Background Paper No. 6 *Author: Marilyn Hatton/Collins*	**Women, Leadership and Church**

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Women are the mainstay of the Catholic Church, the grounding base, from Mary Magdala at our Lord's tomb to Sr. Mary McKillop, together with millions of women, theologians, educators, mothers and religious sisters who have, and still show leadership and devote their lives to the service of others, delivering and speaking out for Christ's message of love and justice.

Significantly, our Catholic faith is a faith based on a theology of equality. Saint Paul says that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all are one in Jesus Christ". (Galations 3.28)

But women and the laity are not included in decision-making when it comes to Church law and doctrine because despite our theology of equality, decision-making in the Catholic Church is reserved to celibate ordained males, usually bishops.

Why is this? There is archaeological evidence of women's leadership and authority in the Catholic Church as early as the second century AD. So why now, in the 21st century, are women, not granted full equality in our Church?

In 2017, on the eve of the Catholic Church's Final Hearings to the Royal Commission on Institutional Sexual Abuse against Children (RC) women from groups in the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal (ACCCR) as responsible citizens wrote to each of the bishops who were presenting at the hearings, explaining that "scholars have demonstrated that the clericalism prevailing in the Church was formalised as late as the eleventh century, and that the exclusion of women from full participation in Church life is based on misguided theology and primitive biology; and that these misconceptions have long been discounted in Western society in favour of respect for every human being, regardless of gender, race or social standing, expressed through full legal equality. "

Our 2017 letter noted that we the laity believed "that our Church must squarely face the realities of clericalism and the Church's endemic exclusion of the laity, especially women, from full participation and decision-making in our Church." Our Church could be leading universally for full equality for women, instead of colluding with cultures where human rights and the dignity of women and the vulnerable are not recognised.

So Catholic women and the laity have demonstrated their leadership and spoken truth to power to inform our bishops of the history and scholarship. So if they didn't know before they should now.

In September this year a group of us comprising Professor John Warhurst, CC; Dr Patricia Hindmarsh WATAC; Peter Johnstone OAM; Catholics for Renewal; and myself from CSO attended a meeting with Archbishop Coleridge and Lana Turvey-Collins in Melbourne initiated by ACCCR. This was a very positive first step, in that they agreed to meet with us at a venue of our choice; to use a process of our choice; to work on the detailed agenda arising from the ACCCR Communique; and listened attentively to our words.

It was however more difficult when we asked them to identify action to demonstrate to the faithful and the Australian community that they had heard our messages and those of the RC. When we asked Archbishop Coleridge why the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference had not responded to the RC recommendations on reviewing Church governance, his response indicated that for a number of reasons it was a difficult task for them. Similarly, when we spoke about participation of women and the laity in decision-making, appointing a woman as co-chair of the Plenary Council, balancing the numbers of laity and clergy at the proposed Plenary Council meeting in Adelaide, it was clear that our bishops are as constrained by the governance and culture of the Church as are, we the laity.

So the ordained and the people of God must act together to make urgent changes to Church laws and culture. Participation of women in decision-making is a key governance issue for our Church at this time. It is hard to understand why men of such education and intelligence who have lived in a democratic society are so reluctant to act for the good of our Church.

Women and men in the renewal movement have taken up the baton and will continue to lead reform, while working with the Plenary Council initiative. Through groups like Concerned Catholics we will drive the priorities we have identified as crucial to Church renewal. International renewal groups during the 2018 Synod in Rome last month demonstrated fearlessly, organising an alternative Synod and broadcasting it to the world. They attended press conferences and spoke truth to power. They, like our groups, operate within the framework of accountability, transparency and respectful inclusiveness.

We are united in the belief that there can be no justice in a Church that does not recognise all its members as equals. As Bishop Vincent Long states we have to develop a new and relevant practice of faith for future generations. Our prayer is for the Holy Spirit to be our guide on this journey.

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