

## **Spirituality in the Pub**

SIP group St Carthage's Parkville, Vic.

### **'The Synod on the Family - the start of major reform?'**

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The Pumphouse, 128 Nicholson St, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Vic., Australia

#### **INTRODUCTION**

First, I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and the Elders from other communities who may be here today.

Thanks to St Carthage's for the invitation, I'm a great admirer of the Pumphouse SIPs - providing a forum for open discussion about the Church amongst the community of believers, all in the spirit of Vatican II - an opportunity for the faithful to play their proper role in the governance of the Church.

After 50 years, we're still awaiting proper implementation of the spirit of Vatican II – particularly its call for the institutional Church to listen to “the people of God.”

Catholics wanting renewal, indeed reform, of their Church have now, after many years of failure to implement Vatican II, some reason for cautious optimism. The Synod of Bishops' assemblies on the Family in 2014 and 2015, and particularly Pope Francis' response in *Amoris Laetitia* provide a good opportunity to assess the progress of reform.

Major reform is now critical to our Church which claims to follow the teachings of Christ. It is not good enough to say, as I've heard many well-intentioned Church leaders say in a resigned voice: “*I guess we have to accept that the Church changes slowly.*” My premise is “*No, we don't have to accept excuses for changing behaviour that is contrary to the teachings of Christ; reform is necessary now!*”

Indeed, canon law following Vatican II provides that

*“The Christian faithful have the right and even at times the duty to (express) 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)*

However, we are now in the era of Pope Francis and prospects have improved.

My own interest in achieving renewal has over the last few years been largely focussed through Catholics for Renewal Inc. I’d like to provide a little background on Catholics for Renewal relevant to tonight’s discussion:

- Started with a small group who shared a concern for reform of the institutional Church and came together in early 2011 to write an Open Letter<sup>i</sup> to the Australian Bishops and the then Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the bishops’ 5-yearly *ad limina* visit to Rome to report on the state of the Australian Church. That letter was drafted with the help of hundreds of Catholics, many conservative by nature but all worried about the state of their Church – it was signed by more than 8,000 despite limited means of postal and electronic circulation.
  - The letter was delivered to Monsignor Wells, then *Assessore* of the Vatican Secretariat of State, by the then President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. We are still awaiting a reply despite many follow-ups over the intervening years – we have since learnt that ignoring correspondence is a well-established tactic of the institutional Church throughout the world in dealing with difficult questions from the faithful. This unaccountability of the institutional Church is a major hurdle to reform.

(Catholics for Renewal has just discovered that this is also a tactic of the present Australian Apostolic Nuncio, but more on that later).

- Coincidentally, I understand that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is presently preparing for the next *ad limina* visit. Regrettably, I don’t expect that the people of the Church will be consulted by the bishops in preparing their report on the state of the Australian Church, despite the clearly expressed views of Pope Francis.
- *Catholics for Renewal*’s agenda was set by that Open Letter and most of the issues have at least been more clearly exposed during Francis’

pontificate and the recent synods. Catholics for Renewal's agenda is based on the premise that the governance of the institutional Church is dysfunctional: an autocratic male-dominated organisation which is unaccountable and lacking in transparency resulting in bad decisions and inequity, and therefore failing in its Christian mission. We believe that reform of the Church's governance is critical.

- I want to stress that Catholics seeking renewal of their Church are committed members of the faithful who are determined that our Church be Christ-like and accountable. We would be wasting our time if we didn't care greatly for our faith and the mission of Christ's Church.

Our Church does many good things, much through lay organisations associated with the Church, but that good is constantly prejudiced by the many failures of the institutional Church, let alone the injustices and the absolute lack of accountability and transparency.

Tonight's topic is about the prospects of the recent synods leading to necessary reform of the Church:

*'The Synod on the Family - the Start of Major Reform?'* was finalised as a title for this talk before the release of the Pope's response to the synod on the family. Francis' exhortation, *'Amoris Laetitia'* ('The Joy of Love'), is critical in considering the question as to whether the Synod on the Family has been the start of major reform.

Did the synods address the real challenges that face Catholic families? Can they lead to reforms addressing the state of the Church today: the alienation of so many, the cover-up of clerical child sexual abuse, dysfunctional governance, exclusion of the laity, discrimination against women, autocracy, non-accountability, and lack of transparency? All of these matters are critical to the interests of families of faith as they strive to live as faithful members of the Church and to bring up their children in that faith.

Where are we now on the reform journey? Have the synods caused the reform train to leave the station at last? and if so, is it likely to be derailed? or is its apparent destination far short of the reform that is needed? Could this be the beginning of the much-needed major reform

journey? The synod process and *Amoris Laetitia* provide a good base for addressing these questions.

The synod process opened a lot of questions which many bishops tried to close even before the synods started. The second assembly finished with much uncertainty with most wondering how Francis would respond to the conservative resistance to necessary change. The pope has now used the authority of his office and his skilled discernment to give some important direction to the future of the Church in *Amoris Laetitia*, a restrained but insightful and important document for the Church's future. Francis' exhortation does not change doctrine but astutely addresses some challenges that face the people and families of the Church.

In my view, there are three very important principles that permeate the Pope's response in *Amoris Laetitia*:

1. A commitment to the key importance of the People of God to the vision and work of the Church,
2. The need for the Church's teaching to be firmly grounded in the concrete realities faced by the faithful in their daily lives, and
3. "(The Church has) been called to form consciences, not to replace them" (n.37) – a pastoral approach requires that the 'concrete realities' faced by individuals be respected.

## **OVERVIEW**

I have three main topics in this paper:

1. The Church's Challenge of Renewal - What are the big issues?
2. Hearing the People of God
  - a. Synods
  - b. Pope Francis' leadership and *Amoris Laetitia*
3. Possible outcomes and next steps?

### **1. The Church's Challenge of Renewal**

It is a simple and very disturbing fact that the Church is losing its people, particularly young people many of whom have been alienated by the perceived hypocrisy of the institutional Church, which:

- a. does not live the values it teaches
- b. is not yet a Vatican II collegial Church, in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances;
- c. is focussed on centralism, and has few effective structures for listening and dialogue;
- d. is often more concerned with its institutional image and interests than the spirit of Christ; and
- e. has been tainted by injustice and blemished by bad decisions and process:

In the case of the clerical child sexual abuse scandal, the Church's response has been and still is manifestly inadequate, and its attempts to protect the institution and paedophile clerics have exposed innocent young people to grave harm. Let's be clear: the failure of bishops to report known paedophiles, indeed to move them to new parishes, has been the cause of further sexual abuse of children. This is not just history - the pontifical secret actually continues to forbid bishops from reporting known paedophiles to the police, unless a state law mandates criminal reporting – the 'keeping bishops out-of-gaol' exemption. Most states/countries do not have such a mandatory criminal reporting law and bishops are subject to the canonical direction to keep paedophilia secret.

There has been a lack of due process in the precipitate removal of good priests and bishops for embarrassing the Church by acting conscientiously; for example Bishop Morris, a dedicated pastor, was removed from his diocese without due process or natural justice. Some of you may be familiar with the lack of natural justice in the excommunication of Fr Greg Reynolds. There are many other cases and there has recently been a world-wide representation to the Holy See organised by Paul Collins of Australia and others which has been ignored – no acknowledgment or reply.

There was a failure to consult properly on the new English translations of our liturgy – how many people in the pews know what '*consubstantial with the Father*' means?

Also, I'll come to the failure to consult adequately for the synod on the Family, a failure not acknowledged by Francis in his exhortation.

The patriarchal attitude towards women within our Church continues. Far from providing leadership to the world, the Church lags behind secular organisations in removing discrimination, let alone ensuring equality and gender-balanced decision-making.

There is a desperate need for new forms of ministry for women and married men (the ban on married priests is, to say the least, an anomaly for a Church which welcomes married ministers from other Christian traditions).

Creeping infallibility continues, stifling discussion on many important issues by claiming an inability to err for the human assertions and prejudices of the magisterium, whilst failing to listen to the experiences of the people of God, such as:

- a) John Paul II banning even discussion on the ordination of women
- b) some teachings on human sexuality, such as the silliness of the ban on artificial contraception, which is generally ignored by Catholic women in a fraught rejection of Church authority.

Then there is the grave issue of inadequate vocations in so many communities and the Church's inability to provide regular Eucharist in many parishes, especially rural areas.

All of these grave issues disturbed Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, a Jesuit like Francis and also seen as *papabile* at the time of Benedict's election, who due to advanced illness ruled himself out in that conclave. Martini recorded a trenchant critique of the Church's governance just weeks before his death on 29 August 2012. He said<sup>1</sup>:

*“The church must recognize its errors and follow a radical path of change, beginning with the pope and the bishops. The pedophilia scandals compel us to take up a path of conversion.”* and

*“The church is 200 years behind the times.”*<sup>2</sup>

> that from a man who might have been Pope before Francis!

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<sup>1</sup>Belfast Telegraph, 3 Sep. 2012, *Vatican is rocked by Cardinal Martini's damning words from beyond the grave*, sourced May 2014 at <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/vatican-is-rocked-by-cardinal-martinis-damning-words-from-beyond-the-grave-16205822.html> - ixzz2G73QteH0

<sup>2</sup> Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini SJ, 8 August 2012, interview in National Catholic Reporter, 4 Sep 2012, sourced May 2014 at <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/translated-final-interview-martini>

We might reasonably expect the Church to be a leader rather than a laggard in accountability and transparency, which follow from the teachings of Christ – think of the parable of the talents. Our Church fails at the most basic level, having failed to protect children from sexual abuse by priests of the Church and then protected the paedophiles.

So **perhaps the main question before us** is whether the Synod on the Family will contribute to the Church reforming its governance structures and culture as a prerequisite to effective renewal. The synods themselves regrettably were evidence of the failure of the Church to listen to the faithful in the first instance, to hear the People of God.

## **2. Hearing the People of God**

### **a. Synods**

Synods are specifically provided in canon law as a means, albeit a limited means, of hearing the people of God. Pope Francis has echoed Vatican II in its insistence on the need for the institutional Church, the magisterium and diocesan bishops, to listen to the People of God.

Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) stated: “*The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief.*”<sup>ii</sup> (The entire body of the faithful of course incorporates bishops, priests and laity.)

More recently, a 2014 Vatican report by the International Theological Commission, ‘*Sensus Fidei* (the sense of faith) in the Life of the Church’, stated:

*“the faithful, and specifically the lay people, should be treated by the Church’s pastors with respect and consideration, and consulted in an appropriate way for the good of the Church”* (n .120);

That report goes on to say:

*“Humble listening at all levels and proper consultation of those concerned are integral aspects of a living and lively Church.”*(n.126)

That report also requires the magisterium, through the bishops, to use the “*structures of consultation*” promoted by Vatican II and endorsed by every

Pope since. Those official structures include the Synod of Bishops, synods at national and diocesan levels, and diocesan pastoral councils.

This is traditional Catholic doctrine. Cardinal (now Blessed) John Henry Newman in 1859 observed that the consensus of the body of the faithful “*is the voice of the Infallible Church*”<sup>iii</sup>;

In *Evangelii Gaudium* in 2013, Pope Francis observed that a bishop should: *encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in Canon Law, and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear.* (n.31)

Francis often refers to 'synodality' in his homilies and conversations, and did so before, during and after the assemblies on the Family.

Yet those canonically endorsed means of participation such as synods and diocesan pastoral councils, limited as they are, have been little used in Australia and the rest of the world. The last synod in the Archdiocese of Melbourne was in 1916 and the archdiocese does not have a diocesan pastoral council. These means of consultation were certainly not available in the token attempts at consultation with the faithful in preparation for the Synods on the Family.

There are clearly disconnects between Church teaching and practice, between the teaching of the magisterium and the experience and insights of the faithful, which is not surprising given that the approved structures of dialogue are not used and the magisterium is remote from the lived experiences of the people of God.

(note **Abp Coleridge's reference** in the context of his Knox Public Lecture in Melbourne Monday week 16 May to: “*the recent proposal of the Australian Bishops to move towards a Plenary Council for Australia in 2020*” – this would appear to be good news but the record to date would not give one any confidence of meaningful involvement of the laity. I should mention that Catholics for Renewal proposed such a plenary council to the Australian bishops in 2012 and eventually received a terse reply, after waiting some months and then following up, advising that the bishops did not consider that “a

plenary council is opportune at this time.” God forbid that our bishops should act on a suggestion from the faithful!)

### **The Synods on the Family**

An inherent weakness of the synods on the family was the lack of any voting rights for those very few laity invited, the minimal presence of women, and indeed the unknown means of selection of those few laity. Let’s acknowledge however that some made valuable and perhaps courageous statements in a difficult environment.

Former President of Ireland and also a canon lawyer, Mary McAleese, made a pertinent observation before the 2015 Synod on the Family: *“...If I wanted expertise on the family, I honestly cannot say that the first thing that would come into my mind would be to call together 300 celibate (bishops) who, as far we know, have never raised a child....”*

The disconnects between the magisterium and the *sensus fidelium* were well illustrated in the Clayton’s consultation for these Assemblies on the Family. The official consultation document, the *Lineamenta*, was highly complex with technical language, limited in scope, and not readily accessible. It was consequently unlikely to elicit useful reflections even if there had been an organised attempt at diocesan level, let alone in all parishes, to facilitate discussion and reflection on the issues. The Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform submitted a considered proposal to our bishop representatives to assist in consultation for the October 2015 synod but the bishop reps did not see a need for organised consultation.

The survey devised by the Archdiocese of Melbourne did not engage the faithful and focussed attention away from any questioning of current Church teaching. The Clayton’s nature of the consultation was demonstrated by the failure either to assist and encourage parish priests in facilitating discussion. And no summary of the limited submissions presumably received was made available in Australia, so we don’t know whether any attention was paid to the limited feedback received.

Nonetheless, for all its faults, setting up the 2-stage Synod Assemblies on the Family was a key part of Francis’ strategic approach to exposing key issues and

the areas of dispute, to encouraging frank discussion and in exposing those resistant to change in the difficult areas brought into the open; we all recall the publicity that was given to the issue of Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. Perhaps not intended, the Synod process also exposed the inadequacies inherent in the process such as not engaging the *sensus fidelium*, and the lack of pastoral commitment of many bishops.

Some technical background on the Synod of Bishops: The ‘Synods on the Family’, as they were usually described, were actually two assemblies of the Synod of Bishops called together to address the issues confronting families in the Church. The Synod of Bishops is a forum of all the bishops of the world established by Pope Paul VI in 1965 shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council:

- to continue the spirit of collegiality and communion that was present at the Council, and
- to assist the Pope by providing counsel on important questions facing the Church;

The Synod of Bishops is an ongoing permanent forum, even when not in session, with a permanent secretariat headquartered in Rome;

Individual assemblies such as the 2014 and 2015 Assemblies on the Family include representatives of bishop conferences throughout the world. The pope convenes **ordinary assemblies** of the Synod of Bishops usually every 3-4 years, on current topics of universal and pastoral concern "for the good of the universal Church".

**Extraordinary assemblies** are called to deal with matters "which require a speedy solution" - participants are fewer, usually the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences in each country or region.

The October 2014 *extraordinary* assembly – attended by Abp Hart as President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference - was called to look at the family and evangelisation, preparing the way for the 2015 *ordinary* assembly (attended by ACBC elected reps – Abp Coleridge and Bp Hurley). That 2014 *extraordinary* assembly prepared the *Lineamenta* which served as a somewhat flawed basis for planning for the subsequent October 2015 *ordinary* Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which would make recommendations to the Pope.

I must admit to some scepticism at this seemingly drawn-out approach to identifying issues, worse with only token lay input and almost exclusion of women. I was also sceptical about whether a focus on families would be a distraction from more fundamental issues of governance facing the Church. Francis perhaps indicated his strategic approach when he said, in a message to theologians and others at an international congress just before the October 2015 assembly, “*Without encountering families and the **people of God**, theology runs the great risk of becoming ideology*”.<sup>iv</sup> Note the broader reference to ‘*the people of God*’, channeling Vatican II.

Can real reform of the Church’s approach to more specific and indeed grave issues such as the challenges facing families throughout the world, be considered effectively without addressing the autocratic decision making of the Church. It did not seem, at the end of that assembly, that the recommendations had given Francis a lot to work with.

My scepticism remains, but the process has enabled issues to be opened that were formerly closed. Before the publication 8 April of Francis’ response to the outcomes of the 2015 *ordinary* Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, most commentators were doubtful whether the dissension expressed during that assembly, the resistance of conservative forces, and indeed the narrow focus on families, and the resultant limited nature of the recommendations, would allow Francis to respond in a productive and progressive manner.

The reality is that Francis’ response in *Amoris Laetitia* has shifted the focus from the synod to his exhortation. He has both built on the synod recommendations and managed to lay foundations for important changes to the lives of the people of God and the Church.

### **3. Pope Francis’ leadership and *Amoris Laetitia***

There is a tendency, I think, to expect too much of Pope Francis. We’ve been waiting so long for reform that we want to believe that this pope is all that is needed and we can relax now while he sorts it all out. He has certainly indicated a genuine commitment to reform and seems a truly humble and holy man capable of the deepest levels of Ignatian discernment, but he is of course still

human with the limitations and frailties of humanity.

Francis has shown true leadership towards a more Christ-like Church, but he has been reluctant to deal with the institutional Church's dysfunctional governance, notably in the scandal of clerical child sexual abuse. It must be recognized also that, despite his clear virtues, he has been developed by his environment and certainly lacks the experience of families that can only be gained by living the daily joys and challenges. He has also been a disappointment in his attitude to women although a little better than his predecessors. Francis has certainly shown that he is aware of both his own shortcomings and also many of the shortcomings of the institutional Church.

His two major documents, his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and his Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* are truly deep and thoughtful analyses for the world to ponder, providing strong leadership in core Christian values. He is a patient and strategic leader, but he is of course human and not all-seeing. However, his management of the Synod of Bishops was always going to be critical to the success of the assemblies on the Family in enabling fruitful change in the Church, and in this process he has shown both his commitment to reform and his sophisticated strategic approach based on Christlike values.

As suggested in the title, 'The Joy of Love', *Amoris Laetitia* is totally grounded in love as the centre of every aspect of Christianity, so that no true doctrine of the Church can be binding if it does not reflect the basis of love. I don't believe it is possible to read *Amoris Laetitia* without developing great respect for Francis.

I think it's helpful to consider the very carefully argued structure that Francis adopts in *Amoris Laetitia*.

He begins with

“an opening chapter inspired by the Scriptures to set a proper tone”, to “then examine the actual situation of families”, then to “the Church's teaching on marriage and the family”, setting the scene for “two central chapters dedicated to love”, followed by “some pastoral approaches”,

“the raising of children” and then a key chapter (Ch 8) on “*mercy and the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us*”, concluding with “a brief discussion of family spirituality.”

The following seem to be key matters within the 52,500 words of *Amoris Laetitia*:

1. Francis is quite sophisticated in his **avoidance of doctrinal change** while opening the door to acceptance of irregular circumstances. Francis says:

*Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. (n.3)*

As Francis said in his address at the end of 2015 Synod:

*What seems normal for a bishop on one continent, is considered strange and almost scandalous- almost! - for a bishop from another; what is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident and inviolable rule in another . . .”*

2. A major message of the exhortation on which it relies heavily in the above interpretation is the need to consider “*the **concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families***”(n.36). The word ‘concrete’ is used over and over throughout the exhortation reflecting on the need for the Church’s doctrines to provide firm guidance but not to be used to judge individuals whose circumstances, practical realities and ‘concrete’ situations will vary with the diversity of cultures and circumstances.
3. Thus, on **contraception**, Francis avoids doctrinal challenge but comments, inter alia, that the Church’s “*call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation*” (n.36). That would seem to accept that the call to grow in love, the very essence of Christianity, could be more important than the begetting of children? Francis is both careful and pastoral, noting that the “*clear teaching of the Second Vatican Council still holds*” and quotes Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.50): “*[The couple] will make decisions by common counsel and effort. Let them thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already*

*born and those which the future may bring. . . . The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.”*

4. Francis, consistent with his theme of concrete realities, comments on individual conscience that “*we find it hard to make room for the **consciences of the faithful**, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.*”(n.37) That view is hardly likely to please Cardinal Pell who is known for his rejection of the role of conscience where it might not accept doctrine: in 2005, Pell stated, “*conscience is the free acceptance of the objective moral law as the basis of all our choices*”<sup>v</sup>, an apparent denial of Francis’ focus on concrete realities?
5. Francis addresses the question of reception of the **Eucharist for people who are divorced and remarried** very cautiously but again pastorally. After stating that “*a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in ‘irregular’ situations*” (N305), he includes a footnote (351) where he draws attention to a comment he made in a section of *Evangelii Gaudium* (n.47), pointing out that the Eucharist “*is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.*”
6. It is regrettable that Francis **avoids the scandal of clerical child sexual abuse** and the Church’s protection of paedophile clerics in *Amoris Laetitia*, a scandal that has destroyed the lives of many children and families. He merely notes:

*The sexual exploitation of children is yet another scandalous and perverse reality in present-day society. . . . The sexual abuse of children is all the more scandalous when it occurs in places where they ought to be most safe, particularly in families, schools, communities and Christian institutions.*

It is impossible, in my view, for the Church to engage in real reform without addressing its moral failure in its institutional governance that permitted its continuing immoral decision-making in the failure to report paedophiles, and more importantly to address the lack of accountability

and transparency in the institutional Church's governance. There appears to be some form of grave denial taking place at all levels of the hierarchy.

7. Francis touches briefly on the issue of **different sexual relationships** whilst reinforcing the Church's opposition to gay marriage. He states:

*every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided. . . . families should be given respectful pastoral guidance, so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God's will in their lives.*

On the question of gay marriage, he simply quotes the Synod fathers:

*there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family.*

I would simply observe that at least Francis accepts the reality of different sexual orientations whilst clearly failing to address how the Church can properly 'respect' that God-given sexuality and extend to "*every person, regardless of sexual orientation*" that love of all on which the exhortation is based.

8. Francis does not directly address any real **questions of governance** of the institutional Church, an omission which might be explained by the synodal focus on the family. However, *Amoris Laititia* reflects Francis' commitment to the inclusion of all the people in a synodal Church but it is not clear that he has thought sufficiently of practical approaches to better harvesting of the *sensus fidelium* (the sense of faith of the faithful). He seems also to lack an appreciation of the real role for women in the Church as a question of simple equality and also from a perspective of the desperate need for better informed decisions with gender balance at the highest levels. He does state in the 2<sup>nd</sup> para that

*The complexity of the issues that arose revealed the need for continued open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions (n.2)*

It might be significant that he apparently didn't think to include specifically governance questions. As Pope, Francis could immediately appoint some excellent progressive women theologians to half the top

positions in the Curia; he wouldn't even have to make them cardinals but he could also do that without the need for ordination, a later issue no doubt.

9. The final **chapter on Family spirituality** (Ch 9) deserves a mention. It is the shortest chapter but one that can only reward careful reflection of Francis' observations and insights. Here's a taste of his more practical wisdom and perhaps his wit:

*Life as a couple is a daily sharing in God's creative work, and each person is for the other a constant challenge from the Holy Spirit. (n.321)*

and the need

*to stop demanding of our interpersonal relationships a perfection, a purity of intentions and a consistency which we will only encounter in the Kingdom to come. (n.325)*

#### **4. So, What are the possible outcomes and next steps?**

The care and sophistication of Francis' expression throughout the Exhortation is particularly notable, with an insistent restatement and considered application of the insights of Vatican II. Our Church tried to bury the inconvenient truths of Vatican II and Francis is insisting on their application, even to the extent of diplomatically supporting quotes from his predecessors who did not usually reflect a Vatican II commitment. The next steps in that regard should be a renewed focus on synods and it is interesting to note that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference are now talking about a synod in 2020.

Francis is very balanced. Some may think he has "two-bob each way" – I suggest he is trying to be seen to recognise the basis of all the positions whilst unambiguously stressing the need for the Church to be Christ-like. He thus implicitly exposes the Church's greatest challenge of reform, namely a dysfunctional governance that has rejected accountability and transparency, that regards institutional status and its preservation as more important than Christ's fundamental message of love. It would be nice to think that a reform of governance could be the next step as it is clearly the real prior need for all reform. I believe that we have a way to go in a Church that still fails to recognise its own immorality in dealing with clerical child sexual abuse. It is likely that the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse will expose this failure.

More immediately, Francis has recently asked his Council of Cardinals to consider improvements to the process for selection of bishops. Coincidentally, due to unexplained delays in appointments, nine new Australian diocesan bishops could be appointed this year, including a new archbishop of Melbourne. (Abp Hart turns 75 in a couple of weeks). Catholics for Renewal is developing a proposal for including the people of God in these selection processes. The involvement of the People of God in the selection of bishops has a rich history in the Church and is one means of improving the governance of the Church consistent with Francis' commitment to engaging the laity.

Catholics for Renewal sought a meeting with the nuncio, Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana, to discuss these matters; regrettably, he ignored our very respectful letter and when eventually contacted by phone, declined to meet with a brusque message through his very obliging staff. We will be pursuing this project, particularly encouraging parish communities to identify the qualities they think important in a new bishop. Peter Wilkinson, who I understand will be addressing your next SIP function on parish governance matters, has written a 2-part research paper for the National Council of Priests which we have included on the Catholics for Renewal website as an informed study of the issue.

Francis' assertion of a pastoral approach respectful of the individual's circumstances and conscience is the most notable driving force of the exhortation, a refreshing change from the autocratic directions we have often seen from the institutional Church, directions without listening to the concrete experiences and insights of the people of God. We might expect more of this approach in this Year of Mercy, which Pope Francis has strategically woven into the timing of the synods.

I mentioned at the beginning that there is some reason for cautious optimism and also that major reform is now critical to our Church. My first reason for cautious optimism is a confidence that Francis is a very genuine and humble man who is not distracted from his God-given mission by status and authority.

So, where are we now on the reform journey? I would suggest that *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis' response to the synods, has certainly caused the reform train to leave the station. I am not confident that the destination has been adequately

identified or that there won't be attempts to derail the train. However, it seems to me that the faithful, the people of God, are now more empowered and that, in the terms of canon 212, the Christian faithful will exercise their "*right and even at times the duty to (express) 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)

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<sup>i</sup> Prepared May 2011 by Catholics for Renewal Inc and signed by 8,500, May – Sep 2011, 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:

### **Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI and the Catholic Bishops of Australia**

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.

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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,

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ii *Lumen gentium*, 12

iii sourced 7 Sep 2015 at:

<http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org/newman/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/on-consulting-english1.pdf>

iv Carol Glatz, *Pope: Vatican II tried to overcome ‘divorce between theology and pastoral ministry’* posted Saturday, 5 Sep 2015 Catholic Herald, at <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/09/05/pope-vatican-ii-tried-to-overcome-divorce-between-theology-and-pastoral-ministry/>

v Pell, May 2005, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/05/the-inconvenient-conscience>