

**Catholics for Renewal Inc. – Annual General Meeting
22 November 2017**

President’s Report 2017

We have a lot to show for our work since a small group came together in late 2010 and initially committed to the development of our Open Letter to the Pope and the Australian bishops in early 2011, a document prepared with wide consultation which remains the clearest statement of our mission (and is attached). This is our seventh AGM. Our activities, initiatives and values have remained faithful to our original objectives and we have established a strong base for influencing renewal of our Church, particularly through the necessary reform of the institution’s dysfunctional governance.

We should not be surprised that our dealings with the leadership of the Church too often reflect the poor standards of governance and inclusiveness of which we are critical. At times, we have been dismissed and our advocacy ignored by our Australian Church leadership and by the Vatican Curia. It is however clear through feedback from various quarters that despite inadequate or nil responses, we are having a substantial impact.

Our initiatives over the last 7 years have included:

Open Letters:

- 2011 (attached – CathfR foundational statement, a document prepared with wide consultation which remains the clearest statement of our mission)
- 2017 (Royal Commission issues including a proposal for a delegation to Rome, which subsequently occurred in unclear circumstances)

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference submissions/advocacy re:

- diocesan and national synods (detailed proposal supported by P Wilkinson’s research)
- Selection of Bishops: Criteria, processes and involvement of the faithful
- Synod of Bishops on the Family, October 2014 and 2015
- Fr Greg Reynolds’ excommunication (to +Hart, President ACBC)

Submissions to Holy See:

- Selection of Bishops (survey results and proposal)
- Pontifical Secret (generated international statement by President, Pontifical Commission on Protection of Minors, Card. Sean O’Malley)

Meetings with bishops (some multiple, plus written communications): Gallagher (Apostolic Nuncio), Wilson, Hart, Long, Morris, Bird, Prowse, Edwards, Wright, Coleridge (informal), Power, Hurley

Other significant meetings/discussions:

- Gen Secretaries ACBC (Brian Lucas and Stephen Hackett), Richard Gaillardetz (noted US lay theologian)

Waverley Parish collaboration

Submissions to Vic Parliamentary *Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations*

Submissions to *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*

Member of Governance panel RC Catholic public ‘wrap-up’ hearing

International liaison:

- CCRI early extensive involvement
- David Timb’s involvement with Limerick Conference (April 2015), Priests and Reform Groups meeting in Chicago, Oct 17-20, and scheduled June 2018 fourth

gathering of the International Catholic Reform Network (ICRN) in Slovakia. David has also been involved following Chicago in an international project to create a Charter of the rights and responsibilities of Catholics within the community of the Catholic Church.

National Liaison:

- ACCCR (active involvement in establishment and ongoing support)
- Catholics Speak Out
- Concerned Catholics ACT

Research: Synods, governance, clerical child sexual abuse, early church (D Timbs' 'Jesus movement' series)

Events sponsored:

- Bp Bill Morris – YTU lecture
- Richard Gaillardetz – YTU address
- Kieran Tapsell on canon law issues with response by Fr Ian Waters

Events attended:

- Pastoral Research Conference 2014
- Pastoral Associates and Planners Conference 2017
- SIPs, etc

CathfR talks:

- Many SIPs
- Rotary Clubs

Articles and papers:

- CathfR newsletters and website
- SWAG
- John Menadue's 'Pearls and Irritations'
- 'OMG' international website
- 'V2Catholic.com' international website

Digital communications (note continuing substantial invaluable work of John Costa)

- professional website, a major resource for CathfR and the Church community
- E-newsletters every 1-2 months
- Mailing list now substantial and increasing (note Open Letters as source)
- Our website and digital capacity is fundamental to our efficacy
- Substantial data base of email addresses in Australia and worldwide

Consistent themes:

We have increasingly clarified over the years the unacceptable nature of the institutional Church's dysfunctional governance. This failed governance is reflected in a lack of accountability, transparency and inclusiveness particularly the involvement of women, in the institutional Church's decision-making, structures and culture). Unaccountable leadership is both a symptom and cause of a lack of engagement of the faithful with an apparent lack of interest by many Church leaders in the *sensus fidei fidelium*, whose importance was stressed by Vatican II and reinforced in a 2012 document of the Holy See as central to the decisions of the Magisterium.

Values:

We have continued to strive to be guided by faith with humility, respectful but determinedly assertive, focused on the urgency of the need for reform in the Church, never afraid of criticism for necessary expressions of concern.

We don't seek glory or recognition, but our focus is to undertake our work to achieve

renewal in the governance of the Church as fundamental to the Church being able to pursue its mission. It does not matter whether we are credited with reforms but that the reforms are achieved and that we have contributed as best we can. We must always be prepared to ‘speak truth to power’ and to accept the responsibility of the faithful for the state of the Church. Vatican II made this responsibility clear, a responsibility reflected in the 1983 Code of Canon Law:

The Christian faithful have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful. (Canon 212 §3)

Progress:

The event having the greatest impact on the Church and our work since the establishment of CathfR is without doubt the election in February 2013 of Pope Francis who has set the scene for many reforms sought by CathfR and thus facilitated our work. Francis’ unambiguous identification of the evil of clericalism as a threat to the mission of the Church and his support for subsidiarity, the importance of synodality, a focus on the “smell of the sheep”, and recognition of the need for better processes for the selection of bishops provide some hope for the governance reforms sought by CathfR – reform with a focus on accountability, transparency and inclusiveness particularly of women. Yet it remains a common insight that Pope Francis has not grasped adequately the institutional Church’s responsibility for the multiple crimes of clerical child sexual abuse, this shameful illustration of the Church’s dysfunctional governance, as evidenced by the continuation of the application of the Pontifical secret preventing reporting of known paedophiles to civil authorities (with an exception from 2010 excluding states where mandatory reporting applies in criminal law, seen as simply a practical step to protect bishops from prosecution). It is also clear that Pope Francis has a limited understanding of the Church’s discrimination against women and its failure to understand the importance of gender balance to the good governance of the Church. These are critical matters that CathfR must advocate all the more strongly in its support of Francis’ reform of the Church.

The work of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has been timely for our work in exposing the worst consequences of the dysfunctional governance which we seek to expose, governance being the means by which organisations are directed, controlled and held to account. CathfR is prominent as the author of RC submissions identifying the centrality of the Church’s dysfunctional governance in its at times immoral and criminal response to the identification of clerical child predators in Australia and throughout the world, thus exposing the need for reform in the totality of Church governance. The Royal Commission invited me to be part of their panel advising on the Church’s governance in the light of our considered submissions.

Our work has been cumulative over the last seven years in reinforcing the nature of our concerns. It is notable that Archbishop Coleridge has acknowledged that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference first considered the issue of synods and a plenary council in 2012, the year that CathfR proposed synods and a plenary council to the ACBC. There can be no doubt that CathfR has been instrumental in getting synods and a plenary council onto the ACBC agenda, ultimately leading to the present proposal by the ACBC for the 2020 Plenary Council.

Central and indeed critical to all our work has been our digital communication capacity established and continually guided by John Costa. Our website is continually accessed within Australia and across the world. Our newsletters are seen by most Australian bishops. The website provides an invaluable reference point for information and current views and news on Church renewal.

CathfR is now well-known amongst the Church's institutional decision makers and other reform groups in Australia and, to an encouraging extent, overseas. Our challenge remains to use that position of influence appropriately to identify the need for reform and to encourage through effective advocacy the adoption of those reforms.

Current priorities:

CathfR must always be ready to respond to the issues of the day as they illustrate the need and the opportunity for the institutional Church to pursue its mission effectively. The CathfR response must be designed to optimise the chances of achieving change, communicating the issues effectively, winning the support of the faithful, always seeking a Christlike Church with the highest standards of governance: accountability, transparency and inclusiveness particularly of women, a Church whose leaders listen to their people and lead with a strong sense of commitment to the teachings of Jesus reflected in all their governance.

The major issue facing the Australian Church at present, and possibly the greatest challenge it has ever faced, is the imminent report of the RC which will certainly expose governance failures of an egregious nature. The response of the Church at this stage seems likely to reflect its dysfunctional governance. There are indications of denial and rejection of the value of the RC's findings. The main public response seems to be the recent announcement of the national Plenary Council in 2020. There is no apparent recognition of the need to adopt immediate changes to governance, even in the preparation for the Plenary Council; a Plenary Council could become little more than an attempt to defer real action until the shock of RC findings have become less familiar.

We clearly have further work to do to ensure that that council is properly informed by all diocesan bishops engaging their diocesan faithful in discerning the *sensus fidelium* in their dioceses. A centralised survey is not appropriate to a synodal Church constituted by many diverse local communities. Diocesan bishops cannot play an informed role in a plenary council without engaging their diocesan faithful. As Peter Wilkinson recently observed: "*Poor governance was at the centre of this crisis; now accountability and transparency must be at the core of the solution.*"

The Plenary Council must not become an excuse for deferring governance reform; its very preparation must be in accordance with best governance practices with inclusive structures, commitment, and engagement by diocesan bishops, inclusion of the laity particularly women, transparency at every stage, and listening carefully to the *sensus fidelium* through each diocese. Otherwise, the Plenary Council will be seen as a facile and defensive response to the imminent RC report, an attempt to respond with an assurance of answers in 2020, effectively avoiding accountability by 'kicking the governance can down the road' for a few years.

Another major issue which is closely related to the reform of governance of the Church is the selection and formation of bishops. CathfR has already advocated strongly in this

area and Pope Francis has himself committed to review the present arrangements. Many existing bishops have been selected for their episcopal roles as part of a canonical process and formation arrangements that have not focussed on the development of leaders able to address the governance and cultural leadership crisis in the Church. It seems that Pope Francis has however made some notable selections seemingly addressing this issue but reform of processes for selection and formation, including the involvement of the faithful, is essential if Church leaders are to ensure a Christlike approach to pursuing the mission of the Church.

Arguably, we are in a time that could be critical to reform of the Church's governance in Australia and universally. It is notable that a delegation from the ACBC visited Rome recently to report on the impact of the RC, a visit that was proposed as necessary in the CathfR sponsored 2017 Open Letter, except that it seems the delegation was summoned rather than initiated by the ACBC as suggested in the Open Letter. Clearly, the Holy See recognises the importance of the RC not only for the Australian Church but worldwide. It is critical to Church reform that CathfR and other Church renewal groups seize this opportunity and ensure that the Church respond promptly and effectively to the Royal Commission's findings affecting the governance of the Church. This must be our immediate focus in collaboration with other renewal groups, while continuing of course to pursue all aspects of governance renewal, particularly the essential need for inclusion of the faithful, gender balance in decision-making, and the removal of discrimination against women in the governance of the Church, prerequisites to achieving good governance.

Our Finances:

CathfR has very limited finances and neither actively seeks membership subscriptions from its supporters or campaigns for donations. We have been dependent since establishment on the generosity of individual members meeting costs, including occasional conferences and travel for advocacy, and some notable donations for substantial initiatives. We are of course very grateful for the financial support received. Given the importance of current initiatives, we may need to consider a fundraising campaign in the context of the current initiatives to ensure that the RC findings precipitate change in the Church.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the members of our committee, all of whom are responsible for and contribute to this enormous work in a variety of ways. Additionally, the support of so many of the faithful in the broader community is critical to informing the renewal discussion and representing a ubiquitous yearning within the Church.

Peter Johnstone
22 November 2017

Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI and the Catholic Bishops of Australia (signed May–Sep 2011)

Dear Pope Benedict and Bishops of Australia,

We, the undersigned Catholics of Australia, write to you regarding our concerns for the Church. We ask that you consider these matters during the 2011 Ad Limina visit.

As Christ's faithful, we must speak out. Under Canon Law we have a right and a duty in keeping with our knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to our pastors our views on matters which concern the good of the Church (C.212.2-3).

The Church no longer adequately inspires many of our communities. It has alienated too many adults who were born of Catholic parents, attended Catholic schools, and lived a sacramental life. It has become disconnected from, and irrelevant to the lives of too many of our children. With fewer priests, its ability to provide regular Eucharist in our parishes, especially in rural areas, has become increasingly limited. As an institution, it does not yet embody the vision of Vatican II for a truly collegial Church in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances. Rather, it appears as an institution focussed on centralism, legalism and control, with few effective structures for listening and dialogue, and often more concerned with its institutional image and interests than the spirit of Christ.

Our Church has been tainted by injustice and blemished by bad decisions. We still reel from the sexual abuse scandal where the Church's initial response was manifestly inadequate and where some authorities, in their attempts to protect the institution, exposed innocent young people to grave harm. We were shocked at the lack of due process in the way Bishop Morris, a dedicated pastor, was removed from his diocese. We were dismayed by the failure to consult properly on the new English translations of our liturgy. We can no longer accept the patriarchal attitude towards women within our Church, and we fear that an extended claim to infallibility is stifling discussion on many important issues. These issues include some teachings on human sexuality, as well as new forms of ministry for women and married men; the latter an anomaly for a Church committed to equality, and which welcomes married ministers from other Christian traditions. These concerns undermine confidence and trust in you our leaders.

We want and pray for a renewed Church that follows Christ more closely in every way. We need a Church committed to authentic collegiality and subsidiarity. We seek 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. We call for an outward-facing Church totally committed to justice, peace, ecumenism and dialogue with other faiths, and which advocates unequivocally for the rights of the oppressed and disadvantaged while tending practically to their needs. We need and want a Church where we are 'all one in Christ, with no more distinctions ...between male and female' (Galatians, 3:28) and whose leaders read well the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.

As a first step towards collegiality and subsidiarity, we call on each diocesan bishop to convene at an early date a synod in his diocese, under the provisions of Canon Law (C.460-468), to discuss how the local Church might be a more authentic witness in the 21st century. We also ask that Pope Benedict allow a return to a more accountable and consultative process for the appointment of bishops, giving both priests and people a real voice as was earlier Church practice. This could commence with the appointment of the next bishop of Toowoomba.

For all of us Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. As the People of God and your sisters and brothers in Christ, who together seek the Kingdom of God, we pray that the Spirit will guide us all ever closer to Jesus in the critical task of renewal.

Sincerely,

(Prepared by Catholics for Renewal Inc and signed by 8,500, delivered to Archbishop Philip Wilson, President, Australian Catholic Bishop Conference who confirmed delivery in October 2011 to Monsignor Peter Wells, *Assessore* of the Vatican Secretariat of State)