

# Catholic Values and Australia Realities

James Franklin

(Connor Court, 2006)

## Introduction

**A**USTRALIAN CATHOLICS have had a distinct “image”: Irish tribal loyalties, Labor but anti-communist politics, childhoods full of guilt and incense. There is more to their distinctiveness than that. Their central contribution to Australian thinking is an objective view of ethics. Ethics, Catholics believe, is not a matter of the tribal mores a society happens to have developed, nor is it an arbitrary command of God (or of our genes). Instead, what is right and just is inherent in the way things are. Because human beings are human beings, serious injustice to them is an outrage, a violation of the order of the universe (ch. 7 below).

That perspective, explicitly or implicitly, has been behind the unique Catholic contributions to Australian life described in this book. A commitment to the inherent equality in the worth of persons was behind the Mabo decision of the Catholic-dominated High Court, which declared that aborigines had rights in land that could not be ignored by the white colonisers (ch. 10). Similar views were behind the Catholic view of the 1940s on immigration, which held that refugees in war-torn Europe had some right to Australia’s unused spaces (as well as being good for Australia) (ch. 3). On more detailed matters too, such as compensation for loss,

objective values based on the worth of persons are not vague motherhood statements but provide a recipe for calculating rights and exactly determining what ought to be done (ch. 9). The untiring anti-communist organising of Dr Ryan (ch. 2) and B.A. Santamaria (ch. 6) reflected not only knowledge of Stalinist atrocities, but a presumption that a materialist philosophy like Leninism could only result in a view of humans as expendable, fit only to be shovelled into mass graves if they were not on the side of “history”. To a lesser degree, Catholics were suspicious of the ruling secular ideology of Australia and so maintained at great expense their own school system with its distinctive values founded ultimately on its objective ethical philosopher (chs. 4, 8). If Freemasonry was a godless ideology, as Catholics believed, not entirely correctly (ch. 1), then it was certainly unsatisfactory if society in general and the school system in particular were dominated by Freemasons. Catholics were equally suspicious of evangelical Christianity which, they believed, replaced “in accordance with the nature of things” in ethics with an ungrounded and simplistic “the Bible says” (ch. 11).

This book is partisan. Though it contains history done fairly as history ought to be, and arguments with a fair view of both sides, the overall pattern points to a conclusion. If Australian Catholics are to make the contribution they should to the Australia of the new century, they need to understand the theory and practice of what was done before. The Catholics of Australia had energy because they knew where they were going. Let us understand what they did and do likewise.

There are some important issues hardly treated in the book. One is Catholic religious life – prayer, the Bible, liturgy, theology, charity work and the other activities of the institutional Church. Those are crucial, obviously, in

## *Introduction*

understanding Catholics and their values. But this book concentrates on a single basic issue, an ethical one that can be understood by Australians who do not share Catholic beliefs. It is natural for an outsider to respond to rosaries and novenas with “just not my tradition”. It is not so easy to avoid serious thinking about whether persons have intrinsic moral worth.

A second topic not dealt with here is the sexual abuse scandals that have disfigured the reputation of the institutional Church. It used to be thought that Catholics had somewhat exaggerated the seriousness and objective wrongness of sexual sins and that less guilt all round would be liberating. The scandals confirmed – not in the way Catholics would have wished, but confirmed nonetheless – that, for some of those sins at least, they were absolutely right.