

FREEDOM AND DISCOVERY in The Liberal Catholic Church

From its inception The Liberal Catholic Church has insisted upon the right of its members to entire freedom of belief. This applies equally to interpretation of creeds, of scripture, and of church tradition. A required profession of belief, it is suggested, tends to produce suppressed disbelief or stifled uncertainty on questions of doctrine. Rather, belief should be allowed to arise from enquiry, study and intuition, for which the authority of another, whether person, creed or book is no substitute. As is explained in the Church's '*Statement of Principles*', "Truth is not true for a man, or revelation a revelation, until he sees it to be true for himself" (1986, p9).

How, it must then be asked, can a church maintain coherence, how can it even continue to exist, when it has no uniformly accepted body of teachings? A body of teachings The Liberal Catholic Church certainly has. It derives not only from scripture and from mainstream Christian sources, but also from the perennial Wisdom Tradition, seen as having been drawn upon in the founding and consolidation of each of the great world religions. Thus drawing upon this esoteric tradition, The Liberal Catholic Church has been able to present a deep and satisfying interpretation of Christian symbols and scriptures. This is expressed variously in an extensive literature, some of the more significant of the writings being focussed upon the normally unseen effects of the sacramental life vitalising the Church and its members. The essentials of the resulting perspective are distilled into a very brief '*Summary of Doctrine*'. Even this bare précis is offered, not imposed. Again, the question arises – how does such a Church hold together?

In the first place the members accept and participate in a common liturgy, whose integrity is the responsibility of the world-wide assembly of bishops. The various liturgical forms are clothed in clear and inspiring language, and are all consistent with the underlying ethos of the Church. The liturgy, greatly prized for the grandeur and beauty of its prose, is used in Liberal Catholic churches in some 40 countries, in English, or in translation – clearly, a powerful unifying influence.

A second source of cohesion comes from the clergy, the deacons, priests and bishops, all of whom have, in the process of their studies and other preparation, formally stated that they are in general agreement with the '*Statement of Principles*' and '*Summary of Doctrine*'. They have arrived at this position freely. There has been no coercion here; nor has there been any attempt to conceal a contrasting outlook in order to secure or maintain an income, as Liberal Catholic clergy are unpaid. The priest or bishop has to earn an income in the usual way, and carry out his church duties in such time as is left. Thus among the Australian clergy are to be found retired or still active teachers, academics, solicitors, business managers, an orthopaedic surgeon, a headmaster, an architect and a musician. Only those who, as well as being academically and practically prepared are comfortably in accord with the Church's doctrinal position, are accepted as candidates for ordination. Otherwise the distinctive teachings of The Liberal Catholic Church would soon be diluted and lost.

It is quite evident that in the long history of Christianity there have been many individuals outstanding as leaders, theologians, orators, ritualists, even as mystics and

seers, who have lived within the strictures of imposed doctrine. This handicap is no longer a necessity. For we ordinary moderns, freedom of belief seems to provide a secure platform from which to explore and to deepen personal experience, and achieve a wider vision. Those so inclined may then, unfettered by unacceptable doctrines, but very often accepting quite demanding disciplines of mind and body, begin to tread the ancient narrow way, the journey inward which leads to conscious entry into the Kingdom of God, that state of mind and heart in which the aspirant ceases merely to believe or speculate, and begins *to know*. Stated otherwise, “The ancient path of purification, illumination and union which in older times brought the candidate to this certainty, is still open for his treading” (The Liberal Catholic Church ‘*Statement of Principles and Summary of Doctrine*’, p11).

The Summary of Doctrine of The Liberal Catholic Church

1. *The Liberal Catholic Church teaches the existence of God, infinite, eternal, transcendent and immanent. He is the one essence from which all forms of existence are derived. ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts17:28).*
2. *God manifests in his universe as a Trinity called in the Christian religion Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one God, co-equal and co-eternal; the Father the cause of all, the Son the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us, the Holy Spirit the life-giver, the inspirer and sanctifier.*
3. *Man is a complex of spirit, soul and body. The spirit of man made in the image of God is divine in essence. Therefore he cannot cease to exist; he is eternal and his figure is one whose glory and splendour have no limit.*
4. *Christ ever lives as a mighty spiritual presence in the world, guiding and sustaining his people. The divinity which was manifest in him is gradually being unfolded in every man until each shall come ‘unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’. (Eph. 4:13).*
5. *The world is the theatre of an ordered plan, according to which the spirit of man, by repeatedly expressing himself in varying conditions of life and experience, continually unfolds his powers. This spiritual unfoldment takes place under an inviolable law of cause and effect. ‘Whatsoever a man soweth that shall be also reap’ (Gal 6:7). His doings in each physical incarnation largely determine his experience after death in the intermediate world (or world of purgation) and the heavenly world, and greatly influence the circumstances of his next birth. Man is a link in a vast chain of life extending from the highest to the lower. As he helps those below him, so also he is helped by those who stand above him on the ladder of life, receiving thus a free gift of grace. There is a communion of saints, just men perfect or holy ones, who help mankind. There is a ministry of angels.*
6. *Man has ethical duties to himself and to others. ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment and the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and Prophets’ (Matt.22:37-40). It is the duty of man to learn to discern the divine*

light in himself and others, that light 'which lighteth every man' (John 1:9). Because men are sons of God they are brothers and inseparably linked together; that which harms one harms the entire brotherhood. Hence a man owes it as a duty to the God both within himself and others, first, to endeavour constantly to live up to the highest that is in him, thereby enabling that God within himself to become more perfectly manifest, secondly to recognise the fact of that brotherhood by constant effort towards unselfishness, by love of, consideration for, and service to his fellow-men. The service of humanity, reverence for all life and the sacrifice of the lower self to the higher are laws of spiritual growth.

- 7. Christ instituted various sacraments in which an inward and spiritual grace is given to us through an outward and visible sign. There are seven rites which may be ranked as sacraments, namely, Baptism, Confirmation, the Holy Eucharist, Absolution, Holy Unction, Holy Matrimony, and Holy Orders. The doctrine of these sacraments is sufficiently set forth in the authorised Liturgy of The Liberal Catholic Church. Christ, the living head of the church which he founded, is the true minister of all sacraments.*