

5-29-08 - Bishop Robinson confrontation leaves unfinished business

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Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's book *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*, in which he explores what he sees as the roots of abuse in the Church, continues to raise controversy.

In May this year the Australian Bishops issued a statement in which they praised Bishop Robinson's commitment to the victims of abuse, but raised issues of doctrine that concerned them in his book. In reply, Bishop Robinson expressed disappointment that they left untreated the central challenge made by his book.

Acting on the request of Roman authorities, many United States Bishops have recently said he would not be welcome to speak in their churches.

It may be helpful to put this controversy into context. When Geoffrey Robinson was assistant Bishop in Sydney, he helped coordinate the response of the Catholic Church to victims of abuse within Catholic institutions. In the course of his work he spoke with many victims of sexual abuse. These experiences inform the central arguments in *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*.

So what is Bishop Robinson's argument, and why did the Australian Bishops criticise his book?

In his book Bishop Robinson argues that the causes of sexual abuse are to be sought in the psychological state of the abusers, in their ideas about power and sex, and in the environment that shapes them. He claims that these factors are woven together in a church culture that needs to be changed if the roots of sexual abuse are to be excised. He explores broadly how this church culture developed and how it could be changed.

In the Catholic Church it is each Bishop's responsibility to teach the received faith. The Bishop of Rome, the Pope, has an overall responsibility to preserve the unity of faith and life in the local churches. He intervenes when local Bishops cannot deal effectively with issues that arise. In their decision to criticise Bishop Robinson's book, the Australian Bishops' Conference judged that matters of faith were at stake.

In their statement, they praised Bishop Robinson's contribution to the life of the church. 'We are deeply indebted to him for his years of effort to bring help and healing to those who have suffered sexual abuse, and for what he has done to establish protocols of professional standards for Church personnel in this area.'

They then claim that the book questions the authority of the Church to teach definitively. It also questions the knowledge and authority of Christ that ground the authority of the Church to teach. In detail, they claim that the book questions Catholic teaching on tradition, scriptural inspiration, the infallibility of Councils and Pope, the nature of priesthood, and elements of the Church's moral teaching. They conclude by conceding that the authority entrusted by Christ to the Church can be badly exercised.

The criticisms are sweeping. But their scope is not altogether clear. The Bishops find fault with Bishop Robinson's questioning. There are two forms of questioning: one explores, the other denies. We can question faith by exploring its grounding and its boundaries. Other questioning can be tantamount to denial. We may assume that received positions are untrue unless we are given reasons that immediately convince us, or we may simply propose an alternative position inconsistent with a received position that we do not even take into account.

In the case of this book, Bishop Robinson certainly questions the authority of the church and other matters in the first sense. He must do so if he is to explore the groundings of a church culture. But if the book is read in a way that assumes the author's good intentions, it is not evident that his questioning amounts to denial.

But the Bishops may have been concerned that the book would be widely read in this way. Indeed this risk is inherent in the shape of its argument. To discuss the pathologies of a culture is like reflecting on the factors within an organism that are conducive to cancer. The sources of cancer are also the sources of the life of the

organism. If we focus only on eradicating cancer without asking what makes for a healthy organism, we may kill the organism in eradicating the cancer.

In *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church* Bishop Robinson focuses on pathological ideas. His arguing partners are those who make excessive claims for the scope of Church teaching, demand too much deference to Church officials, have too narrowly negative a view of human sexuality, and who put compulsory clerical celibacy beyond discussion.

In covering so many areas so broadly, Bishop Robinson cannot give a rounded and solidly grounded view of Catholic faith and life. He cannot do full justice to the Church as a living organism. In Catholic faith, this life is identified with the presence of the Holy Spirit within the development of the Church. If the book is not read in the light of an organic view of the Catholic Church, could be read as a negatively analytical and piecemeal account.

The Bishops then may have thought it necessary to warn against this possible reading of the book, particularly for readers who assume that it has added authority because it was written by a Bishop.

Bishop Robinson has accepted the Bishops' right to respond. But he was disappointed that they did not address the crucial issues which he raised. These are the extent to which the Catholic culture, including the institutions of clerical celibacy and of the exercise of authority, shapes attitudes to sex and power. And the extent to which these attitudes damage people, making abuse and its concealment more likely.

These questions remain. They have not been answered by the criticisms made of Bishop Robinson's book, however justified they may be. Precisely because the sources of pathology lie so close to the sources of life in the Catholic Church, as in other organisms, it will require a great deal of research and self-reflection to address these questions. But the pain of the victims of sexual abuse cries out that they should be addressed seriously.