

Talk to Concerned Catholics Wagga Wagga Diocese

John Warhurst

Public Forum: Accountable, Inclusive and Transparent: A Better Church for Australia”

Commercial Club, Wagga Wagga, 24 October 2019

Introduction

We can do much better and we must do much better by becoming more accountable, inclusive and transparent-at all levels of the church-parish, diocesan, national and ultimately international.

This is not a radical conclusion to reach because it is shared by a wide range of faithful Catholics in Australia (shown by the official summary of submissions to PC2020), by what we are told by our church leaders including Popes Benedict and Francis and Archbishop Mark Coleridge, by our own Truth Justice and Healing Council, and by an expert outside body, with a distinguished Catholic representative, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. I can't put it any clearer or stronger than the words I will quote to you shortly. Nevertheless, it is a position which unfortunately still faces plenty of opposition and apathy within the church.

I should say by the way that its no good to say that many other institutions are similarly in need of reform. That's true, but our own Catholic Church is our focus. We are interested in the state of the church itself.

In saying this I am speaking from my position as chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, formed in April 2017 to be a ginger group inside and a lobby group outside of faithful Catholics committed to reform. Our vision is for a church in which the talents, gifts and wisdom of all Catholics, lay, religious and ordained priests and bishops, contribute to all levels of participation and decision-making as spelled out in Canon Law and encouraged by Pope Francis.

Why (what is the problem)?

We are a shrinking church which has lost touch with our younger generations and older faithful Catholics in staggering numbers.

We frequently neglect the talents and leadership abilities of our laity, especially our lay women.

We have failed to live up to our own standards laid down by Vatican II in governance and culture.

We have been found guilty of widespread of abuse of morality and power by a Royal Commission and by numerous courts.

We have failed to be inclusive, transparent and accountable to our own people and to the Australian people.

We are a powerful source of good in Australian society, but we must realise that we have not lived up to the privileged position that that society has accorded us.

We have a lot to learn about principled organisational behaviour from society at large. We are lagging, not leading.

Principles and Support for Church Renewal

The quotations I am about to share are encouraging for those of us who are attentive to church renewal. Some are from well-known figures, others less so, but they are all important. They range from official recognition that we are in an era of change in which impediments and crises can be admitted to the fact that the urgency and necessity of lay co-leadership must be accepted. They outline what must be done, participation must be the core principle.

Vatican II: “Ours is a new age of history with profound and rapid changes... we are entitled then to speak of a real social and cultural transformation whose repercussions are felt at the religious level also.” (December 1965, Gaudium at Spes)

Pope Benedict: “The laity should not be considered as collaborators with the clergy, but as the people truly co-responsible for the life of the church.” (2013?, quoted by Noel Connolly)

Pope Francis: “It is impossible think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People. ... Without the active participation of all the Church’s members, everything being done to uproot the culture of abuse in our communities will not be successful in generating the necessary dynamics for sound and realistic change.” (August 2018, Letter to the People of God)

Canon Law: “The Christian faithful have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful” (Canon 212.3)

Archbishop Mark Coleridge (President, ACBC): The crisis in the church can’t be met by business as usual. “It is hard to believe that the Church’s response would have been so poor had lay people been involved from the start in shaping a response”.

The Royal Commission: “The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference should conduct a national review of the governance and management structures of dioceses and parishes, including in relation to issues of transparency, accountability, consultation and participation of lay men and women. This review should draw from the approaches to governance of Catholic health, community services and education agencies.” (Final Report, R. 67))

Robert Fitzgerald (Royal Commissioner): “ Current Church governance, and some of the canons that underpin it, are based (intentionally or unintentionally) on fear of the non-ordained, especially women, a fear of outside influence (even where that is good), an arrogant assertion of the position of the Church in the world, and maintaining the unique privilege of an ordained class. It too often dismisses open, transparent and accountable approaches in favour of secrecy, complexity and legalistic approaches. It shuns genuine participation. And there are strong forces within the Church that seek the *status quo*.” (2019, Getting Back on Mission))

Elizabeth Proust, (Deputy Chair, Truth Justice and Healing Council): “It is clear from the Royal Commission’s findings that the dysfunctional governance of the Church aggravated the harm done by sexual abuse. The need for reform in this area is long overdue and the delay and obfuscation in responding to the Royal Commission on this topic, and on many others, will only worsen

the alienation felt by the people of the Church, and continue to make the Church an irrelevance in our society” (2018, Final Report))

Shane Dwyer, (Outgoing CEO, The National Centre for Evangelisation and the Catholic Enquiry Centre): “Many of our problems are of our own making, and any authentic spiritual journey is going to regularly encounter the challenge to get back to what’s essential and to scrape off the accretions that inevitably attach themselves as we make our way. The hull of a ship as old as ours will always need to be scraped clean of barnacles.

The pope has identified clericalism as one such barnacle. Another is the desire to put rules above people. They tend to go hand in hand. The prioritising of rules over people frequently involves the prioritising of an ordained elite over the baptised majority.” (October 2019, Catholic Voice)

Pauline Connelly (Chancellor, Archdiocese of Adelaide): “I want to see a governance structure where the laity have a legitimate governance role. A workable structure, an accountable structure, a transparent structure, an open structure.” (March 2019, St Ignatius Parish, Norwood, Lenten Address)

Fr Noel Connolly (PC2020 Facilitation Team Member): “But unfortunately because of the royal Commission, clericalism, the laity’s sense of being excluded from ministry and governance and a growing feeling of distrust in institutions across society we have now reached a serious level of distrust in the Church. In a few decades we have moved from uncritical respect to deep criticism.” (November/December 2018, The Far East)

Final Report on Submissions to the Plenary Council 2020: “The structure of church life drew a great deal of attention with respondents discussing issues about leadership and governance. Amidst it all, there was a passionate desire expressed for a greater involvement of the laity at all levels” (2019, Pastoral Research Office, ACBC)

What needs to be done and how?

We have now reached the “how” stage. What needs to be done is both general and specific. The general includes adoption of accepted civic and corporate standards in our governance, transparency and participation in the appointment of bishops, the general introduction by bishops and priests of Diocesan Pastoral Councils and Parish Pastoral Councils, greater financial accountability at all levels of the church, co-responsibility of laity and clergy,

greater transparency in all its forms at all levels, wider consultation between leaders and those affected over episcopal and priestly appointments, media freedom within the church and horizontal communication rather than top-down communication within the church, continued debate about the PC2020's composition and leadership, training in synodal leadership for all of the People of God so that cultural practices not just official structures change, etc, etc, etc]

A practical Example: Pastoral Councils

An example of specific renewal is the matter of parish pastoral councils, which are not mandated in canon law (though parish finance councils are), and diocesan pastoral councils, which are mandated but have a miserable history of introduction and operation in Australia in clear breach of canon law.

Parish pastoral councils are the building blocks for lay participation. They should be mandated and act in a spirit of co-responsibility in advising parish priests on all matters.

Diocesan pastoral councils to advise bishops should bring parish pastoral councils together through their representatives and carry out their business in a spirit of co-responsibility.

What is the Church doing?

There is a lot going on in the church. Firstly, there are church responses related to the Royal Commission, child safety and governance reform. Secondly there are a few shining examples of dioceses and parishes moving independently towards renewal. Thirdly there is the Plenary Council scheduled for 2020 and 2021.

- 1. Participation in the National Redress scheme providing financial compensation up to \$150,000 pp for thousands of survivors and victims of child sexual abuse, which began operations in July 2018. This depends on hundreds of Catholic organisations signing up to the scheme. Most will have done so by the designated date of July 2020.**

Catholic Professional Standards Limited is the independent body tasked to ensure that all Catholic institutions, especially parishes and dioceses, have child safe systems in place.

The Implementation Advisory Group is the largely-lay body created in 2018 tasked to implement the 100+ recommendations made to the church by the Royal Commission.

The Governance Review Panel Team is the largely-lay sub-committee of IAG, of which I am a member, created late last year to implement Recommendation 67 of the Royal Commission regarding a review of culture and governance in the church. Its stated purpose is: “To review the governance and management structures of the Church and make recommendations of reform to ensure that the contemporary standards of good governance are mandatory elements of the Church in Australia at all levels. The governance and management of dioceses and parishes adopted by Church leaders must focus on an unending commitment to protect the most vulnerable and rebuild trust and credibility among the Catholic and broader community.” Its March 2020 report will be both a general resource for the church and an input into the preparation for PC2020.

- 2. Individual Parishes and Dioceses across the country are taking some leads in co-responsibility and lay participation. One example are the various diocesan assemblies which are now belatedly taking place. There is no need to wait. Those that are ahead of the pack should be recognised and congratulated and used as models of best practice.**

- 3. Plenary Council 2020 preparations have been underway for more than 18 months and will culminate in two sessions in October 2020 in Adelaide and May 2021. It is a massive exercise in public consultation which like most such exercises is flawed, but it still provides opportunities for lay involvement. These are patchy opportunities because that is the fragmented nature of the Australian church. It all depends on your parish and diocesan location. My opinion also is that the whole process has been too tightly controlled from the centre and more could have been done, including publishing the 17,500 submissions, to facilitate debate and discussion within the church.**

Where to from here?

Get informed and involved, be sceptical, support those clergy and bishops in favour of renewal, do things locally rather than wait for diocesan, national

(PC2020-21 and others) or international developments. Be ready for some opposition and disinterest; but take heart that you have wide-spread support.

Presentation

In this spirit I would like to present a copy of Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together (Garratt Publishing, 2019) on behalf of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn to Concerned Catholics Wagga Wagga Diocese. It is signed by those members of CCCG here this evening and presented with our best wishes for your productive future.

This book is the submission by Catholics for Renewal to the Plenary Council 2020 and has the support of the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform, made up of 15 reform groups from across Australia, including CCCG. It is a road map for the necessary increase in accountability, inclusiveness and transparency which will make our church better.

October 21 2019