

# Raising women's voices

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06 October 2021

Annabel Crabb's ABC TV documentary series *Ms Represented* had us gasping, laughing and raging all at once. The series struck an achingly familiar chord as women from different political parties and generations voiced their common experience of sexism and misogyny in Australia's parliament, elucidating just how hard it is for women to have a voice at the table in Australian institutions of power.



The marginalisation of women doesn't only happen in politics. For too long in Australian churches, and the Catholic tradition in particular, the rich and diverse theological insight of women has been diminished, silenced or ignored.

Yet, unlike the Australian parliament, women make up [more than half](#) of all Australian Catholics. So why, in a Church that teaches the equal dignity of women and men, are women's voices still unheard?

Recent [research](#) has shown that the visibility of, and exposure to, women leaders of faith can play an important role in fostering self-esteem and self-efficacy in girls and young women, which carries on into adulthood. The emerging generation of women in the Catholic Church, however, see a structure, theology and way of being that is dominated and controlled by male voices. Women are [pushed to the margins](#), their voices unheard. They are not even allowed to preach.

The Catholic Church in Australia is currently gathering for the first assembly of its [Plenary Council](#). In the six Discernment Papers written for the Council, all but one make strong statements about the importance of changing church culture to give women a much greater role. The papers identify the gifts that women could bring to areas of governance, leadership and decision-making, as well as pastoral and liturgical ministry. Regrettably, neither *Continuing the Journey*, the Council's [instrumentum laboris](#) (working document), or the questions that make up the [agenda](#), reflect these strong statements.

Just two paragraphs in *Continuing the Journey* specifically address the contribution of women. Paragraph 55 states, 'the *perceived* underrepresentation of women in formal leadership and decision-making roles is a challenging issue for many in Australia' (our emphasis).

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Undeniably there is a large presence of women among those who do the groundwork in the Catholic Church, including consecrated religious, employees in Catholic organisations and people carrying out church-related acts of service and works.

Absolute authority, however, always rests in the hands of male bishops and priests. When it comes to leadership and decision-making, the inequality is not 'perceived,' it is stark.

The marginalisation of Catholic women sits in flagrant contrast to the radical reforms promised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) [Social Justice Sunday Statement](#) released in 2000, more than 20 years ago. The statement followed ground-breaking research on the participation and experiences of women in the Catholic Church commissioned by the ACBC and published in [Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus](#).

The breakthrough statement outlined several barriers for Catholic women, including a failure to address gender equality, the lack of women involved in decision-making and governance and the visibility of female role models. The ACBC made specific recommendations for reform.

Among them was a commitment to establish guidelines to assist with the interpretation and implementation of Canons 766 and 767, concerning lay preaching. Here, a potential door might have opened for women's voices to be heard. Yet, two decades later, few of the ACBC reforms from its *Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000* have been implemented and there is now no clear agenda for tackling the challenges raised.

In a speech given in Rome on [International Women's Day 2018](#), Mary McAleese claimed the 'Failure to include women as equals has deprived the Church of fresh and innovative discernment ... It has kept Christ out and bigotry in. It has left the Church flapping about awkwardly on one wing when God gave it two.'

Nowhere is the absence of the experiences, perspectives and voices of women more stated than during the Sunday celebration of Eucharist. Even though women are [well-represented in congregations](#), the liturgy is dominated by the leadership and theology of male clergy. The homily, as part of the liturgy, is reserved to a priest or deacon.

Bishop of Parramatta, Vincent Long [writes](#), 'The Church cannot have a better future if it does not listen to women's voices, wisdom and insight. So long as we continue to make women invisible and inferior in the Church's language, liturgy, theology and law, we impoverish ourselves.'

In Australia, each generation of Catholic women is [less likely](#) than the preceding one to attend Mass and participate in Church life. Unless the balance shifts, and we are open to the gifts, charisms and contributions of women as equal partners in all aspects of our Church's life, mission and evangelisation will continue to wither on the vine.

The lack of visibility and inclusion of women does not reflect a loss of faith or saliency. Globally Catholic women are joining together and speaking out regarding the equality and inclusion of women in the Church. In Germany, the grassroots movement [Maria 2.0](#) is calling for women's ordination, a gender equitable Church and a re-examination of the scandal of clerical abuse.

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The group [Voices of Faith](#) have created the [#sisterwhatdoyousay](#) campaign to celebrate and empower women in religious life and draw attention to their experiences of struggle within Church structures. In Australia, two groups with a long history of encouraging Christian

women, [WATAC](#) (Women in the Australian Church) and the [Grail in Australia](#) are attracting younger generations of Catholic women who are looking outside traditional ecclesial structures to find community and spaces where their voices are heard.

During *Ms Respresented*, when former Deputy Prime Minister Julie Bishop was asked about the difference it made to have other women in 'her line of sight' when they too were promoted to cabinet, Bishop replied, 'There was a sense that this is how it should be, there should be many more female voices around the table, exchanging views and ideas, a different life experience, different background, different perspective. It added to the richness of the debate.'

Many Christian denominations in Australia have long embraced the giftedness of women; women regularly preach with their faith communities each week. And many women feel a vocational call to preach. But for Catholic women who are disillusioned and frustrated with the inability of the institutional church to change, they must look outside the rigid ecclesiastical structures where women's voices can be heard. This includes the [Australian Women Preach](#) podcast, where a group of Catholic women from WATAC and the Grail provide an opportunity for women to have a voice and share their gifts.

Almost four years ago, the final report of the [Child Abuse Royal Commission](#) highlighted the marginalisation of women in the Catholic Church and made recommendations that church leaders review governance and management structures, and develop measures to increase women's standing and participation in the church. The Plenary Council presents the Catholic Church with another chance to listen and raise up women's voices, wisdom and insight.

Is the Catholic Church in Australian finally prepared to listen? Women are ready to claim their place at the table and are determined be heard.



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Patricia Gemmell is a semi-retired teacher of Latin, French and Italian, who in 2014 graduated with a Masters (Theology) from the University of Newcastle. She currently serves on the National Team of the Grail in Australia and is the coordinator of the Grail's International Spirituality Network.

Tracy and Patricia are part of the organising team for [Australian Women Preach](#), a podcast which celebrates the diverse talents of woman preachers in Australia, and is a project of [WATAC](#) (Women and the Australian Church) and the [Grail in Australia](#).

Main image: Girl looking up in front of a stained glass window. (Getty Images)