

This Sunday's Homily

by Frank Brennan on Saturday, May 14, 2011 at 4:01pm 4th Sunday of Easter

Fr Frank Brennan SJ

Jn 10:1-10

In today's gospel, Jesus tells us who are the loved and protected sheep of his flock that there is a gate, a gatekeeper and a shepherd – and they are all there for our protection. We need to be suspicious about those who enter our lives in ways other than through the gate. Those who jump the fence may be coming to do us harm or to draw us away from the flock and from the one true shepherd.

As members of the Church we are blessed with gatekeepers who keep out false shepherds. We Christians are blessed to be led and guided by Jesus the one true shepherd who also describes himself as the gate – the gate through which we pass on our way to life with the Father. He is the way to truth, freedom, love and life.

As Catholics, we count ourselves blessed that we are part of the flock which has those especially commissioned to act as gatekeepers and shepherds in their roles as pope, bishop and priest. But none of these is any substitute for Jesus – the gate, gatekeeper and shepherd.

We Australian Catholics have just come through a very difficult couple of weeks as our bishops reflected on the forced retirement of one of their number, Bill Morris, the bishop of Toowoomba. Due to a lack of transparency in the Roman processes, we don't know the full truth about his removal from office. We probably never will. I have known Bill as priest and bishop for thirty years. He is a good man – no flash academic but the most down to earth pastoral guy you could meet.

His forced departure from Toowoomba was been some years in the coming. On Thursday, our bishops told us: "The decision came at the end of a complex process which began 13 years ago and which ended in deadlock." You would think someone in the Church could have done something to resolve the deadlock in that time. Every social institution is of course fallible; so too is the Catholic Church. Our Church is not a democracy, and it does not pretend to be. Neither is it egalitarian. It is very hierarchical. And it usually does its dirty washing behind closed doors.

The Church is made up of members many of whom come from nations like ours where there are laws and processes which ensure transparency and natural justice. If someone is to be sacked, they expect to get a fair hearing. If a complaint against a citizen is to be upheld by someone in authority, the citizen has a right to know the case against them and a right to be heard. These expectations don't always translate readily to an ancient institution like the Catholic Church.

Bill Morris was a popular bishop, but he nonetheless upset a minority of parishioners and a handful of priests some of whom sent regular complaints to Rome. US bishop Charles Chaput visited the diocese and submitted a report to Vatican authorities who then alleged that Morris's 18 years of pastoral leadership was flawed and defective. That may have been Chaput's assessment. But we just don't know. Nor do we know the basis or evidence on which the

assessment was made. Morris has never seen the report. Morris rightly claims to have been denied natural justice.

After Chaput's visit, all but three priests of the diocese wrote to Rome in support of Bill Morris's pastoral leadership. So too did all the Pastoral Leaders and all members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Bill was told that he could not see the report and that he could meet with Pope Benedict only if he were first to submit his resignation. That surely put Benedict as well as Bill in an invidious position.

Overseeing a Queensland country diocese stretching from the Great Divide to the Northern Territory border, Bill knew he needed to provide for the day when there would be not enough priests to celebrate mass. He wrote to the diocese in 2006 indicating that several responses "have been discussed internationally, nationally and locally" including the ordination of women and the recognition of other churches' orders. He invited discussion while remaining "committed to actively promoting vocations to the current celibate male priesthood and open to inviting priests from overseas." When quizzed by the media, he said he "would ordain single or married women and married men if church policy changed". So he was sacked, not for ordaining a woman or a married man - but for inviting a conversation about it! On the day of his sacking, his consultors, the most senior priests of the diocese, said, "In our view, Bishop Morris has not been treated fairly or respectfully. We find his removal profoundly disheartening. This judgment on his pastoral leadership stands in stark contrast to our lived experience of his ministry."

This is a tragedy for anyone committed to the Church except for those like the chap who wrote on my Facebook: "The guy was a cowboy, not a shepherd". It's that sort of chap who probably started it all with complaints to Rome, behind closed doors. We need more shepherds in the light and fewer cowboys in the dark. Morris was a good shepherd even to those who acted as cowboys.

The bishops have told us that "Bishop Morris's human qualities were never in question; nor is there any doubt about the contribution he has made to the life of the Church in Toowoomba and beyond." They say, "The Pope's decision was not a denial of the personal and pastoral gifts that Bishop Morris has brought to the episcopal ministry. Rather, it was judged that there were problems of doctrine and discipline, and we regret that these could not be resolved." They intend to raise questions with the Roman authorities when they make their ad limina visit to the Vatican in October this year. After 13 years, most of our bishops are still in the dark about key details of the Vatican's treatment of Bishop Morris.

The Executive of the Catholic Religious of Australia attended the recent meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops. They have put the following questions to assist the bishops in their ongoing inquiries in Rome during their forthcoming ad limina visit. They have asked:

1. How can all in our Church be heard and empowered by our ecclesiastical leaders and processes when private and confidential opinions are given such importance?
2. How is the decreasing availability of Eucharist, 'the source and summit' of our lives' to be addressed into the future?
3. What do we say to the people who have lost an inspirational shepherd and pastor in a time of great need?

Having heard from their members working in the Toowoomba diocese, they have said, "The majority of the Diocese saw Bishop Morris as outstanding in encouraging lay people to take up appropriate leadership in the local church and vigorous in promoting prayer and ecumenical dialogue. He has been tireless in moving our church and society forward in the difficult and sensitive area of professional standards in ministry.

"At a time when many good people in our country are feeling disengaged from the Church we so need Bishops who are first and foremost Pastors who like the Good Shepherd care for their people."

Today let's pray for the flock of Toowoomba and for their erstwhile shepherd Bill Morris. Let's pray for the gatekeepers in the Vatican and for our ultimate earthly shepherd Pope Benedict. Let's pray that the gate is kept open and that cowboys can be intercepted before they do further harm to the flock. Let's pray for ourselves that we can maintain hope that our Church is the privileged place where we can expect to find gate, gatekeeper and shepherd working together in truth for our freedom, love and life to the full.