

# THE PASSION OF THE PROPHET

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Patricia Fresen, D.Th., RCWP.

Our prophets today are indeed speaking with passion and there are many of them.

Whether they are speakers or writers, individuals or groups, our contemporary prophets can no longer keep silent in the face of the present crisis in the church. We have the individual prophets such as, to mention just a few, Hans Küng, Hermann Häring and Gotthold Hasenhüttl in Germany, Ivonne Gebara and Leonardo Boff in Latin America, Albert Nolan, Fritz Lobinger and Kevin Dowling of South Africa; Joan Chittister, Elizabeth Johnson, Richard McBrien, and Leonard Swidler in the USA, Cardinal Jose da Cruz Policarpo of Lisbon, and your own Bishop William Morris, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Paul Collins, Peter Wilkinson and Fr. Greg Reynolds here in Australia.

And we live in a remarkable time when reform groups, prophetic groups are springing up all over the place in Australia, Europe and North America, groups such as WATAC, *Catholics for Ministry*, *Catholics for Renewal*, *Catholics Speak Out*, *Epiphany*, *Wir sind Kirche*, *Noi siamo Chiesa*, *Call to Action*, *WOC*, *WOW*, *FutureChurch*, *CORPUS*, *FCM*, *Voice of the Faithful*, *ARCC*, *the American Catholic Council*, *RCWP* and others. All these are prophetic, reform groups and, with one or two variations here and there, they basically want the same things. A common vision is clearly emerging and it is this common vision that is the main focus of this talk. We are discovering that we have the power to change things, to offer alternatives, in the face of Vatican intransigence. What we are seeing and living through is the end of the clericalist, hierarchical, restorationist church. Benedict calls this rigid restorationism a “hermeneutic of continuity” but we know better. Benedict is pulling the church backwards and reversing the principles of Vatican II.

But that is the official, institutional church. We need to be clear what we mean when we speak of ‘the church’. **We are church** and the good news is that we are now finally becoming an adult church, a church of adults capable of thinking for ourselves and becoming less afraid to speak out and to take action in the face of tyranny and manipulation.

One of the latest areas of conflict is the Vatican’s insistence on the so-called new English version of the Mass, which has unleashed a storm of protest in most English-speaking countries. The translation is not only old-fashioned but insidious, based on an outdated theology which emphasizes victim theology, human sinfulness and our utter unworthiness. It is profoundly misogynous, avoiding any hint that God could be anything other than male and excluding women and feminist theology. Many people are outraged. One of the best commentaries on the new English missal is the booklet by Paul Collins: *And also with you*, with the subtitle: *Is the New English Version of the Mass a betrayal of Vatican Council II?* (July 2009) Dr. Collins shows very clearly that it is indeed such a betrayal, that “back-tracking on the liturgy connotes an

abandonment of the other good things that the Council stood for like consulting the laity, the collegiality of bishops in governing the church, our reaching out to other churches on religious freedom". (*Summary at beginning*)

The reforms in the church that we are demanding - and in some cases, already implementing - are long overdue. Geoffrey Robinson's excellent book, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, published in 2009, it is one of the best studies on the sexual abuse crisis. "Criticising the church for 'managing' rather than confronting the deep causes of the crisis, Robinson blames the papacy for its silence and calls for major reform - a constitutional papacy, a rethinking of all the church's teachings on sex and marriage, and Robinson also suggests that a few phrases of the Nicene Creed may have to be altered". (Internet)

Many Catholic communities are already implementing democratic structures at the local level. For many years now, priests have been getting married (there are 150,000 married priests worldwide); women are being ordained; non-ordained people are leading their parish communities or their home churches even in celebrations of the Eucharist - and medieval, rigid, authoritarian papal pronouncements are being ignored by educated, committed Catholics who will not leave the church but who, like all of us, are sincerely seeking the way forward.

It is a church with a new self-awareness, a new spirituality, which trusts in its own experience, knowledge and competence as the community of the baptized. Church leadership is being confronted by the community of the baptized to respond to us in a stance of equality, not as those in authority talking down to the uneducated or to children. A group of women I met this week used, for a recent Spirituality in the Pub gathering, the topic: "Persistent pressure from below". That sums up well what is happening.

The contemporary papacy is sign and symbol of what has been going on in the Catholic Church since Pope John Paul II became the Bishop of Rome in 1978. Pope Benedict calls it 'the reform of the reform'. The rest of us see it, however, for what it is: 'restorationism' - the carefully planned dismantling of the theology, ecclesiology and pastoral vision of the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 65). (*John Greenleaf, August 14 2011, Papal Mystique and World Youth Days in Spain Church URL.*)

"Frankly the current Vatican administration, orchestrated by the Bavarian pontiff, shows very little interest in transparency. Fortunately the Vatican cannot control the media. The truth will indeed come out. The bishop of Rome wears fancy slippers but he is waltzing on thin ice...." (*Also Greenleaf, citing Patsy McGarry writing in the Irish Times (July 28, 2011) on the Vatican's reactions to sexual abuse in Ireland and the Murphy and Cloyne reports.*)

Has Benedict, I ask, never heard of, or conveniently forgotten, the Catacomb Pact at the end of Vatican II (1965) signed at the Catacomb of St Domitilla, against pomp and luxury in the church? "What the Polish pope launched in the 1970's, the Bavarian pope has now shifted into high speed motion: a carefully orchestrated plan to restore an earlier and more controllable 19<sup>th</sup> century triumphalist model of the church, a clerical empire. Through an increasingly centralized Vatican power structure,

everything in the life of the church is now controlled through a network of Vatican congregations led by right-wing cardinals who ensure strict compliance with what they deem to be "orthodox". Those who do not comply face censure and punishment. Without explanation.

The contemporary "power mystique" of the papacy is Benedict's particular talent. Any hint of criticism or any questioning of his policies, his way of thinking, his antiquated theology, his exercise of authority, etc., is equated with disloyalty. Because of this Ratzinger papal mystique, unquestioning obedience to the pope is now required as a sign of the ethos and fidelity of a true Catholic. And thanks to Benedict's "reform of the reform" the pope's authority has now been intentionally extended to the Vatican Curia.

Today we are told that unquestioning obedience to the very human opinions offered by curial departments and cardinals - about a whole range of human life and church disciplinary issues - has become the mark of one's fidelity as a Catholic. Anything less is interpreted as being disloyal to the pope and therefore, we are led to believe, "unfaithful to Christ." (*Greenleaf - see below*)

Benedict's recent visit to Spain, where there was a huge gathering of young Catholics, is a case in point and was also heavily criticized. The papal visit cost \$70 million, at a time when Spain is in the most desperate economic straits. The Vatican donated \$50,000 it was reported in the press, to the famine victims in Somalia. What, people asked, if the 70 million had been given to them in lieu of the trappings of a papal visit? Whipping up enthusiasm among young people, many of whom go to the World Youth Day for the other young people they will meet, for the concerts and programs and workshops on offer, for the sheer fun of the event, is no response to the critical problems in the church. "The younger people may still fall under the spell of Benedict's papal mystique, but older Catholics have begun to realize what he is really up to ..." (*John Greenleaf, August 14 2011, Papal Mystique and World Youth Days in Spain, Church URL.*)

In contrast to Benedict's insistence on obedience and conformity, and a seemingly stubborn blindness about the reality of what is happening in the church, many prophetic voices are describing clearly what is happening and calling us to respond appropriately. Karen Armstrong says: "Religion is at its best when it helps to ask questions and hold us in a state of wonder, and arguably at its worst when it tries to answer them authoritatively and dogmatically". (*www.charter for Compassion.org*)

### **Reports, protests, books, memoranda ... all from this year, 2011**

It is quite striking that in this year, 2011, a remarkable number of documents, reports, petitions, memoranda, protests and books on the subject of urgent and necessary reforms in the church, have appeared. Let us listen to what they are saying.

**Peter Wilkinson: Catholic Parish Ministry in Australia: Facing Disaster?** (2011)

Among the prophetic voices of today, the voices that are not afraid to ask the difficult questions and to state the problems, I'd like to start with Peter Wilkinson's excellent comprehensive survey. Wilkinson lays out clearly the issues confronting the church in Australia.

"The crisis is real", writes Wilkinson, "and the scale is huge. The causes are diverse. The crisis has been exacerbated by the clerical sex-abuse scandals, the cover-ups by bishops, the lack of transparency, accountability and co-responsibility, the failure to fully implement the reforms of Vatican II, inadequate consultative processes, the teaching on family planning and human sexuality, the clerical clinging onto pomp, power, control and privilege, the blanket refusal to discuss the ordination of married men and women as well as optional celibacy for priests and the seeming disregard for the spiritual welfare of divorced and homosexual persons. ... There is also a view that leaders have not read well the sign of the times, have strayed from the core of the Jesus message and have put the interests of image, reputation and self-preservation ahead of the spiritual interests of the faithful ... Some also see a regressive culture within the leadership. Archbishop Mark Coleridge has stated that clericalism understood as a hierarchy of power, not of service, can easily turn the authority proper to the ordained into authoritarianism, ensuring no role for lay Catholics in the decision-making processes." (p 22) "The real problem is leadership", writes Paul Collins, "or lack of it and the failure of the church to provide adequate pastoral ministry, let alone evangelization - participation as Christians in the wider community". (*Paper on Australian Catholicism - Facing Disaster?*)

Having given the alarming statistics for the present low Mass attendance by Catholics and the priest shortage, Wilkinson concludes: "Clerical authoritarianism is a root cause of the current crisis." (p 21-22).

Options for action put forward by Wilkinson: (*I have changed the order somewhat*).

1. Change the contemporary priestly 'lifestyle package': celibate, male, full-time and lifelong, all of which are totally dispensable. But, Wilkinson adds, if all elements of the priestly package are man-determined, alterable and dispensable, and none God-demanded, what makes them untouchable? Celibacy is not essential for priesthood. Neither scripture nor tradition insists on mandatory celibacy. Celibacy freely chosen and faithfully lived can be a powerful sign; forced, it loses much of its power. When Jesus told his disciples to "ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest" (Mt. 9, 35 -38) he did not specify "celibates only". Celibacy should not be used to deny priesthood to those who are truly called. Wilkinson says that there are probably about 1000 married priests in Australia - (the worldwide figure is 150,000). Welcoming married priests back into ministry would make a significant difference to the vitality of Catholic church life in Australia.
2. Do away with male exclusivity: At this point, the pope and the hierarchy are so determined that women should not be ordained that even public discussion

or debate on the issue has been forbidden: (And we have among us, in the person of Bishop Bill Morris, living proof of the Vatican's ruthless punishment and exclusion of anyone, especially a bishop, who dares to so much as raise the question of women's ordination!) As you all know, a group of women in Europe, now known as the 'Danube Seven' decided that they had talked and waited long enough. They found a bishop who was willing to ordain them and they simply went ahead and did it: they were ordained as the first Catholic women priests of our times, the first since women were deacons, priests and bishops in the early centuries of the church. Our movement, now known as Roman Catholic Womenpriests, is a worldwide movement which has grown rapidly in the USA and Canada, with a small but growing group in Latin America - and we do have womenpriests in various countries in Europe; Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France with a candidate in Norway and one in Belgium - and the latest enquiries have come from India and South Korea. Since 2003, over 100 women have been ordained and there are many candidates preparing for priesthood.

3. Rethink parish ministry: Pastoral planning which involves the whole parish community. It should express the unique cultural character of the parish yet be consistent with the plan of the diocese. It should propose a clear mission statement with parish goals as well as the structures and action plan to achieve them.
4. Rethink the identity of priest: (No "ontological change" occurs when one is ordained, making one intrinsically better, higher and holier than everyone else!) The *huge problem here is clericalism*, the notion that some sort of priestly caste or professional priestly group exists in the church. (The 'Old Boys' Club'). For the early Christians, a minister was someone who was officially appointed but always accountable and subject to oversight. All priests and bishops are called to identify with their people and to place their own priesthood at the service of the common priesthood of the baptized. To their credit, many priests and laity throughout Australia have successfully built up an intense spiritual relationship between priest and people and have lit small authentic fires of renewal. It is in the interests of the whole Church in Australia that these fires are stoked to burn brightly to serve as beacons of hope for a broader renewal.

Wilkinson names the following as the basic principles for the way forward:

1. The vision of Vatican II must be totally unshackled
2. Full co-responsibility must be implemented in every facet of ministry and church life.
3. Proper consultative processes with transparency and accountability must be put in place
4. Priestly ministry must be opened up to married persons
5. The essential role of women in ministry must be properly recognized
6. The misuse of power must cease and the paradigm of service prevail

You have all experienced, since Bishop Bill Morris was removed from pastoral care, the seething outrage that has been brewing up for years. But such outrage does push us to do something, to protest, to take action and gives us a new perspective, especially when the injustice comes so close to home.

Outside of Australia, other groups from around the world are speaking out clearly and prophetically, often from unexpected quarters:

### **The German Memorandum, “A Necessary Breakaway”** ( Feb. 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

The German Memorandum, drawn up and signed first by German theologians and then by thousands of Catholics, points out that the hierarchical church has lost a great deal of its credibility and takes it to task for “self-righteous moralizing” which is simply out of place in a body that has been guilty of violence and abuse against its own members. The German *Memorandum* states: We feel that we have the responsibility to contribute to an authentic new beginning. We can no longer remain silent”.

The *Memorandum* sets out the following demands:

1. A democratic church, with synodal structures at all levels. “Those things that affect everyone should be decided by everyone. Those things that can be decided locally should be decided there”
2. The hierarchy needs to show more respect for people’s freedom of conscience, dignity and intellect: the nurturing of a culture of rights within the church, the *sensus fidelium*
3. The inclusion of married men and also of women, married or single, in the priesthood
4. The participation of lay people in the choosing of priests and bishops
5. Tolerance towards single, divorced and gay people.

### **The Austrian priests’ “Call to Disobedience”** (June 2011)

In Austria in June this year, 300 parish priests issued a statement in which they are openly refusing to comply with official teaching because of the church’s lack of reform. They call for ‘disobedience’ (I would call it “prophetic obedience”) in seven key areas:

1. In every Church service they will say a public prayer for Church reform.
2. They will not refuse communion to well-meaning Christians. These may include divorced and remarried, members of other Churches, at times people who have left the Church.
3. They will avoid saying multiple masses in many centres. They will prefer services conducted by people themselves to artificial supply services.

4. From now on they will call a service of the word with distribution of holy communion a 'eucharistic celebration without a priest'. This will fulfil the Sunday duty.
5. They will ignore the preaching prohibition imposed on competent lay people.
6. They will see to it that each parish has a lay chairperson: a man or woman, married or not. This to counter the joining up of parishes and of projecting a new priestly image.
7. They will use every opportunity to publicly promote the admission of women and married men and women to the priestly ministry -- seeing in both men and women welcome colleagues in our pastoral ministry.

### The American Catholic Council June 10 - 12, 2011

The American Catholic Council (ACC) met in Detroit, USA, over the Pentecost weekend and put it this way:

The overwhelming issue echoed throughout Listening Sessions is **the hierarchy's unwillingness to enter into dialogue with the laity about real issues which affect the lives and faith of real people in the church.** From the perspective of the vast majority of participants in these listening sessions, the hierarchy is increasingly remote, disengaged and irrelevant to the faith lives of rank and file Catholics. This suggests a fundamental crisis of leadership in an increasingly dysfunctional institutional Church. Many see this failure to engage the diversity of the faithful as undermining the promise of a more inclusive Church that is central to the reforms called for by Vatican II. In a report by the WOW representative at the ACC, four areas of great concern emerged strongly during the breakout sessions:

1. The role of women: This includes the church's increasingly hard-line prohibition against women priests, Vatican opposition to inclusive language, the denial of many church offices to women and the fact that many among the hierarchy are insensitive to women's concerns and react with fear, invoking their authority instead of engaging in constructive dialogue.
2. Restorationism: There has been serious back pedalling on the part of the Vatican regarding the teachings and documents of Vatican II: liturgical reform, lay participation, church engagement in the world, consultation in decision-making were at the top of the list.
3. Hierarchical authoritarianism and clericalism: this is perhaps the most serious underlying problem. Clear evidence of it is the revival of Episcopal threats of excommunication, suspension and other penalties as a response to dissent in matters open to serious debate.
4. Inculturation: Progress in the dynamic inculturation of the Gospel and the Church around the world has been increasingly stymied over the past 3 or 4 decades by Vatican decisions requiring global uniformity and rejecting local initiatives in many areas. (Report on the ACC by Kate Conmy)

Preliminary data demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of participants in the listening sessions love the church and do not wish to leave the church like the 30

million who have left in recent years. Many are greatly concerned that the spirit of Vatican II has been repressed. There was a strong call to reinvigorate the Council's reforms, which have been increasingly downplayed in recent years. These include **openness to all peoples and cultures, collegial and responsible decision-making, the primacy of a well-formed conscience, and sincere ecumenism.**

**Hans Küng, *Ist die Kirche noch zu retten?* (Can the Church still be saved?)**  
(April 2011)

In this book, Küng says that only radical reforms can save the Catholic church.

"The Catholic Church is seriously, possibly terminally ill and only an honest diagnosis and radical therapy will cure it," one of the sharpest critics of Pope Benedict XVI, the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng, has written. In answer to the question: Can the Church still be saved? Küng answers, "Yes, the church can be saved, but not the clericalist, medieval, roman system that we have at present. To sum it up, one could say: Less pope, more Jesus." Küng argues that the malady of the church goes beyond recent sexual abuse scandals. According to him, the church's **resistance to reform, its secrecy, lack of transparency and misogyny** are at the heart of the problem. He says the official church is moving backwards (retrogressive), is fixated on men, is Eurocentric and claims to have the full truth of salvation.

The reforms that Küng lists as essential are the following:

1. No more self-fabricated Canon Law but more focus on Jesus of Nazareth and his message. Less pope, more Jesus ...
2. The church should strengthen her main function, i.e. to proclaim the Christian message without biblical archaisms and scholastic dogmatism
3. Forming community with other churches is essential
4. The Curia needs to be reformed according to the Gospel
5. Favouritism to be replaced by competence
6. Church finances: transparency and restructuring urgently required
7. Abolish the inquisition
8. Canon law to be not merely improved but fundamentally changed
9. Allow married priests and bishops
10. Open all offices and ministries in the church to women
11. Laity to have a real vote regarding their bishops
12. Intercommunion - the open table - for Catholics and Protestants
13. Ecumensim without excuses and cover-ups

At the end of the book Küng returns to the question: "Can the church still be saved?" He said he has not lost his vision of a church that would meet the expectations of millions of Christians, but certain conditions have to be met. In their reforms, this Church should show Christian radicalism, constancy and coherency, he said.



**Hermann Häring: Freiheit in Haus des Herrn. Vom Ende der klerikalen Weltkirche. (Freedom in the House of the Lord: the end of the clerical world - church) (Random House, 2011)**

Another major prophetic voice in Germany is that of Prof. Hermann Häring. The following is translated from his latest book: (my translation)

“Despite all attempts by the official church to smother progressive initiatives, the reform movements in many parts of the world are having a profound and lasting effect. These are not looking for quantitative triumphalism but rather for qualitative inner change and structural reform.

In the face of the imploding official church structures, the progressives have come to the end of their patience. No more waiting, asking, arguing that the reforms initiated 45 years ago by Vatican II should finally be accepted. The time for taking matters in our own hands has come. The hierarchy will have to decide whether they are ready to give up their obstinate refusal to move forward, whether they will continue to drive the church into the ground. It is they, the hierarchy, not the progressive groups, who are playing with fire. Everywhere the reform groups are moving into a diaconal and spiritual way of life. Will the hierarchy recognize this as the fruit of the Holy Spirit or will they continue to provoke further divisions and splits? One of the most compelling issues is: **will the hierarchy finally let go of their mediaeval clericalism?** It is important to realize that **the church is not identical with the hierarchical system that has been built up through many centuries and still upholds in the most authoritative way.**

The clerical caste must go and the church must come into her own with a new emphasis on baptism and shared responsibility”.

Many of the best priests have left the numbers of the clerics and the good ones that are still struggling on, suffer greatly. Häring compares them to the mayor of a city in an occupied country who must choose daily between collaboration and resistance. (p. 190). Häring speaks of ‘overdue reforms’ and ‘overdue reversal of direction”. (p. 188 f).

Apart from Küng and Häring, more and more theologians today are openly critical of the church:

**Joan Chittister: Catholicism: A Changing Church - Despite Itself (posted in the Huffpost, Religion, August 2011)**

Chittister names 4 key areas of the church that are already changing, despite ‘itself’, meaning I suppose, despite all the hierarchical attempts to stem the flow:

1. **CLERICALISM.** A by-product of an illiterate society, which has already come head-to-head with the levels of professionalism around it. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, priesthood needs to be a purely ministerial function, not a civic, academic or social office. People look to the church for worship and compassion, for

justice, peace and harmony, not for authoritarianism. The church must see itself as part of the conversation, not as having the last word. The faith is becoming more about faith than about institutional pre-eminence and privilege.

2. **GENDER EQUALITY**
3. **THE LAY VOCATION**
4. **THEOLOGY** (Hans Küng, Paul Collins, Leonardo Boff , now Elizabeth Johnson, to mention just a few, have been severely censured by the Vatican – although this has become a real recommendation, a draw-card. It has the reverse effect of what is intended by the Vatican.)

### OPEN LETTER TO POPE AND AUSTRALIAN BISHOPS

Finally, there is the open letter, the 2<sup>nd</sup> petition to the pope which the Australian bishops were asked to present during their ad limina visit in 2011. It has been signed by thousands of concerned and committed Catholics. I'm sure you are all familiar with it. It summarizes so well what reforms are desperately needed, stating that the church, as an institution, does not yet embody the vision of Vatican II for a truly collegial church in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances. Rather, it appears as an institution focussed on centralism, legalism and control. "We still reel from the sexual abuse scandal in which the Church's initial response was manifestly inadequate ... we were shocked at the lack of due process in the way in which Bishop Morris ... was removed from his diocese. We are dismayed by the failure to consult properly on the new English translations of our liturgy. We can no longer accept the patriarchal attitude towards women within our church, and we fear that an extended claim to infallibility is stifling discussion on many important issues. These issues include some teachings on human sexuality, as well as new forms of ministry for women and married men ..."

"We want and pray for a renewed church that follows Christ more closely in every way. We need a church committed to authentic collegiality and subsidiarity. We seek an open, transparent and accountable church, which respects due process, rejects every form of discrimination, listens to its people, promotes co-responsibility in every facet of its mission and ministry and is compassionate to its core. We seek an outward-facing church totally committed to justice, peace, ecumenism and dialogue with other faiths and which advocates unequivocally for the rights of the oppressed and disadvantaged while tending practically to their needs. We need and want a church where 'we are all one in Christ ... with no more distinctions between male and female'. (Gal. 3, 28) and whose leaders read well the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel. We call on each diocesan bishop to convene a synod in his diocese to discuss how the local church might be a more authentic witness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." *(Created by Catholics for Renewal, written by Peter Johnstone, Open Letter, July 2011)*

To sum up what all these prophets are saying: What we need above all are different structures, a different model of church and ministry. And the time has come for us committed Catholics to take matters into our own hands.

### People are already taking matters into their own hands:

People in the church are:

- much more educated today and we are becoming an adult church no longer frightened off by excommunication, suspension or silencing.
- gathering in house churches to celebrate Eucharist, usually without an ordained priest
- making up their own minds about birth control and family planning
- full acceptance and integration of gays and lesbians
- finding ways of ordaining women (either secretly by a bishop in apostolic succession, or using forms of community laying-on of hands) and forming communities around these women priests
- married priests are often fully accepted by these communities – and the call for the abolition of enforced celibacy for priests is becoming deafening
- bishops and priests speaking out fearlessly in favour of women's ordination and taking the consequences
- protest and '*sensus fidelium*' are becoming much stronger, e.g. in support of the bishops like William Morris and the 'renegade priests' who dare to support women's equality in the church.

We can do this in the spirit of prophetic obedience.

## **Prophetic Obedience**

Prophetic obedience is the kind of obedience that we in RCWP try to live out. It springs from, and leads us towards, a very different worldview from the outdated, medieval worldview of the Vatican, which insists on unquestioning obedience.

### ***Obedience:***

In the older worldview, obedience was understood as doing what you were told by those in authority. But obedience is not doing what you are told by someone else, unless you are a child. Obedience for adults, as we know, comes from the Latin *ob-audire*, attentive listening:

- listening in the first place to myself, my own formed conscience, my values, my sense of what is right and wrong, listening to my heart;
- attentive listening to the signs of the times, to what is going on in the world and the church, to new levels of awareness and new developments within humanity
- listening, individually and together, to the Spirit, whom we believe is always moving and awakening (yes, calling) us to new levels of awareness. As Isaiah says so often: Listen to me, pay attention and your soul will live. (e.g. is. 55:3)

### ***Prophetic:***

Why is this obedience called *prophetic*? I think it is because the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament and our contemporary prophets like Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, and all those I mentioned at the beginning of this talk like Hans Küng, William Morris and Paul Collins, were and are women and men who 'listened to a different drum'. They became aware of what was

wrong within their own society and they felt impelled to take a stand, to speak out, to name what was wrong. And, as we know, those in power usually do not want to hear what the prophets say, because it means giving up their positions of privilege and power - or at least sharing privilege and power, and once these are shared, the entire system changes from being dualistic to being one in which the equality, dignity and freedom of all are respected.

**In summary:**

- + Prophetic obedience often involves taking a stand for justice in the face of injustice or discrimination.
- + In prophetic obedience, our understanding of authority and of obedience changes. The role of leadership is not to give orders but to call the community to be about what they have said they are about, challenging them to be who they are.
- + Prophetic obedience leads us towards the recognition of equality: Schüssler Fiorenza's "discipleship of equals", rather than the older 'family' model (Father, Mother, superior-subject) still often found in the Church. In prophetic obedience, we are moving away from this older model towards co-authority, co-obedience and interdependence.
- + We each live out of our personal centre, our inner authority but at the same time within the framework of the vision we hold in common.
- + Prophetic obedience may at times require disobedience to an unjust law for the sake of God's reign (In Europe we in RCWP are often called the 'contra legem' group because we go against what we regard as an unjust law).

(The reason we in RCWP are ordained is that we hope to bring about change in the Catholic church. The Vatican gets very upset about our ordained women and they are constantly hurling excommunications at us and at those who support us. If we leave the church or if we use a community form of laying-on of hands, the hierarchy takes no notice - but they really get nervous when they hear of yet another women's ordination by a bishop in apostolic succession).

Our RCWP communities have as their aims and principles:

**A CHURCH OF THE PEOPLE RATHER THAN A CLERICALIST CHURCH.** This means:

1. Communitarian rather than hierarchical structures. Discipleship of equals. Primacy and importance of baptism is recognized. Leadership elected by community. Constitution written by community.
2. Servant leadership: empowerment, rather than domination & control. Simplicity in vestments, sacred vessels etc. Our bishops wear no mitre, certainly no long train (*cappa magna*) or red Prada slippers!
3. Separation of administrative and sacramental leadership. Both elected by community.
4. Accountability of all elected leaders, including bishops, to the community according to an agreed mandate
5. Justice and human dignity are fundamental: *sensus fidelium* is important,

- based on the primacy of a well-formed conscience.
6. No mandatory celibacy for priests
  7. Inclusivity: re gender and sexual orientation.
  8. Sincere, open-minded ecumenism and respect for theological diversity
  9. Unity in diversity, rather than uniformity, especially re culture, so enculturation is a highly-respected value.
  10. Financial independence from the hierarchy - our priests and communities are necessarily self-supporting
  11. Prophetic obedience, communally and individually
  12. Understanding chaos as having creative potential: interplay between chaos and self-organization is part of organic growth
  13. Non-violence
  14. Interdependence: earth, human community, church
  15. A reflective, contemplative stance which does not insist on controlling or explaining everything, but embraces the mystery within ourselves, the community, the church, the universe.

*(RCWP Model of Church and Ministry)*

Compare our RCWP model with the recent petitions signed in Germany, Austria and in Australia, with thousands of signatures, asking for these very things. Compare also the aims of reform groups such as the American Catholic Council, Wir sind Kirche, Call to Action, Catholics for Ministry - or to what our theologians are saying. The blueprint is clear. We know what we want. Now the time has come for action.

We cannot all do everything but each one of us can do something. Together we can and will bring about a huge breakthrough. Depending on the circumstances of our lives, each of us is led to a place where one reform issue, or several related ones, become our passion - and that is where we are led to take action.

### **Theological developments since Vatican II:**

Despite the Vatican retrogressive attitudes and statements since Vatican II, there have been major developments in theological thinking since the Council, e.g.

1. On the Trinity (see Elizabeth Johnson)
2. Ecclesiology (e.g Richard McBrien)
3. Eucharist. At Vatican II, the main changes were the vernacular, the priest facing the altar, etc. Since then there has been a growing understanding of the Eucharistic community, rather than focusing on the consecrated bread and wine. Most of these contemporary developments in Eucharistic theology have been reversed by the new Missal, with regard to both the translation and the rituals that are being reinstated.
5. Liberation theology, including feminist theology, has evolved since Vatican II.

Most of these have been ignored, dismissed or outlawed by the Vatican, but they are among the great questions of our time and we are moving forward in spite of the clericalism and closed minds of the official church.

I end with a call to prophetic obedience. Whether they call it that or not, I believe that is what all the individual and group prophetic voices of our time are calling us to, what God is calling us to, is obedience to the Spirit. As you listen to yourselves, to the people whom you know are speaking the truth, to the signs of the times and to the Spirit, to what is God calling you? In what areas do you feel impelled to speak out, to take a stand for justice? Are there unjust laws or situations in the church which you can simply no longer abide? I think this is the great challenge of our time: prophetic obedience. It is not easy but it is very freeing and it is the way forward. For your own individual consideration and for our group discussion, that is the challenge I give you:

**TO WHAT AM I,  
TO WHAT ARE WE,  
THE CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA,  
BEING CALLED IN PROPHETIC OBEDIENCE?**

**Let us have the courage to listen and to act in prophetic obedience. Let us take heart, because God is doing something new in our time.**

“Look, I am doing something new, says the Lord,  
Now it emerges; can you not see it?  
Yes, I am making a road in the desert  
And rivers in wastelands ...  
For my people to drink.  
The people I have shaped for myself  
will broadcast my praises.” (Isaiah 43: 18, 21)

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