

## **BOOK LAUNCH**

### ***Recovering the 'True Church': Challenges for Australian Catholicism Beyond the Plenary Council* by Paul Collins**

**Thursday 21 April  
Holy Trinity Parish Centre, Curtin ACT**

**Response: Joan Warhurst**

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#### **A discussion paper**

For many years I knew Paul Collins as the mellifluous voice of the ABC's Religion and Ethics Report. A Catholic and a former MSC priest Paul is a highly respected figure in religious circles as a theologian and historian.

I too have a connection to the MSCs, though given my gender it is clearly not as a former priest like Paul. My daughter went to Daramalan College, which is one of 4 schools in Australia run by the MSC's. For some years I was a member of the Daramalan College board and then later an inaugural member of the MSC Members Education Council, set up to ensure the MSC charism remained strong in the schools as the MSC's themselves declined in numbers. The MSC I worked often used to say "it is not that young people have left the church but the church has left young people."

I first met Paul - and Marilyn - through what came to be called The Jesuit Discussion Group, a group of concerned Catholic's who met monthly at the invitation of Fr Frank Brennan, at Xavier House in Yarralumla, (sometimes referred to as the Jesuit Embassy). We met to discuss issues facing the Catholic Church. We found we were not short of topics.

The genesis of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn (CCCG) began with this group, concerned about a number of governance, cultural and structural issues arising from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Both Paul and I are founding members of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn.

The announcement by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) that there would be a Plenary Council held in Australia to address, amongst other things, the recommendations of the Royal Commission, was initially seen as a cause for hope and renewal by some members of CCCG but there was also a fair degree of cynicism by others, Paul among them.

Those of us who were new to this attempt to reform the church had no idea at that time how draining it would be to meet constant resistance from the Church hierarchy. Others like Paul, who has a long history of involvement in reform groups already knew this and warned us.

After five years now of putting all our resources into trying, through the Plenary Process, to make the Church in Australia face up to the need to become an inclusive, welcoming, transparent and accountable institution, much of the energy and some of the optimism is fading - and one person at least could be forgiven for saying "I told you so".

Paul is a man of very strong faith but little faith in the monarchical church that is the Catholic Church, one in which absolute power is given to the Pope, and through him to bishops in their dioceses and priests in their parishes. He has been consistent in his lack of faith in the Plenary Council to achieve any real change but despite this has continued to support those of us who still hold out some hope that the PC can make a difference.

This book is the result of a change in thinking on the part of the author. Paul says, and I quote, "For years I was convinced that the central issue for those who embraced Vatican II was the integration of the Council's renewed ecclesiology into present church governance structures ... I think the challenge now is to move beyond the monarchical ecclesiology altogether and begin to sketch out and live a renewed model of church". And this is precisely what he does in the book. For him it is no longer a matter of reforming the current system it is about proposing an entirely different model of church, a model based not on hierarchy but community.

The True Church Paul refers to is based on the early church with its emphasis on the centrality of Christ and his message of love, reconciliation and forgiveness, as well as establishing a community that cuts across social barriers and that accepts all community members as equal.

*Recovering The True Church; Challenges for Australian Catholicism Beyond the Plenary Council* documents the history of how the Catholic Church came to be the monarchical institution it is today despite the Vatican II period of enlightenment. And it lays out its weaknesses. While secular society has, over the centuries, changed and embraced democratic forms of leadership the Catholic Church has remained an absolute monarchy in a hierarchical system run only by clerical men. It is an aberration in the modern world.

The Church has not adapted to changes in society like those that have come out of the feminist movement around equality for women, around marriage and divorce, around acceptance of the LGBTQI + community and around marriage equality.

Whereas there have been significant changes in society, the Church has remained steadfastly stuck in the past. Women are still excluded from most roles, including ordination; remarried divorcees are still refused the eucharist as are the LGBTQI community; and same sex marriage is not recognised.

There is also little recognition of the important roles of lay people, despite the overwhelming role lay people play in Catholic Education, Catholic Health, Catholic Social Services and the St Vincent de Paul Society. And also despite the efforts of the many good priests and religious that we all know and love who work within these boundaries but still manage to inspire us. When I was at the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), for instance, the chair was a monsignor, but that is

unlikely to be repeated. Among the 101 Catholic secondary schools in Victoria 100 (all but one) have a lay principal.

Just as he has documented the background to the monarchical church Paul also documents in detail the processes leading up to and including the first Plenary Council meeting. He describes the passionate early engagement and the increasing disappointment of the lay community as it appeared that much of what had been recommended in their submissions – all 17,457 of them - was omitted from the agenda of the first assembly. And the canonical structures of the PC constrained what was possible. Only bishops (43 of them) have a deliberative vote with the remaining 233 participants having a consultative, or advisory vote.

Despite this there were some gains at the first assembly around recognition of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the role of women in the church and inclusion of the rainbow community. Paul's thesis is that whatever small gains might come out of the Plenary Council they will go nowhere unless the monarchical structure itself changes.

It is against this background that Paul claims the time has come for the Plenary Council to tell Rome loudly and clearly that the monarchical model isn't fit for purpose: it has to go.

The problem is that Paul sees little hope in achieving this goal through the Plenary Council although he acknowledges that not everyone in the renewal movement agrees with his approach. Many believe now is not the time to withdraw from engagement with the institutional church and the bishops. Remain in the game and hold the bishops accountable and continue to fight for a transparent, accountable and inclusive church. In essence this means playing both games, as both a reformer and an advocate for radical change.

It is debatable whether issues such as transparency, accountability and including the laity will "go nowhere" (Paul's words) while the monarchical model remains, or whether they are useful steps forward that are worth fighting for. Can worthwhile reform, even though not root and branch, be achieved? And is fighting for this alternative view worth the effort?

Of course, the actual plenary is not over yet so the real results of the Plenary Council will not be known until after the Second Assembly in July this year, and possibly for years after that during the implementation phase in dioceses and parishes. Waiting for reform is not for the faint hearted.

This book is not waiting for the outcomes of the second assembly of the Plenary Council. It not only asks the big questions but it proposes a way forward; a community model of church Paul describes as "New Testament focussed, engaged with the world around us, and committed to proclaiming the spiritual and human fulfillment that a relationship with God in Christ brings." He provides some tantalising brief examples of what the community model might look like from the meditation movement, the reform movement and the advocacy movement - but I was left wanting more detail on how this new model fits in with those aspects of the

traditional church that should be retained. This is crucial information. Perhaps there is a new Paul Collins book here.

In Conclusion, for me there are three issues that deserve highlighting in discussion.

First, what will the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council actually do in July (and it should be noted many church reformers are still trying influence the process and outcomes)?

Second, are changes, like equality for women, and Diocesan Pastoral Councils, within the existing monarchical structure worth fighting for or is only radical change worthwhile?

Third, how would Paul's "True Church" relate to the existing parish structures or would it replace them?

Parishioners are leaving the Church in droves. Young people are not coming in the first place. Those of us who are rusted on Catholics are getting old, as are the clergy. The church is burying its head in the sand and must do something to make the church attractive to young people.

This book could be said to have a pessimistic view of the Church – and of the Plenary Council – and in many ways it doesn't paint a very optimistic future but in the end it not only asks the big questions all thinking Catholics should be asking but it also proposes a way forward. Paul Collins does not have a vision of a dying church but of one that can be resurrected by recovering the true church.

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