

# Shaping the Future of the Church

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These are times of change in the church. You and I could easily make a list of significant changes that have occurred since the Second Vatican Council. And undoubtedly the future will differ from the present. Coming to grips with the future of the church faces us with two questions. First, what is happening in western culture today, especially as regards faith and religious practice? An insightful understanding of the present is critical if we are to think well about the future. And second, as Catholics who strive to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ and his living memory in the tradition of the church, we must ask: how can we faithfully proclaim the gospel in this culture? Or, to put that second question in the language of Vatican II, how can we live in Christ “as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity”?<sup>1</sup>

These are also *difficult* times for the church. As a bishop, my mind and heart are constantly engaged with the questions of discipleship and ministry. No doubt yours are similarly engaged. If ever there was a time when discernment of the Christian calling was simple, it is certainly not now. Yet these are rich times, good times, times of hope, in which God is at work among us. I want to make clear to you during this talk that my optimism is not Pollyannaish—deluded about the difficulties of the present. It is born out of both deep reflection about our culture, and faith in Jesus’

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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, “Lumen Gentium,” n. 1, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner SJ (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:849.

promise to remain with the church. Let us begin by examining the changes taking place in the West today.

### **The Place of Faith Today**

I am optimistic about the future of the church because of God's faithfulness, and also because I believe that there is an openness in Western culture to receive the gospel message. At first glance this may not seem to be the case at all. In fact, many people would characterise our age as moving in the opposite direction, seeing it as far less religious than previous ages. In support of their judgement these people cite declining church attendances, an increasing sector of the population who see themselves as atheists, and a range of other factors. This sense of decline or loss pervades reflection about the place of religion today, both popularly and in the academic sphere. But I am persuaded that given closer attention, this picture of decline does not accurately represent the social and cultural changes in the West today.

During my time as Bishop of Wollongong and since, my attention has been drawn to the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor has taught principally at Oxford and at McGill University, Montreal. His philosophical interests are broad but moral and political philosophy feature strongly among them. He is highly regarded by his peers, even those with whom he robustly disagrees. For over a decade now, the focus of Taylor's research has been on the place of religion in the West. He titled his 1999 Gifford lectures, *Living in a Secular Age?* Since that time he has published a number of articles and lectures on this topic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See especially his Institute for Human Sciences Vienna Lecture Series, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2002); "Closed World Structures," in *Religion after Metaphysics*, ed. Mark A Wrathall (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, 2003), 47-68; and "Religious Mobilizations," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 281-300.

You may have heard through the media last month that Taylor was awarded the 2007 Templeton Prize, the world's most highly endowed award for intellectual achievement. He gained it for his work on the place of religion today. This September, Harvard University Press will publish his major work on secularisation, a work to rival his magisterial *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. The new book is a development of his Gifford lectures; expanded in both size and scope. I have invited Charles Taylor to lead a conference and give several lectures in Adelaide this December. I hope that the key leaders from your diocese will join us for what will surely prove to be a stimulating and enlightening event.

Taylor is dissatisfied with accounts of secularization that characterise it principally as a falling off of religious belief and practice. This type of account takes many forms that, for example, align the rise of science, or of Enlightenment reason and freedom, or the findings of Darwin with a subsequent decline in the practice of faith. But for Taylor, these are not adequate explanations for why people have abandoned their faith. He calls these pictures of decline 'subtraction stories,' arguing that they do not account for the large cultural shifts in self-understanding that mark the last few centuries and undergird the place that religion has now taken and the way in which it has come to be understood.

Taylor's account focuses on what he calls 'the conditions of belief.' His is a cultural account, which explores the background understandings of the human person, society, politics and religion that have developed through the last millennium. These new understandings were instigated by thinkers like John Locke and gradually, over several generations, became part of the background understanding of the culture.

These understandings of self and society have certainly contributed to a worldview in which it is now possible for a considerable proportion of the population to conceive of a world without God, but they were often shaped by Christian understandings, and sometimes have led Christians to a deeper appreciation of the meaning of the gospel, which could have only be achieved in this new situation. It is Taylor's argument that both belief and unbelief have taken new forms in our day. So, to understand the conditions of belief today, it is necessary to trace the way in which the contemporary place of religion has emerged out of earlier forms. Taylor gives a very detailed account of this transformation. Within the constraints of this talk, I can only describe his account in the broadest of terms.

As Taylor sees it, the place of religion today has its origins in the history of at least the past millennium.<sup>3</sup> He identifies three major phases in this period: medieval, modern and contemporary. The medieval worldview was vastly different from our own: society was permeated with explicit reference to the sacred, and the sacred was seen in strong contrast to the profane. Taylor calls the medieval world 'enchanted,' in contrast to Max Weber's view of ours as 'disenchanted.' In the medieval world, particular places, people and events connected the population to the divine. Political society itself was heavily reliant on the presence of the divine.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the medieval synthesis dissolved with the emergence of new understandings of the human person and society—a changing moral order. In this modern period, humans were not understood primarily as agents

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor sketches this argument in *Varieties of Religion*, chapter 3. A full account is forthcoming in: *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2007).

embedded in society and subsequently the cosmos—as they had been in the medieval era. Rather, they were increasingly seen as disembedded individuals who come together and whose work contributes to the good of all. Taylor calls this modern worldview ‘the society of mutual benefit.’<sup>4</sup> In the context of this view of the person in society, which places far greater emphasis on the desires and plans of each individual, forcing religious belief makes very little sense—belief can only be voluntary. Yet high levels of belief and practice were sustained. The modern moral order also relied on an understanding of God acting in the world through design. In Taylor’s words, there is a strong sense that “the universe declares the glory of God ... evident in its design, its beauty, its regularity, but also in its having evidently been shaped to conduce to the welfare of God’s creatures, particularly ourselves.”<sup>5</sup> God was present in the common life of the modern period to the extent that the society they built was modelled on God’s design.

Further dramatic cultural changes have occurred since the 1960s, resulting in new patterns of religious belief. Motivating the range of social practices that mark our age, Taylor identifies a development of the culture of individualism. A strong emphasis on individual choice was already evident in the modern moral order but what marks the contemporary period, in Taylor’s view, is an “expressive” individualism.<sup>6</sup>

Expressivism originated in the Romantic movement of the late-eighteenth century and influenced the lives of nineteenth century artists and intellectuals. It is Taylor’s argument that in our time this kind of self-orientation has become a mass phenomenon. The fundamental understanding at work is, “that each of us has his or

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor develops this basic hypothesis in: *Modern Social Imaginaries*, ed. Dilip Gaonkar, Jane Kramer, Benjamin Lee and Michael Warner, *Public Planet Books* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *Varieties of Religion*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Varieties of Religion*, 80.

her own way of realizing one's own humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religions or political authority."<sup>7</sup> Conforming for conformity's sake not only makes little sense in this outlook, it amounts to an abandonment of one's own personal journey.

In our expressivist culture, the strong links between society and the sacred that characterised both the medieval and modern periods are no longer possible: what is relevant for me may have no connection with society living out God's design. In the expressivist outlook, the place of choice in religious practice is taken a step beyond the modern view. Taylor puts it in these terms: "The religious life or practice that I become part of not only must be my choice, but must speak to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this."<sup>8</sup>

Taylor's cultural account traces a dramatic change in the place of religion in the West. Today's expressivist worldview certainly confronts the church with some serious challenges; nonetheless it also opens new possibilities for the practice of faith.

### **Some Implications of Expressivist Culture for Christian Faith**

I want to move on now and briefly consider some of the implications of Taylor's account for the church. Four implications stand out.

*First*, the background understandings and the social structures of the medieval and modern periods that enabled the church to proclaim the gospel to entire peoples and

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Varieties of Religion*, 83.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Varieties of Religion*, 94.

bring about their conversion no longer exist. There is now no intrinsic link between belief and the state. And not only does this mean that the broad conversion of whole peoples is no longer possible; in our day neither is it desirable. Individual freedom, democracy and human rights have now been enthusiastically embraced, and this must be regarded as an advance for humanity. Some in the church, for whom our age is one which has turned away from God, hark back to a previous age and would like to take us back there. No doubt they would like to effect this change while holding on to democracy and human rights. But Taylor's account makes it clear that the place of religion has changed amidst massive cultural change. Often this cultural change was inspired by Christian notions. Early in the twenty-first century we find ourselves in a new culture, motivated by the value of expressivism amongst other values. In this new time, it is impossible to return to the enchanted medieval age or the modern age shaped by the value of design.

*Second*, whilst our expressivist culture has clear limitations, and I will turn to them shortly, I think that it should also be seen as an authentic development of the gospel way of life. Its emphasis is not at all foreign to the Christian tradition. I am not suggesting here that we assume an easy embrace of expressivist culture. Rather, as the result of a careful discernment of what in this culture authentically develops the gospel way of life and what distorts or negates, I believe that we will find much that falls into the first category. Even though diminishing congregations may heighten believers' concerns about the emerging culture, a steady look at the expressivist self-understanding in the light of Christian faith finds an authentic development of the gospel ethic amidst dangerous distortions.

If, for example, we examine Augustine's understanding of the believer's journey to God, we find a remarkable resonance with the expressivist worldview. I do not have the time to present a detailed account of Augustine's theology of faith here, but allow me to summarise. When Augustine reflects on the journey of his own life, he writes of it as one of profound searching, a search that engages his whole being—the journey of a restless heart.<sup>9</sup> And he achieves some sense of having arrived, or at least the knowledge that he is on the right path, in a garden at Milan; in an encounter that engages his whole being. Addressing God, he writes of that event:

You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew I my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.<sup>10</sup>

For Augustine, faith engages the whole person, mind, will and heart. It necessarily involves an act of reason—the ability to see the divinely given order in all of creation. But Augustine's major contribution to the Christian understanding of faith is his conviction that the surest path to God leads within. Not only is God to be found in the created world, where God undoubtedly is present, but also in the foundations of the person—in the dynamic of human knowing.

Those few sentences cannot convey the richness and complexity of Augustine's theology of faith, but they do sketch its main lines and I'm sure that you get the picture. I simply want to note here that some of the main emphases of expressivist

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<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), I. i (1).

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, X. xxvii (38).

individualism resonate with Augustine's view of the path to God, and are only possible because of Augustine. I pointed out above that the notion that each person must find their own way of living out their humanity is central to expressivist self-understanding. In this worldview, therefore, each person's faith must not only be chosen by them, it must 'speak' to them—it must make sense of their spiritual journey as they see it. Augustine's understanding of the journey to God in the intimacy of self-presence shares the same understanding that a person's faith takes them within and must make sense of their inner world. A set of beliefs imposed by an external authority that fails to make sense of the believer's inner world cannot be called faith in Augustine's understanding of the term. There is a further dimension of the believer's journey to God in Augustine's understanding, a decentering turn: the truth we find is not *in us*; rather we find the truth *in God*. The believer does not generate their relationship with God from within. In summary, a significant implication of Taylor's analysis is that the expressivist worldview allows at a cultural level the journey of faith envisaged by Augustine. Of course, expressivism also opens the door to some shallow and undemanding spiritual options.

*Third*, since the spiritual is no longer intrinsically related to political society, leading people to faith can only take place through the conversion of individual hearts and minds. Prospective believers must be led to discover that the gospel makes best sense of their lives. For believers, the challenge is to proclaim the gospel so that those whom we encounter may appropriate it as the deepest truth of their own spiritual journey. I will develop this theme a little later. Yet the individual journey to God does not mean that in our time there cannot be collective connections, for example in the

church, but simply that the paths to those connections will be our own individual paths.

*Fourth*, as with every age, the expressivist culture has its limitations, the most obvious being a tendency toward superficial expressions of the spiritual. A proliferation of shallow and undemanding spiritual options is on offer today, and a common thread through each of these options seems to be an emphasis on the *choice* of the seeker. It is as if the seeker is saying: “this is *my* channel to the beyond because *I* choose it” (my choosing it makes it so). From the perspective of the rich history of the community of faith, much of the wisdom of those travelling the spiritual path seems to have evaporated in these shallow forms. Nonetheless, it is a limitation with which we must deal. At least those seekers are on the path, searching, I believe, for the love of God. They offer us an opportunity to explore with them the many ways in which their lives touch the mystery of God. A second limitation of the expressivist culture concerns our common life. When the focus is on individual seekers finding their own paths, maintaining social frameworks becomes increasingly difficult.

### **The Church in an Expressivist Culture**

You and I—members of the church community—are called to proclaim the gospel in this culture. But in an expressivist culture, what shape will our proclamation take? How can we best proclaim the gospel today? It’s this question with which I will conclude. It’s a difficult question; one with which our church struggles. Over recent decades it has been approached in a polemical fashion, and the polemic has taken two forms. I believe that neither side of this polemic serves us well. One side condemns contemporary culture as a culture of decay, citing limitations that I have already identified—the loss of meaning and the fading of moral horizons—in order to return

to an earlier, supposedly godlier culture. The other side, equally polemical, privileges the present, regarding it as the highpoint of western history—singling out, for example, the triumph of human rights and the rise of democracy—and seeks to reshape Christian faith in the light of these ideals. But while both of these polemical forms accurately identify some facets of contemporary culture, they both fail to identify the essential nature of the development I discussed earlier. The first mistakes some of the limitations of contemporary culture for the broad cultural change itself; the second has lost sight of the significance for our world of the great transformation to which Christian faith calls us—to open human life to the divine. And neither will we have understood our proclamatory task if we opt for a simple trade-off between the advantages and costs of both forms of this polemic. Rather, as I said a few moments ago, Taylor’s analysis shows that the expressivist worldview allows at a cultural level the journey of faith envisaged by Augustine.

So, how best to proclaim the gospel? We will proclaim the gospel both by the lives we lead and by our communication with others. By living faithful, vibrant, intelligent Christian lives, in dialogue with the questions of our day, the gospel will be powerfully expressed to those with whom we share the planet. And as a believing community, we must also attend to those outside the community. In an expressivist age, believers must recognise the individual quest of every person and lead each one to discover the gospel as God’s clearest word about their lives, and the community of Jesus’ disciples as the place where his life is made most manifest in the world today. Forcing religious belief makes no sense in this culture. The faith community must lead others to the discovery that the gospel makes sense of their being.

Such an understanding places great weight on the task of religious and moral formation within the church. Our Catholic schools have an important role to play here but the task is much wider. The faith formation of adults is critical. Only through good biblical and theological education will Catholics be able to express their faith in a way that responds to the questions of the day. Biblical and theological education is particularly important for the lay people who will increasingly minister to the needs of the faith community as pastoral associates, chaplains and administrators like you.

World Youth Day 2008 provides us with an opportunity to shape the future of the church in Australia. It has a great capacity to engage young Catholics. We must do all that we can to participate in the program and maximise the involvement of our young people. Parallel to World Youth Day, I believe that we should initiate a pastoral process to engage all members of the Australian Catholic community. This process would identify priorities for the Australian church and bring to life the means by which those priorities would be implemented. The example of the Italian Episcopal Conference is helpful here. Their 10 year plan is the spine around which the pastoral plans and initiatives of the first decade of the third millennium are to be built.

Finally, you would not be surprised by my suggestion that the 1983 Code of Canon Law contains much that has yet to be appropriated by our community. We can shape our community by implementing the Code's directive to increase the participation of Christ's faithful in the life of the church.

As administrators, you have an important role to play in ensuring that the church responds faithfully to its call to proclaim the Gospel. It is a call to which you must

respond both personally and professionally. Personally, you are called to live vibrant, faithful, intelligent Christian lives, engaged with the questions of our age. And professionally, it is your responsibility to assist the bishop in ensuring that God's liberating word in Jesus Christ is lived within the church and made known to the world.

I want to leave you with some words from Fr Brian Lucas, General Secretary to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. In an article on Catholic identity and mission he pleads for a rich and integrated understanding of the church's mission – one which values the *whole* Catholic tradition. This is how he puts it:

Just as there can be an overemphasis on the Word which is not accompanied by action so there can be an overemphasis on action.

Without a secure grounding in prayer and the Church's sacramental life, 'good works' become indistinguishable from humanist or secular philanthropy. This also distorts Catholic identity. Striving for social justice, or service of the poor, can become excuses for some to abandon ecclesial structures. These, they claim, restrict freedom. Doctrine is unnecessary. There is no time for prayer or liturgy. Some want a 'churchless Christianity'. A false dichotomy is established setting the so-called church of the bishops against the so-called grassroots church, or church of the poor. The result, however, is that the 'church of the poor' is no longer the church at all.

Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta had a saying: 'The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; the fruit of love

is service'. Sustainable service, the praxis of Christian charity, is grounded in prayer and the sacramental life of the community of faith.<sup>11</sup>

Thank you.

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<sup>11</sup> Brian Lucas, "Mission and Identity of Faith-based Organisations – The Role of Bishops," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 84, no. 1 (January 2007): 45-55, at 55.