

Catholic Social Services Conference

Melbourne, 27 February 2020, Francis Sullivan

Margin Call – The Risk of Integrity

This morning we have recognised the original inhabitants of the land on which we meet and its elders past present and emerging. We also gather as custodians of the collective ministries of religious orders, diocesan and faith inspired organisations seeking to bring charity, justice or both to the needy, the marginalised and the often forgotten.

Whether overtly or not, this is done in the name of the Church. Even more so it is inspired by the example of Jesus.

It is very much an intentional activity. A moral exercise. We specifically seek to instil a virtuous culture within the haphazard and perilous places where poverty and disadvantage dwell.

Good works by good people for the good of others. Not a bad gig!

But importantly, it is also a Catholic gig. One where there are many Catholic identities yet motivated and sustained by the same spirit, the same founding story portrayed in the Gospels which is the subject of ever deepening understanding and application.

So it is within that light that I provide my thoughts this morning. Not as an expert in the delivery of social services. Rather as a fellow traveller who has reflected deeply over the last six years or so on the ramifications for the Catholic Church in contemporary Australia.

I offer these reflections from a perspective of hope and optimism. I sincerely believe that the desire to bring about justice and well being for others is intimately motivated and sustained by God. That is what faith in action means to me and I suspect many of you hold the same or a similar sense of how this work in which you are engaged is

actually a faith based and inspired endeavour. Not an overt mission for conversion and redemption. Nor an organised strategy to demonstrate how caring the Church can be. Rather it is an extension, a natural consequence, of heartfelt and clear headed commitment to do something in the face of need, suffering and destitution.

I also believe that we need to be realistic about the place of Catholic social services in the broader theatre of Australia's welfare and community services sector. Where once it was the foundation of the evolving safety net, it now occupies a somewhat niche contribution within a wider and more comprehensive government and other non government services network.

So there is likely to be debates over the essential, if not crucial, contribution Catholic based services provide the community and the necessity or otherwise for their continued support from governments, policy makers and funders of all descriptions.

I do not propose to solve that ever brewing issue. What I do want to concentrate on has more to do with the identity of this ministry, its relationship to the public perception of the Church and the need for an enlivened spirituality that both sustains us and motivates our engagement with the realities of life.

The title of my presentation is quite deliberate. In the financial world a margin call occurs when the value of an account has fallen below agreed levels. At that point additional capital is required to restore the value of the account and in turn the confidence of investors. If the trader doesn't deposit funds into the account then assets are sold regardless of their previous market value. The trader remains active for as long as it has assets and can find willing buyers.

The upshot is a depleted company, with its reputation damaged, its product on the slide and its management under notice.

I put it to you that this is not too far from the situation we currently find ourselves facing in the Catholic Church. Through gross mismanagement and blatant deception the institutional Church has squandered the good will of the overwhelming majority of its members. It has debased the value of the Church in the broader community. It has added fuel to the fire over the relevancy of the Church to modern day life.

Just as depressing is when some in positions of authority and influence in the institution remain on a course that holds little hope for any correction in the near term.

You can still hear senior Church personnel deluding themselves that the crimes, cover ups, and obfuscations are things of the past, that the good works of the Church, in schools, welfare and health, will restore its public standing and that the public critics and cynical media are part of a broader 'anti-Church' agenda in a post Christian world.

This risks becoming pathological and will only see the institution further erode its value and any real sense of being a social asset and force for good.

Throughout the Royal Commission years some would lament that there was little attention paid to the extent of good works undertaken by the Church across our community. Works of social service, health care, pastoral support and education. Some now fear that those works will be tainted by the loss of trust the community holds for the institution in general. Others despair at the 'brand damage' the revelations of the scandal have brought.

For example, we do hear these days of a hardening attitude in government bureaucracies towards Catholic organisations. There have been instances where Catholic organisations have not been included in government initiatives without any stated reason or have been warned that their tax exempt status is under threat. These

organisations have no direct link with the sex abuse scandal but now they are in line to pay the consequences.

That said, I believe the bigger concern is the risk that leaders will 'circle the wagons', seek to regroup and then substantially continue on without any significant change. And that change is primarily about our heart.

Have we the capacity to let our broken hearts speak? Can we dare to be different? To humbly accept that our way of seeing things, reacting to things, proclaiming things needs to change.

Are we too captive to an arrogance born of certainty and institutional longevity? Have we stopped hearing the cries of the poor, the oppressed, the misunderstood and the strange ones?

Do we kid ourselves that meeting needs is not wrapped up in a self serving ideology of social action and importance?

These are confronting questions but necessary none the less. They are the type of self analysis that comes with spiritual discernment, supposedly a mainstay for any ministry.

They are also prompted by the prophets of our times. Those who have courageously unsettled our comforts, questioned our intentions and stretched our imaginations. They are the people who have risked their lives for a world that at least could be better for others, let alone for themselves.

They are the brave hearts who dared to speak truth to power, who wore the rejection and the scapegoating of an institution in denial.

They are the free spirits who have stood proudly in the face of prejudice and discrimination knowing all too well that 'fitting in' was the price for acceptance and harmony. A price too high too often. A price no longer able to meet the margin call.

First and foremost we need consensus on what a Church, and in turn, Church run social services, are on about. In a society that regards religion as just another lifestyle choice at best, we need to resist trying to pump air into old tyres that have run their course. We need to dream of an engaged, vibrant and relevant church that is reflected not just in its outreach but more importantly in its manner, disposition and basic humanity. We need to change the terms of engagement. If the Church is not primarily missionary then it will become ossified as a propositional institution, out of touch and out of time.

The sex abuse scandal made it abundantly plain that when the institution is threatened it closes ranks, manages its risks and does not act and speak out of its heart but strategises out of its head.

Only a heart driven Church will have any chance of relating beyond its increasingly narrowing base.

Secondly, the scandal revealed just how 'victim friendly' the institution really is. It was rare to hear of occasions where victims were believed rather than tolerated. To hear where victims were assisted to make their case rather than interrogated in order to be found wanting. To hear where the Church authorities were transparent and pastoral rather than cautious and reliant solely on legal and insurance advice. It was also rare to learn of cases where the Church authorities sought confidential compliance from victims rather than overt reporting to the police.

Only a Church that walks along with victims and risks becoming a victim with them can resonate the spirit of Jesus and the dream of the Gospel.

Thirdly, the glaring lack of moral leadership during the scandal not only speaks volumes about the potential to be disconnected from our basic reason for being, it also warrants major surgery as to who gets to participate in the governance of the church. Unless we break

the shackles of entitlement and cronyism, become inclusive and more representative in our decision making we risk losing any claim to renewal and reform.

Yet, maybe not unsurprisingly, we still find the same model of administration and the same culture of clerical entitlement controlling the management of the institution. Doing more of the same should not be the answer, but there is every indication that the fear of loss of control will continue to ward off sensible power sharing between clergy and laity, the promotion of women into governance roles and the democratising of administrative functions such that local parishes and communities are trusted to design and oversight ministries to meet very local needs.

That challenge lays very much before us and we should not let it fall to those inside the Church bubble. Instead we need to agitate for the change we identify, to speak confidently of its benefits and to insist on a seat at the tables that matter.

As the second aspect of my presentation's title states, can we take the risk of integrity? Are we up to the challenge of becoming authentic and responding in a radical fashion to the call of the Gospel?

The underlying project of Catholic Social Thought is liberation. It calls for a new mindset that unlocks the structures of oppression, both within ourselves and for others. It asks us to wake up to the attitudes and behaviours that enslave, oppress and dehumanise. Most importantly, it compels us to ask whether we are part of the problem or the solution.

To be part of the solution is to take the risk of living our values.

Seeing disadvantage and injustice is not merely an intellectual exercise. It requires us to stand up for those too weighted down and silenced by oppressive systems and cultures, ostracised by self

interested forces, belittled through selfish agendas and discarded by self serving movements.

It challenges us to own our values even in the face of fear, uncertainty and intimidation.

It definitely compels us to take sides – in a power imbalance we need to see life from the underside, to identify who is losing out, who needs our influence and capabilities to come their way.

It means living with hope- that the law of the jungle, of ‘the mob’, of the status quo, of the ‘way things are done around here’, of the owners of opportunity and chance are NOT the determinators of what is right, just and decent.

Others will more eloquently outline what radical steps are required to meet people at the margins. They may well quote Pope Francis too as he implores the Church to be at the margins and in the messiness of life.

Today I want to pick up on two aspects of moving to the margins.

Ours is a comfortable, quite conventional Church. We are very much a part of the socially conservative infrastructure of society – upholders of traditional values, lifestyles and conventions.

Watchdogs for social order. Our asset holdings across dioceses, hospitals, education and welfare settings implants a Catholic footprint the envy of any land and capital speculator. It also engenders a conservative, cautious instinct that makes responsiveness and flexibility difficult to deliver.

We bleach the Gospel of its radical nature and we tame its spirit to fit our narrow vista.

This is a conditioned response, a confected culture of self protection and self promulgation. I think we are called to be so much more. Not mere subjects to an institution or the expectations of an organised religion, but rather active participants in stretching our sense of

church and ministry into frontiers where others stay disengaged from difference or even worse fight against it.

We need to adopt a spirituality that is non dualistic, person centered and humble. One that readily holds what may first appear as opposites in a creative tension. One that pays attention to the surprise of life; its twists , turns, torments and torper that lead to awakenings of the Divine in ordinary ways. A spirituality where silence speaks louder than words and love compels acceptance, confusion and risks the loss of identity into a new creation.

From this disposition I put it to you that there is a call to go to the existential margins as much as there is the imperative to be at the economic and socially impoverished places. Poverty does have a postcode, but not just spatially. The dignity and well being of people is coming under significant threat particularly in the areas of gender identification.

The despair and despondency some people experience as they seek to literally be themselves in communities where prejudice and religious fundamentalism make them outcasts or worse must be eradicated. It is not enough for Churches to spruik platitudes and empty rhetoric over the challenges confronting people of same sex attraction, gender dysphoria or trans sexual orientation. Respect and loving embrace should come with no strings attached.

To be truly catholic is to find unity across differences. It is to acknowledge that everyone is being made in the image of God. We are unfinished products, glimpses of the divine, symphonies aching for the crescendo!

Our tradition speaks of the blueprint for life as being an unfolding of revelation for everyone that their deepest yearnings, their longings for love and acceptance are not found in confected personality or rigid compliance to external expectations, even obligations. Rather it is in giving primacy to the particular expressions of being human,

valuing them as graced gifts, before we seek to corral people into the constraints of commonality and convention.

The signs of our times are calling the Church to rediscover within its tradition this more pastoral approach. For too long we have adopted a 'one size fits all' approach to human sexuality and intimacy. The upshot has seen alienation and despair. Particularly for young people courageous enough to seek an authentic and honest lifestyle in the face of heavy social conservatism and prejudice, often with the voice of the Catholic Church ringing in their ears.

So much energy has been directed to bolstering static notions of human nature and their rigid understandings of what are orthodox lifestyles and moral choices that we have demonised individual freedoms and rights in the process.

Little wonder people lose interest and begin to question how seriously the Church listens to the evolving revelation of its times.

A further boundary beckons in the field of economic justice. It is coming up to 30 years since the Catholic bishops released its economic critique *Common Wealth for the Common Good*. It was a bold and far reaching statement challenging the economic status quo and the political settlement over economic rationalism and market driven policy. It sounded the call for the poor, the victims of income inequality and the evolving underclass in our society.

It was an important and necessary intervention in the public debate.

Our times call for a similar siren call. Debates rage over the levels of income inequality. They are usually joined by ideologues on both sides. But taking the side of impoverished and disenfranchised people is not an option for Gospel inspired organisations. It is a mainstay of the mission.

So it comes with the territory that we need to be advocates for economic justice. This in turn means being economically and

sociologically literate, and most importantly, confident in the application of Catholic Social Thought.

The Church, and Catholic social and human service groups in particular, must not vacate the field of public debate and policy making. We have a voice that others can use. We have a tradition of economic thought that seeks a just distribution of wealth and opportunities. We need to once again lean into public discourses that are deliberately crafted to appeal to the comfortable at the expense of the suffering. We must not shy from critics who seek to put the Church in its place. Our place is alongside those who suffer, are impoverished and face the perils of life on their own. Our voice needs to echo the pleas of the silenced.

This is our true heart. One open, non judgemental and compassionate. One that hears the cries of the poor, the downtrodden and the forgotten.

Our hearts have been broken and well that they have. For only broken hearts can hear the word of God. Only soft hearts can sense the echo of the Spirit. Only open hearts can move the mountains between people, across communities and within the deeper imaginings where violence and hatred fester.

These days we are blessed by prophets of honesty and hope. Victims for sure but advocates for life indeed. Whether they have visited us from the scandal or whether they tentatively live amongst us eager for our awakening and embrace, they deserve our heartfelt respect and we their forgiveness.