

## *The Great Disaffiliation Part I*

Following the Second World War, while the Catholic Church in Africa and Latin America grew rapidly, in the West it was the opposite. There the Church suffered a massive haemorrhage of membership. Only when the losses reached alarming proportions were the apathy and presumption challenged and the big questions raised in earnest.

In Australia, for example, during the period 1954 – 2014, the percentage of Catholics participating relative to their absolute numbers has dropped from 74% to just below 11 %. The biggest single drop-out rate occurred between 1954 and 1961 when the participation rate declined from 74% to 53 %. The period from 1961 to 1978 saw a further decline of 23%. The figure from 1978 to the present indicates another massive slide in the participation rate from 30% to 10.6% or a fall of 19.4%. (1)

There are many explanations for this massive exodus from Catholic pews during just over sixty years. Beginning with this article and continuing until June, I will offer some analysis of what has become a disastrous situation for the Western membership of the Church and particularly for Catholics in Australia.

### *External Factors*

The large scale planned migration from post 1945 Europe contributed significantly to Australia's post war population boom which serviced and benefited from unprecedented economic growth and national expansion. It was during these boom years that Australia came to be known as 'the Lucky Country.' This moniker set the tone for a new social and demographic profile of the nation.

Rapid and large-scale economic growth had a myriad of consequences and among these was geographic and social mobility. People in increasing numbers found themselves improving their economic prospects at the cost of stability of living arrangements. Since the 1960s in particular, Australia has undergone large on-going demographic shifts. In recent years for example, nearly two million Australians have changed their residential addresses every year.

This loss of long term, local stability occasioned by internal migration has had profound consequences for small towns and suburban social groups across the board. Stress on local, neighbourhood communities is part of the opportunity cost of a constantly mobile population. From a religious point of view, local parish life, identity and practice have been profoundly affected by the great post-War demographic shifts. As people moved, the nuclear family became distanced from the extended family and tended to become private and socially anonymous in their new location. (2)

That said, ongoing 'tribal' Catholic memory and loyalty to a former parish have tended to express themselves in a strong desire for the rituals of belonging at a distance without ongoing commitment locally. Some religious observers have coined the expression 'the sociological Sacraments.' While involving the rituals of Baptism, Confirmation, first Communion, perhaps Weddings and Funerals too, they have become essentially social rites of passage largely devoid of a significant faith dimension.

## ***Internal Factors***

Only now, after the last half a century has it become possible to recognise fully the enormous scope and rapidity of human change and readjustment following WWI and WWII. This short period of human history witnessed unimaginable loss of life, the destruction of nations and social dislocation on an unprecedented scale.

A world of absolute certitude was shattered and with it a great deal of human trust. Even the reputation of God took a hammering. The old theodicy and catechism proved utterly inadequate and needed fundamental revision. Deep seated popular cynicism was fuelled by the conviction that Church authorities had not only acquiesced in conspiracies to plan and execute aggressive wars but had actively validated, blessed and supported them. In some instances, these included the greatest of all crimes against humanity, genocide.

People of faith who had witnessed the depths of naked brutality, barbarity, inhumanity and massive destruction of nations came to realise just how trivialised evil and sin had become in the Church's preaching and catechesis. Significantly too, prolonged exposure to unimaginable evil generated by years of conflict dulled people's fear of a wrathful God and even the fear of hell itself. After the experience of total war, people could not imagine that hell could possibly be worse than what they had been through. Clericalism's old fear card-trick had lost its value. That game was over.

The major organised religious Traditions were facing a new age of scepticism, agnosticism and atheism. Shortly before his untimely death, Albert Camus gave a lecture to the Dominican theologians at their house of studies, *Le Saulchoir* in Belgium. When one student asked the author whether or not he was an atheist, Camus replied, "I do not deny the existence of God. I merely affirm God's absence." Camus probably spoke for millions with that remark.

A new Catechesis, fresh ways of preaching the Gospel message had to be found which would attract and persuade people without indoctrinating and infantilizing them. Integral to this challenge was a widespread loss of confidence in the ability or willingness of the Magisterium to acknowledge and teach the difference between what is core and what is secondary would prove decisive. This would turn out to be the great work of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

Most people who have disengaged from regular Church practise have most likely not made a considered, conscious decision to do so. Empirical data show that the principal reasons given for gradual estrangement from Church life and faith practise are: painful experiences and lasting resentments caused by bishops, priests, religious or lay employees of the Church; irregularity in private living arrangements such as cohabitation with the knowledge that it is regarded as immoral in Church theology and Law; divorce, remarriage with little or no possible resolution in Canon Law.

Catholics know full well that the Church does not have a democratic form of governance but they still tend to do their Catholic thinking like people in a democracy. Vatican II demanded

that the Bishops initiate and maintain structures of accountability and transparency which were unheard of before the Council. It was not unreasonable consequently for the Catholics to desire a more significant say and participation in the governance of the Church. They have come to expect from their Church leaders what they expect from their elected secular representatives. That includes the highest levels of transparency, accountability along with the reasonable expectation that appropriate changes and adaptations will be made according to the spirit of Christ and his Gospel.

Pope Francis' call to the entire Church to examine and discuss the real state of Catholic family life along with its many the challenges is both timely and welcome. It has not been uncommon at all over the past year or so to hear people in many areas of Catholic life to express the view that the next twelve months will be critically decisive for the Church's future. The stakes are high and failure to act decisively in the cause of reconciliation and renewal could mean almost certain, irreversible damage to an already wounded and fragile Church. With very good reason Francis has described the Church as a 'field hospital.' (3)

From this month through to June, a series of reflections will be offered on critically important issues ranging from the dramatic exodus of Church members, its causation, the resultant Catholic Diaspora and some suggestions on possible grounds for hope.

Part II – April: *Accelerated disaffiliation during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, 1978-2013.*

Part III – May: *Where have they all gone?*

Part IV – June: *Are there grounds for hope with the Francis effect?*

Notes:

- 1) Peter Wilkinson, "Who goes to Mass in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" *The Swag*, 21, 3 and republished in *Catholica Forum*, 06 September 2013. (Linked [here](#)).
- 2) Chris McDonnell, "Our evangelisation plans rest on outdated assumptions," *The Tablet*, 25 February, 2015. (Linked [here](#))
- 3) Homily on 'Servants of the Kingdom' at a morning Mass in the Santa Marta Chapel (Linked [here](#)).

Some further reading on the great Exodus:

Damon Linker, "Why churches should brace for a mass exodus of the faithful," March 24, 2014 (Linked [here](#)) Linker makes some interesting gender observations in this piece which are relevant to any discussion about the levels of practice retention of Catholics.

Dagmar Breitenbach, "German Catholics leave Church in droves," *DW Top Stories*, 06/04/11.(Linked [here](#)). *Disaffiliation* or *Delisting* has enormous implications for the financial health of the German Catholic Church because of the so-called 'Church tax.'

Thomas Baker, “Why young people are leaving the Church in such numbers,” *Global Pulse*, October 10, 2014. (Link [here](#))

Simon Bullivant, “Put the New Evangelization on hold,” *Catholic Herald*, 19 February 2015. (Linked [here](#))

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