

# **The Elephant in the Room – Ministry: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow**

**By Michael Kelly SJ**

**Viewed overall, the state of the Church is not too encouraging. In the space of a single generation, the deepening dearth of priests will lead to the collapse of the entire structure of parish administration, and I cannot see sufficient courage or creativity among those who have assumed responsibility for running the Church as an institution to find some real alternatives or at least to systematically prepare the community of believers for a situation in which they will soon have to live their faith without support of many things that the Church has regarded for centuries as essential and matter of course.**

**We must not allow ourselves to be drawn into the murky waters of cynicism, passivity, and bitterness. However, nor must we don the rosy spectacles of illusory optimism.**

Tomas Halik, Czech priest and author of *Night of the Confessor: Christian Faith in an Age of Uncertainty*

Firstly let me say how grateful I am to Rosemary Flannery and the Camino committee for inviting me here tonight. This parish is my spiritual home. I first learnt about the faith through this community; I have returned here over many decades and have felt here in conscious and real ways that that here is where I learnt what a community of faith is; and it was here more than 28 years ago that I celebrated my first Mass. Thankyou Rosemary and team. I'm so glad to be here to address something that is important to us all and central to my life – ministry.

About twenty years ago, I was having lunch with a dear friend and one of the larger than life gentlemen ever to grace the Australian clergy – Dr Grove Johnson. He is now close to 90 and lives in retirement in his home diocese, Rockhampton. He is remarkable for many reasons not least his courage to leave Rockhampton at the age of 15 or 16 for Rome where he studied at Propaganda Fide College. He arrived there in short pants, as one of his clerical friends is wont to observe.

He stayed in Rome through the War, returning to Australia in 1947. When I came to know him he was Rector of Many Seminary and later National Director of Catholic

Mission. It was when he was in the latter office that we were having lunch regretting some of the short comings of the Church's leadership of the early 1990s. An incurable optimist, Grove also is a man of the big picture. When discussing some of the difficulties I was having with some priests and bishops, he stopped me with a question.

"Michael, do you know the two subjects Paul VI would not have discussed by the bishops on the floor of the Second Vatican Council?" "No Grove" I said. "I was nine when the Council opened and about to turn 13 soon after it ended. I am not aware of what His Holiness would not allow discussion of." "Contraception and clerical celibacy," said Grove. "And what are the two issues that have bedevilled the Church for forty years?" "I don't know, Grove," I said. "Tell me". "Female anatomy and the nature of ministry".

Grove should have been a headline writer. But as one summarising the questions to take us into the future, he's framed our issue tonight. It's not celibacy of course. The elephant in the room is the nature of ministry.

One of the best things I was told when I was ordained in 1984 came in a card from a priest friend. He told me "the people make you the priest you become".

That was all news to me because I have to say that prior to the Ordination and indeed for a good time after it, I hadn't thought very much about being a priest. I joined the Jesuits and was captured by a world embracing mission, a group of companions with all the get up and go to take on the world and a spirituality that took human experience seriously as the food that nourished a relationship with God.

Priesthood was to me a bit like celibacy – part of the package, not something actually desired or sought. It just seemed to be an unavoidable stop along the way.

But what a discovery lay ahead for me – about ministry I mean, not celibacy! Properly enough, I discovered ministry to be something that could only be found in the community of the Church. It is an inherently, one could perhaps say (as some moral theologians might of sins) intrinsically interactive. My first and most enduring experience of the ministry of a priest is the trust that is invested in you. As a priest, people welcome you into the most significant and eventful reaches of their lives – to tell their story, invite support, reassurance and encouragement, share their deepest joys, their most bitter grief's and their most appalling shame. It is the most privileged form of companionship I can imagine being offered anyone. Such trusting is not so much therapeutic, though clearly there is a therapeutic catharsis at work. It is intimate companionship and whatever the companion may experience, mine in ministry is only one of gratitude for being invited to share the story.

So that's the surprise for me over almost three decades, a journey that began in this Church when I celebrated my first Mass here in 1984. But personal experience aside, the context in which I came to be ordained merits some attention if the nature of ministry in Church is to be appreciated fully.

There seemed to be still priests in abundance. I was one of five Jesuits ordained that year. The practice rate among Catholics was nearly 40% down from its peak in the 1960s and now running at less than 15% and continuing to fall each year.

In 1984, as my friend Frank Brennan has observed (and Frank was ordained the following year), parents were actually pleased to have one of their own put their hands up to serve the Church community. It was something to be proud of – that one of yours was ready to serve in way that entailed hardship and sacrifice to deliver the service but also brought respect and appreciation from a community that named some of its clerical and religious leaders as tribal heroes.

And we still had Religious throughout health care, welfare institutions and the Catholic education system though their presence was beginning to fade. Once Gough Whitlam guaranteed a decent wage for teachers in Catholic schools, the service provided by generations of Religious – as cheap teachers – was no longer needed. The tribal heroes that Religious became – sacrificing their lives to serve a community struggling to find a place in emerging Australia and focusing the faith of Catholics in a diverse and ideologically competitive society – ceased to offer the sort of life that later generations of Catholics saw to be a good place for their children to spend their lives.

The winds of change were blowing and today Religious make up less than 1% of teachers in Catholic schools, the average age of the Australian clergy is over 70 years of age, that of Religious probably higher, and those volunteering for training as priests are so few that, despite claims to the contrary by various Church leaders around the country about current seminary entrance rates, there is simply no way that the supply of priests can meet the demand for services required of them.

Some two decades ago, pastoral planners in Melbourne reported that their Archdiocese needed to be ordaining 12 priests a year to meet its pastoral requirements then. It hadn't received 12 entrants to the seminary for some years before this discovery was announced and the intervening years have seen no more than three ordinations for the Archdiocese a year.

But there was something else at work in the Catholic culture of those years of abundance. Parishes were festooned with devotional groups for people of all ages and genders; devotional practices were everywhere – the nine First Fridays, the ten First Saturdays, all night vigils every month in this parish, Benediction every Sunday evening, Novenas as public events and the exhortation to private Novenas for special needs, weekly Confession throughout Saturday afternoon and during all Masses on Sunday, Eucharistic processions every Corpus Christi at Manly Seminary,

parish Missions on a regular basis. I remember coming to one here at North Sydney in 1961 or 1962 – at the age of 8 or 9 – to listen to the eloquent Irish Jesuit Robert Nash enthral us with the adventures of Jesuit Missionaries in China and I can still recall being ready to walk to Circular Quay that night to get on a boat to join them.

It was a world full of high ideals, religious enthusiasm and appeals to the heart. Then came Vatican 2 and the sober appreciation that a lot of devotional Catholicism was animist, manipulative and debased, that it plays at cornering God into doing things in a magical way, that it cannot withstand the scrutiny of an informed appreciation of the way the world is and how God works and that, above all, it was part of that signal failure of Catholicism since the Reformation – it bore little or no relationship to the foundation of Christian faith – the Old and New Testaments.

What followed as recommended in the Council's decrees was a review of this devotional culture and the encouragement to replace it with a Eucharistically centred and biblically formed approach to our relationship with God.

In many countries, Australia included, devotional Catholicism disappeared because it was unsustainable. However, part of what made this culture thrive before the Council was the abundance of clergy – there were a lot more of them relative to the Catholic population than we have now and in that culture they had a lot to do.

In Australia, little has appeared to replace these devotional practices as a popular means of accessing, recalling and celebrating the mysteries of the faith. And while scripture and revisions to the sacraments have made their impact, we shouldn't be so high and mighty and say that the loss of this devotional culture is without its costs. The devotional practices and beliefs were the carriers of faith to generations of Catholics who trusted those introducing them to the tradition. Carriers are just that – they carry participants to what is central: the engagement with God. Dispense with them as they lose their purchase and credibility. But leave nothing after, and a pretty arid religious world emerges.

I remember when I applied to join the Jesuits in 1970, I was in my last year of school at St Aloysius and late in that year, I was invited to meet the Provincial of the time, Fr Peter Kelly who left the Order five years later. A serious and deep voiced man, Peter Kelly asked me the routine questions about why I wanted to join. I gave the routine answers. This routine experience ended with his encouragement of me to “go away and pray about my decision”.

At the time I asked myself why I would want to do that? I had made up my mind and probably implicitly believed (though never admitted to myself) that it was the Jesuits' good fortune that I had chosen to join them. What on earth did praying about it have to do with my clear sighted choice?

My practical ignorance of the basics of the faith I had chosen to become a promoter of was highlighted even more in my first year of the Novitiate when we were put

through a post school catechesis by an excellent theologian, Andrew Hamilton, and such exotic topics never considered by me to be very important – the divinity of Jesus and the Triune God, for example – were topics I really had to face as if for the first time. Whatever I did in Religious Knowledge classes every day at Aloysius is known only to God.

But lining up at 18 to be a Jesuit seemed the natural enough thing to do. Boys for a decade before me and for a couple of years after me did it every year. And when I got to Watsonia in Victoria where the Novitiate was, I found another 30 mostly of my age doing the same thing.

The culture authorised and endorsed such behaviour. A few years later and ever since, it hasn't done anything like it.

**LET'S TAKE A BREAK FOR TWO MINUTES AND ENGAGE WITH ONE ANOTHER, ASKING THE PERSON NEXT TO YOU, ESPECIALLY IF YOU DON'T OR HARDLY KNOW THEM, WHAT HAVE BEEN THE CARRIERS CONNECTING YOU TO THE CATHOLIC FAITH?**

What, of course, is happening in Australia is occurring across the world on a much wider canvass than that covered by the Jesuits is here. My point is retelling what follows is to underline that where we've been as a Church has left us with some major challenges for the future and going backwards to look for the future isn't getting us very far (which is why the nature of ministry is the elephant in the room).

For example, this Church seats five or six hundred people – enough to fill a bigger Manly ferry. Ten years ago in the United States, for every three ferry loads of parishioners, there was one available priest. That has close to doubled. Ten years ago in the Philippines, however, there was only one priest for every 12 ferry loads of parishioners; and two years ago there were 23 ferry loads of Catholics seeking the attention of a single priest. Yet we are still hoping to get priests from the Philippines to fill gaps in the ranks of Australian clergy.

The opposite patterns appear to prevail in Africa and Asia. In the twenty years from 1985 to 2005, the Catholic Church grew at 87% in Africa and 51% in Asia, with a growth in the number of priests in Africa of 55% and 60% in Asia. Plainly the growth in Africa is not and in Asia is only just keeping pace with the growth in the Catholic population. There are no clergy mines to quarry in those Continents for the needs of Europe and other parts of the world. In Europe the size of the Catholic population has remained stable and the number of priests has declined 11%.

In Australia, in the years since I was ordained (1984), the Catholic population has grown much larger and the available clergy and religious have diminished. We all know this. And during the opening decade of this century, the average number of Catholics encompassed by a parish rose by 25% and the nominal Catholic population grew 10% in the second half of the decade; now at least one in four

parishes is without a resident priest, the average age of active clergy is 60 and the overall average age of the Australian clergy is 72.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with being 60. I turn that myself next birthday. Nothing wrong with being in your 70's. I look forward to having a relaxing time in retirement at that stage of my life. But to rely on people my age now or older is to rely on people NOT of the ages you want to take a community in need of dynamic and extensive change to where it needs to be, let alone maintain it in its present state for very much longer.

As V I Lenin asked when facing the failure of his first attempts to topple the Romanovs: What is to be done?

Let's go back briefly to look at what structures brought us to the circumstances we are in and then look around us now for how we might use that heritage to address the challenges we face.

First place to start is the New Testament and the evolution of Ministry in the first few centuries of the Christian era. The most accessible work on formalised ministry in the early Church comes to us from the now deceased American biblical scholar Raymond Brown. He would have to be the most prolific Catholic biblical scholar in the last fifty years and his eminence is undisputed. He was also a regular object of attack from fundamentalists, among them some Catholics, for what his research did to undermine comforting delusions. His sudden death in 1998 was a great loss to the Church.

In his work **Priest and Bishop**, Brown does an unusual thing for a biblical scholar – he looks back from what was consolidated in the first four and half centuries of the Christian era to what started to happen in New Testament times.

What was consolidated is what are now four distinct parts or features of priestly ministry. Those four features compressed into present day priesthood were callings taken up by different people in the ancient community, and are now compressed into the role definition of a single, male person. They are the disciple, the presbyter–bishop charged with oversight and leadership of the community of faith, the celebrant of the Eucharist and other sacraments and the apostle. Brown nominates them as being the way in which the foundational role and ministry of the Twelve Apostles was extended in an authorised way through the early Church. The first role and ministry of the Apostles was to be witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Regarding the celebrant of the Eucharist, a special relationship existed and still exists between the ordained minister who presides at the Eucharist and other sacraments for “the building up of the Body of Christ”. Although not explicitly developed in the New Testament, it nevertheless lies beneath designated ministry as a fundamental element.

Brown is also quite explicit about how the consent of the community was an integral part of the regularising of the service offered by one who displayed the appropriate gifts of grace to exercise this function. Ordination emerged naturally out of the experience of the young Church: there was some awareness that those who would act in the name of the Apostles should receive some explicit sign of their relationship to the ministry of the apostles.

Such a sign, rudimentary as it may have been in the earliest stages, was a natural act of the Church toward those who would minister from the very beginning. Whatever cultural or practical factors may have influenced the Church's understanding of the ordained ministry, it recognized the need "for specific, designated, empowered individuals in the body to assure the continuity of the authority and power of the risen Lord in the Church." These individuals were seen to bear the authority of "holy order," a designated office bearing a particular relation to the life of the whole body, whatever particular form of ministry the person "in orders" might be called to fulfil.

And, as any familiarity with the Churches Paul founded will show, the ministries that were consolidated in later centuries into what became the ordained ministry did not exhaust the gifts and ministries active in the early Church. In 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 Paul nominates gifts for the service of the community to be those of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, distinguishing or discerning spirits, tongues and their interpretation, teaching and administration as gifts given by the spirit for the common good and the building up of the Church.

In 1 Corinthians 12:28 he goes further and identifies the roles of those blessed by God's grace – apostles, prophets, teachers, wonder workers, healers and guides.

That's how things unfolded in New Testament times and then for the first half of the first millennium of the Christian era. Many features of ministry in the name of the Church that are the forebears and antecedents of our contemporary health and welfare systems were conducted by those not in orders but under vows – religious of different kinds. They were responsible for the corporal works of mercy which are another way of spreading the Good News through self-sacrificing action.

As well, over the next thousand years, the scale of "Orders" came to reflect the tiered social structure that developed in medieval Europe – from Minor Orders that welcomed at Church doors or readers at Mass enjoyed through three levels of Orders: the sub-diaconate, diaconate, priesthood and then the "fullness of the priesthood" – the episcopacy.

The structure became so elaborate and the reach so extensive through the male population that all manner of reprobates became counted among the clergy. The structure allowed the appointment of child bishops so inheritances could be arranged and kept within families and the protection of clerical status provided a protective wall for criminals to evade detection charging and judgement.

For example, Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits into whose care this Church is placed, managed to avoid prosecution for some violent misdemeanour, perhaps murder, by pleading what in England is called “the benefit of clergy” – Ignatius was able to escape charges and trial because earlier in life he had received the tonsure, the primary or basic level of entry into the clerical state. It meant he could not be prosecuted in civil or criminal courts but only ecclesiastical courts which were open to manipulation. I would note that this was an event in Ignatius’ pre-conversion life as a soldier and long before the Jesuits were established.

But when Luther nailed his thesis on the Cathedral door in Wittenberg 1517, there was a lot for him to be upset about. The Council of Trent, whose first session in 1545 convened a mere 28 years after Luther’s performance in Wittenberg, was focused not only on contending with the heretical doctrines of the Reformers but also on reforming the Church and especially the clergy. And reform in abundance came: bishops were to reside in their dioceses, every cleric was to be mandated by and accountable to a bishop and even more extensively effective, clerics were to be trained, educated, assessed and graduated through what became the seminary system.

Seminaries are amazing things. After Church founded universities in the medieval period, seminaries would have to be the most long-lasting education system in the history of the world, serving more or less as conceived in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century until the beginning of their demise in the traditional form in the 1960s – almost 400 years later. Seminaries of sorts exist now. But they are nothing like they were when their purpose was, in the immortal words of the late Fr Ted Kennedy of Sydney, to provide “ways of keeping men in short pants”. It also kept clerics, if they let themselves be, corralled as part of a closed and exclusive if rather sad and out of touch club. And the baleful influence of these formative institutions is plain to see in the clerical culture spawned by them that has had such a destructive effect in the cover-up of clerical misdemeanours “for the good of the Church”.

### **TIME FOR ANOTHER QUESTION TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR NEIGHBOURS: WHAT ARE THE MOST EVIDENT GIFTS YOU SEE AT WORK BUILDING THE CHRIST’S BODY WHICH IS THE CHURCH?**

And it is timely to ask where exactly we are now and where we might go.

Quite apart from the problem of what the current Pope and his predecessor have told us we’re not even allowed to think about or discuss – ordaining women – there is a much bigger issue facing us all.

The quote from Tomas Halik displayed on the screen before I began tonight focuses this part of the consideration of ministry. My little excursus into the numbers earlier was about this – that our prospects of continuing to offer the celebration of the Eucharist on the scale required by the growth of the Church are not looking good.

However, when you look elsewhere in the Church in Australia and across the world, ministry is being delivered in abundance by new armies of people with no authorised status as ministers by the Gospel – catechists, visitors of the sick and housebound, school teachers and religious education coordinators, liturgy coordinators, spiritual guides for retreats or for individuals who check in with a guide on a regular basis, the vast number of people who work to make healthcare and welfare services of the Church operate and then those who help their communities to grow through finance and planning, school boards, nurses/doctors/administrators in health services, providers of palliative care, relationship counselling, musicians and readers in support of liturgical celebrations, welcomers to new comers to increasingly very mobile parish communities, supporters and servants of the poor and neglected in our cities and so on the list goes.

In my lifetime, all these activities have moved from being the often exclusive possession of clerics and religious into lay hands. For example, in Catholic schools, Religious were up to 65% of their staff in the institutions in the 1960s while today they are no more than one percent. And the same is true in Catholic parishes and other services.

The recognition, resourcing and endorsement of the sorts of gifts and services to the Church that Paul identified in his First Letter to the Corinthians, along with other roles and responsibilities in the development and expression of faith couldn't arrive at a more timely moment for the Australian Church. The culture that served the Church well in Australia for one and a half centuries has clearly cracked open. That's a good thing because the culture of tribalism and ritual practice and conformity, the clericalism and management by command and control, the centralism and authoritarianism that shaped Church governance for may have worked well for a poor, embattled and uneducated immigrant minority as it struggled to shape an identity and lay claim to a destiny. But they are plainly unable to meet the challenges that life in Australia today sets the Church as a community. The very success of the Church's biggest investment in its future in Australia – the Catholic education system – has produced what education aims to provide: resourceful people who can think for themselves, choose their directions in life and make their own evaluations.

If Catholic life is to be a persuasive offer in contemporary Australia, it needs to take as given this pluralistic and opt-in condition and one where the choice to be Catholic is more unfashionable probably than at any time in Australian history. The bigotry of old was systematic and entrenched but only occasionally was allowed to bubble to the surface. The palpable anti-Catholicism alive and well in the media, reflecting general public perceptions, has things said and prejudices expressed that if they were said of Jews or Muslims would be howled down in no uncertain terms. I have lived outside Australia for going on four years and my mediated contact through newspaper sites and TV along with occasional visits has led me to believe that hostility to Catholics as narrow minded, prejudiced and bovine is the common condition.

Some elements of the Church don't help by their confirming the worst features of that stereotype in their public displays and frequently expressed view that Catholics are in on their terms or not all. The metaphor of the football team, doing the captain's bidding at every turn, is as tedious as it is adolescent.

But what this context has led me to believe is this: that the future prospects of Christianity in our religiously thin culture in Australia will mostly come down to these things – attraction to Catholicism will be by invitation and persuasion rather than interdict and control; it will require visible evidence of what faith in action means, one that demonstrates a robust engagement with and response to the pressing needs of the neglected and outcast in our society. In a world grown weary of ideologies, this will be for more attractive than repetition of catechism answers or the establishment of an identity that gets its life negatively from what it opposes and condemns; and central to the flourishing of the faith is a more developed spiritual experience than that offered by the devotions of old through the provision of opportunities for more people to develop the skills and the capacity to deepen their inner lives. Distinctive service to the world that plainly flows from faith and a deepening and discerning spiritual wisdom are antidotes to the pervasive forms of escape in our culture and the real home for believers in a world grown weary of religion.

And what do these challenges suggest? Firstly, they say that the challenges we face are great. But secondly, we need to recognise that the resources are many. I wouldn't for the life of me propose that Church authority outline a structure aligned on the triple tier priesthood we have now – deacon/priest/bishop – as the answer to the challenge of the times. There are already in the Australian Church thousands of theologically educated lay people able to grasp and respond to these challenges. There are now hundreds of trained spiritual guides able to guide and assist people in their journey of faith. A fact of Catholic life today is that families more readily identify with the schools their children attend than they do with the geographic parishes they may nominally belong to. Today, leadership of the Catholic community rests more in the hands of school principals, religious education coordinators and lay chaplains and pastoral workers than it does in the hands of the declining number of ageing clergy. But these suggestions are only a start. I'm sure you would have other roles and responsibilities that you could name as points of growth for the building up of the Church.

When Bill Clinton beat the one term President George Herbert Bush in 1992, his recurrent theme and reference point in the campaign, you may remember, was "The economy stupid". The answer to what I've been saying might well be "the laity stupid". Despite various efforts to thwart it, the Spirit seems to be creating a whole new Church, one that does actually embody and enable what Vatican 2 hoped for – a Church of the laity. Only question that remains is when, if ever, will the powers that be in this situation actually wake up to what's happened to the Church in places where the faith was planted many moons ago and authorise the movement

of the Spirit already much at work? And when that happens, let's hope the provision and availability of the Eucharist is addressed. Until then, the matter of ministry will remain the elephant in the middle of the room.