

Passing generation of Vatican II clergy

John Warhurst

Yet another religious order or congregation leaves our diocese. A much-loved Vatican II-inspired archbishop dies. Our parish priest tells us that relieving priests are more difficult to find. These are all striking moments in church life. Yet the biggest shock has been to learn of the seemingly inevitable decline of the National Council of Priests (NCP).

In any likely version of a future Church the clergy will play a central role. They will do this either as the traditional church's clerical workforce in a largely unchanged hierarchical church or as equal partners with lay Catholics and religious in a newly reformed and co-responsible synodal church.

Pope Francis certainly recognises this fact and often gives the impression, when he condemns clericalism, that he frets about whether the modern church's male priesthood is fit for the task and committed to his synodal agenda. As part of the consultation for the second assembly of the Synod of Bishops he called 300 parish priests from around the world to Rome to learn more about their views.

Within Australia church lay reformers have always been conscious of the role of parish priests as reform leaders and allies or stumbling blocks and adversaries. Reform couldn't have proceeded without many priests and former priests playing their part. Where parish priests were indifferent or opposed to reform the going was very tough indeed because of their role as gatekeepers. This was the case in mundane matters such as communication with parishioners through access to parish newsletters and church noticeboards and in more serious matters such as the role of priests as spiritual and liturgical guides.

Clearly the priesthood in the church in Australia has been undergoing radical change. Attention often focuses on the quantitative decline in the numbers of vocations to the priesthood and on the dramatic upsurge in the recruitment of foreign-born priests.

Attention also focuses on the character and values of younger priests coming up the traditional route through Australian seminaries who often hold different values to their predecessors. This has led to frequent dissonance when a new priest takes over an established parish and overturns established practices. Parishioners are often outraged at the abrupt return by more conservative young priests to the old pre-Vatican II ways.

Polarization and cultural conflict within the church has certainly contributed to parishioners 'shopping around' for a 'compatible' parish priest. Generational change among clergy is one important part of this story.

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Such generational change is not new; it is inevitable. Many older Catholics grew up with Irish-born parish priests and have seen them disappear. But as the church in Australia fights for its very survival there is something new about this more recent cultural change.

The current dilemma of the National Council of Priests (NCP) is a striking example of the impact of such cultural and generational change. It is sketched in the current issue of *The Swag*, the newsletter of the NCP, by its chairman, Rev John Conway, committee member Rev Bill Burt SVD, and editor, Rev Peter Matheson.

The NCP, an Australia-wide organisation of Catholic priests and Associate Members (Lay, Religious and Seminarians), was founded in 1970 'in the spirit of Vatican II'. It is 'committed to the fraternity and further education of clergy and to representing clergy in the public forum'. Its national conventions, the next one is planned for March 2025, have served as important gatherings open to issues of church reform. Its members and friends have included some bishops, although it has also been disdained by some others. In the current edition of *The Swag* the main feature article is written by the late Emeritus Bishop Peter Ingham.

The spirit of Vatican II was and is central to NCP. As Peter Matheson points out, its motto, 'Sign of Unity. Instrument of Peace', is taken from the first paragraph of Vatican II's *The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (Lumen Gentium)*.

At its peak, perhaps about 1800 members, the NCP attracted large number of priests to its ranks. But now, in the words of its chairman Conway, it is 'floundering' and diminished. Its future is uncertain. Bill Burt describes the current membership as in a 'dire state'.

Of the current c.3,000 priests in Australia, c.780, only about a quarter, are NCP members and their average age is about 80 years old. As Burt says, 'By far the majority of these are senior citizens, mainly from Anglo-Irish/Caucasian backgrounds.' Clearly, the trajectory of the ageing membership is heading downwards. Examining the membership, Burt concludes, 'Very few priests from other ethnicities are current NCP members and almost no younger clergy from overseas in recent years have indicated any interest in joining the NCP. Quite frankly, we do not represent the body of active Catholic clergy today'.

This decline may not be irreversible, even though it looks likely. The NCP executive and *The Swag* team are trying to attract those who are presently choosing not to join. There are several possible contributing factors to this decline, most of which the NCP leadership has considered. NCP is not alone in its decline. Interestingly, the possible explanations mirror those found in the discussion of the future of other declining organisations, some mainstream like trade unions, and others within the

church like religious orders and certain lay organisations, which have also failed so far to find solutions.

The most disappointing explanation would be that it signifies an active rejection of the Vatican II ethos represented by the NCP. If that is the case it endangers the success of synodality, an idea which draws heavily on Vatican II.

Alternatively, it could reflect the individualism of younger priests who see no attraction in the idea of collective effort and networking. Perhaps they prefer to 'bowl alone', the term of the American social scientist Robert Putnam, like an increasing number of the wider community. It could be that the NCP itself has failed to reach out effectively to newcomers. It could be that new immigrant priests find their support networks within their own ethnic communities or that new religious order priests increasingly find no need for networks other than their own order. Perhaps NCP membership is actively discouraged by church leaders during seminary priestly formation, itself a subject of synodal discussion. There is probably some truth in all these explanations.

The NCP leadership is seeking feedback. Hopefully remedies will be found to enable some revitalisation. If not, it will pass away and the church in Australia will have lost something extremely valuable. Church reform will become less likely without this Vatican II-inspired generation of priests.

John Warhurst is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University.