**CATENIAN MOSMAN CIRCLE DINNER**

**12 NOVEMBER 2020**

**“VIEW OF THE CHURCH – FROM THE CARPATHIA OR THE CALIFORNIAN?”**

Let me start by joining in the acknowledgement of the Cammeraygal people who are the traditional custodians of this beautiful part of Sydney which has been a big part of my life – including my experience of the Catholic Church. I had the great privilege of being involved when the Parishes around Mosman came together, and the views I am putting to you tonight draw more from our much loved Eugene Harley than from any other source. So it is always great to be invited back.

My topic tonight is perhaps a little cryptic. In a tragedy that has held power to fire the imagination for over a century, the RMS Titanic struck its fateful iceberg on the evening of April 15, 1912, and began to sink. By the morning 1,500 passengers and crew had been lost, and 710 saved. The human loss was exceptional, even in a world used to such events, made worse by the view that the ship was the finest product of its age – it was unsinkable and the event unthinkable. And yet, it sank.

My topic goes to the roles of two ships in the vicinity which were starkly contrasted. The Carpathia was the hero, way out of sight but with a radio operator still at his radio, a captain willing to risk all to own the problem. He steamed through the night, aware of the risks, and rescued the 710. The Californian was much closer and the radio operator was asleep and was not woken even when the flares from the Titanic were actually sighted. It watched from a distance, not being sure of what was at stake and apparently not wanting to find out. It took no part in the rescue that night.

Last year I gave a speech to the conference of Mary Aikenhead Ministries (the body which carries on the health and education work of the Sisters of Charity including St Vincent’s Health) titled “*A Church Leader – Not I surely Lord”*. In that speech I shared my ongoing journey with health and education colleagues as I grappled with the question of whether leadership in a church activity, however modest, made you a leader of the church, and if so what difference did it make? Earlier this year I took up the topic in the Campion Lecture at St Aloysius – and it is still on Vimeo – to ask what sort of church the boys of the College might be convinced to lead.

Tonight I want to stay with the same title as Campion and take the journey a little further by applying it to the issues I thought Catenians may be facing, but to do so I need to restate briefly how far I had reached in my earlier comments. Then I will return to my ships!

My starting point was a challenge from Fr David Ransom at the previous year’s Aikenhead Conference that to be active in any ministry made you a leader of the church. This challenge was not hierarchical and it was not discretionary. I quickly realised that if I accepted that challenge I was way off course – my view of church leadership was that “they” were struggling – in fact “they” had dropped the ball – there was very little concept of “we” in the equation. I had bought tickets but nowhere near the stage.

The gospels have plenty of stories of spectators. One is the Epiphany where the religious leaders stand back in Jerusalem as very distant – and safe - spectators at the birth of Christ and the foreigners – the Magi – take the action, accept the risks, and own the opportunity in Bethlehem. Or the powerful moment when Jesus comes across a crowd of spectators watching a woman being stoned, and in one sentence turns them from spectators to jurists – and they set the woman free. I don’t think spectators fare well in the gospels.

Now all of you here tonight, in spite of your involvement with the Catenians, will know there are very good reasons to dodge this responsibility for the church’s future:

* The church is paternalistic and our religious brains have long since atrophied,
* Those senior in the structures we see most prominently may not welcome our arrival
* Amateurs and sinners should stay out of this complex theology business, and
* The direction of the whole enterprise is too contested – who wants to be a leader when everyone seems to have a different view on where to go?
* Or even how will the claim of “Church leadership” go down with your friends at your next dinner party?

Each of you could all add more barriers of your own. So this initial reaction I picked up in the title of my first address - “*Not I surely Lord”.*

But I was not certain that this initial reaction should have the last word, and to get past it I asked two questions – **do I care enough to bother** to break through and **do I have anything to contribute – is there a need?**

What we care about is deeply personal to each one of us, and is at the heart of Ignatian spirituality. I wonder sometimes whether any of us spend enough time on it. My approach to whether I cared was to ask a sequence of questions, and whilst the answers are only mine I think the questions work for everyone:

* *Do I believe I have a spiritual side?*
* *Does it need nurturing or will it look after itself?*
* *Does Jesus Christ give me the best nurturing framework or do I have a better one?*
* *Is that nurturing best done in a community that journeys together and seeks to preserve and hand on that tradition, or can I go it alone?*
* *Does God remain present in that community?*

That discernment can be put as a simple sentence, but it has five distinct questions that I needed to answer in sequence. I think every human being needs to start on that sequence with real discernment worthy of Ignatius – of course your answers will decide if you get past the first one and stay on the same course, or head off on a different one. My answer for the first question was “I hope so” (an answer which draws from Fr Daven Day SJ and theologian John Haught) and the rest were answered “yes” - which meant I had no choice but to care.

So to the second question of whether the church needs the contribution of people like you and me, which takes me back to the Titanic. It may seem a harsh symbol for the church in Australia today, but I suspect one of the few things that unite all of us with our vastly different views of where the church should head is a shared view that it is taking water quickly, and whilst it may not be sinking it is certainly in trouble. I argued last year that many of us shared a “view that our leadership has failed to live up to the challenge of presenting Christ here and present in the Australian community, with joy and confidence”. Sharing a view is fine, of course, but sharing responsibility is much tougher, and “our” leadership can’t stop with the bishops but has to include all of us.

Now we all know that the ministries of the Church like our schools and hospitals are by no means hitting the water line. Nor are many of our parishes and other activities. But what is sinking is trust and respect for the overall role we all play, and our ability to convey the joy of the Christian community and the relevance of Christ at its centre – and the impact we continue to have on Australian society. I see it as one of the worst brand efforts ever experienced– a remarkable product which we appear unable to defend. We may end up with hugely important ministries largely disconnected, not confident of their Divine dimension as key pillars of a community with God at its centre and drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit – and that sounds to me like the ship sinks. So there is a need for all of us, and it is urgent.

Finally, if you are willing to take this journey and accept that you have found yourself, even unwittingly, with some level of responsibility you will get to the point of asking what changes of approach does it encourage, and then what am I supposed to be leading? Where is my church as a Mosman Catenian?

Firstly I think we all have to recognise that to varying extents we are on the Californian, and perhaps it is worth asking how we got there. I suspect it has been coming for a very long time, and a remarkable quote from St Pope Pius X picked up in Fr Brian Lucas’s *Church Administration Handbook* gives you a hint:

“*The Church is by its very nature an unequal society: it comprises two categories of person, the pastors and the flock. In the hierarchy alone reside the power and authority necessary to move and direct all the members of the society to its end. As for the many, they have no other right than to let themselves be guided and so follow their pastors in docility.* ”

If that does not dispatch you off to the Californian you must be very resilient – and that is a quote not from medieval times but 1906 – just over 50 years before Vatican II changed it all and told us to change ships.

The impact of seeing yourself on the deck of the Carpathia, and not on the Californian, is profound. Several simple but important changes of attitude jumped out at me – the first is an obligation to take up Pope Francis’ call to cast off the gloom – that wonderful quote that leadership does not come from those “***who are dejected, discouraged, impatient, or anxious, but from those who have received the joy of Christ”***. Then there is the crucial ability and determination to pursue the trilogy of firstly humbly acknowledging our failures (and there have been some terrible ones, including but not solely sexual abuse), secondly continuing the necessary and robust debate about change, and thirdly celebrating the inspiring work we do and the truly amazing people – including our clergy and religious – who do it. You may think you can’t do all three – I say none of them work by themselves, and if we all focus on repentance and reform alone, and not also on celebration, we will soon end up talking bitterly to ourselves.

And for those who cannot find inspiring work to balance the other legs of the trilogy I would urge you to look again. The Church communicates a lot, but it is not easy to get an overall sense of it. But just in the two areas where Mary Aikenhead works – health and education – the impact is incredible. Even the statistics – 768,000 students in 1,750 schools, nearly 100,000 staff, capital works we funded of $1.5 billion annually, and in health and aged care 25,000 places in aged care, 10,000 hospital beds, 83,000 staff – tell a story that needs to be heard. And they are just two areas, and just the Catholics – and within all of that work astonishing stories of goodness and sacrifice lie. You all know this – you see it in your parishes, our schools our hospitals and social services every day. You see it in your chain of circles in the Catenian movement, which is built on the recognition of the value of a shared faith based friendship and its impact on making you better men in your five areas of ambition.

But we also need to work out where our church lies, and that again is very individual. This is the area where I have spent time since the original speech, and in doing so I will try to respond to the challenge we all face that we live in a world, and in families, where the Church many know does not seem to deserve their trust, and thus their leadership commitment.

I do not pretend to have a settled answer for this challenge, which will be familiar to many of you participating tonight. The closest I have come is to go back to the 5 questions on **do I care**, and focus on the fourth – *“is that nurturing best done in a community that journeys together and seeks to preserve and hand on the tradition”.* This does not focus on any particular structure, or priests, or bishops –however important they all are - but looks more to a nurturing community. This may be the part of the church where the next generation can first land – a community – the people of God - and it can be found, and loved, in every school, and parish, and home – or in Rome itself if that is where you look. Structure is important, of course, especially if it enjoys Divine sanction, but that is not necessarily where all are called to serve. So to those on the deck of the Californian, watching from a safe distance, I think we need to say that the captain of the Carpathia never intended to save the Titanic – he came for the people in the boats.

Fr Frank Brennan SJ advised me that wherever this journey of leadership took us all our most important responsibility as a church leader was in the place of each person’s own ministry – in my case primarily the board of St Vincent’s Health. Like much of Frank’s advice discernment is needed, and I first thought he was discouraging us from getting too involved in Church affairs – as if our leadership was confined. But the wisdom of the advice is clear when you see the church as the community of God, nurturing our spiritual lives and passing on this divine tradition. If the church is the people of God, and your leadership comes from your role as parishioner, or Catenian member, or parent or student, teacher or board member, then that is where you are first called to serve. And in that service you will convey, with the power of the Holy Spirit, the joy of the Christian community and the relevance of Christ at its centre.

May I finish by applying this call to leadership with my understanding of what Pope Francis is asking us to do, and how that should prepare us for opportunities like the Plenary Council. It seems clear that this Papacy is not about a revolution in rules and structures, but one of heart and culture. It seeks to open the Church to the Spirit, and break down the worship of the past. Such a task is monumental, but also potentially frustrating if we define our Church as being the rules and the structure. And if we judge the Plenary Council on the same lines we are bound to be disappointed, and likely to snuggle back into the Californian deck chairs.

But if we approach this time of our history with the openness of Francis, with the joy of being part of the people of God, seeing church in the fellowship of your Circle and Parish, and believing that we are still Christ present in Mosman, inspired by the Spirit, then I think we have made the long jump into the better ship.

Thank you.

Paul McClintock