

CONCERNED CATHOLICS CANBERRA GOULBURN

SUBMISSION 2020 PLENARY COUNCIL

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A Question #1 of Plenary Council submission format:

What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?

Introduction and Executive Summary

The findings of the Royal Commission revealed a Catholic Church in Australia that has been functioning for years in ways that are incompatible with Christ's teachings. Catholics are rightfully ashamed and disgusted by the behaviours revealed and the systematic efforts of church leaders to deny truth and protect offenders. The wider Australian community is also appalled and expects prompt remedial action and the removal of systemic and endemic factors.

For many Catholics the causal factors leading to this disaster have been apparent for some time in the clericalist, exclusivist and introverted ecclesiology that the church has overlaid on the open reform agenda that emerged from Vatican II. Instead of pursuing reforms in the spirit of the Council to make the church relevant in the modern world, the church has become increasingly judgemental, intolerant, exclusive and, sadly, irrelevant to contemporary women and men. In Australia the church has become a self-absorbed and fearful church – resorting to reassuring itself and finding comfort internally in the formulations of habit and history, unable to deal with the world around it as it is.

Against this background, Australian Catholics are compelled to be 'active and assertive', as indeed they have been encouraged by Pope Francis. In simple terms many of the Australian church's hierarchy have failed themselves, their people and the church. They have trashed the trust that people once had in them. In this situation it is essential that the People of God in Australia assert themselves and make clear to the Australian bishops they no longer tolerate such failures of leadership. This is what 'God is asking of us in Australia at this time'. It is in this spirit that a large group of Concerned Catholics in Canberra has prayed, informed themselves, reflected, discussed and discerned a series of questions which the Australian church must address comprehensively and respond to urgently.

The questions which must be addressed and answered are:

How does the Catholic Church in Australia become and continue to be:

- a *transparent* church?
- an *accountable* church?
- a *non-clericalist* church?
- a properly *inclusive* church?
- a truly *humble* church?

In its current status the Australian Catholic Church is 'not fit for purpose'. The characteristics of **transparency, accountability, non-clericalism, inclusiveness and humility** are imperatives dictated by the recommendations of the Royal Commission, the theology and ecclesiology of Pope Francis and the deeply held faith and good sense of the Australian Catholic community. They are also faithful to Gospel values. They provide a compelling agenda that must be addressed honestly for the church in Australia to be relevant and have any coherent sense of what it is offering the Australian community.

The attached document addresses each of these questions and provides a considered and realistic ‘initial’ agenda for rescuing the church in Australia. Much of this agenda is within the authority of the Australian bishops. Other elements will require determined and creative advocacy with Rome. Ongoing adaptation, including reform, has always been an essential part of the church’s mission. In the current circumstances the status quo is not an option.

B Question #2 of Plenary Council submission format:

What questions do you have about the future of the Church for the Plenary Council to consider in 2020?

1. How does the Catholic Church in Australia become and continue to be a ***transparent*** church?
2. How does the Catholic Church in Australia become and continue to be an ***accountable*** church?
3. How does the Catholic Church in Australia become and continue to be a ***non-clericalist*** church?
4. How does the Catholic Church in Australia become and continue to be a properly ***inclusive*** church?
5. How does the Catholic Church in Australia become and continue to be a truly ***humble*** church?

All five questions intersect, and the attached program of initiatives reinforce each other. It is critical that the bishops and the Plenary Council acknowledge and respond to the fact that neither the Catholic community, nor the wider Australian community, will tolerate any of these issues being fudged or responded to in half measures. It is for this reason that the attached document identifies a series of accountabilities that are seen by the Catholic community and the wider Australian community as indicators of good faith. The cost of not being sensitive to and meeting these measures will be extremely damaging and destructive to the church in Australia. It would also continue to prevent true engagement with those people who most need the support and assistance that the church is called upon to offer.

C Please share a story of your experiences of your faith or the church to give context to your responses to Q1 and Q2:

This submission and its attached program of initiatives is an expression of the deep concern and determination of the Catholic Community to address the learnings from the sexual abuse crisis and to start a reform process within the church that enables it to be relevant to Australia and the world in the second decade of the 21st century and beyond. As the bishops have proposed a Plenary Council to consider the future of the church in Australia, that Council must be the vehicle for widespread and meaningful engagement of Australian Catholics. Pope Francis has exhorted the People of God to be active and assertive and fully engaged with local bishops in addressing matters arising from the sexual abuse crisis and in ridding the church of the scourge of clericalism.

While the Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn embarked on a process of consultation with the Catholic community, a widespread view emerged that the process was deficient and the outcomes did not do justice to the wisdom of the People of God of the Canberra-Goulburn region. Constructive comment and offers of help were ignored. Requests were made to the Concerned Catholics

organisation that a more professional process be undertaken. In responding, Concerned Catholics reached out to the expertise and professional skills of members and others who could contribute insight and assistance.

As a first step Concerned Catholics commissioned a series of six short background papers to provide an informed context in which group discussions could proceed. The background papers addressed the following:

1. Demographics of the Australian Catholic Church [pdf](#);
2. Canon Law Issues [pdf](#);
3. Understanding Vatican II [pdf](#);
4. Recommendations of the Royal Commission relating to the Catholic Church [pdf](#);
5. Changing church culture and perspectives of Pope Francis [pdf](#); and
6. Women, leadership and church [pdf](#).

These papers were posted on the Concerned Catholics website. Interested Catholics were urged to read the papers in advance of a public meeting on 29 November 2018. More than 100 people attended this meeting. Its purpose was to establish a *Meaningful Context for a form of Perceptive Discernment*, through group discussions. This meeting was opened with a hymn invoking the Holy Spirit's guidance and was accompanied by regular pause points at which Sister Clare Condon drew the meeting back to the original objective of the process, namely listening to others and their thoughts on what the church needs for it to be effective in its mission in today's Australia. We captured and distilled insights from that process to fashion this submission.

This output, therefore, is a verified expression of the views of many Catholics in the Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese, drawn together in prayerful reflection and discernment. It is true to the yearnings of many Catholics and it is an earnest statement on their behalf.

Significant Area of Focus # 1

A Transparent Church

Context

The sexual abuse scandal has highlighted the church's appalling lack of open and transparent governance, administration and structures – a situation worsened by persistent attempts of church leaders to cloak procedures and issues management in obscurity and secrecy. The Royal Commission made a clear recommendation that governance and management arrangements across all aspects of the church be reviewed to make them open and transparent. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has already accepted this recommendation in principle, but so far little implementation progress is evident. Addressing this issue fully and thoroughly is critical to the credibility of the church in the Australian community and the confidence of its adherents in the leadership and sincerity of the bishops.

Necessary Action

Consistent with the principle of subsidiarity, the church needs to become a responsible and mature entity that is committed to and promptly implements:

- the development of open, participative processes and structures that recognise the wealth of skills and expertise in the Catholic community (women and men as representative of the broader Australian community); and
- effectively harnesses the contributions lay participants can make to properly functioning church structures and shared mission approaches.

There must be genuine transparency of both processes and structures.

A range of initiatives can be implemented immediately, such as mandating that each diocese and parish has a broadly representative Pastoral Council. Others will require the reform of canon law and necessary cultural change (see items below), however these are not a reason for delaying action. Early and on-going progress on such reforms is critical as the Catholic community has an understandable expectation of reform in this area, and it is seen as an early indicator of the good faith of the bishops and their capacity to respond appropriately to the church's recent sad history.

The need for transparency applies across the board, including the appointment of bishops and parish priests. The Catholic community is well educated and committed. As Australians we participate keenly in the management of our civic affairs at all levels of government and see no reasons why that approach cannot apply to the governance of our church. Any church seriously seeking to engage its people in its mission would welcome such approaches and provide suitable ways for diocesan and parish representatives to be consulted meaningfully in the appointment of bishops and priests to their communities.

Indicative Accountabilities

1. A key indicator of good faith in this respect will be provided by the arrangements determined for the Plenary Council itself and the way they are determined. The need for open consultation and transparency is immediate. It cannot be fobbed off or fudged. Procedural arrangements must be clearly stated, applied and reviewed to achieve on-going improvement and compliance. There must be lay women's and men's representation as Co-Chairs of the Plenary Council overall and its committees.

2. The review of church-wide structures and management, arising from the Royal Commission recommendations, must be conducted openly and independently, with opportunities for lay Catholic input and engagement. The outcomes of the review should be implemented and followed-up in truly consultative ways that make it clear to the Catholic community that they are being genuinely welcomed into the governance processes of the church without lingering resistance or suspicion from the hierarchy or parish officials.

Significant Area of Focus # 2

An accountable church

Context

The Royal Commission revealed the real failure of the church to be responsible and accountable, both to God and ‘to Caesar’. The failure of the leadership of the Australian church and its purported structures and processes appalled and offended Australian Catholics. In many respects the church was revealed as an organisation ‘not fit for purpose’ in modern Australia. It is imperative that the church reform itself in this area. Australian Catholics carry a dual burden to ensure that their church addresses these issues and can once again be respected in the Australian community.

Necessary Action

Responsibility and accountability are linked concepts in 21st century best practice governance. So also are the established principles of the ‘separation of powers’ and the need for appropriate ‘checks and balances’. There is a clear need for a thorough reform of church governance to simplify, update and amend structures and procedures so that they are acceptable to the expectations of its membership and civil society in the 21st century. The task ranges from reforms that are within the existing authority of bishops and parish priests to a comprehensive reform and updating of canon law.

Canon law reform would involve changes that respond to failings identified by the Royal Commission and also initiatives that should be taken out of respect for the laity of the church, the educated skills they can contribute and, most importantly, the removal of gender exclusion and clerical exclusivity that permeates many of the canon law statutes. A large number of canons (including Canons: 375, 391, 460, 461, 463, 468, 469, 470, 473, 474, 492, 494, 495, 511ff, 515, 517, 519, 532, 536, 537, 230, 129, and 1024 [relating to exclusion of women]), are in urgent need of reform. Other canons also require fundamental reform, including those pertaining to recommendations of the Royal Commission relating to the ‘pontifical secret’, the statute of limitations for canonical trials for child sexual abuse, the ‘imputability’ test of Canon 1321, and the absence of a real zero tolerance approach in Canons 1341 and 697.

It is critical that the Australian bishops pursue these legislative reforms actively with Vatican authorities . The Australian church has the opportunity , learning from the forensic work of the Royal Commission, to take a leading role in a universal church reform process. Australian Catholics, on behalf of the Australian people, expect nothing less.

Indicative Accountabilities

1. The Australian bishops have stated that such reforms of canon law have been ‘referred to Rome’. However, this is inadequate and suggests there is little sense of commitment or ownership of such reform proposals. For the Australian church to have any credibility with its own people and the wider community, it must pursue these matters assiduously and be seen to be doing so.
2. Australian Catholics expect there to be regular reports to the Catholic community and the wider community on progress with those matters relating to accountability reforms that are within the current powers of the Australian hierarchy and church authorities and on the steps being taken to prosecute the wider reform of canon law with the Vatican.

Significant Area of Focus # 3

A non-clericalist church

Context

The Royal Commission shone a searing independent searchlight on the church and revealed that clericalism was a major contributing factor in the sexual abuse scandal. Clericalism is a 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.

Clericalism has become a prevailing characteristic of church culture and it is often the attitudes of lay groups that encourage and sustain it.

Pope Francis has called for “all forms of clericalism” to be removed from the church. For many Australian Catholics it has been evident for some time that clericalism is a corrosive force, preventing the church from engaging meaningfully with people in a 21st century world. Removing clericalism from the structure and culture of the church must be a key agenda item for the Plenary Council. Clericalism needs to be rebutted at structural, functional and cultural levels across the church.

Necessary Action

All of the baptised share in the priesthood of Christ. The full meaning of that statement needs to be explored in an honest and sincere manner. We need to ‘break open’ the priesthood. This does not just involve distributing more widely roles that have come to be amalgamated into just one persona. It goes beyond that to a more fundamental review, that looks for enablers rather than being focussed on limitations and exclusions. The church in Australia needs priests, rooted in their communities, servants of the wider People of God and representatives of local communities of faith. New models of priesthood would involve optional celibacy, married men and women, respected community members to preach and celebrate Eucharist, and engagements for priesthood that are for specific time-limited periods.

The church needs to empower the many vocations that are in the Catholic community, but presently prevented by restrictive rules and exclusions. Instead of ‘poaching’ priests from overseas, the Australian church should revise its selfish and misguided missionary focus, and instead work creatively with those believers in its own communities who are prepared to serve and best understand Australian communities.

The current training and education of priests, particularly diocesan priests, is inadequate but also oriented towards emphasising separateness and exclusiveness. Pope Francis wants priests with the ‘smell of the sheep’. The Australian Catholic community wants priests who live the meaning and wonder of the Incarnation in today’s world, a first requirement of which is that the persons themselves understand and can relate to realities of life in that world. There is an urgent need to support and provide on-going professional development for the current cadre of diocesan priests, whose welfare has been neglected and are often left feeling under-valued and abused by the church itself.

The cultural effort required to re-educate and prepare both laity and priests (including bishops) for the removal of clericalism is vast and will take time. However, key ‘lighthouse’ statements of commitment and initiatives must be made to demonstrate to those in the church and the wider

community that the intent is firm and irrevocable. In many cases reform will require changes to canon law, but there are practical steps that can be taken at the local diocese and parish levels, within the current ecclesial statutes.

Indicative Accountabilities

1. Bishops will need to engage openly and constructively with the clergy and lay communities in their diocese to develop reform agendas and determine the nature of development and re-learning that is required to achieve serious cultural change. They should ensure that removing clericalism is a standing item on the agenda of every Catholic organisation, administrative unit and functional committee.
2. Australian bishops must state clearly and unequivocally their acceptance of the Pope's agenda in this area and their commitment to implement the relevant recommendations of the Royal Commission. Updated statements of progress should be made openly and accountably on a six-monthly basis. This will include the effort and progress made to prosecute the reform agenda in Rome and the dicasteries of the Curia.
3. Australian bishops should initiate an independent review of seminary administration and training, to ensure that Australian priests possess the skills, empathy and spirituality to minister effectively to the Australian community in the 21st century. Such a review would have a good cross-section of lay involvement that ensures the People of God are intimately involved in the formation of those who will minister to them.

Significant Area of Focus # 4

An Inclusive Church

Context

To be an inclusive church is to be a church that is relevant in the modern world. For too long the church has progressively focussed on its ‘rules’ for salvation. In effect those ‘rules’ have judged and defined lots of people, members of the church and others, into categories of the marginalised – effectively excluded from participation in the church and made unwelcomed by it. But the Gospels teach that it is for God to judge and the church to minister. The learnings from the Royal Commission highlight the cost of the church’s failure to effectively recognise and use the talents and faith contributions of women, who comprise more than 50% of its congregations.

The attitudes of exclusion and exclusivity are therefore wrong as an ecclesial principle and radically out of step with enlightened contemporary governance and social values. The church and all involved with it, need to embrace diversity, to manifest their own Incarnation by meeting humankind as and where they are in their lives and faith journeys. In this there is an obvious fusion between true Gospel values and the need to be relevant to all contemporary women, men and children.

Necessary Action

Within the church there is an overwhelming need to address urgently its relationship with women. Our theology is a theology of equality. There can be no justice in a church that does not treat all its members as equal. Saint Paul says: “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians 3.28*). This will require bold measures by the Pope and the bishops, flowing on through all aspect of the church’s mission and its faith and organisational structures. This will need to be reinforced and supplemented by significant cultural change throughout the Vatican, dioceses and parishes. Resistance to such initiatives is to be expected, however it is important that Australian (and other) bishops realise that Plenary Council consideration of this question must be transparent, robust and constructive.

With plans for the Plenary Council well advanced, the Australian church is uniquely placed to influence episcopal leaders of other national churches and indeed the Pope, when attending the special meeting of national church leaders in Rome in February 2019. There are bold initiatives that can and should be taken within existing canon law and other statutes. Examples are:

- inclusion of lay women and men in deliberative decision-making;
- re-instatement of women to the ordained diaconate;
- appointment of women as cardinals; and
- the appointment of women to head Vatican dicasteries and to be part of the Pope’s C9 consultative group.

Each of these initiatives would be a profound statement of goodwill and intent to proceed with meaningful reforms. The episcopal leaders of Australia should urge the Pope to take such decisive actions.

Not only should the church listen to the concerns of the marginalised, it must welcome them as full members of the church community, whose contributions are valued and sought. The Australian church needs to model an approach that ‘takes the church to the marginalised’. This goes beyond traditional ‘outreach’ to embrace a form of meeting the marginalised where they are in social, geographic and faith terms. Such a mission approach links directly to the initiatives outlined earlier

in relation to the sense of profound and radical service that is both the appeal and the power of an incarnational priesthood.

There is a strong reservoir of spirituality in the Australian nation, one tributary of which is the deeply spiritual beliefs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the longest surviving continuous culture on the earth, and their profound connection with the land. It is incongruous and unacceptable on many levels that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain the most marginalised of all in Australia. There is scope for the church to build a theology that draws on both indigenous and Catholic beliefs, that would have great power and meaning for all Australians. This will require the church to walk humbly with our God and with our indigenous people.

Such an approach is necessary with all groups who feel excluded and marginalised by the church. This includes those whose marriages have failed, the divorced and LGBTIQ people. The church needs to be humble such that it does not itself define those who are marginalised, but listens and responds, in non-judging ways, to those whose own perception of marginalisation is their own reality.

Indicative Accountabilities

1. A clear statement of intent and an agenda of reform are needed from the Australian bishops in relation to the church's attitudes to and treatment of women. This would need to include functional and cultural initiatives, as well as commitments to pursue the removal of canon law and other limitations and exclusions on the roles of women in the church.
2. The Australian people, Catholics especially, are looking to the bishops to respond definitively and remove the structural limitations and cultural prejudices against women and other marginalised groups. This is an area that touches a deep wellspring of national identity – the ‘fair-go’ and egalitarian emphasis in our national life. For that reason, it is a touchstone for assessing the relevance of the church in the broader community and the perceived goodwill (or otherwise) of church leadership in rectifying behaviours and attitudes that are broadly offensive to our national mores. Action in this area of reform also offers the potential for the church and its leadership to regain a measure of respect and recognition in the broader Australian community. All that is required is that the church do the right thing and the Australian thing.

Significant Area of Focus # 5

A Humble Church

Context

In the midst of all that confronts the church at these times, an assured approach is to go back to what is its essential and basic task: to bring to the world the good news of Jesus Christ, our God made incarnate as the carpenter of Nazareth.

This must transcend all the accretions and trappings of status, power and privilege that the church has acquired over the years. They simply detract from the basic message, its relevance in today's world and the capacity of ordinary people to receive that message.

The church needs to look at itself and ask if much of its life, its structures and missionary approach have become inhibitors rather than enablers. Things that inhibit the church from taking its message of God's love to the people, need to be cast aside and replaced by those that enable and empower the meeting of God and humankind.

The church doesn't have to have an answer for everything. Our mission is faith and that involves living creatively with uncertainty and doubt, of reaching out and longing. It is not about finding a protected cocoon where we wrap ourselves in certainty.

Humanity is life lived searching. As a church we need to be and be seen to "walk humbly with our God".

Necessary Action

The Catholic church in Australia needs to be relevant and respected in its time and place. We have lost much of that respect in recent years, and perhaps we need to grow towards a more mature sense of what respect is based on. In its rituals, liturgy and general functioning, the church needs to dispense with the trappings of mediaeval times, in terms of language, robing and attitudes.

Our national culture is inherently suspicious and cynical of such affectations. This links very much with initiatives outlined above regarding removing clericalism and being inclusive.

In reviewing the many aspects of its activities and mission, the church needs to ask itself, at every turn: Is what we are doing and the way we are doing it, enabling us to spread the Gospel of Jesus?

This needs to apply to the Curia, to the hierarchy, to reviews of canon law, and right through to planning done by local parish pastoral councils.

A more humble, searching and questioning church will present a more mature and open, and less judgemental offering to adult Catholics and those outside of the church who are embarking on their own faith journeys.

Young people, who are largely turned off the church in response to such negativities, will similarly be more likely to consider the church's message.

Indicative Accountabilities

1. The Australian Catholic Church should undertake independent in-depth research of the reasons for the decline in its members, noting that we are now into the third generation of ‘raised Catholics’ who have chosen to walk away from the church. A willingness to explore the real reasons and a preparedness to hear the message and respond with appropriate actions, will be a critical indicator to not only the largely disillusioned Catholic community but the wider Australian community.
2. A church that truly does “walk humbly with our God” and is searching and non-judgemental will win respect and support from not just the marginalised and aggrieved but also mainstream Catholics. It will be a tangible indicator that the church has again ‘discovered’ the wonder of the Incarnation.