

5-24-08 - "In many ways, he had no other option but to write such a book."

BISHOP PAT POWER; Catholica Australia

Retired Australian Bishop, Geoffrey Robinson, has in the last week or so come under pressure from the Vatican, from an unsigned statement put out in the name of the Australian Bishops, and from at least one Cardinal in the United States, for his blunt book entitled "Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church — Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus". Bishop Patrick Power, who is presently on long service leave, yesterday sent Catholica this unsolicited statement of heartfelt support for Bishop Robinson which it is our great pleasure to publish. The sentiments expressed in this article very much accord with the overwhelming sense of support we detect being expressed for them in the lay Church we come into contact with in this nation. We salute both Bishop Robinson and Bishop Power for having the courage to exhibit the spiritual leadership of their people that they have shown. ...Brian Coyne, Editor

The lot of a prophet is rarely a comfortable one. Geoffrey Robinson with his great knowledge and love of the Scriptures would understand that better than most. Yet he chose such a path when he wrote *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*.

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In many ways, he had no other option but to write such a book. Since the late 1980s when revelations of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church began to surface, Bishop Robinson was at the forefront in addressing the issue. He began by listening to victims, hearing first hand the stories and witnessing the pain and damage of those most affected. He saw too the effects on families, parish and school communities and other people involved. He began to understand something of the complexity of factors which led to abuse. He saw it as necessary as well to "get inside the skin" of those responsible for the abuse.

It was largely his leadership among the Australian Bishops which led to the publication of *Towards Healing* which gives protocols for receiving complaints of abuse by Church personnel and, also, *Integrity in Ministry* which sets standards of conduct for those involved in the ministerial life of the Catholic Church.

At the same time, he urged his brother Bishops to listen to victims and to deal decisively with complaints of abuse. But he saw the need to go deeper. It is imperative to look not just at the causes of individual instances of abuse, but to try to understand the systemic weaknesses and failures which underlie such a betrayal of trust and power.

The Australian Bishops in their recent statement acknowledge their indebtedness to Bishop Robinson for his huge contribution in this area. But it goes much deeper than that. When I became a bishop in 1986, Geoffrey Robinson had been a member of the Bishops' Conference for two years and even at that early stage he was consistently called upon for advice by his brother Bishops. I remember the late Archbishop Guilford Young enthusiastically nominating him to represent Australia at a Synod of Bishops in Rome, extolling his distinguished qualities. I regard him as possessing the finest mind among my fellow bishops in the 22 years I have been part of the Conference.

Those aware of Geoffrey Robinson's contribution to the Marriage Tribunal, to Catholic Education at all levels, and to the pastoral life of the Church generally, have seen him as a truly Christ-like person. Through retreats, lectures and seminars he has enabled laity, religious and clergy to develop their potential among the People of God. He has sought to promote conversation within and beyond the Catholic Church through *Catalyst for Renewal and Spirituality in the Pub*, thereby connecting with many people who otherwise would be left on the outer.

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When I read Bishop Robinson's book late last year, I recognised anew the author's great love for God and his people, his deepest desires for the Church to be true to its mission in bringing Christ to the world and his great honesty and courage in naming the challenges facing the Church today. Here was a faithful son of the Church wanting it to be its best self, while knowing it was "ecclesia semper reformanda", a Church continually in need of reform.

The Bishop has drawn on his expertise in the Scriptures to tackle some of the thorny questions surrounding the nature of Christ and the Church which have occupied the attention of saints and scholars for most of the Church's 2000 year history. So many of these heroic members of the Church have been dismissed or condemned in their own day only to be fully understood and appreciated later on. I think of Blessed Mary MacKillop and Catherine Macauley as well as many distinguished theologians "under a cloud" prior to the Second Vatican Council. History has shown that immediate judgements very often are subsequently proved to be wrong.

In calling the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII sought to "open the windows" to allow the winds of the Holy Spirit to renew the life of the Church. It saddens me that much of the openness which Vatican II stood for is now being shut down.

In response to Geoffrey Robinson's book, I detected a renewed sense of hope among those who read it. I am told that it has sold like no other religious book in Australia in recent years. That is surely a message from the grass-roots where people's deepest sense of faith is finding its expression.

Pope Benedict's recent visit to the United States has been acclaimed a success, largely through the Pope's honesty in facing up to the issues around sexual abuse in the life of the Church. I dare to say that is precisely what Bishop Robinson has been doing for twenty years and what he has courageously set out in his book *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*.

I recently saw a quote from Pope John XXIII which could aptly be applied to Geoffrey Robinson. "Every believer must be a spark of light, a centre of love, a vivifying leaven amidst his fellow human beings: and he will be this all the more perfectly he lives in communion with God. In fact there can be no peace between humans unless there is peace within each one of them."

+Pat Power

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Bishop Power is presently on long service leave