

Talking Sex and Power in the Catholic Church

John L. Allen Jr. Interviews Bishop Geoffrey Robinson

Posted August 2008

What might drive a committed Roman Catholic bishop to resign his office after almost 25 years and denounce his church? In the case of Geoffrey Robinson of Sydney, it was the church's meltdown during the recent sexual abuse scandals. In the September/October issue of FOREIGN POLICY, John Allen [says](#) Robinson's recent book about his ordeal "will keep an important conversation alive." Now, Robinson discusses his journey from consummate insider to persona non grata.

FOREIGN POLICY: Without fundamental changes, what do you believe is the future of the Catholic Church?

Geoffrey Robinson: I see this whole question of sexual abuse and the response to it as crippling much of the work of the church. When the local church speaks out on some other question, I'm afraid nobody is listening. Until this is confronted, I'm afraid that loss of credibility will continue and get worse. The same problem exists internally. Authorities within the church have lost credibility with their own members. One similarity between [the United States and Australia] is that what's keeping the church strong, numerically speaking, is the great migrant factor. Take that away, and you have a quite steep decline.

FP: What's the first thing the pope should do to resolve the sexual abuse crisis?

GR: I will know the Catholic Church is truly serious when it places obligatory celibacy on the table for discussion. I don't believe the celibacy requirement is the sole cause of abuse, but it has become a litmus test.

The problem is not celibacy, but obligatory celibacy. Mother Teresa freely chose a celibate life because it was the only way she could do what she felt called to do, what she wanted to do. By making it obligatory, you create numerous priests, who want to be good priests, but who are living an unwanted and unaccepted celibacy. Unwanted celibacy can contribute to unhealthy psychology, such as severe depression. It can contribute to unhealthy ideas—for example, misogyny. It can contribute to unhealthy living conditions, including loneliness and lack of support. When these three things come together, you have the circumstances in which sexual abuse can arise.

FP: Have you learned anything about the Catholic Church from the reaction to your book that you didn't already know?

GR: It's brought home just how many people are looking for change, and this includes people in their 80s who have told me that what I've said is what they've believed for the last 40 years, since the Second Vatican Council. The questions I'm asking are their questions. I've received a large volume of correspondence, and many of these letters are moving. They come from people, including some who are quite elderly, who love the church but who believe there is a real need for change.

Before I left for a speaking tour in the United States, I received a letter from the Vatican telling me not to go. It asserted that the people who invited me are not in communion with the church. But in my experience, it's the exact opposite. I met people who were profoundly Catholic, who have spent all their lives in the church. Some who turned up were priests and former priests, but there were also lots of retired people who had raised families and served the church in every possible way. If these people are not in communion with the church, then we have a massive, massive problem.

FP: You wrote the book before Pope Benedict XVI's trips to the United States and Australia, where he spoke candidly on the sexual abuse crisis and met with victims. Is this the kind of strong leadership that has been lacking?

GR: He has certainly gone further than his predecessor, and I welcome what he's done. But it doesn't go far enough.

FP: What else should he do?

GR: You may be aware that in February of this year, the prime minister of Australia apologized to the "Stolen Generation" of Aboriginal people. These are indigenous persons who were taken from their families and entrusted to white families in the mistaken belief that it would be better for them. It was a superb apology. He apologized without conditions. He promptly acknowledged that an apology in itself is just words, so it must be put into action. He spoke about what he would do and said that he would be accountable through regular reports to parliament. He also had the symbolism right, speaking with a significant number of members of the Stolen Generation in front of him. That's what I would hope to see from the pope. He should apologize, but then say this is what we're going to do, when we're going to do it, and how we'll be accountable. I haven't yet seen that.

FP: You complain the pope is too powerful, yet you want him to exercise even greater power on the sexual abuse issue. Isn't that a contradiction?

GR: What I would have liked the pope to have done was to recognize the massive importance of the subject of sexual abuse and its impact on the church, and then to consult with others about how to respond. What I object to is that the entire response of the church depended to the extent it did on the personal response of one individual. Had he consulted with others, including Catholic parents who would have had strong views, he could have made a highly effective speech in St. Peter's Square calling the whole church to respond together. I don't want to take authority away, but I want it to be exercised in a more collegial manner.

For example, I would like to see the pope make use of modern communications technologies to foster wider consultation in the church, something that could be very easily done. The Vatican has the technology, but at the moment [it uses] it to control rather than to consult.

FP: Looking back, is there anything in the book you now question in light of the reactions you've received?

GR: Some people have suggested I should have left out one or two parts because of the controversy they can arouse, such as papal infallibility or homosexuality. But I put them both in because I believe it was more honest.

The surprising thing is that no one has yet said to me, 'You are wrong on such and such a page for the following reasons.' I thought that might come, but no one has made that kind of

attack on the book. Instead, they've attempted simply to brush the book aside, or to brush the author aside. You don't learn much from that sort of reaction. To tell you the truth, most of the reactions I've seen have told me more about the person making the comment than about the book itself.

FP: The Vatican called you on the carpet in 1996 for complaining that Rome was not showing leadership on the sexual abuse crisis. You resigned in July 2004. Between those two dates, can you pinpoint a moment when your attitude toward the church changed?

GR: It's hard to select a particular moment. In a sense, I could say it was that moment in 1996, when those letters started arriving. I felt alone, trying to respond to abuse without the support which I believe was essential. There was the ongoing silence from Pope John Paul II.

FP: How did the Vatican react when you told them you planned to quit?

GR: The acceptance came back within a couple of weeks. It was far from complicated!

FP: Before you traveled to the United States to promote your book, 13 American bishops wrote asking you—in fact, ordering you—not to come to their dioceses. Were you surprised?

GR: I concluded that this had all been organized from Rome. I couldn't otherwise have believed that so many letters would all arrive at the same time. It was disappointing, but I can't really say it was unexpected. I wrote to each of them to say that I would meet with them if they so wished, but there was no contact at all.

FP: After your American swing, you wrote that you "came away with the clear conviction that the American church has some massive problems before it." Can you explain what you meant?

GR: I sensed that the American church was more different from Australia than I ever anticipated. I met a significant number of people who seem to have lost all faith in their bishops over this issue of abuse, with all the legal cases and so on ... I found it hard to find anyone who trusted a bishop.

FP: In the book, you call for revisions to fundamental doctrines such as original sin, and you even say that you would revise the Nicene Creed recited every Sunday at Mass. How do you respond to critics who say you can't hold those views and still call yourself Catholic?

GR: Part of the thesis of the book is the danger of setting things in stone, becoming a victim of our own past. What I've said is that only an equal power, meaning an ecumenical council [a gathering of bishops from around the world], would have the authority to look at and change statements of an earlier council. I see that as healthy, that the same body can look at its earlier statements and consider changes. I'm not advocating changes in fundamental doctrines, but I do believe it's dangerous when human words are put up in such a way that you can't even look at them again. We're talking about the divine, and all our expressions will always be inadequate. For the most part, this is a question of language, not beliefs.

FP: Where do you go from here? What are your future plans?

GR: I'm 71 and my health is good. I don't exclude the possibility of writing another book, but right now I'm still heavily involved in the response to the book I have published. I'll continue to write, to selectively accept speaking invitations, to keep asking questions.

Geoffrey Robinson is auxiliary bishop of Sydney. His book, Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), was recently published in the United States.

Interview: John L. Allen Jr., senior correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and senior Vatican analyst for CNN.