

MORGAN BEGG
Research Fellow at the
Institute of Public Affairs

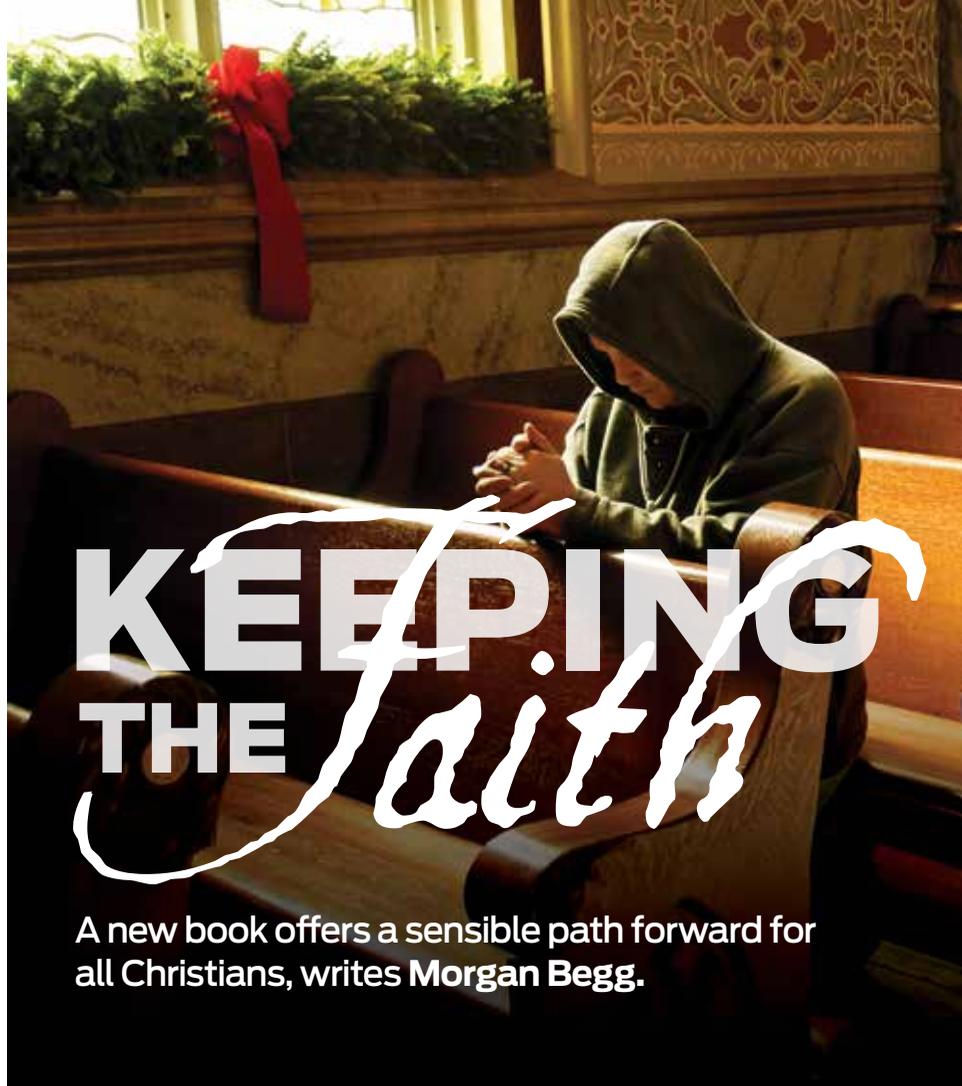


All religious establishments in the People's Republic of China became bound by the government's new 'Regulations for Religious Affairs' from February 1, 2018. The stated aim of the administrative framework is to 'protect citizens' freedom of religious belief' which it does through setting out detailed criteria for religious organisations to meet in order to be 'registered', and requiring religious teachers and officials to report to religious affairs authorities.

It was in the context of this latest round of restrictions on religious activity that it was revealed the Vatican would accept the legitimacy of several Chinese bishops appointed by the Chinese government. In pursuit of a historic deal, the Vatican also asked two of its own underground bishops, hitherto faithful to the church in Rome, to resign and to be replaced by government-backed bishops who were previously not supported by Rome.

➤ **THERE ARE FEW DUTIES IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH THAT ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN DECISIONS ABOUT WHO WILL LEAD THE FLOCK.**

There are few duties in the Catholic Church that are more important than decisions about who will lead the flock. That the church would



KEEPING THE Faith

A new book offers a sensible path forward for all Christians, writes Morgan Begg.

defer to the Communist authorities in the appointment of bishops is a sign of the deep morass the church finds itself in.

A confident church would not make these mistakes. Nor would it promote climate change causes and other progressive economic goals while Christian communities continue to be slaughtered in the Middle East and while mainstream Christianity is pushed ever further from the public sphere in the West.

Fortunately, a new book offers a path forward, and not just for the Catholic Church. The author, Father James Grant, is a former Anglican Church priest who saw first-hand the damage that ensued when that denomination pursued ineffective progressive secularism. *Keeping the Faith* is directed at the Catholic

Church in Australia, but sets out fundamental principles that should guide all Christian denominations across the Western world.

Because many churches have become fearful of secular criticism, they too often seek fleeting popularity by amplifying popular progressive causes themselves. As Father James explains, many Christian leaders in Australia have 'become strongly attached to the ad hoc, shoot from the hip style of leadership offered by the papacy of Pope Francis'. Left untended by this approach is the spiritual health of their flocks and wider communities, hurt by the neglect of the churches and the policy outcomes of progressive politics those churches have come to support.

By this reading, there are



importance. Unfortunately, too many Christian leaders have given their staunch support to the enlargement of a centralised welfare state that promotes passivity and disincentives to work. This has led to the sad transformation of traditional Christian charities and welfare agencies to bureaucratised organisations indistinguishable from their government counterparts. Neither development has alleviated poverty, nor have they advanced Christianity in Australia.

> CHURCHES MUST SERVE THEIR COMMUNITIES NOT WITH PLATITUDES AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS, BUT WITH GENUINE SERVICE ON A PERSONAL LEVEL.

Aside from addressing the spiritual needs of people in the community, the church needs to address the dignity of people in its public comments. This means affirming the core values and history of Western Civilisation, including the defence of individual freedoms. This should be obvious since Western Civilisation is largely a product of Christianity. Yet many Christian leaders today treat Western history with shame or silence. This impossible position ignores that many of the freedoms churches rely on today to practice their faith freely are an inheritance derived from the West.

The antipathy to those freedoms is also becoming more evident. To use a potent example, in the wake of the terror attacks against the headquarters of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris in January 2015, Pope Francis incredibly suggested that free speech should be limited where it offends, saying ‘you cannot

provoke, you cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith of others.’

It is no wonder that the Catholic Church could consider doing a deal with the Chinese government while that government simultaneously restricts Catholic freedom. On what basis could the church object to the loss of freedom of speech when they won’t stand up for freedom in the West?

Fortunately, Christians don’t have to look too far back in history for a real world example of Father James’ lessons at work. In Poland, under Soviet repression during the Cold War, the Catholic Church was a steadfast defender of Western Christian values and individual freedom. The churches today need to learn this inspirational lesson to save itself from irrelevance.

This requires a great amount of courage, and in this respect the Catholic Church in Australia is very fortunate to have Father James in its ranks. As the unfolding saga in China demonstrates, the Vatican needs more in the mould of Father James and, frankly, less in the mould of Pope Francis. 

two possible futures for western Christianity. The business as usual approach is to focus on social justice issues, in which the churches have no expertise and limited impact on Australian society. The message on refugees, Indigenous constitutional recognition and climate change fails to serve the church or its shrinking flock.

The other path presented by Father James is for churches to return to focusing on the dignity of the individual and the social institution of the family. This would require the churches to serve their communities not with platitudes and political correctness, but with genuine service on a personal level. When it comes to talking about the dignity of the individual, the dignity of work is of central



Keeping the Faith: The Battle for Australian Catholicism

By Father James Grant
Connor Court Publishing, 2017, 176 pp