

COMMENTS ON THE TEN YEARS OF THE PASS
BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE ACADEMY
OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN AUSTRALIA

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President's Column
The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences invited me – as President of a sister Academy – to participate in its 10th birthday celebrations. In the end, the Vatican being a long way from Adelaide, they welcomed me as a participant in their entire symposium for 2004. The symposium was held at the Vatican from 29 April to 3 May, with the theme of ‘Intergenerational Solidarity’. The Pontifical Academy has similarities to, and differences from our own. It is much smaller, comprising at most 40 people. Its gender ratio favours men much more than does ours. It has, as part of its purpose, the charter of drawing on the insights of the social sciences to enrich the thinking of the Catholic Church on social issues. Members are appointed by the Pope, drawn from a small number recommended by the Council of the Academy. They need not be Catholic (a number are not) and they come from all corners of the world. They must, naturally, be distinguished social scientists, though not all are academics. They are drawn principally from the disciplines of sociology, economics, law and politics. The economists amongst us will recognise Edmond Malinvaud and the Nobel laureate Kenneth Arrow, who are distinguished members, while Joe Stiglitz had just been appointed. I was delighted to find among the members one of our own Fellows, George Zubrzycki, who has been a member for many years. His presence at the meeting helped to make me feel particularly welcome and his contribution to the debates did our Academy proud. Like our Academy, the Pontifical Academy comprises people who have made major contributions to the social sciences and retain a lively intellectual interest in major contemporary issues.

Members take their role very seriously, as did the two invited speakers (Jacques Vallin – Chair of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, and Francis Fukuyama – the prolific and influential, political scientist). Most contributions to the symposium were provided in writing in advance (no doubt in part to facilitate the simultaneous translation into English, French and German). This enabled the President (Professor Mary Ann Glendon, a lawyer from Harvard) to prepare a draft summary and evaluation of the main contributions to the theme of inter-generational solidarity. This initial draft was then modified in the light of the spontaneous contributions during the symposium. Her insightful summary was of great value to members, but was also motivated by the requirement of the Pontifical Academy to go beyond reflection to provide tools for analysis and evaluation of concrete contemporary issues. The Academy does not attempt to do this on the basis of one symposium. Instead, it uses an initial symposium to canvas the issue, then establishes a working party comprising a sub-set of its members, who work diligently over several years to produce a final document on the topic that the whole Academy is invited to discuss and endorse. The Pontifical Academy is concerned to deal with major social issues. Unlike our Academy, it pays attention to the social teachings of the Catholic Church in deciding what are the major issues. But it is interesting nonetheless to report the topics they have chosen to bring into focus in their first 10 years. We also need to reflect on this question – what are the major social issues? – when we choose topics for the ARC Learned Academies grant applications; when we choose the topic for our annual symposium; when we contribute to discussions of the National Academies Forum; when we commission and publish *Occasional Papers* and when we respond to requests from Government for advice (for example, on the setting of the National Research Priorities). The Pontifical Academy has to date selected only four topics, since each forms the basis for several years' research. The topics are:

- Work;
- Democracy;
- Intergenerational solidarity; and
- The meaning of the human person (for 2005).

The topic of Intergenerational Solidarity encompasses several of the themes of the Australian National Research Priorities: such as the implications of the changing demographic structure of populations; the obligations between different generations and the capacity to meet those obli-

gations (including care for children); and the environmental inheritance passed from one generation to the next. To the Pontifical Academy, it meant using the lens of solidarity (care for the vulnerable and the motivation of civic friendship) to understand and evaluate the emerging relations between the generations, viewed as individual family histories and as national demographic changes. The crisis in the European welfare state attracted a lot of attention, as did the changing nature of families and how to ensure a future orientation among adults who neither have, nor intend to have children. The intellectual exchange was exhilarating. In addition, it was a rare opportunity to spend five days within the walls of the Vatican, experiencing its tranquility in the middle of the pressures of modern Rome, its historical architecture and its formal gardens. I was also generously included among the Pontifical Academy members in their audience with the Pope, to whom I was introduced as President of the Australian Academy.

Reflections

The Pontifical Academy contains outstanding scholars and other thinkers, who put a great deal of care and effort into their contributions to the work of that Academy. Their thinking is sharpened by the objective of producing reasonably concrete conclusions that will assist the Catholic Church in the development of its social teaching on major issues. This requirement to go beyond the life of the mind for its own sake, to more instrumental outcomes, is pertinent to our own Academy. Such an approach could reasonably be applied to the request to our Academy from the Government for more policy-relevant thinking, under our recent Higher Education Innovation Program (HEIP) grant. It would be beneficial in promoting genuine integration of the insights of different disciplines, partly because it requires descent from very abstract language and intellectual space to more concrete realms. The potential to have an influence for the good on policy and outcomes is clearly one motivation for the voluntary effort of the members of the Pontifical Academy, as it is for our Fellows. The Pontifical Academy process of nominating a major theme, having an initial symposium on the topic (where contributions from members are supported by those from several invited scholars), appointment of a smaller team to work solidly on the topic and having at least one further symposium on the topic, leading finally to publication, has much to recommend it. It suggests to me that we could consider making more systematic use of

our own programs to develop deep thinking on a small number of major topics. We could, for example, use a combination of workshops and an ARC-funded research program to develop material for final presentation and discussion at our annual symposium. This symposium could be invited to develop (perhaps with written contributions in advance) some specific and concrete policy recommendations.