

Being Tomorrow's Church Today - A Challenge

On 29th March 2013 WATAC proudly hosted another event at NSW Parliament House to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. It was a wonderful opportunity for WATAC-ers and their supporters to listen to more prophets in our time.

Here you can share in the evening through Michael Morwood and Bishop William Morris in their own words.

'Windows to the Divine'

An outline by Michael Morwood of the talk presented
26th March 2013 - NSW Parliament House Sydney

At any time in history people use what is available as their "windows" or "pointers" to the mystery commonly called "GOD". It could be personal experience, the world around them, their understanding of the cosmos, what they learn from religious teachers... This was true for me as a young Catholic whose additions to the list would include: Scripture, Church teaching and doctrine, the Church's understanding of revelation and salvation, the Creed, liturgy and how I was taught to pray.

This list featured also for the people who met at Vatican II and composed its doctrines. It featured for me as a priest ordained in 1969.

But now, my "window" to the Divine has changed radically and dramatically - in ways I could never have imagined in the 1960's. And this new window has turned my faith perspective upside down.

Two principal components of this new window are: images from the Hubble telescope, and the contemporary scientific understanding of the universe and the development of life on this planet.

Hubble provided us with images we could never have imagined and with knowledge that blew our minds. We learned about billions of galaxies each with billions of stars - and our concept of "God" being "everywhere" was challenged to move well beyond the concept of a personal deity residing in the heavens above us. Really, what does "God is everywhere" mean when we contemplate such a universe, and what, in turn, does it say about this Mystery as the Ground of all that Exists?

In the 4th c, Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

"When we contemplate the cosmos, can anyone be so simple-minded as not to believe that the Divine is present in everything, pervading, embracing and penetrating everything that exists."

This is part of our Christian tradition, and the images and the knowledge we have today challenge us to expand our notion of the "Divine" accordingly.

Early Christian art (cf the excellent book, *Saving Paradise*), along with the mystical tradition, respected and demonstrated belief in the Divine being all-pervasive. The theological tradition, on the other hand, has consistently demonstrated and demanded belief in concepts of disconnection from a "God" and focused accordingly on who Jesus had to be to re-establish connection.

Contemporary science uses the language of wonder, mystery, creative energy and relationship as it explains a universe in which everything that seems solid is actually composed of vortices of energy, and in which everything that exists is somehow connected with everything else through consciousness or mind, an organizing reality that does pervade, embrace and penetrate everything. Science reveals to us patterns of operation, readily seen in the evolutionary development of life on this planet - patterns of co-operation, of units working together to create realities beyond themselves. And these units, such as 60 trillion cells in our bodies, are not thinking about what to do. No, there is embedded in reality, from particles to atoms to molecules to cells an organizing reality that makes our human thinking processes look slow and cumbersome. And yet we shape our understanding of "God" as if GOD were a Being who thinks the way we do, a GOD who hears our prayers (maybe), ponders, thinks about it and may or may not respond, a GOD who has opinions on many topics, a GOD who reacts, a GOD who plots and plans, a GOD who keeps a record of wrongs, a GOD who withheld forgiveness until Jesus died for us. And all around us we have windows to reality and to the Ground of All Reality alerting us that this Godly imagination belongs to ages past.

My window to the Divine no longer starts with Scripture or Church doctrine. It starts, as it should, with what I understand reality to be. It is a window that leads me to the Divine everywhere. It is a window that leads me to the wonder of what it is to be human. The scientific story does that. It tells me the amazing story of a universe that in processes of transformation from the beginning of the universe to the explosion of a giant star four and a half billion years ago in the Milky Way Galaxy to life developing on this wonderful planet, found a way to produce the incredible life form we are. I bring my Christian faith to this story, as faith tells me to, and I contemplate the wonder of the Divine at work in the processes at work in the universe, coming to human expression is us. We are not "poor, banished children of Eve". We are a life form giving human expression to the Divine.

I start with this window now, and appreciate that if this is reality now, then it has always been the human reality, and so I look back through human history through the understanding that the Divine has always been embedded in the human. Indigenous religions had a sense of this, but formal, institutional religion put the Divine in the heavens and used the concept of the heavenly god or gods as a way of controlling society. And all the while the Divine was there, in peoples' lives.

We look back, and expect to find, if the Divine is truly embedded in the human, voices raised throughout human history, in all places, at all times, that give

expression to this Presence. And we find the voices. And the message is consistent: stop the violence, work together, be neighbor, be compassionate.

We look back with a new appreciation of the Hebrew people, the Jewish Scriptures and the prophetic movement within Judaism. We see that Judaism was not concerned with “the next life” or a God who had disconnected from humanity. Rather, it was concerned with the challenge to establish a way of living in God’s presence that would be a light to the nations. Judaism’s concern is for this world, for life here on earth. Consider the prophetic voices within Judaism. Yes, the prophets shaped their message in the religious worldview of the time when they expressed, “This is what God wants”, but in reality the Divine was not breaking through or speaking from elsewhere. No, it was within. We do not need an external deity to be telling us what is good and decent and how we must act. Rather, we must nurture the embedded Presence within all humans that would lead us to compassion, love and co-operation if only we nurtured it properly.

Jesus gave human expression to the Divine at work in the universe. He knew what humanity was really all about, yet when he looked around him he saw that people did not “see” what he saw or understand what he understood about humanity’s intimate link with the Divine. No wonder Judaism could never fulfill its task: people thought they were distant from their God and lived in fear of the Divine. Violence, greed, military power and suppression of people ruled the world. The only way “God’s Kingdom” could be established could be if the “crowd” changed the way they thought about themselves and their relationship with their God. We have to appreciate today in a way the Christian religion has never really appreciated that this was the task Jesus set himself: to change peoples’ thinking and attitudes and actions so that they could change the way society conducted itself. Jesus was not concerned with a God who supposedly had locked people out of heaven. He was concerned about the here and now, about this life and how humanity was heading in the wrong direction.

This contemporary window to the Divine reveals the Divine always present, always active, always coming to expression in human voices. It reveals Jesus as a clear human expression of this Ultimate Reality, challenging us to see the Divine in us, as he saw it in himself, and to act accordingly.

Institutional leadership in the Catholic Church prefers to stay in the story of a God who disconnected Himself from humanity and then intervened from an elsewhere place. It stays in the story about Jesus who uniquely gained access to wherever this God lives. It stays within doctrines formulated within this understanding and demands Yes/No answers when it questions people about doctrine. And when people, such as the religious sisters in the USA, respond that they want to raise questions about the worldview in which these doctrines are shaped, they are told that this is not acceptable, that their fidelity to “the Church” rests on unconditional acceptance of doctrine.

Doctrine is now basically a matter of institutional control; much of it is theology for the sake of institutional identity and authority. Institutional leadership holds on

tightly to the concept of an elsewhere deity who disconnected from humanity because leadership can keep insisting that it has unique access to that presence, that it can tell people what that elsewhere Deity thinks on a range of issues, and that it can keep people dependent on an institutional priesthood for access to the Divine through approved sacraments.

That “story” of a fall and disconnection from and re-connection with a heavenly God is over. It is no longer believable. The “church” of tomorrow has a much better story to tell, a much better window to the Divine. It is a story of wonder and amazement. It is a story that respects the awesomeness and the reality of the Divine embracing and penetrating all that exists. It is a story that brings renewed appreciation of Jesus as the human expression of the Divine. It is our story - and one that challenges us, as it challenged Jesus, to give the best possible human expression we can to the Divine in the human enterprise.

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VATICAN II “BEING TOMORROW’S CHURCH TODAY, A CHALLENGE”

By Bishop William Morris, DD - 26th March 2013

NSW Parliament House, Sydney

I would like to begin this evening with those well known words from the opening Speech of Pope John XXIII at the beginning of the Council:

As I go about my daily work as pope, I sometimes have to listen, with much regret to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. These people can see nothing but a decline of truth and the ruin of the Church in these modern times. They say that our era, in comparison with past ones, is getting worse, and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, nonetheless, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former Councils, everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and religious liberty. I feel I must disagree with these prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster as though the end of the world was at hand. In fact, at the present time, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by the very effort of the people of this time, is directed toward fulfilment of God’s great plans for us. Everything, even human indifferences, leads to a greater good for the Church. It’s easy to see this if you look casually through history.

These were the words ringing in my ears as I completed my studies for the priesthood in the late 60’s. I was ordained in June 1969 and posted to the parish of Sunnybank, which is on the south side of the Brisbane River, and the parish priest at that time was Father Tom Hegarty. Tom was a big man, big in stature, big in ideas. He had been Chaplain to the Y.C.W. in the Archdiocese for many years, and believed passionately in the philosophy of its founder Cardinal Joseph Cardijn. He used the practice of See/Judge/Act, not only in his

personal life, but in all aspects of the pastoral life of the parish. He was chosen as one of the team of priests in the Archdiocese to educate others on the Conciliar Documents of Vatican II. He had one of the best libraries and resource set-ups of any parish in the Archdiocese and breathed, slept and ate the Spirit of Vatican II. I too, lived and breathed this atmosphere for the next three and a half years.

From the late 70's to the early 80's I was Secretary to Archbishop Francis Rush. Now Frank was in Rome as a student when Pope Pius XII was elected. He was in the square to hear Pius' first words.....as he addressed the crowds he said to them..... "you are the Church". These words stayed with Frank for the rest of his life, they were the lens and the ears of his pastoral ministry and the sponge through which he absorbed the Spirit of Vatican XII.

Once again I was privileged not only to learn more about the Council and the Documents but to start to understand what lay behind them re the climate and atmosphere in which they grew. The importance of this cannot be underestimated for to understand the documents fully one has to have a sense of the Spirit in which the Fathers of the Council met.

When Karl Rahner would stay at a Jesuit House during the sessions of Vatican II the students asked him to break open for them the Documents that had been completed. He said to them that it was not the words of the Documents that they needed to understand but the Spirit in which they were written. The reason was that at the time they did not have the words to translate into document form what was really happening. Only in time would the Documents come alive when language developed, and lived experience would keep giving them new life in the life of the day, it was the paradigm of renewal rather than reform that was the framework for the implementation of Vatican II. A book called "Give Vatican II a Chance" written by Jesuit, Fr Pieris, 'An appeal to the Lay, Religious and Clerical Leaders of the Asian Churches', gives voice to the point that the renewalist exegesis, which Rahner was speaking of, challenges us to transpose the Councils vision into continuous renewal according to the needs of the times and the places, but always according to the Councils own vision of Church. And what was the Councils vision of Church, it defined it as the People of God, the model was a circle not a pyramid. [Leadership was to be Lateral not Vertical]

This model involves:

- Universal call to holiness (Lumen Gentium 39-42)

which means that there are no holier classes in the Church but that there is a variety of ways in which each category of persons attains holiness according to the calling they received from God.

The Model involves:

- Common priesthood of the faithful (Lumen Gentium 10-11)

which points to the entire Church or God's People as a "priestly community" in which the ministerial priesthood is given an "essentially" different role not necessarily a superior role, so that both categories participate in the "one priesthood of Christ", each in its own way. The ritual role of the ministers is contrasted with the priestly exercise of the laity in their daily life, Pieris calls it the "Liturgy of Life" to capture the common baptismal priesthood as described in Lumen Gentium. Cyprian of Carthage, 3rd century Saint says, "Christianus alter Christus" (Every Christian is another Christ).

The model involves:

- Common indefectible faith of God's People or *sensus fidelium* (common sense of the faithful).....

which is described in (Lumen Gentium 12) as the exercise of the "prophetic role of Christ" according to the anointing by the Holy Spirit so that the "universal body of the faithful" (bishops, priests and laity all together) "cannot be mistaken in belief". The "guidance by the sacred magisterium" as well as "obedience to it" is contextualized within this common participation of all God's People in the prophetic role of Christ i.e. in the common indefectibility of the Faithful.

In John Henry Newman's view Church teaching could not be a top down, one-way-street, it must be a "breathing together" of the faithful and their pastors, a cooperative venture. The teaching Church, before teaching, must discover what the believing Church really believes, so that the believing Church "recognises" as authentic that which is presented to it as doctrine. When the believing Church does not recognise teaching (Arian 4th century) it is clear that the necessary breathing together has not occurred.

Newman stressed that this in no way undercuts the authority of the teaching Church which has the responsibility of wading prayerfully and cautiously through this tangle of sources, but he added of all the sources "I am accustomed to lay stress on the consensus fidelium. You (we) are that voice, you (we) are the Church."

Many historians attribute the change in language between Vatican I and Vatican II to the writing of Newman and the Council's outgoing, optimistic and inclusive approach to his influence.

Now what is characteristic of all renewal is that it starts as an event necessitated by circumstances in the margin of an institution before it vindicates its legitimacy as a reform accepted by the centre. In viewing Vatican II as a renewalists Council, it is the nature of a renewalist Council to leave the future open to change which is to say, open to creative freedom of each generation.

The Spirit of Vatican II demands that the Church should form and mould Christians in the Spirit of the Gospels rather than make them perpetually dependent on externally imposed restrictions. It is always a temptation to return to the model of herding the flock with a legal stick rather than creating a dialogue based on the Dialogue of Salvation encouraging Christians to grow in the life of the Spirit, treated as adults, creating mature Christians with an adult conscience.

Now in 1964 Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (The Church in the Modern world) spoke of the Church's dialogue modelled on the dialogue of salvation. We are all called to take part in this unending and trustful dialogue, a dialogue initiated and established with us through Christ in the Holy Spirit. In this dialogue of salvation on which is based all conversations, God takes the initiative and this dialogue springs from the goodness and love of God.

Our dialogue needs to be meek, not arrogant, its authority comes from the truth it affirms, shares with others the gifts of charity, is itself an example of virtue, avoiding peremptory language making no demands. Now in the light of our evolving culture, in the dialogue of salvation, we need to look at our tradition with vision so that the God whom Jesus revealed becomes known, and the Body of Christ is set free, experiencing the comparison of a God

who loves all creation unconditionally. For this to be achieved, we need to work together, we need to be a Church that listens, learns and grows in trust.

The Dialogue of Salvation is not stuck in time, it invites us to listen to each other and to discern where the Spirit is leading us. We need to listen with the three Ears of

- Scripture
- Tradition with Vision (Tradition without vision leads us away from the Truth)
- Creation, the World, Society

The Dialogue of Salvation needs to be kept open; it can never be closed. We need to take the initiative and to participate in the conversation of our sisters and brothers no matter what the topic may be, we need to listen to the voice of God in others, the poor, the sick, the outcast, the non-believer. We need to be like the College of Apostles, who accepted Thomas into their midst, even though he did not believe that the Lord had risen. It was in the continued dialogue that Thomas saw the risen Lord. It is our continued dialogue within our local Churches, that we enable the faith to be inculturated into the local community.

We need the trust and the freedom so that the Church, the people of God, can be creative with the lens of the Word, Tradition and Creation, Society, can speak of topics such as the divorced, celibacy, married clergy, collegiality, the principle of subsidiarity, the relationship of the local Church to the Universal Church, the diversity among the Local Churches, a more effective use of Episcopal Conferences, appointments of bishops, the adaptation and translation of liturgical texts, the problems surrounding general absolution and the Communal Rite of Reconciliation, inculturation of liturgy, the unspoken issue of women and their role in the Church, and if we do not want the Church to be peripheral in people's lives we need to ask ourselves the question: What is the mission of the Church for the World today? In the words of Archbishop Francis Rush at the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 we need to look at this question through the lens of his final remarks: *The Church needs to search for and shape an answer to the only ultimate question: Who is Christ for the World of today?*

This can be summed up beautifully in the story of 'The Salt Doll' ("The Song of the Bird" by Anthony de Mello, sj.)

A salt doll journeyed for thousands of miles over land, until it finally comes to the sea. It was fascinated by this strange moving mass, quite unlike anything it had ever seen before. 'Who are You?' said the salt doll to the sea. The sea smilingly replied, 'Come in and see.' So the doll waded into the sea. The further it walked into the sea the more it dissolved until there was only very little of it left. Before that last bit dissolved, the doll exclaimed in wonder, 'Now I know who I am!'

This age needs to be the Age of the Word, not Dogma, Rite or Laws.....and I am not saying these aren't important, but it is my understanding that the Council following the call of John XXIII for a pastoral Council, for a New Pentecost, and remember the Acts describes Pentecost as the event that inaugurated pluralism, inaugurated the New Age of the Risen One characterised by "understanding" among people "speaking (in various) tongues"; with this in mind the Fathers of Vatican II seemed to have been aware of the priority of praxis (lived experience) and tried to take the People of God, the Church to a life beyond the Law, a Worship beyond the Rite and a Faith beyond Dogma. I believe they took us beyond these safeguards to what they point to: The Risen Christ for the World of Today!

Now this is painful, it is like what the Israelites experienced in their Exodus. Once in the wilderness they wanted to go back to Egypt, back to slavery, back to where their basic human needs were met, they were finding that the cost of the fruit of freedom seemed to be too high. It was only when they reached the Promised Land and travelled back in memory did they see life in the journey.

In his book Pieris reflects that between a known past and an unknown future lies a period of uncertainty and confusion, which we cannot bear and which we would like to escape from. In such a situation, which is truly a desert experience we are tempted to look back to the clarity and the certainty of the past. In some ways and in some areas this is what happened in the years after Vatican II.

Rahner pointed out that Vatican II was not a point of arrival, but a point of departure, we are on that journey which is just 50 years old and our mission is to en flesh the unwritten words of the Council by being tomorrow's Church today.

And who is going to show us how to transpose the Council's vision into a continuous renewal according to the Council's own vision of church. It's the Voice ofThe Risen Christ for the World of today.....for it was Jesus who showed us that we do not choose our neighbour.....but we are given our neighbour.

It was Jesus who showed us that if we cannot look on the face of any woman or man and see that she or he is our sister or brother then no matter what time it is, it is never day but always night.

It was Jesus who showed us that the Holy One is a God of Mercy, rich in Mercy, and that this mercy speaks of faithfulness, love, compassion, healing and tenderness.

It was Jesus who showed us that this Mercy speaks of the blessings that will bring harmony to all creation and it will happen not when someone wins or has power over others but when everyone shares.....He showed that if we get our way by violence it won't last. It was Jesus who spoke often of the faithfulness of God, who can't help but forgive and is present in all life, every word, every action.

It was Jesus who not only showed us but told us that God's love is inclusive, no exceptions, we do not earn it, it is pure gift. It is there whether we want it or not.

It was Jesus who prayed that we should all be one as He and his Father are one.

It was Jesus who showed us that because of the sacredness of all creation we need to approach each other, open hearted and barefooted.

It was Jesus who showed us that we must listen to the voice of God in others especially the poor, the sick, the suffering, the non-believer, those who have a different belief structure, those in pain, those who suffer under injustices.

It is Jesus who shows us, through the Spirit, that the Giver is the Gift.

It was Jesus who called on us to unbind Lazarus and set him free.

It was Jesus who came to unbind the lawyer, the priest, the Levite and set them free so they could serve the man or woman who may fall into the hands of robbers.

.....and as we serve and minister to our sisters and brothers it is the healing hands of Jesus that they feel and His face that they see.

As we play our part in the Dialogue of Salvation we help all to see the hidden presence of God in all creation which creates a longing which is expressed beautifully in the words of John O'Donohue....

Blessed be the longing that brought you here and quickens your soul with wonder.

May you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire that disturbs you when you have settled for something safe.

May you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease. To discover the new direction your longing wants you to take.
May the forms of your belonging – in love, creativity and friendship be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul.
May the one you long for long for you.
May your dreams gradually reveal the destination of your desire.
May a secret Providence guide your thoughts and nurture your feelings.
May your mind inhabit your life with the sureness with which your body inhabits the World.
May your heart never be haunted by ghost-structures of old damage.
May you come to accept your longing as divine urgency.
May you know the urgency with which God longs for you.

May we come to realise more and more that it is the little man called Jesus who makes all the difference.

Pope John XXIII saw his first duty: to walk alongside other men and women. Loving them and bringing the Gospel in their midst.....May that be our walk too.

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