changes the heart of stone into a heart of flesh, the Spirit who turns bread and butter into this lovely meal, the Spirit who sits us all down and lets us get up from this lunch feeling more warm towards each other. This is the spirit of Jesus. This is why I call this lunch -little eucharist.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson in his book, subtitled: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus, and the title, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, writes about the **climate** in church today. By climate he means the structures and environment in which Church and church power and authority operate.

Let's consider an everyday example of climate. I saw in Sunday's paper where a 4 year old girl was awarded a medal for bravery by the Ambulance Association for assisting them in saving her 2 year old brother who had been burnt. The article told of the practical things that the little girl had done for her brother - even to packing some of his things for a stay in hospital. You have to ask how such a little girl could help out like that. What she did was astounding in one so young – but imagine the kind of support, praise, modelling, etc - the climate she had grown up in that allowed her to step up and take charge in an emergency. Her family climate had promoted initiative, participation, helpfulness and care of family members.

So what might be the qualities of God – what Divine image could flourish in that kind of a climate? Maybe it's a Divine who relishes participation, who accepts little efforts, who has a heart and an ear for the littlest ones,- a generous God, a God who enjoys growth, who picks up the stumbler.....It's not a God you have to tiptoe around, or stern parental God.

Now in contrast we know some **climates** spawn negativity and tolerate evil more than they allow good to flourish. Just think of the situation in Burma where thousands of people are unnecessarily suffering the increasingly dire effects of a cyclone that ravaged the country two weeks ago - because their own rulers – the military - are actively blocking the world's aid from reaching those suffering.

The climate promoted in that country induces a profound disrespect, disregard and disempowerment of ordinary people. It's a climate of fear. The power for decision-making is clutched in the hands of a few in the military junta. Historically the military was developed -to protect the home people from invasion by enemies intent on enslaving them and stealing their land and resources. In Burma, the military is treating the home people as the enemy and the outcomes are those we see and hear about with horror.

Think of the image of God reflected by such a climate - a harsh, difficult to satisfy God, who is unpredictable, far above the lowly people, who doesn't care if they live or die.... Who is unfeeling, miserly, and warlike ... and we could go on. Certainly people within the climate are not confined to those images but they do have to work their ways around them.

So the climate of families, of countries, and of Church, is crucially important because it encapsulates 'the environmental smile' for some things to happen and the deep 'frown' which prevents others from happening. The environmental frown is a powerful deterrent in all kinds of ways not least is its psychological effect to paralyse us and to create fear. The climate of smile or frown dramatically colours the kind of access and relationship we might have with God.

Geoffrey Robinson says that two very significant human drives operate within the climate of the Church – and within other climates - they are the drive to power and the drive of sex. Freud would say that the drives are in the unconscious so we have to bring them to consciousness in order to work with them. Robinson says much the same – and that the Church in this time is refusing to acknowledge that the drive to power – such as the preoccupation with Roman leadership, and the drive of sex - such as the preoccupation with obligatory celibacy, are distorting the climate of the Church and squashing out the spirit of Jesus. His book analyses the way that both of these drives left unacknowledged – either buried, silenced or spiritualised – damage us as people of the church. Of course I can't do justice to his book today but I do want to lay out a simple story to see if there is some merit in his analysis of power. Now just to agree with him is only part of the exercise. The other part is to decide what we – you and I - are going to do about it. And that's the really interesting bit!

So is the Church's use of power contributing to a flourishing of the spirit of Jesus in the Church climate– if you like – is it more like the 4 year old's family or is it more like the military junta – or like neither?

### **Let me tell you a story...**

My mum and dad, both Catholic, live in a country area which has a small town as the centre. Now as has happened in lots of country areas the population has declined so that church-going people are few and mostly in their older years. In Mum and Dad's area there is a handful of regulars at each of the three churches – Catholics, Anglicans and combined Methodist Presbyterians. And none of the churches has a full-time priest or minister.

So gradually they started informally to pool their resources– the Anglican minister, who is also a small holding farmer, invited everyone to a regular bible study group; they helped out at each other's church working bees; they combined for a Christmas service; and had a common prayer chain to pray for the sick, etc. Then came the time for the Catholic church to hold its centenary and in solidarity, all the church people rolled up their sleeves to help in the preparations.

On the big day the Bishop arrived to preside at Mass and all those who had helped came along to take part– as singers in the choir, as caterers, and as representative of their own Christian tradition. It was a big day for the district!

All went well until it came time for communion. The line formed in front of the Bishop and in the line was the Methodist leader who presented herself to the bishop for communion. "I'm sorry," said the Bishop, "this communion is only for Catholics - but let me give you a blessing." –There was a community gasp! Maybe every other person on the line received communion from the Bishop because he didn't recognise them as Catholic or not - but that one refusal of a good friend of the church was unforgivable as far as the locals were concerned.

My Dad was deeply disappointed at the lack of hospitality, of ingratitude, and of the disregard for the local people that he thought the Bishop's action indicated. "What kind of Jesus Christ and God does the Bishop believe in? Why did he use his authority to override the local people? Why use his authority to override the Methodist person's conscience?" he kept asking. Whatever else, the Bishop certainly provoked theological arguments that continued for months.

Remember, these country people had been reading, sharing and praying scripture together for several years before this incident, so that they had thought a lot about and articulated their experience and growing insight into the spirit of Jesus, and of the God of Jesus, in that time. This incident however, brought them face to face with the disempowerment of the clerical power in the Church which overrode their power as people of God and give them no standing in front of ordained power. It let them do everything to prepare for the centenary except invite the believing community to receive communion. Their apology to the Methodist leader could not make up for the insult given by the Bishop.

Now that's from my Dad and Mum's perspective. What might it have been like from the Bishop's perspective? What kind of climate was he operating in? The Bishop may have thought he was doing right by keeping the rules of the Church – namely that only Catholics in the state of grace can receive Catholic communion because of the Catholic belief in the real presence in the consecrated bread and wine. If that was his concern might he not at least have considered the pastoral situation where Christians were coming to Catholic Eucharist because they don't have access to communion in their own churches? At such an ecumenical gathering, might he not have consulted the locals beforehand as to the best way forward?

Or, the Bishop may have been worried about his own good standing in the hierarchy of the church. For example, if he **had** given communion to the Methodist leader, then some righteous Catholic might have written to the Holy Father in Rome to complain about the Bishop's lack of orthodoxy. Then the Bishop would have received a letter from Rome questioning his judgement and recommending that in future he not give scandal to those in his care. So the Bishop may have been feeling the burden of the constant surveillance and disapproving frown of parishioners and hierarchy which caused him to act circumspectly and 'by the book' but which wrings the life out of his leadership. Think of what it must be like to live in that kind of climate – he becomes a puppet to the invisible puppeteers. On the day of the centenary he may have felt that the consequences to him were not worth the risk of giving the Methodist leader communion.

Whatever the Bishop's motivation, his actions portrayed a rigid church. A church lacking in hospitality, of not hesitating to polarise believers for the sake of a rule - even of a church lacking the spirit of Jesus. For how might we interpret the story of Jesus for example in Matthew and Mark's gospel accounts, when Jesus feeds the thousands – Jews like himself, and gentiles as well - to show that God's vision is for all people? How does authority in the Church, as practiced by the bishop, justify ignoring the experience and wisdom of the people of God in decision-making in their local Church? Why would he even want to disregard the people? What are the drives, conscious and unconscious, that allow the clerical hierarchy to think that they can learn nothing about God from the people of God?

Now it seems to me and to Geoffrey Robinson, that neither the people alone - as in my Dad and Mum's community, or the clerical leadership - as the Bishop in the story, can on their own have the whole understanding of God's vision for the world. It seems to me that we are church so that together - as people of God and leadership – we grow more and more into an understanding of and in relationship with God. This means that Bishop characters need to listen deeply to the people of God and the insights they have into God's will - just as they expect the people of God to listen to and to obey them.

What If we rewind the story?

...On the day of the centenary celebrations the locals welcomed the Bishop and introduced him to all those who had helped prepare for the centenary celebrations and who now wanted to participate in Eucharist together. The Bishop was humbled by the group's attitude: "Your faithfulness to the spirit of Jesus in this country area where we as leaders have not been able to assist you much, inspires me! Thank you so much!" And when it came time for communion the line formed beginning with the Methodist leader. The Bishop said – "Body of Christ, faithful one." And she answered, "Amen."