

Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform

Convocation of Catholics

5 May 2021

Catholicism “must grow up”, reform leader tells big Australian audience
Catholics want a reformed Church

Catholic reform leader, Sr Joan Chittister OSB, has boosted the calls for change in the Australian Catholic church in an inspiring address to a 3,000-strong audience.

Sr Joan, an American Benedictine writer and spiritual leader drew an enthusiastic response for her message of lay empowerment and spiritual renewal in the first of three Convocations organised by the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform.

Sr Joan called for lay Catholics to be treated “as equals, as seekers, as spiritual adults. Old styles of worship, old criteria of piety, old ways of relating to the world . . . good as all of them may once have been . . . cannot build for us a new Jerusalem in this place in this time when the forces of history face us with new challenges ...”.

She was dismissive of the Church’s unequal treatment of women, referring to the “equality of women as human beings”, querying why there should not be women deacons, women priests, and women cardinals. She observed that in a world that suppresses its women, the Church “needs the presence of the other half of the human race”.

Catholicism “must grow up”, she said, “beyond the parochial to the global, beyond one system and one tradition, to a broader way of looking at life and its moral, spiritual, ethical frameworks”.

For almost 50 years Catholics seeking reform have been trying to scale the mountain of renewal together, to re-evaluate church life, re-examine liturgy, theological givens and parish organisation. Ignored and repulsed, more and more have left the pews and the clerical politics to rediscover our God in other places and ways.

The convocation Sr Joan addressed was a cross-church collaboration supported by Catholic Religious Australia and Garratt Publishing.

Andrea Dean, co-convenor of the reform Coalition (ACCCR) and chair of the convocation, described the event as a call by lay Catholics for church authorities to listen to their voices in the context of the forthcoming first meeting of the historic Plenary Council.

Dean said: “The future of the church in Australia needs a new model because the old model is broken. Lay Catholics must be allowed co-responsibility in the new church, alongside clerical leaders.”

In a greeting to the convocation, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, President of the Australian Catholics Bishops Conference, called for all Catholics to rise above politics and to receive the influence of the Holy Spirit during the Plenary Council. He recognised Sr Joan as an echo of St Benedict and urged Catholics in the spirit of Benedict to “Listen, listen and attend with the ears of the heart”.

Sr Joan stressed a number of spiritual challenges for Catholic Church renewal, equality for women and minorities, and inclusion.

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Sr Joan said a prophetic church cared only for the needs of the poor, the outcast and the powerless. Big buildings and new churches would not save an institution that “fails to use its corporate power to confront the corporate powers of the world because the benefactors won’t like it, or the bishops don’t want publicity, or the past won’t approve, or worse, because the parishoners themselves will be upset by it”.

Sr Joan observed, “The old church with its parochial provincialism, is long dead”.

Nonetheless, her concluding message was one of hope: “My hope has never been higher. We must be mountain-climbing people.” People will lead and leaders will follow. She urged all present to be the “carriers of the new age” and hoped for an “open, honest and heavenly Plenary Council”.

‘The Church is in embers. You can't cook for too long on embers. We are the baptised body of the church. You (the bishops) are running it, but you don't own it.’

This Convocation was the first of three Convocations of Catholics organised by ACCCR and its partners during 2021.

Peter Johnstone, co-convenor of the reform Coalition called for the movement for church reform to grow in the lead up to the October 2021 meeting of the Plenary Council.

Johnstone invited all church leaders and Plenary Council members to listen to the voice of the People of God guided by the Holy Spirit, as stressed by both Archbishop Coleridge and Sr Joan.

“Let us journey together with self-confidence and humility,” Johnstone said, “as we travel the long and challenging path to church renewal”.

Everyone is invited to the open and free Second Convocation on 26 August 2021.
Further information at accr.com.au

Each ACCCR member group has its own focus and history; all are united in the call for renewal in the Church. The role of ACCCR, established in 2012, is to foster collaboration and support among its member groups and to disseminate messages of hope and opportunity.

Contacts Peter Johnstone, Co-convenor, ACCCR – Ph: 0419 307 566
 Andrea Dean, Co-convenor, ACCCR – Ph: 0487 388 873
 Mark Metherell, media relations – Ph: 0417 603 697