**Chapter 2**

**Roman Catholicism**

*A Communication Impasse*

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**Introduction**

Vatican II (1962–1965), a key event in Roman Catholic history, aimed to achieve church renewal. Measures initiated immediately following the Council intensified many of the divisions now evident in the Catholic communion. Successive pontificates reined in Vatican II initiatives; curtailing the role of the laity, particularly that of women, and re-asserting pre-Vatican II stances on sexual and procreative issues. While there are clear positions that delineate conservative and progressive extremes in Catholic camps, the traditional edifice is kept in place by a much larger portion of the faithful managing the dialogic space between them. But those occupying the pews are ageing and young Catholics reject values promoted by external authorities, carving out personal moralities that tend to be quite different from those taught by the Church (Cornwell 2002: 112). Roman Catholicism’s most deeply felt controversies concern the ways authority is exercised, the roles of women and the conduct of sexuality. They are anchored by structures and communication patterns aligned with traditional gender stereotypes and have led to what many have described as a breakdown in communications between laity and clergy.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Catholic religious practice in Europe, the United States and Australia declined markedly, a trend that continues in Australia (Dixon et al. 2013). There has been a marked growth in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Pacific (Luxmoore 2013). Admissions to the all-male priesthood have declined internationally to the extent that many parishes have been incorporated into larger ones. ‘Faith communities’ led by lay people in the absence priests for Sunday mass have developed around the world. To address the shortage of priests, dioceses in Western countries are importing priests from ‘developing’ countries such as India, the Philippines and Latin America to ‘re-vitalise’ parishes (Schreiter 2005). In Australia such imports are believed to account for around twenty-one percent of active clergy (Wilkinson 2011: 16). At the same time, the Church’s rejection of the idea of admitting women to the Catholic priesthood has remained non-negotiable. While some slight gains towards gender equality in the West were made during the second half of the twentieth century, Roman Catholicism
along with other monotheistic religions actively consolidated its identity by promoting traditional, unequal gender roles between men and women (Woodhead 2008). Kautzer (2013) sees the Church’s current conservative stance as a reaction to the ‘culture wars’ experienced world-wide, a situation not unrelated to the changing roles of women and men.

At the time of writing, there is much speculation regarding how the actions of recently inaugurated Latin American, Pope Francis (19 March, 2013) might signal the beginnings of change. The year 2013 witnessed Pope Benedict XVI’s resignation, an unusual event in papal longevity as popes normally stay in office till the ends of their lives; the last resignation of a pope having occurred almost six centuries ago. There are many reports of his humility and simple lifestyle, revealing a determination to lead by example. For instance, he has chosen to live in modest quarters with other clergy rather than taking up residence in the Apostolic Palace in which popes have been dormitoried since 1903 (Agence France-Presse 2013). One could read into his reported activities attempts to send a message to the faithful that the church’s established power relations are in for a shake-up.

Francis’ reign comes at a time when the Catholic Church can no longer ignore criminal charges now being brought against it by secular authorities around the world. Evidence of diocesan financial mis-management in the United States and German Churches as well as in the Vatican’s own financial division, the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See (McElwee 2013), has emerged. Abuse charges have been mobilised internationally with some countries, notably Ireland, the United States and Australia mounting national inquiries into institutional abuse. Perhaps the Pope’s statements that too much power is centred in the Vatican (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2013), and his conduct of a third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the purposes of looking at The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization (Synod of Bishops 2014) are indications of a meaningful response to these challenges. But some theologians, notably Joan Chittister (Chittister et al. 2013) visionary theologian and member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, and Boston College of theology professor, Thomas Groome (Connor 2013) are sceptical as to whether such consultations will lead to action on the ground. Research is frequently commissioned by bishops’ conferences, conducted by well-meaning, skilled people, reported upon at bishops’ conferences and left to languish (Coco 1999). Controversial findings are

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