

Spare a thought for the new archbishop

Where bishops once had the last say, they are now just another voice in public debate

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Eric Hodgens, Australia



“A bishop’ job is part shepherd, part leader, part ruler, part manager. Pope Francis insists that pastoral care is the primary role. The Melbourne Catholic Church is getting a new bishop. At 54 he can look forward to 21 years in that post. What is the scenario Archbishop Peter Comensoli is walking into? “

Archbishop Peter Comensoli.

(Photo courtesy of Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne)

It is not a good time to be a bishop. Over the last 50 years Western culture has dramatically changed. Contemporary culture is secular and pluralist. Authority, once derived from status, now must be won. Where bishops once had the last say, they are now just another voice in public debate.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) has problems. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has diminished episcopal authority in the public forum.

Meanwhile, within the Church institution, some bishops take a strong, conservative line on issues like abortion, same-sex marriage and dying with dignity, asserting that their views are “the Church’s teaching”. But a proportion of faithful Catholics either oppose or take more nuanced views on these matters. The Church itself is divided. The Bishop’s Conference is divided.

The new archbishop leapfrogs most bishops in seniority. As archbishop of the biggest diocese he now has a much stronger base in the Conference. Uniting the Conference is a challenge awaiting him.

Catholics are steadily walking away while others, once fervent, are tired or disillusioned. The inevitable result is decline in voluntary contributions – both personal and financial.

There are 1.07 million Catholics in Melbourne according to the 2016 census – nearly 24% of the population. The ethnic mix is increasing.

There are about 220 parishes.

There is a large Catholic School system. There are 260 primary schools and 66 secondary. Parents bring a more consumerist mentality than in the past. Declining enrolments will most likely track disaffiliation.

Then there is the massive problem of ministry.

Melbourne has 300 diocesan priests. 100 are retired, leaving only 200 active. It is an ageing work force – half are over 55. It is becoming increasingly a foreign workforce – currently 40%. Foreign priests, with their own cultural upbringing often find it hard to adjust to Australian church culture. In many cases their English is hard to understand, especially from the pulpit.

Older priests are tired. They are generally happy doing their local parish work but find the job’s ever-growing bureaucratic demands oppressive. Though ageing, they are still the backbone of the pastoral leadership of the diocese. In the main, they are Vatican II priests who see themselves primarily as pastors in the field, rather than consecrated priests in the sanctuary. A simpatico new leader could win their support.

A significant component of the few younger priests that the seminary is producing have a heavily sacral view of priesthood which shows in greater clericalism and ideology. Priesthood for them is a consecration to sacred status, and not a profession. So, professional demands do not apply to them.

The priesthood itself is divided.

Seminary training is very long – seven years – but with little practical training for pastoral ministry. Ongoing professional development in schools, hospitals and caring institutions is now taken for granted. This is not so with priests. A “grace of state” theology, sends newly ordained into roles requiring leadership, counselling and management skills, public speaking ability without appropriate preparation or much ongoing support and supervision.

Ironically, many effective pastors have adapted under this sink-or-swim policy. But they have been largely self-taught. It is not good policy. Grace of state is a failed theory.

Whatever about the quality of the priests, they are in short supply. There is no prospect of an increase in numbers under the presently required conditions of service – male, celibate, full-time and life-long. Between 1955 and 1975 Melbourne ordained 15 priests a year. In contrast, For the last 35 years there have been only 3 per year. Over the same time the Catholic population has grown 70%. The present organization structure is unsustainable. Recruiting lay men and women to formal ministry is the only option.

Pastoral planning is another challenge. Melbourne led the way with its Pastoral Research Office which was set up in the eighties. Besides projecting future needs, it discerned early that ministry had to be undertaken by laity, both women and men. Training courses were designed, and recruitment was good because, at that stage, there were still numbers of people willing to work for the Church community both remunerated and volunteer. The ACBC set up a national Pastoral Planning Office (PPO), while Melbourne’s office was weakened under Archbishop Pell and closed by Archbishop Hart. There may be better days ahead because Archbishop Comensoli has valued pastoral planning in Broken Bay.

The picture is not entirely bleak. There is a hard core of sophisticated faithful who are willing to give their time and effort to promote a faith that has sustained them.

So, spare a thought for the new archbishop. He faces the biggest episcopal task in Australia. He will have to make big changes. He will meet resistance. But he has the brains. He has post-graduate qualifications from Rome’s Alphonsianum and Scotland’s prestigious universities – St Andrew’s and Edinburgh. No doubt this caught George Pell’s eye. George picked him as his auxiliary, got him made administrator of Sydney when George went to Rome and then guided his move to Broken Bay as he secured Anthony Fisher as his successor in Sydney.

His academic background is juridical rather than pastoral, but any new job requires adaptation. His episcopal motto is “We proclaim the Messiah – a Crucified One”. This is the core of St. Paul’s message as N.T. Wright explains in “Paul: A Biography”. God is doing something new for us. Not a bad omen for future endeavours.

He will find that the Melbourne Church has a very different history and culture to Sydney’s. Still, he will find a small, but faithful Catholic core who will respond to positive leadership.

Strength to his arm.

Eric Hodgens is a Melbourne Priest currently living in retirement.