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A note from Down Under

Tom Roberts | Nov. 25, 2013 NCR Today
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I've been in Australia for the past week and a half, speaking to people across the spectrum in Melbourne and Sydney and gathering some impressions about the church here.

Some similarities are striking, both culturally and ecclesiastically, as are some differences. In the latter category, I had an instructive moment when I noticed a tease Monday on the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald*. It read: "Institutions told to stand up in culture war."

I went to the story on the inside, expecting to find some political rant about the usual matters we see as the stakes in the war -- abortion, homosexuality, and so on down the list. What I found instead was a discussion of, well, actual culture of the traditional sort. In this case, it was a report [1] about Arts Minister George Souris wanting the New South Wales government to become more involved in acquiring more art and a discussion about how to incorporate private money to help such institutions as the Art Gallery of NSW, the State Library and the Australian Museum "to expand outwards, upwards and even downwards ... to regain ascendancy in staging more blockbuster exhibitions and attracting interstate and overseas" visitors.

Make no mistake -- there's a limit to private investment.

"Let me rule out one thing immediately: privatization," Souris said. "These are state cultural institutions, they are flagship institutions owned by the state. I don't want to walk through the Qantas foyer to the Optus hall to find the Vodafone exhibition in one of our state institutions," he said, referring to three major Australian companies. For the most part, "government" isn't a dirty word here. People actually seem to appreciate a mandated living minimum wage, universal health care and great public art institutions. The Catholic schools (far more on this in a later report) benefit handsomely from government funding. No one is complaining in that regard about socialism and, by the looks of things, free enterprise is rather robust.

On another note, I have been a somewhat regular guest from the states on the Australian Broadcasting Corp. show Sunday Nights with John Cleary and was able this week to sit in live in the studio in Sydney. I was on with Dr. Angela McCarthy, senior lecturer in theology at Notre Dame University in Fremantle, and Jesuit Fr. Frank Brennan, professor of law and director of strategic research at Australian Catholic University, discussing Pope Francis and other matters of a church in transition: abc.net.au/sundaynights/stories/s3897923.htm [2].

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Links:
[1] http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/sydney-arts-world-told-to-step-up-in-culture-war-20131124-2y42h.html
[2] http://www.abc.net.au/sundaynights/stories/s3897923.htm