

Archbishop Hepworth's Charge

National Synod Australia held 26th July – 30th July 2010

at St Stephen's Anglican Catholic College, Coomera, Queensland

The Charge of a bishop at the Synod of his diocese is rather like the speech of the sovereign at the opening of Parliament. It reflects the context of the times, the difficulties facing the church, the challenges that the Synod must address, and the obstacles that must be overcome.

The Bishop is more than a local church leader. Each bishop shares the responsibility with every other bishop in the world for the transmitting of the faith from the Apostles to those as yet unborn - until the end of time. That great founding father of the Australian Constitution, Alfred Deakin, stated in an Adelaide speech in the 1890's that "The Constitution we seek to prepare ... is for the ages yet unborn and unknown". So it is with the teaching role of a bishop. When bishops join with one another as a global village in transmitting the faith in communion with the one who succeeds Peter, they are teaching the truth which comes from God. This is so because Peter was charged by Jesus Christ with the gift of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, to confirm his brothers in the faith, and to have the leadership of His whole flock. Christ continues to teach the Church, which is His body, through the successor of Peter and his fellow bishops, until the end of time

It is in performing this awesome task that a bishop stands before his priests, deacons and people, when they gather to represent the church in Sacred Synod, and gives his Charge under the twin burden of Apostles and bishops past, and bishops yet to come.

If he is in communion with Peter and his successors then he teaches under that Divine protection that was promised until the end of time. If that communion is broken, then that divine protection is less tangible, and the bishop's teaching is less certain.

That was at the heart of the TAC bishops' petition to the Holy See. We said (indeed, we signed on the Altar in the midst of the Holy Sacrifice) *We understand that, as bishops separated from communion with the Bishop of Rome, we are among those for whom Jesus prayed before his death "that they may be completely one", and that we teach and define matters of faith and morals in a way that is, while still under the influence of Divine Grace, of necessity more tenuously connected to the teaching voice of catholic bishops throughout the world.*

As Bishop Mercer said when we presented the Petition, "we have lived with uncertain teaching. We have seen what it has done to our beloved Anglican Communion."

Every generation faces challenges to the gospel. Every generation must renew its faith, proclaim the gospel in its own new languages, and apply the Gospel to things that could not have been imagined by those first Twelve.

But the tide of change is now intense. We live as no humans before us have lived. Last week I was in Canada. Two weeks before that in New York. A few weeks before that in Rome. Before that in rural Guatemala. Before that with the US bishops in Florida. And all that since February....

The steady pattern of rural life that was true of Europe 300 years ago had remained much the same for 3000 years. The pattern of life of the indigenous peoples in the United States and Africa and Australia had not much changed in 30,000 years. 100 years ago the idea of mass travel by air was a foolish dream. Next year, Virgin Galactic will open the world's first spaceport and take more people to the edge of space in their first twelve months than have managed to reach there in the past 50 years. We cannot try to imagine what the world will be like at the end of another 50 years.

And yet at the end of this first decade of the new century the problems seem strangely familiar.

Christianity is now the most persecuted of all the world's religions. In almost one third of the world's nations it is in some way illegal to be Christian. The reasons are threefold.

First: Economic and political changes have enabled the other great world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam - to assume a role that once belonged to Christianity. In their several ways, in those regions that they now dominate, they set the standards by which society governs itself. The first and most significant question that any society must answer before it can begin to set laws and norms by which its people will live in harmony one with another must be that most basic challenge – what are human beings for? Science is still silent. The question cannot be answered by even the most intimate scientific investigation. The answer must come from elsewhere. Between the remote and vengeful God of Islam, the complex idols of Hinduism, the nihilist philosophy of Buddhism, and the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a gulf that is almost beyond spanning. Globalism means a global competition for a basic philosophy of human nature. The one that has shaped Western culture for 2000 years is openly mocked and successfully dimmed.

And we in the West are abandoning the very thought processes and disciplines that once produced the answers and tested them in the crucible of informed debate. Theology, Philosophy and History have almost disappeared in one generation from the Western academic curriculum.

Second: Meanwhile the power of secular humanism, in denial that anything exists beyond this life, and in its thirst for material possessions, has made a strange alliance with the enemies of Christianity. The Islamic fundamentalist and the militant feminist share a conviction that the principled order that once ruled societies such as ours should be overthrown. One of the most plausible ways of understanding our world is to view it as a world of fading ideals ridiculed by all those who would see them gone, and a world in which allies against Jesus Christ have not yet seriously begun the battle between themselves for supremacy.

The battle for ideas is seen most stridently in the battle for life itself. There are still struggles to be had over legislation on abortion, but already lawmakers have turned their attention to rendering illegal public opposition to abortion. Countries that have legalised abortion very quickly move to legalise the creation of laboratory embryos for experiments that will lead to pharmaceutical manufacturing. This is a rush back to the days of a eugenicism that the world has only just left. Euthanasia, especially of the elderly, where it has been introduced on the understanding that it will be rare and voluntary, quickly shows its dark side as the vulnerable are killed without their knowledge and consent. In places such as the Netherlands, documentation showing the regular culling of nursing homes fails to raise political interest.

Where same-sex marriage has been legalised lawmakers quickly move to punish those who proclaim Christian truth about marriage and family. One Scandinavian country goes so far as to entrench the ban on preaching against homosexual acts in its constitutional law. In the US, a professor teaching “Catholic Studies” at the University of Illinois, was recently sacked for outlining Catholic teaching on homosexuality. The mere description of Catholic moral teaching was enough to see this professor deemed guilty of ‘hate speech’. Under pressure he was later reinstated although the University continues to investigate. And so the persecution of the ideas that have shaped our society continues largely unnoticed and unremarked.

And the global adoption of free trade and of economic rationalism has transformed human relationships into a brutal competitiveness. We no longer live in a friendly world.

Third: Meanwhile, the Christian churches of the West, especially Catholic and Anglican, have been wracked with internal destructiveness of their own making. The destruction of our theology was the forerunner of a destructive attack on sexual morality that still threatens to neutralise the mission of the Church for much of this coming century. And far too often, in the communities that consciously sustain their faithfulness, the failure of theology is seen as a reason to abandon it instead of a reason to revive it.

The roots of theological destructiveness – and please remember that theology has been for centuries regarded as the queen of sciences – has had its roots in the Enlightenment and the resulting challenge to the reality of divine revelation in England and Germany 150 years ago. The denial of the divinity of Christ, the denial of the very fact of the Christ event, the denial of the power of the Holy Spirit in baptism, the denial of the Resurrection, the denial of a creating God at the heart of the cosmos, the denial of the great Pauline parallel between the husband and his wife and the Christ and His church, the denial of guilt and personal sin, the denial of God’s self revelation as Trinity, the denial of the necessity and reality of the cross and redemption, the denial of the divine institution and necessity of sacraments for salvation, and the ultimate denial of judgement and accountability in which this life is but a moment of preparation for an eternity that can only be glimpsed *as in the mirror faintly* – all this has been but a prelude to a cataclysmic failure of personal morality that manifests itself as a crisis of abuse and especially in the sexual abuse of the young and the vulnerable. The church is seen to be a church of violence in that most cruel area of violence in which the sanctity of sexuality within a stable and loving family is perverted into what Pope Benedict constantly calls the filth and perversion of a lust that has been quenched without regard to the lives that are destroyed in the quenching.

It is true that in most parts of the world a majority of abuse takes place within the family. This is an utterly damning fact of the extent to which we live in a society whose corruption is rapidly expanding and destroying that heart of human love and stability. But the abuse within the Church by those in positions of sacred trust, whether they be religious or clergy or laity in positions of trust and influence - is generally and rightly regarded as more corrosive of victims’ lives than that which occurs elsewhere. The innate contradiction between a priest who can sodomise teenagers and go from that to handling the Son of God himself at the altar is as vast as any contradiction we can encounter. Both Hitler and Stalin attempted to destroy the church by destroying its priesthood. Neither succeeded. Martyrs are the lifeblood of the church.

But in the past 50 years the priesthood has begun to destroy itself. And let us be quite clear. The verbal abuse that destroys a person's confidence in their own personality, the physical abuse of unreasonable punishments and sadism, and the sexual abuse that ranges from inappropriate touching to sodomy and rape protected by blackmail are simply different points on a pathway that has destroyed not thousands but tens of thousands of lives that the Church has touched - but not for the better - in our generation. Ireland admits that one in five of its population have been abused by someone within the church. Parts of Australia have a percentage almost as high.

The aftermath of abuse is destructive for the abusers. To hold the heights of depravity and the heights of sanctity within a single personality is utterly destructive. The church has an ultimate responsibility to everyone within it and to all people even to the ends of the earth. To minister to those whose ministry has turned to abuse is one of the most difficult and complex tasks that confront the church in our time. That we have people prepared to go into prisons and remand centres and sit for week after week and year after year slowly seeking to crack the tough shell with which these people try to protect themselves from themselves is an inspiration to us but more importantly places massive demands on the prayers and the sacrifices with which we support them.

And the aftermath of abuse is destructive for the victims. Many victims experience the most powerful sense of shame and guilt, passionately believing that they provoked and invited the things that happened. They believe that their relationship with God is beyond redemption and their attitude to God turns often to anger and rejection. They struggle with minds that are dominated by images of their sexual experiences and often turn to drugs and drink to escape their own minds with which they cannot live. In over 40 years of priesthood, I have done too many funerals of young men whom I think now must have been victims because of the way in which they killed themselves. Because of their image of being un-clean victims will have problems with things that are sacred. Because their social development in key areas is often frozen they will fail consistently in relationships. And especially if they are men they will find it almost impossible to speak of what has happened. Often they may come to speak later in life and only because of some cataclysmic stimulus in which speaking suddenly becomes possible. And then there is the trauma of remembering and the trauma of trying to learn what parts of their life might have been a product of abuse and what parts might genuinely have been products of a sinful mind. There is in fact no known escape for these victims.

I know of these things now because a bishop is bound in today's Church to learn what there is to know. He must ensure in every way possible that the past is not repeated. And since only the church can heal what the church has done, it is the responsibility of the Bishop to ensure that his clergy and people will respond with healing when they encounter the one in five or 10 that our statistics still tell us are waiting, perhaps longing, for the chance to tell someone in the church the story of their own lives. A victim will often only try once to turn to the church for help, and everything hangs on the spiritual and professional skill of the one to whom they turn to, be it lay or be it clergy. Each of us has the responsibility to be prepared. Only the church can heal what the church has broken. And until the church learns to heal its victims, the church will itself remain broken and unhealed.

I also know these things because it is impossible to be a priest and Bishop and not encounter abusers and victims in the day-to-day reality of our ministry.

I was in Rome with Archbishop Falk nearly twenty years ago when he set out his vision for the TAC – the treasures of the Anglican tradition within the solid certainties of apostolic communion. At that moment I made his pilgrimage my own, and I was elected Primate to bring it to a conclusion. That, in God's Providence and the all-embracing vision of the Holy Father, is now close.

Unity has been tried at moments that are propitious. The ARCIC conversation, designed to lead to full corporate unity between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, was born in the full springtime of Anglo-Catholicism and the extraordinary renewal of the Second Vatican Council. Conservatives, such as we claim to be, often tend to forget that the Venerable Pope John XXIII called the Council out of a desperate concern for the state of the Church. The Council transformed not only Catholic worship, but also Catholic theology of the Church and the Catholic understanding of the Church in the modern world. Neither the great scope of Catholic renewal nor the dominance of Anglo-Catholics was enough to save ARCIC. It failed in its primary objective of organic unity. Malines should have succeeded a generation earlier. Rome invited the Church of England bishops to Trent. It was the Queen Elizabeth I who forbade their attendance. Four centuries of failure. Over and over and over.

Canon Woodman and I sat with Bishops Mercer, Falk and Wilkinson in a Roman office with an Archbishop who described his researches in Vatican Archives in preparation for our Petition. “In the past hundred years, Anglicans have repeatedly asked for terms of unity. Rome has responded positively. Then the Anglicans back away. We wondered if that would happen this time.” I want you to know that your bishop feels the massive weight of these centuries of division, and the cost to the church and the world of one more failure. The church must heal its own wounds, before it can heal the world.

I say these things so that you will understand what I stated at the outset of the meeting in the very heart of the Vatican – the Palace of the Holy Office, once known as the Inquisition, charged – not so strangely on reflection – with the twin roles of ensuring that the doctrine of the faith is taught and transmitted faithfully and with bringing Christian bodies that are outside catholic communion within that communion. I stated that we were not there because of our experience of the Catholic Church. We had not always experienced it as a good thing, although often we had. We were not there because of our attraction to it, although indeed we were attracted. We were there because of Truth. We were there because Jesus Christ demanded unity of his followers, and unity with Peter’s successor was where unity had always begun, from those remote days of the Councils of Chalcedon and Nicaea and Ephesus, to the just signed agreement on the Petrine Ministry with Holy Orthodoxy in Ravenna.

We will study the Apostolic Constitution in the sessions of Synod that follow.

In the meantime, I conclude by summarising again the things that we must do if our children and grandchildren are to avoid the stark choice between the apostasy of a liberal – dominated Anglicanism and the ghetto of ever shrinking and dividing Continuing churches.

These times call for a more intense theological formation that must continue throughout our lives. We must be able to explain the Incarnation and Redemption, doctrines at the very heart of our faith, that have not troubled us too much until these times in which the Pope is met by thousands of placards on his arrival in Istanbul, each saying “Jesus Christ is not the Son of God.” We must be fluent again in Greek and Hebrew, the languages of the Bible; in the language of Jesus himself; in Latin, the language of the Fathers of the West and of a liturgy whose bones can still be glimpsed in our Anglican worship. We must have a sustained knowledge of the arts and the sciences, so that the gulf between the Law of Christ and the Business Plan of the pharmaceutical laboratory can be bridged. We must do for our age what *the Imitation of Christ* once did for its generation – create a robust adult holiness. We must become a Communion that prays what we study, and studies what we pray. We must discover the life of mortification, for only through the Cross do we find the One who died on it for us.

And in spite of our very real fears, and with what Cardinal Levada has so beautifully described in his letter to the bishops of our Communion as “the delicate process of discernment that will no doubt need to be embarked upon by many of our Anglican brothers and sisters”, we must achieve unity with the See of Peter, without which our Apostolic teaching is muted and less certain, and our witness blunted. The late Pope, already often called Great, constantly said in the last years of his life, “Jesus did not come down from the Cross.” And he was a man who walked the Stations of the Cross when a critical decision confronted him. In obedience to Jesus’ own prayer “May they be one, Father, as You and I are one...so that the world may know that You have sent Me...”

We will not do this alone. But great movements start in unexpected corners of the Church. We have been a crucial instrument in the creation of the structure that enables Anglicans to live out their God-given Patrimony in the communion of the whole Church. That is an awesome grace. Pray God that you and I will be given the strength!

John Hepworth

Archbishop and Primate

Traditional Anglican Communion

Anglican Catholic Church in Australia