

Dear Readers,

Several really fine (and challenging) articles this season.

We begin with an article from *America* by retired Bishop Emil Wcela, from the Diocese of Rockville Center on Long Island. Bishop Wcela has been a progressive voice in the Church for many years and this article reflects his love and fidelity to our Church once again.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson from Australia has written a provocative book challenging mutable Church teachings ranging from the structure of seminary training to mandatory celibacy. In it, he addresses the sexual abuse scandal from the perspective of a victim. A review of the book is included here. Long, but worth a read.

Several articles follow concerning the Dutch Dominicans' reflection on ministry in the contemporary Church. They challenge us to expand our understanding of who may preside at liturgy, particularly in light of the numbers who are being deprived of the Eucharist because of the lack of active, ordained clergy.

Fr. Peter Phan of Georgetown is being investigated by the Vatican and the US bishops for having the audacity to suggest that other religions might be valid spiritual paths.

Bishop John Spong contends that the Christian Church has lost its credibility as a teacher of sexual morality. He calls for the Church to replace its quest for conformity with a celebration of our common humanity.

Defying the Bush administration's tendency to employ the threat of military confrontation as the solution of first resort for all international conflicts, American religious leaders met with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, thereby inviting us to look again at the diplomatic alternative.

With gratitude once again to Rocco Palmo and his blog, *Whispers in the Loggia*, there is an article concerning the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's statement regarding the morality of withholding nutrition and hydration from persons in a vegetative state. BTW, Rocco is always in need of financial assistance to keep his valuable site afloat. Go to:

<http://whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com/>

to make a donation

And finally, an article from the *Center of Concern* regarding how local proposals regarding the status of immigrants deprive immigrants of their God-given dignity as Children of God. The *Center of Concern* is also a very worthy site for your financial support.

If you want to comment on any of these articles, to agree or disagree, or to offer any insight that may have been overlooked, give in to the urge. I want to hear from you. Your participation in the continuing dialogue is valued.

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A Dinosaur Ponders The Latin Mass

By [Emil A. Wcela](#) | OCTOBER 8, 2007



We are fast becoming extinct, we dinosaur Catholics who passed through childhood, adolescence and into adult years with the Latin Mass. Now men and women in the generations after us are talking a lot about the Latin Mass. Perhaps my personal recollections of the journey from Latin to English, surely not unlike those of others from my era, can add to the conversation.

The Way It Was

As an altar boy—only boys then—I struggled to learn the Latin prayers and not to mumble unintelligibly as I responded to the priest celebrant. Depending on how careful Father was with his Latin enunciation, Mass without a sermon could last anywhere from 15 minutes to a half-hour.

In the seminary, each day began with Latin Mass, which on special feasts was sung. Two hundred male voices at 6:30 a.m., still early-morning raspy and rough, did not exactly challenge the angelic choirs, but the Sunday solemn Mass at 10 a.m. was splendid. First came the entrance procession, with all the seminarians, the subdeacon, the deacon and at the end the celebrant; then the polyphonic entrance antiphon sung by the choir; then the Kyrie and Gloria, and the other parts of the Mass in chant or polyphony. There was, however, a peculiarity in liturgical practice. We did not receive Holy Communion, because this was our second Mass of the day. We had already received at the 6:30 a.m. silent Mass.

During the first years of my priesthood (I was ordained in 1956), I knew and celebrated only the Latin Mass. Since the congregational singing was not especially notable and since the priest had his back to the people, the only way to gauge how deeply they were involved was to listen for the rustle of missal pages being turned. One accepted the self-contradictory ritual of proclaiming the Epistle and Gospel in Latin toward the back wall and then going to the pulpit to read the Gospel again, this time in English. The same readings were repeated each year, instead of following today's three-year cycle that presents so much more of the Bible. The quality of music, some Gregorian chant, some English hymns with different degrees of theological and aesthetic value, varied from parish to parish. In some, the experience was inspiring, in others, just plain awful. A good test for music directors was the Dies Irae, the long lament at funeral Masses. Too often, the standard that really counted was how quickly it could be sung, especially if another funeral was to follow.

'New Life'

For many years, there had been agitation for reform of the liturgy. Some called for Mass in the vernacular, but more attention was usually directed to encouraging choirs and parishes to participate more fully by improving the singing of Gregorian chant. The Benedictine monasteries at Solesmes in France and St. Benoit du Lac in Canada were the models to be imitated. A monk named Pius Parsch was writing about his efforts to give new life to the liturgy in his small chapel in Austria.

From 1961 to 1963, during my studies in Washington, D.C., and from 1963 to 1965 in Rome, we student priests celebrated Mass without a congregation, with a priest partner. We served each other in turn at one altar in a long row of altars separated from one another by flimsy partitions. Having a concelebrated Mass when a number of priests were present, instead of individual Masses, was just becoming a possibility (bolstered by a doctoral dissertation on the practice written by a nun at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.). On Sundays in Rome, a small group of us chose to concelebrate. But the rector of the residence for priests in graduate studies thought concelebration was an aberration. We had the unusual experience of moving our Mass from room to room each Sunday to elude the one searching for us—not a Communist persecutor but a defender of what he believed to be proper liturgy.

I returned to teach at our seminary in 1965 and stepped into the stream of gradual liturgical change. I admit it seemed to me incongruous when I first saw seminarians vested in cassocks and surplices playing guitars in our magnificent, soaring chapel.

When Mass in English arrived (in hindsight, perhaps with insufficient preparation), reports of liturgical abuse followed—that, for example, some of the “new breed” of priests were celebrating with Pepsi and pizza instead of bread and wine. Despite all the talk, I never met anyone who had actually been at such a “mass.” No doubt there were abuses; but most priests and congregations were doing their best to learn how to celebrate, how to write music for a different kind of liturgy, how to help people to be active participants in the action taking place, not just at the altar but in their lives, through the Eucharist.

In 1967, the same year that the Beatles brought us “Sgt. Pepper,” another priest and I, along with three seminarians, spent a summer conducting a renewal program in one of our parishes. We visited homes and organized study groups; and for the first time, our bishop permitted home Masses, which we celebrated every evening. These simple liturgies, each with a few families, were another eye-opening experience of how people could be touched by the Eucharist when it was brought closer to them.

By the time I became pastor of a large suburban parish in 1979, Latin had pretty much disappeared, except for some hymns. Our parish, however, had the custom of a Latin Mass one Sunday a month. Because it was prime time, the 10:30 a.m. Mass was designated, with the full parish choir assisting. During the summer, because of vacations and other priests filling in, we suspended the Latin Mass. After one of those breaks, I suggested to the other priests an experiment: in the fall, we would not reintroduce it unless people asked for it. The months came and went without a word of interest. So the Latin Mass simply stopped.

Getting It Right

As we weigh the Mass in English, my experience is that the vast majority of people find that it enriches their understanding and participation.

The first translation of the Latin Mass prayers, the ones we use now, was put together very quickly. It surely needed revision to recover in some places dignity of language and depth of meaning. The [International Commission on English in the Liturgy](#) is working on this, along with the national bishops' conferences. The process has not been easy. Some translations proposed by ICEL, preserving very literally the grammatical structure of Latin with its luxuriant growth of complex clauses and modifiers, sound more like attempts to teach Latin grammar in English dress rather than prayers that people could actually use to worship God. ICEL is open to comments, however, and as the revision process goes on, some prayers have become more "prayable."

It must be acknowledged that there are still priests who look upon the Mass as a showplace for their dubious creative talents rather than as the shared worship of the community of which they are a part. I find such do-it-yourself liturgies very off-putting. There are still music directors who believe that their own compositions are exactly and only what is needed for good worship. Trying to participate in those parishes calls for special dedication, because one encounters music known only to the local parishioners and to God. It has never been and never will be the case that all music used in churches makes the theological and musical grade.

As for the Latin Mass today, two pertinent articles, both by young women, struck me. One author, writing in Time magazine (7/30), seemed to be disturbed mainly by some sermons she had heard. The thrust was that if the Mass is celebrated in a language nobody understands and the priest has his back to people, then she won't have to listen to sermons on social issues with which she disagrees or the presentation of which bothers her. The Mass itself would be a kind of mantra, a reassuring background for her personal thoughts about God and other things. Not much of a reason for the Latin Mass, especially since not every bishop, priest or deacon will always be an inspiring preacher—regardless of the language spoken.

The other author, in the Brooklyn diocesan weekly, [The Tablet](#) (7/21), seems to favor Latin because of, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, "arbitrary deformations of the liturgy." One gets the impression that to her every Mass in English is by definition a "deformation." She also loves to have the priest with his back to the congregation, facing the east, the direction from which Christ will some day return. Does it count for nothing that at the Mass Christ is with us then and there? When I imagine celebrating again toward the back wall, even an eastern wall, I remember how deeply moved I was the first time I was able to celebrate facing the congregation, whose faith and life I shared.

The same author loves the Mass in Latin, even though she understands little of it. As she writes, "That's what the missal is for." I certainly cannot dictate for anyone what brings them more deeply into the Eucharist. But I can only shake my head in puzzlement when I hear people talk of how good it is to celebrate Mass in a language they do not understand, while I continue my struggle to learn Spanish so that members of a different congregation can celebrate Mass in a language they do understand.

I appreciate Pope Benedict's deep pastoral concern to invite back into unity with Rome groups of people who have separated themselves and have made the issue of the Latin Mass the centerpiece of their dissatisfaction. May God make the initiative fruitful. The pope knows the people he is trying to reach. Over the years, though, my experience with a few members of these splinter groups has convinced me that the Latin Mass is at most a rallying point, a handy focus. The real issues go much deeper, into faith, the meaning of church and God's salvific will.

For those who want Latin because of its sense of mystery or the feeling of stepping away from the mundane, it seems to me that pondering the mystery of God in one's own thought structures and vocabulary provides enough mystery without celebrating our most precious liturgical act in a language not understood by most. And the mundane? God thought enough of it that he sent his only Son to enter its realm to the fullest, even to using the language of his time and place.

The Most Rev. Emil A. Wcela retired recently (June 2007) as auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y.

From the London Tablet.

1 September 2007 **Outlook from the Outback** by Stephen Crittenden

A devastating critique of the Catholic Church in Australia recently published by one of the country's most respected bishops has ignited debate about its future and pushed the progressive majority of the Church back to prominence after years in the shadows.

Like the rural horizons of Australia after the worst drought in 100 years, the Australian Church is tinder dry, and a retired auxiliary Bishop of Sydney, Geoffrey Robinson, may have lit the match. His new book, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: reclaiming the spirit of Jesus* (John Garrett Publishing, Melbourne), accuses the leadership of the Catholic Church of treating the clerical sexual crisis as something to be "managed" in the hope that it will go away and never be referred to again. He says that until it confronts the root causes of this crisis, the Church will continue to be crippled.

One of the most intelligent and capable of the Australian bishops, Geoffrey Robinson, 70, is a former lecturer in canon law and was seen by many as the logical successor to Cardinal Ted Clancy as Archbishop of Sydney. Erudite, shy, rather unsmiling, and certainly no wishy-washy liberal, he is esteemed by Australian Catholics for his integrity in coordinating the Church's national response to the abuse crisis in the late 1990s. I interviewed him for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation at that time, and his bleak and careworn demeanour left a deep impression.

Thanks to this book, we now know that he was struggling both with his own sexual abuse as a boy and his mounting frustration at Rome's silence and lack of support in relation to the crisis: "I eventually came to the point where I felt that, with the thoughts that were running through my head, I could no longer be a bishop of a Church about which I had such profound reservations."

The story behind his book is about the falling away of a disillusioned company man who nonetheless remains a company man at heart. But this is not a memoir. Instead it reads like a local encyclical addressed to the world Church by a bishop in full teaching mode. Drawing heavily on Scripture and his training as a canonist, it is structured like a religious textbook, with points for reflection at the end of each chapter. Melbourne's leading broadsheet, *The Age*, has made comparisons with Martin Luther, and it is not hard to see why when he raises so many foundational questions for

discussion. Bishop Robinson is adamant that he is not attacking the Church he loves, yet many people will see it that way.

In language reminiscent of a court martial, he lays the charge of "failure to give leadership in a crisis" squarely at the feet of Pope John Paul II: "I am convinced that if the Pope had spoken clearly at the beginning of the revelations, inviting victims to come forward so that the whole truth, however terrible, might be known and confronted, and firmly directing that all members of the Church should respond with openness, humility, honesty and compassion, consistently putting victims before the good name of the Church, the entire response of the Church would have been far better. With power go responsibilities. The Pope has many times claimed the power, and must accept the corresponding responsibilities."

Bishop Robinson says his experience in dealing with offenders has convinced him that there is a strong case to be made for mandatory celibacy having triggered the abuse crisis, even if it is not the only cause. He says there is no evidence that homosexual priests are any more likely to abuse minors than heterosexuals. He also argues that seminaries and novitiates may not be healthy places to form priests and Religious. In Sydney, this is a story that goes back 40 years to when a group of priests wrote to Cardinal Norman Gilroy calling for St Patrick's Seminary, Manly, to be closed down, on the grounds that it was an environment that fostered immaturity in the students and paternalism in the staff, a "hush-hush attitude to the subject of celibacy", and little of the "flexibility and toughness needed to cope with the outside environment".

But Bishop Robinson believes the deepest sources of the abuse are embedded in the power structures of the Church, and he calls for a major corporate restructure, including a constitutional papacy: "Papal power has gone too far and there are quite inadequate limits on its exercise." He says the College of Bishops has been marginalised, and that in his time as an active bishop it was rarely asked its advice and never asked to vote, even on controversial matters: "We were not asked to vote before the publication of the document on the ordination of women, not even when the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI] spoke of this teaching as 'infallible', with the Pope doing nothing to contradict him. If bishops are not asked their opinions even when the word 'infallible' is in the air, the College of Bishops would seem to have no practical importance in the Church, and the statement of the Second Vatican Council that the college is a co-holder of supreme power would seem to have no practical importance."

Continuing further, Bishop Robinson says that "many bishops are uneasy" about the Church's present teachings on marriage and divorce, and questions whether the constantly repeated teaching that both the unitive and procreative aspects must be present in each act of sexual intercourse is anything more than an unproven assertion ("If it is only an assertion, is there any reason why we should not apply the principle of logic: What is freely asserted may be freely denied?"). He says that there is no proof in the New Testament that Jesus acted with divine knowledge, and no evidence of an explicit order by Jesus that there must be successors to Peter and the 12 apostles.

Venturing on to even more dangerous ground, he says the arguments put forward in 1870 in support of the doctrine of papal infallibility were

flimsy, asks whether it was "prudent" of Pope Pius XII to make an authoritative statement on the doctrine of the Assumption in 1950, and even suggests that "a few phrases" of the Nicene Creed might be considered in need of change.

Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church single-handedly propels the progressive majority in the Australian Church back to centre stage after years of being pummelled and pushed out. Calls for the ordination of married men and women priests are becoming more and more urgent in Australia, and they are coming from ordinary Catholics who want priests, the Mass, more articulate sermons and less of the second-rate shambles they fear is probably in store for them.

Bishop Robinson's book also confirms Australia's place at the forefront of debates about reform in the wider Church although, in all fairness, this is where a more critical assessment is in order. It is the result of what has undoubtedly been a difficult journey for him personally, but many other Australian Catholics such as Dr Paul Collins, Bishop Pat Power (auxiliary Bishop of Canberra-Goulburn), the late Bishop John Heaps of Sydney and the late Fr Ted Kennedy have been making similar arguments for at least two decades. Many Australian reformers believe the time for theorising is far in the past.

In these early years of the pontificate of Benedict XVI, we can all feel the centrifugal forces in the Catholic Church beginning to pull the various continents further apart. The reason is simple. Rome seems unable and unwilling to engage with the practical problems that local Churches are facing on the ground, and more and more they are looking to local solutions. In Australia, an acute personnel crisis is now being experienced, and in rural dioceses vast distances magnify the problem. For some of these areas the point of no return has passed, and they are now facing institutional collapse. The bishops know that merely repeating the Vatican line is not going to solve anything. This is why Australia is one of the places where the Catholic ecclesiology of the future - how the Church will look in 10 years' time when there are no priests - is already being worked out. And because the solutions will be Australian ones, they are likely to be practical, low-key, non-ideological and user-friendly.

To give just one example: late last year, Bishop William Morris published a pastoral letter predicting that by 2014 his Diocese of Toowoomba in Queensland - territorially the size of Germany - would have just 19 active priests remaining, including the bishop. Mostly they would be old men, and they would be expected to spend their lives on the road. He outlined a list of options including the ordination of women and married men; welcoming former priests, married or single, back to active ministry; and recognising Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Church orders. However, this year the Vatican responded to the bishop's letter by appointing Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver as apostolic visitor to the Toowoomba Diocese. On his arrival, the bishops of Queensland banded together in Bishop Morris' defence and told Chaput to back off.

Meanwhile, in Sydney, Cardinal George Pell is a much-reduced figure, too often playing the tub-thumping reactionary. Things came to a head recently when he went beyond the stand of the other bishops by threatening Catholic politicians with denial of the Sacraments during a stem-cell debate, thereby making himself the issue. This prompted one New South Wales government

minister to brand him a "serial boofhead" (the ultimate Australian term of dismissive abuse). Appointed to the Sydney Archdiocese in 2001, he is regularly described as a bully by the Australian media. There are some who say that quite a few priests agree. He has never been elected president of the Australian National Bishops' Conference. Now Cardinal Pell is facing significant problems finalising plans for World Youth Day in 2008. With less than a year to go, the major outdoor venue for the final papal Mass is still in doubt, and Rome must be wondering what is going on.

The launch of Bishop Robinson's book in Sydney last weekend was like a large tribal gathering, with a very significant group of Catholic lawyers, judges, doctors, business people, senior priests and one bishop present. Many others sent their support but chose to remain anonymous for the moment because of their senior positions. The Sydney historian, Fr Ed Campion, reminded the crowd that the venue, St Patrick's Church Hill, had been the meeting point of Sydney Irish Catholicism - the place where the Irish took a stand in the early nineteenth century to defend their faith and demand just and fair treatment. In his address, Bishop Robinson said he knew what he had written was probably about to change his life forever, and that it was quite possible that the Roman authorities would come after him: "I do realise, at least in theory, that I could end up outside the Church. Whatever happens, let it happen."

So far, Cardinal Pell's response has been to ignore the book, and the Vatican may not know what to do about him. But if Rome does come after Geoffrey Robinson, it should be prepared for a conflagration.

Editorial

The Catholic Church throughout the developed world faces a series of challenges: a fast-changing society, declining attendance, liturgical disputes, falling vocations, scandals caused by child abuse. It is an uncomfortable position to be in, whether experienced in the pew of the parish church, in its pulpit, in archbishop's house, or in the heart of Rome. The barque of Peter may not be sunk, but these are distinctly choppy waters and difficult ones in which to cast out nets.

Criticism of the Church's response to these crises has come frequently from those looking in, often perceived as attacks by people who do not wish the Church well. But criticism from within is much harder to dismiss. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson of Australia is a man of undoubted integrity. Taken together with his intelligence, his pastoral expertise, his qualifications in canon law and his specific role in dealing with child abuse in the Church, his newly published account - *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: reclaiming the spirit of Jesus* - is a searing indictment of its recent history.

According to Bishop Robinson, the Catholic Church has ill prepared seminarians for the priesthood, it has let down the victims of clerical sexual abuse and Pope John Paul II lacked leadership in the way he dealt with the abuse crisis.

If the Church is to restore its role in the life of the faithful, according to Bishop Robinson, it has to ensure that there are more clergy, the liturgy is improved, its teaching is enhanced, and greater participation of the laity in the life of the Church is ensured.

The Catholic Church, while not a democracy, has a pyramidal structure that should enable it to understand the needs of its flock. But it depends on those with eyes to see and ears to hear being willing to understand the signs of the times. That requires a desire by Rome to listen to its bishops and bishops in turn being able to communicate with priests and people. At the moment the pyramid works too much one way. Much flows downwards. Little flows upwards.

It is evident from Bishop Robinson's convincing analysis that key to the changes needed for the future health of the Church is reform of its power structures and its decision making. He urges a move away from domination by the Vatican and instead a strengthening of local churches. But those reforms were advocated by the Second Vatican Council. More than 40 years on, they have still to be implemented. The Church has yet to see episcopal collegiality affect the exercise of papal authority and the curtailment of the influence of the Curia.

Only the Pope and the bishops worldwide could instigate such a marked change in governance. Meanwhile in Australia, which is suffering from a distinct shortage of priests, the Church on the ground is having to adapt as best it can. For proclaiming and living the Gospel, commitment to the poor, and the enrichment of lives through prayer are all of far greater importance than structures.

But if those structures get in the way of evangelisation, then the need for reform grows all the more urgent. Bishop Robinson will have made a major contribution to the Church if his book reopens the debate about the kind of institution it needs to be in the twenty-first century - and not a moment too soon.

From The London Tablet

Dutch Dominicans call for laity to celebrate Mass

William Jurgensen

THE DOMINICAN Order in the Netherlands has issued a radical recommendation that lay ministers chosen by their congregations should be allowed to celebrate the Eucharist if no ordained priests are available.

In a booklet posted to all 1,300 parishes in the country, it says that the Church should drop its priest-centred model of the Mass in favour of one built around a community sharing bread and wine in prayer.

"Whether they are women or men, homo- or heterosexual, married or single, makes no difference. What is important is an infectious attitude of faith," said the brochure, which has been approved by the Dutch order's leaders. However, the Dutch bishops' conference promptly said that the booklet appeared to be "in conflict with the faith of the Roman Catholic Church". It said it had no prior knowledge of the project and needed to study the text further before issuing a full reaction.

The 38-page booklet, *Kerk en Ambt* ("Church and Ministry"), reflects the thinking of the Belgian-born Dominican theologian Fr Edward Schillebeeckx. In 1986 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under the then Cardinal Joseph

Ratzinger warned Fr Schillebeeckx that his views on the Eucharist and lay ministry were "erroneous" but took no action against him. The booklet was written by four Dominicans including Fr Andréé Lascaris, a theologian at the Dominican Study Centre for Theology and Society in Nijmegen. Fr Lascaris was involved in peace work for Northern Ireland from 1973 until 1992 and has published numerous articles and books on conflict, violence, forgiveness and reconciliation.

The other authors are Fr Jan Nieuwenhuis, retired head of the Dominicus ecumenical centre in Amsterdam, Fr Harrie Salemans, a parish priest in Utrecht, and Fr Ad Willems, retired theology lecturer at Radboud University, Nijmegen. The booklet says that many Dutch Catholics are frustrated that combining parishes and closing churches is the main response to the challenge of a dwindling clergy. "The Church is organised around priests and actually finds the priesthood more important than local faith communities," said Fr Salemans in an interview posted on the order's Dutch website. "This is deadly for local congregations." Using the early Church as its model, the booklet said a congregation could choose its own lay minister to lead services. The minister and the congregation would speak the words of consecration together. "Speaking these words is not the exclusive right or power of the priest," the booklet said. "It is the conscious expression of faith by the whole congregation."

The ranks of Dutch Dominicans have thinned along with those of other clergy, and now number only 90 men. Since 2000 around 200 parishes in the Netherlands have been closed due to the lack of priests and the fall in church attendance.

To serve and celebrate

Andre Lascaris
The Tablet (UK)
September 22, 2007

Four Dominican theologians have caused a furore in the Dutch Church with their new booklet, arguing that the Church in future will have to allow 'inspired members of the community' to celebrate the Eucharist. Here, one of the authors explains their beliefs about who should preside.

The Catholic Church is a eucharistic Church with the celebration of Mass at its very heart. However, the number of priests in the Netherlands is declining and in many cities and regions it has become increasingly difficult to find a church where the Eucharist is celebrated on a Sunday.

It is against this background that the 2005 Provincial Chapter of the Dutch Dominicans decided to try to clarify the relationship between Church and ministry. This was done in the form of a booklet, *Kerk en Ambt* ("Church and Ministry"), sent to all parishes at the end of August, which sought to shed light on various aspects of this relationship, including the ministry of those who preside at liturgical functions. Not least it proposed that in the absence of ordained priests, laypersons - men and women - should be allowed to celebrate the Eucharist. The booklet is not intended to be a dogmatic declaration, but rather an attempt in clear and simple language to renew a discussion on the subject. It does not claim to say anything new: it is based on statements of the Second Vatican Council and on publications of professional theologians and pastoral experts.

The Catholic Church in the Netherlands numbers 1,557 parishes, with 1,112 priests, many of them elderly, 286 deacons and 774 male and female pastoral workers. Officially, there are more than 5 million Catholics (out of a total

population of 16 million, of whom 1 million are Muslims). Less than 10 per cent of the Catholics are regular churchgoers. Most young people do not relate to any Church. It is expected that, by 2020, some three-quarters of the population will not belong to any Church.

Church authority follows an unambiguous policy, especially with regard to the Eucharist. In the absence of an ordained priest a celebration of the Eucharist is out of the question. However, this position does not appear to be shared by a part - probably a large part - of the priests, pastoral workers and volunteers active in the field. Many parishes and groups of the faithful are confronted with the simple fact that, now or in the near future, an ordained priest will no longer be available and that there is no hope of a remedy for this situation. The bishops try to meet this growing shortage either by importing priests from abroad, or by joining parishes into a region in which one priest has to be of service to several parishes. In this way the hierarchy opts for maintaining the clerical form of the priesthood over and against the right of church communities to the Eucharist. Although in theory the Eucharist is said to be the centre of the Church's liturgy, celebrating it is, in fact, made dependent on the person presiding at it, which in consequence makes ordination the most important sacrament.

Pope Pius X (1905-1914) was hardly a progressive leader of the Church but he promoted the active participation of laymen in the celebration of the Eucharist. He stands at the beginning of the liturgical movement; the Second Vatican Council would not have taken place if Pius X had not pleaded for the renewal of the eucharistic practice.

In many parishes the celebration of the Eucharist is often replaced by a so-called Word and Communion Service: after the ordinary Service of the Word some prayers are said and Communion takes place with hosts, consecrated in a celebration of the Eucharist elsewhere. In the Netherlands the number of celebrations of the Eucharist on a Sunday fell between 2002 and 2004 from 2,200 to 1,900; the number of Word and Communion Services increased from 550 to 630. Many people do not notice the difference between such a Communion service and the celebration of the Eucharist. They call both celebrations "Mass".

What is happening today at grassroots level in the Netherlands is in accordance with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council stated that the people themselves and their salvation are the goals of the Church. It took the view that the hierarchy is at the service of the people of God and is therefore, strictly speaking, of secondary importance. This marked a departure from the "vertical theology" that still dominates the minds of the present conservative majority of bishops. This theology depends very much on the philosophy of Neoplatonism, in which everything comes from above like the water of a cataract and is handed over from one level of authority to the next inferior one. It sees the priesthood as part of a pyramid. The top of this pyramid reaches into heaven and therefore participates in divine life to the maximum extent. From this peak supernatural life flows down, through priestly mediation, to the lowest regions of the Church and finally reaches the base of the pyramid - that is, the laity. In this model a priest is admitted into the special domain of the holy and supernatural, which takes him beyond the domain of the natural and profane.

In the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, a different model of the Church came into better view: less strictly hierarchical, more organic and directed towards the community as a whole. This view is in line with the Pauline image of the Church as Christ's body. This change also made room for a different view of the function of leadership in this community. A minister receives a place or "order" in the body of the Church.

Recent letters from the Vatican, including Pope Benedict XVI's post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, published last February, almost deny that the Eucharist is a meal. By contrast, our booklet says that the Eucharist is rich in meaning. In the common sharing of bread and wine, in doing what Jesus did, He is present in our midst. The bread that is broken refers explicitly to Jesus' life and death, the wine points to his life force, to his strength of mind and spirit, to his blood; in the Bible "blood" means life force. Jesus' surrender of himself in his life and death may be called a "sacrifice". This sacrifice is made present in the Eucharist in the shape of a common meal, and the faithful join Jesus' act of sacrifice and surrender themselves. The leadership in a community is indeed a "service" in this view.

The booklet urges the parishes to take the freedom which is theologically justified to elect their own leader or team of leaders to celebrate the Eucharist. According to the text, "Those who preside in local celebrations should be inspired members of the community in question. Whether they be men or women, homo- or heterosexual, married or unmarried is irrelevant. Of interest is whether or not their faith attitude is stimulating and inspiring."

The parish community should then ask the bishop to confirm its choice of leader after due consultation by the laying-on of hands. This was the ordinary practice in the early Church. If a bishop should refuse such a confirmation or "ordination" on the basis of arguments not involving the essence of the Eucharist, such as obligatory celibacy, parishes may be confident that they are able to celebrate a real and genuine Eucharist when they are together in prayer and share bread and wine. It is to be hoped that bishops may in the future live up to their commitment to serve and confirm the leaders of local communities in their office.

The Dutch bishops have given a furious reaction to the booklet. Even before reading it in full, they declared that it contains elements "in conflict with the faith of the Roman Catholic Church". They think it improper for one group of faithful to address another without their prior consent.

Following pressure from the bishops, the Dutch Dominican Provincial, Fr Ben Vocking, has called off a conference the Council of the Dutch Dominican Province was planning to discuss the booklet's proposals. But the matter will not end there. Already there are signs that other Catholic groups in the Netherlands want to look closely at what provisions can be put in place to celebrate the Eucharist if no ordained priests are available. The Dominicans have also invited the bishops to set up workshops jointly with them. As yet the bishops have not responded but I hope they will agree. The matter is too important and urgent to brush aside.

Vatican, bishops investigating Georgetown theologian Phan

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

National Catholic Reporter Conversation Cafe

Wednesday, September 12, 2007

Both the Vatican and the U.S. bishops are investigating a book by a prominent American Catholic theologian, Vietnam-born Fr. Peter Phan of Georgetown University. The book raises issues about the uniqueness of Christ and the church, issues that were also behind recent censures of other high-profile theologians, as well as a recent Vatican declaration that the fullness of the Christian church resides in Catholicism alone.

The case confirms that no subject is of greater doctrinal concern for church authorities, including Pope Benedict XVI, than what they see as “religious relativism,” meaning the impression that Christ is analogous to other religious figures such as the Buddha, or that Christianity is one valid spiritual path among others.

Critics of writers such as Phan, who offer a positive theological evaluation of non-Christian religions, assert that their work courts confusion on these points, while others believe church authorities are drawing the borders of theological discussion too narrowly.

Phan, a priest of the Dallas diocese, is a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. The book in question is Phan’s 2004 *Being Religious Interreligiously*, published by Orbis.

Sources who asked not to be identified said that Phan received a July 2005 letter from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith signed by Archbishop Angelo Amato, the congregation’s number two official. It presented 19 observations under six headings, charging that Phan’s book “is notably confused on a number of points of Catholic doctrine and also contains serious ambiguities.”

The letter said the book is in tension with the 2000 Vatican document *Dominus Iesus*, which states that non-Christians are “in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.”

The congregation asked Phan to write an article correcting the problems identified in Amato’s letter, and to instruct Orbis not to reprint his book. Phan wrote back in April 2006 offering to comply under certain conditions, and, according to sources, to date has not had a response.

Last May, Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chair of the Committee on Doctrine for the U.S. bishops, also wrote Phan to indicate that the Vatican had asked his committee to examine the book, and that it wanted Phan to respond to an enclosed three-page set of observations. Lori indicated that the committee “feels obliged to publish its own statement.”

In a subsequent letter dated June 20, Lori indicated that his committee’s examination is separate from that of the Vatican.

According to sources who have seen the correspondence, the central issues flagged both by the Vatican and the U.S. bishops are:

- Christ as the unique and universal savior of the world;
- The role and function of the Catholic church in salvation;
- The saving value of non-Christian religions.

All three issues are core concerns of Benedict XVI, who led the doctrinal congregation when *Dominus Iesus* was published. Those concerns were also at the heart of previous censures of theologians such as the late Jesuit Fr. Jacques Dupuis of Belgium, as well as Jesuit Frs. Roger Haight of the United States and Jon Sobrino of El Salvador.

Phan declined comment on this story. Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, a spokesperson for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, confirmed Sept. 12 that the Committee on Doctrine has contacted Phan, and said “the dialogue is on-going.”

Why Should People Pay Any Attention to the Christian Church on Sexual Matters?

By John Spong

In recent decades the primary battles that have been fought in the Christian Church have not been about theology, but about issues of human sexuality. Huge debates polarize the Church on whether priesthood will be limited to males; the morality of birth control and abortion; who has the right to decide on what birth control will be legally available; whether celibacy for priests should be required, and the role and place of gay and lesbian people in the Church.

These debates have received front page treatment in newspapers across the world as the media, and presumably their audiences, continue to regard them as newsworthy. Those parts of the Christian Church that move ahead by ordaining women or qualified homosexual candidates into their ministry are portrayed as doing very controversial and extraordinary things. The attempt to excommunicate the ones who are initiating the change or to threaten the church's fabric with schism is also regarded as newsworthy. The presumption behind this media coverage is that the Church is actually qualified to speak with competence on matters of sexuality. I challenge the correctness of that presumption.

From where does this presumption come? Why do people think that the Church has sufficient expertise in matters of sexuality to warrant any attention? Is this not the same institution that has taught us that sex is both evil and dirty, and that 'sexlessness' is the higher calling into holiness? The Christian Church has actually defined marriage as a compromise with sin. Is a sexless world imaginable or even desirable? This institution has so deeply attached guilt to sex that it has produced in Christian countries either a repression of healthy sexuality among the faithful or an irresponsible free love among the dismissive. Is either a healthy alternative?

Throughout its history the Church has also systematically filled women with deep feelings of inadequacy by declaring that menstruation produces a state of uncleanness. No one today believes that attitude to be based on anything other than ignorance and prejudice. One unspoken, but always present, argument used to prevent women from being ordained in several churches is that menstruation makes women a potentially polluting presence in holy places. That is also why the choirs in the great European Cathedrals consisted only of men and boys.

This institution has even informed the world that the ideal woman is a "virgin mother." Since it is impossible for anyone to be both a virgin and a mother, no woman could ever live up to the ideal. Thus in one stroke all women were made to feel morally compromised. With the ideal not possible, this Church then proceeded to offer women a consolation prize. They could be virgins who joined the nunneries (as the brides of Christ and clearly the higher calling) or they could be mothers. If they chose marriage and motherhood they were still taught that the only redeeming purpose for sex was procreation, so any birth control practice that inhibited or minimized the possibility of pregnancy was a mortal sin. That is where the prohibition against birth control had its origin. In an overpopulated world is not the absence of effective family planning itself immoral?

It was out of the Roman Church's visceral negativity to birth control that it recently instructed its adherents in Africa that condoms were not even morally acceptable for use even inside marriage to protect a wife from becoming infected by her HIV positive husband. Is it not a sign of distorted values to place a religious rule ahead

of a woman's life?

There is no end to this litany of ecclesiastical malpractice, that reveals both contradictory and incompetent behavior. This institution first limited its priesthood to unmarried men, and then refused to acknowledge the fact that vast numbers of homosexual males found in this celibate priesthood a place in which to hide. Attempts to deny the fact that "mandatory celibacy" created the largest closet in which gay men have found sanctuary in Western history are laughably naive. When a gay man, however, dares to be honest about his priestly identity, the Church reacts with ecclesiastical uproar. Does anyone really believe that Gene Robinson, the Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire is the first gay bishop in the Anglican Church? He is not even the only gay bishop currently serving in that Church! His distinction is that he is the first honest gay bishop. Indeed to illustrate the total duplicity present in church hierarchies, some of the fiercest critics of homosexuality in the Church today are closeted homosexual bishops! I can name them on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. They have occupied the highest positions of ecclesiastical power. Repressed and dishonest homosexuality is never healthy, but that has been what the Church has practiced for centuries and yet people, for reasons that defy rationality, continue to listen to church leaders for guidance on sexual issues.

The sexual values of the church are so deeply confused that travesties occur frequently. When the rampant abuse of children by priests was revealed, the church responded by covering up the evidence, transferring the violators and promoting their protectors like Cardinal Law. In England recently a man who was the trainer of clergy for one of that nation's largest Anglican dioceses was forced to resign his appointment as a bishop because he was honest about his sexual orientation. No one seemed upset about that, however, when he was the trainer of clergy. Is this not a mixed message totally lacking in credibility?

In the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI began his pontificate promising to remove homosexuals from the priesthood of his Church. When the fine print was read, however, he only wanted to prevent "activist" gay males from "entering" the priesthood. If he went beyond that, the shortage of priests in that church would become unbearable. Estimates are that fully half of their ordained clergy throughout history, including bishops, archbishops, cardinals and popes have been closeted gay men. I would not bet against the truth of that estimate.

To bolster these irrational stances on sexual behavior, Church leaders regularly use the Bible as their final authority. In doing so, they reveal an amazing ability to be quite selective, while appearing oblivious to centuries of biblical scholarship. They seem not to notice that the Bible has been quoted through the ages on the wrong side of every social change, including ending the "divine right of kings" while clothing sexism inside high sounding phrases like "sacred tradition." The Bible has also been used to promote immoral wars like the Crusades and to undergird the tyranny of right wing dictatorships in the third world. The Bible has even been quoted to justify the corporal punishment of children, producing in the process scandalous examples of abuse in both church and church related schools. In the light of these things why there any surprise that the Bible's credibility has become minimal?

With a record like that, why does anyone still listen to the public proclamations about sex emanating from the Christian Church? Why would any woman be willing to heed the "moral opinion" of an all-male ecclesiastical group that pontificates in the name of a God called "Father," about what is moral for a woman to do with her own body? Women, who are precluded from the decision making ecclesiastical processes, are quite rightly refusing to be subjected to such

uninformed ignorance.

With these sexual battles draining its energy in hopeless conflicts they are destined to lose, no one seems to notice how little attention the Church leaders pay to the Christ figure, who identified himself with the marginalized of his society, the lepers, the Samaritans and even the woman taken in the act of adultery. He broke the bands of religious prejudice against women by engaging the woman by the well in conversation, by encouraging Mary, the sister of Martha, to choose the role of a pupil for herself and by having female disciples who "followed him all the way from Galilee." How was it then possible for Christianity, formed by the followers of this Jesus, to diminish throughout its long history and always in the name of God, the lives and the humanity of so many? I think of the Church's traditional victims: the Jews, the "heretics," the scientists who introduced us to a new understanding of the world and finally people of color, women and homosexual persons everywhere, and wonder what these ecclesiastical victims think when they hear church leaders say: "the Bible is the inerrant word of God." The gospel of John quotes Jesus, I think correctly, as saying "I came that they might have life, abundantly." One cannot give life and diminish people's humanity at the same time. Yet in spite of that record many people still seem to think that institutional Christianity must be listened to in the debate about changing sexual patterns among human beings. In the light of this record, I wonder why.

I am a bishop in the Church. I am deeply devoted to the Christ who stands at the heart of the Christian story. I treasure the sacred scriptures of my faith tradition and study them daily. Nonetheless, I am repelled by so much that I see emanating from within institutional Christianity today. Everywhere I go I confront a spiritually hungry population, but one that is increasingly unwilling to listen to the religious claims of those who have done such evil to so many while claiming that they are speaking for Christ. Most people I meet think that their only options are to continue to be part of this kind of abusive tradition or to rid themselves of all religion. That is why atheism has become such a popular subject for books today. I think a better alternative is to call the Christian Church into a new reformation that will transform it from being a power-seeking institution designed to create religious conformists to one whose goal is to enhance our common humanity. That would be for the Church to walk in a vastly different direction.

September 26, 2007

U.S. Catholic leaders join dialogue with President of Iran at UN

Meeting with President Ahmadinejad is third in a series focused on improving East-West relations

New York City-Even as the war drums beat louder and the rhetoric remains heated, U.S. Catholic leaders joined an interfaith effort to defuse tensions between Iran and the United States. The dialogue between North American religious leaders and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took place at the United Nations this morning and was focused on improving East-West relations through informal diplomacy.

President Ahmadinejad, visiting New York to attend the United Nations 62nd General Assembly session, sat down with a delegation of U.S. religious leaders for the third time in the past year. The first meeting happened last year, also at the UN, followed by a February 2007 visit to Iran by U.S. religious leaders at the invitation

of the Iranian president, who received them at the Presidential Palace, the first U.S. citizens to be welcomed there in over 25 years.

These dialogues have included frank discussions on the Holocaust, nuclear weapons, the role of religion in peacemaking, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the use of hostile rhetoric.

"We are deeply concerned about the prospect of war with Iran, but I left today's meeting hopeful because of the statements made by President Ahmadinejad regarding the renunciation of war and the quest for peace," stated Joseph Fahey, professor of religious studies at Manhattan College and a member of the Catholic delegation. "This meeting was an attempt to build bridges with Iran despite the generally hostile reception President Ahmadinejad received here in New York City. We strongly believe that only through formal and informal diplomacy and respect for international law can there be peace between Iran and the U.S."

The Catholic delegation was organized by Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement, and included theologians, clergy and religious, and leaders of national Catholic organizations. The meeting, hosted by the Mennonite Central Committee, took place amidst heightened security at the Church Center at the UN and was billed as a "time of dialogue and prayerful reflection among the children of Abraham."

"Our message today, both in our words and by our actions, is that our country and our political leaders need to engage Iran in respectful and meaningful dialogue in order to overcome the historical enmity that has existed between our two nations," said Dave Robinson, Pax Christi USA Executive Director. "We need our leaders to put aside the threats of war and to engage now-to have what President Ahmadinejad asked for today: sincere and fair negotiations."

Jean Stokan, Pax Christi USA Policy Director, stated that now is the time for U.S. citizens to start encouraging their elected officials to push for a policy of negotiation with Iran.

"It is our responsibility-the responsibility of people of faith in the U.S.-to work now to assure that the Bush Administration chooses a diplomatic path, not a military one, in dealing with our differences with Iran. The alternative is simply unacceptable."

For more information, contact:

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Pax Christi USA encourages all of its local groups, campus groups, regions, religious communities, and parishes to pray for peace.

CDF Issues Ruling on PVS: Food and Water = "Right and Duty"

Ending a two-year inquest sought by the American bishops in the wake of the Terri Schiavo case, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a decision this morning to clarify that "it is not acceptable to interrupt or to

withhold" nutrition and hydration to patients in a vegetative state.

The congregation's [formal response](#) to the two questions submitted in July 2005 by Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, the USCCB president, was presented to and approved by the Pope in late July, at which time Benedict XVI mandated their publication. The text -- published in Latin and the Holy See's working languages of Italian, French, English, Spanish, German, Portuguese and Polish -- is accompanied by an extensive, similarly-translated "[commentary](#)" sketching out the development of the Magisterium on the topic, summarized by its statement that, even when the vegetative state is persistent, "the provision of water and food, even by artificial means, always represents a *natural means* for preserving life, and is not a *therapeutic treatment*" (emphases original).

The decision, communicated to the bishops of the world earlier this week, sides with the pro-life activists who vigorously protested the 2005 denial of food and water to Schiavo -- a Florida woman who had been in a vegetative state for fifteen years following a cardiac arrest. After a five-year legal battle between her parents and husband, Schiavo died thirteen days after the removal of her feeding tube. The case became a political football, as state and federal courts, Congress and the White House became involved at various turns. Within the church, though, some of the activists faulted the hierarchy for a response the former deemed lackluster.

As the CDF's preparatory work for today's decision entered its final stages, an Italian "right-to-die" case late last year brought the issue right into the Vatican's backyard.

In late December, Piergiorgio Welby, an Italian poet and activist suffering from muscular dystrophy, died after his respirator was turned off at his own request. Though not in a vegetative state, Welby's interventions on the issue -- including a book he titled "Let Me Die" -- led the Italian hierarchy to deny him a church funeral, citing his repeated and much-publicized intent to end his life.

As controversy over Welby's campaign and death dominated the nation's chattering circles, his funeral rites in a Roman square attracted thousands. After an ethical panel unanimously exonerated the physician who terminated the patient's respirator on charges of malpractice, Benedict employed a Sunday *Angelus* talk to "urge all not to fall prey to the deception of thinking that they can dispose of life to the extent of 'legitimizing its disruption with euthanasia, perhaps masking it with a veil of human pity.'"

From "Whispers in the Loggia" Blog 9/14/07

"Not in Our Backyard": Victimizing Immigrants Across the U.S.

September 20, 2007

There's a scary trend sweeping across the U.S.

In the absence of a successfully enacted immigration reform law, local communities, motivated by fear and an increasingly publicized rhetoric of misunderstanding about immigrants, are taking matters into their own hands. In the areas surrounding Washington, DC, alone, some quite unbelievable proposals are being considered. In July, the Board of County Supervisors in [Prince George's County, MD](#), authored a resolution calling for police to check the immigration status of violators of any laws, criminal or civil, and for public services to be denied to undocumented persons. The police department responded

by introducing a new policy in which police would now be required to check the immigration status of immigrants stopped for misdemeanors like traffic violations. So, failing to come to a complete stop at a stop sign might now lead to deportation.

Bordering the District on the other side, in Virginia, the GOP announced legislation Aug. 29 to prohibit public colleges and universities from admitting undocumented persons, effectively barring their access to the higher education that would guarantee their ability to become productive members of society. These are only two examples local to where I live, but hundreds of such proposals have begun popping up throughout the nation since Congress failed to pass an immigration reform law. The proposals, often a response to fear, mistrust, and the exaggerated (and often untrue) rhetoric of anti-immigration campaigners, are a travesty for many reasons: they divide instead of unite communities; they create an atmosphere in which neighbors do not trust one another and immigrant communities do not trust police; they are patchwork "solutions" that do nothing to address root causes; and worst of all, they paint the immigrant as an "other" and deny the human dignity of those who have often fled to our country trying to escape the horrible realities of poverty, suffering, and persecution in their own. The problem with these local initiatives is that they dehumanize immigrants, masking the fact that they are really fellow human beings, dignity-filled human beings, created, as we are, in God's own image. The local proposals treat people as problems, and instead of trying to heal communities and bring diverse backgrounds together for dialogue, they seek to divide and separate.

In his Labor Day statement, Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, the chairman of the Domestic Policy Committee for the U.S. bishops, expressed grave concern about the trend. He described the local laws enacted as "a patchwork of conflicting policies, punitive measures, and local disputes" that "cannot fix a broken federal system, but they can further enflame the divisions that make real progress more difficult."

Instead, the debate "should be shaped and measured by fundamental moral principles," the Bishop said, like the fact that human dignity is "a gift from God, not a status to be earned." *Human dignity is a gift from God, not a status to be earned.* How true this is. Yet how blatantly it is denied in the corrosive local proposals being introduced around the country. As citizens of the world and people seeking to live lives of solidarity, we have to stand, even if our local communities won't, for human dignity.

by Jill Rauh, Education for Justice Project, Center of Concern
