

THE CULTURE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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What do we mean by "culture" ?

When the word "culture" is used, a variety of ideas come to mind - culture of a civilisation, ethnic culture, and even culture as a biological growth. The Macquarie Dictionary lists at least ten different ways in which the word can be understood in English. The idea of culture on which I will focus in this study/reflection is the sociological meaning of the word - the sum total of ways of living and acting built up by a group of human beings and which can be passed on to others who join the group.

In the mid 1980s, books began to be written on the culture of corporate and also human service organisations. More recently, we find the term being used relating to the Catholic Church - to the call for a change of culture in the Church in regard to sexual abuse.¹

Culture and the Church

A recently published book by Bishop Geoff Robinson, Emeritus Auxiliary Bishop in the Archdiocese of Sydney, Australia, has the title *For Christ's Sake - End Sexual Abuse in the the Catholic Church ... for Good*.² To some extent, this book is an extension of his previous work *Reclaiming Power and Sex in the Catholic Church - Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*.³ In his second book however, Bishop Robinson is more specific about some matters, and goes further in suggesting what may contribute to addressing the issue of sexual abuse in the institutional Church. He proposes three major tasks to be performed in eradicating sexual abuse in the Church:⁴

- identifying and removing all offenders
- reaching out to and assisting all victims/survivors
- identifying and overcoming the causes of both abuse and the poor response to abuse

The third point of those above relates to some less overt aspects of the Church - causes for the abuse and for the poor response to it. If the behind-the scenes aspects that have lead to the present situation are not attended to, then removing those who offend and reaching out to victims will not be a permanent solution. In his book, Bishop Robinson recognises this, and speaks of some not so visible causes of what has produced the present situation. He has divided this latest book into three sections ;

¹ For example: Keenan, Marie, *Child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church - gender, power, and organizational culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

² Robinson, Geoffrey, *For Christ's Sake - End Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church ... for Good*, Garratt Publishing, Mulgrave Vic., 2013.

³ Robinson, Geoffrey, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church, Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, John Garratt Publishing, Mulgrave Vic., 2007.

⁴ Robinson, *For Christ's Sake*, p 3.

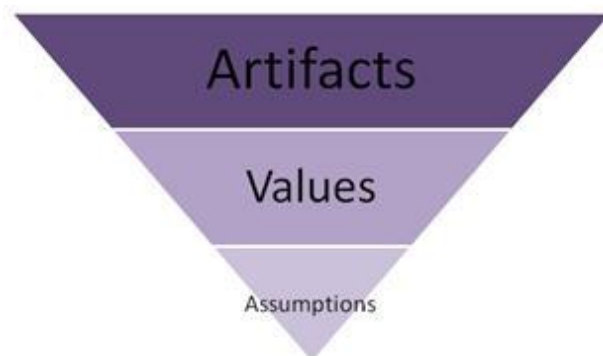
Part I: **Factors contributing to abuse**; Part II: **Factors contributing to the poor response**; and Part III: **Enabling a healthy response**. - Part III concludes with a Petition for a Council of the Whole Church.⁵

Bishop Robinson has highlighted a number of negative aspects he finds in our organisational Church - a religion of fear, moral immaturity, excessive emphasis on sexual morality and celibacy, male dominance, mystique of priesthood and religious life, "safe" theology and thinking, taking refuge in authority, and "creeping infallibility"⁶, At the same time, he proposes more emphasis on the role of women, the collegiality of Bishops, the contributions of a wider Church, the sense of faith of the People of God, and the stimulus of vision and imagination.

I would like to suggest that much of what Bishop Robinson talks about concerns not so much matters of faith and essential belief, but rather matters relating to the culture of the organisational Church, that is, how the people of the Church live and work together. So what do we mean by the culture of an organisation ?

Organisational Culture

There have been a number of books written and models proposed on the culture of organisations in general. Edgar H. Schein, a former professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is one of those who have made a contribution to the study of this topic over a long period of time . In his book titled *Organizational Culture and Leadership*⁷, he offers a model of three levels represented by the graphic shown on the right:⁸ From top to bottom in the diagram, the individual levels become less easy to observe, and ascertain.



First Level: In Schein's model, the most visible level of contribution to the culture of an organisation would be that of **Artifacts and Creations**. This level is the easily perceived physical and social environment which the organisation constructs around itself. This is often assumed to *be* the culture of the organisation, but in fact there are other underlying aspects of culture that are not so overt.

Second Level: Less obvious are the sets of **values, beliefs, goals, ideologies and rationalisations** of the organisation and its members. Values may have been designated by

⁵ This petition can be found at: <http://change.org/forchristssake>

⁶ Note: The term "creeping infallibility" is sometimes applied to the claiming of more authority for a statement made by a Church leader than the statement should be given.

⁷ Schein Edgar H., *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 4th Ed., 2010, Ch 3, p 24 ff.

⁸ Edgar Schein, *Schein's Organizational Culture Model*, accessed July 7, 2013, at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Schein

the founders of the organisation, or may have been established and further developed by later leaders or members.

Third Level: The level of basic **underlying assumptions, judgements, fears, hidden beliefs and goals**, is the most difficult to ascertain and deal with. In many cases, this is an unconscious or even arational level. Differences at this level can lead to real differences in values and beliefs. Challenging at this level may bring about much resistance.

When we apply all this to the culture of the organisational Church, we can think of the face the Church presents to the world - churches and furnishings, worship, schools, hospitals and other public ministries, hierarchical and authority structures, public teaching and documents, public opinions and public behaviour of leaders and members - all being part of Schein's Level 1 model of the culture of the organisational church.

Behind this face the Church presents to the world are the less visible elements of Church culture which drive the leaders and members of the Church such as the religious beliefs they have personally, the theologies they adopt, their own personal values, and founders' charisms. Still more hidden are the underlying assumptions, judgements, fears, beliefs and goals that may not even be expressed. For example, the assumption that the organisational Church is more important than the members of the Church has led to the value that the organisational Church has to be protected at all costs - and this has broken through into the public face of the Church in the form of the abuse crisis.

The negative issues Bishop Robinson has highlighted show up in the visible area of Church organisation culture, but are driven by some less overt elements. The positive aspects that Bishop Robinson highlights might need to have the assumptions, beliefs fears and values of many leaders and members of the Church addressed before they would become part of the overt culture of the Church.

Church Tradition and Church Culture

Church Tradition in the sense of the Scriptures and Church Teaching is part of the culture of the Church but I suggest that not every aspect of the current culture of the organisational or institutional Church should in reality be considered as the received Tradition of the Church. Some parts of the culture of the institutional Church arise from responses ,to situations of history, fear of change or losing control, desire for power, and even personal preferences...

Somewhere along the line, some elements of Church organisational culture have become intermingled with Church Tradition and systematised, so that what is presented as a matter of fundamental belief is not only not a matter of faith, but needs to be examined and perhaps removed from the culture of the Church. At the same time, other aspects of Church culture have been neglected, and need to be emphasised. A very sad result of failing to distinguish between genuine Tradition and Church organisational culture is that there is sometimes a gap between what the Church organisation proclaims itself to be and what it actually is.

FOR REFLECTION

Consider the Catholic Church:

1. How is the culture of the Catholic Church seen by those who are not members of the Church, and by those who are within the Church ?
2. What are the main aspects of Catholic Church culture that assist the Church in carrying out its mission ?
3. What are some of aspects of Catholic Church culture that hinder its mission ?