

BOOK LAUNCH

Recovering the 'True Church' by Paul Collins

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Holy Trinity Parish Centre, Curtin ACT

Response: Elisabeth Doherty

One of the great chants of Latin American protest marches, is the phrase: “El pueblo unido jamas será vencido”, meaning: “a united people will never be defeated or overcome.”

Every Latin American protest contains some version of this, and in many ways, some of the conclusions of liberation theology which originated in this part of the world find their way in parallel into Paul's latest book, at least in its focus on a back-to-basics approach, a return to the Gospels and the practices of the early Church. Certainly, a proposal to restore the now fledgling practice of Basic Ecclesial Communities is evident in the book's pages.

Unfortunately, as we have observed, and perhaps those of us here this evening more than most, the Plenary Council being conducted by the Australian Church has displayed anything but unity, or “un pueblo unido”, and in many cases simply magnifies an already haemorrhaging fracture.

I attempted to address some of this in my 2020 book *“All the beautiful things: Finding truth, beauty and goodness in a fractured church”*, which sold exactly 15 copies, most of which were purchased by my mother. It was a love letter to my Church, and Paul's books are the same. His just sell a bit better.

So, I want to begin by talking about this beloved church and its Plenary Council.

Just last week, an Archbishop was given space in the Catholic Weekly to make a point about the Plenary Working Document:

He wrote:

“One senses in this document a church that has become tired and has lost its sense of purpose; a church that has surrendered to the surrounding cultural ethos. While it speaks of making “God's reign of justice, love and peace” visible, it rarely speaks of the task of bringing people under the grace of salvation by a bold proclamation of the cross of Christ.”

Now, I agree with the Archbishop. But let me explain.

I agree with that paragraph and a few other assertions. The rest of the article is sadly a confirmation of the bitter culture wars that have become so prevalent in the Australian Church since the Plenary Council was announced.

The part I like, and it seems that Paul would agree with me, is the point that we need to bring about “God's reign of justice, love and peace” and indeed bring people under the grace of salvation by a bold proclamation of the cross of Christ.

But, our tactics and methods and ways of proceeding are different.

Indeed, I suspect that if women wanted to boldly proclaim the cross of Christ from a pulpit that this would present a problem for some of those people. I suspect that if members of the LGBTIQ+ community asked if they could find safety in the grace of salvation, the cross they would be asked to carry by some would be too much to bear.

On the other hand, I hope and have no reason to believe otherwise that seeking “God's reign of justice, love and peace” for refugees and asylum seekers is in the hearts of most of the Australian

episcopate and backed up by the last five decades of church teaching..... as long as that justice, love and peace doesn't translate into banners displayed in support of said refugees at church venues.

It may or may not be correctly attributed to Irish writer James Joyce who said "Catholic means here comes everyone". For some, that "here comes everyone" is a joyful, colourful and hope-filled cause for celebration. For others they are threatened to their very core. Because what happens if everyone includes a transgender teen?, a woman who senses a call to priesthood? A Muslim fleeing persecution in the Middle East? Then the welcome becomes complicated.

I discussed this with a friend on instagram one day, when, as the kids say, I slipped into her DMs to speak to her about a public unfollowing of a minor Catholic celebrity.

The person she unfollowed had proudly proclaimed on his account that:

"After a lot of thought I now believe that the Catholic Church needs to change with the times in order to be more inclusive and allow:

1. Abortion
2. Contraception
3. Same sex marriage
4. Pre marital sex
5. Divorce
6. Choosing one's own gender
7. And living one's own truth.

He ends the post by proclaiming "gotcha". Indeed, it was all a cruel and unusual joke and he saw absolutely no problem with proudly placing his stake in the ground, no matter who might be offended or worse.

My friend, with a public profile in the Church and well sought out by the bishops for her incredible leadership in music ministry, openly unfollowed him and called him out on it.

We discussed how young people we come into contact with were merging 'like sheep with some very strange shepherds' toward unusual hybrids of Catholicism which can run the whole gamut of wanting Hillsong music in Catholic Churches and then in the same breath popping on mantillas to wear to Latin Masses which they drive up to 100kms to attend, lest they be contaminated by the heresy of the Novus Ordo in a parish close to their home. Proponents of "*Laudato si'*", Pope Francis' encyclical on Care for our Common Home might wonder at the petrol expenditure of these earnest faithful.

But, I digress. Tonight we are celebrating Paul's latest contribution to dialogue, and I tell those anecdotes by way of appreciation for his relentless faith that we can make a difference.

So, let me begin by giving some observations of the title: *Recovering the True Church*.

The title is an interesting literary device whether Paul intended it this way or not.

Should we think of the word recovery in terms of recovering alcoholics? Perhaps. I suspect Paul is still recovering from the last two papacies which while giving him much to write about, probably also have driven him to the drink.

Or is the word re-cover in a journalistic sense? Paul covered story after story for the ABC and perhaps wants to be able to do so again, covering a story of hope rather than disillusion?

Perhaps his use of the word recovering is a commentary on cover up? Does he mean to recover from the cover-ups? The way in which the institution has broken down and failed so spectacularly in the area of sexual abuse requires more than just first aid, bandaid recovery. It needs major surgery. So, to recover that trust, and to find ways to elicit beauty from the ashes of the church's more recent history is one of the only ways forward. Forgiven, but not forgotten.

Or maybe it is to recover something lost? I suspect this was his original intent, because we have lost much, and Paul's commentary as a historian on the early church tells us what we could be.

All of these are possibilities. But, back to the launch.

My father likes to tell everyone who will listen that he has a Doctorate by RPL/Recognition of Prior Learning, or osmosis. He's actually a painter but just go with me on this one.

He's been privy to so many theological, church fixing discussions since marrying my mother in 1975 that he thinks he needs some recognition.

He used to wonder out loud where his children had come from, indeed, my brother actually does have a similar doctoral area to Dr Collins, so we have had Paul's books in our household since the 1990s.

When working at Eureka Street magazine in the early 2000s and later studying theology, I started to realise that to be a theologian of any notoriety, you needed to get some kind of a notification or be investigated by the Vatican.

When a book is denounced by the Vatican, sales go up. There's even an article in the National Catholic Reporter with that title: "increase book sales? Get Vatican denunciation"

Perhaps Paul's most read book "*Papal Power*" was the one that really solidified his enduring friendship with Popes John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. "*Papal Power*" didn't exactly get onto the index of forbidden books, but it ruffled a few tail feathers.

So, having read a few of Paul's books, I enjoyed *Recovering the True Church*, as I do all of his writing. He brings his wit and intelligence to the table, and dazzles us with his historical knowledge.

His 'true' Church, as aforementioned, is based in part on the earliest Christian communities, and states the bleeding obvious. Let's turn this ship around.

The 1986 Roland Joffe film "The Mission" which chronicles the story of the Jesuits in South America with the Guarani people has an interesting scene which I think is appropriate here.

A young Jesuit is speaking with Cardinal Altamirano who has been sent to the Mission as some sort of 'apostolic visitor'. They are having a conversation about money and resources in the community that the Jesuits share with the Guarani people, and where they go.

The Jesuit says to the Cardinal, "all the money is shared equally among the people, we are a community."

The Cardinal responds: "There is a radical French group that preaches that doctrine."

The Jesuit responds: "It was the doctrine of the Early Christians."

Indeed. I think this is what Collins is partly trying to say in his newest book.

"Let's get back to basics. Let's not forget where we came from."

The Plenary Council, to which Paul's book is partly addressed, talks of discernment of that key question "what is the spirit asking of the Church in Australia at this time?", and this question has become, unsurprisingly, something of a lightning rod.

Who has the key to the thoughts of the spirit and how do we know?

Is it those who have been chosen as representatives?

Is it the periti, the experts called in to observe and support the Council?

Is it the Bishops only and everyone else is window dressing?

We still don't know.

And, just because someone thinks something or has an opinion, how do we know it is informed by the Holy Spirit and not some agenda. This is the more difficult conundrum.

In the spirit of healthy dialogue, there were parts of Collins' text which made me bristle, perhaps because their truth was so frustrating to me, rather than being evidence of any wrong conclusions on his part.

On page 67 he speaks of the very few public Catholics left in the Australian context, and mentions the ones he can think of by name. Fr Frank Brennan, Francis Sullivan and himself.

Now, we can't expect the very poor calibre of religion journalists to think outside the box when seeking commentary on religious affairs, but if we want diversity and diverse views, we do need to go there and ask why this list is the default position.

Collins' omission of female names is not an oversight and he can't be blamed for it. It's been happening since before the Church began. It's that it simply still does not occur to us that women's voices, that female commentators exist...and it is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When women are not included, when their voices aren't heard, they disappear. This is certainly one of the most important aspects of the "true" church to which we need to return.

It's no secret that Dr Collins and his wonderful wife Marilyn and many others are enormously supportive of a more incisive place for women in the Catholic Church, and being a historian, he knows better than most of us about the female deacons of the early Church, Phoebe, Lydia, Junia. Pope Francis has opened a second commission to investigate women deacons, and there does seem to be hope. But public acclaim is important.

Perhaps if we take away anything from Paul's text is the exhortation that we all need to do better. The project of Church reform is a large and, often times, exhausting one. There's an old saying that we should "pray as if everything depends on God, and work as if everything depends on you." It's been attributed to St. Ignatius and to St Augustine, and many other men of repute.

But let me remind you. The Church is feminine, and I don't just mean because of the dresses and lace donned by members of the clergy.

If I am to sum up the message of Paul's book therefore, is that he has a dream. He dreams of a church that may one day be all she can be, a place for all.

And as the deceased writer Rachel Held Evans, a young woman of my own age who grappled with some of the same questions that we assembled here tonight said: *"The church is God saying: 'I'm throwing a banquet, and all these mismatched, messed-up people are invited. Here, have some wine.'"*

Elisabeth Doherty is a journalist, teacher and musician based in Canberra. She is the Archdiocesan Director of Caritas Australia in the Canberra Goulburn Archdiocese. She is the author of the 2020 book *"All the Beautiful Things: Finding Truth, Beauty and Goodness in a Fractured Church"* about meaningful reform in the Catholic Church.