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Believers: Does Australian Catholicism Have a Future?

Paul Collins
The University of New South Wales Press, 2008
$65.95, 190 pages

Reviewed by Gregory Hine

The text *Believers: Does Australian Catholicism Have a Future?* explores the historical, contemporary, and present role of Roman Catholicism within Australian society. Central to six engaging, challenging, and perhaps controversial chapters is the question: "Is the Church in a state of decline within Australia?" In his book Paul Collins highlights certain aspects of Australian culture and society that have flourished due to the influence of the Church, and critically examines some factors attributed to the apparent "failure" of Catholicism to permeate this same culture fully. Despite his criticism of the localized Church, the author remains optimistic for the future of Roman Catholicism in Australia.

According to Collins, the sectors of Australian culture with which Catholicism has been most involved and influential include those of parish life, health care, and education. The success of Catholic schools is made mention of, with many non-Catholic parents wishing to enroll their children in Catholic schools because of sound discipline and the values-based education offered. Attention is drawn to the permeation of values-based politics within the major political parties, and how Catholicism has had considerable influence over Australian politicians and political decisions alike. The St. Vincent De Paul Society, affectionately known as "Vinnies," works tirelessly for those less fortunate individuals in the community, and comprises Australia's largest nonprofit organization, with over 42,500 volunteers nationwide. These services include aged care and disability services, home visitation, financial and food assistance, migrant and refugee support, homeless accommodation, soup vans that support about 450 homeless people every night, centers for youth, and overseas projects. The Catholic Church has been instrumental in assisting the Australian Aborigines who have been dispossessed of land, family, and culture. This assistance came largely from the efforts of 19th-century bishops John Polding and Rosendo Salvado, and many other committed clergy and members of religious orders.

Australian people are a people "spiritually adrift" in the opinion of Col-

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lins. Several reasons are offered to suggest why there is an apparent "fragility in faith," and, more importantly, why Catholics within this country have left their faith. One such explanation is elucidated within the author's claim that the majority of the laity who have left Catholicism have done so because they feel the "official" Church has abandoned them, and is uninterested in their concerns. These concerns include the credibility of belief, gender, pluralism, equality, institutional corruption, and, at the deepest level, spirituality. Although it is not a focal point of this text, Collins assures his audience that the recent sexual abuse scandals involving a minority of clergy have not done anything to lift the profile of institutionalized religion in this country. He draws attention to the current shortage of Australian priests, and the apparent alienation of women in the Church, especially within the spheres of participation and decision making. These points provide the author with an opportunity to criticize Pope Benedict's stance on the ordination of women, and Collins claims that this issue "cannot be side-stepped, no matter how often the hierarchy attempt to wash their hands of the issue" (p. 70). In a similar vein, Collins challenges celibacy as being a necessary criterion for priestly ordination, and states that both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches permitted marriage for their clergy during the first millennium. He also highlights comments made by the current pope about Australia's present state of "godlessness" (p. 39), and criticizes the pastoral and creative leadership of Benedict's predecessor, John Paul II. Furthermore, Collins apportions blame to the Catholic Church in Rome in that "the primary responsibility for the Church's pastoral failures lies squarely within its structures and within its own leadership" (p. 149). For the situation to improve, a localized approach to "genuine leadership" is offered as a potential solution. This genuine leadership is loosely defined as leadership that lies between the extremities of liberal and traditional perspectives, acknowledges equality among all members of the Christian community, seeks increasingly to recover and integrate Jesus's and the New Testament's model of servant leadership, and does not necessarily require any Roman authority to make decisions on behalf of the bishops.

Believers uses many historical and current statistical data to help depict the present state of Catholicism in Australia. For example, according to census data, approximately 16.6% of Australia's population declared themselves Catholic in 1996. In 2006, that same demographic rose marginally to approximately 18.7%. Although the nationwide statistics report an increase in Catholics nationwide, there is an overall decrease in Mass attendance on Sundays, particularly among young people. Despite this decrease, the shortage of avail-

able clergy is once again underscored, with many dioceses having parishes with large parish-priest ratios (on average, there is one priest for every 2,400 Catholics). After considering the elements that perhaps hinder and enhance the Church's progress in Australia, Collins forecasts an optimistic opinion about the future of Roman Catholicism. He states encouragingly that "Catholicism will survive, certainly with less numbers, but with more commitment and more ministerial clergy" (p. 175). It is his firm belief that whilst the school system and strong institution will sustain the Church, Catholics will require genuine leadership and a willingness to confront both the difficulties and opportunities the Church faces. The registered sentiment that Collins leaves his readers with is that the country of Australia is uniquely placed to address these issues directly. The direction for the future of the Catholic Church within Australia, according to Collins, is reliant on two central issues. The first of these is the introduction of a transparent, reformative program that seeks to renew current and past practices, not least of which is the pastoral leadership shown by bishops at a local, diocesan level. Second, the Church must be willing both to realize and directly address its past mistakes. It is hoped that such an approach will assist the Australian Church in recovering from such mistakes, and to render the question of decline redundant.

Overall, this book offers a well-balanced, critical, and contemporary "snapshot" of the Catholic Church in Australia, drawing particular attention toward the challenges this religion currently faces. Collins makes effective use of current research, statistical analyses, and the opinions of several esteemed "experts" to support his incisive and carefully constructed arguments. However, the author's arguments call for solutions that conservative Catholics will find confronting, and potentially offensive. Such solutions advocate married clergy, the ordination of women, and the creation of a more localized, "genuine" approach toward pastoral leadership. These attributes combine well to render *Believers* a compelling, engaging, and useful resource for a wide audience: teachers and students of secondary and tertiary institutions, those in religious life, the laity, and perhaps even the "unchurched."

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