

Power and Leadership of Women Within the Catholic Church in Australia

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The first time I heard the words ‘Never waste a catastrophe!’, they were spoken with an Australian accent during a hearing at the United Nations, in New York, May 2013. The topic was ‘Sustainability and the Future of the Planet’. The speaker was describing how a recent catastrophic drought in Australia had provided an unexpected opportunity: it had enabled the disastrous state of the entire Murray–Darling River System to begin to be restored to health. He argued that such had been the political stasis on this critical issue that only a mammoth disaster such as this was able to begin the processes necessary to unlock it.

This insight came to mind when during a lunch break I opened up a website to view the public hearings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse within the Catholic Church. The questions being addressed were about why such a horrific culture of abuse had been able to develop and why it had developed much more acutely in some places. One of those being questioned was Dr Neil Ormerod, who suggested that it might be more helpful to ask where there were the lowest rates of abuse and why. He then observed that the Archdiocese of Adelaide provided an example of such a place, noting that Archbishop Leonard Faulkner’s decision to ‘set up a pastoral team which included a number of women’¹ instead of requesting an auxiliary bishop may have some significance. Since I was one of the women in leadership during the first five years of that episcopate I listened to this exchange with some

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1. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, Case Study 50, Day 2, 7 February 2017.

interest. During those years (1985–91), the Archbishop of Adelaide consistently reported after meetings of the Australian Bishops Conference that his fellow bishops remained steadily disinterested about the good news he wanted to share about the governance of his diocese.

This, however, is a new time, a very critical time, when Australians, including many Catholics, are asking ‘whether the bishops and other public representatives of the Catholic Church have the stomach for changes in governance needed to address the factors that led to child abuse’.² They also want to find answers to a deep malaise that has led so many of our young people and women and men of all ages to abandon the practice of their faith. Despite systematic efforts to reform diocesan systems of child protection, the effects of the catastrophe of child abuse presided over by episcopal leadership in this country, and worldwide, is still playing out like a train wreck in slow motion. Increasingly many Catholics find this deeply distressing and, for some, literally ‘faith shattering’. This surely demands us to reframe the question at the deepest level of our faith: What is the Spirit presently offering the Australian Church in light of this truly terrible catastrophe? How might this offer of transformative new life be harnessed for the good? Could the plenary council of the Catholic Church in 2020 become a catalyst for a collective, profound listening to the Holy Spirit, for communal discernment, receptivity, and then decisive action?

In this article I will focus briefly on the critical question of the exercise of power and of the leadership of women within the Australian Church, with a view to making a positive contribution to this quest. I will reflect on learnings from my experience of active participation during a significant phase of post–Vatican II governance within the Archdiocese of Adelaide when I and other women were both enabled and encouraged to exercise power and leadership in governance. I will then make some brief connections with the experience of the papers, processes and response of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT) research project, ‘A Question of Gender Justice’, at the 2016 conference of the Australian Catholic Theological Association (ACTA). Finally, I will note the significance of Pope Francis’s vision and practice of synodality and discernment for us to be able to respond at depth to the catastrophe before us.

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Bedrock to our belief as the people of God is that the Holy Spirit is already providing the charisms for life-giving leadership and creative exercise of power needed for this time, for this disaster, in this place. However, if this catastrophe is to be harnessed to ‘unlock’ what is binding us so that the church can heal and regenerate, its leadership, and all of us, need a significantly renewed capacity to be open to recognise, discern and to receive these gifts the Holy Spirit provides for the major transformative change required. I want to argue that theologians

2. Andrew Hamilton, ‘Australian Bishops Gather in the Light of the Royal Commission’, *Eureka Street* 27, no. 9, 4 May 2017.

and biblical scholars have a crucial role to play in this endeavour and that theological reflection needs to take place in a variety of ways. It is thus within the mode of faith seeking understanding that I now seek to identify strands of wisdom accrued from the experience of the church of Adelaide during the period of Archbishop Leonard Faulkner's leadership.

One factor is very clear: the significant shift that happened during that time (1986–2001) was most certainly not just about a strategy of 'adding a few women to diocesan governance structures and stirring'. There is a much more complex story to tell about the development of a strong collaborative culture of participation and inclusion of the baptised that unfolded over many decades. During that time, young people, women and men, religious and lay, were beginning to be enabled to find their place, voice and identity as God's holy people, as a community for the world. I believe that the subsequent capacity and quality of women's contribution to leadership within the archdiocese was considerably enabled by this steady post-Vatican II shift in local ecclesial culture.

This movement began in Adelaide with the leadership of Archbishop Matthew Beovich (1939–71) and was significantly deepened by the proactive commitment of Archbishop James Gleeson (1971–85). The latter has been described as 'one of the most notable reformers' amongst those Australian bishops who attended the sessions of the Vatican Council.³ The proclamation of church as the 'people of God' and Avery Dulles's articulation of the church as 'a community of disciples' spoke to him deeply, and became a particular focus for his leadership. Further, he was encouraged by leaders of institutes of religious women and men, lay leaders and some clergy to initiate a major systematic process of diocesan pastoral renewal in the light of the Vatican II teachings. The essential object of this three-year process was to encourage the people of the archdiocese as a whole to reflect on their lives in the light of the Gospel, to share their hopes and concerns, and to respond to them individually and together with a deeper appreciation of Christian faith. The task force established by Archbishop Gleeson to lead this renewal adopted a process of 'action-reflection-action'—the method of the Cardijn movement already familiar to many in the diocese. Lay, religious, and ordained were encouraged to participate with the aim of creating a culture and spirit of ongoing renewal. At his retirement Archbishop Gleeson claimed that this diocesan pastoral renewal (1982–85) was the 'most important initiative and legacy' of his episcopate.⁴

The early resignation of Archbishop Gleeson due to ill health led to his coadjutor Leonard Faulkner being formally installed as Archbishop of Adelaide earlier than originally anticipated. This occurred in June 1985, just before the

3. John P. Maguire, *Prologue: A History of the Catholic Church as Seen from Townsville* (Toowoomba: Church Archivists' Society Queensland, 1990), 230.

4. James W. Gleeson, 'The Church in Adelaide during My Years as a Priest and Bishop', *Australasian Catholic Record* 65, no. 3 (July 1988): 302.

diocesan renewal program was completed. In its final two months, over 5000 people met in small groups for eight weeks to deepen their understanding of Jesus and what it meant to be church in their daily lives, in their parishes and within the archdiocese. In retrospect, this process, which included a struggle to arrive at future directions for the archdiocese, could be properly described as a process of communal discernment. Thus, it proved to be very significant that the newly installed Archbishop Leonard Faulkner was able to be an active participant, was formed himself by the processes and became committed to directions that emerged.

Another factor to note is that, immediately after his installation, the new archbishop appointed local priest-theologian Denis Edwards as his theological adviser and co-opted the director of the renewal program, lay leader David Shinnick, to assist him in establishing a way forward. In response to the recommendations from the renewal program, the archbishop invited a cross-section of diocesan leaders to provide a 'Brief for a Consultation concerning Appropriate Ways in which the Archbishop May Govern the Diocese'.⁵ A primary presenting issue included in this consultation was whether to ask for an auxiliary bishop to be appointed.⁶

At the risk of labouring the point, but in the interest of examining the question of what had been happening in this diocese that made a difference, it is significant to note the various ways in which this newly installed archbishop was, from the beginning of his leadership, operating consistently in a consulting, learning, listening mode. Moreover, this former Bishop of Townsville, whose motto is 'as one who serves',⁷ had learned from his earlier experience, and with disarming candour was prepared to share his reflections on his own strengths and weaknesses in episcopal governance. Before formally announcing the consultation, he had discussed it with the diocesan pastoral council and the council of priests and the college of consultors. These post-Vatican II organs of governance had already been well established by his two predecessors. To inform all of the people of God, the 'Brief for a Consultation' was also announced in the diocesan newspaper, the *Southern Cross*. It was described as a two-day consultation process under the guidance of Fr Brian Bainbridge, from Melbourne. There were to be forty-four participants, including heads of diocesan offices and a number of leaders from parishes and different cultural communities.⁸ From this formal consultation the recommendation presented to the archbishop was:

5. Archdiocese of Adelaide, *Comprehensive Report of the Diocesan Pastoral Renewal: Phase 1, 1983-1988*, vol. 3, part 1: *Supporting Documents* (Adelaide: Diocesan Pastoral Renewal, 1988), doc. 21.

6. *Ibid.*

7. See Decree concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus* (1965), 16.

8. Archdiocese of Adelaide, *Comprehensive Report*, vol. 3, doc. 21, 2.

That the Archbishop appoint a small group or team of people including a Vicar General to work with him in the ‘governance’ aspect of his office as Archbishop. That membership of this group be open to lay men and lay women and religious.⁹

The recommendation did not include the appointment of an auxiliary bishop.

Archbishop Faulkner received this proposal for a *diocesan pastoral team* (DPT) and indicated that he was willing to accept it on the condition that both the council of priests and the diocesan pastoral council support the concept.¹⁰ Due to the energetic commitment of his immediate predecessor, the diocesan pastoral council was at the time a substantive, lively body of women and men, young and old, elected from local deaneries and cultural communities, and they supported it. The council of priests needed some questions to be addressed first, and this process took a few months. It is thus obvious, even from this brief description, that a culture of collaboration and participation was continuing to be developed within the archdiocese. A culture of welcome and respect for voices that differed was unfolding, and this included a capacity and a commitment to value the gifts of all the baptised.

With regard to this development, which can be described as a Vatican II culture, official historian of the church in South Australia, Josephite Sister Margaret Press, observes that the reception of Vatican II’s changes in the Adelaide Archdiocese had been facilitated by ‘an acceptance of and encouragement for lay leadership’. She notes that this factor had been a continuous feature of the local church since the foundational years of South Australia and had been nurtured by a ‘long tradition of educating and forming adults’ to inspire and serve the community in faith.¹¹ In these postconciliar years this tradition was built upon and further developed throughout the archdiocese by the sustained and creative contribution of the Catholic Adult Education Service. Another factor at play was that the diocesan renewal program had also followed some years of women and men religious collaborating with Archbishop Gleeson to ensure that there were concerted efforts to make opportunities for visiting scholars to assist priests and people of the archdiocese to absorb the transformative theology and teachings from Vatican II. These included study of specific documents, such as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). On reflection now, it seems that one of the teachings gradually being received about the intrinsic nature of the church and already

9. Archdiocese of Adelaide, ‘Diocesan Pastoral Team’, July 1989 pamphlet.

10. Leonard Faulkner, ‘Reflections on a Diocesan Pastoral Team’, *Compass* 27, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 1.

11. Margaret Press, “‘Poor but Very Good’: The South Australian Catholic Story”, *Australasian Catholic Record* 68, no. 2 (April 1991): 197.

effecting a notable change in culture was that powerfully enunciated in *Lumen Gentium* 32:

By divine institution, the holy church is directed and governed with a wonderful diversity. 'For just as in one body we have many members, yet all the members have not the same function, so we, the many, are one body in Christ, but individually members one of another' (Rom 12:4-5). The chosen People of God is, therefore one: 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Eph 4:5); there is a common dignity as members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons and daughters, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity. There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, for 'there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28).¹²

This radical Pauline teaching enunciated so clearly and placed strategically within the council's major document on the church (still amazingly relevant and prophetic for the present century) was, of course, a long way from being fully lived out within the archdiocese then. However, enough had happened by April 1986 to enable Archbishop Faulkner on the recommendation of and support of the key governance bodies of the archdiocese and in the light of a diocesan assembly to establish what he called the diocesan pastoral team. The archbishop appointed Fr James O'Loughlin (as vicar general) and me as members of his first team. Budget constraints caused a brief delay in the appointment of the final member at that time. However, advertisements were placed in the *Southern Cross* and the *Adelaide Advertiser* in early December 1986 for a lay member of the DPT. From forty-seven applicants a shortlist of six was formed for interview in January, and Mrs Madge McGuire was appointed on 2 February 1987.

The first team initially defined itself as 'a small full-time executive group which assists the Archbishop in his work, and helps to get things done', and its task was described as 'liaising with the many archdiocesan consultative groups in order to coordinate and implement new policies and directions within the remit of the archdiocesan vision'. It was also made clear that 'it is the Archbishop alone who is responsible for making the final decisions which affect the Archdiocesan Church'.¹³ The function of the team was clarified as being an executive body that leaves policy-making to the consultative groups whilst still retaining the prerogative of deciding the manner of policy implementation. With

12. Quoted from Austin Flannery, ed., *The Basic Sixteen Documents of Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, rev. trans. in inclusive language (Dublin: Dominican, 1996).

13. Archdiocese of Adelaide, 'Diocesan Pastoral Team'.

the support of much professional advice and assistance, the first team pioneered a new system of leadership and administration, and created a structure that successive teams have modified and developed.¹⁴

How this all unfolded during the sixteen years of Archbishop Faulkner's leadership, along with the learnings involved, is a bigger story and no doubt could yield wisdom much needed in this time of great challenge to the Australian Church. In 1992 the archbishop was invited by the National Council of Priests to offer his reflections on this mode of governance at the council's annual conference. Within this talk he offered this insight on ecclesial leadership from his experience of working as a part of a team:

In more recent years, after workshops with a number of experts on leadership, we have come to claim more fully a visionary leadership role for the DPT. It has been pointed out to us that the key role of leaders is to carry out the vision and to witness to it in every way possible. We need to be a leadership team in the sense that both as individual team members and above all in our common witness we are called to express and model a vision of church. We have come to see that our task as a team is to keep the vision of Vatican II and our own vision statement, *Community for the World*, constantly before our local church ...

When I visit parishes now, I find it easier because of my own experience of the DPT, to talk with priests about their collaboration with pastoral associates, school principals and parish councils. I think that it is true to say that the DPT provides something of a model and an invitation for further pastoral collaboration at the parish level.¹⁵

During Archbishop Faulkner's tenure (1986–2001), in addition to himself, twelve people served terms on the DPT: four vicars general, four religious sisters, three lay women, and for the final year a coadjutor archbishop. Over the years, the lengths of members' terms were determined in a way that assisted the various transitions. During that time seven women were enabled to exercise power and leadership in governance. The succeeding Archbishop of Adelaide, Archbishop Philip Wilson, continued the practice of involving women in senior positions by appointing women as chancellors to assist him in leadership of the archdiocese.

14. P. K. Hawkes, 'The Adelaide Diocesan Pastoral Team 1986–2001: A Study of an Innovative Model of Episcopal Leadership in the Catholic Church' (BTh(Hons) diss., Charles Sturt University, 2014), 8.

15. Leonard Faulkner, 'Reflections on a Diocesan Pastoral Team', *National Council of Priests Newsletter*, December 1992–January 1993.

Reflecting on my own term of service in this ministry, the critical factors that enabled and facilitated the gifts I had to bring to the exercise power and leadership within the Archdiocese of Adelaide included:

- (1) The call for a leadership team to assist the archbishop in governance that could be inclusive of women and non-ordained emerged from a substantive, people-centred diocesan renewal program that was seeking to implement Vatican II.
- (2) The incumbent archbishop's embrace of this call as a way of assisting him ensured that his episcopal leadership would be faithful to the teaching of Vatican II. Archbishop Faulkner's respectful and appreciative style of leadership welcomed the challenge and rigour of working in a collaborative way with all the members of his team.
- (3) Our primary method of work together—see, judge, act, and further review—was explicitly based on the belief that the Holy Spirit was already providing the charisms for life-giving leadership. This enabled different gifts not only to be received but to flourish.
- (4) Ongoing theological input, reading and reflection continually informed and shaped our work together.

This last factor proved to be very significant and leads me to a brief reflection on the ACTA Conference 2016, when we joined with colleagues in the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT) to respond to Pope Francis's call in his apostolic exhortation 'The Joy of the Gospel' (*Evangelii Gaudium*) to explore theological foundations that support 'opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church' (n. 103).

A Question of Gender Justice at the ACTA Conference 2016

Many times, including 2016, there have been papers presented at ACTA and ACBA (Australian Catholic Biblical Association) that have addressed the theological and biblical bases for recognising the place of women in the church and the world. In 2016 this issue was approached in multiple ways: through the challenging witness and address of our guest feminist theologian and warrior woman from the Philippines, Sr John Manaquan, OSB, which was followed by a rich and animated joint session with ACBA that was generated by papers from Veronica Lawson, RSM ; Robert Gascoigne; and Maeve Heaney, VDMF. Both these sessions stimulated vigorous discussion and focused the reality that the case for the inclusion of women in leadership in a variety of ways by virtue of baptismal call has been made with increasing depth and clarity over the last decades. Theological research confirms that gifts needed are being provided but are yet to be received. It therefore left the question unanswered: *When* will this wisdom be harnessed to become transformative within the Catholic Church in this country and worldwide?

The final session, using the method of receptive ecumenism, was led by Geraldine Hawkes and Toni Pizzey. In preparation for the session, members of ACTA had been invited to draw on the wisdom emerging from experience of a much ‘more incisive female presence’ within other Christian Churches. This took place through conversations with ecumenical partners who have benefited from the exercise of power and leadership of women within their respective churches, in some cases now over decades. During this process we were encouraged both to listen to the wisdom accrued from such practices and to notice and attend to our own responses as we listened. We thus tapped into a key element of the method of discernment—paying attention to the movement of spirits—and this enabled us as theologians to participate in a communal process of ‘faith seeking understanding’. The climate of receptivity thus generated, I believe, provided another level of listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches: What are we presently being offered in this time of huge challenge that we have not yet been able, or prepared, to receive? This method surely has the potential to contribute to a way forward for the coming plenary council in 2020.

A key learning from my experience of leadership within Adelaide Archdiocese twenty-five years ago is the value of the constant theological reflection that significantly shaped our decision-making, planning and work practice. I believe that it is crucial at this time of catastrophe for the Australian Church that members of these conferences continue to contribute proactively to what this church is being called to become.

The Gift of Francis’s Vision and Practice of Synodality and Discernment

Pope Francis’s trust and capacity in the practice of the discernment of spirits and his profound belief that the Holy Spirit enables true difference to flourish in communion is, I believe, a great gift to the church at this time. Discernment is intrinsically connected to the processes of synodality. In a compelling address on synodality in 2015 the pope announced to the assembled bishops: ‘From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council’.¹⁶ Such is Francis’s trust in the God of mercy and compassion, the trinitarian God at the heart of our believing, he is not dismayed by the often inevitable messiness that comes with the process of discernment. Strengthened by a lifetime of initiation into the practice of discernment our present pope has the capacity to be utterly genuine in his welcome of difference. Discordant voices are listened to and brought into dialogue with other opinions. These in turn are brought into dialogue with our rich theological tradition, which is continually yielding new wisdom from the deeper reading required by contemporary challenges. Witness the fruit this bears within Francis’s three major teaching documents: ‘On Care for Our Common Home’ (*Laudato ’Si*), ‘The Joy of the Gospel’ (*Evangelii*

16. <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco>.

Gaudium) and ‘The Joy of Love’ (*Amoris Laetitia*). This, in turn, as Archbishop Mark Coleridge testifies, enables Pope Francis to recast an understanding of synod from being ‘some of the bishops some of the time’ to ‘all of the Church, all of the time’.¹⁷ It seems that his whole mode of exercising papal leadership is to teach this not only by his words but by how he acts on a daily basis. Whom he is becoming by the grace of God, with his limits and extraordinary gifts, is constantly before us and invites a new way of being church.

To return to my opening question: What is the Spirit presently offering the Australian Church in light of the still unfolding catastrophe of child abuse? In this article I have drawn on three sources that offer wisdom for this huge challenge: learnings from a substantive precedent of creative, inclusive governance within the Archdiocese of Adelaide (1985–2001), thus far largely unknown and untapped by the wider church within Australia; the depth of theological reflection on gender justice accrued over decades within the church and explored again in 2016 within ACTA and other theological conferences around the globe; and Francis’s inspirational witness of leadership on discernment and synodality. Learnings from these reflections that I believe could contribute to the plenary council of the Catholic Church in Australia in 2020 include:

- (1) the requirement for an ever deepening theology of the Holy Spirit and of the call of the baptised, within a renewed trinitarian theology of communion, for the power and practical implications for renewal;¹⁸
- (2) the recognition of the necessity to find ways to begin to implement a major shift in the practice of present church governance that will enable the reception and release of the gifts and charisms of women and all of the laity for leadership within the church;
- (3) the embrace of the art and the discipline of communal discernment and synodality encouraged by Francis the Bishop of Rome that can harness the power and leadership of ‘all of us, all of the time’.

My hope is that the plenary council in 2020 will find ways within its processes to include the full potential of women as well as men, lay as well as ordained, and become a catalyst for receptivity, learning and decisive transformative action.

17. Mark Coleridge, ‘From Wandering to Journeying: Thoughts on a Synodal Church’ (Cardinal Knox Lecture, Catholic Leadership Centre, Melbourne, 16 May 2016), 14.

18. Cf. encyclical letters of John Paul II, *The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World* (1986); *At the Beginning of the New Millennium* (2001).