



Catholic Social Services
Australia

SPEECH

NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2007

McCOSKER ORATION 2007

COFFS HARBOUR

TUESDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 2007

**BISHOP PAT POWER, BISHOP OF THE CANBERRA GOULBURN
ARCHDIOCESE**

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Meeting on September the eleventh 2007, we might ask what should be our focus as Catholic Social Services Australia.

This question could be asked of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, formerly a member of the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission and currently author of a challenging book calling for reform in the Catholic Church. We could turn to Monsignor Frank McCosker who has played such a central role in the development of Catholic social welfare policy and practice in this country. We might reach out more broadly to Pope John XXIII whose vision led to the convocation of the Second Vatican Council, the teaching of which gives so much affirmation and direction to our mission.

The visionary Pope, the reforming bishop and the imaginative priest would each answer in his own way but I am sure that at the heart of their advice to us would be to 'read the signs of the times'. They would recognise the potential of Catholic Social Services Australia to play a prophetic role in shaping the future of the Catholic Church in this country and in so doing to advance the betterment of Australian society as a whole.

Pope John XXIII in his opening speech to the Second Vatican Council made it clear that the Church was moving from defensive mode to a more open, confident and joyful proclamation of the message of Jesus. He explicitly warned against the 'prophets of gloom' who would seek to undermine the reforms of the ecumenical council. In his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in terris*, the Pope used the expression 'signs of the times' in reference to international relations and world peace.

But it was in one of the Council's final and landmark documents, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, that 'signs of the times' really came to the fore. The bishops of Vatican II saw the Church deeply immersed in the heart of

humanity. Like Jesus himself the Church must stand in solidarity with the people of this world. The opening words of the Constitution proclaim this boldly:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are in any way poor or afflicted, these too must be the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of all the followers of Christ.

As the Constitution unfolds, it challenges us to communicate the Gospel message to today's world.

In every age, the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live.... Ours is a new age of history with profound and rapid changes gradually spreading to all corners of the earth. (#4)

Those familiar with the YCW method of 'see, judge and act' will recognise the influence of Joseph Cardijn, the founder of the Young Christian Workers. Their method is to seek out the issues facing young workers, reflect on them in the light of the Gospel and set about collaboratively to change things for the better. At the heart of all they do is the promotion of human dignity.

The Second Vatican Council enabled the Catholic Church to engage with contemporary culture, challenged it to seek closer communion with other Christians and to pray and work in collaboration with them. It sought to be in dialogue with other believers and with non-believers. It enabled the liturgy to be celebrated in the language of the people and called on all its members to take an active part in the life of the Church. No longer was the role of lay people simply to 'pray, pay and obey'. Human and religious freedom was promoted, as was the primacy of conscience. The notions of collegiality and dialogue were very much part of the aspirations of the Council. John XXIII's successor, Paul VI, wrote a wonderful encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* which spelt out the qualities of respectful listening dialogue. How urgent is that message in today's world.

It saddens me that in recent times, the 'prophets of gloom' whom Pope John XXIII warned against are exerting more and more influence within the life of the Church. There are people who would seek to wind back the reforms of Vatican II. However, I always point out that we should not allow their negativity to obscure the many expressions of the vitality of the Church at the grassroots. I am sure that blessed Pope John XXIII would give a tick of approval to the aspirations and the achievements of the people and agencies which make up Catholic Social Services Australia.

It was the earthiness of Pope John XXIII which appealed to so many people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. That same quality expressed very differently shone through the person of Frank McCosker.

The son of a baker, he grew up in country New South Wales and joined the PMG before entering the seminary and being ordained to the priesthood in 1931. "Mac" as he was affectionately known in adult life never lost the common touch. This was beautifully illustrated by Fr John Usher who spoke about his much loved mentor at his funeral Mass in February 1996. Fr McCosker's first years as a priest where he was chaplain to Callan Park mental institution helped to shape his future ministry. Soon after he was very much part of 'Catholic Action' promoting various forms of lay apostolate in the Archdiocese of Sydney. Later as an army chaplain serving in New Guinea, he saw life at its best and its worst.

Damian Gleeson's thesis gives many insights into the challenges Fr McCosker faced as he read the signs of the times in relation to social welfare in the Archdiocese of Sydney and in wider Australia.

Not the least of his problems were financial. That will probably come as no surprise to this audience. He also had the task of convincing his Archbishop, Cardinal Gilroy and his auxiliaries of certain strategies in the face of opposing advice being given from other quarters. At a time when the contribution of women to the life of the Church was not always acclaimed, McCosker welcomed the talents of such outstanding people as Norma Parker, Mary Lewis, Pamela Riddle, Dorothy O'Halloran and Margaret McHardy. He also gave assistance to and benefited from the work of the Religious Orders in the welfare sphere.

Gleeson's thesis also notes McCosker's concerns where there was a lack of professionalism and the training programs he introduced to overcome the problem. As well, he highlights Monsignor McCosker's promotion of cooperation between voluntary and professional models of welfare in the Australian Church. Monsignor McCosker was a 'big picture' man and the Church in Australia will be forever in his debt for the way he positioned it to be a credible voice in field of social welfare. Yet he never lost sight of the fact that it is people who matter.

Is there a danger in today's climate with so many demands of compliance from government and even church that we become so 'professional' that we lose sight of the human persons involved? Does a whole variety of services guarantee that many people will not 'fall between the cracks'? Do those of us in positions of leadership and authority remain close to people at the 'grass-roots', ready to listen to their stories of pain, abuse and neglect?

One leader who has listened and remained in touch with his people is Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, the retired auxiliary bishop of Sydney. Having entered the seminary at the tender age of 12, he was later sent to Propaganda Fide College in Rome for the completion of his seminary studies and ordained to the priesthood in 1960. Although he has degrees in Philosophy and Theology and a great love for and knowledge of Scripture, it is his Doctorate in Canon Law which gave direction to much of his priestly life where he made an immense contribution to the life of the Australian Church on the matrimonial tribunal.

Here he listened to heart-rending stories of people seeking annulments of their marriage; stories which not only related to a broken marriage but very often were

life-long sagas of misfortune and deprivation. In his tribunal work he did much to promote the Church's ideal of justice tempered with mercy and compassion.

Ordained bishop in 1984, his advice and guidance was sought by his brother bishops on a whole range of issues. He was chosen to represent them at two world-wide Synods of bishops and a number of other international forums.

But his major contribution came in the late 1980s when the Church first began to be aware of the horror of sexual abuse within its ranks. By the mid-1990s it was becoming obvious that immense damage had been done to a significant number of people at the hands of church personnel. Often it was Centacare and other church agencies who first received the complaints from victims and their families.

Geoffrey Robinson exercised a brave leadership role in helping the bishops and the leaders of religious orders to address the issues. *Towards Healing*, the procedures for responding to complaints of abuse and *Integrity in Ministry*, a code of conduct for clergy and religious were the principal documents produced as part of the Catholic church's response to the terrible chapter in its history. I do not have to tell you how far reaching have been the consequences of abuse within the Church and indeed in other parts of society.

Bishop Robinson's newly published book, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church* is a brave exposition of what the author judges to be some of the root causes of abuse. He sees this crisis as an opportunity for the whole Church to 'read the signs of the times' in thoroughly re-examining whole areas of its life which are in need of reform.

He pleads for open and honest discussion, painful though it might be. Ultimately, he recognises that it is the truth which sets us free. In no area of Church life should we back away from the hard questions. At this point in the history of Catholic Social Services Australia we are at a 'kairos' moment, a time of challenge and risk but also of great hope and opportunity. Bishop Robinson would be telling his old colleagues to face up to this moment with courage and confidence and in a spirit of dialogue and mutual trust.

It is not without significance that we meet on September 11, the day which saw the terrorist attacks in the United States six years ago, a day which has influenced so many subsequent attitudes and policies and the lives of countless people.

This time last year I was asked by the *Canberra Times* to write an op ed article on peace. Bear with me if I quote from that article because I think some of it has relevance to our aspirations for Catholic Social Services Australia.

Since the terrible events of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush and his supporters have been outdoing each other in proclaiming a war on terror. I have never understood exactly what such a war involves, apart from increasing fear in every part of society. It seems to me that it is much more constructive to talk about a war on poverty, rather than a war on terror. With all the rhetoric of the past five years, it obvious that terrorism is now a much greater threat

because the divide between 'them and us' has grown much greater. The notion that one side can be beaten into submission by the other is a recipe for conflict rather than peace. It builds up a climate of fear, hate and suspicion alienating rather than bringing people together.

The UN Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000, aim at implementation by 2015. They offer a way to peace, security, development, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all peoples. They seek to:

- *Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*
- *Achieve universal primary education*
- *Promote gender equality and empower women*
- *Reduce child mortality*
- *Improve mental health*
- *Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases*
- *Ensure environmental sustainability*
- *Develop a global partnership for development.*

There are no 'quick fixes' for the world's problems but I take heart in the adage 'think globally; act locally'.

I must say that I very much admired Frank Quinlan's enunciation of Catholic Social Services Australia's response to the Government's measures to tackle the problems of child abuse in aboriginal communities. Such an approach recognises fundamental human rights, the human dignity of every person and community and the need to address the complexities of so many such issues. It is, moreover, a measured voice when so many elements such as the tabloid press are trotting out simplistic remedies.

It is no empty claim when CSSA's discussion paper states:

Our voice has earned a place in the public discourse of the country on issues affecting the lives of people who are poor and marginalised including domestic violence, taxation, unemployment and work family balance.

The same paper

proposes substantial change to Catholic Social Services Australia. The proposed changes would see its continued growth into an organisation recognised primarily for its success in social policy development and advocacy for those people who are poor and marginalised. Its authenticity and effectiveness in this task will be drawn from the experience of the high quality programs and services offered by its members.

In our response, Pope John XXIII, Monsignor Frank McCosker and Bishop Geoffrey Robinson would point us to the person of Jesus who not only stood up for the most vulnerable people of his time but became one of them. They would

urge us to bring the best of the Church's tradition especially its social teaching to bear on our future direction.

They would encourage us to 'read the signs of the times'; to carefully identify our areas of concern and competence; to deliberate wisely in the light of the Gospel and to act decisively and courageously.

I am proud, honoured and humbled to part of this noble endeavour.

With God's grace may it prosper.

(Bishop) Pat Power
Coffs Harbour, 11 September 2007

CONTACT Judith Tokley 0408 824 306 / 02 6285 1366