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Fra: Buch [FamBuch@DBmail.dk]
Sendt: on 12. december 2007 22:56
Til: Buch
Emne: VEOK Nyhedsmail nr.45 - Spong's anmeldelse af Robinson's bog
Vedhæftede filer: oledata.mso; image004.jpg; image003.jpg

VEOK's Nyhedsmail nr. 45

12-dec-2007



Confronting Sex and Power in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus

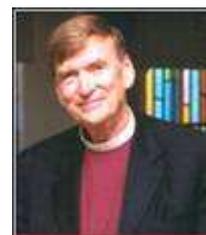
**by The Most Reverend Geoffrey Robinson, Retired Auxiliary Bishop of
Sydney, Australia**

Book Review by retired Episcopal Bishop, John Shelby Spong.

Bishop Spong is a prolific writer whose insights in to Scripture and current world events affecting faith and spirituality have been helpful to millions all over the world.

Not everyone might agree with Bishop Spong on every point, but his common sense approach to many issues makes a lot of sense in the light of cosmological developments over the past one hundred years.

That stated, this book review is more a reflection of the thinking of RC Bishop Robinson rather than that of Bishop Spong.



The Review

- The Pope has too much power. The Pope is finally answerable to the Church.
- The Catholic Church has a problem with credibility.
- The Church's teaching on sex needs to be reviewed.
- Seminaries are not healthy places.
- A few phrases in the Nicene Creed need to be revisited
- There are homosexual priests in the Catholic Church - a significant number probably higher than the percentage (of homosexual persons) in the general population.

These quotations are not lifted from the writings of some anti-Catholic Protestant reformer. It was no modern day Martin Luther or John Calvin who said these things; it was not even some Catholic-baiting Irish preacher like Ian Paisley.

They are rather the words of a highly respected Roman Catholic Bishop in Sydney, Australia, who was such a significant leader in the Church that he was the one to whom the Catholic Church turned to investigate the sex abuse scandal involving priests in Australia and to issue that Church's national response to that tragedy. His name is The Most Reverend Geoffrey Robinson. His official title at the time of his recent retirement was The Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney. He was by any measure Australia's best known and most admired member in the Catholic hierarchy.

Clear favourite

When the previous archbishop tendered his resignation to the Pope, Geoffrey Robinson was the clear favourite [sic] of the Australian people to be his successor. Sydney's archbishop is always the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in that entire land which makes him an immediate candidate to be a cardinal.

With Joseph Ratzinger handling such appointments for Pope John Paul II, however, there was no way that Geoffrey Robinson would be chosen for that post. Instead the appointment went to George Pell, Melbourne's ultra-conservative and highly homophobic archbishop, whose inner circle of priestly advisors was known as "The Spice Girls" by many Australians.

Bishop Robinson, feeling incapable either of working with or even of supporting this appointee as one of his assistants, decided that the best step for him to take was to retire. His work heading the commission on clergy sexual abuse had also disillusioned him with his church and had tempered his desire to continue any longer in what he felt was a losing battle. As his disillusionment grew other questions that he had long kept suppressed, not only about the way his church acted but also about what the church said must be believed, could be suppressed no longer.

Silence broken

In his retirement he has broken his silence by writing a book entitled *Confronting Sex and Power in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*.

Published in 2007 in Australia by John Garrett Publishers, it has quickly rocketed to the top of the best selling charts in Australia and is inevitably now being attacked and vigorously debated on the Internet. In conservative Catholic circles the response has been vitriolic with Bishop Robinson's character being assassinated by his former colleagues. Australian television commentators have named that response: "Poison from the Catholic Right."

The UK's liberal Catholic publication, "The Tablet," made this book a front page story. Since the book's publication Bishop Robinson has been a featured and frequent guest on Australian radio and television programs. Most of the quotations with which this column began were lifted out of the transcripts of those media interviews.

This kind of criticism is rare inside the Roman Catholic Church, which prides itself on keeping all conflict behind closed doors, with only the face of unity confronting the world. After a hotly contested papal election, the cardinals tell the world and the press that the person chosen was clearly the best possible choice for the papal task and in a public ceremony pledge their loyalty to the new Pope. Cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priests must take public vows to obey their superiors and to protect the church so that its reputation as "the holder of ultimate truth" never falls into public dispute. It was this mentality that collided with massive evidence and subsequent public charges of the rampant sexual abuse of minors carried out by ordained Catholic clergy that produced the crisis that ultimately drove Bishop Robinson to write his book.

Looking at Australia primarily and feeling his Church's refusal to provide full disclosure on these crimes, Bishop Robinson began to state publicly what everyone who followed the Catholic Church's investigatory process clearly knew. "I am not happy," he said, "with the level of support I am getting from Rome. Had the Pope responded (to this crisis) it would have been a totally different story. Instead we got silence. I regret saying this. It gives me no joy at all. I was one trying to work at this problem and with only silence coming, the Church fractured."

Massive problem with credibility

He went on to say that the Church now has a massive problem with credibility: "We might say all sorts of beautiful things on other subjects, but with the great danger that no one is listening. We have not controlled or yet eradicated this problem within the church."

Later he came back to this theme of credibility by saying that "vast numbers of people have left the

Church, and they are the very people that, if they had stayed might have been able to change the Church." In a public radio interview he stated what everyone outside the hierarchy of the Church believes to be factually true. "If one asks: 'Are you satisfied that the Catholic Church has done everything possible to study sexual abuse in the church and has eradicated everything that needs to be eradicated?' I don't see how anyone can answer and say yes." It is one thing to get to the core of a crisis, expose it and clear the Church's good name; it is quite another to manage the crises, to seek to minimize institutional guilt by pretending to purge when what you are really doing is covering up.

That is clearly what the Roman Catholic Church has done across the world. When an international organization [sic] acts in every country in a similar manner, what becomes obvious is that this strategy is being dictated from on high. The sad truth is that this duplicity and cover up will not work for several reasons.

First, the power of religion in general and of the Catholic Church in particular is not today anywhere near what it used to be in the western world. Europe, once a Catholic stronghold now has the lowest birth rate in the world, indicating that Europeans do not listen to the Vatican's condemnation of birth control.

The nation of Ireland, whose deepest identity once reflected the influence of the Roman Catholic tradition, is now moving to legalize abortion. Catholic couples get divorced in the West in about the same percentages as do non-catholic couples. This is not the 13th century and some Catholic hierarchical figures appear not to recognize that fact. Second, the spread of information today makes institutional secrets fair game for full exposure. Ecclesiastical closets will not remain closed.

Corruption and criminal behaviour are not conditional on whether the perpetrator is a priest, a bishop an archbishop or a cardinal. Yet we witnessed Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston not being prosecuted despite massive evidence of his guilt of being an accomplice in crimes against thousands of minors. Instead of jail, he was promoted to a Vatican post in the Papal States where he is immune from prosecution and will never have to answer questions under oath or release the records which would prove his complicity. Instead of being forgotten he has become today nothing less than the public face of that Church's corruption.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles just this past fall agreed to pay \$696,000,000, on the day before the trial was to begin to settle the class action suit brought by the victims of priestly abuse. This last minute settlement represented resistance and cover-up, not co-operation in the face of criminal judgment, and let them off from the task of testifying publicly under oath. This fine was of such magnitude, that the imagination is stunned to embrace the depth of guilt that it revealed. Los Angeles Cardinal, Roger Mahoney, said, "we have now put this behind us," but he will discover that un-investigated evil is not cauterized by legal settlements that do not admit guilt. The details will continue to seep out.

The disillusionment will continue to grow. People know that there was no real co-operation with the investigation.

Catholic hierarchical figures have done little more than damage control, placing the well-being of the Catholic Church far ahead of the well-being of the victims of the Catholic Clergy. A genuine reform is clearly not forthcoming at this time.

A way to begin that necessary act of reformation

Geoffrey Robinson offers a way to begin that necessary act of reformation. He believes a first step is to restore power to the bishops, which he argues has in recent years been drained from them into the upper echelons of the hierarchy and especially to the Pope. If nothing changes, those bishops who raise questions publicly in this Church will be silenced and marginalized in the same way that their creative, but questioning theologians were handled over the last thirty or so years.

Remember this is the same church that removed Hans Küng from his position as Catholic Theologian at Tübingen University, harassed Dutch New Testament Scholar Edward Schillebeeckx until he was drained of both his time and energy, dismissed tenured professor Charles Curran from the faculty of Catholic University in Washington, D.C., silenced Matthew Fox when he developed his new spirituality based on original blessing rather than original sin until he finally resigned his priesthood and became an Anglican in California, and then drove the Latin American theologian, Leonardo Boff, into his decision to be laicized.

It was Joseph Ratzinger, serving as the Cardinal Inquisitor for Pope John Paul II, who was responsible for these actions. Now as Pope Benedict XVI, does anyone think it will be different if any bishop does not toe the line on all doctrinal, ethical and ecclesiastical issues? Creative change never arises from within when truth is suppressed and new ideas are never entertained. Geoffrey Robinson's great contribution is that he has broken the silence. He has called for the development of some mechanism that would make the Church accountable to the people. He believes that the 19th century dogma of papal infallibility should be revisited, that the church's whole attitude toward sexuality ought to be reviewed, and that Catholic scholarship needs to engage contemporary knowledge that it has not done since before the days of Galileo.

Hope

My hope is that other bishops, who will inevitably hear about and read this powerful book, will recognize the truth and accuracy of Geoffrey Robinson's insights, that these issues will then be raised and examined inside that church's gathering of bishops, and that steps at reforming this church will be allowed to begin.

Fear

My fear is that this Church, like so much of Christianity, is blind to its own incompetence and its fortress morality, which means that it will fail to see that these troubling symptoms are nothing less than the signs of death encircling this once great Church.

John Shelby Spong