

# Where is the authentic voice?

**Catholics appear to be at home in a pluralist, secular society and judge that it is not right to force their opinions on others**

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*Cardinal George Pell was able to make his voice heard from a prison cell in Australia. Bishops he has promoted have continued to echo the cardinal's voice. But, on three current issues in Australia, polls show that most Catholics disagree with them. So, which voice is authentically Catholic?*



Pope Francis will call the Synod of Bishops into session again next month in Rome for a special assembly on Pan-Amazonia. The aim of the Oct. 6-27 gathering is to identify new paths for the evangelization of that region.

The synod's [working document](#), issued last June, delves into the main issues concerning the Amazon and its people.

But questions concerning the evangelization of the people have, in turn, raised some secondary issues, such as the ordination of married indigenous men and the role of women.

These secondary issues have raised alarm bells for the reactionary faction of the culture wars that are currently bedeviling the Catholic Church and, indeed, much of the Western World.

Cardinal Pell has been a prominent voice of the right-wing faction all his life – dogmatic and authoritarian. Although convicted and in jail for sexual abuse of minors, he has used a letter to his supporters to add his voice to those opposing the so-called Amazon Synod.

Pell's style is reactionary. That style echoes in statements issued by his protégés – the archbishops of Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart. Recent Australian legislation has given them material for reaction on the three hot-button issues: same-sex marriage, standardizing abortion legislation and assisted dying.

These are the issues that really get them going – not refugees, immigration or climate change. The episcopal voices are supported by ideological, right-wing activist groups such as Sydney-based Notre Dame University's Institute for Ethics and Society, the John Paul II Institute in Melbourne and the Christopher Dawson Centre in Hobart.

These institutes are part of a worldwide collection of similar organizations pushing a right-wing, ideological agenda.

Italy has the Dignitatis Humanae Institute promoted by Steve Bannon. The United States has the Napa Institute promoted by Timothy Busch and supported by Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia and an array of others, including George Weigel.

These movements are highly organized and well-funded.

Polls show that, while Australian Catholics have mixed opinions on the morality of the above-mentioned hot-button issues, a heavy majority are against *criminalizing* them.

**Catholics, in the main, appear to be at home in a pluralist, secular society and judge that it is not right to force their opinions on others. They have a different ethical standard than the bishops and a more compassionate moral compass.**

**The days of coercive intervention by bishops are over. This explains why Archbishop Peter Comensoli came under such heavy fire when he vetoed Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittester from speaking at a national Catholic Education Conference in the Archdiocese of Melbourne.**

**It was a Pell-like intervention that was met with a "who does he think he is?" reaction. This showed that being a bishop carries little weight in public debate anymore – even with Catholics.**

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) shifted the Church's centre of gravity from the hierarchy to the people of God. This *decentralizing* movement led to a new doctrinal development – *Reception Theology*.

For a doctrine or moral opinion to be authentic it must be *received* by the body of the faithful. In disputed matters, what Catholics *believe* is as important as what the hierarchy *proclaim*.

The 1968 papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, was the watershed moment. The pope proclaimed that contraception was sinful; the Catholic body did not receive it.

So, where can the voice of the faithful be heard?

Movements for continuing the renewal started by Vatican II have grown in number and strength.

Examples include the Voice of the Faithful in the United States, the Pastor's Initiative in Austria and Catholics for Renewal in Australia. Originally treated with disdain by bishops, these are now mainstream movements.

**Bishops are routinely ignored these days. Maybe some will come to realize that they need to take notice of what their people believe.**

**The decision of the Australian bishops to hold a Plenary Council in 2020 has brought a surprisingly large number of submissions from Catholics – surprisingly large because most Catholics under 50 have given up on the Church.**

Catholics for Renewal have produced a booklet of their [submissions](#), "Getting Back on Mission" (Garratt Publishing).

The situation is fluid. It is a plenary council of the *bishops*. The laity are signalling where they stand. If the bishops ignore them, they could well see a replay of Paul VI's 1968 encyclical and its aftermath of more departures from the Church.

All around the globe the lay voice is being formulated and speaking out. It is imperative that the world's bishops get theologically up to date and realize that the voice of God's people is part of the game.

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