

SPEECH

Claire Victory, National President

Standing up – reclaiming lay leadership in the Catholic sector

Ozanam Conversation with Francis Sullivan and Geraldine Doogue AO

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Being a younger Catholic, I am often the only Catholic – or at least, the only known, identifiable, practicing Catholic – within a given group of people, in social settings or the workplace.

So, when there is news or commentary about problems, scandals and the like in or associated with the Catholic Church, I am often asked questions like “what do you think about all this?”, “How does it make you feel?”, “Does it challenge you?, It’s is *your* church.”

My experience – and I do not pretend for one moment to speak for others – is that the terrible things that have happened within the Church make me feel shocked and sad and angry... the same as I feel when I hear about those things happening within other churches or organisations, or government services, or families.

But it does not challenge my faith or my relationship with the Church because those elements in which we have seen such deficiencies – those individuals, that hierarchy, that structure – have never been or defined the Church or what it is to be Catholic for me.

The Church, and being part of the Church, was about the cordial and biscuits that my sisters and I would enjoy while running around the verandah of St Maria Goretti Church as kids after Saturday night mass while mum and dad caught up with friends and acquaintances over a cuppa, and it was special events and traditions like the Easter Vigil mass which was so exciting because the music was fantastic and we got to light candles and have supper with family friends afterwards.

The Church was a community of hundreds of people in which I was happy and comfortable and where I was always able to play a role, and it was where I found my purpose in life – to volunteer my time and to help people and serve my community.

There have certainly been some great priests and bishops I've met over the years, interesting and well educated guys with fantastic stories to share, but they, their titles and any sort of hierarchy to which they belonged were never what I considered to be the Church or the leadership of the Church; they were people who played their part, just as I played mine as an altar server and just as so many people – men, women and children – played theirs as readers and Eucharistic ministers and musicians and in a myriad of other ways in the rich and vibrant life of the church within and beyond the mass.

The leaders were the pastoral associates who did everything from organising the mass to visiting the families of parishioners who had died to running family-based sacrament programs.

The leaders were the mums who initiated children's liturgy in our parish and whose daughters over time joined them in leading children's liturgy when they reached their late teens and early 20s.

The leaders were volunteers like St Vincent de Paul member Ros, who visited elderly parishioners on weekends and who took us 10 year old 'Young Vinnies' with her; in time, the leaders were the Young Vinnies who raised funds for and awareness of the St Vincent de Paul Society through our cake stalls and other activities that we'd plan during Friday night meetings over pizza.

The leaders were the married couples in their 40s and 50s who brought Passionist Family Groups to our parish, and who led those groups which became such a big part of my family's social life, keeping us connected to our community.

Leadership in the Church, to me, has been the extremely dedicated parish and archdiocesan youth workers who have taken groups of teenagers and young adults to World Youth Day and then channelled those participants' enthusiasm into taking on leadership themselves, organising activities for ongoing engagement like social justice forums and youth events.

Leadership in the Church has been teenagers and young adults living their faith, spending their uni holidays taking disadvantaged and at-risk kids away on camps and activity days and, through that service and those interactions, finding their vocation as teachers or social workers or advocates.

Leadership in the Church to me is, and always has been, people – women, men, couples, singles, kids and teenagers – serving their community, inspired by their faith, doing their little bit to help that community to function and to flourish.

This is what the Church, and leadership in the Church, has always been to me. I haven't lost faith in the Church because all that good stuff that the Church always represented is still there and is still what matters.

The Society of St Vincent de Paul consists of 60,000 members and volunteers who operate on the ground through over 1,000 Conferences located in individual parishes across Australia.

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