

The Catholic Church in Australia faces a crisis in its leadership. It has relied on the priesthood for this function but now has inadequate numbers of candidates for this office. The long tradition of exclusivism in the Church has discouraged questioning the current arrangements. Such a view says that we already know what is right and it is in within the Church. Acceptance of pluralism, however, provides an opportunity to seek models outside our own where lived tradition has found other solutions to this dilemma that could heal the office itself by widening the selection pool available and changing the relationship between the priesthood and the laity.

Appreciating the functional attributes of other models of Church leadership with the humility to accept the shortcomings of our own tradition suggests a way for dealing with problem issues such as vanishing vocations within the Church and even perhaps reviving the stalled juggernaut of ecumenism. Reviewing other models regarding priestly roles can also alert us to alternative Roman Catholic solutions that have existed in the past and even currently coexist uncomfortably with rigid directives from Rome. It would make sense to observe the transition of other faiths that are constructively engaging with the modern world from within their own repository of tradition. The outstanding example of this is Judaism and I will be looking to their experience for directions.

The fact that other Christian traditions, let alone Islam and Judaism, have married clergy, is a stumbling block of dubious validity to our acceptance of their faiths as valid. Such dogmatism fights even the most moderately inclusivist tendency. If Catholicism is right about priests needing to be single and celibate then other faiths' priesthood is by definition in some way invalid and of a lesser worth. Abandoning dysfunctional attitudes to priesthood would allow the Church to have

closer communion with other faiths as they too leave their pre-modern enclosed worlds.

Christianity has always functioned best as an oppressed Church. Under such circumstances, the exclusivism that has characterized the Church in all areas, including concepts of the priesthood, had a survival function. The bulwark of scripture and tradition should provide a vital anchor to the task of finding new solutions to human problems as they arise, but not an unyielding hazard upon which to shipwreck the faith. Celibacy for priests is one such Catholic tradition that threatens the fabric of the faith. While not even consistent throughout Catholic history and even current practice, the celibate, unmarried male clergy has been one of the distinguishing factors of the Church and provided one of the tools for creating a workforce of priests unencumbered by having to support a family. The economic argument and workforce flexibility has some merit, but its lack of understanding of human sexuality becomes a problem as soon as the call to celibacy is taken seriously. While the strictures of celibacy were largely observed in the breach as a saintly ideal, the masses of the priests seem to have managed.¹ Once expected to be followed by all priests, the system fails.

Getting men to want to be priests is inhibited by the call to celibacy, not only because it is at odds with human sexuality, if taken seriously, but because it has become linked with clerical abuse of children. It is hard to argue with the National Catholic Reporter's view that:

Mandatory celibacy has other corrosive effects. In the past fifteen years, the US church has spent an estimated one billion dollars to cover court costs,

¹ Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 511.

attorney fees, settlements and victim/survivor awards in clergy sexual abuse cases. Again, this is a complex phenomenon, but surely one factor in the crisis of sexual misconduct within the clergy is the inability of priests to form open, healthy sexual relationships.²

Getting a group of aging celibate bishops in Rome to accept that their calling is no higher than the call to fruitful sexual relationship has been slow, but the laity has already spoken on the subject by the reluctance of men in the modern West to heed priestly vocations. Reason suggests that enforced celibacy is not a blessing, and may be as dangerous to the well being of society as promiscuity, when its strictures provide no outlet and exploitation of weaker souls is provoked. Chris McGillion's commentary on *Towards Understanding*³ notes:

It...found that celibacy was inappropriate for a "considerable number" of clergy. The report argued that images of God that emphasise notions of lordship and control rather than community, participation and love were factors conducive to clerical sexual abuse, and that the "hibernation" of seminarians from psychological growth and authentic social interaction also contributed to emotional immaturity and, in this way, to abuse among some priests.⁴

Celibacy for priests has not always been part of the Roman faith and was only formalized in 1139 at the Second Lateran Council.⁵ Within the Church we have the inconsistency of the long tradition of married Eastern Rite clergy and the innovation of married ex-Anglican clergy, while other priests find their vow of celibacy unrealistic when faced with its consequences and leave in droves to get married.⁶

² Anonymous, "Costs of Clerical Celibacy are Rising," *National Catholic Reporter* 3 Sept 1999; http://www.natcath.com/NCR_Online/archives/090399/090399p.htm; Internet.

³ *Toward's Understanding: A study of the factors specific to the Catholic Church which might lead to sexual abuse by priests and religious*, Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and Centrecare Catholic Community Services, 1999.

⁴ Chris McGillion, "Visions, Revisions and Scandal: A Church in Crisis," in Chris McGillion (ed.) *A Long Way from Rome* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2003), 33.

⁵ Edward Stourton, *Absolute Truth: The Catholic Church in the World Today* (London: Viking, 1998), 200.

⁶ John Horan, "Let's welcome back married priests," *US Catholic* Feb 1999 <http://www.uscatholic.org/1999/02/sb9902.htm>; Internet.

While Judaism shares many common cultural antecedents with Catholic Christianity, its separation came before it could be influenced by the extreme views of the Church Fathers and therefore with less taint of the life-denying attitude to the world that devalues sex and therefore marriage. Paul's interim ethics while awaiting the parousia became frozen in unhealthy praise of virginity and fear of women in general. Sexual contact with women was seen as evil and mixed up with the transmission of original sin.⁷

The purity concerns of the Hebrew temple priests in the ancient world never intended permanent celibacy and the reverence for life of the Jewish tradition seems to flourish without the negative connotations of sexuality that have dogged Catholicism. That the rabbi in Jewish faith is expected to be married is simply a cultural given. As a married man the rabbi was no less able to represent God in the yeshiva than a priest in his parish. Rabbis in⁸ Eastern European communities, for example were held in the highest esteem and no diminution of commitment was perceived by his family duties: "His presence was perceived as the presence of the Torah, indeed of God."⁹

That a rabbi be married was essential from another perspective, as rather than an economic burden, the rebbetzin was the breadwinner, often granted by the community exclusive trading rights in candles, yeast and other essentials for a shop she would run.¹⁰

⁷ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (London: Picador, 1976), 54.

⁸ Yaffa Eliach, *There Once was a World* (Boston: Little Brown, 1998), 94.

⁹ Eliach, *There Once was a World*, 94.

¹⁰ Eliach, *There Once was a World*, 95.

There are Catholic women who have been called to the priesthood and are currently denied this vocation. This is anomalous when the composition of most caring professions in Australia are examined. Women predominate in nursing, social work, counselling and are becoming the majority in nonprocedural medicine. As both a solution to the shortage of priests and as an acknowledgment of the dignity of all humanity, female priests seem inevitable. The rarity of sexual abuse caused by women would not hurt the Church either. Certainly the primitive Church in the era before priests, following Jesus' clear example, was particularly open to female participation in all facets of community worship.¹¹

As the Church became part of the establishment and conformed to prevailing attitudes that relegated women to subservience, Christ's initiative to elevate women to equal positions in the Kingdom was lost until our encounter with modernity has given the Church the opportunity to reexamine the prejudices that have unjustly denied the priesthood to women.

While other Christian traditions have been forward in examining the issue and enduring the pain of transition, the Roman Catholic tradition has failed to do so. From Quakers in the 1800s to the Salvation Army, and at various times in their recent history, Presbyterians, Methodists and Anglicans have all worked through their issues to allow female ministers. In Australia, the Congregationalists ordained Winifred Kiek in 1927 and many other traditions followed.¹² Catholicism now finds itself accompanying only the most rabidly fundamentalist groups in failing to address the issue constructively.¹³

¹¹ Karen Armstrong, *The End of Silence* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), 69-70.

¹² Ian Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 131.

¹³ Bruce Robinson, "Women as Clergy: When some faith groups started to ordain women," <http://www.religioustolerance.org/femclrg13.htm>; Internet.

Judaism, with its own extensive traditional baggage, has faced this as well and is now a generation into widespread acceptance of female rabbis in the reform, reconstructionist and conservative strands of the religion. Even the orthodox have recently begun using female interns performing many tasks previously reserved for rabbis.¹⁴

In America, Ray Frank was despite her protestations, labeled a potential female rabbi as she broke through to preach in the synagogues in the late nineteenth century. Despite rulings by Reform Judaism in America in the 1920s that there was no justification for failing to ordain women as rabbis¹⁵, the first female rabbi was actually ordained in Germany in 1935.¹⁶ Regina Jonas was only one of many female students who could have been ordained had the holocaust not intervened. In the ghetto prior to her death in Auschwitz in 1944, she said, “Wherever one steps in every life situation, bestow blessing, goodness and faithfulness. Men and women, women and men have undertaken this duty with the same Jewish faithfulness.”¹⁷

Reform Judaism in America finally ordained women in the 1970s and Conservative Judaism in the 1980s and now the rabbinical schools in the US are at least half female.¹⁸ Despite problems like being referred to as rebbetzin or being told they are too pretty to be a rabbi, as in other professions, women have succeeded.¹⁹ In a generation, it has become unremarkable to have a female rabbi, and the religion is benefiting from feminist perspectives on worship.

¹⁴ Anonymous, “Women in the Rabbinate,” <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/frank/auxrab.htm>; Internet.

¹⁵ “Women in the Rabbinate.”

¹⁶ Louise Scodie, “A Forgotten Pioneer of Faith,” http://www.totallyjewish.com/woman/spiritual/features/?disp_feature=B4x4XT

¹⁷ Scodie, “A Forgotten Pioneer.”

¹⁸ Charles Sherman, Thirty Years of Women in the Rabbinate,” *From the Rabbi’s Desk* Nov 2002. <http://www.uahe.org/congs/ok/ok004/SermonNovember01-2002.htm>

¹⁹ Joseph Telushkin, “Women Rabbis,” *Jewish Virtual Library* http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Judaism/women_rabbis.html

Not surprisingly, involvement of women has caused reinterpretation of tradition with insights that have escaped males.²⁰ Christianity has a surfeit of feminist spirituality that would doubtless break through in a torrent if linked to the fulfillment of priestly callings.

Some orthodox Jews use similar arguments to the Catholic hierarchy against women's ordination. They inflexibly appeal to the same sort of ancient traditions in the Halacha that recommend many practices meant to represent justice which are illegal in the modern world, to say female rabbis are invalid. They claim the authority to tell women that their callings are not inferior to those of men and so there is no need for them to become rabbis.²¹ The fact that women rabbis are now commonplace in other branches of Judaism and contributing to and expanding the work of their faith is, however, a practical demonstration that even religions with thousands of years of tradition can rapidly come to terms with modern existence to the great benefit of the faith and refutes the theoretical objections of the orthodox.

Just as the benefits of vernacular liturgy took a generation to bed down post Vatican II, it may take a generation or so for Catholicism to learn the lesson of its fellow religions' encounter with modernity. Dispensing with obligatory celibacy will doubtless reduce the Catholic Church's anxiety about sex in general as we welcome the married to the priesthood and therefore assist the next innovation, that of female ordination. Both innovations will allow the continued existence of the countless parish communities who will otherwise lose their access to priests in the next generation.

²⁰ Gerhard Falk, "The Feminist Seder and other Innovations," <http://www.jbuff.com/e040501.htm>

²¹ Anat Cohen, "Rabbi Stakes Her Claim in Orthodox Stronghold," *Women's E-News* Nov 2003. <http://www.womensnews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1483/context/archive>

The current reduction of priests in Australia has already led to a redistribution of work to the laity in parishes. Just as the disappearance of religious orders has made Catholic schools vastly different, the scarcity and increasing frailty of the remaining clergy has inevitably pushed more responsibility onto the laity. This is entirely appropriate and will likely survive the recovery in vocations when celibacy is made optional, married priests reinstated as the natural order and female ordination arrives. Increased responsibility, however, suggests increased input into Church governance. The potential tyranny of apostolic succession suggests other modes of Church governance. Pluralism needn't look far to find the alternatives to Episcopal approaches that are available even within Christian circles with the more democratic Presbyterian and Congregational examples of running a Church.

Within Jewish traditions the written authorities are so numerous and diverse as to allow interpretation and rabbinic debate without a final authority analogous to the Pope. The shift of power away from the clergy to the laity will deliver a construction closer to the non-hierarchical structure of Judaism²², that is by its nature debating and social, without the toxin of absolute authority that poisons relationships.

Pluralism allows greater perspective on what our own tradition is trying to achieve. Acceptance that the glimpse of God from other traditions that have fed off their own centuries of experience is as valid as our own, leads to reassessment of old defensive postures that have outlived whatever usefulness they had. As Australians

²² Anonymous, "Judaism" *ABC Religion and Ethics* <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s796551.htm> ; Internet.

are now regarding themselves as more spiritual but with less religious adherence, those few within the Churches may fruitfully engage with each other and those seekers outside when provision is made for Church leadership that is from the broadest range of experience and tradition. There is no particular reason that our religious leaders will need to be male or celibate or even, in the long run, Catholic. You could imagine communities having consolidated worship spaces where the sacramental tradition of Catholicism and Judaism meets the best scholarship of the Protestant and Islamic world along with the practice of Buddhist disciplines. Members would interact and partake, as their journey requires.

Catholicism's problem with its priests and priesthood tell us that the answers aren't always going to be in doing what always has been done. Continuing the current scheme will cause huge changes in the Church in any case, as parishes close and merge. There is no option of returning to a triumphant past that we are now discovering encompassed much that was dysfunctional and damaging. Openness to the gifts God has given other traditions will provide a lifeline to the Church in this area. The work of the spirit is now essentially pluralist: the task is to guide this exchange to the benefit of God's reign.

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