

A response from Fr Steven to concerns about clericalism, leadership and the scandal of sexual abuse.

The Authority of Leadership – the ways in which it has been exercised and the ways it has been just accepted by people has changed dramatically in the Western world over the last two generations. The authoritarian, hierarchical, command and control structures of the past are gone. The days of simply telling someone to do something are gone. The authority of a doctor, politician, teacher, banker, financier, parent, bishop or priest is no longer accepted simply on the basis that they are qualified to exercise this role because they have studied for, or graduated, or been ordained to these positions. In more recent times some exercising these roles have been exposed for incompetent or even criminal behaviour. The trust therefore that people had in those who exercised these roles has certainly diminished. Good leadership by anyone in these and other roles of responsibility over people is today determined by whether the roles are exercised with integrity and it is only then that their authority is deemed acceptable and worthy of adherence.

In the case of the Christian Churches, and the Catholic Church in particular, the traditional acceptance of the authority of leadership has been even further damaged by the revelation of sexual abuse of vulnerable people by clergy on an international scale, and the exposure that leaders of the Churches have tried to hide their activities of protecting the Church rather than caring for the victims and their families. Beyond the obvious damage this has done to individual victims and their families, the exposure of this behaviour has not only deeply hurt the faithful of these Churches, but has also caused disillusionment and devastation in the minds of those who held the Church to be the last vestige of trustworthiness. As a result, in the minds of many, the Church has no right to have a say in social moral issues because its official representatives have behaved deplorably and reprehensively, and so when the Church would seek to speak out about moral issues, its voice is considered hypocritical and irrelevant.

In Australia, the Victorian Inquiry and the Royal Commission have further exposed unhealthy, systemic and structural dimensions of the Church that require radical reform if the Church is to have a place in society. Clericalism has been named by the Pope and the Royal Commission as the sickness that has influenced the Church's abuse of power and lack of integrity. Pope Francis blamed "clericalism" in the Catholic Church for creating a culture where criminal abuse was made widespread and extraordinary efforts were made to keep the crimes hidden.

There is much to be done with regard to the sexual abuse issue that needs to begin with a 'remaining in' the mess, shame, scandal and pain of what has been done to vulnerable people; to feel their pain and express a sincere solidarity with them. This needs to happen before the Church even publicly expresses an apology to those who have been abused. The apology can only be expressed if it is accompanied by a clear and public declaration of a resolution to effect changes in the structures of the Church, and particularly in the ways that leadership is expressed, not just by the bishops in their dioceses, but also by priests in their own parishes and apostolates.

The Royal Commission has been a blessing because its findings and recommendations impel the Church to put into place changes to structures that on its own initiative the Church would not have had the capacity to do. The Royal Commission report also tried to tackle some Catholic theology, claiming, "The theological notion that the priest undergoes an 'ontological change' at ordination, so that he is different to ordinary human beings and permanently a priest, is a dangerous component of the culture of clericalism. The notion that the priest is a sacred person contributed to exaggerated levels of unregulated power and trust which perpetrators of child sexual abuse were able to exploit." It seems to me that we have required an external body to impel the Church to make reforms that would be in keeping with the way leadership is to be exercised today and be consistent with the way Jesus led.

Clericalism, is the ailment that pretends “the Church” means “priests and bishops,” that ignores or minimizes the God-given grace and talents of laypeople and that emphasizes the authority of clerics over their obligation of service. It is a disordered attitude toward clergy, an excessive deference and an assumption of their moral superiority. In the pithy description of Pope Francis, it’s when “Clerics feel they are superior, [and when] they are far from the people.” Yet, as Pope Francis wrote, clericalism can be “fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons” — laypeople can fall into clericalism, too! Lay people can fall into thinking that their contributions to the life of the Church are only second-rate, or that in all things, surely “Father knows best,” or that priestly virtue exhausts Christian virtue.

Within three years of Jesus commencing his public ministry, he not only selected twelve, whom he called ‘Apostles’, but appointed 72 disciples, whom he sent out in pairs to extend his mission. Jesus himself was a collaborative leader who formed, empowered, encouraged and entrusted those he chose for leadership to actively promote the mission that was precious to him – the furthering of God’s project – God’s kingdom. Over the course of the history of the Church, we have done a disservice to this shared leadership by confining it to ordained men, and further, a disservice has been done to Mary, the mother of Jesus and Mary of Magdala, the former being the first evangelizer and the first disciple of her Son, Jesus, and the latter who can rightly be called the “Apostle of the apostles”, being the first witness and proclaimer of the Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus chose to empower with his Spirit others to lead and to continue his mission to the world of manifesting God’s life-giving love. This Christian theology of leadership is something we need to revitalise in our own time. We are at the crossroads where we have a choice to make with regard to how leadership is exercised in the Church now.

At the highest levels and at the local grass-roots parish level leadership needs to be shared between the those ordained for ministerial priesthood as cardinals, bishops and priests with the priesthood exercised by those not ordained for sacramental ministry – men and women who have been baptised as “priests, prophets and kings” with the mission of preaching in word and action the kingdom of God for the sake of the world. In this way the Church can become again as Jesus intended – a light for the world and salt to the earth.

So now we are at the crossroads where we can make the choice to reclaim for the Church less a role of power, dominance and privilege but more a position of vulnerability and powerlessness to be truly in solidarity with the broken of the world; less a leadership of control and clericalism but more a role of a humble service exemplified by Christ at the Last Supper; less a preoccupation for its own maintenance but more a concern for the kingdom of God.

I would like to finish with a quote from Bishop Vincent Long of Paramatta with regard to the hope we can have at this time in history: “I make bold to say that this is the unexpected way of God. Consistently in salvation history, he has brought unexpected outcomes out of the most crushing defeats. Out of the ashes of the exile, he brought about the new Israel; out of the ashes of the crucifixion, the resurrection; out of the ashes of the Roman persecution, the universal church. Watershed moments can be catalysts for renewal and transformation. I believe that we are living in a watershed and a privileged moment in the history of the church. Just as the biblical exile brought about the most transforming experience that profoundly shaped the faith of Israel, this transition time can potentially launch the church into a new era of hope, engagement and solidarity that the Second Vatican Council beckoned us with great foresight. From where I stand, the arrival of Pope Francis and his emphasis on servant leadership have unambiguously signalled this new era. He himself said poignantly that we are not living in an era of change but change of era. By this, he means that it is the church that needs to live up to its fundamental call to be *ecclesia semper reformanda* or the church always in need of reform in order to be in sync with the movement of the Holy Spirit and direction of the Kingdom.”