

Overview of the Last Fifty Years – 1957 to 2007

[This was a talk given at Redan to invited guests to celebrate Fr John's fifty years as a priest. All of those present had been closely involved with him over the fifty years in a variety of roles and ministries]

The 1960s

All my life I have been lucky to be in a good place at a good time. I came into the diocese at a good time for a priest – 1959 – and was appointed to Swan Hill. John Molony and Vin Fennelly were key men at the time, and the YCW and NCGM were in fine shape. A close friend of mine, Laurie Halloran, was in Mildura, and, on our days off, we frequently met along the river, half way between both places. We shared similar interests and convictions.

YCW

In 1962, I came to Ballarat, which brought me into frequent contact with both John Molony and Vin. They gave me plenty of involvement with YCW groups, through Fatima House, which had not long opened up. When John mysteriously vanished into smoke, I was appointed diocesan chaplain of the YCW movement, and came under the influence also of Pat Goggin. I regard myself as particularly blessed by the YCW key leaders of the time – their interest and enthusiasm, their common sense and their deep and real faith.

Encouraged by John Molony, I took an increasing interest in helping key leaders to pray and to reflect on the Gospels. Fatima House will have a special spot in my heart for that reason. The emphasis proved a helpful incentive also to myself. The interest in praying eventually had me talking about prayer to some of the younger religious in various stages of formation at Ballarat East.

In 1967 I went back to Rome for the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate. Kevin Murphy, who at the time was diocesan chaplain of the YCS, went to the same Congress. One of the lessons for me that came out of that trip, and accompanying visits to other countries, especially to France, was the value of an adult lay apostolate able to act as a more mature “think tank” for the less mature and experienced YCWs.

Adult Lay Apostolate

The Adult Lay Apostolate was just getting under way at the time in the diocese. It was quite unique in Australia, and had some wonderful leaders. I was chaplain to two groups of the ALA in Ballarat. In encouraging the development of personal and responsible reflection and action, it stood in contrast to the stronger and more numerous NCC groups, which enjoyed the particular patronage of the bishop of Ballarat.

Vietnam

One of the outcomes of the trip to Rome, and to a number of places in South East Asia, India and Vietnam on the way there and back (and the many encounters and conversations with lay apostolate leaders that it facilitated), was to begin to question the legitimacy of the war in Vietnam. I began to reflect at length on the question. Conscription was an issue for the YCW at the time. It affected the nation as a whole. In time, after a lot of reading, thought and prayer, I came not just to judge the war in Vietnam as immoral, but to adopt a general pacifist attitude to the use of violence as a means to secure “peace”, and so to war in general. My stance on the war was not appreciated by a lot of people, especially by the NCC. I felt a little bit supported by an article written by Ron Mulkearns, not long before he was made bishop. As far as I can remember, he did not go so far as to be a pacifist, but he did reject the morality of Australia's engagement in Vietnam.

The 1970s

Baby Boomers

Things had been happening during the second half of the 1960s, which we were not in touch with at the time. They were to lead to the eventual disappearance of the YCW in the diocese.

One major factor was that, by 1965, the last of the pre-Baby Boomers had reached the age of 20 years. After 1965, apart from a few older leaders, all our YCW leaders represented the first of the Boomers to come on line. Around that time, recruiting became increasingly difficult. Full-timers (underpaid and over-worked) were harder to find, and the ones who did respond deserve credit. They were a vanishing species.

Hugh Mackay would describe the Baby Boomers in their early years as the “me” generation. In broad terms, they tended to question authority and authority structures. The influence of former institutions – family, Church, school – decreased. The young people were individualistic, and more independent of each other, though still susceptible to peer pressure. They were not open to much idealism – certainly not to working for a pittance. TV had come on line, advertising became more sophisticated.

I remember writing late in 1969 a reflection called “*Whither the YCW?*”, that I sent around to the priests and a few others. As far as I can recall, some of the factors that I had noticed over the preceding years, and that impacted on the YCW, were the growing availability of cars, which allowed young men and women to get around in pairs, rather than in groups. Dating and courting patterns changed as a consequence. The contraceptive pill came on the market, and sexual activity between the unmarried was no longer dangerous. The sexual revolution was launched. World-class entertainment became easily available on tapes and records, and the amateur bands that used to provide the music for the workers at their weekly dances were no longer good enough. Dances needed to be conducted professionally, and got beyond the range of the YCWs. Relative affluence prevailed, and the YCWs detected little injustice to stir them into action. The focus seemed to be more on personal conversion – which was hardly attractive.

At the time, we were bewildered, and did not know how to approach the steady death of the lay movements. We were too close to the cultural changes to see them.

In 1969 I was moved from Ballarat to Ararat. Laurie Halloran had also been moved to Warrnambool. He had been in Ballarat at the same time as myself, and had become diocesan chaplain to the girls YCW. We worked well together. We both resigned as diocesan chaplains following our new appointments.

Humanae Vitae

The availability of the contraceptive pill and the appearance of “*Humanae Vitae*” had created something of a crisis in the broader Church. It affected not simply the Baby Boomers and potential YCWs, but the generations that preceded them as well:

- A lot of adults drifted from the Church.
- Of those who remained, some accepted the Church’s teaching, but felt angry and not understood.
- Some seemed to move into a moral “no man’s land” and felt a vague loss of integrity, which tended to sap their enthusiasm and to undermine their former loyalty to authority.
- Some grew up, faced the situation and learnt to explore their own consciences.
- When the Baby Boomers eventually came on line, they did not seem to care what authority said.

Focus on Adults

As a diocese, we accepted the demise of the YCW and the difficulty of engaging the Baby Boomers, and focussed more on helping the older generations with their marriages.

The 1970s particularly were the decade of the Cana Conferences (and later of Marriage Encounter), building on the efforts begun in the 1960s. It was in this work, and particularly in helping people with natural family planning, that I became increasingly involved with Neil and Kate Andrews. In some ways, theirs was a

thankless task – but they persisted with integrity. Kate had already been a full-timer with the NCGM, but was no longer active on that scene when I arrived in the 1960s.

I appreciated the incentives to constant prayer and reflection leading to action provided by the YCWs. I particularly appreciated the more mature, and sometimes stretching, interactions with the adults. I am thankful for the faithfulness of Neil and Kate, and of others like them.

Vatican Council II

Against the background of these cultural changes, the Church was beginning to come to terms with the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council. For me, the Council had been very welcome. It gave the all-clear to much of what I had been reading about (unofficially) and hoping for during my time of study in Rome. It was far from comprehensive enough for my likings (the conservative forces in Rome still had considerable influence on final outcomes, and most of the Council documents were compromises), but was nevertheless a step in the right direction.

Development and Peace

With the support of a few papal encyclicals and the final document of the Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church increased its concern for world development. In Australia, the bishops set up *Australian Catholic Relief* (with Project Compassion) and the *Social Justice Commission*, of which Bishop Mulkearns was the episcopal chairman.

Early in the 1970s the ecumenical program, *Action for World Development*, came online. It touched into a growing enthusiasm, hope and vision – that continued during the decade, supported particularly by the older Catholics. The image of the world as a global village became significant.

Choosing Vocation

The early 70s were a restless period for myself. Laurie Halloran had got married and had to relinquish practice of his priesthood. While I preached peace, I found it difficult to live in peace with the parish priest in the presbytery where I had been appointed. I felt compromised. I briefly fell in love at the same time, with all the ardour of a forty-year-old adolescent.

Fortunately, I was moved to Beaufort, and the pressure to make peace with someone with whom I strongly disagreed was lessened, even if the challenge remained. I felt the temptation to leave priesthood; but decided I would leave only if I could find an alternative lifestyle that would make more sense to me.

I remember attending a training weekend for key people involved in work for development and peace from a number of non-government voluntary organisations. I was deeply impressed by the competence and knowledge of many of the participants, but was also frightened by the depth of hostility and violence shown by some of them to those whom they saw as the enemy. I came to the conclusion that the primary task was always to call to conversion. Without personal conversion, revolutions and structural changes of themselves could too easily adopt the same violence and oppression of their opponents. I felt reaffirmed in the work of priesthood – even if it often seemed ineffectual.

Ministry supplants Apostolate

Surprisingly, while the Council strongly emphasised the importance of the lay apostolate, that emphasis was largely overlooked in the years that followed. The focus moved from the formative movements, like YCW, to consideration of the broader issues of peace in the world and of development. The strong Catholic sub-culture began to dissolve, and “See-Judge-Act” technique lost its appeal.

Liturgy and catechetics prospered after the Council, as did lay ministries in the Church, but formation for the local apostolate languished in the less favourable cultural climate.

Parish Life

The Beaufort parish had three faith communities: Beaufort, Streatham and Buangor. None of them had had much exposure to the ferment of Vatican Council. We set up a Parish Council, but the members had little vision of Church; and I found it difficult to share my dream of what parish life could involve. With wonderful exceptions, Beaufort seemed reluctant to change; some of the Streatham community thought I was a Communist – but at least they were alive, and, in time, some of them began to grasp the vision. Buangor was smaller, but the congregation generally accepted me as the person I was, and I always felt at home there. I am glad that Des and Margaret Brennan are here today. Des was not frightened of change, and in later years we worked together on the *Pastoral Planning Taskforce*. Des also had the chance to share his wisdom with the Diocesan Interim Pastoral Council.

Around this time, the Bishop accepted the suggestion that we conduct an Attitudinal Survey of the people of the diocese – a first in the Australian Church. Interestingly, the Survey foreshadowed a number of the changes that have since come home to roost in the Church. Though the Survey served to inform us of where people were at, and where the younger ones, particularly, were heading, we did not apply ourselves to address the situation effectively. Some structural changes were made in line with suggestions, but, beyond that, we did not know how to face the changing cultural situation.

After my time in Beaufort, I came to the conclusion that parish life as we knew it was not touching the spot. Though I did not know what might be better, I was not motivated to simply do more of the same. Rather than accepting a placement in a different parish, I became full-time chaplain to the tertiary students in Ballarat (as an interim appointment until something worthwhile might turn up).

The last of the Baby Boomers were finishing secondary school by the second half of the 70s, to be replaced by the next generation, the Gen-Xs. But the tertiary students were still all Boomers. By the time they had finished secondary college, most of them, along with many of their disillusioned parents, had begun to lose interest in the institutional aspects of the Church. The trend has continued, and seems to me to be more a factor of culture than of Church.

Renewal Movements

Around that time, the second half of the 70s, Marriage Encounter hit the diocese. I attended a weekend during 1975, and found it a wonderful experience, with its strong insistence on the awareness and communication of feelings. Feelings until then had been still a largely unexplored area of my life. It also helped me to come to terms with the presence of love in my life. Not long afterwards, I was introduced to Charismatic Renewal. I was always a somewhat reluctant participant in the renewal, but finished up as its diocesan liaison priest. I found that its focus on inner healing complemented my growing awareness of my feelings and emotions. It proved very helpful to me, and it has stood me in good stead in the work of spiritual direction to which I have been increasingly drawn. I think that the diocesan movement suffered from an imbalance of men in the movement, and from the shortage of really good leaders. Despite the valiant efforts of a dedicated few, the renewal did not become a powerful force in the diocese.

In the absence of other meaningful alternatives, I accepted the invitation to return to parish ministry, and was appointed to the parish of Redan in 1978. Along with chaplaincy to Ballarat's tertiary students, not many of whom were interested in my ministrations, I also lectured part-time at Aquinas Teachers' College, enjoying the challenge very much. During those years, I shared the chaplaincy activity at Aquinas with Lis Teggelove. In 1982, I was asked to go to Wycheproof.

The 1980s

By 1980, those aged between 16 and 35, including the new wave of parents, were all Baby Boomers. By the end of the 80s, their children, the Gen-Xs, had hit 15, and were moving through secondary college.

The 1980s witnessed a strong drift from active participation in Church life, which has gathered momentum over the years. By now secondary students belonged to the Gen-X generation, which, in general, like the generation ahead of them, showed little interest in authority and structure, and even less in life-long commitment. Priesthood and religious life, for a whole raft of reasons, no longer figured on their horizons. They were responsive to personal example and integrity, but no longer to objective dogmas. They were susceptible to media influence, and attracted to celebrities. Pope John Paul became a superstar, though most took little notice of what he taught.

During the 1980s, enthusiasm for justice, peace and world development weakened. The task was more complicated and difficult than originally anticipated. Many people were disillusioned by the political process. Problems all seemed too big. Of more recent years, people have responded to politicians who favoured personal and national interest. Homes, gardens and kitchens seemed more manageable.

The German theologian, Karl Rahner, once said that Christians of the 21st century would either be mystics, or they would not survive. I tend to agree with him. Unless people find a personal relationship to Jesus to support their belonging to the Church, cultural influences will prove stronger than their faith. Spirituality has survived until the present, but surveys seem to show that young people at the moment do not have much spiritual sensitivity.

A good number of the YCWs who learnt to pray the Gospel have continued their commitment to Church across the years. I think that a good number of those touched by Charismatic Renewal, especially those who allowed their spirituality to deepen, have also survived.

Growth of the Right Wing

A further unexpected survival has been those who have been generally frightened of change. Not only have they continued in the institution, but they have become a quite strong presence, effectively, and often militantly, holding back the on-going renewal of the Church. Fear, unfortunately, sometimes generates commitment. In times of change, there is usually a strong movement towards restorationism and a return to the past.

Others have survived, simply from their innate goodness and perseverance.

Religious

The Vatican Council had invited religious to reconsider and to recapture their founding charism. With the 1980s the effects of the deeper reflection began to become obvious. Religious began moving out of the schools to become engaged in other necessary, sometimes more specialised and more urgent activities, especially reaching out to those on the margins of society.

I very much envy how they have approached questions of structure, authority, mission and discernment. We diocesan priests could fruitfully learn so much from their experience. They have learnt to consult, to reflect and to decide thoughtfully. Like the clergy and involved parishioners generally, their numbers have decreased dramatically. Most seem to approach the future with serenity, leaving outcomes in the hands of God.

The 1990s

Sexual Abuse

Early in the 1990s, the clergy abuse phenomenon surfaced, and the inadequate response of many bishops came to light. The immediate reaction was at first denial. Scapegoating came next, with many Catholics tending to doubt the accusations levelled by victims. When these accusations could no longer be denied, many Catholics took to blaming the media for the relentless publicity. As Bishop Geoffrey Robinson remarked recently, the crisis has been managed to some extent, but the underlying problems have still to be addressed. The impact upon the local Church has not yet been assessed, but the crisis has no doubt added to the many other factors affecting people's allegiance. It may also have affected the morale of some of the remaining clergy.

Pastoral Planning

During the 1990s, it became obvious that the diocesan scene was changing rapidly. The first thing to be noticed was the growing shortage of clergy. The need for more enlightened pastoral planning became obvious. Bishop Mulkearns set up a *Diocesan Pastoral Planning Taskforce* to study the problem and to make recommendations. I was asked to chair the body, and both Des Brennan and Margaret Carmody were important contributors. It immediately became obvious that priests were not the only ones in short supply. People had drifted from the Church, and numbers everywhere were less. In rural areas, many of the small communities were disappearing as farms became bigger. Pastoral planning in a rural diocese presented different problems from those confronted in the larger, growing and often multicultural, city dioceses.

After the publication of the final report of the Pastoral Planning Taskforce, *A Shoot Will Spring*, the document was presented to the priests. The majority accepted its recommendation formally, without, however, being really committed to the adjustments called for. Not long after the report was published, Bishop Mulkearns retired from the diocese, and was replaced by Bishop Peter Connors.

Despite valiant efforts by the members of the Pastoral Planning Office over the first few years of its operation, the approach favoured by *A Shot Will Spring* was eventually abandoned in practice, and the Office itself was downsized. The question of the mission of the diocesan Church is not at the forefront of the diocese's preoccupations, perhaps because we just don't know what to do or how to go about things. We seem somewhat reluctant to engage with the big questions, possibly from a fear of highlighting our divisions.

Conclusion

Despite shortages, the main problem is consistently the renewal of the Church and its mission. It is much more daunting than simply working out how to provide regular Masses and sacramental opportunities for people. It is a call to ever deepening conversion, and in a world that sorely needs an effective Church witness and its focussed service.

There is a need to rediscover the meaning of Eucharist and the reason for its centrality. Sometimes I wonder if current attitudes to Eucharist are so entrenched that there is little possibility of doing more than fine-tuning them, and playing around with non-essentials. Is the dramatic fall in Church attendance the Spirit's way of clearing the decks for genuine renewal?

Along with a thorough rediscovery of genuine Eucharistic spirituality, however it may happen, there is need to rediscover, and probably reshape accordingly, our whole understanding and practice of priesthood.