

Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform

A Communiqué to the Catholic Bishops and Religious Leaders of Australia

(A communiqué open to all the People of God)

Precis:

The Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform calls for sweeping changes in the Catholic Church. The Coalition urges Church leaders to return the church to the path of love and inclusion set by Christ. The Coalition wants the Church's leaders at the now deferred Plenary Council to renounce autocracy and unaccountability.

The Plenary Council must not enable the Church to return to 'business as usual'. As Pope Francis has recognised, the culture of clericalism has stifled the spirit of Christ in the Church.

The 15 organisations that comprise the national reform coalition are calling for the Church and all its people to model the Christian ideals that reflect a caring and open society, including equality for women in church leadership and ministry, and transparency and accountability with inclusion in decision-making.

Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform

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Dear Bishops and Religious Leaders of Australia – An Open Communiqué

As our pastoral leaders, you preside over a dying church. As committed Catholics from across Australia seeking a Christ-centred Church, we are dismayed by the state of the institutional Church.

We are speaking out because, as baptised members of the people of God, we have a serious responsibility for our Church stressed by Vatican II: “*The holy people of God share also in Christ’s prophetic office . . . The entire body of the faithful . . . cannot err in matters of belief*” (*Lumen Gentium*, 12). We share responsibility for the Church’s failings and sins, and are concerned that a pervasive and destructive culture of clericalism, supported by autocratic and unaccountable leadership, and compounded by the sexual abuse crisis, has left the Catholic community ashamed and heart-broken with what has happened to our faith community. We embrace co-responsibility.

Our voice is informed by the concerns of the many committed people we represent and by the lived realities of Australian Catholics who feel disenfranchised by the church’s leadership, or who have been alienated and abandoned in the practice of their faith; these concerns reflect the sense of faith of the Australian faithful (*sensus fidei fidelium*) reflected in the submissions to the Plenary Council.

Catholics have been estranged from the Church by poor presentation of the faith. The faithful of today reject inappropriate biblical interpretations and outdated theology. As an institution the Church needs to embody the vision of Vatican II which respects local cultures and circumstances and leads people to a mature faith. Our leaders must reflect that vision.

Our Church must reject the “business as usual” model and commit to a truly Christ-centred Church in all its doctrines and governance. Pope Francis’ synodal approach is a path to an inclusive church. This approach will only succeed if there is less episcopal control and more co-responsibility. The time for change is now; a crisis is upon us.

We can no longer accept the patriarchal attitude towards women within our Church. Women must be included in all decision making. Clericalism is reinforced by patriarchy and it, in turn, promotes a masculine image of God. To avoid being eternally patriarchal, it is essential that we reject maleness as the normative image of God.

Immersed in the COVID-19 pandemic, Pope Francis says that this is a time of testing, “*a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not*” (2020 *Urbi et Orbi* blessing).

Understandably, the Plenary Council has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the process up to this point has not inspired confidence that all the bishops support the need for a Plenary Council. Few bishops have authentically discussed the Council with their diocesan faithful. Most bishops even reject the use of canonically endorsed pastoral councils and diocesan synods or assemblies. This does not inspire confidence in Plenary Council 2020/21.

Whilst in communion with the universal Church, your *primary* responsibility as leaders is for our Australian churches. With Pope Francis’ synodal approach encouraging you to assume that responsibility, we call on you, bishops and religious leaders, to accept and adopt the following essential proposals:

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- The fundamental importance of **good governance** with accountability, inclusion in decision making and appointments, equality and transparency, with synodality and subsidiarity, with the very best models of leadership, and with ongoing and open dialogue with all Christ's faithful;
- The need for gender-balanced and diverse **diocesan and parish pastoral councils and assemblies**, with diocesan and parish planning, financing and reporting - open, inclusive and accessible;
- **Equality of women** in the Church, welcoming women and their gifts equally into all roles of leadership and ministry, so that all share co-responsibility in the mission of the Church – a matter of equality and good governance at all levels, that goes well beyond the recent welcome increase of women in parish, diocesan and dicastery administration;
- Every diocese should have a **women's council and inclusive language** adopted throughout the Australian Church as recommended by the ACBC (*Woman and Man - one in Christ Jesus*, 1999);
- There should be disciplinary measures for those who limit **women's involvement** at any level;
- God's gift of difference in sexuality and the place of **LGBTIQA+ people** to be welcomed, as in the requests we have made regarding women, recognising the innate dignity of every human person;
- Embrace **first nations people, asylum seekers, and survivors of sexual abuse** and their loved ones;
- There should be a **national council for the laity** with responsibility for the Australian Church in partnership with the ACBC, with equal representation of men and women;
- **Formation of clerics and laity** to be completely reformed with candidates for ministry and priesthood pastorally prepared, after obtaining a theological degree, by experienced people already working in ministry;
- **Liturgy** to be designed to support an educated population in developing mature spiritualities;
- The **teaching and preaching of scripture** to be informed by modern biblical scholarship;
- Church doctrine to address **social and environmental priorities**;
- **Divorced and remarried Catholics** to be welcomed within the communion of the Church;
- **Pastoral commitment** including the full reinstatement of the Third Rite of Reconciliation (we are a faith of forgiveness);
- Reforms properly beyond the competence of the Australian Church to be **referred to the Holy See**;
- A lay woman committed to church renewal to be a **co-chair for the Plenary Council 2020/21**.

The Plenary Council provides an opportunity for renewal of the Church both in Australia and universally, with universal matters referred to the Holy See. In particular, the Holy See must be apprised of the Australian faithful's desire for a priesthood which includes women in addition to married clergy.

We all want to put aside the practices of the past that are not Christ-centred and to identify the reforms that God expects of us in ensuring a Christ-centred Church, a Church that reflects the Christian values of love, justice, compassion, peace, equality and freedom. Our Church must reject 'business as usual'. We would welcome an opportunity to discuss our concerns.

Yours in Christ

Peter Johnstone

for Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform

Catholics Speak Out, Catholics for Renewal, Women and the Australian Church, Australian Reforming Catholics, Inclusive Catholics, The Cyber Christian Community, Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, Rainbow Catholics InterAgency for Ministry, For the Innocents, Women's Wisdom in the Church, Voice of Australian Catholic Laity,

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