

# A Vatican-Inspired Theological Revolution



*Paul Collins is an Australian historian, broadcaster and writer currently based in Canberra.*

*Collins has a master's degree in theology from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in history from the Australian National University (ANU). He has taught church history and theology in Australia, the United States and Pacific countries and worked as a Catholic parish priest in Sydney and Hobart.*

The new apostolic constitution is a decisive, even revolutionary theological shift because it re-roots ministry in the mission to which all are called by baptism.

I'm not telling you anything new when I say that one of most toxic problems facing Catholicism is clericalism. By 'clericalism' I mean the tendency to place priests on a pedestal, to accept their pronouncements as gospel, encouraging them to feel, as Pope Francis says, 'superior to lay people.'

It begins in seminary training when candidates start to see themselves as joining a unique male, celibate, secretive caste enjoying privilege and power, set apart from ordinary humanity by ordination. Clericalism is at the root of sexual abuse when inadequate, immature men feel they can use children to satisfy their warped sexual impulses. It is a way of life far removed from Jesus, 'the man who had nowhere to lay his head' (Matthew 8:20).

It's also very different to Pope Francis' call to priests to experience 'the smell of the sheep.' But in his recent (March 19, 2022) Apostolic Constitution entitled *Praedicate Evangelium* (PE), 'Preach the Gospel', Pope Francis dealt clericalism a major blow. This is the final document in a long-planned reform of the Roman Curia, the Vatican bureaucracy. The cardinals who elected him in 2013 asked Francis to restructure the curia following several scandals under Benedict XVI and John Paul II. PE is the result.

The practical detail is not important; my personal view is that no matter what the structure, the curia is a creature of the 16th century and is irreformable. But there was a basic principle laid down in PE that is profoundly important with far-reaching consequences for the whole church.

This principle states that any baptised Catholic 'can preside over a dicastery,' that is run a Vatican department. Previously only ordained clerics could do this because ordination was the absolute precondition for exercising 'ordinary jurisdiction' or church governance.

Explaining the change canon lawyer, Father (now Cardinal) Gianfranco Ghirlando, SJ said unequivocally 'that the power of governance in the church does not come from ordination, but from one's mission' (my emphasis). The absolute centrality of baptism.... Yes, but so what? Well, as sometimes happens, profound, long-term change follows a seemingly minor shift of emphasis. Essentially, Ghirlando is saying, reflecting Francis, that you don't have to be ordained a priest to exercise the power of governance in the church.

And by 'governance' Ghirlando means the administrative authority that comes with a call from the church to carry out a specific 'mission'. Now that's a profound transposition for a church that has been fixated on clerical power for centuries. What PE does is shift the focus away from ordination to restore the absolute centrality of baptism.

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All Catholics can now share in church governance by the very fact of their baptism. The people of God already share in the common priesthood of those baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. The distinction between the ordained and the baptised is one of function, not of essence.

The 20th century theologian who restored the role of laypeople was Yves Congar, OP (1904-1995). His theology broke down the separation between the spiritual and secular world, a separation that long bedevilled Catholicism. Reflecting Congar, the *Vatican II Decree on the Laity* is clear that the church lives in the world to bring it to Christ, not into some separate spiritual sphere. Congar wrote that the church is challenged 'by the world to re-join it, in order to speak validly of Jesus Christ.' This is literally the Catholic 'mission statement', the reason for the church's existence. Historian Edmund Campion says that Catholics were persuaded by Congar that 'all of us were responsible for what the church did ... that waiting to be told what to do was foolish ... that there was work for us ... as servants of the world which had its own destiny in God's plan' (*Then and Now*, 2021).

However, PE takes a step beyond the mission of all the baptised. While still using the word, PE is actually taking about a specific kind of mission. It's saying that any baptised person can be called to governance in the church. This is a call to a more focused mission, that of leadership. Distinguished Australian theologian, John N. Collins, is helpful here. He has conclusively shown that in the New Testament the Greek word diakonia, which we translate as 'ministry', refers explicitly to a public role of leadership in the church's mission, which is recognised by the community (*Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, 1990).

So, leaders in Catholic schools, hospitals, aged care, social services or, in the terms of PE, a Vatican dicastery, are called to ministerial leadership. Other staff are invited to share in the mission of proclaiming Christ in the world, or participating in and supporting the ethos of the organisation. While PE is right when it re-situates mission in baptism, it would have been much clearer

if it had picked up John Collins' re-interpretation of diakonia, ministry, because that is what it is really referring to when it talks about 'presiding over a dicastery.' In the Australian context I would argue that the women and men exercising leadership in a specific work of the church are truly ministers. In a Catholic school, for example, the principal and the RE co-ordinator are the ministerial leaders of the school community, modelling and engendering the mission of proclaiming Christ and the Catholic tradition. In hospitals and aged care facilities the leadership ministry is more complex with their disparate medical, nursing and domestic staff, visiting doctors and specialists, and volunteers.

Most Catholic hospitals are now part of larger organisations such as Mercy Health, St Vincent's Health Australia, or Calvary Health Care, with an overall coordinating body, Canberra-based Catholic Health Australia (CHA). CHA focuses its ministerial emphasis on the 'wholistic healing ministry' of Jesus, meaning that he cured and integrated the whole person, not just the physical illness or disease.

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In conclusion, there's no doubt that PE is a revolutionary, if understated document. It would have been clearer if it had picked up Collins' re-interpretation of ministry as leadership because that's what it's talking about. But it is a decisive, even revolutionary theological shift because it re-roots ministry in the mission to which all are called by baptism.

**Genocide is biblical.**

**Loving your enemy is biblical.**

**But only one is Christlike.**

**Slavery is biblical.**

**Chainbreaking is biblical.**

**But only one is Christlike.**

**Patriarchy is biblical.**

**Counter-cultural elevation of women is biblical.**

**But only one is Christlike.**

**Retributive violence is biblical.**

**Grace-filled restoration is biblical.**

**But only one is Christlike.**

**Segregation is biblical.**

**Unity is biblical.**

**But only one is Christlike.**

**Christ transforms, not the Bible. Be wary of those who know one but not the other.**

**Jordan Harrell**