

**Address by Dr Peter Wilkinson, President of Catholics for Renewal, at the launch of the *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together***

**Welcome and Thanks**

Welcome everyone and thank you for your presence. This is a special occasion for Catholics for Renewal and Garratt Publishing, and I am delighted that you are here to share it.

**Thank Francis Sullivan**

To Francis Sullivan, I extend my most sincere thanks for launching our book. Francis is an outstanding Australian Catholic layman who, for five long years, undertook with commitment and integrity the task of liaising between the Australian bishops and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. In the process he provided important impetus for the reform of our Church.

We are honoured, Francis, that you accepted our invitation to launch *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming our Church Together* and, on behalf of Catholics for Renewal, I thank you for your kind and carefully chosen words about our book. They reaffirm our hope that it will take forward the movement for renewal.

**Renewal in Australia**

Renewal of the Church in Australia never was and never will be an easy task. Even Vatican II's vision for renewal was slow to get off the ground here, stumbled, and slowly petered out.

Early renewal groups that called for reform were usually labelled dissenters and troublemakers, and they struggled to make an impact. The fortress was strong and almost impregnable.

And yet, renewal groups continued to emerge, sometimes like spot fires, breaking out spontaneously, and Catholics for Renewal was one of these.

Eight years ago, a handful of committed Catholics, lay men and women and priests, gathered to discuss the state of their Church, all deeply concerned. After much discussion and discernment, and aware that the bishops were

planning their *ad limina* visit to Rome later in the year, they decided to do two things: 1) write an *Open Letter* from Australian Catholics to Pope Benedict XVI and the Bishops of Australia; and 2) incorporate as Catholics for Renewal, indicating their willingness to be accountable and their preparedness for the long haul.

The *Open Letter* set a single goal: to renew the Catholic Church in Australia so that it “follows Christ more closely in every way”. It also set a strategy: to understand the true situation, and develop concrete proposals for achieving the goal. The proposals in the *Open Letter* were two: that “each diocesan bishop should convene a diocesan synod” and that the Pope should “allow a more accountable and consultative process for the appointment of bishops”. It also stated that “We can no longer accept the patriarchal attitude towards women within our Church” and called for “an open, transparent and accountable Church, which respects due process, rejects every form of discrimination, listens to its people, promotes co-responsibility in every facet of its mission and ministry, and is compassionate to its core.”

The Letter was signed by over 8000 Catholics and presented to Archbishop Philip Wilson, President of the ACBC, with the request that he present it to the Pope. He gave it to an official in the Secretariat of State, but we are yet to receive a response.

### **Engagement with bishops and people**

Following the *Open Letter*, other projects were undertaken to build the momentum for renewal. Efforts were made to engage with the bishops, with other renewal groups nationally and internationally, and with those Catholics who had signed the *Open Letter*. A website was set up for this purpose.

Being transparent, accountable, and inclusive have never been the principal governance characteristics of Australia’s bishops. Few publish informed annual reports on the state of their dioceses, and they rarely convene diocesan synods or assemblies to consult their people. Secrecy and control has been the norm, and resistance to change fierce. Not even the submissions made to the plenary council have been made public. The one in this book is the exception.

When Catholics for Renewal made a formal submission to the Australian bishops in 2012, asking that they seek approval from the Holy See to convene a 'plenary council' to be held in 2015, the bishops' response was: "the time is not opportune", even though parish ministry was in crisis, the Church was drifting and unfocused, and was being pushed by circumstances, not being led.

The same year, Catholics for Renewal made a submission and gave evidence to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations (2012-2013). It focused on the Church's dysfunctional governance and the need for legislation to make criminal reporting of alleged child sexual abuse mandatory. The Victorian bishops opposed mandatory reporting, but the legislation was introduced in 2015.

Catholics for Renewal also made a submission and gave evidence to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2012-2015). It repeated its concerns about dysfunctional governance, made recommendations for cultural and structural reforms aimed at eradicating clericalism and promoting synodality and co-responsibility, and argued for mandatory reporting nationwide.

After the Royal Commission, a second *Open Letter* was addressed to the Australian Bishops, asking them to "Please Listen and Act Now" on key issues identified by the Commission as needing reform: clericalism, accountability, equality of women, diocesan synods, priestly formation, redress for abuse victims/survivors, Vatican inaction on child sexual abuse, governance, and the selection of bishops. Some 4000 Australian Catholics endorsed the letter.

### **Getting Back on Mission: Reforming our Church Together**

The essence of this book is Catholics for Renewal's submission to the Plenary Council, a distillation of all the earlier work and an attempt to write a document of substance, incorporating all previous proposals for reform, but with more data, more careful analysis in the light of the Gospel, more recommendations, and all in a spirit of prayer and discernment.

Catholics for Renewal was convinced that our Church had gone 'off mission', and to get it back 'on mission' practical proposals were needed: well founded on scripture and theology, 'reasonable', 'doable', and (for the most part)

within the competence of a plenary council. In chapters 2-5 of the book 115 recommendations are presented, some broad, some specific, including some addressed to the processes and voting procedures of the plenary council itself.

While not everyone may agree with every single recommendation, together they are intended to make our Church more Christ-centred, so that it can be a credible sign of the Kingdom of God in Australia at this time.

### **Other people to thank**

Eight years ago, there was no thought that the group's ideas, hopes and proposals would one day appear in a book. That it has happened is thanks to Garratt Publishing – to Garry Eastman, David Hughan, its board and its staff. The result is the book before you. To everyone at Garratt, for bringing this project to fruition, I extend heartfelt thanks.

And if you too would like to show your appreciation to Garratt Publishing for this book, I can only suggest that, before you head for home, you purchase as many copies as possible, and ask your friends and families to do the same.

To Robert Fitzgerald, former Royal Commissioner, I offer sincere thanks for his thoughtful Foreword, a significant contribution towards the necessary reform of church governance.

I also thank those who wrote introductions to the several chapters, and those who wrote endorsements for the book. Their words are published on the first pages and they provide much confidence that this book will inspire many other Catholics seeking renewal to raise their voices and insist that the chief pastors listen to what they have to say.

It is our hope, of course, that this book will be widely read because, as Frank Brennan says, "it provides a realistic, hopeful and authentically Catholic roadmap for the forthcoming Australian Plenary Council" and, indeed, for the universal Church.

So please spread the word and use it to spur more discussion on how to get our Church back 'on mission'.

You will note on the cover that the book is not the work of a single author, but the product of a communal effort by all members of Catholics for Renewal.

And while the preparation of the original submission was a huge effort, preparing the manuscript for the book was even greater. I want to thank all members of Catholics for Renewal for their contribution, and particularly the editorial team who took on the onerous task of finalizing the text and tables, proofing them, and sourcing the photos and illustrations, especially the striking cover painting 'After Resurrection' by He Qi, with its theme of 'darkness into light' and 'listening to the Spirit'.

Catholics for Renewal is but one spot-fire which broke out spontaneously burning for renewal. Others have also broken out, and included in the additional documents is one from the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform, a coalition of 14 renewal groups across Australia, whose common propositions for Church reform are fully supportive of this book's direction. It is my hope that many more spot fires will break out, and fanned by the Spirit, merge and create an unstoppable conflagration for renewal. Perhaps then, 'Business as usual' will be over.

Pope Francis has said that now is the time "to be bold and creative in the task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization", and that any "proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory". "The important thing", he has said, "is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment."

*Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together* is Catholics for Renewal's contribution to that important task of walking together in a communal search.

Peter J Wilkinson

President

Catholics for Renewal

17 September 2019

To order the book: <https://www.garrattpublishing.com.au/product/9781925009651/>