

Catholics for Renewal Annual General Meeting – 29 November 2018

President's Report

When I was elected to the office of president this time last year, I did not foresee the health problems I would encounter shortly after. They certainly curtailed my activities, but I am now much recovered.

Catholics for Renewal is now holding its 8th AGM, and as my predecessor, Peter Johnstone, stated in his 2017 Report, “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”.

Two major events have influenced our activities during the past 12 months: the *Final Report of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, released in December 2017, and the launch of the 5th Australian Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia on Pentecost Sunday 2018.

Royal Commission

In May 2017, following the Royal Commission's 'wrap-up' public hearings into the response of the Catholic Church, where the failures of church leadership and its dysfunctional governance were on full display, Catholics for Renewal published an *Open Letter to the Bishops of Australia* calling on them to “Please Listen and Act Now”. Drafted after extensive consultations and signed by 3876 Australian Catholics within 7 weeks, it set out a clear and urgent reform agenda.

The Royal Commission's *Final Report*, published in December 2017, contained 39 references to Catholics for Renewal, including a highlighted direct quote from Peter Johnstone (Vol. 16, Book 2, Part D, 13.5.3) -

I still remain absolutely unable to understand how a bishop knowing about child sexual abuse could not immediately do whatever had to be done to protect children. We can talk about forgiveness and balancing it with retribution and all those things. What we are talking about with clerical child sexual abuse is an abuser on the loose, who is able to in fact abuse children anywhere “

and 60 citations from the RMIT report on *Child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church: An interpretive review of the literature and public inquiry reports* prepared by Des Cahill and Peter Wilkinson.

Following the *Final Report*, the ACBC and CRA commissioned the Truth Justice and Healing Council to prepare an assessment document for both bodies on how they should respond to the Report. Though finalized in early April 2018, both bodies were reluctant to make it public and Catholics for Renewal took the lead in making a public call for its release. It was not released until 31 August 2018. In our September 2018 *Editorial* we were very critical of the equivocal response of Australian bishops to the Royal Commission's recommendations

and of their continued dithering. I envisage that their dithering will be ongoing and will call for more action on our part.

Peter Johnstone and Peter Wilkinson were both invited to be interlocutors at the *Health and Integrity Conference*, held in Melbourne in August 2018, looking at needed follow-up actions to the Royal Commission. Many of our members also attended. The papers from this conference will be published in the near future including those by Peter Johnstone and Peter Wilkinson.

In the year ahead, I believe that we must continue to apply pressure on the Australian bishops to morally oblige them to take stronger and more immediate action on the Royal Commission's recommendations, particularly Rec. 16.7 on diocesan and parish governance and management structures.

Another focus of our attention will be on the scheduled 21-24 February 2019 meeting in Rome of all presidents of Episcopal conferences worldwide to discuss the child sexual abuse issue. We discussed this meeting with Archbishop Coleridge - who will be attending the Rome gathering - at our 19 September 2018 engagement and he would do well to carry the 2017 *Open Letter* with him to this Rome meeting as a current record of the Australian *sensus fidelium* on the clerical child sexual abuse issue.

2020/2021 Plenary Council

The 2020/2021 Plenary Council was officially launched by ACBC President, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, on Pentecost Sunday, 20 May 2018. On the same day, he agreed to meet with a delegation of Catholics for Renewal in late September 2018.

Catholics for Renewal gave its full support to the *Communiqué* of the Australian Coalition for Catholic Church Reform (ACCCR) issued on 23 March 2018 following a gathering of representatives of Catholic reform organizations in Canberra. The *Communiqué* called for some radical initiatives in relation to the Plenary Council:

- greater involvement of the people of God and attention to their input
- nomination of a woman to co-chair of the Council
- decisive reforms to church governance structures
- greater co-responsibility between bishops and the people
- a summit for all Catholics prior to the plenary council to discuss major issues confronting the Church in Australia
- the urgent need to give priority to the place of women in the Church.

Prior to the Canberra gathering, Peter Johnstone took on the role of Convenor of ACCCR and a delegation met with Archbishop Coleridge and Ms Lana Turvey-Collins on 18 September 2018 to discuss the *Communiqué*.

In July 2018, Peter Wilkinson, Peter Johnstone and Maria George were invited to address a gathering of 100 Catholics at St Patrick's Cathedral Hall in Ballarat on the Plenary Council. Peter Wilkinson was also invited to address a leader's group at St Kevin's Parish,

Templestowe, and a Teams of Our Lady gathering at Wattle Park Parish on the Plenary Council.

During the year, Peter Wilkinson has been researching and writing a series of articles for *The Swag* on the 7 previous plenary councils held in Australia since 1844. There is the possibility that, when completed, these may be published in book form in late 2019.

On 19 September 2018, Archbishop Coleridge and Ms Cathy Jenkins, of the Melbourne Archdiocese, met with Peter Wilkinson (President), Maria George and David Timbs to discuss the 2020/2021 Plenary Council, synodality, and church governance. The agenda was prepared by Catholics for Renewal, and accompanied by a research paper focusing on the membership of the plenary council and the rules of procedure for voting. The delegation stated that for the plenary council to succeed, the following were essential:

- a clear vision of what the Church in Australia needs to become;
- the share of the total membership of the Council for non-religious lay men and women, in balanced numbers, to be at least one third; and
- adequate recognition given to those members with a ‘consultative’ vote.

Archbishop Coleridge was given a copy of the detailed recommendations and the supporting research paper, and urged to recommend to the ACBC at its November plenary meeting that the ACBC immediately seek a dispensation from the restrictive provisions of Canon 443 regarding council membership.

At the 2 August 2018 Committee meeting it was agreed that Catholics for Renewal should prepare a well-researched and thoughtful submission to the Plenary Council. Subsequent meetings refined the planning, structure and timeline for the submission preparation, and it is now aimed to have a first draft prepared before Christmas 2018.

International connections

Since 2015, Catholics for Renewal has been a member organization of the International Catholic Reform Network (ICRN). It has had representation, through David Timbs, at the ICRN’s meetings in Limerick, Ireland (2015), Chicago, USA (2016) and Pezinok, Slovakia (2018). Member organizations of ICRN include Future Church (USA), the Pfarrer Initiative (in Austria, Switzerland and Germany), the National Council of Priests (Australia), and the Association of Catholic Priests (in Ireland and USA). One of ICRN’s projects is to develop a model charter of Fundamental Rights and Obligations of all the faithful of the Catholic Church, according to the principles spelt out by the 1971 Synod of Bishops’ document *Justice in the World*. At the meeting in Slovakia, David Timbs played a leading role in taking this project forward. We are most grateful to a generous donor in the US who has provided financial assistance to allow Catholics for Renewal to be present at these international gatherings.

Communications

Our Communications Team, composed of John Costa (leader), Peter Johnstone, David Timbs and Peter Wilkinson, has been very productive during the year, writing and publishing 5 widely-read editorials, 2 submissions to Commonwealth Government inquiries, and – with

Bruce Duncan – numerous articles (see list below). A Christmas editorial with the provisional title of “Which diocesan bishops are listening to their people?” is currently in the drafting stage and will be circulated to all members in the near future for their comment and suggestions.

Rose Marie Prosser gave invaluable input to the Ruddock Review submission, and Maria George put the case strongly for the inclusion of women in decision-making and ministry at the Ballarat gathering and at the meeting with Archbishop Coleridge.

Finance

Our Secretary/Treasurer, Garry Nolan, does a major work in keeping the group in good financial order and his report will be presented shortly. I thank him for his invaluable contribution to our work. Catholics for Renewal depends on its supporters and particularly our members’ fees and donations, and it is pleasing that income via our online donation facility is almost sufficient to cover the cost of our current communication platforms. Our [donation facility](https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/supportus.htm) is available at <https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/supportus.htm>

Conclusion

Looking back on the year past, I wish to thank sincerely all members of the group for their dedicated enthusiasm for the renewal of the Church that we each love. It is that love which drives us and keeps us going. We have said from the outset that we want our church to be Christ-like, to be a true sign of the Kingdom of God, to live by Gospel values, and to be a beacon of hope and joy in our Australian society.

As we move forward, I would also like to think that others of like mind and heart might join us in our work.

I thank everyone for the support that you have given me and one another during a most eventful year, and I look forward to working with you all in the year of renewal ahead.

Peter Wilkinson
President
29 November 2018

Editorials (with readership to 28 November 2018)

December 2017: “A Christmas Message from the Royal Commission” (1589 unique readers/4459 total reads)

February 2018: “Getting Catholic Church renewal happening now” (1553 unique readers/4030 total reads)

May 2018: “Seeking Christ-like leadership: Inclusive, Transparent, and Accountable (1775 unique readers/4852 total reads)

September 2018: “Response of Australian bishops and religious leaders is more dithering” (2081 unique readers/6330 total reads)

November 2018: “Synodality: the medium is the message” (after 7 days - 1746 unique readers/3946 total reads)

Submissions

Submission to the Freedom of Religion Review (Ruddock Review). Submission of 23 pages lodged on 14 February 2018. Notes: 1) Three members of Catholics for Renewal – Peter Wilkinson, Peter Johnstone and Rose Marie Prosser – also had an hour-long teleconference meeting with the full Review Panel; 2) The Review Report was finalized in March 2018, but has not yet (at 28/11/2018) been released.

Submission to the Australian Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Reverses Committee for its Inquiry into “Legislative exemptions that allow faith-based educational institutions to discriminate against students, teachers and staff”. Submission of 23 pages lodged on 21 November 2018. Note: The report of this inquiry has not yet (at 28/11/2018) been finalized.

Published articles by members during the past year

Peter Johnstone:

“An ill-informed plenary council for the Catholic Church” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 10 November 2017

“The Seal of Confession: resorting to the Age of Christendom” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 13 December 2017

“Public relations responses to Royal Commission” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 15 December 2017

“Should Australian Catholic Bishops be Trusted” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 13 February 2018

“Catholic Reform Groups Want Urgent Actions from Bishops” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 2 April 2018

“Bishops in the headlights” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 31 May 2018

“Breaking the seal for the common good” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 21 July 2018

“The Seal of Confession: civil law, church law and conscience” in *The Swag*, Spring 2018

Bruce Duncan:

“Pope Francis under attack” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 13 November 2017

“A stringent critique of financial abuse” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 1 June 2018

“Scott Morrison, the ‘prosperity gospel’ and neoliberalism” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 17 September 2018

David Timbs:

“The Catholic Church in Australia: Who has the Moral Authority?” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 17 May 2018

“The priest shortage and the elephant in the room” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 22 September 2018

“Priest shortage, imported clergy and the ‘men of proven character’ solution” in www.catholicsforrenewal.org

“Report on the International Catholic Reform Network (ICRN) Conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, 11-15 June 2018” in www.catholicsforrenewal.org

“The 2020/21 Plenary: Who is accompanying whom? In www.catholicsforrenewal.org , April 2018

Peter Wilkinson:

“Particular Councils: a resource rarely used in Australia” in *The Swag*, Spring 2017

“Preparing for the 2020 Australian Plenary Council” in *The Swag*, Spring 2017

“Catholic Church 2020 Plenary Council: bishops must tap into the grassroots without delay” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 20 November 2017

(with Des Cahill) “Clericalism, celibacy and child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Australia” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 19 December 2017

“First Australian Provincial Council, 10-22 September 1844” in *The Swag*, Summer 2017

“The 1862 non-recognized Australian Provincial Council” in *The Swag*, Summer 2017

“Second Australian Provincial Council, 18-25 April 1869” in *The Swag*, Autumn 2018

“First Plenary Council of Australasia, 14-29 November 1885 – Part 1” in *The Swag*, Winter 2018

“First Plenary Council of Australasia, 14-29 November 1885 – Part 2” in *The Swag*, Spring 2018

(with Des Cahill) ...*And what would God think?: Theological and Pastoral Reflections on the Findings and Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*. A Paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Australian Catholic Theological Association, ACU, Melbourne, July 2018

Other publications

Renewing the Catholic Church in Australia: Some indexed 'background resources, prepared the Yarra Deanery, Archdiocese of Melbourne, September 2018, 62 pages. Published online at www.catholicsforrenewal.org

Members in the News

Peter Wilkinson in Joanne McCarthy: “Reformers urge Australian bishops to release report on child sexual abuse royal commission” in *Newcastle Herald*, 15 March 2018