

## **AGM – 21 October 2020**

### **President's Report for 2019-2020**

The past year has been one of intense activity for Catholics for Renewal as preparations proceed for the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia, rescheduled to commence in October 2021. Almost all of our work has been focused on influencing this significant event.

### **Membership**

It is with deep sorrow that we mourn the death of Maria George, an original supporter of Catholics for Renewal, later a dedicated member and Secretary and, most recently, our Emeritus Secretary. Her absence leaves us deeply saddened. May she rest in Peace.

During the year, the President, Garry Nolan, resigned from the group, Bob Dixon withdrew due to other pressing commitments, and Viv Williams also withdrew, though expressing a desire to maintain close contact.

Currently, Catholics for Renewal has 12 members: 8 male and 4 female. This gender imbalance requires immediate attention.

### **Special General Meeting**

On 30 January 2020 a Special General Meeting was held to fill two office vacancies brought on by the resignation Garry Nolan from both the office of President and from membership, and the resignation of Fiona Lynch from the office of Vice-President. At the meeting all office positions were declared vacant and nominations called for. Elected unanimously for office were:

President: Peter Wilkinson

Vice-President: Gail Grossman Freyne

Secretary: Maria George

Treasurer: David Timbs

### **Communications**

The great bulk of our work during the past year has been dedicated to communications: researching, writing, and publishing a series of Summary Documents, accompanied by monthly editorials on a range of topics on which we have chosen to advocate, including: mandatory reporting and the Seal of Confession, priorities for the Plenary Council, and the rights and responsibilities of Christ's Faithful.

To date we have published 9 Summary Documents on key theological terminology, concepts, and principles, fundamental to good governance and church renewal, and directed at informing our website readers, Council participants and the wider Catholic community. Our aim has been to generate and enable a meaningful discussion around the actual pressing issues which the Council needs to confront, and to promote a genuine movement towards the renewal of the Catholic Church in Australia.

The Summary Documents addressed the following topics:

- 1) December 2019 - Sense of faith of Christ's Faithful – (*Sensus fidei fidelium*)
- 2) January 2020 - Synodal governance for a pastoral Church
- 3) February 2020 - Co-responsibility: sharing in church governance
- 4) March 2020 - Clericalism

- 5) April 2020 - Women and ministry
- 6) May 2020 - Priesthood, celibacy & marriage
- 7) June 2020 – Subsidiarity
- 8) July 2020 - Signs of the times
- 9) August 2020 - Stewardship

A 10<sup>th</sup> Summary Document on 'Discernment' is currently in preparation.

Also in preparation is another series of documents containing data-rich profiles of Australia's 28 territorial dioceses and titled 'Know the Dioceses in 2020'. The first four profiles, of the dioceses of Cairns, Wagga Wagga, Hobart and Sandhurst, have been completed and sent to the respective bishops for their response before publication in the October 2020 Newsletter.

John Costa, chair of the Communications Sub-Committee, continues his magnificent work of editing and formatting our Newsletter editorials and articles, publishing them on schedule to a strict timeline, and updating our website almost daily with a careful selection of important news items and articles suited to our readers and followers. I thank John most sincerely for his service and contribution to our work and I know that all members are similarly grateful.

### ***Getting Back on Mission***

Our book, *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together (GBOM)* launched in Melbourne, Sydney and Warsaw (Poland) in late 2019, had successful initial sales, which warranted a 2<sup>nd</sup> printing. Garratt Publishing selected it as its December 2019 'Book of the Month' and it was well commented on in both the Australian and international media, e.g. <https://international.la-croix.com/news/culture/lay-community-key-to-reforming-catholicism/10838>

Sales have tapered off in recent months, but Garratt Publishing continues to promote it strongly. At a meeting earlier in the year we decided to offer complimentary copies to all those called to participate in the Plenary Council, and that offer has been communicated to the Plenary Council Facilitation Team. We are currently waiting on a formal response to our offer. Royalties and revenue from sales have been significant and currently total in excess of \$3000.00.

We were recently saddened to learn of the death of Garry Eastman, founder and Chair of the Board of Garratt Publishing. It was Garry who, after reading our submission to the Plenary Council, asked for permission to publish the document as a book, and gave us a stage and opportunity that we could not have envisaged when we prepared our submission. We will be forever grateful to him for his encouragement and support. May he rest in Peace.

We continue to work closely with David Hughan, CEO of Garratt Publishing, and his Team, and are committed to finding new ways to publicise *GBOM* and gain wider circulation.

### **ACCCR**

Catholics for Renewal is a founding member of the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR). From the outset its defined role has been to foster collaboration and support among its member groups and to disseminate messages of hope and opportunity. ACCCR is now made up of the following 19 renewal groups across Australia and New Zealand:

#### **ACT**

Catholics Speak Out (formerly Catholics for Ministry)  
Concerned Catholics Canberra-Goulburn

#### **VIC**

Catholics for Renewal  
For the Innocents (FTI)  
Inclusive Catholics  
Women's Wisdom in the Church (WWITCH)  
The Cardijn Community

#### **NSW**

Women in the Australian Church (WATAC)  
Australian Reforming Catholics (ARC)  
Voice of Catholic Australian Laity (VOCAL)  
Rainbow Catholics Australia  
Concerned Catholics Wagga Wagga  
Concerned Catholics Wollongong

#### **WA**

Cyber Christian Community WA  
The Friendship Group WA  
Communities of the Way WA

#### **QLD**

Toowoomba Catholics for Church Reform

#### **SA**

SA Catholics for an Evolving Church

#### **TAS**

Concerned Catholics Tasmania (CCT)

#### **NEW ZEALAND**

Be the Change NZ

Peter Johnstone, a member and former President of Catholics for Renewal, is the current Co-ordinator of ACCCR, and has been instrumental in building the coalition into a significant advocacy body for church renewal with an increasingly national and international voice. Catholics for Renewal continues to strongly support this important coalition.

#### **ICRN**

The International Catholic Reform Network (ICRN) was established as a network of international priests associations and lay reform groups in 2013. Catholics for Renewal joined ICRN in 2015 and our delegate, David Timbs, has attended ICRN's usually bi-annual conferences in Limerick (Ireland) in 2015, Chicago (USA) in 2016, Pezinok (Slovakia) in 2017, and Warsaw (Poland) in 2019. The next conference, planned for Mumbai (India) in 2021 is presently on hold due to COVID-19 restrictions.

On 15 October 2020, 3 members of Catholics for Renewal participated in an international ICRN Zoom meeting to discuss the *Der Synodale Weg* - The Synodal Way of the Catholic Church in Germany. David Timbs has advised that he will not be available to attend the next ICRN conference in Mumbai and I am hopeful that we will find a volunteer to replace him.

#### **COVID-19**

Due to the restrictions placed on citizens by the Victorian Government, almost all our meetings during the past year have been via ZOOM, an innovative technology which has proved quite successful in permitting effective communication among members. However, we look forward to resuming our face-to-face meetings.

#### **Submission to WA Parliament**

In July 2020 Catholics for Renewal made a carefully considered submission to the WA Parliament on the *Children and Community Services Amendment Bill 2019*, which proposes to extend mandatory reporting of knowledge of child sexual offending to ministers of religion, including knowledge gain in a sacramental confession. The writing team for the submission consisted of Gail Grossman Freyne (Chair), Michael Leahy, Peter Johnstone, Peter Wilkinson, and guest contributor, Emeritus Professor Des Cahill. The Parliament is still considering the Bill which is likely to be put to a vote in the near future. Shortly after lodging the submission, Mrs Patricia Boylan in Cairns advised us that she had forwarded a copy of our submission to the Queensland Attorney-General who had made it available to the QLD Parliament where a similar Bill was being debated. We understand that the submission had some influence on the outcome of the vote in the Parliament which passed the Bill in September 2020.

### ***The Catholic Weekly and Fisher/Walton exchange***

In July/August 2020 the President wrote to the Archbishop of Sydney, Anthony Fisher OP, regarding an article by Dr Philippa Martyr published in the Sydney Archdiocese's official publication *The Catholic Weekly* which asserted that the Plenary Council had: a) very little authority; and b) was a largely cosmetic exercise. An exchange followed, with an invitation offered to the President to write a response to the article for possible publication in *The Catholic Weekly*. The offer was not taken up, as a series of very conservative articles had already appeared pushing back against the progressive reform agenda for the Plenary Council. One article had directly attacked *GBOM*. The Archbishop did not give direct answers to the assertions made by Dr Martyr.

### **Published articles of Members**

During the year several members of the group wrote articles and had them published in various media. They include the following:

Bruce Duncan

- 'Mr Morrison, please do not abandon innocent Aussie children in Syria' in *Pearls & Irritations* (1 January 2020)
- 'Faith and the Triple Crises of Corona Virus, Economic Shutdown and Climate Change' in *Pearls & Irritations* (8 April 2020)
- 'Pope Francis: We need to get serious about climate change and unfair economic systems' in *Pearls & Irritations* (2 September 2020)
- 'Pope Francis on preparing a better future for humanity and our planet' in *Pearls and Irritations* (30 September 2020)
- 'Pope Francis's new encyclical On Human Fraternity and Social Friendship' in *Pearls & Irritations* (15 October 2020)

Gail Grossman Freyne

- 'A Plenary of Broken Promises?' in *Pearls & Irritations* (17 June 2020)

Peter Johnstone

- 'Catholics want reform' in *Pearls & Irritations* (30 June 2020)
- 'Is religious freedom code for a licence to discriminate' in *The Swag* (Spring 2019)

David Timbs

- 'Bishops and branch stacking: the second oldest profession' in *Pearls & Irritations* (13 July 2020)
- 'The Polding House Push and *The Catholic Weekly* Bugle' in *Pearls & Irritations* (20 August 2020)

Peter Wilkinson

- 'The Third Australian Plenary Council 3-10 September 1905' (Parts 1 and 2) in *The Swag*

- 'Fourth Plenary Council of Australian & New Zealand 4-12 September 1937' (Parts 1 and 2) in *The Swag*
- 'Most prominent issues for the Plenary Council agenda' in *The Swag*
- 'First Provincial Council of Melbourne, 17-24 November 1907' in *The Swag*

Peter Wilkinson & Des Cahill

- 'Holy See response to Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission: another example of clericalist obstinance' in *Pearls & Irritations* (10 September 2020)

Peter Wilkinson & Gail Grossman Freyne

- 'Historic Church Governance Report locked down by Australian Bishops' in *Pearls & Irritations* (26 May 2020)

## Thanks

I take this opportunity to thank all the members of the Committee for a year of extraordinary commitment and productivity. An article by John O'Malley SJ about 'Who is in charge at a council?' states that one of four key groups is always "the laity and other influences —that is, those persons or those larger realities (like the modern world) that very much influence a given council even though they are not physically present". He further notes that all the groups play different roles, and that there is "a dynamism intrinsic to the synodal aspect of church governance". I think that Catholics for Renewal, in its own particular way, has been very committed to participating in that dynamism, and the year ahead will surely call for similar commitment.

Peter Wilkinson  
President  
20 October 2020