

Australian bishops have a transparency problem

[John Warhurst](#)

Australia's bishops have yet to demonstrate the new openness to the Catholic community necessary for a successful Plenary Council 2020. Their inclination to secrecy remains an impediment. They just don't get transparency as a virtue and they have twice demonstrated their adherence to old ways of doing things in recent months. Whether they realise it or not secrecy runs deep in episcopal culture.



The first example came in the conduct of the restructuring of the central apparatus of the Australian church, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), which was decided last November at the biennial ACBC meeting.

This restructuring involved an overall cut of 50 per cent to funding of the national church administration based in Canberra and some capital cities. Grants to national agencies have been cut, including total removal of the long-standing central funding of Catholic Social Services Australia, and jobs have been lost in a shake-up of the general secretariat. One of the most notable casualties has been the stand-alone Council for Australia Catholic Women with the consequent loss of the Office for the Participation of Women and its executive officer, Andrea Dean.

There is much more, including the disappearance of many jobs in executive support, research and journalism and funding cuts across many offices and commissions. The whole package is so substantial that both its general contours and its administrative detail deserves wider debate beyond the ACBC. The bishops should take the wider Catholic community into their confidence and share the financial difficulties which have led them to take what ACBC President, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, has described as 'a difficult but unavoidable path'.

National church administration is funded by diocesan levies and many dioceses are clearly feeling the pinch. Revenue is falling because of well-known problems such as falling attendance and an ageing church membership. Expenditure is rising, including the significant contributions to the National Redress Scheme and Catholic Professional Services Ltd, the church body set up to implement the new child protection regimes. All Catholics need to own these problems, but to do that we need to know about them.

The second example is in the process currently underway for selection of diocesan delegates to the PC2020. This procedure, by which lay, clerical and religious delegates are being selected by each diocesan bishop, cries out for more transparency than is currently being allowed.

Small numbers of delegates, four to eight from each diocese according to its size and status, are being chosen from each diocese, formally by the diocesan bishop but presumably on advice from his administrators. Expressions of interest have been called for by late January/early February, through Catholic media advertisements and parish newsletters. Those interested have been asked to submit a short explanation of their interests and credentials as well as the usual personal information.

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This is always a difficult time of the year to take critical decisions, much less the tumultuous end to 2019, and the church must make its choice of delegates open and transparent if community trust in PC2020 is to be established. But information about the selection process itself is scanty at best. Representation of lay Catholics, especially women, must be a high priority.

The possibility of a change of mindset about transparency lies mostly with the bishops themselves, individually and collectively. Instruments of accountability are largely lacking. The diocesan Catholic media, impotent or uninterested, is useless in this regard. The bishops must look beyond their impregnable position in Canon Law and take on a much more open mindset. The Catholic community is crying out for it.

There are easy remedies available in both the above examples and the solutions would not be difficult to implement.

In the case of the ACBC restructure it is not too late for the bishops to issue a full explanation, in clear language, of exactly what they have done and why they have done it. This would involve a detailed explanation of ACBC income and expenditure, preferably couched in a full analysis of the income and expenditure of the whole Australian church, and a complete explanation of the organisational changes, cuts and restructuring, made to the central secretariat, commissions and councils.

In the case of the selection of PC2020 delegates, when the announcements are made during February of the appointed delegates from each diocese they should be accompanied by a note explaining how many expressions of interest there were, how and why the particular choices were made and, if there was a selection panel to advise the bishop, who was on it.

Transparency should be essential in church affairs. The bishops should begin 2020 by turning over a new leaf.



John Warhurst is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University and Chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn. He has submitted an expression of interest in being a PC 2020 delegate from the Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn.

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