Concerned Catholics: Where to from here?
A response to the Royal Commission on Institutional Sexual Abuse from the Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese

Thursday 7pm - 7.30pm 27 April Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture ACCC, 15 Blackall St, Cnr. Kings Ave Barton.

I want to respond to Francis Sullivan’s rallying call for reform `Where to from here`?

I am going to start from my perspective of the here and now from my position within renewal movement. We are a broken Church. People and their families have been terribly damaged; our Church has lost credibility with its people; and the world with all its challenges risks, being deprived of Christ’s message of love and justice. Importantly we no longer have a practice of faith that is relevant to our children and grandchildren even though they would embrace Christ’s gospel message of love and justice.

In our own archdiocese there has been criminal behavior, disappointments, darkness, fear, shame, grief and loss: the child abuse and the mishandling of it; the collapsing of the Women’s Commission when expert witnesses at the Royal Commission are emphasizing the importance of participation of women; dismissive action by bishops about discussion of lay representation at 2014/2015 Synods; banning of letters to the editor in the Catholic Voice; questions of resignation, lack of a Diocesan Pastoral Council. All have caused pain and alienated many.

Watching the evidence of our bishops at the RC, with the exception of one or two like Bishop Vincent Long from Parramatta, was disheartening. It became clear that somehow our leaders despite their commitment and sincerity have not understood how the clerical culture blinds them. Most importantly their evidence did not demonstrate that they knew how to correct this clerical culture that is at the heart of our dysfunction.

Clericalism is like a disease in our Church and any renewal has to take the nature of clericalism into account. It emerges like a horrible disease. You don’t realise it is affecting you and it makes you fearful and weakens you as it gradually renders you dysfunctional. It is all pervasive and affects all of us in the system.

Comments like `once we get through the RC we will be alright`, display a complete misunderstanding of the gravity of our situation and they are symptomatic of clericalism.
The reality is our Church will never be the same. Those who experience loss know that. The loss and grief become part of you and impact on the way you think and act for the rest of your life.

This dysfunction in our Church can’t be dismissed, it is part of our historical record. It has happened on our watch. History will judge us harshly, on where we go to from here.

Clericalism is a disease generated by the particular structures and governance of our system and it has become a self-perpetuating destructive power. Recognising its insidious nature and examining how it works helps us to identify change.

A quick snap shot of clericalism in action shows us that all who have tried have experienced great difficulty in establishing authentic discussion with our bishops and often our efforts have been summarily dismissed. We have documents from bishops with quotes like ‘it’s beyond our a capacity to do that’; or ‘our hands are tied by the Vatican,’ or ‘we will get back to you on that’ and sometimes they don’t, or when they do, it is often a God Bless! statement that does not address the issues which we have gone to great pains to explain.

Our bishops seem powerless to act. I don’t think they intentionally want to shun us but it seems as though they do not know what else to do. They are bound by the obedience of clericalism. Any idea of reading the signs of the times is squeezed out.

Massimo Faggioli commenting on Pope Francis’ emphasis on re-building the Synodal system says that “under the guidance of previous Popes the Church developed an institutional sclerosis. It was marked by the inability not only to live synodally but also to believe in the very idea of a Church that can debate synodally.”

Such dismissive communication cuts off any participation of the laity in decision-making. It says ‘your views are not wanted or valued.’ Clericalism communicates in patriarchal/authoritative ways: ‘men to women’, ‘parents to children.’ The father has the authority, we can’t question and we must obey.

Authoritarian statements while not intentional, are messages ‘of control even if they are caring…. like a patriarchal husband speaking to his wife or an autocratic parent to their child, ‘I am looking after you, you just have to trust my judgement on this, I know what’s best for you, we have decided this is the best thing and that’s an end to it.

Except that we are not children! We are adult, experienced, thinking men, women, priests and religious who in many cases have taken responsibility for and had great commitment to living and developing an adult practice of faith, some of us a lot more than some bishops.
The clerical culture focuses on obedience that not only blinds us but it also immobilises us by creating a closed culture of fear and silence, stifling the independent thinking and freedom to speak out, that is essential to change it.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) seems to be a key body, but it certainly doesn’t function in the way one would expect! Requests and papers go into ACBC but nothing of significance comes out of it! So there is no effective mechanism for participation and change. This is a key governance issue that must to be addressed. The Church needs to develop channel of communication from the laity to the Vatican.

Where to from here?

It is clear that we can’t go back to the old ways. We have to develop new ways to move from silence and come out of the darkness into the light, like Christ’s healing of the blind man, in St John’s gospel. We need to start to restore trust and must develop an authentic & effective practice of faith especially for those who need to heal and those who have been alienated and importantly for our young people as they explore their relationship with Jesus Christ and develop their faith.

Our situation calls for radical root and branch change. Systematic change of this proportion can’t possibly be achieved unless we all work together. Quoting from a recent article in the Tablet by Jenny Sinclair "if we are to rebuild the broken body of our Church, our task is to step outside the echo chamber, to leave the comfort zone of like minded friends. All of us in our Church are “members one to another”. Rebuilding the broken body involves listening and humility ;it is not a matter of persuasion but of encounter, for it is only in meeting that transformation can take place. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul says we should tell each other the truth, because we all belong to each other in the same body". (Tablet 8 April p.5.)

So we must empty ourselves of the old ways with no more vying for status or divisive clinging to left and right views, but respectfully working together in an inclusive, mutually respectful and affirming partnership. It is in this process that we will, in Pope Francis’ words “rid ourselves of clericalism.”

We are blest to have Pope Francis, who is a Pope who can read the signs of the times. His words in Evangelii Gaudium and Amoris Laetitia together with his frequent prophetic statements, lead us into the light and give us the imprimatur to have the courage to speak out.

Courage is driven by conscience, and once you listen to your conscience it is much easier to respectfully speak out.

In his exhortations Pope Francis addresses all the issues necessary for the change that is required.

The exhortations call for:
• ridding our church of clericalism.
• increasing women’s participation in decision-making from the grass roots into the most senior positions in the Vatican.
• drawing on our catholic theology of equality based on baptism.
• encouraging the laity to take responsibility for their faith and to lead while simultaneously urging his bishops to listen to the laity
• exploring a new ecclesiology and models of practice.
• re-building and monitoring the Synodal tradition of our Catholic Church
• exploring compulsory celibacy and vireo probate options for ministry

He has freed us up for change

The exclusion of women and the laity continually arose as an issue during the Royal Commission hearings and expert witnesses claimed that such exclusion has been an integral factor in clericalism. It is a key issue of structural governance. Robert Fitzgerald suggested to our bishops that a way of proceeding to correct the culture of clericalism might be to establish a governance framework based on principles of gender balance, inclusiveness, transparency and accountability.

There can be no justice in a Church that not does not grant full equality to all its members. Full equality of women in the Catholic Church is consistent with the Catholic Church’s theology of equality. If more women were elected and appointed to senior positions not only in administrative professional positions, in which they are proving indispensable but also in the most senior positions in Vatican dicastries and other doctrinal and teaching commissions it would have an immediate impact on clericalism. It would improve flawed decision-making and start to correct the gender imbalance in our Church.

Dr. Trish Hindmarsh (WATAC) in our ACCCR letter to Archbishop Mark Coleridge during the RC hearings says “Scholars demonstrate that the clericalism prevailing in the Church even until now was formalised as late as the eleventh century.” This change is acknowledged and written about extensively by prominent historians and theologians including: Paul Collins, Garry Wills, Gary Macy and Edward Schillebeeckx. So the precedent for change has already been set in our Church. If our Church changed dramatically in the eleventh century, it can and must urgently change now.

Here in our Catholic community we can initiate reforms that will immediately impact on the structure and governance of our archdiocese which will enable the Church in Canberra/Goulburn to be guided by principles of inclusivity, transparency and accountability. So there are no barriers to the suggestions we have put except our destructive culture.

We would progress our reforms through exploring:
• New models for more effective lay participation new ways to bring Christ’s message of love and justice to the world.
• Effective vehicles for women’s participation in key decision-making, not just in professional positions but elected positions, in teaching and doctrinal governance in councils and commissions who decide policy and mission.

• Immediate establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council with a view to establishing lay leadership with elected representatives from parishes, religious communities and other ministerial organisations within the Archdiocese.

To do this we seek an agreement for a work program based on mutual partnership with our bishop, lay people and committed priests and religious to achieve a reform agenda.

We will provide Archbishop Prowse with feedback from this meeting and ask that he bring them to the attention of the bishops at the plenary session in Sydney in May.

The proposed initiatives by the Canberra/Goulburn Archdiocese will assist in preparation for the planned Rome Synod next year and the National Plenary Council in 2020 and could serve as a model for other archdioceses.

Concerned Catholics intend to hold another public meeting in late August to report back to participants on the ACBC’s response.

We have to rise out of the ashes of this horror, strengthened, to make space for Christ’s message of love and justice in this secular world where it is so contested but so desperately needed every minute of the day.

“We will do this through the grace of the Holy Spirit and in Trish Hindmarsh’s words “the love of our faith and the world we share”.

Marilyn Hatton
Catholics Speak Out CSO and Convenor, The Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal ACCCR.