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***For Christ's Sake: End Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church ... for Good*, by Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Melbourne, Garratt Publishing, 32 Glenvale Crescent, Melbourne, Victoria, 3170: Publication date, 2013. A\$19.95.**

Patrick FitzGerald Hutchings

Christ's Name is often taken in vain, but not in this book-title. It is at once a prayer, and a cry of anguish. Robinson was deputed to deal with the whole abuse problem in the Arch-Diocese of Sydney, and knows horrid things at first hand: abuse and clerical cover-ups, both.

Bishop Robinson's book is practical – if perhaps at the time of publication unduly sanguine. He calls, in Chapter 13 for 'A New Council for a New Church' to enable to get the problem of sexual abuse fixed, and for the Church to get out of its self-constructed 'prison of the past'ⁱ. The authoritarian Church to date has not squarely faced, and not by any means fixed, the sexual abuse problem. It can do this Robinson argues only if it changes both its ways and its structures. Such a change Robinson suggests could happen iff there were a new Council in which the laity were represented. Published in the Pontificate of H.H. Benedict XVI *For Christ's Sake* was likely to be ignored. Now with H.H. Pope Francis enthroned and Benedict *emeritus* there is a glimmer of hope. Hope that a new Council might be called to deal with the scandals of (a) sexual abuse and, (b) its being swept under the carpet to 'save' the reputation of the Catholic Church. The abuse and the attempts at face-saving have occasioned a Parliamentary Commission in Victoria, Australiaⁱⁱ where this review is written, and all but emptied the pews in Catholic Éire. We still await the Victorian Commission's report, and that of a similar Commission just recently opened in Belfast.

Bishop Robinson bases the suggestion of a Council both clerical and lay on the notions of the collegiality of bishops and of the *sensus fidei* of the whole Church – the lay as well as the priested (see Chapter 12). Both of these – old – ideas were strongly reaffirmed by Vatican II. Robinson writes:

The Second Vatican Council [1962-1965] spoke of '... the holding of Councils in order to settle conjointly, in a decision rendered balanced and equitable *by the advice of many*, all questions of major importance' (no.22).

Whether or not the expression ‘the advice of many’ was intended to include lay with clerical is open to speculation. But Robinson is right. The Church as lately run by various clerics has lost its prestige. Papal ‘authority’ is not easily to be entangled from prestige, credibility and other popular (but powerful) ideas.

Further: as far as laypersons and pastoral-priests are concerned the Church’s teachings on sexual matters are by and large quietly ignored. In Robinson’s opinion these are (i) doubtfully based; (ii) and unlikely to form part of the *sensus fidei* of laypersons consulted. And (iv) they ought to be relooked at. Robinson speculates that a revisiting of e.g. the stuff about contraception might even lead to ‘[a] change of teachings’ (p.119). He adds ‘teachings in which much papal prestige has been invested’ (loc. cit.). Of this more later.

Pages 141ff of *For Christ’s Sake* – are – as we indicated above in the first sentences of this review – *practical*. On p.141 Robinson gives the wording of a ‘Petition for a Council’ which includes ‘An essential part of this call is that the laity of the whole world should have a major voice in the Council (*for it is our children who have been abused or put at risk*) [Italic added]. The Petition asks that the following subjects be included:

- Seeking to remove all elements of a religion based on fear
- Immaturity in moral thinking
- The teachings of the Church on sexual morality
- The part played in abuse by celibacy, especially obligatory celibacy
- The need for a strong feminine influence in every aspect of the Church
- The idea that through ordination the priest is taken [i.e. elevated] above other people (clericalism).

And the list goes on for seven more points – the most forceful of these is perhaps:

- The provision of structures to make a reality of the ‘sense of faith’ (*sensus fidei*) of all Catholic people.

The Petition ends:

If change is to occur, it is the people who must now speak!

In his ‘Appendix’ Robinson lays out practical suggestions for the logistics of setting up a Council with lay representation.

CHANGING TEACHINGS

The teachings which Bishop Robinson has in his sights, are the ones which he criticized in his earlier book *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*. This book the present reviewer considered, favourably, in *Sophia* in 2008 (Vol.47, pp.231-239). Part of *Confronting...* is requoted in the later work presently under review, pages 74-78, *q.v.*

Robinson quotes, in a scholarly – and inevitably ironic? – way from Cardinal – as he then was – Ratzinger, now Emeritus Holiness Benedict XVI:

Not everything that exists in the Church must for that reason be also a legitimate tradition; in other words, not every tradition that arises in the Church is a true celebration and keeping present of the mystery of Christ. *There is distorting as well as legitimate tradition...* Consequently, tradition must not be considered only affirmatively, but also critically. [Italic mine.]

(Robinson p.71ⁱⁱⁱ)

Ratziger as a German knows the history of Criticism, in the Kantian, Biblical and Theological senses. Robinson has a strong criticism of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* which simply reasserts the anti-contraception line. In the chapter ‘Papal Infallibility and *Prestige*’ (Chapter 10) Robinson renews his earlier doubts about Papal Infallibility/‘Infallibility?’ declared by the First Vatican Council in 1870: (see my review of *Confronting...* p.232 and Robinson in *Confronting...* pp.242-257.) Infallibility should not lead to still-contestable outcomes. But the defensibility of Infallibility on critical occasions can occasion criticism – Criticism in the high sense.

Robinson writes:

A classic example is the teaching on birth control. The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* lacked the technical requirements of infallibility. And yet so much papal energy and prestige have been invested in this teaching that for many people it is quite unthinkable that the Pope could be wrong, for such an admission would seriously undermine all papal prestige, and that can never be allowed to happen.

(Page 118)

He goes on on the next page to the notion of 'the prison of the past'; (see *Confronting...* and my review of it). What is up is that:

And yet the entire response of the Church to the scandal of sexual abuse has taken place in this atmosphere that the Pope cannot have been wrong in any matter that involved papal energy and prestige. This has had a crippling effect on the entire response. Abuse has called papal prestige into question in a way that few other things have, and it is manifestly impossible to give an adequate response while maintaining that the Pope (and, therefore, the Church) cannot have been wrong in his response or in any of the factors that may underlie the scandal.

(Page 119)

Robinson adds, with daring frankness:

No Pope has ever even called for a profound study of any and all factors that

may have contributed to the scandal of abuse, for every Pope knows that an honest study might lead to powerful calls to change laws, practices and even teachings in which much papal prestige has been invested.

(*Loc. Cit*)

The teaching which Robinson hopes to be changed is the Catholic line on contraception. In *Confronting...* he had objected against it that it had little New Testament foundation and that the Church's fall-back position is derived from the Stoics. He singled out Philo of Alexandria (13 BCE – 45-50 CE). The Natural Law notions which the Church relies on require, in the twenty first century, close philosophical re-examination. Both 'Nature' with a capital 'N' and 'nature' in 'the nature of x' do not remain perspicuously the same as they looked to Philo and his colleagues. The 'nature' of sexual intercourse is to produce offspring: but that one-shot-teleology will not quite do. The obvious – 'sex produces offspring' – does not exhaust the concept of sex among humans. What is the most obvious – sex produces progeny – need not be given axiological priority. Sexual companionship lasts in many marriages long after potency and libido have gone. And so forth. See *Confronting...* where Robinson wrote 'I was gradually coming to realise that the "tradition" behind and teaching on and attitude towards sex must be questioned'. See, page 176 of *Confronting* and my review p.233.

One of the things about Infallibility (which whole notion Robinson mistrusts) is that it *creeps*. And this is for him a crucial problem. *Humanae Vitae* was not uttered as Infallible, but crept towards 'being so'. Having been against contraception for so long the people running the Church at the time seem to have felt that turning back would damage 'Infallibility': so pushing something doubtful *towards* it would settle the matter. Settle it *without further reference to the merits of the case*, that is.

A farmers' one-shot-teleology of sexual intercourse is softened by the Church's admission of sex as a 'unitive' factor in married relationships. (p.53) But: we – the lay Catholics – are left with Philo and the old party line, without an intellectual defence of it. 'What I say three times is true'.

One very odd thing is that the inventor of the pill thought that he might be welcomed by the Church, because medical management of fertility (a matter of 'Nature' in one of her plural

senses) might obviate the practical but unaesthetic use of the condom. Condoms after the invention of rubber became less grotesque than they had been theretofore. 'The pill' would be neater. It would use Nature to counter Nature. And so would be as Natural as the – OK – 'rhythm method'. One can see point in such an argument. And the pill would be useful in preventing unwanted pregnancies in marriages where communicable diseases need to be avoided. We now know from DNA studies that babies can be born with avoidable genetically programmed nasties. The pill's prevention of the nasties – a prevention 'Natural' within in a large sense of 'Nature' – obviates the occasion for *post hoc* abortions. (And so would the condom.) And so forth.

If the Church is to invest any teaching in Natural Law /'Natural Law'^{iv} contemporary readings of "Nature" are needed. Philo needs to tour some labs, and take a course or so in Social Anthropology. We are rational and social animals, not sheep and chooks. If we look at the fairly transparent notion of 'the lesser of two evils', then contraception is less 'evil' (if evil it is) than is abortion. This lesser of two evils notion has been more or less recognised in the grudging semi-allowing of Catholic missionaries to tolerate the use of condoms in Africa in order to prevent the spread of AIDS, a besetting problem there.

That contraception-by-pill is somehow not as legitimate as any other medical procedures needs to be argued for, and in detail. All medical procedures modify 'Nature'/nature. All that has been said: 'progeny trumps' has been simply asserted. And Robinson is fond of reminding his reader, 'What is freely asserted may be freely denied'. (This phrase – given an Oxbridge Philosophy analysis – cashes out – possibly – as: 'What is asserted *free** of evidence one is free** (i.e. at liberty) to deny). Robinson might enjoy this little refinement.)

Since the Church allows the unitive aspect of sexual intercourse as an end for it – *a telos* – why does the simple farmers' 'intercourse produces offspring' always in the Church's doctrine trump the 'romantic'? Why are quality of life issues not taken into account: the difficulty of the poor in poor countries supporting large families is a real *human* fact. Just as real as sex. Human Life may be generated in an animal husbandry kind of way, but humans are not mere animals. They are husbands and wives: and, parents. Is it because the 'first' end of intercourse is so evident, and human affairs so complex that simple procreation trumps any other ends that sex may have? Trumps those which it *does* have. (See Robinson p.49). In the matter of human living there is a notable lack of simplicity: a one on one and a half shot teleology for sex is over-simplified if one is considering real life. The complexity of Life is as much an aspect of God's creation, Nature/'Nature' as is the – simpler – mechanism of bi-sexual reproduction: itself not

universal in Nature ('Nature' in the zoological sense), even. (Note: Robinson p.50 and footnote 23 to p.50)

GOD ON SEX

When one was a schoolboy one was told that a single act of 'wilfully entertaining "impure thoughts"' was 'a mortal sin', and one had to go to Confession before taking the Sacrament of Eucharist. Nowadays my cousin who is a Catholic priest sits on Saturday afternoons in the confessional and has no clients. The sense (as in 'common sense'?) of the *sensus fidei* may have changed? Bishop Robinson is less sure about mortal sins than the good Fathers of my school were in the 1940s. (I was not at the time quite sure that they themselves thought much of the party line.) In his first chapter 'Moving from a Religion of Fear to a Religion of Love' Robinson (a) explores 'Six levels of Morality' and (b) directly faces the notion that God is so Majestic that a single 'impure thought' is *lèse majesté* and so as infinity sinful as God is infinity good. See pp.10ff. As to (b) Robinson writes '... believing in a primitive and angry God is unhealthy', (p.21). And he discusses 'Mortal Sin' at length pp.36ff. He writes 'I suggest – note the 'suggest' – that a sin that is not death-dealing that does not change someone from a good person should not be given the name 'mortal' (p.37).

Robinson writes a little further on:

I suggest that we are on far safer ground,
and have a much better basis on which to
build the whole of morality, if we restrict
our understanding of mortal sin to those
things that truly change a person from a
good person to a bad person (Robinson,
page 39).

He goes on to warn us not to go to 'the opposite extreme' of believing that mortal sin could never happen to us. It could. But my schoolboy example will not do. We were told: if you punch a fellow schoolboy that is possibly a sin, punching a priest is sacrilege, and punching the King utterly bad. God is like the King, but much, much, more so. This did not really convince me in Form III Professional: it doesn't convince me now. Nor would it convince Bishop Robinson: a man who had, as a Bishop, to listen to the confession of 'reserved sins' – no doubt often rather nasty stuff. A man who was deputed to deal with the matter of the abuse and its cover-ups. The whole of the 'Mortal Sin' section deserves close reading. It does not do away with the notion – that would not in a Catholic context do. But it does

clarify. And it clears away a lot of knee-jerk reactions to sexual irregularities as – *eo ipso*, ‘mortal’. This while yielding nothing to paedophiles and their sins.

Bishop Robinson’s two books *Confronting...* and *For Christ’s Sake...* are closely argued and no review can do either justice. For Catholics in Open Societies they are essential reading. Catholics of late have lived in ‘divided and distinguished worlds’. Catholics hitherto have lived in the quasi Venetian Republic of the Church where very select Electors^v elect a virtually monarchical Pope, while, since the Nineteenth Century, spending their everyday lives in Democratic Republics, or Democratic Constitutional Monarchies. And I’d sign Bishop Robinson’s Petition (*vide supra*) any day the Colleges of Bishops put it to a referendum. The logistics of the thing are, as I noted before, in Bishop Robinson’s ‘Appendix’. If you want to sign the Petition – after reading Robinson – you may do so on the Internet:

<http://www.change.org/en-AU/petitions/pope-francis-the-vatican-for-christ-s-sake-stop-sexual-abuse-for-good>

Ending sexual abuse ‘for good’ of course means both: for all time from now on *and* for-the-good-of those liable to be abused. Bishop Robinson’s book’s sub-title has a double-banger sense.

CODA

The New Yorker Dec 23 & 30 2013 had as its cover-image a genial caricature of HH Pope Francis as ‘Snow Angel’. Inside there is an enthusiastic – for *The New Yorker* – profile on his present Holiness by James Carroll, ‘Who am I to Judge: A radical Pope’s first year’ (pp.81-91). However radical HH Francis is, Carroll writes:

In speaking of women’s ordination
Francis has cited John Paul II’s
“definitive formulation” agreeing “That
door is closed”. He reiterated the
exclusion last month.

(p.89^c)

HH John Paul did not go through the drill of declaring *ex cathedra* on this issue. The vehemence of an old sick man may, even now be creeping into an Infallible matter. Vehemence does not equal an Infallible/‘Infallible’. An Infallible doctrine is one that has

gone through the conventional hoops. Some things creeping into Infallibility undermine that very Infallibility doctrine itself: 'creeps on this petty pace from day to day unto the last syllable of recorded time' one thinks rather: *not*. If the Church wants Infallibility to be taken seriously outside a Vatican clique then: *no creeps*. At my Catholic school we were taught about 'The Deposit of Faith' there for the Church to draw on forever. Keeping Philo of Alexandria on the books, along with a prohibition against even discussing the question of women's ordination may run the Catholic Church into an overdraft on its deposit.

Carroll's article, generally very hopeful, has one point of interest for readers of Bishop Robinson:

The Vatican [has] announced that Pope Francis had ordered the establishment of a sexual-abuse commission, made up of priests, nuns and lay experts...

(p.90^c)

One hopes that Bishop Robinson be invited on to that Commission. He had to deal with (a) sexual abuses (b) clerical cover-ups for some years as a Bishop delegated to do this work.

NOTES

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- ⁱ See *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, Melbourne, Garrett Publishing 2007: reviewed in *Sophia*, Vol.47, pp.231-239 in 2008. See page 119 and *passim*.
- ⁱⁱ The Victorian Parliamentary Commission investigated not only the Catholic Church, but other Churches, and Institutions such as the Scouts, the Salvation Army and so forth. What one saw of the proceedings on TV was distressing, and the cover-up apologists all appeared utterly pathetic. The full findings of the Commission are yet to be published. That any Pontiff could imagine reserving matters of sexual abuse solely to himself in the twentieth or twenty first century beggars belief. The cops will get you in the end oh pedophiles. The days of a soft-shoe shuffle to another Parish are over.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Robinson's source for the Ratzinger quote is 'The Transmission of Divine Revelation', in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol.3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, New York, Herder and Herder, 1969, p.185.
- ^{iv} In a recent TV presentation on Same Sex Marriage on SBS (The Multicultural-Multilingual station) the Catholic Church was represented by a sole cleric who when asked the basis of the Church's objection to homosexual unions answered at once, in one word, 'Nature'. He led with his trump. There was no response at all. He fell, subsequently, silent. Apart from the term 'natural justice' used by lawyers and the occasional politician, references to Natural Law remain almost totally unfamiliar and unintelligible to Australians in a largely secular society. A priest of my acquaintance quipped in another context 'Whose "Nature"? To protect the innocent I shall not specify if he were Anglican or Roman. (See Robinson p.44)
- ^v I am – credibly? – informed that Cardinals travel on red passports, as do Heads of State and Ambassadors; Cardinals on the strength of their Electorships. So, oddly, do – or used to – Knights of Malta.

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