“What is the good of drawing up, on paper, rules for good behaviour, if we know that, in fact, our greed, cowardice, ill temper, and self-conceit are going to prevent us from keeping them? I do not mean for a moment that we ought not to think, and think hard, about improvements to our social and economic system. What I do mean is that all the thinking will be mere moonshine unless we realise that nothing but the courage and unselfishness of individuals is ever going to make any system work properly. It is easy enough to remove the particular kinds of graft or bullying that go on under the present system; but as long as men are twisters or bullies they will find some new way of carrying on the same game under the new system. You cannot make men good by law, and without good men you cannot have a good society.”

C.S. Lewis ‘Mere Christianity’ (1952)

This quote, from one of the most popular writers and theologians of the early 20th century, highlights how systems and rules for engagement may come and go but underlying moral and cultural issues will always underpin enduring abuse and corruption. Why? Because people retain old toxic attitudes relating to abuse, privilege and entitlement and remain ‘twisters’ and ‘bullies’ – and other things. Revolutions and reforms may change the rules, but they don’t always change the culture. So most of the time, nothing ultimately changes.

Many organisational features of Catholicism echo the old Roman Imperial administrative model to the current day. Amongst other things, it was highly patriarchal. It minimised women’s role, largely excluding them from power structures and influence. Women may have been key witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection, but when politics was blended with faith with the adoption of Christianity as the State Religion of the Roman Empire in 380 AD, was it a case of the new religion simply ‘carrying on the old game under a new system?’

It doesn’t always have to be this way. Sometimes a community succeeds in truly creating something new by stepping outside the toxic patterns of an old system. An excellent example was at the 2013 Federal Election in the Electorate of Indi, in country Victoria. The ‘Voice for Indi’ campaign allowed the people of Indi to take ownership of the democratic process through involved citizen democracy, and in the process, to elect a new parliamentary representative, Cathy McGowan, and re-create the principles of representative democracy.

This wasn’t achieved by buying into the existing system and the same old worn out dysfunctional political rules which had led to the electorate being overlooked, disrespected and taken for granted. Nor by endorsing a candidate who was part of, or willing to be part of, that system.

‘Voice for Indi’ participants went back to basics, commencing with a program of open, honest dialogue to establish what exactly were the most important issues to Indi constituents, based on a culture of respectful information sharing. In other words, they created a process which in turn created a new culture; one based on respectful engagement – with a final democratic result which took care of itself. A process in which women played key roles.

These features of grassroots citizen engagement can be applied to other systems in need of root and branch reform, such as Catholic Church patriarchy, clericalism, child abuse, and centralisation of power. Pope Francis has examined some of these issues in documents such as ‘Evangelii Gaudium and ‘Letter to the People of God’.
As with the ‘Voice for Indi’ campaign, we, the ‘People of God’ need to drive Church change from the bottom up and the Church needs to go back to the basics of creating a new and renewed culture and community, underpinned by inner moral values, rather than ones which simply provide a means to continue ‘the same game under the new system’.

In the five years since his election, Pope Francis has laid out several defining principles or approaches that have come to characterise his pontificate. These include:

1. the church should be a church for the poor and humility should characterise all aspects of it and especially its structures. He has strongly criticised the Curia and is moving to reform it;
2. new approaches to evangelisation must be accompanied by thorough and lasting reform of the church’s organisation and pastoral approaches;
3. a culture of dialogue has characterised his approach to synods and other initiatives. Francis has effectively restored a freedom of dialogue and development of doctrine that his two immediate predecessors had removed in the years following Vatican II;
4. Francis is not afraid of open dialogue and discussion of issues. Seemingly he is not threatened by intellectual debate of key issues—he encourages it as a sign of a living church;
5. He has happily asked Bishop Conferences to make decisions on matters. He has urged bishops to “seek solutions better suited to each country’s culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs” (Amoris Laetitia) Examples are marriage and the family and eucharistic participation by those of other faiths;
6. Francis has been explicit in challenging bishops to be servants of the People of God. His favourite image of the church is of ‘a field hospital’. His model of church is not focused on hierarchy but of a People on a journey. This links directly to the outcomes of Vatican II. He has indicated that he is open to married clergy, and in response to a lack of priests to serve the pastoral needs of dioceses, he urges bishops to send “brave and bold proposals” to Rome;
7. Francis has been explicit in calling out clericalism, which he says “leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say ‘no’ to (sexual) abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism”. (Letter to People of God [LPG]):
8. Francis calls for a pastoral conversion of all aspects of the church. He wants, particularly, the People of the church to be actively involved in this conversion. His letter to the People of God urges the baptised to assert themselves so that their participation is real – it is as if he wants them to keep their bishops honest and grounded in gospel values;
9. In referring to sexual abuse, he also lists “the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics”. He goes on to urge that “no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening” and “to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated.” This requires all to “join forces in uprooting this culture of death”. (LPG);
10. “Every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need….it is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all members of God’s People”. (LPG)

Clearly Francis wants a reformed church with a new culture and new structures. His writings and actions invoke the theology, openness, documents and spirit of Vatican II, arguably updated to current times. For Francis the only credible response to the current crisis in the church is for the People of God to be front and centre of the thinking and process that is needed. Indeed, his call is not just for Catholics to be concerned, but active and assertive. He wants bishops to be brave. He has no fear – neither should we.

A resource paper prepared for Plenary Council consultative sessions conducted by Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn.