

## CATALYST DINNER, HUNTERS HILL

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“Statement of Conclusions – Twenty Years on:  
Recovering the Mystical Heart of Catholicism”

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### *Background*

During the days of 17-20 November 1998 – on the sidelines of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ *ad limina* visit and the Special Assembly for the Synod of Bishops for Oceania, in Rome – representatives of seven Dicasteries and fifteen members of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference met.

This meeting was at the request of Pope John Paul II. The Catholic media organization, Zenit, wrote at the time, that “similar meetings held with other Episcopal Conferences have proved to be equally beneficial as expressions of ecclesial communion”.

A document from that meeting – *Statement of Conclusions* – was published on 14 December 1998. The text of the statement is 10,420 words. Significantly, explicit references to “priest” and “priesthood” occur 88 times. There is one reference to the “baptized” and that is in the context of the “priesthood of the baptized”. Zenit explained the purpose of the meeting and the nature of the document as follows:

*(T)hey discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the Church in Australia. In particular, this statement of conclusions examines the role of the Bishop, the clergy, and consecrated persons, as well as the sacraments, liturgy and Catholic education. In Australia, and throughout the entire world, there is a crisis of faith that is rooted in an attitude of tolerance and relativism. Because so many have lost confidence in their ability to know the truth, they have also lost their faith in God, and more particularly, in Christ. In response to this loss of faith and the moral problems that necessarily follow, the bishops must rise to their threefold vocation of teaching, sanctifying and governing. The document explains these three roles and why they are so necessary. It goes on to examine the identity, formation and spiritual life of the priest, which is of utmost importance for*

*the church. It discusses the decline of vocations in Australia and offers some solutions, especially regarding the good example of consecrated religious. In examining the nature of the Liturgy, it calls for a more thorough liturgical catechesis for both priests and lay people. Priests must not introduce changes to the liturgy of their own initiative, but must subordinate themselves to the mind of the Church. In addition, priests must encourage those who no longer have a sense of personal sin and their need for Christ's redemption to return to the sacrament of Penance.*

Catalyst for Renewal organized a Public Forum in Sydney Town Hall on 22 April 1999 in response to the Statement. More than 2000 people came to that Forum. In fact, the Town Hall security people closed the doors because the venue was filled to capacity. An unknown number were thus locked out. And all this on an evening of very inclement weather.

The then Archbishop of Melbourne – George Pell – was asked in a media conference in which he introduced the *Statement of Conclusions* in Melbourne on 19 March 1999, "What is the biggest threat, in your opinion, to the Catholic Church today?" The Archbishop replied: "Oh, that we'll just merge into the background. We're a minority church, fewer than 30 per cent of the people, and we'll just take on the colours of our society, and that we'll become the bland leading the bland." The Archbishop went on to say that, "as a result of the *Statement of Conclusions*, for the foreseeable future the Church in Australia will never be the same again."

### *Historical influences*

Pope Pius XII reminded us of the importance of history in understanding the Church. In 1949, talking to a group of seminarians in Rome, the Pope said:

*The mystical Body of Christ, following the example of the physical members which comprise it, does not live and act in the abstract, outside the constantly changing conditions of time and place. It is not, and can never be, separated from the world which surrounds it. It is always of its century; it goes forward with it day by day, hour by hour, continually adapting its ways of doing things and its attitudes to those of the society in the midst of which it must act (Pius XII, "Speech at the Anagni*

Seminary,” April 29, 1949, in *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi XI*, p. 50; and R. Rouquette in *Études*, April 1951, p. 68).

To assist with our reflections tonight, I would like to briefly recall just three particular events of history. These events offer significant points of reference within which we can situate both the *Statement of Conclusions* and our current situation as Catholics in Australia:

1. The first event was instigated by the Roman Emperor, Constantine, with his **Edict of Milan in 313 CE**. Ostensibly an edict of toleration, the Edict of Milan had radical and far reaching effects for the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church – as Christianity had become known since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Through Constantine’s Edict, bishops and their clergy became integral to the daily running of the Roman Empire. As such they held much power within both the Empire and the Church. In fact, they gained increasing power as the 4<sup>th</sup> century unfolded. By the end of that century, Catholicism/Christianity had become **the state religion**.

Fr Yves Congar OP wrote in his journal on the day the Second Vatican Council opened, 11 October 1962:

*“I see the weight, that has never been renounced, of the period when the Church behaved as a feudal lord, when it had temporal power, when popes and bishops were lords who had a court, gave patronage to artists and sought a pomp equal to that of the Caesars. That, the Church never repudiated in Rome. To emerge from the Constantinian era has never been part of its programme.”* (Yves Congar OP, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Mary John Ronayne OP and Mary Cecily Boulding OP, Liturgical Press, 2012, 88).

One of the major tasks of the Second Vatican Council – implicitly at least – was to facilitate the complex and difficult journey out of Constantinianism. Sixty years on, we are still beginning that journey.

I will mention just two parts of Catholic life that manifest what I am calling Constantinianism. The first is **liturgy**:

*The effect of the Constantinian benevolences toward the Church are immediately visible in the liturgy. After Constantine's conversion there came a dramatic shift from the simplicity of homes to the splendour of imperial basilicas. These roofed structures were rectangular in shape and divided inside into three or five naves marked by rows of columns. At the far end was the apse where the emperor had his throne. Taken over by Christians, the domestic dining room gave way to the large public halls where there was ample room at the nave for the assembly and enough space in the sanctuary for the table, the ambo, the bishop's chair, and the seats for presbyters and ministers. The first Christian basilica was the Lateran palace, which Constantine gave as a gift to Pope Sylvester. The emperor ordered the construction of new basilicas on the Vatican hill where the apostle Peter was buried, at the Ostian Way where the apostle Paul had been martyred, at the Campo Verano where the deacon Lawrence was buried, and in several other places outside the city.*

*When Constantine decreed in 321 the observance of Sunday rest for the empire, the celebration of the Eucharist acquired a more solemn form. The atmosphere and architectural ambience of basilicas demanded, at any rate, a more splendid form of celebration. The prayer formularies were rhetorically enriched in consonance with the ambient of the imperial hall (Anscar J Chupungco, "History of the Liturgy Until the Fourth Century" in Anscar J Chupungco, editor, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies – Volume 1: Introduction to the Liturgy*, Collegeville, Minnesota, A Pueblo Book, 1997, 107-108). This essay is highly recommended, along with the others in this volume on the history of the Liturgy.*

The second part of Catholic life that was profoundly affected by Constantinianism is that of the **priesthood**. The eminent medievalist, Jean Leclercq, wrote in a 1969 conference paper:

*"The change which affected the priesthood at that time (ie in the 5<sup>th</sup> century) was itself a consequence of an even deeper change: one which affected ecclesiology as a whole. Mentalities passed from a conception of the 'Church, community of Christians' to one which accepted the 'distance*

*between the lay people and the Church of the clerics'. In the first state there was 'an organic union between pastors and faithful' in matters touching liturgical celebrations, councils and other activities of church life. In the second state the idea that predominates is that 'the whole Christian life and the religious state depend upon the priests, their fidelity, the purity of their life, and their learning'. The 'different stages of the progressive distancing which took place between the priest and the faithful' seem to have arisen from a definition of the Church as 'consisting mainly of priests'" [Jean Leclercq, "The Priesthood in the Patristic and Medieval Church," *The Christian Priesthood*, edited by Nicholas Lash and Joseph Rhymer, Dimension Books, 1970, 73].*

Today's clericalism is in large measure a legacy of the shape of the priesthood given to the Church in the Constantinian era. In the same essay, Leclercq refers to the "clergification of the Church" and the "clericalisation of the clergy" that became established in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and remains pretty much the fact as we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

2. The second event was instigated by Pope Paul VI with his encyclical, ***Humanae Vitae* in 1968**. Just as the Edict of Milan had significant unintended consequences, so *Humanae Vitae* – ostensibly about birth control – had significant unintended consequences. Specifically, the encyclical provoked widespread questioning among Catholics internationally as to the **authority** the Church holds in our lives. A most serious question, with profound ramifications, was raised: **Would it be possible to follow an alternative path to that laid down in *Humanae Vitae* and still come to the sacraments in good faith?**

A large number of Catholic theologians in the United States protested the encyclical's teaching on birth control. This became known as "The Washington Case". In April 1971, the Holy See published a *Statement of Theological and Pastoral Principles* by way of response. The *Statement* says in part:

*"Conscience is the practical judgment or dictate of reason by which one judges what here and now is to be done as good, or to be avoided as evil. .... Particular circumstances surrounding an objectively evil human act, while they cannot make it objectively virtuous, can make it inculpable,*

*diminished in guilt or subjectively defensible. In the final analysis, conscience is inviolable and no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his or her conscience, as the moral tradition of the Church attests”.*

The Australian Bishops wrote to Pope Paul VI on April 24 1972 and voiced their concern. They said there were “a number of interpretations of *Humanae Vitae* by episcopal conferences offering the faithful a less difficult course in situations where duties and obligations clash than would seem to be provided by the encyclical”. Several Australian Catholic doctors, on November 13 1973 also wrote to Pope Paul VI seeking clarification on these pastoral matters.

In September 1974, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference offered a guiding statement, having taken into account the ongoing debate and discussion worldwide, as well as the guidance from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In part that statement said:

*“It is not impossible, however, that an individual may fully accept the teaching authority of the Pope in general, may be aware of his teaching in the matter, and yet reach a position after honest study and prayer that is at variance with the papal teaching. Such a person could be without blame; he would certainly not have cut himself off from the Church; and in acting in accordance with his conscience he could be without subjective fault”* (See Nicholas Kerr, editor, *Australian Catholic Bishops’ Statements since Vatican II*, St Paul, 1985).

The critical question of **conscience** – and with it the question of fidelity to the Church and the exercise of authority within the Church – had come to the fore. How could the rights of conscience be reconciled with the Church’s teaching as found in *Lumen Gentium*, #25? There we read that the teachings of the Church demand “loyal submission of will and intellect”. (It should be noted that, even in the Council documents there is tension on this matter – compare for example *Lumen Gentium*, #25 with *Gaudium et Spes* #16.)

Father Joseph Ratzinger – later Pope Benedict XVI – puts it more bluntly in his 1969 reflections on *Gaudium et Spes* #16:

*“Over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority there still stands one’s own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary, even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. .... Conscience confronts (the individual) with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even of the official Church”. (Herbert Vorgrimler, editor, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II – Volume V*, Burns & Oates, 1969, 134.)*

In his August 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II sums up the relationship between the individual and Church authority: **“The Church puts herself always and only at the service of conscience”** (#64). (Emphasis added.)

The teaching on conscience found in *Gaudium et Spes* #16, the Holy See’s response to the “Washington Case”, Joseph Ratzinger and Pope John Paul II, is not new. This has been part of Catholic teaching, at least since the time of Pope St Gregory the Great (540-604), confirmed by St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), but largely forgotten under “the weight” of Constantinianism.

I would place the Catalyst Public Forum on the *Statement of Conclusions* in the same category as *Humanae Vitae*, as a part of the ongoing clarification of authority within the Catholic Church and the rights and responsibilities of individual Catholic.

3. The third event has been instigated by the **sexual abuse crisis**. Ironically, one of its unintended consequences might be the loosening of the hold that the Constantinian mentality has within the Catholic Church. Huge damage has been done to the authority of the Catholic Church. The consequences of a significant loss of trust would be hard to over-estimate. Catholics are being forced to find new ground for their Catholicity or abandon it altogether. This is both **danger and opportunity**.

The **danger** is twofold. In the first instance, as Church authorities attempt to recover the trust of people both within and outside the Catholic Church, there is a danger that excessive emphasis will be placed on law and doctrine and conformity. This would tragically confirm the Constantinianism. Sadly, there is strong evidence that this is precisely what is happening in some parts of the

Catholic world at the moment. The second danger is that, thinking of the Church as just another multi-national corporation, we will yield to systems analysts, sociologists, psychologists, management consultants and the like and force changes on the Church that are more destructive than constructive. Sadly there is also strong evidence that this is a reality today as we approach the Plenary Council.

This does not present us with an either/or choice but a both/and choice. Let me briefly explain what I mean.

### *The Mystical Heart of Catholicism*

In the Church, we need to constantly pay close attention to developing our understanding of the Incarnation and the doctrines pertaining to that central mystery; we also need to constantly pay close attention to developing good laws and good attitudes to our laws; we also need to constantly pay close attention to developing institutional structures, ensuring that they serve the Gospel we intend to embody. But more than these essential processes and grounding them is the recovery of the mystical heart of our faith. Without this, the rest will be pointless – maybe even destructive.

Alan Watts wrote more than 70 years ago:

*A Christianity which is not basically mystical must become either a political ideology or a mindless fundamentalism (Alan Watts, Behold The Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion, New York: Vintage Books, 1947/1972, xiii).*

The oft-quoted words of Karl Rahner echo those of Alan Watts:

*The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he/she will not exist at all (Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, Volume XX: Concern for the Church, London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1981, 149).<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Sr Jocelyn Kramer OCD forwarded to me the following comment on this quote from a German friend: "According to my information Rahner first used this quote in a talk in 1966 and subsequently repeated it in many talks. There are two different written versions in his collected works: (1). The longer one appeared in 1971, and it does not say 'the Christian of the future' but 'the religious person (literally 'the devout person') of tomorrow will be a

Google the word “mysticism” and you will get more than one million hits. This suggests there is a spectrum of definitions and understandings and usages of the word today. However, a fair definition of mysticism is found on Wikipedia:

*Mysticism is the pursuit of communion with, identity with, or conscious awareness of an ultimate reality, divinity, spiritual truth, or God through direct experience, intuition, instinct or insight. Mysticism usually centers on practices intended to nurture those experiences. Mysticism may be dualistic, maintaining a distinction between the self and the divine, or may be nondualistic.*

The mystical heart of Catholicism is found in **the experience of being one with all in Jesus Christ**. St Paul sums it up in expressions such as the following:

*God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18 – NIV).*

Everything in our doctrines and laws and institutions points to this, nurtures this and is in turn enlivened by this fact of our lives. Our life as Church can be summed up in that one word: **Reconciliation!**

We are “baptized into Christ” (see Romans 6:3). We find our identity in Christ.

*if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Corinthians 5:17 – NIV)*

To say he is “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (see John 14:6) is not a theological abstraction but a lived reality. When we have awakened to the

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mystic or he will not exist at all'. Rahner then goes on to explain that by mysticism he does not mean an esoteric phenomenon, but 'a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence'. Then he says that the source of religious conviction is not theology but the personal experience of God. It's a long and very intricate passage in German, with Rahner's typically complicated, multi-clause sentences. It was published in: Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, Einsiedeln 1971, vol. VII, 22. (2) The shorter version is the one that is now more widely spread. It reads: "The Christian of the future etc.' I suppose by this time Rahner had become aware of the fact that his original expression 'der Fromme' ('the devout person') was beginning to sound obsolete and likely to put readers off. It is found in: Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. XIV, Zurich 1980, 161. You might find a reference to the English translation on the internet."

mystical heart of our Catholicism we can say with a simple truthfulness, with the conviction of experience: Father, Son and Holy Spirit have made their home in me (see John 14:24). We have some inkling of the truth expressed by St Paul: “I live now not I but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:19).

Our communion in Christ allows us to live the tensions of both/and. In Him, and only in Him, we can find an ultimate reconciliation of all that seems contradictory, incomprehensible, beyond proof, imperfect, incompetent or inadequate. **Perfectionism is idolatry.**

In Him we can live the tensions of the “not yet” and the “as yet” unattainable. **Aspirations are not necessarily expectations.**

In Him, *kenosis* becomes fruitful, full of promise rather than threat. The victory does not come at the achievement of an ego project or a clever syllogism or even an algorithm. It comes as grace. **The kingdom is gift and it may not look like a victory.**

In Him, our perspective is radically transformed. We begin to sense something of God’s logic. We begin to see the kingdom coming to birth amidst the multiple other kingdoms vying for ascendancy. In God’s kingdom

*there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28 – NIV).*

### *Conclusion*

I conclude with a brief meditation. About thirty five years ago, the monk, Carlo Carretto, returned to Italy from the Sahara Desert, after many years living among the Bedouin. He wrote a document entitled, “I Sought and I Found.” There he tells of his inner journey and his struggles with God. He concludes the document with a letter to the church. It is born of a mystical heart. The letter begins:

*How much I must criticise you, my church and yet how much I love you!  
You have made me suffer more than anyone and yet I owe you more than  
I owe anyone. I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your  
presence. You have given me much scandal and yet you alone have made  
me understand holiness. Never in the world have I seen anything more*

*obscurantist, more compromised, more false, yet never have I touched anything more pure, more generous or more beautiful. Countless times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face – and yet, every night, I have prayed that I might die in your sure arms! No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you. Then too – where should I go? To build another church? But I cannot build another church without the same defects, for they are my own defects. And again, if I were to build another church, it would be my church, not Christ's church. No, I am old enough. I know better!* (Messenger, Jan-Feb., 1989, 15. The piece originally appeared in the U.K. *Catholic Herald*. Carlo Carretto died on 4 October 1988 at the age of 78.)