

The Science of Listening: Context and Challenges Facing the Catholic Community in Australia

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In November 2013, Genevieve gave the 15th Annual Peggy Glanville Hicks Address, Australia's only public lecture on music.² In her address, she focussed on what it means to listen and to hear—in everyday life and also as both a performer and artist:

Listening is an activity that connects us deeply to others. It can change how we perceive the world, and then, how we decide to live in it. To listen suggests an open, receptive stance, without necessarily knowing what will arrive. It suggests alertness, willingness. Listening is essentially an act of respect and generosity ...

Musicians are consummate listeners. Our attentiveness is a gift, with potentially broad-reaching applications ... We have skills that go

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1. See www.genevivelacey.com/cms/musician/, accessed 12 February 2014.

2. The New Music Network established the Peggy Glanville-Hicks Address in 1999 in honour of one of Australia's great international composers. See www.newmusicnetwork.com.au/pgh.html, accessed 12 February 2014.

way beyond the specifics of our craft ... Listening with care, hearing complexity, and noticing subtlety need not be purely professional music practices, but tenets for living. Such listening has radical potential.³

Later, she goes on to say that ‘I understood that I could take my sensitivity to tone, nuance, sound, silence, body language, and cultivate that in a much broader context’. In other words, musicians are skilled listeners. Can we say the same about ourselves, all of us here who have some type of leadership role in our Church? In this talk, I am going to suggest that as a Church, we need to be good listeners; better listeners than we have been. I am going to invite us all to listen, firstly to the social science data, then to the voices of three young women and, at times as we go along, to Pope Francis.

Firstly, though, a little bit about the Pastoral Research Office. The office was established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in 1996 with two basic responsibilities: to run the National Catholic Census Project, which involves acquisition of census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and to coordinate Catholic participation in the National Church Life Survey. Both projects are still running today, but we have also broadened our activities to include a number of other projects. According to our mandate:

The mission of the Pastoral Research Office is to assist the Catholic Church in Australia at all levels in understanding the cultural, social and personal dimensions of religion in the changing contemporary context. It does this by preparing, in consultation with the Bishops Commission for Administration and Information and the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research, a research agenda designed to assist the bishops and other leaders in the Church in their pastoral planning and decision-making.

In carrying out its responsibilities, the Pastoral Research Office is, among other things:

- inspired by Gospel values and guided by the principles of Catholic pastoral theology
- at the service of, and participates in, the mission of the Catholic Church in Australia.⁴

So, the job of the Pastoral Research Office is to put social science at the service of the Church. And social science is all about listening—it is just that we use different methods of listening from musicians. Listening is our job—you can be the judge of how well we do it.

3. www.genevieve-lacey.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/PGH-Address-2013-Learning-to-Listen-Genevieve-Lacey.pdf, accessed 12 February 2014.

4. See <http://pro.catholic.org.au/ourmission>.

In the 1994 *motu proprio* establishing the Pontifical Council for the Social Sciences, Pope John Paul wrote, ‘Social science research can effectively contribute to improving human relations, as has been shown by the progress achieved in various sectors of society especially during the century now drawing to a close’. For this reason, the Church has turned to ‘this field of scientific research in order to obtain concrete information for fulfilling the duties of her Magisterium’.⁵

I have heard many people say this conference is about statistics. Well, yes and no. I would say it is more about reading the signs of the times. It’s about doing what our conference after-dinner speaker, Fr Michael Mason, calls ‘social exegesis’. If figures help us to read the signs of the times, then that is good, but they are never more than tools to be put towards improving the quality of ministry and evangelisation.

For this conference, we have proposed four key questions: What do we know? Why does it matter? What are we going to do about it? and What else do we need to know? We invite your participation in this process.

In the past, we have concentrated almost exclusively on what we know, and to a small extent on what else we need to know, but only a little on why it is important. We have tended to avoid the question ‘What are we going to do about it?’ partly because we didn’t want to impose solutions. Solutions, or strategies for achieving them, belong to the local scene, whether it be diocese or agency or sector. But at this conference we need to accept Pope Francis’ invitation ‘to be bold and creative’ in ‘rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation’,⁶ because for the first time ever we have gathered a group together to consider the meaning of a broad spectrum of findings from our research and that of some of our close colleagues. Let us be open to considering bold proposals together, because the situation is so urgent.

The Parish

Parishes are fundamental to the life of the Church. I heard that some people decided not to come to this conference because they thought it would only be about parishes. There’s some truth in that, but what we are looking at has implications that go far wider than the parish to touch on all aspects of the life of the Church in Australia. It’s about the mission of the Church—it’s about our Catholic identity.

Furthermore, I think it is fair to say that many sectors of the Church are going very well today; it is not so urgent to speak about them. Think about our Catholic schools, Catholic social services, Catholic hospitals and Aged Care, Caritas, the Catholic Youth Festival in December, and so on. I will not be speaking about these today. Great things are happening in all those sectors. This is not to say that they don’t have problems of their own, but, in general, they are

5. Pope John Paul II, *motu proprio*, *Socialium Scientiarum*, 1 January 1994.

6. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (henceforth EG) 33.

identifying and successfully responding to the challenges that face them. By and large, the parish sector is not a success story, although, as you will hear from what Trudy Dantis has to say about the Building Stronger Parishes Project,⁷ some are doing very well.

One reason why parishes are crucial is because they are ‘stable communities of faith’.⁸ Unlike the new movements, which often last for a relatively short time, parishes endure. The American priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley, who died last year, wrote that ‘the American Catholic parish [—and it applies equally well to Australian parishes—] is one of the most ingenious communities that human skill has ever created. Its overlapping networks of religious, educational, familial, social and political relationships has created ... “social capital”’.⁹ I was so profoundly influenced by Greeley’s vision of parish that I called my PhD thesis on parishes ‘Ingenious Communities’ in his honour.¹⁰

Parishes are tremendously important: to the Church, to the Catholic people, to the communities in which they are situated. Social capital theory says even the fringe attenders are important, because of the way they connect the parish to the wider community—in many cases, their weak links to the parish mean that they have links to other groups in the local community as well, where they can communicate their positive experiences of parish life to others.¹¹ We have many more fringe attenders than any other Christian Church in Australia.

In his conference opening address, Archbishop Gallagher told us what Pope Francis wrote about parishes in *Evangelii Gaudium* (n. 28). Let’s hear a little of it again:

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community ... [It is crucial that it] really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. ... We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.¹²

7. See www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au.

8. Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, *The Code of Canon Law in English Translation* (London: Collins, 1983), can. 515 §1.

9. Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990), 154–5.

10. Robert Dixon, ‘Ingenious Communities: Catholic Parishes in Australia as Creators of Social Capital and Religious Social Goods’ (PhD thesis, Monash University, 2010).

11. Mark Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (1973): 1360–80; Dixon, ‘Ingenious Communities’, 70–1.

12. EG 28.

As long ago as 1982, Columban priest and anthropologist, Fr Cyril Hally, who died in 2010 at the age of 90, expressed concern at the situation of Australian parishes. He wrote that ‘In many parishes attendance at weekly Sunday Mass may be no higher than 35 per cent’.¹³ Stephen Reid informed us this morning that, in 2011, Mass attendance in Australia was 12.2 per cent and almost certain to fall further. Fr Hally went on to say that ‘Unlike the schooling crisis, which is being recognised and tackled, the parish crisis remains concealed from most Catholics’.¹⁴ What about now? Have we ‘recognised and tackled’ the ‘parish crisis’? I suspect that, with some very commendable exceptions in Australian dioceses, the answer is ‘No’. I would go further and say that, at the present time, our parish system is in danger of collapse!

Without parishes, and despite the best efforts of our excellent Catholic schools, I believe that it is almost impossible to hand on the faith to large numbers of people. This is because faith is a family affair, a community affair, not simply something that is learned in the classroom. Parishes, in contrast to schools, can offer a lifelong environment for the nurture of faith. So let’s look at a little more of what we know about parishes.

After reaching a peak in the 1950s or early 60s, Mass attendances have been declining ever since.¹⁵ Until 1996 there was little information available about who went to Mass and how the profile of attenders was changing over time. Between 1996 and 2011, the percentage of Mass attenders born in non-English-speaking countries rose from about 18 per cent to over 33 per cent, resulting in an increase of attenders born in non-English-speaking countries of about 69 000. This was not due to an increase in the percentage of Catholics from non-English-speaking countries in the Catholic population: throughout that period, the percentage of Australian-born Catholics remained very steady at about 75 per cent. However, overall Mass attendances declined by about 23 per cent in that period, despite the increase in attenders from non-English-speaking countries. This happened because the number of Australian-born attenders fell by around one-third! Two major factors have contributed to this decline. Firstly, people in particular age cohorts have stopped going to Mass; it is estimated, for example, that up to 26 000 baby boomers stopped going to Mass between 1996 and 2011. Secondly, young adult attenders are not being replaced as they age. In 1996, about 136 000 Catholics aged 15 to 34 attended Mass on a typical weekend, but by 2011 the number of Mass attenders in the 15 to 34 age group had dropped to about 80 000. As well, Mass attenders as a group have been ageing; in 2011,

13. Cyril Hally, ‘Growth Patterns in the Catholic Church’, in *The Shape of Belief*, ed. D. Harris et al. (Homebush: Lancer, 1982), 86.

14. *Ibid.*, 83.

15. Robert Dixon, *The Catholic Community in Australia* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2005); Robert Dixon, ‘The Changing Face of the Catholic Community in Australia: Challenges for Catholic Social Service Organisations’, in *Listening, Learning and Leading: The Impact of Catholic Identity and Mission*, ed. Gabrielle McMullen and John Warhurst (Ballarat: Connor Court, 2014).

about one-third of all attenders aged 15 and over were aged between 60 and 74. Attenders aged 15 to 19 accounted for only 4 per cent while people aged 80 or more made up more than 8 per cent of attenders.¹⁶

We all know that attendance rates vary considerably by age. Among young Catholic adults aged 20–34, only about 5 or 6 per cent attend Mass on a typical Sunday. The highest attendance rates are found among those in their 70s, where attendance is typically a little over 30 per cent. What we might not know is that the attendance rate of *every* five-year age group from 20 to 69 dropped between 1996 and 2011, a mere fifteen-year period, in most cases by close to 50 per cent. The biggest drop was in the 50 to 54 age group, where the attendance rate fell from 26.8 per cent in 1996 to 12.3 per cent in 2011.

A look at attendance rates by birthplace is informative. In the period from 1996 to 2011, the attendance rate of Australian-born Catholics fell from 17 to 10 per cent while that of Catholics born overseas in English-speaking countries fell from 26 per cent to 16 per cent. The magnitude of that decline has been camouflaged to a certain extent by the consistently high rate of attendance, hovering around 23 to 25 per cent, by Catholics born in non-English-speaking countries.

Sometimes overall figures like these fail to make an impact. We look at churches on Sundays and there seem to be plenty of people there, at least in many places. Maybe not as many as in the past, we think to ourselves, but still a good number. Well, let me show you attendance figures for three urban parishes in one Australian archdiocese. I won't name the parishes or the diocese. These three cases are not typical (they are rather dramatic examples), but neither are they unusual; many parishes are experiencing substantial declines in attendance. In 1991, these three parishes had attendances of 2442, 1807 and 798. Twenty years later, their attendances had fallen to 964, 591 and 197, respectively. If the same rate of decline were to continue for another twenty years—and remember, we are already three years into those twenty—these three parishes would, respectively, have attendances of 381, 193 and 49! Unlikely, you might say, and I tend to agree. But how will the next seventeen years be different from the last twenty-three in such a way that this rate of decline does not continue?

So, in summary, what can we say about the future of parishes? The age profile of attenders tells us that we must expect a continuing strong decline in Mass attendances, leading to the potential collapse of numerous parishes within fifteen to twenty years. This collapse will be managed and to some extent disguised by parish mergers. The problem will be most severe in areas where high proportions of Catholics are Australian-born, since it is among that group that Mass attendance is declining most rapidly. Furthermore, it is not only the ageing of the present attenders that will result in a continuing decline in

16. Many of these results from the National Church Life Survey have not been published before. Others can be found in various publications referred to in the footnotes to this address.

attendances. Our 2007 report on why adult long-term attenders stop going to Mass¹⁷ identified seven ‘Church-centred’ reasons why people cease attending. Until these reasons are addressed, there is no reason not to believe that some current attenders will decide to stop going.

In other words, we face the prospect of the Catholic Church in Australia becoming a set of institutions in various sectors (education, health, social services) without a parishioner base except in ‘ethnic’ congregations.

Catholic Beliefs and Practices

Now I want to direct your attention, for a moment, to what we mean by a ‘good Catholic’. We use the term often enough—don’t we?—but what do we mean by it? Well, here are a few possible criteria. A good Catholic:

- goes to Mass every weekend
- holds Catholic beliefs
- accepts the Church’s moral teachings
- accepts the Church’s disciplinary rules
- doesn’t practise artificial contraception
- goes to confession at least once a year.

This, of course, is not a complete list. I could add things like ‘fasts during Lent’ and ‘cares for the poor’, something that Pope Francis frequently emphasises. But I have chosen this list because our survey data can throw some light on them.

We have already seen that the overwhelming majority of people who regard themselves as Catholic do not go to Mass every week. Of the 12.2 per cent who are there on any one Sunday, only 85 per cent are there *every* Sunday;¹⁸ that is, only 10.4 per cent of Catholics go every week. Among Mass attenders, our survey results show that 10 per cent do not believe that the bread and wine become the sacred Body and Blood of Christ at the consecration, 25 per cent do not believe that Mary gave birth to Jesus without having had sexual intercourse, and 29 per cent do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. Less than half of Mass attenders accept the Church’s teaching that pre-marital sex is always wrong,¹⁹ and 40 per cent do not accept the practice whereby divorced Catholics who have remarried without an annulment of their previous marriage are refused Communion (a further 16 per cent say they don’t know whether they accept it or

17. Robert Dixon, Sharon Bond, Kath Engebretson, Richard Rymarz, Bryan Cussen and Katherine Wright, *Research Project on Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass: Final Report, February 2007* (Melbourne: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2007).

18. Robert Dixon, Stephen Reid and Marilyn Chee, ‘Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment. A Report Based on the National Count of Attendance, the National Church Life Survey and the Australian Census’ (unpublished report, ACBC Pastoral Research Office, Fitzroy, 2013).

19. Robert Dixon and Ruth Powell, ‘Vatican II: A Data-Based Analysis of Its Impact on Australian Catholic Life’, in *Vatican II: Reception and Implementation in the Australian Church*, ed. Neil Ormerod et al. (Mulgrave: Garratt, 2012).

not). Among Mass attenders for whom the question is applicable, there is a big difference in numbers between those who say they use artificial means of birth control and those that use natural family planning methods—54 per cent to 10 per cent among attenders aged 15 to 34, and 48 per cent to 5 per cent among those aged 35 to 59. More than half said they had not been to the First Rite of Reconciliation in the previous twelve months, and 66 per cent had not been to a celebration of the Second Rite. More than three-fifths of Mass attenders either do not go to confession at all these days (30 per cent) or else they go less often than they used to five years ago (32 per cent).²⁰

If we examine our sample of Mass attenders, we find that only about 20 per cent of them satisfy the criteria for being a ‘good Catholic’. So we are talking about 20 per cent of 10 per cent, that is, just two per cent of all Catholics! Perhaps we can add another couple of per cent because, after all, not accepting the Church’s *teaching* about pre-marital sex is not exactly the same as *practising* pre-marital sex. But no matter what we do to the data, we can’t get the percentage that ticks all the right boxes above 5 per cent. For me this raises a troubling question. What about the other 95 per cent? Are these figures saying that most Catholics are abject failures as Catholics? We frequently hear it said that those Catholics are unfaithful, disloyal, ignorant or simply lazy. But we don’t hear those things coming from Pope Francis. He recognises, for example, that there are ‘those members of the faithful who preserve a deep and sincere faith, expressing it in different ways, but seldom taking part in worship’.²¹

It has always seemed to me to be strange that an institution would talk in disparaging tones about the vast majority of its members. To me the numbers speak of a profound failure to communicate the faith in a way that resonates with the people of today. As a Church, how well have we been listening to the experiences of the 95 per cent?

Three Young Women and Africa

We have seen that there are very few young adult Catholics involved in the Australian Church at present. As well, well over 100 000 young adults who were bought up Catholic ceased to identify as such between the 2001 and 2011 Censuses.²²

I believe that the Church needs to be much more appreciative and encouraging of young adult Catholics. As examples of what great things young people are doing, I want to tell you about three young Australian women I know

20. Robert Dixon and Stephen Reid, ‘Pastoral Challenges to the Family: Research Results for the Australian Catholic Community. A Report to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in Preparation for the 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the Family’ (unpublished report, ACBC Pastoral Research Office, Fitzroy, 2013).

21. EG 15.

22. Robert Dixon and Stephen Reid, ‘The Contemporary Catholic Community: A View from the 2011 Census’, *Australasian Catholic Record* 90, no. 2 (April 2013): 131–46.

who have all contributed a part of their lives to working in Africa. I tell their stories with their permission.

The first is Elissa, a doctor, now working in global public health research in Melbourne. She is the daughter of some friends of ours. She spent six months, then some additional shorter stints, working in a clinic founded by Australian Christian Brothers in the slums of Nairobi. Then she worked in another Christian Brothers initiative in South Sudan for a further three months. When I asked her about why she did these things, she said that she was profoundly influenced by her parents and also that her time at a Catholic secondary school had been important. What really matters for Elissa is social justice, accepting responsibility, and using her privilege and education to make a difference to others. She says she is still Catholic but is 'uncomfortable with the institution'. I asked her what she would like to say to the Church. She replied that 'The Church needs to stop chasing people away'.

The second young woman is Katie. Katie worked in an area outside Durban in South Africa, firstly for Australia's Oak Tree Foundation and later for a local initiative promoting cultural tourism. She was involved in community development, and is now back in Australia and is employed by Engineers Without Borders. Katie is my niece.

I asked her what motivated her to do the work she did in Africa. She replied, 'I believe that God has a plan for my life and that he wanted me to go to Africa. At the time, I did not recognise it as God, but upon reflection I realise that when God has a plan for you he opens up opportunities and gives you peace and excitement about these plans'.

'Are you a regular churchgoer?' I asked.

'Yes', she said. 'I go to Stairway Church and I love it. It's very different from a Catholic church but essentially has similar underlying beliefs.'

So I asked her if she still identifies as a Catholic. 'For example', I said, 'would you tick the Catholic box on the Australian Census form?'

'No', she said, 'I wouldn't, as the church I regularly attend is not a Catholic church'.

Finally, I asked her what she would want to say to the leaders of the Catholic Church in Australia if it was her, not me, giving the talk today. She said, 'The dominant perception of the Church needs to change from one of judgement to one of love'.

The third young woman, Jillian, is an architect. She is currently working in Malawi with a small NGO, in a very hands-on role building a trades training school. This follows a year or so building a village school with Architects Without Borders in India, and, before that, as a volunteer at a children's library in Guatemala. I met her as we walked across France as pilgrims in 2008. When I asked her in an email what drives her to do the work she has been doing in Guatemala, India and now in Africa, she replied, 'I genuinely wish to make positive change in the world—not just to talk about it ... and I also find that I

grow personally through the physical and emotional challenges that go along with immersing yourself in a foreign place’.

I asked her, ‘To what extent do you think your Catholic upbringing and Catholic education has influenced you in your desire to do the things you have done?’

‘I think this upbringing has been a big influence—especially the Catholic School I went to in Sydney, it had a strong focus on social justice ... I still identify with Catholic values, and there are many Catholics that I admire ... Having said that, I do not find my experience of church or doctrine to gel well with my views of the world that I have developed through first-hand experience in travel, pilgrimage etc.’

I asked her, ‘Do you still identify as a Catholic?’

‘I do not identify as Catholic anymore. For the past three years I have been attending a Buddhist Centre, and I would more closely align myself with this group. I also find the Buddhists are much less interested in shaking their heads at wrong doing and bestowing judgement and are more concerned with helping individuals to find their own, peaceful path to enlightenment.’

I asked her what would she want to say to the leaders of the Catholic Church in Australia.

‘I would challenge church leaders to preach the gospel in a modern context, instead of rejecting the modern world, find a way for Catholicism to make a positive contribution to the spiritual, emotional life of modern people.’

All three of these women, now aged in their 30s, were baptised Catholics. Elissa retains her Catholic identity by ticking the box on the Census form (but she thought about not doing so), but does not go to Mass. Katie now regards herself as a member of another Church and Jillian is a Buddhist.

These are three outstanding—in fact, I would say, heroic—young women, and their parents and the Catholic schools where they were educated deserve much credit for the commitment they bring to serving others. It is tragic that we, as the Catholic Church, have somehow obscured the vast richness of the Church’s spiritual traditions and social engagement so that it ‘does not radiate forcefully and attractively’²³ to the young adults of today. How well are we listening to people like these young women? If we do not, ‘the Church’s moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk’.²⁴

Listening to Our Culture

I have always loved the text of John 3:16. ‘God *so* loved the world’. Perhaps that ‘so’ is the most important two-letter word in the New Testament. There are apparently debates about whether the Greek *houtos* means more ‘in this way’ than ‘so much’, that is, whether it primarily conveys manner or intensity, but

23. EG 39.

24. Ibid.

many scholars seem to argue for the intensity interpretation. Raymond Brown is good enough for me. His translation is ‘Yes, God loved the world *so much* that He gave the only Son’.²⁵

So which world does God love? Only the world of first-century Palestine? The world of medieval Christendom? Perhaps God loved the world the way it used to be but now is not so sure? But the statement in John’s Gospel is not qualified. God loves the world we live in *so much*. But sometimes the Church acts disdainfully, suspiciously, towards the world; why are we Christians, we Catholics, often so reluctant to embrace it? After all, it’s all we’ve got, and we can learn from it.

What can we learn from the world we live in? It is possible to discern a number of changes or trends that have taken place in Western society in the last fifty years or so. Among them are these shifts:

- from traditional to experiential authority and, with it, a shift from reliance on external authority to a reliance on individual conscience²⁶
- from being ‘religious’ to being ‘spiritual’
- increasing secularisation, but also the emergence of ‘reverse secularisation’
- from dwelling to seeking
- from arriving to journeying
- from permanent to temporary.

You will be familiar with many of these trends, and most of them are well-documented in other places, so I will not enlarge upon them here. I will, however, make a comment about secularisation and reverse secularisation. There are many definitions of secularisation, but one that will suit our purposes today is ‘The process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance’.²⁷ This is said to be bound to happen in modern Western societies. Hence people stop going to Church because religious thinking is no longer important to them. But David Hay, former Director of the Alister Hardy Research Centre in England, a centre devoted to the study of religious experience, suggests that the reverse is also happening:

This is because a rift seems to have grown up between spiritual intuitions and the possibility of expressing them directly and simply through traditional religious doctrine and language. Hence they are leaving for the opposite reason from secularisation. They may choose to

25. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 129.

26. Robert Dixon, ‘What Do Mass Attenders Believe? Contemporary Cultural Change and the Acceptance of Key Catholic Beliefs and Moral Teachings by Australian Mass Attenders’, *Australasian Catholic Record* 90, no. 4 (October 2013): 439–58.

27. Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London: Watts, 1966).

move away from a religious institution because they find it no longer sustains their spiritual roots.²⁸

This seems to describe what has happened with Elissa, Katie and Jillian.

In an address to major superiors of religious orders, Pope Francis asked, ‘How can we proclaim Christ to a generation that is changing? We must be careful not to administer a vaccine against faith to them’.²⁹ The generation of which he speaks is at home in today’s culture. To treat our culture as our enemy is to alienate them. Instead, says Pope Francis, ‘the ultimate aim should be that the Gospel ... will create a new synthesis’ with the particular culture in which we live. Otherwise, we may become ‘mere onlookers as the Church gradually stagnates’.³⁰

We have been through a period of rapid change, but, as Pope Francis once remarked when he was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, there is no reason to think that everything will soon settle down again into a comfortable pattern.³¹ We don’t look forward to change and we don’t manage change well. Overall, especially in the Church, we tend to think that change is bad. Therein lies a challenge for us all.

So How Are We To Respond?

Perhaps a good place to begin a response is with *Evangelii Gaudium*. The first thing that strikes you about it is that it is full of references to joy. Francis uses the word forty times in the introduction alone. Also prominent is his concern for ‘the poor’, both the financially poor and the spiritually poor. One theme that speaks particularly strongly to me is the idea of ‘accompaniment’. Pope Francis uses ‘accompaniment’ to talk about being there for people. ‘The only way is to learn how to encounter others with the right attitude, which is to accept and esteem them as companions along the way, without interior resistance.’³² ‘The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.’³³ It is not just individuals who ‘accompany’ in this way: ‘an evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be’.³⁴ Thus, ‘it is not by proselytising that the Church grows, but by attraction’.³⁵

28. David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), 24.

29. Quoted at <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/francis-tells-religious-wake-world-outlines-modern-struggles-church>.

30. EG 129.

31. Former Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis), quoted at <http://visnews-en.blogspot.com.au/2013/09/priests-to-face-epoch-change-as.html>, accessed 4 February 2014.

32. EG 91.

33. EG 169.

34. EG 24.

35. EG 15.

In relation to the theme of my talk today, it is also noteworthy that Francis speaks about listening many times in *Evangelii Gaudium*. For example, the bishop is to ‘listen to everyone’;³⁶ it is better to slow down and listen to others;³⁷ it is helpful to listen to young people.³⁸

Pope Francis has called for bold proposals. The Church in Australia has taken some bold initiatives (e.g. World Youth Day 2008 and the Australian Catholic Youth Festival) that have been generally successful. But, in the main, what we are doing now is not working, or not working well enough, or working with only small groups of people. We need to do something different.

I speak as an employee of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, and I am acutely aware of my responsibility in that role. The questions I will raise call for a change of perspective and a change of practice. They are designed to help the Church become more effective in the proclamation of the Good News. Some may accuse me of ‘diluting’ Catholic teaching, but I have no intention of doing that. Rather, what I want to do is to move obstacles aside so we—and by ‘we’ I mean to include the 95 per cent as well as the 5 per cent—can better see the view.

Have you ever had the experience of someone pointing something out to you, and you saying, ‘No, I can’t see it’, or, ‘No, it doesn’t look like that to me’? Your companion says to you, ‘Come here and stand where I am. Now, can you see?’ And you move over to their position and you exclaim, ‘Ah, yes! Now I can see it! Now I understand what you have been trying to tell me’. Perhaps Pope Francis was thinking along similar lines when he said:

Truly to understand reality we need to move away from the central position of calmness and peacefulness and direct ourselves to the peripheral areas. Being at the periphery helps us to see and to understand better, to analyse reality more correctly, to shun centralism and ideological approaches ... We need to become better acquainted with the reality and life-experiences of people. If this does not happen, we then run the risk of being abstract ideologists or fundamentalists, which is not healthy.³⁹

The pope reminds us that Jesus went to ‘all the peripheries’. So let’s see if we can move to the periphery to look at a couple of areas of concern in the Church. Let me start by suggesting a couple of areas where we might try

36. EG 31.

37. EG 46.

38. EG 108.

39. Antony Spadaro, ‘Wake up the World: Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life’, www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli_download/extra/Wake_up_the_world.pdf, accessed 4 February 2014.

changing our perspective. These are in relation to the *celebration of marriage* and to *parish leadership*.

The Celebration of Marriage

At their November Plenary meeting last year, the bishops adopted a statement that said that there is no impediment to Catholics acting as civil marriage celebrants. This is a very good step and the bishops are to be congratulated. But the statement warns civil celebrants that they must not say any prayers or give blessings, in case people might mistake the civil celebration for the form of a Catholic wedding. But I say, ‘Why not?’

As Stephen Reid showed us in his address, the proportion of church weddings is decreasing while the proportion of civil weddings is going up. Young people are choosing not to marry in a church setting and with a priest. Surely this calls for a change of perspective! Here is a time when the Church can so easily be more available to young people, when it can ‘accompany’ them in their time of great happiness as they set out on their life journey together.

So why not give Catholic civil marriage celebrants encouragement and the authority to witness marriages in the name of the Church? After all, a priest is not required to administer the sacrament of marriage: the couple do that themselves. As a first step, could we not allow civil celebrants to bless couples, and to pray with them? It is common practice for Catholics to ask God to bless others—their families, friends, and so on. Why prohibit civil marriage celebrants from doing it if the couple would like that?⁴⁰

This is not a big jump: what I am talking about is only an application of existing canon law:

§1. Where there are no priests and deacons, the diocesan Bishop can delegate lay persons to assist at marriages, if the Episcopal Conference has given its prior approval and the permission of the Holy See has been obtained.

40. Professor Paul J. Griffiths, Warren Chair of Catholic Theology at Duke Divinity School, told me in a recent conversation in Melbourne that he opposes this proposal because the Church should move in the opposite direction. His view, expressed in a lecture delivered at ACU in July, is that instead of authorising civil celebrants to witness sacramental marriages, priests should stop acting as agents of the state in witnessing secular marriages. Briefly, his argument is that secular marriage and sacramental marriage are essentially two different things, and the sharp distinction between them is obscured when both are celebrated in the same ceremony. I have some sympathy with his point of view, but I wonder whether adopting this approach, which would mean that couples who desired a sacramental marriage would need to participate in *two* ceremonies, would result in even fewer young couples choosing to celebrate sacramental marriage. This conversation illustrates why I call, below, for open discussion of ideas about how the Church can best accompany young adults.

§2. A suitable lay person is to be selected, capable of giving instruction to those who are getting married and fitted to conduct the marriage liturgy properly.⁴¹

Authorising civil celebrants, many of whom are women, to do this would also help to ‘create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church’.⁴²

At the same time, recognising the importance of place in young people’s spirituality—something that we have already noticed—why not allow people to be married in parks and gardens, in the bush or on beaches, where the presence of God is more powerfully present to them? This can already be done on those occasions when permission is sought and granted. Why not make it easier for couples to be married in the place where they choose, whether it be by a priest or civil marriage celebrant? The system could be simplified, for example, by bishops delegating the authority to approve the location to the priest or other celebrant. Existing canon law suggests that this, too, is not out of the question:

§1. A marriage between catholics, or between a catholic party and a baptised non-Catholic, is to be celebrated in the parish church. By permission of the local Ordinary or of the parish priest, it may be celebrated in another church or oratory.

§2. The local Ordinary can allow a marriage to be celebrated in another suitable place.

§3. A marriage between a catholic party and an unbaptised party may be celebrated in a church or in another suitable place.⁴³

Parish Leadership

The second area where I want to raise some questions about modifying our practice is in relation to parish leadership.

In 1977, I had a conversation with a Christian Brother who was teaching in a Brothers’ school in Melbourne. He was probably in his 60s at the time. It was already apparent that the Brothers’ numbers were declining. I asked him what would happen if the number of Brothers declined to the point that they could no longer staff their schools. He replied that ‘One thing is for certain: we would never consider running a school unless Brothers made up at least 50 per cent of the staff’. Well, we know that the Brothers still run schools, but that they themselves have all but disappeared from the staffs of their own schools. How did the Christian Brothers, as a congregation, respond to the decline in their numbers? They employed lay teachers, and from among those teachers they

41. Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1112.

42. EG 103.

43. Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1118.

identified, trained, appointed and supported the best leaders to take on leadership roles in their schools. Those schools have continued to grow and to flourish over the last forty years. The same can be said of the schools run by other congregations of men and of women. With very few exceptions, the schools are led by trained and talented lay people who work hard at promoting the particular charism of their founding congregation. We have seen much the same thing happen with Catholic hospitals.

When it became increasingly difficult to find priests to take on the leadership of parishes, the response was very different. Many Australian dioceses, if not all, have sought to bring priests from overseas to fill the gaps in parish work. Anecdotally, we know that some of these priests perform very well, others manage to survive in difficult situations, while yet others have a terrible time of it, and so do their parishioners. For generations, and particularly since the Second Vatican Council, Western missionaries working in Asia, Africa and the Pacific have appreciated the importance of understanding the local culture; it is no less important for non-Western missionaries working in a country like Australia to understand Western culture.

It is also worth noting that young priests are being asked to take on parish leadership with very little experience as assistant priests. However, the problem of priests struggling to be parish leaders is not confined to overseas priests and recently ordained priests. There is also a problem with lack of accountability in the very role of parish priest. Over the years, numerous parish priests have complained to me about the lack of accountability in their role. Why do they complain about that? Because the obverse of not being accountable is not being supported. One consequence of this lack of accountability is that a priest who is not at all suitable for the role of parish priest can be appointed to a parish and yet be left without professional supervision.

Certain priests are poor choices as parish leaders because they are not yet ready or simply because they are not suited to that role. There is much anecdotal evidence to show that appointing priests like this as leaders of parishes is disrespectful to the people, destructive of the community and, often enough, the cause of suffering for the priest himself. Yet the reality is that we have parish priest vacancies to fill, and these will expand in number in the next few years because of the age of our current parish priests. If current strategies for appointment have not been a particularly successful response to a growing shortage of priests available for parish leadership, what might be a better response? Is it worth trying to follow the example of the religious congregations? They didn't look overseas for extra brothers and sisters to lead their schools and their hospitals. They didn't, by and large, appoint their few young members to senior positions before they were ready for leadership. Instead, they identified, trained, supported and appointed the best leaders, even though they happened to be lay people.

There are clearly some problems here. Most obviously, it threatens the connection between ordination and parish leadership. There is also the question of how we would pay these highly talented leaders. But, again, the possibility of such a strategy is already there in canon law:

If, because of a shortage of priests, the diocesan Bishop has judged that a deacon, or some other person who is not a priest, or a community of persons, should be entrusted with a share in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish, he is to appoint some priest who, with the powers and faculties of a parish priest, will direct the pastoral care.⁴⁴

A careful application of this strategy could bring several benefits, including greater accountability and support for priests. It could diminish the risk of poor appointments, promote ongoing professional development of priests to equip them for parish leadership, and allow for a period of acculturation for overseas priests and newly ordained priests.

These are just a couple of ideas, my response to Pope Francis' call for 'bold proposals'. Have you ever noticed what happens with ideas? They get better when people talk about them. Pope Francis says, 'We will always make mistakes, no doubt about it. But this should not stop us, because there is the chance of making worse mistakes'.⁴⁵ These proposals won't in themselves change the world. But they are a start. Are we all ready to grapple with bold proposals? Are we all ready to listen?

Let me return for a moment to Genevieve Lacey's Peggy Glanville Hicks Address, where she drew on the wisdom of Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Merton wrote:

You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognise the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage and hope.⁴⁶

I will conclude with words that Fr Cyril Hally wrote in 1982: 'The times call for the development of a new identity and *modus vivendi* by the Catholic Church as an institution, in continuity with the past and open to the future'.⁴⁷ I think his words are just as relevant today—don't you?

44. Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, *Code of Canon Law*, can. 517 §2.

45. Spadaro, 'Wake up the World'.

46. www.genevivelacey.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/PGH-Address-2013-Learning-to-Listen-Genevieve-Lacey.pdf, accessed 12 February 2014.

47. Hally, 'Growth Patterns', 87.