

Seems Francis is with the People

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Pope Francis recently wrote to all Catholics. The letter is remarkable for several reasons, partly because it was written at all. Addressed to the People of God, it was a letter to Catholic laity throughout the world, sent via the internet. In the past Popes have occasionally written to the Universal Church, but such statements were prefaced by a long list of hierarchical recipients, starting with Cardinals and Bishops and ending with mere laypeople. This was different. It was a case of 'cutting out the middlemen' and going directly to the ordinary Catholic.

Francis wrote about the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church, which just keeps getting bigger and bigger. As Australia's Royal Commission demonstrated, it takes forensic inquiries to tear down the secrecy and get to the truth.

It reads as if Francis has also had just about enough of the systemic and cultural nature of the offences and the pathetic responses from his delegated leaders - local bishops and cardinals. He calls out clericalism as leading directly to sexual abuse and its cover up. He is clearly in agreement with the Royal Commission's report that clericalism is a major cultural factor in the church's betrayal of trust. Francis sees it as a root cause, saying "clericalism ...supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today...to say 'no' to abuse is to say an emphatic 'no' to all forms of clericalism".

By way of explanation, clericalism is the perversion of priestly mission and humility into priestly and hierarchical power and exclusiveness. It is a toxic mix of attitudes, dispositions, behaviours and judgements that have come to characterise an entrenched male, celibate priestly class, distracted by perceived status rather than driven by real service. But it is not limited to clerics, a sizable minority of lay Catholics share such attitudes.

Francis believes "to say 'no' to abuse is to say an emphatic 'no' to clericalism". He insists that "to acknowledge the truth of what has happened...is not enough". He says that the response is a task "for all of us as the People of God" because without support from the bottom, "everything being done to uproot the culture of abuse in our communities will not be successful in generating the necessary dynamics for sound and realistic change". This is not just a profound shift in ecclesiology, it is also sound culture change management. I doubt a Pope has ever before fused such principles.

But Francis does more than point to a significant cause and insist it be removed. He is clearly marshalling allies and he sees the ordinary catholic as strategically important to his cause. "It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God's People", adding "every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need". Indeed, he says that unless the (lay) people of the church engage in this effort, it will not succeed.

The Pope's letter is itself an act of de-clericalisation and his comments are something of a cry for help. He correctly acknowledges that cultural change on the scale required won't happen simply by decrees from the top. He also seems to be implying that he needs the support of the people to light a fire that will put heat on all church leaders, from priests to bishops and cardinals.

The timing of his message has special significance for Australian Catholics. Australia's bishops have called a Plenary Council for 2020 to address the state of the church in this country, post the Royal Commission. Lay Catholics are currently arguing vigorously for proper representation at this forum, the powers, processes and composition of which are still undefined. There is justifiable scepticism that it will be a sanitised affair with few real outcomes. Certainly; the official process of 'listening', which purports to be collecting the views of the Catholic community only adds to people's justifiable doubts.

But the letter from Francis greatly empowers Australia's Catholics to use their influence and puts heat on the bishops to allow the voices and wisdom of Australian Catholics to be heard seriously. According to Francis this must occur to achieve the "the necessary dynamics for sound and realistic change". The questions left hanging therefore are: Do the Australian bishops want real change? and Are the bishops on board with the Francis agenda?

Several groups around the country are advocating for serious change. Canberra's Concerned Catholics is part of this movement. But after reading Francis' letter that title seems a little timid. Francis wants active and assertive Catholics.

Those Australian Catholics involved in such a cause have a powerful two-fold motivation, one as Catholics another as Australians. They seek reform of the church in an updated spirit of Vatican II, and they carry an obligation as Australians to ensure that sex abuse never recurs to damage Australian society and its people. The recommendations of the Royal Commission are effectively a statement of requirements on behalf of the Australian community, insisting that real change occur in the church. The active Catholic groups pursuing reform, therefore, are effectively agents for all Australians to achieve those outcomes.

Francis is calling for a church more in line with the theology and ecclesial direction of Vatican II. He wants significant change. In his words he wants 'a church with the smell of the sheep'. He is seeking allies in "solidarity" with ordinary Catholics in Australia and elsewhere. All Australians have a vested interest in this cause.

Concerned Catholics of Canberra Goulburn is holding an open meeting to seek input for a submission to the Plenary Council, at 7.30pm on Thursday 29 November, at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Barton.