

The Risk and Future Visioning of Sustainable Catholic Services

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As trustees, board members and senior executives of major Catholic health providers, you are expert in matters relating to finances and management. I make no pretence to offer you any assistance in those tasks. My suggestion today is that the risk and future visioning of sustainable Catholic services lies more than ever in the contested social, economic and political space in which we are operating and in our response to the deep theological chasm within the contemporary Church about Catholic identity.

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis says:

If in the course of the liturgical year a parish priest speaks about temperance ten times but only mentions charity or justice two or three times, an imbalance results, and precisely those virtues which ought to be most present in preaching and catechesis are overlooked. The same thing happens when we speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God's word.¹

So, we need to be more focused on grace, Christ and God's word, rather than just on law, the Church and papal utterances. But today, I will draw more on law, the Church and the Pope to point us towards those more fruitful domains: grace, Christ and God's word. Our future visioning needs to focus more on the gospel imperatives including the option for the poor and the dignity of all persons (including those who are non-believers and those who find our faith a stumbling block to their human flourishing and the realisation of their real needs and legitimate aspirations) rather than on what Pope Benedict used label the 'neuralgic' moral questions, dictating what services a Catholic institution could and could not offer to clients and patients in a pluralistic democratic society.

¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* #38

As trustees, directors and executives, we aim to create institutions and communities of moral agents which are transparent, just and truthful. The structures and culture of such institutions and communities can then encourage individuals to be merciful and loving to all. In that way, the structures and culture might be truly Catholic.

1. The Contested Space

Social policy

Social policy is being dumbed down by both sides of politics in the western world. In an age of ‘budget repair’, it is just a sidebar to economic policy which is a contest of ideas about how best to grow the size of the pie thereby providing a slice for ‘the deserving poor’ without having to redistribute too much of the pie, while ‘the undeserving poor’ drop off the edge as they would have anyway. For those of us schooled in Catholic social teaching, the so-called ‘undeserving poor’ are the litmus test of our commitment to the human dignity of all persons. We believe human dignity is innate; it is not acquired by displaying socially attractive attributes like employability.

Service delivery

New government initiatives such as community home care packages and the NDIS are a real challenge to those of us who profess a preferential option for the poor, wanting to fill the gaps which other providers leave untouched so that coverage might be truly universal. We now find that we are having to advertise ourselves, having to engage in economies of scale, having to give each client value for money, thus having less discretionary income to allocate to the poorest of the poor. We are less able to cross-subsidise to the benefit of those least able to pay. The business case is dictating that we abandon some of our neediest clients, or is it?

Political context

There is less public trust in our major political parties which used be the primary spaces for negotiating and effecting the compromises necessary in any democracy committed to the right balance between the popular will and the recognition of the due rights and entitlements of all citizens. These compromises are now effected through back room deals with the increasing Senate cross bench with its plurality of philosophies, or at least a variety of self-interested claims.

The Church in the Public Square

Our church has a credibility problem in the public square and a transmission and translation problem with the young. The findings of the royal commission have been devastating, shocking and surprising even those bishops who have had the longest, most privileged access to the Church's internal workings. A hierarchical, sacramental church, we have a declining pool of clergy from the worshipping community. Overseas clergy, unlike their predecessors, are not drawn primarily from migrant communities already strongly represented in the Australian Church. These new clergy often come from cultures where the 'clericalist' mindset is even more tight than it was in Australia in the 1950s. We rightly face increased political insistence on compliance with government regulation regardless of church special pleading. Our structures are clunky and outdated. We continue to tolerate, accept and even theologise the ongoing failure to give women their place at the table. Any young girls sitting in our pews now know from experience that a woman can be governor-general, prime minister or chief justice. All three options were unimaginable in Australia at the time of the Second Vatican Council.

2. The deep theological chasm

At the royal commission, one of Australia's newest bishops, Vincent Long, himself a migrant, refugee and victim of sexual abuse in the Church told the commission:

It's no secret that we have been operating, at least under the two previous pontificates, from what I'd describe as a perfect society model where there is a neat, almost divinely inspired, pecking order, and that pecking order is heavily tilted towards the ordained. So, you have the pope, the cardinals, the bishops, religious, consecrated men and women, and the laity right at the bottom of the pyramid. I think we need to dismantle that model of Church. If I could use the biblical image of wineskins, it's old wineskins that are no longer relevant, no longer able to contain the new wine, if you like. I think we really need to examine seriously that kind of model of Church where it promotes the superiority of the ordained and it facilitates that power imbalance between the ordained and the non-ordained, which in turn facilitates that attitude of clericalism.²

² Royal Commission, Transcript, Day 252, p. 25779

Pope Francis has no time whatever for the notion of the Church as a perfect society. Soon after his election, he gave a lengthy interview in which he spoke about his vision of the Church as a field hospital. He said:

*The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. ... And you have to start from the ground up*³

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis writes: ‘Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.’⁴ More recently in *Amoris Laetitia*, he repeats the image of the field hospital and complements it with other images: ‘The Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm’.⁵ He then goes on to insist that mercy must be the hallmark of all we say and do: ‘Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness which she shows to believers; nothing in her preaching and her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy.’⁶

There is no way that Francis wants to abandon the ideals and the commitment to truth and justice so well exemplified by his predecessors John Paul II and Benedict. He embodies Paul’s statement to the Colossians: ‘And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.’(Col:3:14) He commissions us to risk and envision our Catholic services by planning and acting with love and goodness, espousing ideals, affirming truth and a commitment to justice, and seeking grace and mercy in the mess and complexity of our world, in the reality of the market place, and in the lives of our staff and clients. As he told the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, ‘The credibility of a healthcare

³ *La Civiltà Cattolica*, August 2013

⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* #47

⁵ *Amoris Laetitia* #291

⁶ *Amoris Laetitia* #310

system is not measured solely by efficiency, but above all by the attention and love given to the person, whose life is always sacred and inviolable.⁷

Let there be no mistake about the depth and width of the chasm between our present pope and some of those bishops who waged the culture wars in times past as Pope John Paul's most loyal storm troopers. This is now playing out in Rome and will be an ongoing tension in our Church for at least another generation or two. Speaking last September to the Bishops of the United States, some of whom went to the barricades in times past declaring that they would refuse to give communion to a Catholic presidential candidate who dared contemplate the appointment of a Supreme Court justice not opposed to overruling the Supreme Court's earlier pro-abortion decisions, Francis said:

'I know that you face many challenges and that the field in which you sow is unyielding, and that there is always the temptation to give in to fear, to lick one's wounds, to think back on bygone times and to devise harsh responses to fierce opposition. And yet we are promoters of the culture of encounter. We are living sacraments of the embrace between God's riches and our poverty. We are witnesses of the abasement and the condescension of God who anticipates in love our every response. For this, harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart; although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing'⁸

In November, four elderly Cardinals who were in the peak of their powers during the previous two papacies took the unprecedented step of publishing their concerns about Pope Francis's teachings quite rightly pointing out that some of the things being said by Francis are irreconcilable or at least inconsistent with previous clear statements by Pope John Paul II.

Cardinals Brandmuller (who previously chaired the Pontifical Committee of Historical Sciences), Burke (who previously headed the Church's most supreme court), Caffarra, erstwhile archbishop of Bologna, and Meisner, erstwhile archbishop of Cologne think Francis

⁷ Address of Holy Father Francis To Participants in The Meeting Organized by The International Federation Of Catholic Medical Associations, 20 September 2013

⁸ Address to US Bishops, 23 September 2015

is seriously in error when he teaches about mercy and justice, right and wrong, and the place of conscience.

Back in 1993, Pope John Paul II went too far in stipulating one and only one way of moral reasoning in the Catholic tradition. But this way had strong appeal for the present dissentients. Pope Francis does not even refer to John Paul's detailed 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. Invoking *Veritatis Splendor*, the four cardinals insist that there are absolute moral norms which prohibit intrinsically evil acts which are binding without exception. Circumstances and intention cannot transform these acts. There are objective situations of grave habitual sin. They are insistent that *Veritatis Splendor* both excludes a creative interpretation of the role of conscience and emphasises that conscience can never be authorised to legitimate exceptions to moral norms that prohibit intrinsically evil acts.⁹

Just to give one comparison of the divergent thinking between John Paul II and Francis. In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II writes:

*Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil. Rather there is profoundly imprinted upon it a principle of obedience vis-à-vis the objective norm which establishes and conditions the correspondence of its decisions with the commands and prohibitions which are at the basis of human behaviour.*¹⁰

You will appreciate that it's this sort of thinking which underlies the Church's ban on Catholic health providers assisting even married couples with IVF. It's this sort of reasoning which was invoked to stop the Sisters of Charity from setting up a supervised injecting room aimed at harm minimisation for long time drug users.

Francis has an altogether different approach in *Amoris Laetitia*:

Individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church's praxis Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one's pastor, and to encourage an ever greater trust in God's grace. Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now

⁹ Full Text and Explanatory Notes of Cardinals' Questions on 'Amoris Laetitia', National Catholic Register, 14 November 2016

¹⁰ *Veritatis Splendor* #60

is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal¹¹.

It's only the legalists who will be able to resolve this conflict to their satisfaction by saying that John Paul's statement is contained in an encyclical while Francis's plea is only in an apostolic exhortation. No doubt, John Paul II was both a man and a pope of his time. So too, Francis is the pope of our time and the man of the moment. Francis has named the chasm. And the dissenting cardinals have highlighted how deep and wide it is. This chasm opens new possibilities and new risks for those Catholic health providers wanting to show mercy and love to those who most need it.

Francis says that a person can be living in God's grace while 'in an objective situation of sin', and that the sacraments, including the Eucharist might help, because the Eucharist 'is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak'.¹² It's the sick and supplicant who need the doctor, not the well and the righteous. Our Catholic health services also are not only a prize for the perfect who can pay, but also a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.

3. Questions

So, let me leave you with some provocative questions by way of conversation starters.

Would a health service conducted more as a field hospital than as a tollhouse contemplate the running of a supervised injecting room? Would a Catholic hospital now contemplate some circumstances in which mercy and love would encourage the provision of IVF, tubal ligation and contraception in some circumstances? Why would a Catholic institution continue to prohibit any participation in legalised physician assisted suicide just as it prohibits and participation in abortion? Would a Catholic provider decline to participate in the NDIS because it is failing to provide for the poorest of the poor? But if we don't participate, who will care for these people? How far can we go in co-operating with evil so that good might be done? Let's always remember that Francis urges: 'Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness

¹¹ *Amoris Laetitia*, #303

¹² *Amoris Laetitia*, footnote 351

which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, “always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street”.¹³ While we get our shoes and hands dirty, let’s work in our church towards the achievement of goals which are mutual, and not just top down. Let’s remember that we cannot be what we cannot see, and that we are now on a burning platform which calls for a radical plan. Business as usual has only a few years left in it. Business as usual will mean Catholic entities which are Catholic only in name, or entities which are so small as to be marginal to the service of society, especially at those junctures where the option for the poor and the dignity of all are most at risk. Thanks for all you do, and thanks for the opportunity to share a few reflections on the risk and future visioning of sustainable Catholic services.

¹³*Amoris Laetitia*, #308