

Having a Say in Selecting Our Bishops: Summary Report of an Online Survey Conducted by Catholics for Renewal

Overview of the results

At a critical time for the Church in Australia, a number of dioceses (6 at 31 March 2016) have been without bishops. Also as bishops at age of 75 are required to submit their resignation to the pope for consideration, other dioceses are expected to become vacant in the not too distant future.

Most Catholics have few, if any, opportunities to have their say on the current state of their local church and what they are looking for in a new leader for their diocese. Catholics for Renewal has provided this opportunity through an online survey. The questions were simple seeking through open-ended replies to give people a chance to use their own words to express themselves freely. Whilst this required detailed analysis, it has yielded excellent and detailed feedback. The survey results, therefore, have special value because respondents had full scope to say in their own words what the pressing needs of their diocese are and what qualities a new bishop needs to address these needs. Most respondents took the time and made the effort to spell out their hopes and concerns in depth.

Overall, the concerned Catholics who responded to the survey showed widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of their local diocese and parishes. Their dissatisfaction referred to current governance arrangements, the need for a stronger pastoral focus and more effective leadership from their bishop based on his willingness to consult widely. The survey results also suggest that concerned and informed Catholics believe that many bishops do not recognise or understand the realities of the contemporary world. Many respondents believe that bishops continue to seek to live and work in a separate world, with close engagement with the laity at parish or diocesan level. There is also some feedback to suggest that the clergy also feel a strong lack of support for the work they do. The survey results clearly show the strong desire of Catholics to have a greater role in the selection of their bishop and in the governance of their diocese and local parish.

Purpose of the survey: Catholics for Renewal decided to invite Catholics to take part in a survey on what criteria should be considered in the selection of bishops selected for the vacant Australian dioceses, with an initial focus on the Melbourne Archdiocese.¹ The purpose of the survey was to show how a more consultative process, drawing on the knowledge and experience of the people of the diocese, should be used to help identify the most pressing needs of a diocese and the qualities needed by a new bishop to meet those needs.

The total number of respondents was 146 which included three respondents from the initial pilot survey, with 77 of these respondents from parishes in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. As the survey was designed to identify first the pressing needs of a specific diocese and then the qualities expected of the presiding bishop, the results make more sense if they focus on a specific diocese. While respondents from all vacant and other dioceses were invited to respond to the survey, Catholics for Renewal put additional effort into publicising the survey in the Melbourne Archdiocese by writing to each parish priest and a number of pastoral associates.

The report, however, also reports on the responses for other dioceses in an attachment with 64 usable verbatim responses to the survey from 20 dioceses or archdioceses, other than Melbourne.

Responses: Nine out of ten responses about the needs of the archdiocese called for a change from current custom and practice. Half of the responses called for a change of approach in general and

¹ Melbourne Archbishop Denis Hart was required under Canon Law (Can. 401 §1) to submit his resignation on his 75th birthday on 16 May 2016 for the Pope to decide whether to accept it or not.

40 per cent referred to the need for specific changes in institutions. The remaining one-in-ten responses called for a return to simple basis values to the past in some way.

Most pressing need of the archdiocese: The 94 responses under the governance theme included specific mention of ‘empowering the laity’ (20 responses), need to address clerical sexual abuse (14 responses), for church leaders to consult before making decisions (9 responses), have women participating in the Church at all levels (5 responses) and the need to reduce clericalism (2 responses). The theme of pastoral focus included 22 responses that specifically mentioned the need for a more pastoral approach. In addition, 14 responses specifically mentioned the need for a social justice focus, 9 responses called for parish life to be revitalised, 5 responses wanted greater efforts to engage with non-active Catholics and 3 responses requested greater support from the Archdiocese for the clergy.

The proposed governance changes referred to the need to address clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up. But this was not the major issue identified for change. Many made the call for greater involvement of the laity in the life of the Church at all levels, including in the selection of bishops. Calls for greater opportunities for lay involvement in the Church included greatly expanded role for women in the Church such as achieving gender balance all diocesan structures, organisations and agencies. Specific suggestions for greater lay participation included the need to establish a pastoral council to develop a pastoral plan, and the need to hold regular diocesan synods or assemblies:

bring together the priests, religious and laity to express their views on matters proposed by the bishop and important to the local church. Need to do this as soon as possible to prepare for the National Plenary Council proposed for 2020.

Other proposed changes to governance were directed at how parishes operate. One respondent placed the blame for difficulties parishes are experiencing on the lack of interest and support from the hierarchy. One comment provides a good summary of how many respondents felt:

Relations between the church hierarchy and the parishes need to be significantly improved. Parishioners by and large regard bishops and the church hierarchy as remote figures who hand down orders to priests and people without engaging with them at any human level. There is a high degree of mistrust of the hierarchy by many Catholics, especially following the findings of Royal Commission.

Desired qualities of the new archbishop: The predominant tone of the replies about the desirable qualities of a new archbishop was critical of current practice (31 per cent). The next most important tone identified was the need to be inclusive (19 per cent). Only 17 per cent of responses have been categorised as traditional. The responses on the desirable qualities of a new archbishop covered the following issues: the need for a pastoral approach, to return to basics, to address governance issues, and to speak out on public issues. Other responses wanted a new archbishop to make a radical break with the past and to show a greater understanding the contemporary world.

Often mentioned was the need for the new archbishop to be open to consulting with others, to show a willingness to be accountable and to lead in a collaborative way. Another way this was expressed was the need for the new leader to be inclusive of a range of groups within and outside the church. The word ‘vision’ was also used as well as the need to ‘*be open to a variety of possibilities for our ever-diminishing church*’. Another key attribute mentioned by some was the need for the archbishop to speak out publicly on moral and social justice issues. **See the full survey report for the respondents’ views in their own words.**