

“WAKE UP OR WITHER”

A Talk by Michael Kelly SJ

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Thank you for the invitation to join you tonight here at St Canice's. Your parish community is set in a larger community that is one that has seen and now experiences a dazzling pace of change.

In that context, what could be a better subject for us to consider in Lent than change – change of heart in a time and place when so many opportunities are before us today, there to embrace and develop.

I would like to look at the moment we are in and the signs of our times. But before I do that, I would like to

see where we have come and what has brought us to this moment of opportunity to change.

Irish Origins

Let's get specific “the Catholic Church” is an abstraction. It actually exists in particular times and particular places and the texture, color, tone and ambience of it in various places is influenced by its context and heritage.

The church in Australia goes back to the earliest days of British colonization. The first priests here were convicts, Peter O'Neil, James Harold and James Dixon, sent here for their part in the revolutionary rising by the Irish against the English in Cashel in 1798.

Then in 1823, the first priest arrived to be chaplain to the convicts, John Joseph Therry. Though Catholic Emancipation came in 1829, the Catholic hierarchy was not established in England until 1850. But the first bishop in Australia - an English Benedictine, John Bede Polding – arrived in Sydney in 1835. The hierarchy was established here in 1842, the first in a British domain since the Reformation.

English though all the Benedictines were, the Catholic and mostly convict population of the colonies was Irish. That Irish base came into its own with the Irish Famine of the 1840s. The famine not only meant starvation in Ireland. It was the trigger to continuous, at times mass, migration that has been renewed in recent years after a relatively brief period, early last decade, when there was a net inflow of population to Ireland, mostly from the EU.

But side by side with the griefs and woes of the Famine and the apparently unending poverty of Ireland in the 19th century, something else was happening. A new Archbishop of Dublin, Paul Cullen, to become Ireland's first cardinal in the 1400 years of Catholicism in the Emerald Isle, was beginning a work that would have global impact from Ireland to the UK, North America, Australia and New Zealand where ever the Irish diaspora and its attendant clergy and Religious would spread.

The key features of the Cullenite Revival, as it came to be known and as they impacted Australia, are well known and were evident in Australia even until two generations ago. The cast of Irish Australian Catholicism was devotional, authoritarian and clericalist, a Church focused on Rome as the pivotal point of Catholicism almost to the point of Papal idolatry.

These features expressed themselves in an array of movements and practices whose culture and energy expressed the tribalist and largely Jansenistic context in which they were conceived and developed. Until the 19th Century, most clerics in Ireland were trained in Paris at the Sulpician seminary whose nearby church, Saint Sulpice, was made even more famous by The Da Vinci Code. Maynooth College now in Dublin was only established for the training of Irish clergy in 1795. The Sulpicians were notable for their support and spreading of Jansenistic ideas.

French Jansenism and its suspicion of the body, the flesh as well as interior movements in the souls of believers heavily influenced Irish Catholicism. That influence plus the social and economic condition of the new immigrants meant Catholics in Australia needed to be a disciplined and coherent group if they were to survive and thrive in what was a mainly white Anglo-Saxon and Protestant environment.

So, what developed was a regime of weekly confessions, a devotion to Mary that focused on her purity and virginity, the penitential nature of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Jesus's sacrifice for us sinners. This happened despite the origins of the devotion in a focus on God's love in a time when the Jansenists were extreme in their emphasis on sin and human depravity.

These and other practices and groups, along with a concentration on the Eucharist as the celebration of a sacrifice to take away sins, were a potent and fear inducing mix which was energetically fostered by clergy running to keep up with themselves as their promoters while Australia was invaded by wave after wave of religious who

were joined by local recruits to create the institutions to keep the tribe together from childhood. The schools became, from the 1870's, a parallel Church system. It was privately funded, supported more out of loyalty to the tribe than a belief in their merit as educational institutions, and knitted together the community day in and day out.

These were the features of an externalized form of Catholicism where the emphasis was on identity with the group, participation in its rituals and performances and obedience to its authorities. While not everyone complied of course – at the height of this culture's life, the practice rate among baptized Catholics was 60% - this was what you belonged to if you called yourself a Catholic. Where were the other 40% you might ask.

Post War Interlude

Then it all began to change. At the end of World War 2, Australia was Sleepy Hollow, a population of six million migrants and their descendants from the UK and Ireland, an Aboriginal population that, to the surprise of many and the disappointment of some hadn't died out, and a few Jews and Europeans from various countries on the Continent.

Enter Arthur Augustus Calwell whose major contribution to changing Australia was the post War migration scheme that brought millions of mostly unskilled European migrants and among them more Catholics than the Irish Australians matrix could accommodate. Calwell was the long-serving State Secretary of the Victorian ALP who became the Member for Melbourne and joined John Curtin's Cabinet during the War. With the end of hostilities, he became the Minister for Immigration and later, in Opposition, the ill-fated leader of the ALP after the disastrous period of Herbert Vere Evatt and before Gough Whitlam led Labor to Government in 1972, after 23 years in Opposition.

Post War migration triggered three decades of unrelenting growth in parishes and schools and the slow modification of community life as new national traditions of Catholicism came to life.

But a decision was made in the Australian Church that contrasted with the one made in that other land welcoming migrants - the USA. In Australia, the decision was made to absorb migrants into existing or developing structures rather than allow separate development.

This decision ensured that ethnic solidarity was to occur in the context of existing structures, following what was Federal Government policy - assimilation into what already existed rather than integration into a society and community that recognized and respected diversity. That approach didn't become part of Australian life until the 1970s when the Whitlam Government proposed and implemented what come to be called multiculturalism.

What this meant for Catholicism in Australia was the continuation of a way in which Catholics – whether settled or “New” Australians – built an identity in a diverse society by a continuing emphasis on externals as the carrier of faith the practices. Devotions and movements, attitudes to authority and the expression of belonging that characterized the church until 1945 and continued even if the colors were different, the feast days celebrated changed and the processions had other features.

It was the Whitlam Government, later followed by Fraser whose government did its work through the Schools Commission that the Hawke kept operating through the 1980s, that then did a major of job consolidating the way the Church operated. By financing its growth as the provider of the major non-government networks in health, welfare and especially education, the hard won victory for State Aid in the early 1960s blossomed into unprecedented levels of government subsidy in the following decades.

Having the capital and cash flow from government - State and Federal - also had a major impact on one feature of Irish Australians Catholicism – the place of Religious in the Australian Church.

Together with the diocesan clergy, Religious priests, brothers and nuns were not only the engine room of the institutional matrix of Catholicism. They were its tribal heroes, exemplars of the perfection all were encouraged to aspire to, respected and revered for the self-sacrificing ways in which they served the community.

In a world of externals, they were emblems of what being Catholic meant: devout, obedient, self sacrificing and loyal. They were the carriers of heart moving elements of the Catholic faith as many lived from or were the carriers of the devotions so favored by lay Catholics. But the majority of their time and effort was something that carried the greatest value in pragmatic Australia: they kept much of the ship of the Church afloat.

Asia into Australia

Demographic changes in Australia’s migration program, the formal end to the White Australia Policy in the 1970s and the arrival of large members of refugees from Asia over the last more than thirty years have extensively affected the make up of the Australian Church. It is arguably Malcolm Fraser and his government’s approach to Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s that killed White Australia stone dead.

In the 1980s, our then Foreign Minister, Bill Hayden predicted that by 2050, Australia would be a Eurasian society of forty to fifty million. The numbers might be a bit out, but the direction Hayden indicated is irreversible. Two years ago, the member of migrants arriving in Australia from China exceeded the number of

migrants from the UK for the first time in our history. While White Australia may be well and truly over, Hayden's prediction of a date for a Eurasian society might need some tweaking.

Immigrant communities, as we know from the history of migration to Australia, can tend to settle in the same suburbs near each other, look to send their children to the same schools and for some Catholics among them, especially the Italians and Maltese who numbered close to a million among those coming to Australia, treated their first church on arrival in an Australian city as "their" parish church, wherever they ended up living.

Certainly, communities of Catholics from Asia have brought diversity and energy to the Australian church. But, like other ethnic communities from Europe and Latin America who have arrived in, for the most part, our cities, Catholics from Asia bring the culture and dispositions, the languages and habits and the historical form of Catholicism found in their homeland.

Resilient and hardworking, ethnic Catholic communities tend also to rely on and prominently display the externals of a Catholicism they learnt in their homeland. They are emblems of a belonging that they so eagerly desire in a new land.

What they offer us of longer standing in the Australian Church are companions on the journey of faith and resources born of their courage, tenacity, independence and determination. It's why they make the best of new settlers since many are refugees. But together with us, they face a new challenge in this old land. Let's look at this new challenge and the opportunity it a

The challenge and the Opportunity

What do we make of this? But more to the point, what sort of opportunity do these challenges offer us?

Much of what made people pleased to be Catholic is gone and never to be revived. It fitted a time – one where most Catholics felt at home in the tribe, got their identity through belonging to an ethnic group that was mostly populated by relatively uneducated and unskilled or semi-skilled males and house bound females who married in their early twenties if not their teens.

Until the 1970's, three quarters of Australian school children did not complete six years of high school and matriculate. Tertiary education was taken up by little more than one in five Australians. Today, nine out of ten young Australians complete six years of high school and from my own experience, which is among those who do get married in the Church, I would rarely see a couple where the male is younger than his early thirties and the female in her late twenties.

Gone are the days of strict ethnic, religious or cultural identification under pinned by fairly rigid and exclusive social groups that impacted on employment opportunities. As well, the carriers of faith that helped many generations of Catholics to find a relationship with God have been unequal to the challenge of building a post – Vatican 2 church whose self understanding was not to be found in hierarchy or devotional practice but as the People of God whose appreciation of their faith was to be grounded in Scripture and sacramental participation.

For robust Catholic faith to thrive something new has emerged. People come to faith by invitation and persuasion rather than direction and fear. The invitation and persuasion are there to develop understanding, conviction and personal commitment as pilgrims on a faith journey.

Moreover, what many fail to appreciate is that now some two generations of Catholics in Australia have been better educated in faith, in Scripture and in Catholic theology than many, even most, in the generations of clerics and Religious who did the yeoman's work of building communities and institutions, of providing services and creating the culture that is now all but gone.

What I believe is the next and deepest challenge for the Catholic faith and its prospering in Australia is to feed more than the minds of those drawn to affirm the faith. That is necessary and must endure. What is needed are various ways in which the hearts of those seeking to discover deeper conviction can be nourished.

That search is essentially a personal and intimate one, a search that is given the loose name "spirituality".

I am not talking about the return to devotional practices of the past that are still alive and well in the seclusion of some ethnic groups more recently arrived in Australia, with patterns of Catholic devotion that are not going to the fountain of faith – the New Testament. Like their predecessors in the Irish Australian tradition, they simply will not survive the chill winds of the wider secular culture in which Australian Catholics live.

And, of course, I do not refer to that form of nostalgia evident in some Catholics for a pre-Conciliar way of being and worshipping as a Catholic that is little more than a self-indulgent distraction.

The spirituality I am referring to is the experience of the living God, felt at depth and the experience of whom is the peace and confidence within which faith, hope and love grow. It is the experience of a relationship with God that is supported, encouraged and celebrated in the community of faith through the Eucharist especially. But it is also an experience that is deeply and essentially personal.

For faith to deepen in us, we need to absorb and face our experience of life, be honest with what we discover in the depths of our being, in our hearts where we

find what is leading us to joy, light and growth and what is inhibiting or distracting us from embracing the growth we are invited to enjoy.

Of course, our spiritual growth is always done in context - the context of our own lives and their opportunities and disappointments, their blessings and failures. But they are also done in the context we share with others: in our society and world and in the Church that is our faith community.

We can each describe the changes on our personal journey home to our hearts where we discover the God who is searching for us. But I would like to say something about what happens to us individually by focusing on an experience we all share.

I believe there is something we share as an experience right now that suggests to me how we should proceed not just with it but with many things in our lives as we discover more about how we become more deeply involved with God.

I believe we Catholics in Australia are at a tipping point, in a crisis that is also an opportunity for us as a community of faith. I refer of course to the event engulfing the Catholic Church in Australia: the Royal commission into child sex abuse. What relationship does this event have to the deepest opportunity for Catholics in Australia and those who may be drawn to our faith?

The point we always start from in approaching the living God is one of humility. We are only unworthy servants in the presence of the one who is both utterly other and mysterious but also intimately present to us, coming to us through our experience of the people and world we encounter. That is what Christians proclaim - God is to be found in and among us. Our humble and open acceptance of this mystery is our starting point.

But sometimes a humble starting point is forced us. We may be the object of abuse and betrayal or of others' loathing, envy or violence. Or we may be humiliated by something we have done or been part of.

That is where most of us are in the Australian church right now: humiliated.

In a book to be published in May, the journalist and academic Chris McGillion has chronicled the sorry story not just of criminal misbehavior by Catholic clerics and religious who have abused children but also of the complete ineptitude and likely malfeasance of many bishops and religious Superiors over a long time.

McGillion then looks at what is likely to happen following the three enquiries which are mostly into the Catholic Church, the Royal Commission currently happening, the investigation into the handling of complaints against a cleric in the Diocese of Armidale by Antony Whitlam QC, the Parliamentary Enquiry in Victoria last year

and the investigation into the Diocese of Maitland Newcastle conducted by Margaret Cunneen whose report has just been handed down.

While conceding that these external interventions into the Church will insist on institutional best practice for the protection of children by the Church from here on, McGillion is doubtful that they will be any more effective than such enquiries are on other subjects when conducted in universities, Government departments and other similar large organizations.

Much of it, in McGillion's view, will lead to extensive bureaucratic red tape, adept evasion of the strictures imposed, ways around ordinances and fundamentally a distraction from what is the Church's only way to fix itself - the revivification of its core mission of communicating and sharing sacred truth. Without that, the Church collapses into being no more than an extensive NGO service provider, bogged down in itself.

I am inclined to agree with Bill Wright, the bishop of Maitland Newcastle, in his answer to a question on ABC radio last year. Asked by an ABC Radio journalist if he would guarantee that children in the care of the Church in his Diocese would never be at risk, he responded with a firm "No".

Asked why, Bishop Wright replied that there is no system known that can meet the challenge posed by the mercurial, deceptive and fraudulent behaviour of some of the most evil people known among human kind. He would try but couldn't guarantee that he would beat them at their own devious game and there is probably no system that could guarantee that he would beat them.

I'm sure Bishop Wright would agree that while regulatory regimes need to be as tight as we can make them, the law wont renew the faith life of Catholics in Australia. Only the spirit can do that.

And, as St. Paul never tires of telling us, God's grace and the Spirit's energy are most at work in our human weakness and there is no weaker place to be than the experience of humiliation and diminishment.

In his Spiritual Exercises, St Ignatius Loyola invites anyone following his way to a deeper encounter with God to consider and pray for what he calls The Third Degree of Humility. That is where he invites the exercitant or the one making the Exercises to pray for the gift of identification with Jesus in his dereliction, in the abuse and derision he experienced in his Passion.

This can sound like masochism if it's not understood as a gift of God that brings pain yes, but also freedom and peace, as his crucifixion did finally to Jesus.

Now we don't have to go looking or try to invent for events in our lives that can allow us into the heart of Jesus in his derelict state. They come our way uninvited on

a regular basis – those times when misunderstanding, betrayal or envy may come unbidden, for example. These are the moments when a deeper unity with our Savior is there if we can accept them.

We can deny them, dance around them, acknowledge them but wish they would go away. Most of us do that to humiliation and the opportunity it offers most of the time. But embracing humiliation as a gift and an opportunity is the first sign that the Spirit is at work in and among us.

And where does the spirit take us if we embrace what is happening into and among our community of faith as it faces the inescapable shame of deeds and misdeeds of too many, including those trusted with leadership? Just where the Spirit always takes us: to the foot of the Cross where we share in the surrender of that prototype of all disciples, Mary the mother of Jesus, in her surrender into the hands of the living God.

And what happens with that? We come by God's grace to let God be God.

This is the present moment and the present opportunity for Catholics in Australia - face failure and deliver on reform we must.

But accept this as a moment of grace. And we can only do so if we let go of the securities that fostered faith for a different time and for people in a different place. Daily conversion to following the Nazarene on his path to Golgotha is not the only thing we have to do to meet the challenges of our mission today in Australia. But without it, we will deliver a caricature of Catholicism and a substitute for adult faith.

It will be a distraction from the riches given into our hands not simply for our benefit but for those who may be drawn by God's grace to find the inexhaustible treasure to be found in Christ in our country at this time.