

August 25, 2007 - An Australian Luther?

By Barney Zwartz, The Age (AU)

A Sydney Catholic bishop has written what strikes me as one of the bravest and most important challenges to the church in generations. He says until the church gets serious about two key areas - power and sex - it can't be taken seriously over sexual abuse.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, the former head of the Australian church's anti-abuse efforts who was himself an abuse victim, has called for radical reforms, including cutting papal power and rethinking some ancient attitudes. He would put sex outside marriage, homosexuality, women priests, celibacy, the idea of a special status for priests and much more back on the agenda for discussion by the whole church.

In an article today, I compare him with Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation. This is slightly mischievous - Bishop Robinson remains a devout Catholic - but it's intended to show the ambition and extent of his suggested reforms. A much longer analysis of the book was dropped from today's edition of the newspaper at the last minute, so - enjoying the luxury of a blog - I produce it below.

Is Bishop Robinson right? If you are a practising Catholic, what - if anything - bothers you about church dogma and practice? If you are lapsed, would Robinson's reforms attract you, or what further changes might be needed? Do other churches or religions need to rethink various issues too, and if so which?

The missing article

In English, it's only a tiny preposition, two little letters, but it has helped the Catholic Church get its power relationships wrong for centuries

Dissident Sydney Bishop Geoffrey Robinson shows how in the translation from Greek to Latin the church took a serious wrong turn that gave priests an inflated view of their special status and helped create a climate in which abusers could flourish.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Bible talks of a priest being "chosen". The Greek word means "taken" but in Latin it became "taken up". The "up" implies they are lifted to a higher level than laypeople, which allows an element of "messiah complex", and eventually a mystique.

It's an example of the close reasoning and broad scholarship behind Robinson's call in an explosive new book for perhaps the most radical and all-embracing reform ever suggested by a Catholic bishop, re-examining centuries of carefully guarded doctrines.

"Spiritual power is arguably the most dangerous power of all," writes Robinson, a retired Sydney bishop, in *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, to be launched tomorrow.

"If the governing image of how to act as a priest is tied to the ideas of lordship and control then, no matter how benevolently ministry is carried out, an unhealthy domination and subservience will be present." It also adds to the pressure on priests.

"It was not a healthy idea, and it must now be confronted," writes Bishop Robinson. But it's not the only serious problem he thinks needs correcting.

He believes the church needs to ditch its traditional thinking about sex - in which all sex apart from a married couple who must not use contraception is an offence against God - in favour of a relational model. This has implications for sex outside marriage, contraception, homosexuality and women priests.

And there's much more, ranging from the sort of God Catholics worship - wrongly focusing on an angry God made the lives of millions sadder and poorer, he says - to curbing the power of the Pope and Curia, down to the sort of clothes bishops wear.

Carefully reasoned and presented, the book is set to electrify the Catholic Church. Such is the significance of the changes he seeks, Robinson could be likened to a modern Martin Luther, the 16th century theologian whose challenge to key doctrines and the authority of the papacy gave birth to Protestantism.

It's a thought, naturally, that a Catholic bishop is not entirely comfortable with. "It's not quite as dramatic as that," he says. "I don't have inflated ideas that the book will change the world, but if no one speaks out nothing will happen. I think if you asked an out-and-out Protestant to read this book he would say 'that's not my church'. For a start, there's a pope in it."

Little in his past would suggest that Robinson might break ranks so spectacularly. Indeed the full force of the tradition and the institution and an oath of fidelity to the pope are used to prevent bishops doing so. Robinson outlines the way this works, and writes "please believe me that all of the above and more have been in my mind as I have written this book".

He is well regarded in the Australian church as a careful and scholarly thinker, an excellent canon lawyer who was a sensible head of the Marriage Tribunal, a pastoral bishop who was good with priests, well versed in Scripture and author of devotional studies. Those who know him say he never courted popularity or power, but was well liked.

He ruffled legal feathers in 1990 by asking a series of pointed questions about lawyers' fees and their links with big business at a Mass for the opening of the law year.

As chairman of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference professional standards committee, Bishop Robinson headed the drive for a national protocol that served victims better, the Towards Healing program.

He finally convinced all but two of the 180 bishops and leaders of religious orders whose assent was needed to introduce the protocol, but one of the pair was then Melbourne Archbishop George Pell, who broke ranks to introduce a separate protocol. (To this day, Melbourne has a different protocol from the national one.)

When Archbishop (now Cardinal) Pell, the chief bastion of conservative orthodoxy in Australia, became Archbishop of Sydney he and Robinson were not natural allies. Robinson does not mention Pell at all in his book but admitted to *The Age* that the pair had differing views of the church.

But it wasn't Cardinal Pell who led Robinson to resign: it was a deep disillusionment over the response by church and pope to the abuse crisis. "I felt I could not continue to be a bishop of a church about which I had such profound reservations," he wrote, so he retired to write this book.

Bishop Robinson himself was the victim of abuse while young, and he says it took him 50 years and his role in tackling abuse to come to terms with it. When in 1996 he answered a victim's question by saying he wasn't happy with the level of support from Rome, he received a letter from the Vatican saying he had been reported to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (once known as the Inquisition).

The Catholic Church is still not truly confronting the abuse problem, he believes. "I have a serious fear that many church leaders are now feeling the worst of the problem is now behind them, that it has been successfully 'managed' and hence that they do not need to look at deeper issues," he writes.

Pope John Paul II failed his duty of responsibility and therefore failed to hold the church together. Even now, no pope has apologised to victims or promised to study the causes of abuse and ruthlessly change factors that contribute.

Abuse is most likely when three factors come together to create a "murky" climate: an unhealthy psychological state, unhealthy ideas about power and sex, and an unhealthy environment, according to Robinson.

Compulsory celibacy can contribute to abuse _ especially of adult women _ by fostering an unhealthy psychological state such as depression and unhealthy ideas such as misogyny or homophobia. A church serious about tackling abuse would at least re-examine celibacy, Robinson writes, but both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have forbidden any discussion.

Papal power has gone too far, Robinson writes, "and there are quite inadequate limits on its exercise. The authority of the college of bishops has been marginalised and the faith of the whole church has been rendered powerless."

The pope is caught in a vicious circle. The more he insists on authority the less people will listen and the more he will insist on authority. Papal infallibility _ the 1870 doctrine that the Pope is preserved from error when he rules *ex cathedra* on doctrine _ was a bad idea, he argues, and was based on claims that were known to be mistaken at the time. Even though it has formally been applied only once, he says, there has been a process of "creeping infallibility" in which statements by popes are increasingly seen as definitive and not open to discussion or change.

On sexual issues, Robinson asks rather than states, but his opinions are pretty clear. Traditional church teaching is that sex is designed to express love between a married couple and the means of bringing new life, and sex is proper only when it serves both these God-given purposes. All other sexual acts are offences against God.

Robinson suggests this argument is inadequate and misunderstands God. He recognises that sex can be misused and can damage people, but wants a sexual ethic based on the good and harm done to people and their relationships. This understanding would leave room for both sex outside marriage and homosexual sex.

He writes: "The church's task in the field of sexuality is to present to people an insight into the depth of all that is involved in sex and love, reminding them of the many factors that people ought to bear in mind. It is then individuals who must make their own decisions and take responsibility for them."

Robinson says the search for meaning which religion answers concerns love, and it is his developing understanding of God's love that underpins his book. But the Catholic Church for the last 1000 years has reflected far too much an angry god, a view responsible for "many of the worst pages in church history".

"At its worst people were ordered to perform the impossible task of loving a most unlovable god under pain of damnation. Millions of people were affected by these ideas and their lives were made sadder and poorer."

Catholics have no monopoly on the angry God, he told *The Age*, but "where that happens you will have a pretty angry sort of religion with lots of rules and lots of thundering from the pulpit".

A related problem is that the church has tried to constrain the beliefs of its members too rigidly in too many non-essentials. He cites the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven, declared an infallible truth in 1950 so that to deny it is to deny the Catholic faith. As it happens Robinson believes the doctrine, but admits it is not in the Bible, it is not an early tradition, the arguments are weak and if it's wrong, the essentials of the Christian faith are untouched. It should not be made a test of faith.

Bishop Robinson makes some interesting proposals for restructuring the church, from the top down. The pope's authority should be reduced, partly by requiring far wider consultation and partly by setting up regional "patriarch-presidents". The Latin church already has patriarchs of the Melkites and Copts, a model the church knows and accepts.

The pope should function like a prime minister _ more than a rubber stamp, but less than a dictator _ and should speak on behalf of the church only after he has consulted it.

The Curia (Vatican bureaucracy) also needs to be reformed, because it spends too much energy protecting and exercising papal power and privileges. Its members should not be bishops or cardinals, which would help clarify roles and show that not everyone important to the church must be a bishop.

The synod of the world's bishops should be given more authority, which would be helped by limited Curia appointments to three and getting the bishops, rather than the Curia, to appoint its staff. Other groups within the church, including lay groups, could also hold synods.

Bishops must go further in reversing the 1000-year history of clothes and ornaments that speak of power and riches, for example consigning the mitre to the dustbin of history. A hat that makes one the tallest person present sends the message "I am more important than anyone else here", not the message of Jesus, he believes.

Only such reforms, and a concentration on the liberating power of love, can restore the church. "Only a truly radical reform can give the church credibility again," Robinson writes. "I strongly believe that the future health of the church depends upon it being set free from the prison of the past. Only then can the church as a whole have the freedom to grow."