

# Peter Bennie at All Saints, Wickham Terrace, and as Editor of *The Australian Church Quarterly*, 1952-1963

By John A. Moses

My approach to this paper has been determined by two main factors. First, I knew Peter Bennie as well as any twenty-year old person from the bush could possibly know a Melbourne born, bred and educated scholar of considerable erudition and personal remoteness from the world of simple tradesmen. Secondly, my paper will reflect the fact that I became a trained historian, equipped to trace the documentary record of Peter Bennie's intellectual contribution to the Australian Church during his time as Rector of All Saints, Wickham Terrace in Brisbane. So I am offering a brief personal memoir followed by an assessment of Bennie's achievements as an Anglo-Catholic intellectual, in the hope that I have been able to do justice to what was an unusually gifted and also complex personality.

I

Back in 1950 I was an apprentice radio mechanic in the Brisbane firm of Bush and Company; I lived in St Oswald's House, North Quay, a residence for young men including university students, assorted office workers and other apprentices. St Oswald's was a hostel run by the Church of England Men's Society and it lay within the parish boundaries of All Saints, Brisbane. However, the warden, a Mr Dewdney, was an ex-Royal Navy officer of decidedly hostile temperament regarding Anglo-Catholicism who would not allow the clergy of All Saints to minister in the hostel where there was a chapel in which a week day Eucharist was always held by the Rector of the neighbouring parish of Milton, one David Richardson. I used to serve for him, also on Sundays in his parish church, but I was much more strongly attracted to All Saints whose Rector then was Fr. Richard Pearson. I confided to Fr. Richardson of Milton that I would prefer to go to All Saints, something he quite understood, being himself an Anglo-Catholic, but he warned me that it was rather a "hot-house" place that would not be so good for my development. Nevertheless, I migrated to All Saints and became an altar server there. It was biographically speaking a crucial move because there I came under the influence of Fr. Pearson<sup>1</sup> who quite soon suggested that I had a vocation to the priesthood, even though I did not have matriculation. He understood this as he himself did not have a university background; indeed he had come from the city as a clerk, and had clearly been influenced by his then Rector, Fr. Robert Bates. He was so motivated that he completed the Th. L in two years instead of the normal three. Consequently, he urged me to test my vocation at St Francis' College, too, which had just then acquired a new principal, Fr. Ivor Church, who became a close friend of Peter Bennie's. Fr. Church, an ex-air force chaplain, had revolutionised the College policy by introducing a preliminary year for unmatriculated students. So I entered the St Francis' College in 1953 on the conclusion of my apprenticeship.

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<sup>1</sup> Fr. Richard Grenville Pearson was Rector of All Saints from 1947 to 1952.

In my early days at All Saints the name Peter Bennie was still to be heard as he had served a curacy there under Fr. Bates.<sup>2</sup> That was between 1938 and 1942. In that early phase of Peter Bennie's priesthood, he had already become involved in Brisbane literary and artistic circles, for example having cultivated the friendship of the poet Gwen Harwood who used to play the organ at All Saints. Bennie's autobiography is sketchy on this period but at some point he fell ill and was admitted to St Martin's hospital just a short distance away from All Saints and adjacent to St John's Cathedral.

The point of mentioning this is simply that Peter Bennie had previously cultivated the ideal of priestly celibacy but this had obviously evaporated during his illness because one of his carers was a nurse with whom he decided to spend the rest of his life. Consequently, he married Sister Joyce Sweetman in 1942, resigned his curacy at All Saints and became vicar of the parish of Mary Valley at Imbil. In 1946 the Bennies and their children left for Thursday Island where Peter served as Archdeacon and Sub-Dean of All Soul's Cathedral there until his appointment in 1953 to All Saints. I can recall a staunch advocate of clerical celibacy quipping about Bennie's career move that if a priest cannot refrain from marriage he should take a wife and migrate to the mission field and sire a quiver full of children.

Despite the isolation of Thursday Island, Peter Bennie did manage to re-appear at All Saints from time to time to stay with Fr. Pearson and his then curate, the redoubtable Fr. Clive Britten, for short periods. I remember seeing Bennie and possibly even heard him preach at Evensong on these occasions but never actually met him.

Then in 1952 Fr. Pearson became mortally ill thus confronting the trustees of the parish with the problem of finding a successor. No one in the congregation reckoned on Peter Bennie as a likely candidate, least of all the assistant curate who announced the appointment of Peter Bennie with unconcealed disgust at Evensong one Sunday. I was present and actually heard him say: "I regret to say that the Trustees have appointed a man named Bennie as your new Rector". Peter Bennie recalls this in his unpublished memoirs with obvious bitterness. And he was bitter, because I heard him say once in a sermon: "Have you ever been in a situation in which you know you are universally hated?"

Clearly, Bennie's appointment had broken a long tradition of celibate priests as Rectors of All Saints. There had only ever been one married priest previously and that was famous Fr. Tommy Jones in 1878. However, despite his initial unpopularity, Peter Bennie, his wife Joyce and their four children gradually became accepted although they were intensely unhappy for various reasons, one of which was the fact that the rectory was situated above a railway cutting that formed the egress of the Brisbane suburban railway tunnel, so consequently the house was drenched permanently in coal soot and smelled accordingly.

I knew the rectory quite well since after Evensong every Sunday evening Fr. Pearson hosted all the males who cared to stay for tea and biscuits. It was like an informal theological seminar for young Anglo-Catholics, where diocesan gossip flowed freely. Music was also discussed as one of Brisbane's foremost organists and music critics,

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<sup>2</sup> Fr. Robert Bartlett Bates was Rector of All Saints from 1926 to 1947.

Frederic Rogers, who played then at All Saints, always attended. Of course, that all ceased once the Bennies were installed. However, as I continued on the week-day server's roster I assisted regularly at Mass at 7.00 am on Fridays and was always invited to breakfast afterwards. Two things stick in my mind: first I realised just how poor the Bennies were, indeed like Trollope's Mr Quiverfull to be sure. Breakfast consisted always of a plate of porridge preceded by half a grape fruit followed by a little toast and marmalade, and of course, tea. The children had by then all had their breakfast and been packed off to school. And I remember once Bennie referring to the call to the priesthood as being automatically a call to poverty.

The second feature of breakfast with the Bennies that I fondly recall was Bennie's discussion of English literature and, especially poetry which I enjoyed as I was by then doing English at the university having eventually matriculated and enrolled in an Arts degree. I must say, though, that Bennie never came to terms with the fact that I as an untutored tradesman who had managed to matriculate and start an Arts degree alongside my theological course. I think it surprised him that I had even entered St Francis in 1953 with a group of other unmatriculated young men of diverse backgrounds. Obviously, I did eventually matriculate, a daunting task since it demanded Latin, a hurdle that caused most of the others to stumble. But two of us finally did matriculate and eventually got ordained; the others disappeared after one year in College into whatever oblivion is reserved for failed young spikey seminarians.

Interestingly, in the time I was at St Francis's College I was never taught by Peter Bennie. He was employed to teach, of all things, Old Testament, in which he had no formal qualifications. I did not take it until much later. However, all students knew that Bennie inspired trepidation among particular ones as the following incident confirms. We had an older student named Jack Madsen, a former primary school teacher of exceedingly humourless and puritanical character who was rash enough to presume to correct Fr. Bennie in class one day about the role of Rahab the harlot in the book of Joshua.

Bennie's response to this impudence was to say: "Ah well, Mr Madsen, you have obviously so much more experience with this kind of woman than I so I defer to your superior knowledge. Another example of Bennie's Oscar Wilde-ish wit that I personally recall was his after dinner talk in College one evening following his return from the 1955 General Synod in Sydney where the presiding bishop of ECUSA, Sherrill, had been a key-note speaker. At that time we had an American student named Will Bingham who ventured to ask Bennie what contribution the presiding bishop had made to the Synod. "Precisely none, Mr Bingham; the trouble with the presiding bishop is that he suffers from intellectual constipation and verbal diahoerra".

So, Bennie had a reputation as a ruthless antagonist who took no prisoners, not of course entirely humourless, but clearly not one to suffer fools gladly. He was, though, capable of genuine acts of kindness such as allowing me to park my motorcycle under the rectory during a long vacation. And although he tended to be an intellectual snob he could recognise insights even from the likes of me on occasion. It was well known that Bennie was a patron of the arts and he once acquired on loan the Robin Boyd ceramic of the crucifixion and had it installed temporarily in the wall of the church close to the side altar on the left of the nave that was reserved for requiems. Some people complained that

it was ugly, certainly not the traditional portrayal of the serene “Christ in torment” that people were used to. Bennie was forced to defend his action in a parochial council meeting one evening at a time when I was a member. Quite unexpectedly, he asked me to say a few words about it as I had often served Mass at that altar and knelt right under the controversial work of art.

I surprised myself and Bennie with my own eloquence, explaining how Boyd’s crucifix captured the absolute horror and enormity of the event. At any rate Bennie was impressed and told me so at breakfast on the following Friday. Obviously, boys from the bush were not entirely intractable. On the other hand Bennie’s advice to me had been that I’d be better off simply to stick with just the Th. L course since I did not have the mental equipment to do a degree.

After I had returned from Germany with my doctorate and a brand new German wife, who arrived by ship in Sydney a few months after me, in April 1965, I went out to St Paul’s with the intention of renewing my association with Bennie. We walked into the drive way only to meet Bennie just leaving in his car. Without cracking even a glimmer of a smile he told me to go to the office and make an appointment. I never did. It was my last conversation with him, but a year or so later I had to travel to Sydney on a short research trip, and decided to enquire of the Warden of St Paul’s by letter if I could spend a week there during a term vacation. I’ll never forget his curt negative reply: he was “very much afraid” that there was no accommodation for visiting lecturers at St. Paul’s. I had no difficulty whatever in booking a room at Womens’ College. I assumed rightly or wrongly that Bennie set no store whatever at renewing our acquaintance. I never had cause to recall him again until now. But I saw him once walking with a lady to the Sydney opera where my wife and I were also going to see a performance of a Wagner opera, either *Tristan und Isolde* or *Meistersinger*. This, I thought, must have been due to the influence of the second Mrs Bennie because he had once told me at a record evening in All Saints’ rectory to which I had contributed a Kirsten Flagstad recording of “Brunhilde’s Immolation” that Wagner was the “quintessence of vulgarity”. At any rate it showed that even he could change his mind.

## II

Turning now to matters of a more serious nature: In the July 1965 issue of the *Australian Church Quarterly* that had not appeared since Bennie had relinquished editorship in 1963, his successor, Bishop T. B. McCall, felt moved to pass the following judgement: “The Reverend A.P.B. Bennie was -- in the new editor’s humble opinion -- the producer of the finest religious publication in this country and indeed of the two or three outstanding religious magazines of high quality in the world”.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, Bishop McCall found Bennie a hard act to follow. From the end of 1953 until his appointment to St Paul’s, Bennie edited the *ACQ* and contributed vastly to its pages. I confess that, at the time, I never knew that Bennie produced the *Quarterly*, nor had I ever read any of its articles until now. However, having listened to numerous

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<sup>3</sup> *ACQ*, first issue 1965, p. 3.

Bennie sermons I can now see where they ended up. He was very much in touch with the burning issues exercising the wider Church. And the 'fifties was an era of crises.

When Bennie arrived at All Saints the protracted "Red Book Case" had raised the temperature of debate within the Anglican Church concerning what constituted 'lawful authority'. We in Brisbane looked on with dismay at what the Diocese of Sydney was trying to do to destroy the Bishop of Bathurst. Little did we know that forces were at work with the same sinister intentions with regard to the Archbishop of Brisbane, Reginald Halse. Three Anglican barristers Mssrs Henderson, Wanstall and Hart launched a parallel attack on Halse to that which had been carried out against the Bishop of Bathurst. It was patently obvious that the learned men of the law, did not dispose over a parallel knowledge of Anglicanism or Church history generally. They clearly had not the slightest idea of what they were doing, and in the event were certainly no match for the combined scholarship, political and debating skills of both Fr. Bennie and Reginald Halse. I do not think many people in Brisbane were entirely aware until this confrontation just how formidable Bennie was. He carried very high calibre guns which he fired in both diocesan Synod and committees, and in a brilliant article that investigated what constituted 'lawful authority' in relation to the liturgy. In it he illustrated how he demolished the lawyer's case against Halse in that he, like the Bishop of Bathurst, had allegedly departed from the doctrine and practice of the Church of England by approving the use of a small green covered prayer book called *Adoremus* which contained a version of the Eucharist that was not word for word the same as that of the Book of Common Prayer of 1662.

Bennie demonstrated from his encompassing knowledge of Church history and Anglican tradition that the Diocesan indeed had the lawful authority to deviate from the letter of 1662 provided what was done expressed the tradition of the entire Church Catholic. In mounting his defence of the Archbishop, Bennie emphasised the freedom and responsibilities of the parish priest. In typical Bennie-esque style, he wrote: "The parson's freehold recognizes the essential independence of the parish priest in law and effectively protects him alike from vexatious rescripts from ecclesiastical bureaucrats and the trouble-making proclivities of litigious busybodies".<sup>4</sup>

Bennie then went on to stress that the Church is the Body of Christ and not a department of State as the lawyers Henderson, Wanstall and Hart—the "three blind mice" as Bennie called them—had wrongly assumed.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Fr. Bennie was able to draw upon such an impressive store of knowledge to support his case that his legalistic adversaries had to concede that they had been massively out-gunned. Of course, Bennie was sage enough to delineate exactly the limits of the 'parson's freehold' which included such things as; 1) the local tradition or 'ethos' of the parish Church itself; 2) The Godly admonitions of the Diocesan which certainly demanded filial obedience, but obedience that was limited to all things lawful; 3) The rules and canons of the Bishop in his Synod, and here Bennie stressed that the Bishop was plainly the 'lawful authority' in matters of liturgy<sup>6</sup> and; 4) the Canon Law of the whole Anglican communion was derived from

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<sup>4</sup> *ACQ* Easter 1954, pp. 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> *Memoirs*,

<sup>6</sup> "Lawful Authority..." p. 17;

both the pre and post-Reformation eras. All of it was an integral part of Anglicanism. Indeed, as Bennie affirmed, “the operative pre-Reformation canons are those contained in the whole body of medieval Canon Law”; and; 5) Bennie appealed to the ‘general mind’ of the whole Catholic Church”, pointing out that the priest may never forget that he is not a priest of the Church of England but a priest of the Church of God. Indeed, a priest will endeavour to avoid insularity and think with the Church Catholic of all ages.

So Bennie concluded his argument on this question by maintaining that, “it is surely possible and desirable that while the Prayer Book remains the norm and standard of our worship, the authority of the experience of the whole church may be called upon to enrich and complete those foundations of common prayer that it so soberly lays”.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, this observation sums up Bennie’s conviction that the Anglican Church was and remained an essential part of the universal Church. Of course, in writing this Bennie was merely re-iterating what the aims of the *Australian Church Union* were, namely to maintain the practice of the Catholic Faith; to defend its doctrine and discipline against Rationalism, Erastianism, Papalism or Puritanism<sup>8</sup>, and the ‘mouse’ attack of the three vision impaired lawyers in 1953 certainly prompted him to do just that. He later had occasion to observe that,

Catholic Churchmen loyally accept the Prayer Book as their standard of worship, but they are, and will continue to be, in revolt against the narrow and restraining interpretation the lawyers have continued with staggering lack of success, to foist upon them by means, as the second Lord Halifax put it, ‘of legal interpretations of rubrics avowedly based upon the theory that on the accession of Elizabeth I, everything was swept away to make room for a new Church, a new clergy and a new ritual.’<sup>9</sup>

In short, Bennie continued to argue that questions of Church belief and practice could not be solved by the methods of civil law. Indeed, he was firmly of the view that, “those whose training is primarily in these methods are peculiarly unsuitable to have any prominence in the methods of their solution”.<sup>10</sup> Bennie’s principle here was that of Lord Acton, namely that no prescription is valid against the conscience of mankind.<sup>11</sup>

All Bennie’s writings thereafter during his editorship of the *Quarterly* reveal a mind of exceptional learning and sharpness that was focussed on the burning issues of that eventful decade. One may judge from Bennie’s concerns that he perceived himself an advocate and champion for Catholic truth, writing with erudition, precision and vigour, striving always for informed and balanced judgements.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.18. Bennie followed up this issue in the April issue 1956 in an article, “The Church and Her Lawyers” in which he surveyed the question of the legality of “The Eastward position”, “Altar Lights”, “Eucharistic Vestments” and finally “Incense”. Here he concluded that questions of the Church’s belief and practice cannot and should not be solved by the methods of civil law.

<sup>8</sup> *ACQ* Christmas 1953, Editorial, p.3

<sup>9</sup> *ACQ* April, 1956, Editorial, pp.10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

As indicated, the crisis brought on by the aforementioned ‘blind mouse attack’ of Henderson, Wanstall and Hart challenged Bennie immediately on his installation at All Saints to employ his scholarship and debating skills in defence of the Church. Thereafter, he used the pages of the *ACQ* to further the cause of Anglo-Catholicism, to propagate his enlarged vision of the vocation of Anglicanism and to overcome the theological narrowness and cultural impoverishment of Protestantism within the Church of England. But Bennie’s mind was not that of a theological boffin; he was acutely attuned to history as we have seen, but also to the world of affairs. For example, he editorialised in the Easter issue of 1954 on the occasion of the Queen’s visit to Australia of that year indicating that despite his distinctly socialist persuasion Peter Bennie was a monarchist by conviction, observing that the British monarchy had “realised that the kingdom, the power and the glory of this world only became tolerable if they are not absolute, but subject to, derived from and referred to that ultimate sovereignty which was God’s”.<sup>12</sup>

This expression of loyalty to the monarchy was but the obverse of the coin of Bennie’s conviction that the course of British history in which the political and ecclesiastical constituted an organic whole, and that it in turn manifested unique characteristics that served the well being of the universal Church and the peace of the world. Clearly, Bennie cultivated a holistic view of history that was undeniably whiggish. Certainly, there is more than a mere suggestion of the influence of William Ewart Gladstone perceptible here. Both the English people and the English Church had distinct but interconnected vocations. This was certainly the belief behind his version of the “Three Branch Theory” of the Catholic Church which he advanced with unusual persuasive power and which formed the basis for all his intellectual endeavour.

For example, he could aver: “In the Catholic Church man finds hearth and home; nothing else is spacious enough for his mind, or sublime enough to satisfy his heart: outside it is the night.”<sup>13</sup> Clearly, an Anglican priest who could make this statement had to be very confident of his command of Church history. And here Bennie was persuaded that a firm grasp of historical facts was the pre-condition for any sound theology. Certainly, he was intellectually equipped to acquire a mastery of the sweep of Church history from the New Testament to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was not just that he was well informed through knowledge of the key scholars, past and present, he could critically synthesise this vast panorama into compelling narrative.

A fine example of this ability is the paper entitled “Towards a Doctrine of the Church” in which he posed the question: “What is the Church as an empirical reality in the world and where can its boundaries be fixed?”<sup>14</sup> Bennie’s point of departure was that there was broad agreement that there is one visible Church which exists in the world by divine will, properly described as holy, catholic and apostolic. His project was to establish the reality of the Church as a living entity both witnessing to and effecting God’s will for all humanity. This is crucial in understanding Bennie’s intellectual integrity and his views on issues ranging from sacraments and ritual down to Church unity and ecumenism.

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<sup>12</sup> *ACQ*, Easter 1954, p. 8

<sup>13</sup> *ACQ*, Editorial, October 1959 entitled, “The Catholic Concepts and Reunion Schemes”.

<sup>14</sup> *ACQ*, Easter 1954, p. 6

First and foremost Bennie emphatically rejected the Roman doctrine of the Church as expressed by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302 through the Bull, *Unam Sanctum*. This had demanded unconditional submission to the Roman Pontiff to be necessary for salvation. And, of course such a view had a certain longevity, having been reiterated by the First Vatican Council (1869-70). This, as Bennie pointed out, was absurd because there was no evidence whatever in the first six centuries of the history of the Church that anyone at all, in Rome or out of it, held such a doctrine of Roman primacy. Certainly, the Eastern Orthodox Church held such Papalism to be heresy. Neither was it consistent with the practice of the Latin medieval Church, which, at the time of the anti-Popes during the Great Schism of 1378-1417, had no difficulty in welcoming back those nations as consistently Catholic who had been temporarily out of communion with the See of Rome. And finally, in order to illustrate yet further the untenability of Roman claims, Bennie quoted Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) which states: "The Roman Pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization".<sup>15</sup> And this, it was argued by some, was an *ex cathedra* statement. At any rate, Bennie evinced a certain impish delight in unmasking the inconsistencies of Papalism. One would have to say that he was the last Anglo-Catholic who could have been accused of being a Romaniser!

With regard to defining what precisely the Catholic Church was, Bennie, citing Canon Henry Liddon (1829-90) enquired, "Can any one Christian body - the Church of Rome any more than the Church of England or the Orthodox Eastern Church—pretend to be in full possession of the note of sanctity?"<sup>16</sup> So, no Church was anywhere near entirely holy. Nor did the Church, i.e. Christians taken all together, comprise more than a third of the human race, so it was scarcely universal. But despite these defects, the Church was Catholic enough to give assurance that she will one day be literally more so and holy enough to satisfy mankind that Christ was in her midst. So, for Bennie, the Church was in a state of becoming. The all important feature of unity, when all nations shall fall before Christ and do Him service, was a promise yet to be fulfilled. Consequently, the features of sanctity, universality and unity had only been partially fulfilled in history.

This observation led Bennie to conclude that the Church was eschatological in its nature. "And in this the Church proves herself to be of a piece with the whole Gospel".<sup>17</sup> So, the Church was integral to the Gospel and the original preaching of Christ. Consequently, argued Bennie, if one is eschatological in its nature, so must be the other. He went on, "The Gospel is essentially eschatological because it is the Gospel of the Kingdom. Not the Kingdom of the ethical moralists—but the Kingdom of eternity..." This humanity obtains by participation and anticipation and yet never wholly and completely on earth.<sup>18</sup>

For Bennie, then, the Church was an instrument of the Kingdom, her ultimate function lying beyond history because beyond time. He concluded, therefore, "We shall

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp.8-9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

be warned then to seek no obvious or facile unity, holiness or Catholicity in the Church militant".<sup>19</sup> So, in what, after all constituted the basis for this broad Catholic unity? The answer was, of course, baptism. It is this sacrament that is the essential pre-condition for Catholicity.

At this point in his paper, Bennie went on to make what might appear to some as quite startling observations. Since, as Augustine taught, even baptised heretics and schismatics are valid members of the Church, it follows, then, that the ministries of heretics and schismatics are also valid. So, "as there are real ministries in schism from the hierarchy, so the boundaries of the Church must extend beyond the hierarchy."<sup>20</sup> This led Bennie to conclude that all Christians who are supernaturally united to Christ, and the mode of this is baptism and faith, belong to the Body of Christ and that, therefore, it would seem that baptism alone constitutes membership of the Church.<sup>21</sup>

Bennie then went on to qualify this by observing *inter alia* even if a person receives valid baptism he still needs to be instructed in the Faith in order to become a fully Catholic Christian. Of itself, baptism is but the beginning of a process, albeit the essential beginning. He summed up his position on this as follows: "It therefore must be held and believed that baptism alone constitutes a potential membership of the Church which must be actualised on attainment of the age of reason by conscience adherence to the apostolic hierarchy of bishops and open profession of the Catholic Faith, as the rite of baptism in the Book of Common Prayer makes plain".<sup>22</sup>

Central to Bennie's thought here is his distinction between schism from the Church and schism within the Church. He argued:

Where the Church is divided in such a way that on each side of the division the same faith is held and sacraments practised as between Rome and Orthodox East in 1054 or Rome and England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, you have schism within the church. The cause of such schism is primarily national, political and economic. When, however, a body separated itself from the Church in such a way that it loses the integrity of Faith and order as the schism of the Methodists from the English Church in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or the Lutherans from the Latin church in Germany in the 16<sup>th</sup> century we have schism from the Church.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, to leave the sheltering confines of the supernatural life of the Body of Christ constituted a grave impediment to true Christian witness. Groups who separated themselves from the Church became the victims of the vicissitudes of a merely human

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> This was also central to the understanding of Archbishop Reginald Halse. See John A. Moses (ed.) *From Oxford to the Bush - Essays on Catholic Anglicanism in Australia* (Canberra: Broughton Press, 1997) pp. 196-203.

<sup>21</sup> Bennie, "Towards a Doctrine of the Church" *ACQ*, Easter 1954, p. 11

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

movent. Consequently, it was crucial for Bennie that the faithful stay within the fellowship that was perpetuated by the successors of the apostles down to our own time. Nevertheless, he conceded that non-apostolic ministries could produce spiritual fruits outside the Church because God was not limited by His sacraments.

That, of course, was indisputable, but Bennie declined to consider such ministries as Catholic because, as he said, they had received no apostolic charisma through apostolic succession since none had the indisputable commission from Christ himself but the Apostles, a position, as Bennie triumphantly observed, that was unequivocally attested to in the Preface to the Ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer, which, as we have seen was a central foundational document of the Church of England

Finally, on this issue, Bennie ventured a definition stating that the Church was the Mystical Body of Christ... "It is His instrument as our bodies are our instruments, to do what He wills to do in the world. It exists in three planes, triumphant in heaven, expectant in purgatory, militant on earth. As life on earth is both visible and tangible, so the Church militant is a visible and observable corporation".<sup>24</sup> In all of this, of course, Bennie acknowledged his indebtedness to the Caroline Divines, above all Archbishop Laud himself, to whom the honour was due for expressing the true Anglican Catholic position. He concluded his excursus by claiming: "For the Anglican communion has significance with regard to Catholicism. She is a living witness that Catholicism is a wider, deeper, more truly universal thing than it has hitherto been presented to the world."<sup>25</sup> And in characteristic prose, Bennie summed up: "the whole world should see its own redeemed face in the Catholic Church, and she does not appear in her most impressive guise in the bearded and balkanised peasantry of Eastern Europe, nor for that matter in the grave cloths of the Roman Empire. Let the Anglican Communion then, turn to the rock from whence she was hewn, that mighty Catholic religion which is the whole counsel of God to mankind, and shew it forth to the world with a charity and integrity in which it has never been shown."<sup>26</sup>

Well, may we ask, where else in the Australian Church at that time could one have found a more eloquent, intellectually rigorous and energetic advocacy for the Anglo-Catholic position?

### III

Bennie's articles in the *ACQ*, as I have suggested, provide an inventory of the chief concerns that exercised the Anglo-Catholic mind during the 'fifties and early 'sixties. These focussed *inter alia* on the *Constitution for the Australian Church*, *Ecumenism* and *schemes for re-union*, as well as the key question about the nature of the *authority of the Bible* in relation to the authority of the Church. In all these things Bennie took a determined Catholic position, always arguing his case with scholarly precision, a little humorous irony and obvious vigour.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

On the question of the Constitution as it then existed Bennie was formidably patriotic. In this he was in full accord with Bishop Ernest Burgmann when he wrote: "It (the constitution) condemns the Australian Church to a passive obedience to an ecclesiastical authority which it can neither frame nor modify. The situation of the Australian Church might fairly be described as one of the most extreme forms of colonialism".<sup>27</sup> There was no autonomy and hence no Australian identity. Bennie was concerned that the new constitution should "explicitly deliver the Australian Church from bondage to past decisions of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, which some of the present diocesan constitutions explicitly adopt and, probably implicitly".<sup>28</sup> He was adamant that this lay body with its erastian origin and function had absolutely no right to decide questions of faith. He was penetrating in his criticism that there was no machinery in place to bind the separate dioceses to the decisions of a national synod, and he rejected that draft constitution of that time as enshrining Congregationalism. In fact the only positive aspect of the draft was that it allowed a certain liturgical elasticity, paving the way for experiments to be made with the liturgy under episcopal approval without the threat of legal action from dissidents using the secular courts' current interpretation of the property trusts to freeze the Church's liturgical life "at the point where the receding tide of the evangelical movement left it in the early nineteenth century".<sup>29</sup> Indeed, anything that threatened to impede the freedom and progress of the Church by fitting it with hobbles designed by men of distinctly blinkered theological and historical vision was anathema to Bennie.

This explains why he was allergic regarding proposals for the Church to enter into schemes for reunion or formal ecumenical relationships with Protestant bodies. With regard to the debates then raging about the wisdom of sections of the Church of England in India allowing itself to be absorbed into the Church of South India, Bennie was cautiously on the side of the English Convocation that approved the merger. And I distinctly remember Bennie preaching about this at the time, saying in effect that it was both legitimate and in the best interests of the broader Catholic Church that the Church of England should dispense her Catholicity to those separated Christian bodies in the interests of apostolic unity. We lost nothing by acting in this way and indeed advanced the Catholic cause. He took this view precisely because every effort was made to preserve and guarantee established Catholic order. Nothing essential was lost, but a great deal gained. Bennie rejoiced that in all the negotiations the Church of England was "quite unprepared to take any action which would prejudice her acceptance of the Catholic

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<sup>27</sup> "General Synod and the Constitution" Editorial *ACQ*, October 1955, p. 5. Bennie's editorial of the *ACQ* for July 1961 was a tribute to Burgmann on his relinquishing of the diocese of Canberra-Goulburn in order to retire to St Mark's Library in Canberra, and Bennie quoted views attributed to him on the constitution in these words "The Church of England in Australia is the last relic of the British Colonial System in existence". p.3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

doctrine that the minister of the Eucharist is a priest ordained by a bishop standing in the Apostolic Succession".<sup>30</sup>

That said, however, Bennie was not so edified a few years later, at the time of the Lambeth Conference of 1958 when this question was again on the agenda. He suggested that, "the essential issue is the nature of the actual reunited church that results from any given venture. We do not wish to judge our Indian brethren in their solution of their own problems, even though it is not just 'their business': the integrity of the Church everywhere concerns us all".<sup>31</sup> Indeed, what exercised Bennie's mind at that time was the way in which the question of priesthood was managed in practice. He argued,

[...] we do not much care whether we are an episcopally ordained or a presbyterally ordained minister, but we do care whether or not we are a Catholic priest. Competent observers tell us that South Indian Christians value increasingly their new episcopate. This is reassuring; but we find it difficult for its members to hold the Catholic doctrine that the episcopate is an essential part of the Divine economy for the Church. To keep the episcopate for reasons of tradition or efficiency may well prove to be, in the nature of things temporary. For tradition without a dogmatic basis resolves itself into sentiment and it is difficult to make a case for the efficiency of feudalism. We do not wish to dispute any of Lambeth's decisions, nor, for that matter, those of the English Convocations, but we are profoundly glad not to be a native of Madras.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Bennie also voiced severe reservations about the 1958 Lambeth Conference's forty page report on the Reunion of Christendom. He cited Bishop Lancelot Andrewes who used to pray for the unity among the Churches, "Eastern, Western and Ourselves", but there was precious little about that to be found in it. This was regrettable to say the least, wrote Bennie, and he ventured to say, "that if 97 per cent of our efforts towards Reunion had been expended towards reconciliation with the Orthodox with whom we are in fundamental agreement in faith, rather than with Free Church bodies with whom we are merely in juxtaposition, the committee might well have had something more satisfying to consider than the patchwork of ambiguities provided for them by the various reunion schemes and plans for Indians".<sup>33</sup>

What undoubtedly concerned Bennie's most in these questions was the crucial importance of hanging on to and defending the Catholic heritage of the Anglican Communion in order to enable it to fulfil what many Catholics within its boundaries perceived to be its vocation, namely to act as an agency of Providence for the ultimate reunion of Christendom. He averred,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> *ACQ*, April 1958, editorial, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *ACQ*, Editorial, January 1958, p. 4.

From the beginning the Anglican Communion has taken a lively interest in both the oecumenical and reunion movements. Her leaders have felt that she had, in view of the contacts in her own life with both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions of Christian life, a crucial role to play in the task of reconciliation, and successive Lambeth Conferences have moulded this role into a discernible policy.<sup>34</sup>

But in order to be able to accomplish this the Catholic heritage had to be preserved sacrosanct. This is indeed the thrust of a long and learned article Bennie wrote for the April 1959 *ACQ* entitled rather whimsically, "Promoting Catholic Unity in Pudding Time".<sup>35</sup> In it he examined the similarities of mind between the leading English thinkers and their Gallican counterparts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. But despite these examples of encouraging unanimity between English and French theologians, Bennie concluded, citing Laud, "Reunion with her [Rome] will always be a beckoning mirage until she becomes other than she is".<sup>36</sup>

This is obviously, why in Bennie's mind the clear ecumenical strategy for Anglicans to pursue was reunion with the Orthodox first, and this he strongly urged as follows:

The desire for the Reunion of Christendom in the one visible Body of Christ which is the Church is a fundamentally Catholic desire. On this great point Catholic theology and the oecumenical movement are emphatically at one. The questions at issue are of the practical order: matters of procedure and priority. What is maintained here is the first priority for Anglicans is and must be reunion with the Orthodox Churches of the East, and, until this is happily consummated, other plans must wait, lest their premature acceptance narrow rather than extend the arena of the Catholic Church and create sects rather than end them. Further, that the only procedure consistent with the history of the primitive Church, and for that matter with intellectual integrity, is unity after an unambiguous agreement in faith is obtained, that the resultant unity may be of one heart and mind, as well as mere unity of outward organisation.<sup>37</sup>

Those were the clear priorities as Peter Bennie saw them. The Pan Protestantism of the ecumenical movement remained for him extremely suspect, and he could not warm to it in all conscience. He had established his priorities on what he saw as authentic and essential propositions derived from an unquestionably encompassing knowledge of

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<sup>34</sup> *ACQ*, Editorial, October 1959, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> The reference to "Pudding Time" comes from the famous ditty, "The Vicar of Bray". The fifth stanza begins, "When *George* in Pudding time came o'er,/ And Moderate Men looked big, Sir,/ My Principles I chang'd once more,/ And so became a Whig Sir." The *George* here is the first Hanoverian monarch of England, reigned 1714-1727.

<sup>36</sup> *ACQ*, April, 1959, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> "The Catholic Concepts and Reunion Schemes", *ACQ*, Editorial, October 1959, p. 18.

Church history, and it would be less that intellectually honest to compromise these principles in any well intentioned but essentially emotional and sentimental moves at what would be at best a superficial talk fest that involved the leaders of a chequered variety of what were little more than sects spawned in post-Reformation Europe in North America. And that is why he very much deplored the watering down over time since its enunciation in 1888 of the Lambeth Quadrilateral.<sup>38</sup> He perceived himself at that time as guardian of a spiritual heritage that had the potential to heal the world. It was certainly a lofty and admirable aspiration. And for the Anglican Church to be better equipped to carry out its vocation it was essential that its leaders, meaning bishops and theologians, think as rigorously as he did. Bennie was appalled by what he regarded as woolly thinking on the part of Anglicans who, he would have argued should have known better, because the intellectual heritage was there for all to draw upon. For this reason he was impatient with Protestants who never could comprehend the simple and obvious fact the Church was responsible for the Bible and not the other way around.

In April 1956, Bennie published one of his most perceptive and significant articles in the *ACQ*, entitled “The Authority of the Bible in Relation to the Authority of the Church”. Today it reads as though he had specifically written it for the benefit of the Sydney Jensenites, and in particular, the luminaries who teach Biblical studies at a near by institution for the training of ecclesiastical terrorists, an appellation of which Bennie would have approved since their so-called “Church planting” policy is calculated to destroy the spiritual-intellectual heritage for which he stood and defended with all the fibre of his being.

This particular essay begins with an overview of how dictatorial Papal authority displaced the dispersed authority that the Conciliar Movement was seeking to establish as the norm for the entire Western Church. As Bennie observed, “the defeat of the Conciliar Movement by the papacy in the fifteenth century inevitably meant the defeat of its twofold aim, which was, as expressed by the Council of Constance, ‘the abolition of schism’ (between East and West) and the ‘reformation of the Church of God in its head and its members’”. The consequence of this was seen as a failure by Bennie to reform the Church from within, so it came as no surprise that, “As there would not be reformation from within, the Reformation from without became tragically necessary”.<sup>39</sup>

The consequence of this was that,

The men of the Reformation had to find a spiritual authority with unchallenged credentials which they could oppose to the authority of the Papacy. The authority of the whole Church, as expressed in the universally acknowledged authority of its general Councils having apparently failed, they found it in the universally acknowledged authority of canonical Scripture, which they separated out from its context in the development of general Church tradition, and erected as an unchallengeable criterion of sound doctrine and discipline.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. pp. 12-18.

<sup>39</sup> *ACQ*, April 1956, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Bennie proceeded to point out that the expression “Word of God” had two distinct meanings, one to designate Christ Himself, the other, inspired Scripture. And the “Word of God” became the watchword of the Protestant movement, allowing the first meaning to slip into the background. The consequence of this was that all that was necessary to understand the standards of doctrine and discipline was a modicum of literacy. And the chaotic results of this exclusive emphasis were there for all to see. But Bennie does not dismiss the authority of Scripture. Rather he sees the two authorities not as dialectically opposed, but as complementary. The argument, once often heard, that in the end it was the individual conscience that was the final authority in matters of belief, Bennie found absurd. And he affirmed that “No conscience is authentically Christian, which is not definitively formed by the authority of revelation”.<sup>41</sup>

He then, very rigorously, defined the nature of spiritual authority which was non-coercive in contrast to the authority of the State, by opposing to it the authority of the Gospel, “which though not compulsive, is none the less absolute”.<sup>42</sup> And it operates with the individual “after the manner of recognition”, the recognition of the sublime. This, Bennie says, can easily be denied or betrayed, but if it is denied then the individual becomes conscious of personal degradation as in the case of Peter’s denial of Christ which resulted in tears and in the case of Judas ended in ultimate despair, “for the one had denied and the other had betrayed the Image of God in Himself”. As Bennie affirmed, “There is that in us which would compel us to love the highest when we see it, and the spiritual authority over us is quite free but quite unconditioned. We suggest that this is the authority of the Incarnate Lord, and consequently the authority of His Body, the Church”.<sup>43</sup>

So, here Bennie was saying that for the individual Christian to be able to recognize the authority of Christ he or she must remain active members of the Church, Christ’s Body, and so to live in continuity with it as it progressed through history. One may conclude here that wilful separation from the Body of Christ constituted a grave impediment to recognition of truth. Within the historic fellowship of the Body of Christ one was equipped to recognize the authentic elements of faith.<sup>44</sup>

Bennie then proceeded to investigate the origins of Biblical authority. As he pointed out, “the earliest Church entered the world with a Bible, and that Bible was the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. [But] “this version contained quite a few books not recognized as canonical by the Palestinian Jews. The Hebrew Canon was not settled finally until the Jewish Council of Jamnia in A.D. 90...”<sup>45</sup>

Bennie then observed that the scriptural books actually in the hands of the early Church were accepted for the reason enunciated by St John in words ascribed to Jesus, namely, “Search the Scriptures, these are they which testify to me” (John 5:39) So the Church, affirmed Bennie following Lightfoot, took over the Old Testament because “it

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 13

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p.14.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p.15.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

provided the context of the Incarnation, and without it, the theological form of the New Testament is unintelligible".<sup>46</sup>

Then, in the first two centuries, the Christian Church produced many occasional Christian writings, those that have survived being mostly to serve the homiletic and didactic need of the particular community which produced them. Here we see Bennie systematically developing, from the empirically derived evidence, the case that the early Church gradually produced the texts that were later selected to form the New Testament. And this was only incidentally history in the usual understanding, being principally the theological teaching of the Church illustrated by miracle, anecdote and the pregnant sayings of Jesus, selected and strung together in order to answer the questions of faith that challenged the Christians of the first century to whom they were addressed. And Bennie observed that the modern reader on close examination of the Gospels found them increasingly enigmatic since they were focussing on issues that concerned people in the ancient world, "which for us, the arches of the years have put somewhat out of focus".<sup>47</sup>

This is because, observed Bennie, the Church was struggling with the challenge of Gnosticism and was forced to determine what Scriptures bore authentic witness to Christ. The Church aimed from the beginning to project the whole counsel of God, and they brought for evidence two witnesses. The first was a collection of books, either of apostolic authorship, or at least closely associated with the first apostles, which taken together fully expounded the faith as it had been received:

Thus emerged a Canon of the New Testament comprising those earliest Christian books in which the Church recognised an authentic expression of the faith she had received from the beginning. Other early books were much valued, others less, but the Church finally selected these books as compromising a sufficient statement of the norm of faith, as it had been received from the beginning. These books were then conjoined with those already inherited from the Greek Canon of the Old Testament, to provide for the Church the two testaments, Old and New.<sup>48</sup>

The conclusion that must inevitably be drawn from these facts is simply that it was the Church that conferred canonicity upon the books, and here Bennie introduced the second witness by the Fathers of the early Church against Gnosticism, namely the Apostolic Succession. "By this was meant at least in the first formulation, the continuity of teaching authority expressed by the unbroken succession of Episcopal occupants of the *cathedra* or teaching chair, of the various sees. The bishop was, and is, essentially the voice of the see's tradition of faith, and the apostolic succession bears witness to this continuity of tradition from the apostles".<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Here Bennie cites Irenaeus who contrasted the stable tradition of the Catholic sees with the vagaries of the Gnostics. "Those who wish to discern the truth, he says, writing against the heresies, "may observe the apostolic tradition made manifest in every church throughout the world. We can enumerate those who

So, for Bennie those things, in short, the Apostles' writings and the Apostles' successors provided both a static and dynamic witness to the authenticity of the Church's teaching authority on which we can rely were Scripture and the Apostolic Succession. These were the organs by which the Church expressed her developing consciousness of the revelation she had received.

Thus had Bennie built up the case for the authority of the Church which he saw as the ground both of Scriptural authority and the authority of the Apostolic Ministry. And this authority was exercised in the manner of spiritual authority in contrast to the coercive authority of the State. Indeed, the authority of the Church followed from her nature as the Body of Christ, the sacramental extension of the Incarnation, the bearer of His revelation. And in this Bennie appealed to none other than John Henry Newman whose lectures on the prophetic office of the Church published in 1837 clearly provided him with his rationale, and he quoted Newman as follows:

Almighty God placed in His Church first, apostles, or Bishops, secondarily Prophets. Apostles rule and preach, Prophets expound. Prophets or Doctors are the interpreters of the Revelation; they unfold and define its mysteries, they illuminate its documents, they harmonise its contents, they apply its promises. Their teaching is a vast system... permeating the Church like an atmosphere, irregular in its shape for its very profusion and exuberance; at times only separable in idea from Episcopal Tradition;... partly the interpretation, partly the supplement of Scripture, partly preserved in intellectual expressions, partly latent in the spirit and temper of Christians;... This I call Prophetic Tradition.... This is obviously of a very different kind from the Prophetic Tradition, yet in its origin it is equally Apostolic.... This is the body of teaching which is offered to all Christians even at the present day, though in various forms and measures of truth, in different parts of Christendom, partly being a comment, partly an addition upon the articles of the Creed.<sup>50</sup>

Bennie, in quoting Newman was careful not to see in the creeds or Conciliar statements a theological cul-de-sac, an intellectual-spiritual dead end where all thought about the mystery of Revelation was frozen. Rather the Creeds outlined the minimum "for a theology to be authentically Catholic"... For the rest "theology is free".<sup>51</sup> This position allowed Bennie to criticise the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers for abstracting the authority of scripture from its context as one of the modes of expression of the authority of the Church, and setting the two authorities over against each other". Scripture, he insisted

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were appointed bishops in the churches by the Apostles, and their successions down to our own day, who never taught and never knew the absurdities such as these men produce. For if the Apostles had known hidden mysteries which they taught the perfect in private and in secret, they would rather have committed them to those to whom they entrusted the churches"

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 18. Quoting from J.H. Newman, *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church viewed relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism* pp. 297-299.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

was but a voice of the Church, and not the only one. And as well, the Scriptures could not be definitive as St John wrote, “There are many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written” (John 21:25) <sup>52</sup>

But the Scriptures we had, as the Church itself obviously insisted, did contain everything that was fundamental. On the other hand it was untenable that a Pope, for example, could arrogate solely to himself the right of determining what the true tradition was. Bishops, *collectively* were the witnesses of tradition. So, Bennie rejected both the Reformation’s denial of the controlling arm of Apostolic authority on the one hand and the dictatorial claims of the Bishop of Rome on the other.<sup>53</sup> Rather, he was committed to Newman’s three strands of what he called “Episcopal tradition”, consisting of Scripture, Creeds and Apostolic Ministry, and he would add a fourth, namely the life of grace in the sacraments to which the Church’s continuing communion with her Head found expression, and to which the Lambeth fathers had repeatedly witnessed.<sup>54</sup>

As Bennie judged in the ‘fifties,

The great problem before the Church is to find the wholeness of the Christian tradition which is true Catholicity, which has been fragmented by the vicissitudes of many centuries of Christian history. So often a truth had been dissociated from the balance of truths which in their right relationship to each other bears witness to the proportion of faith. The real antithesis of the Catholic Church is the sect, and sectarianism ever stunts the spirit, binds the mind, and inhibits the imagination.<sup>55</sup>

Here is summed up Bennie’s agenda for Anglicanism: Acting with intellectual integrity to recover and sustain the wholeness of the Faith of the whole Church. It was indeed a “vision splendid”.

Finally, on the All Saint’s chapter of Peter Bennie’s priesthood, one may fairly judge that in those years he laboured intensely, indeed heroically, to realise the vision he had inherited and embraced with all the power and conviction of his extraordinarily well stocked mind. Indeed, as Archbishop St Clair Donaldson remarked about another high-profile priest of the diocese before 1914 who was in those days both a prophet and fighter for great causes, “He was a Triton among the minnows”.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. pp. 19-20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 20. On this issue Bennie observed, “The literal word of Scripture provides a ready reckoner for all who can be persuaded to accept it as an absolute, as direct and uncomplicated as an ipse dixit from the Vatican. The appeal to history is as much treason to the Spirit in the one case as in the other”.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 20

<sup>56</sup> St. Clair Donaldson commenting on the priesthood David John Garland, a man of extraordinary vision and administrative ability who fought courageously, though not always tactfully, for great causes. See John A. Moses with Alexander Kidd, “Canon David John Garland (1864-1939) and the Problem of who Leads” in *Episcopacy—Views from the Antipodes* edited by Alan H. Cadwallader with David Richardson (Adelaide: Anglican Board of Christian Education, 1994) p. 163.