

30 November 2008

Archbishop John Bathersby DD STD
Archbishop's House
790 Brunswick St
New Farm 4005

Dear Archbishop Bathersby,

Thank you for the opportunity you have given St Mary's to think about some of the core issues that underpin our flourishing faith community. Since your letter of 22 August we, the community of St Mary's, have prayed, thought, discussed, debated, reflected, met, workshopped, and finally done our best to reply to the issues you raised.

As in any other community, there is no single opinion held by every member. That is, in fact, one of the wonderful things about which we have been reminded as a result of this process. So this letter does not purport to be a statement that accurately reflects every opinion of every person on every issue.

St Mary's and its liturgical celebrations offer a warm welcome to all, including those who struggle with their faith. We do not demand they leave those struggles, ambiguities and questions at the door. Indeed, we believe that opening the door to them enriches us all.

Do we always agree with everything the priests, Peter Kennedy and Terry Fitzpatrick, and other homilists say? No. Do we agree with every statement issued from Rome? No. Do we believe that we at St Mary's and our practices are always right, and our insights always more "truthful" than those of Rome, Your Grace and other parishes? No, we don't.

What binds us together is that we listen, reflect, discuss and pray about these matters and believe that, no matter where any individual is placed on any issue, they share equally in the love of God. Further, they share it to no greater or lesser extent than any other human being. Therefore, all are welcome without any guarantee that they sign on to a particular doctrine.

This brings us to the first of many points you raise in your letter. We will deal with them one at a time.

Communion with the Catholic Church

With the caveat above — that this letter does not bind every single person who sits in our pews — our community believes it is in communion with the Catholic Church. We hope this letter will show why we believe so.

First, we believe we do our very best to put into practice the statement delivered recently by Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops of France, which must apply equally to all within the church:

Everyone has a place in the church. Every person without exception should be able to feel at home and never rejected.

We have embraced Pope Benedict's statement and placed it on our banner at the front of the church. We believe this is just one example of how seriously statements from the church's hierarchy are taken.

We note in your letter a belief that your statements have been dismissed by us. Please be assured this is not so. Your previous correspondence regarding Baptism was taken very seriously. While our response may not have been exactly as you wished, or as prompt, or as consistent, we can now tell you that Baptisms at St Mary's have changed and include the words "Father, Son and Holy Spirit".

We do also believe that if God is indeed omnipotent and all-loving — the breadth of which is beyond the limitations of human language — then other descriptors of God are also valuable in helping a broader spectrum of people enhance their understanding of God to the greatest extent possible. In this we are in communion with the intent of Catechism 42 of the Catholic Church which states:

God transcends all creatures. We must therefore continually purify our language of everything in it that is limited, image bound or imperfect, if we are not to confuse our image of God 'the inexpressible, the incomprehensible, the invisible, the ungraspable' with our human representations. Our human words always fall short of the mystery of God.

Further, Catechism 40 of the Catholic Church states:

Since our knowledge of God is limited, our language about God is equally so. We can name God only by ... our limited human ways of knowing and thinking.

Hence, Rome's preferred words are used at Baptism, and other words are used to enhance that experience.

Buddhist statue

It is important to state up-front that the statue was actually not a statue of Buddha, was not a focus of prayer or worship, and indeed was not used in our liturgies. It was a statue of a monk meditating. It was, more importantly, a simple gesture of cultural acknowledgement and respect for a Buddhist meditation group that uses the building on week nights.

Furthermore, we believe this gesture to be in line with the Vatican II statement:

In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth (Acts 17:26). One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all (Wisdom 8:1; Acts 14:17; Romans 2:6-7; 1 Timothy 2:4). (*Nostra Aetate*, art. 1)

We were surprised the statue became such an important issue. We understand you introduced many seminarians to Zen Buddhism in 1985. We understand you were highly culturally aware, and were respectful of, practised and taught some of the Buddhist techniques. We applaud this and believe our actions of respect for other religions and people are similarly appropriate.

The matter of faith

In your letter you cited Pope Benedict XVI who wrote in 2004 about the importance of worship or prayer. Again, we believe we are in communion with the Pope on this matter. It was troubling to many in our community to read your concerns about St Mary's faith practice.

We assure you that our liturgical expressions of faith are central to the community. For example, like many parishes, we celebrate three Eucharists every weekend, with an estimated 700–900 attending across the three liturgies. Until the recent vandalism and disrespect for the church displayed by some of those who corresponded with you and Rome, we celebrated Eucharist every day.

Our Saturday and Sunday liturgies are the prime expression of faith for most who take part at St Mary's. They do not set this aspect aside and spend their time focusing only on social action. However, those who do put social action first are equally welcome at St Mary's.

Social justice is an absolutely fundamental aspect of the community's life. Like other parishioners across the Church around the world, most of us attend our liturgies and struggle to make Christ's message of justice, respect and love for all a reality in our lives. In this regard, we attempt to reflect in our Eucharist and live in our lives the words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. (*Gaudium et Spes*, art. 1)

You asked about our position on the Trinity and other dogma. As we have already said, we cannot state the exact beliefs of every community member; moreover we believe this is a question that is not asked of other parishes. We can say, however, that prayers within our liturgies reflect a Triune God and our prayers are enthusiastically expressed by the community. Like other churchgoing Catholics, many believe without question in the Triune God whereas others struggle with the concept, and some may even reject it. We do not ask people to sign a pledge or nominate to which "team" they belong.

We believe there should be no issue with our welcoming those who may not believe in a Triune God, because everyone is exposed to the core message of Christ's life in our liturgies. In fact, we believe turning such people away from communion with the St Mary's community would be a rejection of Pope Benedict's statement that "Everyone has a place in the church. Every person without exception should be able to feel at home and never rejected."

Therefore, on the matter of faith, we believe we are in communion with the Catholic Church.

Liturgy

St Mary's remains in communion with the Catholic Church on this issue. We take very seriously the call of Vatican II to encourage the "Fully conscious and active participation by all the faithful". (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, art.14)

As in many other parishes, our liturgies are highly prayerful and reflective; we hear readings from scriptures and share hymns; we use appropriate liturgical music and a number of standard Catholic prayers.

We agree that the sacraments are "actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are 'the masterworks of God' in the new and everlasting covenant" (Catechism, 1116). We endorse St Augustine's statement as cited at the Council of Trent that the "sacraments are visible signs of an invisible reality". (*Catechismus Concilii Tridentini*, n.4)

We believe if any error is to be made, it is better to err towards inclusion rather than exclusion. Inclusion will do no spiritual or other damage to those participating, and it will extend to them a sign of grace, acceptance, love and forgiveness. Exclusion, on the other hand, can cause damage to individuals. It extends to them a closed hand, and brings about feelings of rejection, "less than", unworthiness and lowliness. This, we believe, is at odds with the Catholic Church's own statements on the very point of the Sacraments; it is out of step with Pope Benedict's words of inclusion and Christ's words "love one another as I have loved you" (a welcome hand to sinners, tax collectors, lepers and prostitutes). We believe it is not possible for a sacrament acted and spoken in love to be harmful.

In practice this means that the entire community is free to join with our presiders (Peter and Terry) in all aspects of the Eucharist. To do less would be exclusive, and we believe this to be contrary to the full depth and inspiration of the Catholic Church.

Therefore, we believe we are in communion with the Catholic Church on matters of liturgy.

Matters of governance

We endorse your appointment of Peter Kennedy as our leader. We endorse the Bishop of Toowoomba's approval of Terry Fitzpatrick to work in the Brisbane Archdiocese and your appointment of Terry to Murri Ministry in the Archdiocese. We endorse Peter's invitation to Terry to assist him in our community. And we believe there are two important aspects to these positions — the official appointment and community acceptance.

In your letter, you spoke of the difference between priests and lay people. At St Mary's, we focus on the inspirational call of Vatican II for all to share equally in "the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, art 31). We focus not on what, if anything, is different between priest and lay; instead we focus on what binds us all together as equals before Christ.

We also believe that the Church, established by Christ, practised by his immediate disciples and carried on by their followers for more than 300 years, was indeed congregational in nature. We believe that the governance of our community is a partnership between the hierarchy, Peter and Terry, our Council and the broader community. It is of course a balancing act, but we single none out for rejection and we believe this keeps us in communion with the Church and the fullness of its tradition.

Matters of authority

It is important for us to communicate to you that St Mary's does not "deliberately reject" the Church's apostolic authority. Indeed, we understand that this authority has been expressed in many ways throughout the history and tradition of the Catholic Church. It has never been expressed in one simple way and, no doubt, never will.

We do not believe in absolutism. The tradition of the Catholic Church, for which you perceive St Mary's has little respect, teaches us that human attempts at absolute truth are always capable of error.

The Church's history is full of error and full of good. Our community is no different from other Catholic parishes in this regard. We believe that, on matters of authority, the informed conscience of every member of the community in their personal relationship with their God is the final arbiter in this life. As the Second Vatican Council said in *Gaudium et Spes*, its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

In the depths of our conscience, we detect a law which we do not impose upon ourselves, but which holds us to obedience. Always summoning us to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to our hearts more specifically: do this, shun that. For we have in our hearts a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of the human person; according to it we will be judged.

Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There we are alone with God, whose voice echoes in our depths. (*Gaudium et Spes*, art. 16)

Our views, however, are best summed up by citing some of the Church's most loved sons, starting with words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark:

You know that among the Gentiles those they call their rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. Among you this is not to happen. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be a slave to all. For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve. (Mark 10: 42–45)

Further, we concur with Cardinal Newman who said that the Apostolic tradition:

... manifests itself variously at various times: sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors [of the Church], sometimes by the people, sometimes by the liturgies, rites, ceremonies, and customs, by events, disputes, movements, and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history. It follows that none of these channels of tradition may be treated with disrespect. (*On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine, The Rambler*, July 1859)

St Mary's gives no disrespect to Church Authority (questioning perhaps, and sometimes humour, but not disrespect), and prays for none in return.

We concur with the words commonly attributed to St Augustine of Hippo:

In essentials, unity;
in doubtful matters, liberty;
in all things, charity. (*Ad Petri Cathedram*, art. 72)

Finally, we would like to stress that your authority is certainly not taken lightly at St Mary's. Our in-depth consideration of your 22 August letter and the large volume of responses from members of the community highlight how seriously we take your authority.

The community took to heart your 2003 Archdiocesan Hearts on Fire Synod, and we believe we enact the nine priorities you outlined in your 27 July 2003 Promulgation Address. We also used them as a framework to look at the faith, liturgical and justice aspects of our community when preparing this response.

We are sorry if you think your words are not taken seriously in this community. We assure you that they are, and believe our actions are proof of it.

In conclusion

Your Grace, your letter focuses substantially on *negative* concerns you have with our community, and makes only cursory comment on what you see as our good works. We would like to remind you of some of the positives:

- Families and children flock to our community, including teenagers who often feel alienated elsewhere.
- The liturgies are vibrant, inclusive and seek to engage the heart, mind and soul of our members.
- Participants sing, pray and reflect in a full, active and conscious manner.
- No one is turned away.
- We set up Micah as a collective commitment to social justice in our community, complementary to many expressions of social justice that are carried out by individual members in their own life, and as an integral part of our collective belief in social justice as a matter of faith.
- Families encourage their children to embrace the sacraments.
- The homeless and wealthy happily pray side by side.
- We are invited to be challenged by new ways of thinking, praying and reflecting on our personal and collective faith.
- We attract people who would not attend any church if it were not for St Mary's.
- We connect to other communities seeking justice in the world, including unions, women's groups, gay people, Indigenous people, and victims of abuse from within and outside the Church, to name just a few.

We are conscious that you have cited the Pope and scripture to question us, and we too have cited the Pope, scripture and other historical Catholic sources to support our response. Both are true at the same time. Both are part of the same imperfect body of Christ on earth.

In the end, we look to the history of the Church — a Church that excommunicated Galileo, condemned Joan of Arc, barred Mary Mackillop, led the Inquisition and stood idly by while children were abused. We embrace that history because it teaches us much about absolutism and unbridled clericalism.

We also embrace the history and tradition of the Catholic Church because at the same time we know it has spoken in favour of workers' rights, poured countless millions into working with the poor, encouraged a

tradition of learning and questioning, provided shelter and hospitals, and sacrificed the lives of its martyrs for the promulgation of Christ's message of love.

Whether or not we agree on everything, St Mary's is part of the Catholic Church. We are in communion with that very same Church. We at St Mary's struggle every day alongside you to allow God's boundless love to become real in our lives, through the power of the undefinable Spirit of Christ at work within the Church and in the hearts of its members. None of us is perfect, and we don't belong to a club whose membership is determined by signing on to the Rules. We are all members of the living spirit of God. We are all striving to find that spirit in ourselves, to provide the still point in our turning lives.

We ask that you respect our decision to declare ourselves, as you asked, to be in communion with the Catholic Church. We believe that St Mary's is a valid Catholic community.

As Pope Benedict XVI also shared with the Bishops of France, "Let us therefore strive always to be servants of unity!"

The Council and Steering Committee would appreciate the opportunity to discuss these matters with you in more detail. We remain willing to meet at a time convenient to you.

Yours in Christ,

Peter Kennedy

Endorsed by the St Mary's Community through a community gathering of 230 community members on 30 November 2008