

# Catholics forge their future

*This is where we're going*



## Approaching the Topic

People who know where they are going in life have a distinct advantage. They set goals, go after them and grow in the process. Others wander through life and allow events to direct them, never making a decisive choice about anything. As a faith community entrusted with a mission, Catholics take their future very seriously. We believe that God's places us on this earth for a purpose. We aspire to ideals that offer hope to our troubled society. We work and pray for the renewal of our world, while recognising that our ultimate destiny lies beyond this earth. Even in the face of our doubts and human limitations, we trust that the Holy Spirit guides the Church and will help us find our way towards the fullness of truth. In this leaflet we explore some of the issues that affect the direction our Church is headed in as we move forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Facing the Future

Forty years after the Second Vatican Council, the situation of the Catholic Church in Australia heralds both hope and warning. The media are quick to point out the warnings. It is not uncommon to hear gloom and doom reports about declining numbers of priests, poor church attendances and opposing points of view within the Church which threaten its stability. And yet, one does not have to look far to see exciting signs of hope: an expansion of lay ministries, the emergence of small Christian communities, a rejuvenated spirit of participation from once-dormant members, and more open channels of dialogue and cooperation between the Church and the world.

In other words, Catholics today are faced with the 'good' and the 'bad' news, the ups and the downs, as the Church journeys through human history. As people of faith, we believe that, just as Jesus had to undergo suffering and death before resurrection, so too does the evolution of the Church participate in a death-resurrection cycle. While we believe that the Spirit guides us forward towards everlasting truth, the human endeavours that seek and express this truth are often fraught with human frailty. Some attitudes and habits have to die in order for new expressions of the truth to bud. Through this natural process of evolution, the age-old tenets of Christian revelation speaks afresh to each new generation.

Today, shifting circumstances are forcing the Church to ask some unsettling questions: Who will lead our parishes? How will systems of leadership operate without the traditional presence of priests and religious brothers and sisters? Questions like these call for creative and courageous decisions. They also call for compassion and sensitivity for those who grieve the loss of their once reliable certainties.

Whatever the solutions, we can be sure that the Church must choose a

path of greater collaboration between its members of all vocations and states of life. While we acknowledge the human process of struggle, grief and evolution, we also rejoice in the gifts of the people of God which abound in many unexpected 'nooks and crannies' of our faith community. Mindful of the riches of the past, the insights of today and the timeless presence of our God, **together** we must confront the issues facing the Catholic Church at the dawn of the new millennium. Here we briefly outline just some of these issues:

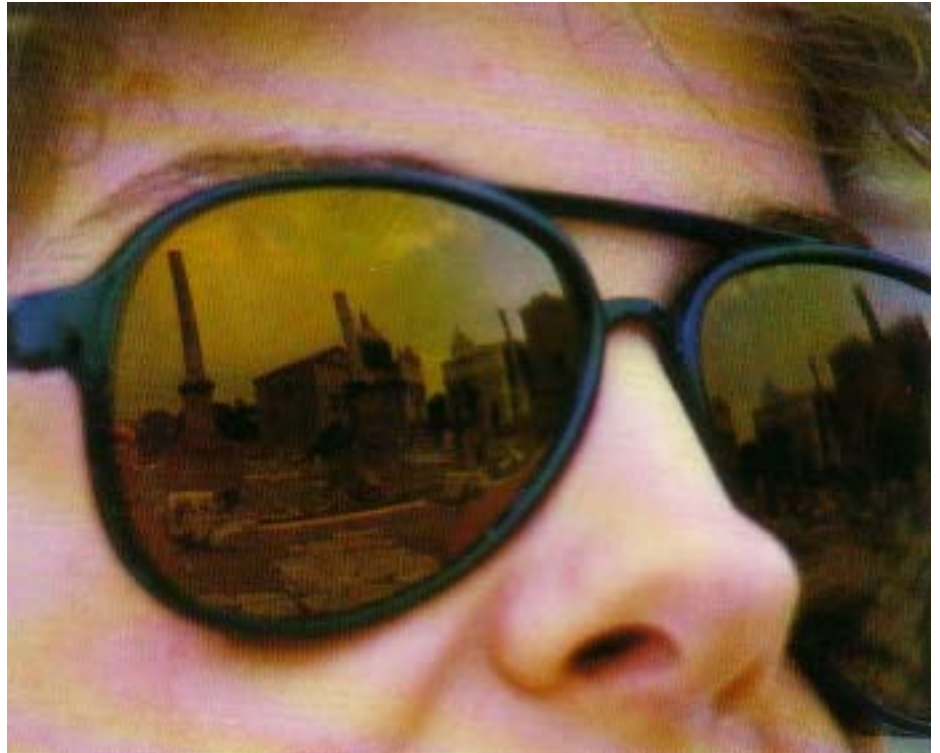
## The challenge: *communication*

We live in an era of extraordinary technological change. In science, business, industry and countless other human endeavours, yesterday's possibilities have become today's realities. Social communications systems have shrunk our world into a global village. An event which happened thousands of kilometres away, centuries away or even light years away, meets us in the 'now' of our TV screens. From our own living rooms, we feel we can be 'anywhere' – seeing, hearing, touching, participating.

For the Church, such rapid advances pose a serious challenge, not just to the way it has traditionally transmitted its message, but also to the very human thought process through which it formulates its message. Pope John Paul II has acknowledged this in a document on the mission of the Church (*Redemptoris Missio* is its Latin name) which was published in 1990:

*'It is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message... It is also necessary to integrate that message into the "new culture" created by modern communications. This is a complex issue since the "new culture" originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new technologies and a new psychology.'* (n.37)

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The Church must take these contemporary factors into account as it strives to communicate the Gospel, particularly if it is to reach the hearts of young people who have grown up with and are at home with the psychology and language of our audio-visual age.

## The challenge: *ongoing dialogue*

For a family that has suffered severe hurts, a commitment to loving communication is the only way back to unity. Likewise, the tragic splits in Christianity (between Catholics and Protestants and between East and West) are wounds for which the Catholic Church today continues to seek healing. Ecumenical efforts to dialogue, cooperate and pray together occur on a variety of different fronts: grass root and

parish initiatives, theological discussions and meetings between denominational leaders. The task of identifying and overcoming our differences is a slow process, but one to which the churches are deeply committed.

Beyond the Church, Catholics are also continually challenged to dialogue and collaborate with other world religions and humanitarian groups, as the Spirit prompts our human family to work together for the healing of our wounded society. There is endless scope to do this! Our global village faces formidable issues: poverty and the economic systems that contribute to it, questions of peace and justice in war-ravaged nations, the complex mine field of sexual ethics and bioethics, the protection of human rights, of minority groups, and indigenous peoples and the ever-growing threat to the environment. The Church, as part of

# The Scripture Story

The scriptures are full of stories about people who, after meeting Jesus, found their lives pointing in a whole new direction. This new course was not always an easy path to take. Yet those who took it discovered an extraordinary sense of purpose, fulfilment and peace. You may like to read some of these stories for yourself:

### Matthew 2 and Luke 2

The birth of Jesus. The first people to greet the Christ-child are deeply affected by their experience. The shepherds in Luke's Gospel indicates that Christ identifies with the simplest and poorest of people. In Matthew's Gospel, the wise men, foreigners

from the east, show that Christ has come to bring light to all people of the world.

### John 1.35-40

'Where do you live?' That was the

simple question that triggered a life-long friendship between Jesus and two of his disciples. They in turn, introduced their brothers and friends to Jesus. Today, Christianity often spreads



through the same simple method: a personal invitation among friends.

### John 1:43-51

'Can anything good come out of Naz-

areth?' was the challenging and somewhat cynical question Nathaniel asked upon hearing his friend speak excitedly about a man called Jesus from Nazareth. Nathaniel soon became one of Jesus' most ardent followers.

### Luke 19:1-10

The story of a short man with high sights. Zaccheus climbed a tree hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he passed by amidst a crowd of people. Perhaps there's a bit of Zaccheus in all of us. We long to get a better 'view' of Christ. Are we prepared to make the effort of climbing the tree?

### Acts 9

The road to Damascus. From being a notorious enemy and murderer of Christians, a man called Paul underwent a profound conversion of heart on his journey to Damascus. He went on to become one of the greatest of Christian missionaries. Today, some of the most unlikely people

become followers of Christ.

the wider human family, cannot stand apart as if immune from such issues. Indeed, it is called to bring its unique Gospel perspective to bear upon proposed solutions.

## The challenge: *men and women*

Not surprisingly, the influence of the women's movement which exploded from the 1960s has also affected the Church and raised new questions and challenges. Issues surrounding the unique contribution of women in the Church are likely to continue to make their presence felt as the Church discerns the voice of the Spirit amidst the plethora of feminine insights arising in theology, spirituality and community life.

At the same time, we can expect a growing interest in a deeper understanding of masculine spirituality and the role of men in the Church. As a community of brothers

and sisters which professes unity, we are compelled to an ever-deeper appreciation of our gender differences and how their reciprocal qualities together enrich the body of Christ. We are committed to calling forth the strengths in one another, being reconciled with and healing one another, when our differences threaten to pull us apart. It is likely that a more developed understanding of the theology and spirituality of marriage will assist the Church's efforts in this area, since the smallest and most intimate of human communities provide a sign and model of the male-female relationship at work.

## The challenge: *community*

One of the negative realities of the pace, size and complexity of contemporary society is the amount of alienation and loneliness that

has been generated. In the face of such pain, the Church feels compelled, more than ever before, to witness to the value of lasting relationships and a communal lifestyle that allows the individual to be nourished and challenged by the love of Christ. To this end, the Church is committed to strategies which deepen and enhance authentic human relationships through parish life, small groups, Christian networks, religious communities and households. At the heart of all such efforts lies a conviction that marriage and family life provide the sacred building blocks for a vision of Christian community.

## The challenge: *option for the poor*

At the heart of the Christian lifestyle is a principle often expressed as an 'option for the poor'. That is,



'option for the poor' a pertinent challenge for our future.

## The challenge: *it's up to us*

To be a Catholic today is to be part of these exciting times of transition, change and challenge. Our baptism compels each of us to be active contributors to the future of our Church. We are all familiar with citizens who blame 'the government' for all social ills. Lest we fall into a similar trap, it is important for Catholics today to realise that the Church is not a remote governmental body. We are the Church. We will affect our community's direction by our choices, attitudes and actions.

Christian love has a particular sensitivity to the plight of those whom circumstances render them powerless, voiceless or materially impoverished. The principle readily springs to mind when we think of the oppression and poverty in certain parts of the world. In societies like Australia, where wealth and security obscure general public awareness of such poverty, Christians can easily neglect this commitment and adjust to being a 'comfortable' Church. The ingrained materialistic attitudes of Australian society make the Church's

Most of all, we believe that it is our love for another, our faith in Jesus Christ, our life of prayer and our urgency to live the ideals of God's Kingdom that will affect, not only our own future as a Church, but the future of our world. To live as a united faith community with a distinctive Spirit-filled lifestyle is the greatest witness we can offer to Jesus' presence in the world today.

## Claire's Story

**The call of Jesus challenges us to ask ourselves, 'What direction is my life taking?' Here is the story of a young Catholic woman who did just that.**

'By the time I'd turned 15 I had worked hard to establish my reputation as one of the "in" crowd. Life was the beach, the boyfriends and the booze. Study, family, church... all these were the opposing authority – a threat to me and my individuality. I wanted to leave school in year 10. My parents wouldn't let me. So I said, "Right, if you're going to force me to go to school, then I'm not going to study". So I didn't. I bombed out in the final exams. But I didn't care. I was being me and I

was living my own life.

'Somewhere along the way, I began to change. I started to get bored doing the same old thing with the same people every Saturday night. I wanted to find work. They were satisfied with the dole cheque. I wanted to make something of my life, not spend my weekends sleeping off a hangover.

'I was forced to the reluctant conclusion that if I wanted to change my life's direction, I would have to leave my friends. It was a tough decision and it caused tensions. But I made the break and I haven't regretted it. I believe God calls us to make gutsy decisions like that.'

## Your Story

### Where are we going?

Put aside some time to reflect upon the questions: Where am I going? A suggested format follows:

- Find a quiet moment, on your own or with a trusted friend.
- Relax. Take some deep breaths. As best you can, let go of life's distractions and worries.
- Be present to God, to the great mystery of love that embraces all of us.
- Listen in the depths of your heart.
- Articulate what is in your heart right now.
- What response (to the question: Where am I going?) emerges from within?

As a result of your reflection time:

- What issues emerged or were clarified?
- Did any new questions arise?
- Is there an action you feel prompted to take?

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