

Catholics for Renewal Annual General Meeting – 25 September 2019

President's Report

As usual, 2018-2019 has been another eventful year for Catholics for Renewal.

Membership of Management Committee

During the year we welcomed three new members to the Management Committee: Michael Leahy, Bob Dixon, and Gail Grossman Freyne. One member, Di Brebner, retired. As a group, we are now approaching gender-balance, with 6 female and 8 male members.

While we continue to receive inquiries about joining the group, our policy has generally been to encourage inquirers to form their own local renewal group, and recently, with our encouragement, one inquirer, Michael Gill in Sydney, established the new group Voice of Catholic Australian Laity (VOCAL).

ACCCR

We also encourage all renewal groups throughout Australia to become members of the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR), a network of renewal groups which currently has 14 members from the ACT, VIC, NSW and WA. Catholics for Renewal is a foundation members of ACCCR, participated in formulating its Call Statement and more recently, its Renewal Propositions, now included as a supplement to *Getting Back on Mission*. Peter Johnstone is the current Convener of ACCCR.

ICRN

Catholics for Renewal is an active member of the International Church Reform Network (ICRN). Our delegate, David Timbs has participated in four of its international conferences, thanks to a generous sponsor: Limerick (2015), Chicago (2016), Bratislava (2018) and the current one in Warsaw (2019). The network is focused on fundamental rights in the Church, emerging models of parishes, women's equality, LGBTIQ+ issues, and synodality, all issues of prime concern to Catholics for Renewal. At the Warsaw Conference, in session as we speak, Fr Helmet Schüller, of the Austrian Pfarrer Initiative, will launch our book. David is also leading the initiative to develop a statement on Fundamental Rights in the Church.

Plenary Council 2020/2021

Most of our activities during the year have been related to the Plenary Council. The Council was launched at Pentecost 2018 with the approval of Pope Francis, and the preparatory stage has been guided by a Bishops' Commission (5 bishops with Archbishop Costelloe SDB as Chair), a Plenary Council Advisory Committee (14 members, mostly lay women and men), and a Facilitation Team (Lana Turvey-Collins, Noel Connolly SSC, and Peter Gates). After determining the processes and timelines for the Council, an invitation was extended to all Australian Catholics and others to make submissions on what should be on the Council's agenda by responding to the question: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?*

Plenary Council Submission

This time last year, Catholics for Renewal decided to make its own submission which should be a document of substance, incorporate all previous proposals for reform, include more data, more careful analysis in the light of the Gospel, more general and specific recommendations, and be composed in the spirit of prayer and discernment. The deadline was 6 March 2019.

With careful planning and drafting, and the collaboration of everyone making inputs on the issues selected for coverage, the drafting group finalised the submission by the deadline. It was titled: *Getting Back on Mission: Strive first for the Kingdom of God*. It was 142 pages in length, contained 114 recommendations, and included extensive footnotes, references and data. It was immediately made public available on our website.

The book: *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together*

While on vacation in Perth, I was contacted by Garry Eastman of Garratt Publishing and asked if Catholics for Renewal would permit Garratt to publish our submission as a book. A quick survey confirmed that we should, and Peter Johnstone, John Costa and Fiona Lynch volunteered to undertake the arduous task to converting the original text into a manuscript fit for publication within a second deadline. A contract with Garratt Publishing was signed, and dates set for having the manuscript finalised and proofed, and printed copies ready for launch and distribution. In addition to the original text, some additional fresh data and text was added together with an additional recommendation (2.10) on homosexuality, some appendices and supplements.

The first edition of the book – I am being optimistic – arrived in Melbourne on 9th September (a little late due to shipping problems) and the launch proceeded as planned on 17th September at the Oratory, Newman College, University of Melbourne. Fiona Lynch acted as MC with some well chosen preliminary remarks, Francis Sullivan, former CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, gave the main address and launched the book, followed by the President's address of appreciation. Copies of the Launch Program and President's Address are attached for the record. A copy of Francis Sullivan's address will be attached when it is available.

Communications

Effective and clear communication of our message, to make our Church Christ-centred, is essential. I include here an abridged version of John Costa's excellent report. John, who makes our website a 'go-to' site for Catholics and journalists around Australia and internationally, is an apology for tonight, but I wish to put on record how grateful we all are for his huge contribution to our endeavours. John reports:

Apart from information gathering and sharing, analysis, open debate, policy formulation and advocacy, a major objective and output for Catholics For Renewal is clear and well targeted communication. Publications, newsletters, oral presentations and a website are our current key tools. During the last year, radio and TV interviews and external journal publications have been effectively and frequently used to inform and increase our public profile. We still make little use of social media, have yet to exploit our capacity to produce short video clips, and could still benefit more from well-targeted media-releases, preferably in collaboration with other reform groups.

Newsletters: Newsletters are currently broadcast to a significant number of subscribers, including many clergy and parishes. They invariably prompt immediate responses (typically 100 readers in the first ten minutes), and readers of our last 5 Newsletters have been very high. While small numbers of regular readers have un-subscribed, greater numbers have newly subscribed, probably due to readers forwarding the newsletters to friends and colleagues, or to random website searches.

Typically, 35% of our subscribers regularly read the linked retrospective-news-reports with their strongly themed messages, and many are prompted by our newsletters to correspond with or seek support from us, often to praise, sometimes to complain, and occasionally to donate. Our subscribers are overwhelmingly supportive of our work. Recently we have increased our invitations to donate.

Website: The website attracts additional Independent visitors who seek information on our group, details of coming events, and book reviews. Over the last 12 months the pages most read, in descending order, are: News; Home; Church Mutation; Events, Documents; About us; Renewal; Other. There is a regular flow of overseas visitors.

Website visitor numbers peak dramatically following Newsletters, and at other times average around 50 per day. When the website was launched 8 years ago there were relatively few other such resources, now there are many. However our 'one stop shop' website uniquely brings together news from multiple sources, stores past news and significant documents, and provides a valuable Church reform resource and research aid. The website platform hosts our membership list and provides data forensics.

Future communications : With *Getting Back on Mission*, which tells its own story and will take us into the future, the next Communications subcommittee will meet shortly to consider and propose new strategies. Our main effort should be to promulgate the book and its contents rather than develop new positions and recommendations. We particularly need to consider ways of being seen as positive and hopeful rather than negative, supportive of reform though critical, and importantly, as being practicing Catholics of strong faith, and fellow builders of the Kingdom of God. We should recognise and support those bishops who are Christ-like and progressive. We need to consider collaborating more with other renewal groups in Australia and around the world, work more on joint media releases, and strive to become much better known and respected in parishes. In summary, our group and its well-researched positions should be seen more often, more positively, but not over-repetitively.

Member Publications

During the year several members have published a variety of articles in several print and online media.

Peter Johnstone:

“Is religious freedom code for a licence to discriminate? In *The Swag*, v. 27, n.1, Spring 2019 and *Pearls and Irritations*, 5 June 2019

“Archbishop rejects top woman theologian – business as usual” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 5 August 2019.

Bruce Duncan:

“No issue matters as much as climate change” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 15 August 2019

David Timbs:

“The Pax Romana and the Gospel of Disturbance” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 18 December 2018

“Australia’s bishops are presently visiting the Pope ...What are they telling him and will Australia’s ordinary Catholics ever find out” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 1 July 2019

“Archbishop Comensoli needs to cut the ecclesiastical umbilical cord” in *Pearls and Irritations*, 9 September 2019

Peter Wilkinson:

“First Plenary Council of Australasia, 14 – 29 November 1885” in *The Swag*, v.26, n.3, Spring 2018

“Second Australian Plenary Council, 17 November – 1 December 1895” in *The Swag*, v. 27, n. 1, Autumn 2019

“The Third Australian Plenary Council 3-10 September 1905 (Part 1)” in *The Swag*, v. 27, n.1, Spring 2019

Thank you

As I step down from the position of president I want to express my sincere gratitude to all the members of this Committee for your enthusiasm, passion for renewal of our Church, and for the support you have given me during my period as president. I would especially like to thank my fellow office bearers, Peter Johnstone, Vice-President, and Garry Nolan, Secretary and Treasurer, for their incredible assistance and wise counsel.

It is my confident hope and prayer that the incoming president and office bearers will receive the same level of support, encouragement and wise advice as was afforded me.

I would also like to thank Michael Elligate for generously allowing us to use the Parkville Parish presbytery for your regular meetings.

Thank you, one and all.

Peter J Wilkinson

President

25 September 2019

Attachments: