

## Pastoral Associates under Threat

Jacinta Bright

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge my colleague Mary Cameron who wrote so eloquently for this page, about the pastoral care aspect of our ministry as Pastoral Associates. Mary described beautifully the heart from which we come.

What I would like to do here, is explore something of the leadership aspect of our role. We were brought to birth in the late 1980s, in the early shadow of the Second Vatican Council. We were formed for public and responsible collaborative leadership. Just as our heart leads us into mission with the most vulnerable and the searching, so this pastoral heart forms our desire for a vibrant Church, responding to God's mission. It is in this context that we lead.

I have been a Pastoral Associate for 30 years. In my current role, I work alongside my Parish Priest, Steven Rigo. Over the years I have been involved in calling, forming and enabling people for mission, theologically, spiritually and pastorally. This means engaging with school families so that they might see a Church living in the real world as a compassionate and hospitable and curious presence that honours their human reality, rather than only trying to get them back to Mass. I listen with others, to find where the Spirit might be calling us as a Church, and to engage people imaginatively in response.

Many of us have been blessed to have worked alongside Parish Priests who minister with this same real, compassionate, and hospitable heart formed in the wisdom and hope of Vatican II. Sadly however, in recent years a significant number of priests in Melbourne have been formed in a clerical model. This has had a significant effect on the Church because it is an obstacle to the impetus of Vatican II.

In relation to Pastoral Associates, these priests are at times affronted by both women and men who have a vision for a thriving, just and compassionate parish that reaches out to parishioners and the world beyond the parish, in response to the mission God gives us. Having said that, Pastoral Associates are 99% women.

In the last ten or fifteen years, but more particularly in the last five years, we have seen the gradual erosion of that presence in leadership by Pastoral Associates in Melbourne. Many of us have decades of experience and are tertiary qualified, often with degrees in complimentary fields as well as in Theology, Spirituality and Pastoral Ministry. In some respects, this combination of qualification and experience, which includes a well-developed capacity to form relationships pastorally and enables the leadership of parishioners to flourish, can be felt as a threat by some new priests when they come to the parish.

I am often amazed, but not surprised at the way that we, as a Church, can let this happen. I feel disappointed at the feeling of powerlessness that pervades us. However, I do understand the fear that prevents people from speaking up, because if you do, you are surely labelled

prejudicially by those who are protecting the status quo. We are so afraid to venture out – and yet, here we are in the Easter season, having just engaged with the disciples who return to Jerusalem, their fear dropping away as they realize the revolution of power that Easter brings in themselves and for the world.

Returning to the topic of Pastoral Associates. If there was a significant departure of the very people we have formed and educated for ministry – just as we have done for Pastoral Associates with such hope for the future – this would be a serious concern for the Church. In the corporate world such loss of future leadership would be investigated and acted upon. Time, thought, and finances would be invested in order to retain the level of skill and experience, and steps taken to form the next generation in the same vein. But I guess that would only happen if the employees and their roles were valued and if all were focusing on the same mission.

So, what do I see for the future? I am not sure. I know, as many of us do, that we are in a new time with this Coronavirus and we really do not know what our Church will look like once the social distancing is diminished or finishes. What I hope is that with the renewed sense of what is important in life, and with the need that will arise to resettle ourselves, we won't go back to business as before, but will find a new direction – one that might be more open to freedom and hope. I hope that the Plenary Council will surprise us and come with an Easter energy, but I am not so sure that is a possibility. Daniel Horan, in a recent article in National Catholic Reporter, speaks of a crisis of imagination in the world and in our Church. Perhaps in this time of isolation, instead of keeping the show on the road, we can embrace the darkness, trusting that God will bring new life. But like the disciples, it will take courage and a feeling of solidarity as we face the unknown in the journey ahead, to place our trust in the Spirit who will inspire us anew.

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