

Catholicism in Australia: Demographics, scandal underlie tectonic shifts

Tom Roberts | Mar. 17, 2014
Melbourne and Sydney, Australia

More than a hundred people turned out on a Sunday afternoon in late November to the crypt of historic St. Patrick's Church in Sydney for a presentation by a forensic psychologist on the sex abuse scandal jarring the Catholic community in Australia.

During a question-and-answer session, a woman in the audience made a sarcastic reference to priests once thinking they were "ontologically different." The phrase provoked an immediate howl of laughter, as if she'd delivered a punch line of a joke.

This over-50 (and probably well over-60) crowd, the equivalent of a Call to Action gathering in the United States, represents the very generation raised on such notions of clerical superiority and priestly otherness. It is the same generation that, in terms of numbers of priests, nuns and people in the pews, had brought Australian Catholicism to a zenith not too many years ago.

A linchpin of that phenomenon -- a clergy standing "in persona Christi" and marked indelibly as something different from the rest of humanity -- is now as much taken for granted as a laughing point as it once was a tenet of faith. Granted, the line was an offhand observation in a presentation and discussion of more immediate matters. But it contained, like an exploration of Catholic DNA, a key to a striking transformation of Catholic life that appears to be occurring in regions where Catholicism once seemed a settled and unchanging reality.

The basically Irish/European Catholic project of the past 150 years, evident here as it is in the Northeast and Upper Midwest of the United States, is unraveling as we've known it. That era's high notion of ordination and the baronial character of its institutions no longer fit a world in which kings and princes have given way to democratic yearnings. Here, across the harbor from the Sydney Opera House and high on a hill looking toward the Pacific Ocean, stands a magnificent residence, referred to locally as "the cardinal's palace." Behind it is an imposing edifice that once served as a seminary. What was described as once a "throne room" in the cardinal's palace still has a stained glass window high on a wall, but the sun shines through it onto rows of computer tables holding laptops. The building itself is now an administrative center for the Catholic high school just across the drive.

This visitor from America was reminded of the observation by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, archbishop of New York, that "American Catholic leadership is being strangled by trying to maintain the behemoth of the institutional Catholicism that we inherited from the 1940s and '50s."

Catholics in the United States and Australia, despite a host of differences, are living through a moment in church history that has ringing similarities, and the most evident of those is that the church is undergoing a major transition. The talk in Sydney, the comment about the very nature of priesthood, the mocking laugh about such a notion, priestless parishes, nunless schools, the repurposing of structures that once symbolized the

institution and its authority are all indications of the tectonic shifts underway, many occurring beyond anyone's control.

In nearly two weeks of travel in and around Melbourne and Sydney last November, I conducted interviews and had conversations with dozens of church members, workers, officials and a variety of other observers. Though those encounters represent only a sliver of the vast and diverse reality of Australian Catholicism, some elements of church life about which there appears to be broad consensus came clear:

- The church has changed, in some ways dramatically, during the past 50 years in terms of its structure, membership and certain levels of leadership.
- One of the most significant changes here as in other Western cultures is the drop in recent decades in the number of priests and sisters.
- Concurrently, there has been a remarkable growth in the numbers of laypeople trained and stepping in to lead elements of the institution where once only the vowed or ordained were permitted.
- Similar to the demographic shifts experienced in the United States, Catholic numbers in Australia are being buoyed primarily by a surge in immigration. Here, the newcomers are from places like the Philippines, Vietnam and India.

If consensus exists about change, agreement also exists about the question that proceeds from it, which can be rounded off as "What's next?" The leadership may be strangling on the institutional legacy of the last century and a half, but what replaces it?

The answer to that can range from the rather bleak and sociologically driven conclusion voiced by a journalist, "It's over," bolstered by demographic data showing so many areas of decline, to the positive view voiced by a religious sister taking a cue from the new cosmology and some comfort from its lesson that all things cycle into some manner of death and new life. She is encouraged, if unspecific, by what might be emerging.

Along the spectrum between those poles exist a range of views and the stuff of real life -- of church mutating under pressures no one can manipulate or plan for as well as quite intentional acts of service and love born of the Gospels. Those points can be as mundane as the understanding that the old "four-square model," as described by one parish pastor -- a church, a convent, a rectory and a school, on 10 acres and always within walking distance of its membership -- is no longer sustainable. Or one might encounter the mile-high view that derives from the changes underway such fundamental, if unsettling, questions as: "What does it mean to be a eucharistic community?"

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Wentworth Falls is about an hour and a half train ride west of Sydney* and into the Blue Mountains, rugged terrain dense with eucalyptus forests. It is the region that Chris McGillion, a longtime religion affairs editor for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and author of three books on the Catholic church in Australia, now calls home.

The 60-year-old McGillion, who teaches journalism at Charles Sturt University, would have been part of the bedrock demographic upon which the success of the church was built in the last century. His grandparents emigrated from Ireland in the late 1800s and his parents -- his mother was a seamstress, his father a railroad worker -- were devout Catholics, regular Mass attenders who said the rosary in the evenings. McGillion was the youngest of four, attended primary school taught by Presentation nuns and two schools taught by the Christian Brothers.

The first in his family to attend university, he describes himself as "an example of the success of the church's mission in the 20th century as defined by [the Irish-born Melbourne Bishop Daniel] Mannix in 1917." Mannix's definition of success, he said, was that "Catholics should be able to take full advantage of the benefits of

society." The means to achieve that place in Australian society was education. The Catholic school system, significant back then, has surfaced, in the current alignment of things ecclesial, as a cornerstone of Catholic presence in many communities.

However, in McGillion's analysis, the fuel for the Irish Catholic project, so dependent on the push to take advantage of all the benefits of Australian society, has run out. In a phrase, Catholics have made it. There are those, of course, who would have a different view of things, and those views will be explored in the next segment. But McGillion has a lot of numbers to back his view.

As in the United States, while the number of Catholics is growing, thanks to immigration, overall Mass attendance has steadily declined. The clergy and religious sisters are aging and their numbers are falling precipitously, parishes are without full-time clerical pastors and an increasing number of those parishes are being forced to close and/or merge.

McGillion has explored the complexities of the church in two books: *Our Fathers: What Australian Catholic Priests Really Think About Their Lives and Their Church*, co-authored in 2011 with John O'Carroll and reporting on a wide-ranging survey of the attitudes of Australian priests; and as editor of *A Long Way From Rome: Why the Australian Church Is in Crisis*, a 2003 collection of essays on the state of the church. He has just completed work on a new book, *Reckoning: The Catholic Church and Child Sexual Abuse*, which he said will be published sometime in the next few months.

"I have very vivid memories of the pre-Vatican II Catholic experience. I have very vivid memories of the cultural identity Catholicism gave me. But by the '70s, none of that was operative," he said in an interview. "Catholics had basically moved into the middle class. The sectarian divide had basically disappeared ... the whole cultural glue -- Catholicism -- basically disappeared. The vision that drove the church for 60 to 70 years and that was highly successful was never replaced by anything else."

His 11-year-old daughter, Xiao Bao, attends a Catholic school run entirely by laypeople. "She's developing a great sense of community spirit, responsibility and so forth. She's almost a test case." Xiao Bao, of Chinese birth, will make up her own mind about religion when she's ready, he said. In the meantime, she's "kind of been put in a lolly shop and offered this thing, and she can't stand it. She doesn't like going to church; she's got no time for God. She's got no time for Jesus. So the product isn't interesting her at all. But she's getting this whole ethos," an ethos that he still admires and cherishes.

Whether that ethos eventually persuades her to make time for God is the unknown, but the certain thread that wound through most conversations here is that Catholic schools have become the most consistent and perhaps even the most important expression of the faith in Australian culture.

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The clerical sex abuse crisis is the disruption that has become almost the norm of Catholic life in many parts of the globe. It might seem unfair to begin a description of a church with a report on a meeting about the sex abuse scandal, but the scandal is one of those immeasurable forces that are changing the landscape. Every subject, whether church membership or drop in the numbers of priests and nuns or the future of eucharistic communities, must be considered, at least for the moment, against the backdrop of the scandal. The crisis has arguably bared the worst of anyone's imagination -- the abuse of children by priests and the cover-up of the abuse by bishops. The long-term effect of clergy sex abuse increases the complexity of any answer to the question "What's next?"

The scandal plays into the pessimistic conclusions of McGillion, who said, "It doesn't matter what the Royal Commission comes up with, people have already made their judgment: The Catholic church stinks on the issue of child abuse."

In fact, the presentation in Sydney by Dr. Gerard Webster wasn't a standalone treatment of the question. It was the fourth in a series of talks held from September through November under the heading, "The Church Re-Imagined," three of them bearing directly on the sex abuse crisis. It apparently has to be dealt with first on the way to dreaming about the future. The scandal has been the subject of several government inquiries at the state level. The major and most recent inquiry is the Royal Commission Into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, a national effort that includes a deep investigation of the Catholic church. The commission has exercised broad subpoena powers in soliciting testimony and documentation.

There are many parallels to the narratives of the church in Australia and the United States -- in many ways similar histories, with the swells of membership and vocations and the eventual declines following a similar timeline. The sex abuse crisis is no exception, and there is little reason here to go into details of the territory numbingly familiar to U.S. Catholics -- the patterns of deceit, from grooming vulnerable children to the instincts of clerics and bishops to protect the institution at the expense of victims, transferring priests and hiding their crimes. The narratives go in different directions, however, at the stage of government inquiry. In the United States, no national or even state body exists that has the power to conduct such a sweeping inquiry. So the information -- the documentation of the crisis and its depth and dimensions -- flows out over time, case by case, diocese by diocese, religious order by religious order. It is no coincidence if it seems such discoveries might go on forever.

In Australia, it was the informal consensus among most of those I interviewed that the pain might be severe for a time -- the Royal Commission isn't expected to complete its work for at least another year and a half -- but when the final report is released, there will be a certain satisfaction that most of the truth had been unearthed and that the worst had been dealt with culture-wide.

What remains in every situation where abuse of children by priests is being discovered are internal questions for the church about its procedures, about the breach of trust between leadership and the community and about what effect the crisis will have on the church in the future.

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Fr. Brian Lucas, general secretary of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, and retired Sydney Auxiliary Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, an often outspoken critic of the hierarchy and certain church teachings, have each spent years working on the abuse problem.

Robinson's recent books, *For Christ's Sake: End Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church ... for Good* and *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, are strong pleas for reform, challenging the church's reliance on such elements as infallibility and its elevated notions of ordination to maintain authority.

The two men, who speak of each other as friends, worked together during Robinson's nine years, 1994-2003, as a member of the bishops' committee charged with coordinating the response of the church to sexual abuse. Lucas has been helping to fashion the Australian church's response since 1988.

Their comments, in separate interviews, demonstrate the complexity of both the problem and of devising a response at this point in the history of the crisis.

Lucas is a civil lawyer and his remarks reflect that orientation. He recently spent hours being questioned before the Royal Commission about tactics in handling cases in the past. He admitted in testimony to using procedures to remove priests more quickly from ministry while failing to turn the cases over to police.

According to an earlier *NCR* report on the commission session, "Lucas said his role was to hold confidential meetings with the perpetrators during which he tried to 'seduce' or 'strong-arm' them into agreeing to resign from priestly ministry."

"I think the general view at the time, and a view certainly that I had at the time, was that the canon law processes, the formal structural canon law processes, were unworkable, and we needed to find a different way of dealing with these allegations," he said during questioning.

When we spoke in November, the equivalent of a state government inquiry had just been completed in Victoria. Even parties who viewed the results differently seemed to agree that the hearings were procedurally inadequate and even unfair to the church because they seemed to lack basic rules and boundaries for how material was presented. At the same time, people also appeared to see the hearings as beneficial since victims finally had the opportunity to tell their stories in an open forum.

Lucas said he believes the church is in a no-win situation regardless of how it proceeds. "The Royal Commission scope is so enormous -- question is whether it can come to any reasonable outcome. Engaging victims and giving victims a chance to have their say is very positive," he said. "But this is an extraordinarily complex question because a narrative can be developed, particularly in the media world, that whatever you do is wrong."

For example, he said, "We had a policy of encouraging priests to plead guilty. Even though lawyers would say they have rights as citizens and there may have been questions about prosecutors' evidence, our policy was to encourage them to plead guilty.

"That was attacked by victims' groups who criticized it saying they're only pleading guilty to avoid the publicity of a trial and so that the whole truth doesn't come out. On the other hand, if you let them plead not guilty and let the prosecution proceed, you're attacked for putting the victims through a trial. You pay damages? Well, it's never enough. You're buying them off cheaply; you're avoiding the full truth coming out in a trial."

Others structure "a narrative," he said, that considers whatever is done as wrong. "If you override the victim's wishes and report the matter to the police when you're asked not to, you're betraying the victim. If you do what the victim says, then you're covering up. Whatever step you take in the management of these cases someone will develop a narrative that it's wrong. It's almost impossible to do anything right in the minds of some people as they construct the narrative."

Is he saying, then, that the church did everything right from the start?

"I'm saying that the church back in the 1970s and '80s, like the rest of society, was woefully ignorant about how these things should have been dealt with. The prevailing methodology was to say there's been an accusation ... the person confronted denies it. Sometimes we didn't go to the police, other times we did go to the police. In some cases, the man was acquitted. In that case, it was always because the church had a high-powered lawyer, so that's part of the narrative -- you're not allowed to have a high-powered lawyer.

"You see the problem. So the bishops were very often caught with an accusation and a denial and here's the era -- the lack of experience. They needed to say there's more going on here than simply this accusation and this denial. They didn't know to go deeper. In some instances, they thought it sufficient to send the person off for

psychiatric therapy or evaluation and often the priest would come back with a signed psychologist's report saying he deserves a fresh start. Twenty years on, you'd say that was a ridiculous bit of advice."

Robinson, who has worked through his own experience of abuse as a child, though not by a priest, goes very deep into causes in his book and speeches, to the very nature of the God that has been historically preached by the church. Early on in *For Christ's Sake*, he sketches a list of alternatives to the angry God, the God who can be possessed by religious authorities, "from a god greatly concerned with glory and majesty to a god not standing on dignity and not threatened by anything human beings can do, but caring passionately about what we do to each other, to ourselves and to the community."

Sexual abuse, he has written, "is first and foremost an abuse of power. It is an abuse of power in a sexual form. Unhealthy ideas concerning power and its exercise are always relevant to the question of abuse."

All of those softer, more inviting aspects of God have long existed in the Catholic tradition, he says, but, "Sadly, there has also been a long history of the angry god. ... Coercion of many kinds, including torture, has had its place in an institution that should have reflected the example of Jesus."

He takes on, as well, the ontological distinction mocked by the crowd at the seminar on sex abuse. "No explanation is given as to what this means, and I confess that I have always found it meaningless," he writes. "It appears to be another of those pure assertions that are made to bolster teachings that have little rational support, and one may once again apply the principle of logic that 'what is freely asserted may be freely denied.' "

Not surprisingly, Robinson has not been consulted by the leader of the Australian church, Sydney Cardinal George Pell, recently appointed to head a new finance oversight agency at the Vatican by Pope Francis. In fact, when Robinson sent Pell and Melbourne Archbishop Denis Hart notice that he had 120,000 signatures on a petition asking for the pope to call a new ecumenical council to discuss some of the issues he's raised, he did not receive a response from either man.

Robinson, a trained canonist but someone who has a much keener interest in Scripture, said he takes his hope and faith "in the person and the story. From that protrudes the moral rules I follow, the worship I give, the community I belong to. But take away the person and the story, and all those are dead."

Part 2: Parishes, schools, aboriginal outreach and other signs of hope.

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated Wentworth Falls' location in relation to Sydney.*

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