

## **Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn**

### **Opinion**

#### **Canberra Catholics lay out church reform agenda**

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Inclusive, transparent, accountable, non-clericalist and humble – characteristics not usually associated with the Catholic church, but ones the church must adopt. That is the view of a large group of Canberra Catholics in a submission to the church's Plenary Council being organised in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis.

In the aftermath of the Royal Commission report, Catholics are confronting the reality that much of the behaviour and functioning of their church is not fit for purpose, and worse still, is contrary to gospel values. Catholics, rightfully, have been ashamed and disgusted by the efforts of church leaders who support a system that entrenches clericalism, denies truth and protects offenders. Accordingly, the submission by Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn makes clear to the bishops that the people of the church in Australia will no longer tolerate such failures of leadership. Change can and must happen and the document outlines how.

In the wake of the sexual abuse scandal, the Australian bishops have invited submissions to shape the agenda for formal sessions of a Plenary Council to address the future of the church in Australia, to be held in 2020 and 2021. Its focus will be on governance, rather than doctrine. Catholics have a right to be wary about the process, which is slow and tedious, hardly reflecting the gravity of the situation.

A Plenary Council does at least acknowledge the existence of the laity and legitimise their involvement, albeit in a limited, highly structured fashion. Canon law dictates that ultimate decision-making is restricted to the bishops, however they are being urged to show good faith and demonstrate that the views of the people will be taken seriously. While efforts continue to free up the rules for lay participation and despite other reservations, it is a start – a source of hope. As Australian Catholics become increasingly active and assertive, they are determined to ensure their voices are heard, real issues are confronted, and that meaningful change follows.

The Canberra Catholics road map for the Council is constructive and creative. Part of its impact is that it emerged from a self-generated broad consultative process undertaken by the Concerned Catholics group, after frustrations were expressed with an archdiocesan endorsed process, that seemed geared towards gathering platitudes and general aspirations. In the face of a compromised official process, the Canberra group got themselves organised to produce six background papers that gave the 100 participants an up-to-date primer on the situation facing the church in Australia and then proceeded to have discussion groups examine a range of topics in detail. The output of those discussions became input to the submission. It therefore represents a thoughtful and earnest, indeed prayerful, expression of the wisdom in the Australian Catholic community.

Determining the five key areas for focus and reform was in a sense the easy part. Identifying an appropriate program of action and reform was more challenging. The five key areas for reform flow directly from recommendations of the Royal Commission in relation to being transparent, accountable, inclusive and non-clericalist. They also flow from statements of Pope Francis who in

recent times has made bold calls for the ending of clericalism and the need for a humble and inclusive church. They are unremarkable in that, on reflection, they are blindingly obvious.

Framing a program for action that can be taken within existing episcopal authority, the submission highlights much that the bishops can do without needing approval from Rome. It points to how the church can begin to implement change to its attitudes and treatment of women, and how it can take decisive steps against clericalism. It also points to how the Australian church can influence the Pope, the Vatican and the wider church.

To date the Australian bishops have appeared largely dumbstruck on the the realities of the church's failures. Only one or two have had the courage to publicly call for serious change or the faith to articulate a direction for change. The Concerned Catholics' submission gives them ample food for thought and a road map to sustain them. But the Canberra submission is just one of many that are being finalised in advance of the lodgement deadline of 6 March. The Plenary Council itself is just the beginning.

In both its content and the manner of its preparation the Canberra submission is realistic and respectful. It showcases the best of informed Catholic judgement and wisdom. In seeking a way forward for the church, they have looked hard and found resonances in the values of the gospel, the words of Pope Francis, and the good common-sense of the Australian people. Pope Francis wants "active and assertive" lay Catholics and his stewards, the Australian bishops, should welcome their ideas.

*Terry Fewtrell was involved in the Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn consultative process and submission preparation. The submission and background papers are available on-line at <https://www.concernedcatholicscanberra.org/cc-draft-submission/>*