

**HOW IS POWER USED IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?
A CASE STUDY OF A GROUP OF MALE RELIGIOUS IN THE ARCHDIOCESE
OF MELBOURNE**

Submitted by
Peter William Dowling TPTC, B.Sc., MS

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School of Social Science
Faculty of Arts and Science

Australian Catholic University
Research Services
Locked Bag 4115,
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees.

Signed:

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ABSTRACT

Aim

While there is much talk of an emerging interest in spirituality in Australia, there is evidence of a declining affiliation with the established Churches. The impact of mainstream Christianity in these circumstances would appear to be waning. The continued attention given to the Church in the wake of these realities and that of the Church's dealing with situations of sexual abuse has often focussed around the way in which the Church has used its power and influence. While undoubtedly there is much evidence of the Church's service and care for its members and those most in need, more questions are being asked about the accountability of those who minister within the boundaries of Catholic Church structures, and the healthiness of those very structures for helping the Church to live out its mission with integrity. Further questioning has often been around the perceived intent of Church authorities, as seen by many, to return the Church to times prior to the Second Vatican Council when clerical authority was unquestioned. There are divergent viewpoints as to whether the call of the Council for wider involvement of lay people in Church decision-making and structures is in the process of being reversed.

The researcher, coming from his experience as a member of a Catholic Religious Congregation of Men, is interested in looking broadly at the issue of how power is used in the Catholic Church, with a particular focus on a case study of one Group of Male Religious in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. The aim of the study is to provide further insight into use of power in the Catholic Church, and to offer some recommendations for future use of that power in a healthy and constructive way for the benefit of the Church and, ultimately, all of society.

Scope

A Literature Review was carried out to investigate the broader issues of how power may be defined. A multitude of answers emerged, resulting in a rich understanding of power and some specific related factors: gender, hegemony, patriarchy, authority, leadership, empowerment and networks. Following these explorations around how use of power may

be understood, examination of issues relating to abuse of power took place. Given this background, attention was then given to issues of power in relation to Church structures.

With these learnings, the researcher conducted five focus groups of people who had relevant knowledge of the male Religious Congregation in Melbourne, which was the specific case study for this research. The groups included current members of the Congregation, former members, staff members in schools run by the Congregation, former students and a women's group. The study was restricted to one specific Congregation, the 'Brothers of St Charles' [fictitious name], in Melbourne, in order to provide a particular and manageable focus. While limited in scope, the study provides an analysis of the focus groups and a linking between this analysis and the Literature Review.

Conclusions

The study finishes with some reflections by the researcher on the learnings of the study and recommendations arising from the study. Central place is given to the quality of relationships of those engaged in ministry on behalf of the Catholic Church. An interplay of personal and Church/Congregational factors is proposed in order to provide some qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of such relationships.

In order for ministers to take up and use their power in an enriching way for themselves and particularly for those to whom they are called in service, recommendations are made around the need for learning about use of power as part of formation for Church personnel, around encouraging ongoing personal growth in those in Church ministry, around the importance of engaging in processes of healing where people have been hurt by past inappropriate use of power, and around the need to continually critique and challenge existing Church structures where there is injustice through lack of inclusivity.

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RESEARCHER'S NOTE:

The Congregation of Brothers studied has, for the purposes of this thesis, been given the fictitious name of the 'Brothers of St Charles'.

When the actual name of the Congregation has been used by a participant in a Focus Group or in a Focus Group question, the name of the Congregation has been put in parentheses, as [Brothers of St Charles].

The initials B.S.C.C. refer to 'Brothers of St Charles College' wherever they appear in the thesis, and they are put in parentheses, as [B.S.C.C.], if the reference specifically mentions the initials of the Congregation being studied.

PREFACE

I come to this study as a member of the Congregation of Brothers of St Charles, and since 1990, a member of the leadership team of the region of the Congregation which is centred in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. In that time, various religious groups, including the Brothers of St Charles, have had to face allegations of sexual abuse of children by some of their members and I have been a member of the team which has been responsible for responding to this situation. The response has required a genuine attempt to listen to those making allegations; offering support to them in their need for immediate therapy; setting up structures which encourage further disclosures; supporting Brothers who face allegations; dealing with general morale of the rest of the region; examining the protocols in our ministries relating to safety of all engaged in the enterprise and ensuring public accountability for this; and coming to grips with the type of culture in which such abuse was able to occur.

As I reflected on these issues, engaged in discussion with others and began to read around the topic, it seemed to me that there were wider questions to be asked. Power began to take a central place in my thoughts as I noted constantly that abuse was an expression of a disordered use of power, particularly within a Catholic Church context where religious people had always been given great respect and trust by the Catholic laity. So, while the sexual abuse factor may have been the triggering point for my investigations, it opened the door for a broader examination of how power has been understood and used in the Church. I was interested not only in the negative impact of the use/abuse of power, but also in seeing where power has been used to positive effect in the Church and Brotherhood as it was clear that those charged with sexual abuse were a minority of members of these organisations.

Such a topic would seem particularly relevant at a time when, given present world insecurity with its many associated human problems, company collapses due to questionable accountability standards and a general heightened feeling of the need for

transparency of action in all spheres of living, people are much more critical of structures which may have been so strongly entrenched in past times as to have been virtually beyond scrutiny. That scenario has changed and is likely to be increasingly challenged, particularly as the global view of domination by super-powers is being held up for greater examination and evaluation.

In this light, the time-honoured patterns of use of power and authority by the Catholic Church are also being exposed for investigation. I believe that such a process is very important so that the integrity of the Catholic Church is demonstrated by the ways in which it is seen to operate both at an official level and between its members. While this study offers a particular focus on the Brothers of St Charles as one group in the wider Catholic Church, the implications of the study may be of benefit for the wider Church.

I offer my reflections on the use of power in the Church in that light, and in the hope that they will be another small voice which calls the Church to remain faithful to the call of Jesus Christ to promote life to the full in all of its endeavours.

INTRODUCTION

The research begins with a Literature Review in Chapter 1 which looks at definitions of power and some related concepts and aspects of power. The issue of abuse of power is clearly one aspect which is looked at specifically, and then these matters are examined insofar as they relate to Catholic Church structures.

In order to relate the material in the Literature Review to the reality of life in Melbourne in the Catholic Church and in the Brothers of St Charles, I chose to engage in conversation with a variety of groups of people who had personal experience of the Brothers, either as current or former members, as staff members in the Brothers' schools, as past students of these schools, or as others with relevant knowledge of both Church and Congregation. Virtually all of these people, I believe, were raised in the Catholic religion, and most would see themselves as still affiliated with the Catholic Church in their adult life. This is not to say that all would agree on all aspects of Church teaching and functioning, but such people were very familiar with the culture of the Catholic Church in Melbourne and had some direct involvement with the Brothers of St Charles. As many of the above people were men, I was interested in hearing from women as well, particularly in a forum where they were free to express their opinions without any influence from men in the group.

I chose the use of Focus Groups rather than a series of interviews with individual people. One reason for this was the lack of my own time availability to conduct a large number of interviews of a one-to-one nature. The second and, in terms of my hopes, more important reason was that the telling of stories and memories by one person in a group could trigger responses and thoughts in others, the effect being that a richer understanding and teasing out of the issues became possible. I believe that this happened in each of the groups. After each group, I received comments that 'we could have kept talking about this for a long time!' While further groups would need to be held in order to have a greater sense that there were no more significant issues to be surfaced, the Focus Groups which were held offered an opportunity to explore the issues in a stimulating manner with people who were interested in the topic of research. The details of how people were recruited for each of the Focus Groups are contained at the beginning of Chapter 2, *Focus Group Analysis*. One

point worthy of note is that, while the greater time in each Focus Group was spent looking at the Brothers of St Charles, the underlying Catholic Church background and experience of the participants was the bedrock on which their comments were built.

Following this analysis, I have highlighted in Chapter 3 what seem to me to be the emerging issues coming from a marriage of the Literature Review with the Focus Groups. I have chosen to use the areas of definitions of power, related concepts and aspects, and abuse of power, and then to look again at these issues in relation to Church structures. In that sense, the format follows the structure of the Literature Review.

I conclude the research with Chapter 4, *Learnings and Recommendations*, in which I bring together the elements of earlier sections into a form where specific proposals are put forward as important if the use of power in the Catholic Church and in the Congregation of Brothers of St Charles is to be positive and growth-producing into the future.

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