

A PROPHETIC VISION OF THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD

Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM, Bishop of Parramatta, New South Wales, Australia, delivered the Dom Helder Camara Lecture at Parkville, Victoria, shortly before the first Plenary Council held by the bishops of Australia since the Second Vatican Council. His message is important and compelling for the entire Church. I think it's so important that I've printed it for you to read and, if you're so inclined, to study. He began the lecture by speaking about the Church in Australia and the consultative process used to prepare for the Council. I'm picking up his text at the point when he begins to speak about the universal Church.

Fr. John

What the Church needs is not simply a renewal or an updating of methods of evangelizing. Rather, what we desperately need is an inner conversion, a radical revolution in our mindsets and patterns of action. Gerald Arbuckle speaks of refounding as opposed to renewal. This refounding means going to the very cultural roots and a hope-filled journey into the Paschal Mystery for mission under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Unless we genuinely repent of institutional failures and unless we convert to the radical vision of Christ and let it imbue our attitudes, action and pastoral practices, we will not be able to restore confidence and trust in the Church.

Conversion is one of the key areas on the agenda of the Plenary Council. It is framed in terms of our openness to learn and meet the needs of the world we live in. As a result, the questions revolve around our engagement with First Nations peoples, with the marginalized and the vulnerable. However, one wonders if conversion needs to be framed not just in terms of our openness to learn and meet the needs of others but also in terms of our examination of the Church's attitude and treatment of racial minorities, women, LGBTQ+ individuals and others. Until we have the courage to acknowledge the old ways of being Church, which are steeped in a culture of clerical power, dominance and privilege, we cannot rise to a Christ-like way of humanity, inclusivity, compassion and powerlessness.

There is a sense in which the Church must change into a more Christ-like pattern of humility, simplicity

and powerlessness as opposed to worldly triumphalism, splendor, dominance and power. Christians...are like the Jews after the exile. The future of the Church, like the new Jerusalem that the exilic prophets often speak of, will not be revitalized by simply repeating what was done in the past. It will not be simply a restoration project or doing the old things better. Rather, we must have the courage to do new things; we must be open to the Spirit leading us to new horizons even as we tend to revert to the old ways.

Change of era and the new way of being Church in the world

Many Catholics hope that the Plenary Council 2020 will see a number of priority issues such as greater inclusion of the laity, the role of women, clerical celibacy etc. While it is important that there is an openness and boldness to discuss these matters, what is more important is to envision a new way of being Church in the world.

The model of the Church based on clerical hegemony has run full course. Insofar as it is deeply imbedded in patriarchal and monarchical structures, it is incapable of helping us meet the needs of the world and culture in which we live. We have long moved out of the *Ancien Régime* and the age of absolute monarchs. We are on this side of the secular state and the rise of democracy. Yet it seems that the deeply entrenched patriarchal and monarchical structures of the Church have failed to correspond with our lived experience.

For the Church to flourish, it is crucial that we come to terms with the flaws of clericalism and move beyond its patriarchal and monarchical matrix. What is urgent is that we need to find ways of being Church, and fresh ways of ministry and service for both men and women disciples. New wine into new wineskins! The new wine of God's unconditional love, radical inclusivity and equality needs to be poured into the new wineskins of humility, mutuality, compassion and powerlessness. The old wineskins of triumphalism, authoritarianism and supremacy, abetted by clerical power, superiority, and rigidity are breaking.

It is worth noting that at the recent Synod on the Amazon, the synod bishops said they consider it “urgent” for the Church to “promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner. It is the Church of baptized men and women that we must strengthen by promoting ministeriality and, above all, the awareness of baptismal dignity.” Beyond these generic statements it remains to be seen how women can share in the decision-making power and institutionalized ministries in the Church.

The Church cannot have a better future if it persists in the old paradigm of triumphalism, self-reference and male dominance. So long as we continue to exclude women from the Church’s governance structures, decision making processes and institutional functions, we deprive ourselves of the richness of our full humanity. So long as we continue to make women invisible and inferior in the Church’s language, liturgy, theology and law, we impoverish ourselves. Until we have truly incorporated the gift of women and the feminine dimension of our Christian faith, we will not be able to fully energize the life of the Church.

In the world where the rules are made by the strong and the structures of power favor the privileged, the Church must be true to its founding stories and responsive to the living presence of God. It must find ways to promote a community of equals and empower men and women disciples to share their gifts for human flourishing and the growth of the Kingdom.

Our founding stories are those of emancipation and liberation. It is the story of Moses and the movement of the new social order against the tyranny of empires that lie at the heart of the prophetic imagination. It inspires Mary who sings of the God who overthrows the powerful and lifts up the lowly. It is the story of Jesus who washes the feet of his followers and subverts the power structures that are tilted toward the strong. The narrative of the new reality that envisions radical reordering of human relationships was, in fact, the hallmark of the earliest Christian movement.

The Church must continue to embody the alternative relationship paradigm. The alternative relational paradigm turns the world’s system of power structures on its head because it is rooted in the biblical narrative of the new social order of radical inclusion, justice and equality. The Church cannot have a prophetic voice in

society if we fail to be the model egalitarian community where those disadvantaged on account of their race, gender, social status and disability find empowerment for a dignified life.

Towards a Church of co-responsibility and synodality

Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said that the arc of history is bent toward justice. The parallel statement I want to make is that the arc of the Church is bent towards co-responsibility or synodality. Let me explain.

The way of being Church has evolved over the centuries. When, after the early centuries of persecution, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the early tradition of egalitarianism gave way to a more clerical and hierarchical governance system that actually took on many of the features of the Empire. Throughout the long reign of Christendom and up to the Second Vatican Council, the Church understood itself predominantly as a perfect society. Its institutional functions and dynamics were steeped in clericalism.

Ministries gradually became the domain of the ordained. They were all subsumed under a very cultic priesthood (set apart for the sacraments). Even the ancient ministry of deacon became a casualty of the process known as the “*cursus honorum*.” This means that no one could begin “the course of honor” unless he was destined and qualified for the priesthood (not married and certainly not a women)! The shift toward the celibate priesthood as the normative form of ministry effectively deprived the Church of the richness of ministries as attested by the New Testament.

At the Second Vatican Council, there was a shift in the Church’s self-understanding. The dominant metaphor of a “*societas perfecta*” gave way to a more biblical image of a pilgrim people. The priesthood of the faithful was rediscovered along with the affirmation that the working of the Holy Spirit was granted not to the ordained only but to all the baptized. Ecclesial ministries were understood in such a way as to fully honor what Paul said, “everyone is given the grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.”

Pope Paul VI accordingly suppressed the minor orders and opened some of these ministries to the lay faithful. Now, some sixty years later, (talk about the glacial

speed of change in the Church), Pope Francis took a step further with two recent important decisions. In January of this year, he opened to women the “installed” lay ministries of lector and acolyte, previously restricted to men. Then, just a few weeks ago, he responded to an idea that sat untouched since the Council and established the installed ministry of catechist. The Pope called for “men and women of deep faith and human maturity, active participants in the life of the Christian community, capable of welcoming others, being generous and living a life of fraternal communion.”

Pope Francis affirmed that the path of ‘synodality’ is precisely what “God expects of the Church of the third millennium.” He gave new impetus to the doctrine of the *sensus fidelium*, (the sense of the faithful) stating that the path of synodality represented an indispensable prerequisite for infusing the Church with a renewed missionary impulse: all the members of the Church are called to be active subjects of evangelization and “missionary disciples.”

The Church has entered a new era that is characterized by a crisis of a top-down centralized ecclesiology. With Vatican II, the *resourcement* and *aggiornamento* led to a more biblical paradigm of a pilgrim People of God, called to be the sacrament of the Kingdom and the prophetic witness in the world. The emphasis on the superiority of the ordained gave way to an ecclesial communion based on common baptism.

Pope Francis has applied a critical lens through which the Church is renewed for the sake of its mission for the poor. The Church is helped to decentralize and impelled towards the peripheries. The Church, the people of God, should walk together, sharing the burdens of humanity, the *anawim* of the Hebrew Scriptures, who were at the heart of Jesus’ public ministry.

Conclusion

The COVID crisis, the Pope says, has exposed our vulnerability. It has revealed the fallacy of individualism as the organizing principle of our Western Society. It has exposed the lie of the “myth of self-sufficiency” that sanctions rampant inequalities and frays the ties that bind societies together. If we want a different world, we must become a different people.

I wonder if the crisis in the Church today could be framed in analogous terms. In fact, we are at a point in

history where all the indications point to a perfect storm: sexual abuse crisis, near-total collapse of active participation, loss of credibility, shrinking pool of clerical leadership etc. Some have likened the state of the Church to Shakespeare’s state of Denmark. It is hardly an exaggeration.

This monumental crisis above all has exposed the weakness, and indeed the unsustainability, of the clericalist model. Hence, if we are to emerge out of this, we will need to boldly embrace a new ecclesiology from below that has regained momentum thanks to the prophetic leadership of pope Francis. We must take up the call issued to Saint Francis, “Go and rebuild my Church that is falling into ruins.” It is not only possible; it is the most exciting time for us to construct a new future.

It humbles us to know that God is with us in the mess and even in the perceived irrelevancy of the Church. It comforts us, too, to know that the Church was not at its best when it reached the height of its power in what was known as Christendom.

It was the Church of the catacombs that shone forth its best rays of hope ironically when it was poor, persecuted and powerless. Christendom for most of its history has tried to be great, powerful and dominant.

It was no coincidence that Dom Helder Camara and many Latin American colleagues chose to make the so called “Pact of the Catacombs” as a way to return to the roots and foundations of the Church. They weren’t just letting the fresh air of the Second Vatican Council blow away the cobwebs and the manacles. They were determined to recapture the original and radical spirit of the earliest Christian movement.

It may be a long and winding road to a vision of the poor, humble but empowering and leavening force in the world. But as Teilhard de Chardin wrote: “the only task worthy of our efforts is to construct the future.” I pray that this historic once in a generation Plenary Council may be an expression of such effort. May we have the courage, boldness and parrhesia to move from the old paradigm of triumphalism, power and splendor to the new ways of being Church that will convey the freshness of the Gospel.