

Book Launch

*Convinced by the Truth:
Embracing the Fullness of Catholic Faith*
By John I Fleming

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Lidcombe NSW

Remarks by

John McCarthy QC, KCSG

Following the launch this evening of John Fleming's new book "Convinced by the Truth" many people throughout the English speaking world and elsewhere will have a different perspective about the significance of Australians in shaping major international religious interactions. Many people will also come to hear of a place called Parramatta for the first time.

Father John Fleming needs little introduction. He is now a Catholic Priest, is one of the outstanding Anglican converts of the last generation, a former leader of the Anglo-Catholics.

Father Fleming, with the co-operation of Archbishop John Hepworth, Primate of the Traditional Anglican Communion, a major community of Anglo-Catholics, has published an account of the strategy and background of the approaches to the Holy See in 2007 which led to the promulgation in November 2009 of the Apostolic Constitution – *Anglicanorum Coetibus*. This established a canonical framework for the corporate reception, for the first time, of an ecclesial community whose historical origins traced to the rupture and division of the Church during the Reformation in the 16th Century.

Father Fleming's story has enormous significance and needs to be told. Father Fleming with Archbishop Hepworth has traced for the first time the way in which the process was developed, who was involved, how it was implemented right up to the time when the TAC made its unconditional proposal to Rome in 2007 and Rome's response in October / November 2009.

What has this to do with Parramatta you might ask – Everything!! In 2005, the Traditional Anglican Communion (TAC) had been in existence for 15 years, having been formed by a concordat of a group of Anglican Bishops disaffected and alienated by the direction of contemporary Anglican practice, particularly the ordination of women. These Bishops sought to establish a single College of Bishops for local and regional churches, expressly denying that these local churches have authority:

...to derogate from Holy Scripture, or to determine unilaterally any question of Faith or Order, the authority for determining such residing in the College of Bishops of this Communion acting with such competent advice as may be available to it.¹

¹ John I Fleming, *Convinced by the Truth – Embracing the Fullness of Catholic Faith*, Modotti Press, 2010, p117.

In 1991, leaders of the new communion were invited to meet with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian unity where these leaders clearly expressed the desire to achieve unity with the Holy See. While the TAC expanded and consolidated over the next 14 years, ecumenical progress between the TAC and the Catholic Church seemed to stall, even though further approaches were made to the Council for Christian Unity. That Council seemed more interested in conversations with the official Anglican communion. As well there was the Council's genuine uncertainty as to the provenance, legitimacy and stability of the continuing Anglican Churches.

By late 2005, the TAC was increasingly concerned that their sincere efforts to open a meaningful ecclesial dialogue with Rome were unlikely to succeed. What was to be done? Archbishop John Hepworth, now Primate of TAC, tells how he decided to approach Father Fleming and why.

I had known Father Fleming for long enough to trust both his insights into Catholicism and his adroit political skills. As his honorary assistant priest in his final Anglican parish, I watched his very real agonising with his conscience as he left behind the church of his upbringing and journeyed into the Catholic Church. I had watched for years as he battled secular humanists on behalf of the unborn. I also knew him as an ethicist with international recognition. He knew Anglicanism (and especially Anglo-Catholics), he knew Catholicism (and especially the struggles of "converts"), and he was the best strategist I knew. A perfect combination for an age-old problem of saints, kings and reformers: how does one get the Vatican's attention?²

A luncheon meeting was arranged for 28 December 2005 at Liana's Restaurant, Parramatta. Bishop David Chislett of the TAC was also present. The TAC Bishops explained to Father Fleming the nature of their unsuccessful initiatives with Rome for full corporate union.

Then came the Fleming response

Since my advice was being directly sought, I abandoned caution and said what I really thought. I urged the bishops to abandon current approaches based upon 'ecumenical dialogue'... It was my belief that the TAC was in a very different place theologically from the Anglican Communion and well situated to cut to the chase. I suggested that if the TAC was really serious about its future and about full corporate reunion with Rome as an integral part of that future they needed to take a whole new approach. This approach was outlined by me as follows:

- 1. That the TAC seeks corporate reunion with the Holy See without condition. In this way there would be no need for committees discussing doctrine and reporting back to various authorities. It would be a straight out application for corporate reunion, no strings attached.*
- 2. To achieve point 1 above, local synods of the TAC should be asked to consider, and if thought fit, pass motions to the effect that there now no longer exist any doctrinal or moral differences between the teaching of the TAC and the Catholic Church.*
- 3. Any petition to Rome would need to include an explicit recognition of the Petrine Office (i.e. the Office of Pope) as being of the esse of the Church. Put simply it would mean that the TAC accepts that the constitution of the Church as given by Christ included the leadership of St Peter as it has been handed on in the Church ever since. That the Pope has real and immediate jurisdiction in every local Church and enjoys the gift of infallibility when teaching in certain*

² Ibid, p99.

circumstances. There would need also to be an acceptance of the proposition that the Church founded by Jesus Christ and committed to the care of St Peter most perfectly subsists in the Catholic Church with the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, being the legitimate successor of St Peter. The Pope and bishops in communion with him have the task of governing the Church.

4. *The TAC would also need to make it clear to Rome that it fully understands that the question of Holy Orders in the TAC would need to be addressed, and that the TAC would accept whatever the Catholic Church required to be done to assure validity, including the possibility that its ministers would need to be re-ordained.*
5. *If the TAC really wanted to give clear and unmistakable evidence of the seriousness of its ecumenical intentions it could do so by a clear sign that it accepted all of the teachings to be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In other words, TAC bishops signing a copy of the Catechism would put beyond doubt doctrinal issues leaving the way open for a discussion on just how the TAC might be fully incorporated into the Catholic Church with the TAC being ready to accept the guidance of the Holy See.³ [my emphasis]*

The subsequent series of momentous TAC consultations following the Fleming strategy is well covered in the part of the book contributed by Archbishop Hepworth and was foundational to the eventual response of the Holy See through the CDF. John Hepworth conveys the doubts and uncertainties with which he was wracked during this process.

By any measure both Archbishop Hepworth and Father Fleming are immensely significant and effective Church leaders whose vision, action and writings have shaped some of the most important contours in church development world-wide. Both have much more to contribute and accomplish but their roles in bringing the apostolic constitution to proclamation and operation should be acknowledged and valued by everyone of goodwill who desires Christian unity.

Father Fleming must also be praised for the splendid writing and narrative found in the balance of this new book. He provides many answers about who John Fleming is. In concise and accessible prose he tells through a series of letters to his three daughters (who were small children at the time and are now in their twenties) the background and circumstances in which their parents (John and Alison) were received into the Catholic Church in 1987 after 16 years of service by Father Fleming as an Anglican Priest. He writes with disarming frankness, - saying "in fear and trepidation I am going to tell you about my spiritual odyssey." Beginning with his childhood, as a son of an Anglican Priest and the nephew of another Anglican Priest, he describes teenage doubts and boredom, but

Most importantly, during this time I came to know Christ as a friend, someone upon whom I could rely, someone who loved me unconditionally and could forgive my sins. I had also come to see that faith in God was essential if I was to make any sense out of the world and my place in it. Belief in God was not only reasonable, but safeguarded reason itself.⁴

He sets out the influences which led him, after university in Adelaide, to seek ordination in the Anglican Church and the formation of his convictions as an Anglo-Catholic.

³ Ibid, p97-98.

⁴ Ibid, p6.

His book is a scalpel-like dissection of the collapse and decay of Anglicanism under the fissures generated by the ordination of women issue. Its narrative records the transition away from his earlier period as an optimistic and confident Anglo-Catholic. Some of his descriptions of his former self must be savoured for their frankness and insight. Because he really believed in the probability of Catholic / Anglican reunion, he remained Anglican. Increasingly concerned about the new directions being pursued within the Anglican Communion he nevertheless decided to remain within the Anglican Church to fight for what he regarded as his heritage.

And what was that? To be an English Christian, following the English Catholic tradition, safeguarded in a Church which was, in essence, Catholic. Well, we didn't have the Pope, but all the signs were there that reunification was just around the corner if people would just keep their sights on that goal and not be sidetracked by other issues. In any case I felt completely at home and comfortable within Ecclesia Anglicana. Yes, I had to fight hard to convince other Anglicans that they were really Catholic but not 'Roman', and so belonged to a branch of the one true Church. But I had become used to that.⁵

My compromise, for that indeed was what it was, was to accept all the Catholic teachings, or at least the ones I knew then, and do my best to be as Catholic as possible but without the Pope. That is, I was a convinced Anglo-Catholic.⁶

...I have to admit I was prepared to tolerate the intolerable so that I could remain in the Church of England, persuading myself that the Church of England was really a Catholic Church with some Protestants in it and a small minority of heretics in high places, when in fact it was a Protestant Church with some Catholics in it.⁷

The truth is that I allowed myself, willed myself, to be beguiled by an English culture which seemed to suggest, or at the least be consistent with, Catholicism but which, in reality, was a Protestant conceit. I just did not want to face up to the 'signs of the times' which were portents of a powerful storm about to deluge us with the great Anglican compromise between Christianity and state sponsored secularism.⁸

He (Peter Geldard), like me, was an Anglo-Papalist, that impossibly illogical Anglican view which held that while we could have Catholicism without the Pope, in fact we really believed in the Papacy as essential to the reunified Church and personally preferred to accept the Pope's authoritative pronouncements in everything except becoming a Catholic in fact!⁹

Well why the crisis? What was being proposed by Anglican Bishops? The Anglo-Catholic dilemma is well diagnosed by Father Fleming and constituted, amongst other things, a personal and ecclesiastical challenge

That question was this: I am just one Anglican priest, not a theologian, or at least no more so than most of the most prominent advocates for women's ordination. I could be quite wrong about women's ordination. If I am wrong, from whom would I take correction? The Anglican Church? Absolutely not! Then from whom? I answered, "The Pope and the Catholic Church". The absurdity of this answer

⁵ Ibid, p21.

⁶ Ibid, p8.

⁷ Ibid, p14.

⁸ Ibid, p13.

⁹ Ibid, p16.

struck me with great force. I would not take correction from the Church to which I did belong, but I would take correction from the Church to which I did not belong. This was because the Pope was the infallible head of the Church, and the Anglican Church was no real Church with real authority but a free association of Christians with Ministers of doubtful validity.¹⁰

I was shocked to find Anglican bishops were claiming an authority to do what Christ did not do, even if this meant overturning 2,000 years of Christian fidelity to what Christ did in the matter of ordination to the priesthood, and thereby claiming far greater authority than that actually possessed by the successors of St Peter and the other apostles.¹¹

You see, I had been brought up to believe bishops were defenders of the Catholic Faith and it never occurred to me that bishops would be revolutionaries, undermining the Faith as it had been received, and thereby claiming an authority which even the Pope did not claim.¹²

John Fleming's book may come to be regarded as the most important book on religious affairs published in Australia this year. It may also be recognised as one of the best modern short books on the contemporary crisis in Catholic-Anglican affairs. This will be a tribute to Father Fleming's intelligence and capacity as well as his mastery of effective language in modern communications, honed from a generation spent in media, particularly radio. His language and tone whether about his views, events or individuals invariably sounds the right note. There is scarcely a word wasted in any chapter which probably explains why so much has been covered in 125 pages. It is splendid writing in an email and mobile phone world and its X and Y generations.

The launch of this book will make him not so much the talk of the town but the talk of the religious blogosphere worldwide.

I finally make brief reference to that part of Father Fleming's new publication which includes chapters on the Sacrifice of the Mass and the Real Presence in the Eucharist. These two chapters repay close reading because they are written by one of the Church's most skilled debaters and controversialists. His purpose is to persuade and to clarify vitally important concepts to young educated minds. He deploys all his experience as an Australian universities champion debater to achieve his goal. Many young people will be urged to read these pages in the years to come – many will be convinced – by the truth as offered by Father Fleming.

This new book is well produced and easily readable. It has a useful index and includes the TAC "Portsmouth" Petition to the Holy See and extracts from the Apostolic Constitution and related documents. All you need to know.¹³

To Alison and the Fleming daughters to whom this book is dedicated, thank you for your inspiration to Father Fleming and for sharing this record of his spiritual odyssey with all of us here and abroad – it makes us part of both the Fleming connection and spiritual family.

¹⁰ Ibid, p24.

¹¹ Ibid, piv.

¹² Ibid, p11.

¹³ It must be noted with regret that there is not an Appendix in the book which sets out the menu at Liana's Restaurant, Parramatta on 28 December 2005. This would have been a valuable reference for ecumenical meetings!

Before declaring “Convinced by the Truth” officially launched and stepping aside to allow Father Fleming and Archbishop Hepworth to defend themselves – let me offer thanks, on behalf of us all, for the successful writing and publication of this new work in our Lord’s cause. In the words of the great Anglican Doxology – appropriately set out at P.100 of this book

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

With warmest wishes I declare “Convinced by the Truth” officially launched.