

OUR CHANGING CHURCH # 10 – 2015

“Practising communion”

There is a lot of talk about ‘culture’ and how to make change in an entrenched culture that is holding back or damaging a community. This is currently on the agenda in many sporting codes, and also in the church. Culture is essentially about people and how they relate to each other.

A recent article in *The Australasian Catholic Record* by US priest and professor, Anthony J Gittens, addresses issues around healing in the church and also culture. Gittens has many insights, a few of which are shared here.

“The dividing-line between the disciples of Jesus and the rest was not a matter of intelligence or status (just think of tax-collectors and fishermen: ‘low-lives’ in today’s language), but simply a matter of willingness to learn and to admit they still had some way to go.”*

“Throughout human history and almost universally, there is a way of living that can be identified as *domination* and whose features constitute a *domination paradigm* [culture]. It is most certainly alive and well in the institutional Catholic Church. By contrast, the alternative, the Way of Jesus, is that of *communion*, and its features together constitute the *communion paradigm*. It is, we can say, a glimpse of the Kingdom, or Realm, of God. ... But because we are fallible human beings, there will always be a tension between the call to *communion* and the temptation to *domination*.”

“Features of the *domination paradigm* include the polarization of people into *us* and *them* (where *us* takes preference over *them* or *you*); non-reciprocal relationships between people; and the use of control or fear.”

Gittens says that *dominating people* decree how others will behave and participate, making others feel “inadequate, vulnerable and fragile. They become identified generically, or by what they do, rather than by their intrinsic human worth; hence demeaning expressions such as ‘just a layperson’ or ‘only a woman’.” In Australia we come across many examples of this, fuelled by political spin and talk-back radio: “dole-bludgers”, “queue-jumpers”, “losers.”

Gittens’ article is based on images from scripture: images of the way that Jesus treated people. How he called them to communion. How service and love become the action and attitude that gives all people fullness of life. Those who fall into the culture of believing ‘dominant is better’ are in a world that sees ‘good’ as being about winning and losing. The domination culture is like a “contest in which there *must always be* a winner, and *therefore* a loser.”

The culture of *communion living* that Jesus taught is the opposite: “persons can develop, differences can be positively welcomed, aggression or selfishness is not provoked, and individuals become energized, eager and hopeful in their daily lives.”

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* All quotes from Anthony J. Gittens, “Stretch Out Your Hand!” *The Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol 92, 2. April 2015.