

***Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church  
Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus***

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson

John Garratt Publishing 2007

**Introduction**

*Papal power has gone too far and there are quite inadequate limits on its exercise. The authority of the college of the bishops has been marginalized and the faith of the whole church has been rendered powerless* (p128). And so Bishop Robinson confronts his church, a church he has given his life to from the time of his early youth to his retirement in 2004. Power is an abstract notion but there is nothing abstract about the quotation above. Nevertheless, direct generalizations and criticisms, as in this case about papal power above are not the way this book moves. It progresses in a calm, logical manner with questions – hundreds of questions that must have been spinning around in the mind of Bishop Robinson well before he was elected by the Australian bishops in 1994 to take a leadership role with the National Committee for Professional Standards. This body coordinates the response of the national church to clerical sexual abuse. Robinson acted as co-chairman of this body from 1997 until 2003.

Many of Bishop Robinson's questions are rhetorical. We know what the bishop thinks and he challenges us to consider them in the same unemotional and rational way he does. Despite this, he is not one for answers. He seeks rather to define problems and sees himself as a searcher for truth. And on this point he finds a simple division between the two sides who now make up the Catholic Church – on the one side there are the *proclaimers of certainties* and on the other, *the seekers after truth* (p268). For Robinson, we can never know the mind of God...*human words are inadequate carriers of divine truth* (p236). Faith for Robinson then is not found primarily in propositional statements of beliefs. Faith must first be found in the person of Jesus Christ (p261). Bishop Robinson's view of church is therefore a humble one – it is the image of church defined by the Second Vatican Council, a pilgrim people making its way towards the mystery of God it continually seeks but never quite finds.

Robinson wrote his book in response to clerical abuse in the Catholic Church. He became convinced that the search for causes of the abuse could not simply be found in analysing individual cases. Rather, the causes, he believed, were systemic. This led him to question many aspects of the Catholic Church, aspects that for many of us define its identity in today's world. Thus, he explores issues relating to the sources of our knowledge of God and what we can say of this God; issues about the human and divine natures of Jesus and his conclusion that Jesus had limited knowledge; issues about the way we read and interpret the Bible and about the governance of the Church especially issues surrounding the papacy, infallibility and the way authority is exercised in the Church. There are issues relating to freedom and conscience and about the way the Church approaches sexual ethics. By the time he finishes, there is little left in the Church that Robinson does not confront.

## Questions

You might like to consider either individually or in groups the questions below. They may help you to focus on just two issues, namely of clerical sexual abuse and a *better church*:

1. Bishop Robinson believes that *there are serious dangers in basing the church's moral teaching concerning sex on the concept of direct offences against God* (p203). Why? (pp201-213). You might wish to use the Meditation on page 214 as a prayerful conclusion to end your discussion.
2. Why is sexual abuse so harmful to *a person's sense of wholeness and connectedness, and hence the person's sense of meaning and identity*? (pp217-220).
3. Healing and forgiveness are important concepts in regaining a sense of meaning and identity for any person who has suffered sexual abuse, especially clerical abuse. How does a victim of abuse learn to forgive and become healed? (pp219-229).
4. Bishop Robinson is critical of authorities 'managing' the Catholic Church's response to clerical sexual abuse rather than confronting the deeper causes of the crisis. What do you understand by his distinction? (pp7-10) Do you personally have evidence of this 'management' response? (see p23 footnote 1 for example of papal 'management' of the issue).
5. Robinson believes that clerical sexual abuse has occurred in an *unhealthy church atmosphere* which has helped build a *climate of abuse* (p16). He outlines three 'unhealthy' signs. What are they and do you think he is right? (pp9-19).
6. Bishop Robinson wants a *better church* in which abuse will not happen. He outlines in Chapter One what that *better church* might look like. He outlines three ideas that are intimately related – a *healthy God*, a *healthy people* living in a *healthy relationship* with their God. What are the essential characteristics of these three aspects of a better church? Perhaps your current experience of church is already healthy. Do you see any need to change? (p25-46). .
7. Robinson's vision of better church is also captured in his final meditation – the song of Jesus. Bishop Robinson wants us all to sing the song despite the knowledge that *the song is always greater than the singers*. Is this an unrealistic vision? How would you begin to put this vision into practice? How important is it for you that the institutional church exemplifies this vision? (p304-306).