

Support Pope in time of crisis, urges Bishop Long

The Bishop of Parramatta, Vincent Long, says the Church is facing “the biggest crisis at least since the Reformation” and has called on Catholics to support Pope Francis in his quest for a modern, inclusive church.

In a passionate address in Canberra this week, Bishop Long said there was already “a kind of silent schism” in the church. The conservative clergy’s reaction to the direction Pope Francis was taking and theological conflict spurred by events in the United States was like “a tectonic fault line”.

Bishop Long, speaking to a 200-strong meeting of Concerned Catholics of Canberra Goulburn, said he hoped and prayed that Pope Francis stayed the course because “nothing less than deep reform will save the day”.

He said the structure and culture of the church needed comprehensive reform and if the Pope’s reforms were to fall over, the Church was at risk of sliding backwards.

The anti-Pope Francis forces had accelerated their frontal attack against him and were using the turmoil among the hierarchy in the United States and the Vatican as an opportunity to snipe at and undermine his papacy and to derail his reform agenda.

Yet it had to be remembered, Bishop Long said, that until recently any open criticism of the Pope would have been considered as anathema in the church.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recommended a review of the clerical structure of the Church along the lines of the existing Catholic lay structures administering welfare, health and education agencies.

It was time for grassroots Catholics, the baptised, to take their rightful place, to hold their leaders to account.

For the Church to be a truly synodal and listening Church, it had to go beyond the business as usual approach in consulting with the baptised in preparation for the 2020 Plenary.

He said was not necessarily a bad thing for the Church to be finding its way from a position of weakness and vulnerability.

The Church had fallen spectacularly from its position of power and privilege. Finding the way of Christ involved ambiguity, a time of mourning but also of hope for a new dawn.

The Church saw itself as self-sufficient and separate from the outside world. It had become a church of the ordained even at the expense of the Church of the baptised. The result was an exalted and elitist club, protecting the status of its members.

The Church once and for all needed to jettison the “disease and virus of clericalism” to engage with the world on the basis of love not fear.

It was time for the Church to be truly a Church of the baptised, a pilgrim Church. The deeply-embedded clerical and patriarchal structures currently in the Church were incapable of helping to meet the needs of the world and the challenges of today.

On women’s role in the Church, Bishop Long quoted the words of the theologian Mary Hunt of the value of “adding women and stirring”.

But adding women in terms of admitting them to ordination might be likened to pouring new wine into old wine skins.

“I believe in gender equality but I don’t thinking injecting women into the ailing, clericalist structure will be a liberating experience for them...”

For the Church to flourish, it was crucial it came to terms with clericalism and moved beyond its paternalistic nature.

Pope Francis had spoken of a “new theology of women... and I would like to postulate that what we need even more is to find fresh ways in the Church and a fresh way of ministry for women and men.

While the faithful were not able to participate with full citizenship in the Church, much of the structure of the Church was the dying model of clericalism.

But the old paradigm of male and clerical supremacy was coming to an end.

So long as women were excluded from governance structures, the Church was depriving itself of the richness of our full humanity, like having only one half of the brain in service.

“What is undeniable is that there is a need to read the sign of the times. The deep alienation that many feel towards the Church because of its stand on women.

“The Pope needs the voices of women to remind him of the many disillusioned Catholic men and women who yearn for a modern, inclusive Church.

“We are witnessing a profound transition in the Church...We are moving beyond the clerical structure.

“There needs to be strong leadership at all levels for committed Catholics like yourselves to move towards a more humble, inclusive and compassionate model.”

Also speaking at this week’s gathering in Canberra was Sister Clare Condon, a Good Samaritan Sister and national religious leader, and Ms Anne Kirwan, CEO of Catholic Care Canberra Goulburn.

Sister Condon said the Australian Church was at a critical crossroads and now was the time for it to build and renew. The institutional church had lost connection with contemporary society and needed to find a language that spoke to people of the 21st Century.

She said there needed to be more delegated authority and governance through elected position. Too many church leaders who did not have the necessary skills were “too hands on” while lay Church personnel accepted this out of misplaced reverence or out fear of losing their job.

Ms Kirwan said the Church had lost credibility and trust and the brand of lay Catholic organisations had also been damaged. The church organisations now had to demonstrate change and growth to rebuild public trust in the Church.