

Factions and ginger groups within the church

- [John Warhurst](#)
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Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, in the middle of his troubles within the Liberal Party, told the NSW State conference of his party that there were no factions among the Liberals.



St Patrick's Catholic Cathedral, Parramatta
Credit: Leelakajonkij / Getty

Knowing full well of the conservative-moderate split within the party and of the fractious

relationship within the party between Turnbull and Tony Abbott, the Liberal Party delegates fell about laughing. The laughter was derisory. Facts can't be papered over by sweet talk.

The same is true of the church in Australia today. This fact of life must be spoken about openly in the lead up to the Plenary Council assemblies. What is happening at the moment is that certain bishops are condemning members of the church renewal movement as pressure groups pushing an agenda, while ignoring the well-known fact that groups with other agendas are widespread within the church. Condemnation of the renewal movement is a clear attempt to shut down legitimate engagement and debate from some quarters while allowing jockeying, factional politics and agenda-pushing by other conservative groups, including certain bishops, certain Catholic media and other groups embedded in the hierarchical structure of the church.

My impression is that bishops prefer to deal with individuals. Catholics who organise themselves independently of official church structures to advance church renewal are frequently treated with suspicion by the hierarchy.

Trying to shut down the renewal movement is not the work of the Holy Spirit. If it continues it will make for a very lop-sided Plenary Council. No amount of prayer and discernment will overcome a stacked assembly.

The renewal movement is large and growing numerically and in regional diversity. It has engaged with the Plenary Council through submissions and public discussions from the very beginning. It has also tried, collectively and individually, to engage with bishops and other church leaders.

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Sometimes that engagement has been reciprocated. For instance, in September 2018, after the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) sought a meeting with the Permanent Committee of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) it was granted one by the President of the ACBC, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, accompanied by Lana Turvey-Collins of the PC2020 Facilitation Team. Of the four member ACCCR delegation the three interstate members flew to Melbourne at their own expense for what turned out to be a prayerful and serious interchange. ACCCR did not get what it wanted, including a woman co-chair of the Plenary Council, but it did get a lengthy hearing.

Presently elements of the renewal movement are attempting, without much success, to engage with the President of the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council, Archbishop Timothy Costelloe. This difficulty reflects the experience that renewal groups often have in attempting to engage with diocesan bishops, including several of the metropolitan archbishops. The correspondence is often fobbed off, sometimes courteously and professionally but sometimes brusquely, as if the groups had no right to exist, much less see their archbishop.

Such rejection is not universal and my own group, Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, in the Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn has always been granted regular access to its archbishop, vicar-general and other senior church officials. But the record in many other dioceses is different. The implicit or even explicit message is to conform or be frozen out.

The church in Australia is fragmented in various ways, often reflecting international fragmentation. The same is true of its leadership. Networking and pressure group tactics are rife. The range of views within the church is as broad as that within the political system and Australian society at large.

This means that views range from the church equivalent of News Corporation to the church equivalent of *The Guardian*, but with more of the former than the latter.

Whenever a randomly selected group of Catholics gathers there will be diversity of experience and belief so great that the gulf between individuals is massive.

When the selection is not random but selective, as in the case of the PC2020, then, while the gulf will remain, the imbalance towards conservatism will be embedded and the *sensus fidelium* as revealed in the submissions to the PC will not be adequately represented.

What is to be done? For a start we must be honest about the problem. Factions, ginger groups, networking and lobbying are commonplace in the church among bishops, clergy and religious leaders and are certainly not restricted to the laity, including the renewal movement. There is a battle for control of the agenda under way and no amount of papering over can conceal it.

Catholics at an individual level must strive to voice disagreement while treating each other respectfully and with an equal right to be heard, whatever their official status. Collectively events like the Plenary Council assemblies must be structured to make this more likely by eliminating hierarchy and encouraging diversity.



John Warhurst is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University, the Chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn and a delegate to the Plenary Council.

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