

## Cross Road Forum 2 April 2025

Kevin Liston

### **A. What might the church say to politicians on public issues?**

### **B. How can this be done most effectively?**

Good evening.

First. I would like to acknowledge the Kaurua people whose land we meet on tonight.

Second, I would like to acknowledge the work of our politicians. They are on the frontline in the work of creating a better world. They have enormous responsibilities - at State, Commonwealth and Local Council levels. We often rush into criticism of what they do or do not do or their political views.

MPs and Councillors reflect the wider society and represent that diversity in their policies and programs. It is not an easy task and their commitment has to be respected, whatever we think of their policies.

Thank you, Alex, as the representative here of all Australian politicians. (Alex Dighton was also a speaker that evening)

### **Community of Faith and Church organisation**

My presentation refers mainly to the Catholic church, not because it is most important but it is the one I am most familiar with.

I like to make a distinction between the church organisation and the Community of Faith, a growing reality in Australia.

The role and place of Catholicism, of the Catholic Faith, in Australia is changing. The significance of this is that Catholics now vote from a personal position or conviction rather than in conformity with a church stance.

At the last census 20% of Australians declared themselves to be Catholics – 5 million people. Just 10% are significantly engaged with the church organisation through Mass, sacraments, etc – around 500,000. 2% of the population.

That leaves 4.5 million non-church going Catholics. Registering as Catholic means they have at least some sense of what it is to be Catholic. From my own experience of talking with many of them and reading or hearing about many more, I am sure that a significant proportion, maybe up to half, are inspired and motivated by Catholic faith and values. They have personalised and interiorised these – certainly not discarded them. The Community of Faith I feel at home in includes these as well as people who go to church regularly.

What I have to say here reflects my position as a member of the Community of Faith rather than a view from the institution.

I would like to talk about two of the features that have contributed to the changed role of the Catholic church in Australia – the turn to the personal and understanding of spirituality.

### **The turn to the personal**

Since the mid-1900s, there has been a growing awareness of personal autonomy and agency, a shift towards more focus on the personal and a widespread questioning of passive obedience to authority. This is not simply individualism.

The emphasis on the personal has led to a major rebalancing of attention from the community and social to the personal in relation to how we live our lives. Carl Jung, Karl Rahner, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Gandhi, Bernard Lonergan and Richard Rohr were key figures in promoting this shift by placing a clearer focus on self-awareness, self-knowledge, personal experience and values.

This is not restricted to religious spheres but is part of a universal trend. It is a major feature of the postmodernist critique of institutions, 'handed down' authority, ideology and power. Questioning the basis of religious authority has revealed, in multiple situations and circumstances, the flaws in claims for obedience and, consequently, dismissal of anachronistic spiritual/religious values and credibility.

The turn to a more personal perspective is seen in marketing strategies that personalise advertising, the increasing numbers of independent members of parliament and even in the songs of Taylor Swift.

### **A word on spirituality**

Objectively, spirituality is what we believe in, know, our convictions, values, what we regard as worthwhile and build our lives around.

Subjectively, spirituality refers to how we as subjects draw the threads of our lives together, how we cope with experience, make sense of what know and believe and find purpose in our deciding and choosing, bringing it all into a coherent integration. As such it refers to the spirit of each person, which is not necessarily religious.

It is the way we bring together the various aspects of our lives, exercise agency, get our personal 'ducks in a row,' aligning what we do with what we know and believe, our values, sense of integrity, and our relationships, how we relate to everyone and everything else – family, friends, neighbours, our environment, the universe and God.

Our spirituality expresses who we are. It is not to be restricted to one aspect of life or one layer of our personality but what our lives ultimately add up to. It reflects what each person is.

It is in the integration of the variety of experiences, meanings, values and commitments that we find our personal integrity, our coherence as individuals. In our interactions with others, we discover more of who we are.

This is the thrust, the dynamism of spirituality, of intentional living.

### **The Transformed base of Christian spirituality**

Traditionally, Catholics focused on belief and creeds as the basis for spirituality. Morality and standards of behaviour were derived from the handed-down knowledge provided by Jesus, scriptures and the wise people of the past.

Thanks to developments in psychology, sociology, historical research and other human sciences we now have a clearer understanding of the motivations and inspirations underlying human behaviour.

Through personal experience, our own insights, reasoning and choices, each of us has developed an ability to discern what is good and true in our own circumstances.

Catholics call it a 'Sense of Faith' or conscience. We take responsibility for working out our morality and standards of behaviour for ourselves.

This is the church that I think might have something to say to politicians on public issues and that I can speak for. In fact, we have quite a lot to say.

### **The vision of the Kin'dom of God.**

The Kin-dom – Kin-dom - that I strive and work for is a reality to be worked for in our everyday living rather than through a special or distinct realm of ritual, liturgy and traditional formulas, in hope for a distant future divine intervention or a heavenly paradise.

It is here and now, rooted in social and cultural transformation - a reordering of society and culture characterized by equality, inclusion, and care for the marginalized. It demands a reorientation of values, expressed through love (even of enemies), forgiveness, and care for people in trouble.

It is lived out through acts of nonviolent activism and solidarity with the marginalised and oppressed. It is discussed, dissected, planned for in meetings, conversations over coffee, shared meals, and a multitude of gatherings and celebrations, including though not necessarily, eucharists and sacraments.

We dream of creating a kin'dom where people belong together, cooperate and work together and share both their bounty and needs.

It is a vision for people everywhere cooperating locally, nationally and internationally, creating kin'dom bonds of care and compassion. It envisions communities of equal opportunity and quality of life, living the values of care, compassion, critical thinking. It is the way of non-violence.

It is the vision, message, values and mind of Jesus

### **Working for a better world – the kin-dom.**

The adversarial 'strong man' Syndrome (It is almost always men) is now unashamedly on show. It consists in, media- and money-driven politics, where personal attacks put people down, facts are misrepresented, and any perceived weakness in your opponent is ruthlessly exploited.

It is evil and morally bankrupt. It leads to polarisation, fragmentation and disrespect in human relationships and needs to be called out.

We want our politicians to stand up and say, 'No' to the 'strong man' syndrome, to bullies and others who exploit the weak and vulnerable.

The way to quality lies in mutual respect, attentive listening, inclusion, working for consensus, accepting responsibility and speaking up for justice and what is right. Catholics now call it synodality.

It is practiced in methods such as Cardijn's 'See-Judge-Act', Lonergan's 'Be attentive-Be intelligent-Be reasonable-Be responsible' and the Synod's 'Conversations in the Spirit'.

Our vision of the kingdom is a vision for all people. We insist that politicians, as well as other in positions of responsibility, must:

**On authentic human development:**

Promote the rights and responsibilities of everyone personally and communally, insist on informed and critical thinking on issues such as opportunities and capacity for participation.

Voters must choose leaders who uphold ethical governance, resist the influence of vested interests, and commit to policy-making that serves the common good. A healthy democracy requires politicians who act with honesty and integrity, placing the needs of the people above personal or corporate interests.

On that note, abortion and euthanasia are not simple issues to be collapsed into three-word slogans.

**On social and economic Justice:** Advocate policies that promote social justice, equity and provide a fair living income. Stop the exploitation of poor and voiceless people.

Beyond economic measures, social justice must be embedded in policies that promote equal opportunities in education, employment, and healthcare. We believe that a nation's strength is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens,

**On care for the environment:** The climate crisis remains one of the most urgent moral and ethical challenges of our time. Responsible environmental stewardship, with action on climate change and sustainable practices is required.

We need climate policies that align with the Paris Agreement, invest in green technology, and support communities affected by climate change.

Protecting Earth is a moral imperative that extends beyond politics; it is about ensuring a liveable planet for our children and grandchildren.

**On human rights and refugee protection** – Ending inhumane offshore detention, ensuring humane and fair treatment of asylum seekers, and upholding Australia's commitment to its international human rights obligations.

We want an immigration system that is transparent, fair, and just. Policies should prioritise family reunification, offer pathways to permanent residency, and treat those seeking asylum with the humanity and respect they deserve.

**On First Nations justice** – A just Australia must acknowledge and address the historical and systemic injustices done to First Nations peoples.

Commitment to real action on reconciliation, including implementing the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and programs that have effective impact on improving the well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is required.

### **On leadership with integrity**

Integrity in politics is a major issue. Leadership with integrity demands that leaders do not promise what they cannot achieve and followers do not have unreasonable expectations.

We demand our politicians to be honest with us and we, the rest of us, need to be mature about what is possible.

Leadership with integrity also demands a willingness to tackle the hard questions and stand with the poor and voiceless.

A person is a person regardless of whether they are homeless or living in a mansion, on drugs or in full agency of their lives, in good health or poor and chronically ill.

In a country as wealthy as Australia, it is a scandal that so many live below the poverty line in lives of quiet desperation.

In the church we have seen the devastation caused by secrecy, lack of accountability and cover-up. There is now a strong movement demanding transparency, accountability and evaluation, essential measures in any institution or organisation.

Strong anti-corruption commissions are required in all Australian governments. The ongoing cover-up and equivocation around indigenous matters and the shortage of housing are festering sores, bleeding energy out of our nation until they are faced squarely.

### **In conclusion**

Australia is a great country and Australians are wonderful people. However, if we are to live up to our potential, we, politicians and people, must pull together in refusing to play along with a wishy-washy acceptance of inevitability and mediocrity.

The poor do not have to be with us always. Homelessness is a solvable problem.

### **Moving on to the second question, ‘How can the church speak most effectively to politicians’.**

It is as challenging as the first.

### **What can be done by the Community of Faith?**

Let our voices be heard. Do not wait for someone else to speak for you.

The majority of people of faith are not represented in the public square, other than as members of the church organisation which many of us feel does not adequately reflect our spirituality, values, principles, or personal positions.

There is no single voice for the Community of Faith, nor is there ever likely to be. That is the nature of the emerging reality. As we discern our positions, we will seek information and guidance from sources that we judge to be reliable.

We are all part of the political process and we will vote. As responsible citizens we will consider the policies and programs of the various parties and candidates

As opportunities arise – or we make opportunities – we will question candidates at street-corner and large public meetings and when they come door-knocking. It is imperative that we make our views known as I am trying to do tonight.

Many organisations and groups have or will produce media releases. This is one produced by the Catholic Church

I suggest you also consider the media release put out by the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform – ACCCR. You should have found a copy on your seat. If not, I have some more here.

Thank you for your attention.