



CONCERNED CATHOLICS CANBERRA GOULBURN MEDIA RELEASE

Bishops are deceiving laity about Plenary Council agenda

31 August 2020

Catholic bishops are deceiving the laity in their failure to acknowledge the calls for reform from many committed members around Australia.

The refusal of Australia's Catholic leaders to respond to the reality and causes of the church's decline was the overwhelming view expressed by participants in a Zoom forum held by the reform group, Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn on Thursday, 27 August.

The forum was called to consider the six official discussion papers released by the bishops in response to 17,500 yet-to-be released submissions from Catholics throughout Australia, many of them distressed at the state of their church.

The calls for reform, and the bishops' responses so far, are part of the preparation for the church's Plenary Council. The council has been called to consider changes in the wake of the damning findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Chair of Concerned Catholics, Emeritus Professor John Warhurst AO said the sense of gloom and disillusion about the bishops' failure to show they were prepared to deal seriously with calls for fundamental reform was notable at the Zoom meeting.

While the process was held out as an opportunity for all Catholics to have their say, each of the central discernment groups comprised two bishops and several other institutional employees.

'The disturbing aspect is that the bishops, despite the example of Christ and despite being faced with such convincing reasons for solid reforms, have responded with deceptively bland responses, containing little in the way of substance, or credible willingness to address the need for change.

'Concerned Catholics has for three years made considered recommendations for church reform including full participation of women, transparency and accountability and an end to the toxic culture of clericalism in the church.

'The forces for change which confront the Australian church include the clear and persuasive call by the Royal Commission for fundamental reforms, a call which has come amid a sharp and continuing decline in practising Catholics in Australia.

'But perhaps most unnerving of all is that the Australian bishops are at odds with Pope Francis on several key issues, including the papal call for governance reforms and an active and assertive laity.

'Responses from the 80-odd participants in the Zoom meeting ranged from questions about how to engage the bishops effectively, to suggestions to mount an alternative reform conference to be staged alongside the official Plenary Council scheduled for Adelaide late next year.

'As one participant said: "The God bit is just great --- but the management is a big issue and needs to be replaced".'

Professor Warhurst said the meeting was inspired by three powerful presentations from reform advocates Terry Fewtrell and Andrew Phelan and teacher and author Beth Doherty.

'We heard from Andrew Phelan that the Plenary Council process has been opaque, limited in scope with a predestined outcome. The bishops have released a ground-breaking review of church governance in Australia and many of the 86 recommendations can be acted on now and do not need to wait for the plenary process which is more than a year away.

'The bishops claim the Holy Spirit for themselves. I have hope for the church but not for this process', he said.

Terry Fewtrell said there needed to be a parallel reform process to the Plenary Council given that the discussion papers produced through a bishop-stacked process failed to be anything but shallow and mediocre.

'Serious doubt was expressed that the issue of women would be dealt with seriously or in any depth. There were doubts that the concerns of the Catholic community would make it to Rome,' he said.

Beth Doherty quoted the author Brennan Manning who said that "the greatest single cause of atheism in the world today was Christians who acknowledged Jesus with their lips but denied Him by their lifestyle".

'It seems obvious that Jesus should be the model for our lifestyle. 'It seems obvious, but it's still missing from much of the Plenary Council process',” Beth said.

Professor Warhurst said the range of views expressed at the meeting was that the bishop-ordained documents were along way short of the Pope's call for bishops to express local views.

'As we heard from Terry Fewtrell, Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn have invested a lot of hope, but it is close to being lost. The input of Catholics generally has been processed out.

'The bishops' response has been a pastorally disruptive alienation affecting a large percentage of the flock.

'But the bishops should by now accept that they are talking to adult citizens who expect much more rigorous statements from their leaders.

'The dishonesty of this process is that it is being passed off for something that it is not. The Holy Spirit is not in these documents', he said.

A copy of the forum papers is available [here](#).

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