

## LOOKING BACK ON THE WAY WE WERE

Pat Mullins\*

While visiting a parish last year I overheard a young woman berating the parish priest about changes to her experience of church. She complained loudly enough for me to hear, 'The Church has never changed in 2000 years. Why NOW!' At the time, I was doing research into how we in the Australian Church spoke about marriage from the turn of this century. This research led me to the pages of *The Australasian Catholic Record*, a journal which since its first publication in 1895 has continued to today, having only a brief period of inactivity at the time of the first World War. Continually, I was distracted from the purpose of my research by light-hearted enjoyment, and at times, horror, at reading of the concerns of the Church in the times of our grandparents and parents and in my own past. The words of the complaining young woman and the pleas of those who call us back to the 'good old days' continually came to mind.

From the pages of *The Australasian Catholic Record* in 1924 comes a description of its vision of its early role, as a permanent organ [of the Australian and New Zealand church] to deal with domestic problems, to enshrine its history, to reflect its learning, to help its clergy in the pulpit and the confessional, to aid them in the general revision of theological studies . . .

To this end, up until the 1970s (when the changes of Vatican II had begun to be absorbed), several pages of each issue of *The Record* were devoted to the anxious questioning of priests, on moral questions, who used a non-deplume to prevent any betrayal of confidence.

### ***The Australasian Catholic Record***

In 1902, baptism was seen as necessary for salvation. The lawfulness of the use of chloride of mercury to dilute the water was questioned, in the event of babies being baptised in the womb, should they not survive the birth. The same year, a suspected impoverished priest asked for permission to take up the collection at the church door as the devout entered the church, since many escaped before the normal collection time.

In 1911 the question was raised as to whether it was lawful for an owner to appeal to the land valuation court, although he knew his land had not been taxed above its true value. The answer was that such a man was not guilty

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of injustice simply by reducing the value of his property by one-fourth or one third, provided such a course was commonly adopted by local owners generally.

The question of how to interpret the meaning of the word attend in a decree, which called for priests to be suspended if they attended race meetings, evoked a response of one and a half pages in 1925. It was explained that a priest, looking on at the races from a neighbouring hill or from the windows of a house in the vicinity of the racecourse, could not be described as attending the race meeting, but the question of scandal arose if he sat on the fence. Where a moderate bet at cards or billiards could be tolerated, 'betting on the horses' was named as 'unbecoming the clerical state' and 'could easily undermine their [the priests] spiritual life and seriously distract them from what ought to be their principal occupations'.

'Worried Pastor', also in 1925, raised the issue of 'the increasing tendency of our Catholic people to take part in . . . socials, concerts and bazaars in aid of Protestant churches . . . even going so far as to enter their children for a Protestant Queen Competition'. The same year, the 'more or less general use of wireless communication' brought to the fore the question of whether 'listening in' to broadcasts of Protestant sermons incurred censure. The respondent to the question wrote that listening in could not be named as attending, and that there was no specific law regarding the wireless, since when the law was given, the legislator 'could hardly have foreseen, much less have intended to prohibit positively, this extraordinary method of wireless communication'.

In 1926 the question was asked of what a priest should do if, while performing a mixed marriage in the sacristy, he hears the strain of music proceeding from the choir gallery. Ecclesiastical legislation prohibited singing and playing of the wedding march at a marriage of mixed faith. The reply to the question appeared to be made by a musician who saw it as 'not good to create a scene and sensations, such as the catastrophic collapse in mid-career of a glorious wedding march'.

Legislation surrounding marriage provided the substance for many questions. In 1938, a priest asked whether it was permissible to have 'what is called a "Kitchen Tea", in a local hall during Lent, a time when the church frowned on the celebration of marriage. The reply noted that 'our competence, alas! does not reach the "Kitchen Tea" in the local hall'.

Indicating the progress of society, a priest inquired in 1939 whether it was forbidden to place electric lights inside the throne of exposition in order to illuminate the monstrance. The contentious question was bridged in 1940

of whether knitting could be called servile work and therefore was forbidden on Sundays. The response ran to seven and a half pages, resulting in the conclusion that if a woman was by profession a knitter, knitting would be for her servile work. If the knitting were complicated and artistic, it would then fall into the category of embroidery and crochet-work, which were not servile work. If, again, were a woman not to knit, she might risk committing sin, say by the harmful reading of novels, then to knit would not be a sin, being necessary to put 'fidgetiness and irritability to flight' in 'this age of nerves'. Should, however, a woman knit a stocking simply to get the knitting done, this would be servile work, but would be mortally sinful only after three hours.

A sign of the times appeared in *The Australasian Catholic Record* of 1941 when a priest asked whether the installation of a burglar alarm or a steel tabernacle would violate any liturgical laws. In 1943 again when the question was raised as to whether a busy working girl might do her laundry on a Sunday without fear of sin. The question also arose of whether absolution was valid in the case of a person who regularly went to confession, deliberately choosing a deaf priest.

*The Record* of 1949 saw an impassioned plea from a priest on behalf of the dairy farmers in his congregation who, having done half a day's tiring work before they were able to come to the second Mass on Sunday, found the need to have breakfast. Therefore they could take Communion only at Midnight Mass on Christmas Day or during the off-milking season. A priest in the 1952 issue raised the question of the right to refuse Communion to women who used lipstick which he saw as 'unbecoming'. He also berated the so called hats of fashion, which did not adequately cover the head, being little more than an ornament. The respondent said such extreme behaviour on the part of the priest could be justified only if the use of lipstick were classified as immodest.

The question was asked in 1962 under what circumstances could priests carry women passengers in their cars. Two causes were then given under canon law, necessity and charity. The moral theologian replying noted that 'some frankly honest purpose must exist for a priest to have women passengers in his car. Would not the intention of the Fathers of the Council have been to forestall any dangers to the virtue of the priest, and to prevent the gossip of idle tongues and the consequent harm to his reputation?'

I commend the constancy of the staff of *The Australasian Catholic Record*, who have maintained a periodical for such a long and changing period of our history. A browse through pages of the Church's publications,

if only in Australia and only in this century, would convince the most sceptical that we, as church, have changed almost beyond recognition. We will continue to change, and must do so, because if we remain unchanged in a changing world, we will simply be irrelevant.