

The title of a book will sometimes readily suggest its contents to any prospective reader. But other times it will not.

*Benedict, Me and the Cardinals Three* is the rhyming and catchy title to this book written by a Catholic bishop—the much admired and respected Bishop Bill Morris.

I have been asked to launch the book and I enthusiastically embraced that task.

A prospective reader however might nonetheless be immediately intrigued by the title of the book.

Does the book expose the previously hidden talent of a Bishop in country Australia who has committed to rhyming verse his experiences of a recent *ad limina* visit to Rome?

Or, does the book record for posterity some factitious interlude which the bishop shared with the pope and three leading cardinals in the Roman Curia in the course of a recent visit to Castel Gandolfo during a Roman summer?

Regretably, it is none of those things.

Rather it is a book which had to be written,

It is even a book which is likely to provoke the reader to variety of emotional responses: anger, confusion, disbelief, even sadness.

This is a story of a courageous and loyal priest and diocesan bishop whose clerical career and valued ministry as a bishop were ruined by a process which was grossly unjust and which extended from at the latest, late 2006 to May 2011.

It is a book which tells the story in all of its necessary detail about how a good priest of more than forty-five years and a much loved bishop for eighteen of those was forced to retire from his diocese which he had served with distinction, by a process, initiated, managed and controlled by three cardinals of the Roman Curia with the support of Pope Benedict XVI which reeks of injustice and which has caused much pain and hurt not only to Bishop Morris but also to most of his priests, to his lay diocesan pastoral leaders and to the overwhelming majority of his flock.

The exceptions are only those who might readily be identified as the ‘temple police’—that disturbingly destructive element in the Australian Catholic Church, whose biased and fallacious judgments are, it seems, readily accepted, even by cardinals in the Roman Curia.

Those of us who are and have for a lifetime been practising Catholics have held in awe until now leading figures in the Church—the bishop, the cardinal and the pope.

We are therefore entitled to be concerned by this story.

What is involved here is not some disagreement about matters of faith and morals.

We are dealing with the administrative processes of the Roman Curia which like other agents of governance have to make decisions about purely administrative issues.

Should Bishop Morris be removed as the Bishop of Toowoomba which diocese he had served for eighteen years? That was the issue.

It is like, should the Director General of the Main Road Department, or some like individual be removed from his position against his will?

For that to happen there must first be a process which by law must be executed in accordance with the principles of natural justice.

The Director General or other person must be told the reasons why he/she is no longer considered suitable in the position; he/she must be given the evidence which is available and relied upon to support these reasons; he/she must be given the full opportunity to be heard and to accept or reject the evidence relied upon. The process must be free of actual or perceived bias; and pre-judgment is anathema.

In short the person must be dealt with fairly. That is the concept which lies at the heart of the natural justice principles.

Should not these principles also govern the process when a bishop is alleged, in this case wrongly, to have acted in a way which requires that he be removed from his diocese?

If natural justice requires that lay persons be subjected to a fair, and just process, why shouldn't a bishop have the same fundamental right to a fair and just process.

The bishop's right to protect his reputation is as fundamental as the mythical director general's right to protect his/hers.

Can you imagine a more scathing and damaging allegation to make against a Catholic diocesan bishop than one that alleges he has 'failed to guide the faithful in fidelity to the doctrines and discipline of the Church and under his leadership the Church or his diocese is moving in a different direction to that of the Catholic Church'?

This surely is the language of heresy and apostasy.

And this very allegation is made against one who has been true to Church teaching for all of his life and for all of his priesthood and who as bishop has insisted on fidelity to the magisterium.

And is seeking to respond to these damaging allegations he was denied access to even the most fundamental principles of justice.

Scripture abounds with references to justice and to our need to 'act justly' in our personal lives.

Show me the law or doctrine which exempts the pope and the cardinals three from compliance with this same requirement with this same requirement in the circumstances of a case like this?

This is why this book *had* to be written.

It deserves the close attention not only of theologians and canon lawyers but also those who occupy the pews each week in any Church across the Catholic world.

There is surely now an urgent need to ensure that no other diocesan bishop ever has to endure what Bishop Morris had to.

This book also had to be written because it must provoke an urgent process of reform which ensures adherence to the principles of natural justice in any case like this.

I have heard it said definitively 'but the Church is not a democracy', as if to justify some Curia backed process which is unjust.

My friends we are not talking here about some political theory and its application or otherwise to the Church.

We are talking about Natural Law and Natural Justice principles and their application to Curia based decision making in matters like this.

In *Gadium et spes*, Pope Paul VI identified Natural law as 'that permanent and universal binding force with all embracing principles'.

Show me where it is authoritatively laid down that the pope and the cardinals three are exempt from compliance with such principles and are permitted to act unjustly and in breach of those principles in the performance of what is essentially administrative decision making but which has the capacity to 'harm the good reputation which a person enjoys' (Canon 220).

If reform of the Roman Curia and its processes is timely, then let that happen.

That will be too late for Bishop Morris. But it might protect others from a like fate.

May this book, therefore, be the catalyst identifying the need for such reform.

I have been honoured to be asked to launch this book and to do that now on behalf of a very courageous bishop who sought only fairness and justice but which was denied him by the pope and the cardinals three.

Please let me end with my own piece of poetic rhythm:

Benedict, me and the cardinals three is now out there for all to see.

There are some lessons in it which even popes and cardinals need to heed

But apart from all that—it is a darn good read.

BJ Carter

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