Catalyst for Renewal
Public Forum

Saturday March 28 2009
Salvation Army Assembly Hall
Elizabeth Street, Sydney

LOOKING FORWARD TO MORE CONVERSATIONS

Michael Whelan SM

On Saturday March 28 2009 Catalyst for Renewal held a public forum to promote conversation arising from Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's book, **Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus** *(John Garratt, 2007), and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Statement (May 2008) concerning that book.*

To that end, Catalyst arranged for four speakers to give presentations. The speakers were Barry Brundell MSC, Tim O'Hearn PhD, Frank Brennan SJ and Michael Whelan SM. In between the presentations there was opportunity for conversations and open forum in which those present were invited to either make statements or ask questions. The day ran from 9.30am to 4.15pm. Some 400 people attended.

The forum was held in the Salvation Army Assembly Hall in Elizabeth Street Sydney. The Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, had specifically forbidden Catalyst to use Catholic Church property to hold the forum.

What follows is the text of the presentation by Michael Whelan. Michael had the task of summarizing the day.

Fifty years ago – on January 25 1959 – Pope John XXIII announced that he would convoke the Second Vatican Council. He noted that the seventeen Cardinals present for this announcement greeted the news with "impressive, devout silence."[1] Pope John further noted that although all the Cardinals – those present as well as those absent – were invited to submit a response that would let him know how each felt and the suggestions they might give for carrying through on the plan for a Council, "few accepted the invitation and almost all who did did so in cold and formal language."[2]

Giovanni Battista Montini, Archbishop of Milan, at the time commented to a close friend, Fr Giulio Bevilacqua:

> "This holy old boy does not seem to realise what a hornet's nest he is stirring up."[3]

To which Bevilacqua gave a very wise response:

> "Don't worry Don Battista, *lascia fare*, let it be, the Holy Spirit is still awake in the Church."[4]

Cardinal Lercaro, Archbishop of Bologna, commented:

> "How dare he summon a council after one hundred years, and only three months after his election? Pope John has been rash and impulsive. His inexperience and lack of culture brought him to this pass, to this paradox. An event like this will ruin his already shaky health, and make the whole edifice of his supposed moral and theological virtues come tumbling down."[5]

Cardinals Montini and Lercaro, like many others, were later to think very differently about the Council and its work of renewal. Montini, when he became Pope Paul VI, in the face of considerable opposition, made the brave decision to continue the Council. He also wrote a treatise – as his first encyclical – on the need for dialogue.[6] Lercaro was largely responsible for the Church's liturgical reforms after the Council. He was also a favourite target of the right wing, with one writer saying that

[1] Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A Komonchak, *History of Vatican II, Volume I: Announcing and Preparing Vatican II – Toward a New Era in Catholicism*, Orbis/Peeters, 1995, 2.
[2] Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A Komonchak, ibid.
[3] Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII: Pope of the Council*, revised edition, Fount Paperbacks, 1994, 324.
[4] Peter Hebblethwaite, ibid.
[5] Peter Hebblethwaite, op cit, 323-324.
[6] *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 1964).

> "after Martin Luther, the most formidable menace to the Church's unity and integrity is Cardinal Lercaro."[7]

The same man nicknamed Cardinal Lercaro "the termite."

Welcome to the "one holy, catholic Church"!

In essence, I believe Bishop Robinson's book is a continuation of what John XXIII – and people like Montini and Lercaro and many others – was promoting: A critical self-reflection so that the Church can be more faithful to its mission.

By definition, no event, no statement, no life, no book will ever be entirely adequate to this task. Firstly, it is a never-ending task. The Church is always a work in progress. We will never reach a point where we are entitled to say there is no more need for critical reflection, no more need for greater fidelity to our mission. Secondly, the Church is a mystery. It is – and will always be – a complex and ultimately incomprehensible mixture of the divine and the human, of gift and task, of grace and sin, of the charismatic and the institutional, of order and chaos, of the saint and the sinner.

In life – and therefore in the Church – paradoxes abound. Life is played out in the in-between. We are never quite "there." A reviewer of the movie "Sunday Bloody Sunday" put it wisely back in 1971:

> "Life is not so much beginnings and endings as it is middles, middles that don't measure up -- and our happiness depends on how we come to terms with the pale reflections of our dreams."[8]

The acceptance of this melancholy fact does not necessarily lead to fatalism – though it might – nor does it necessarily lead to mediocrity – though it might. For someone whose life is centred in God, this inevitable in-between-ness of our lives can give rise to a sense of humour and a sense of mystery, a simple honesty and transparency, a spirit of humility and compassion, a desire to give and receive forgiveness, an inclination to patience and endurance, a disposition of hope and unrelenting questioning.

[7] Peter Hebblethwaite, op cit, 324.
[8] Paul D. Zimmerman, "Middles and Muddles", review of film "Sunday Bloody Sunday," *Newsweek*, September 27, 1971, 106.

When this response pervades your life, you will also know, first hand, what the great guides of the tradition called compunction. Bishop Robinson fits in here. His service of the People of God has been outstanding, marked by integrity, generosity and a thoroughgoing professionalism in whatever he has done. He has been a leader in the academic community, a leader in pastoral care, a leader in education and – perhaps most importantly – a leader in those dark days of the 1990's when, amidst great resistance, he courageously pressed us to face what we had to face.

I do not believe Bishop Robinson actually intended his book to be received as an academic work so much as a pastoral work, a continuation, as we have said, of what Pope John XXIII himself intended in calling the Council. That said, I do think the book has probably tried to cover too much ground. As a result, many areas of scholarly expertise have been brought into play, including Systematic Theology, Ecclesiology, Christology, New Testament, Old Testament, Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology, History, Spirituality and Canon Law. The treatment of issues pertaining to these fields of scholarship is not always substantial or precise or well-referenced. At times it is open to serious criticism in fact.

This morning Barry Brundell spoke to us as someone whose special area of expertise is ecclesiology. He indicated where a conversation in this field might take us. He focused particularly on the Apostolic tradition which has given us certain boundaries within which we must work.

Tim O'Hearn spoke from his extensive experience of leadership within Catholic education in Australia. He indicated the outlines of a conversation that might look more carefully at the structures of church life and especially the uses of power in those structures. He also reminded us that there will be different readings of Bishop Robinson's book and that in itself calls for multiple conversations. Tim's presentation also reminded us that anger and conversation are not necessarily at odds, it depends on the way you express yourself.

Frank Brennan cited an observation from a letter of Pope Benedict to Fr Hans Kung: "Of course there will be controversies," Pope Benedict commented, "of course we must have conversation." Frank reminded us of the significance of that simple phrase in that context: "Of course …" Through various anecdotes Frank also reminded us of the complexities of Church life and that we need to take this into account in our conversations.

He also pointed to a conversation that needs to develop around the role of the Pope.

I think it is reasonable to take the book as a point of departure rather than a point of arrival. The book is an invitation to embrace conversation – many ongoing conversations – for renewal within the Catholic Church. Let me briefly suggest the bare bones of the beginnings of a particular conversation from my own discipline of Spirituality.

Chapter One of Bishop Robinson's book is entitled "Healthy People in a Healthy Relationship with a Healthy God."[9] Some key ideas are outlined under this heading, ideas that might facilitate the development of a more life-giving culture, one less vulnerable to the kinds of abuse we have come to acknowledge in recent years.

When I entered the seminary in 1965, for example, scant attention was given to my emotional life. In fact, it was worse than that. I got the distinct impression that my emotional life was an obstacle to my development as a priest.

This is a highly destructive way to think. In my experience it leads to a pattern of denial – both conscious and unconscious – which in turn leads to compensatory and defensive behaviours. And I believe this pattern has become far too common in the clerical culture which dominates the Catholic Church. Which may go some way to explaining the entrenched resistance to facing the fact of sexual abuse. We might well ask, for example, whether we would have done much to address the issue if it were not for the pressures applied by the secular press and the courts of the land.

However, on the other hand, I am wary of the word "healthy." As a headline concept it is too soft to support the gravity, subtlety and complexity of what we are attempting to address here in the formation of the human person. It is a time and culture-bound concept. In our society, what is more, it is a concept largely shaped by the human sciences. Their contribution is useful but limited. The concept "healthy" is also useful but limited. For example, what are we to make of the incident reported in Mark's Gospel:

> "Jesus went home again, and once more such a crowd collected that they could not even have a meal. When his relations heard of this,

[9] See Geoffrey Robinson, op cit, 25-47.

they set out to take charge of him; they said, 'He is out of his mind.'"[10]

And what are we to make of those many wonderful men and women who came through the system we might say was "unhealthy," and have lived very fruitful and loving lives? It does not seem satisfactory to me to say that those people became such deeply human people *in spite of the system*.

This is certainly one conversation, prompted by Bishop Robinson's book, that I would like to see pursued with vigour.

It was G K Chesterton who said that if a job is worth doing it is worth doing badly. I think it is probably too early to pass final judgment on Bishop Robinson's book. However, it is not too early to say that he has, with remarkable courage and no little daring, embarked on a job that is worth doing. His efforts urge us all to take up the task. I believe the most constructive response to his book is to receive it – in the language of our day – as a stimulus package. I encourage all here present to continue the conversation Bishop Robinson's book has sought to promote.

In saying that, I also encourage you to give primary focus to the sub-title. This conversation is about reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus. In the end it is not about academic theology or politics or sociology or personalities or corruption or you or me or Bishop Robinson or even the Catholic Church. It is about God's liberating love and mercy made manifest in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and active in our midst every moment of every day. As you have been loved into freedom, go into the world so that God may love others into freedom through you.

I conclude with the final words of Bishop Robinson's book. In a very real, these "final words" are more of an invitation and a challenge than a

[10] Mark 3:20-21. See also verses 31-35: "Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. [32] A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters[c] are outside, asking for you." [33] And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" [34] And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! [35] Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." What was the intent of his family in this instance? Perhaps Jesus is beginning to look too much like one of the prophets of old?

conclusion. Using the metaphor of song to describe the Good News, Bishop Robinson says:

"Compared with this song, there is little else that is of great importance. In the atmosphere created by this song, abuse cannot flourish."

Michael Whelan SM did his initial formation at St Peter Chanel's Scholasticate, Toongabbie, NSW and was ordained in 1972. He gained his PhD in 1984, while studying under Adrian van Kaam at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. He has been Deputy Principal of the Catholic Theological Union (CTU), Hunters Hill (1986-1988); Principal of the CTU (1989-1994); President of the Sydney College of Divinity (1989-1990). Michael is Director of the Aquinas Academy in Sydney where he also lectures in spirituality. In 1994 Michael helped set up Catalyst for Renewal which is dedicated to promoting conversation for renewal within the Catholic Church and beyond. He is currently the Executive Director of that association. He was Editor of its journal, *The Mix* (1996-2007). In 1995 he co-founded Spirituality in the Pub which currently operates in more than 30 venues around Australia. He is the author of three books and a number of journal articles in the field of Spirituality.