

TRANSCRIPT

**Sunday Nights Live – Presenter Bill Crews
2GB (syndicated including to 2CC Canberra)**

***Catholics yearning for change*
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**Emeritus Professor John Warhurst AM
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Bill Crews: Well average Catholics are, it seems, in the mood for change. A year-long survey has revealed an overwhelming mood for reform in the Church. John Warhurst, Chair of the group Concerned Catholics, I gather the issue of celibacy was one of the most frequently raised topics? What's the mood on it?

John Warhurst: Oh, the mood definitely is that the priesthood doesn't necessarily mean celibacy. Celibacy can be voluntary for Catholic priests. And among the 17,500 submissions and over 200,000 Catholics who participated in this consultation over this past 12 months or so there's broad support for the reform of the celibacy laws for the Catholic Church.

Crews: Now that seems at odds with the Pope's recent statements about married priests.

Warhurst: Yes, it may well be. I think the Pope also wants to hear from Catholics around the world. He's made that clear, that he's in favour of a decentralised church and Catholics in Australia are saying it loud and clear. Its also been the case in other major consultations around the world. The Amazon Synod recently, and the German Synod is also going on.

So, I think there is a mood for change in the Catholic Church. These are active Catholics. These are Catholics who are very much inside the tent, so to speak, and they are voicing their views loud and clear. I should also add that these are views that are held by many Catholic priests in Australia. The National Council of Priests, which is a representative body of Australian Catholic priests has also recently called for voluntary celibacy. So there really is a mood for change, not only among lay Catholics but also priests in Australia.

Crews: And what about women in the Church? 'Cause here again the Pope recently said no to ordination. What's the mood of Aussie Catholics?

Warhurst: Well I think the Pope certainly didn't move on ordination as the Amazon Synod had wanted him to. But the mood among ordinary Catholics in Australia is that there's a very large group of Catholics in Australia with considerable support for the ordination of women. So not only support for married clergy but also for the ordination of women.

Now there's been a long time Bill of course as you know, where Catholics haven't been encouraged to talk about these things. But given the opportunity, active Catholics are very much in favour of the ordination of women.

Crews: I was interested to read that many people felt there was a lack of leadership from bishops in the Church. What sort of leadership are people looking for mate?

Warhurst: Look I think they are looking for humble leadership and they are also looking for a listening leadership. We know bishops and Church leaders come in all shapes and sizes, but I think ultimately, they feel that these voices that we've been talking about on a whole range of issues are not being heard by Church leaders in Australia. The Church leadership, the clerical leadership and also the hierarchical leadership.

The Catholic Church in Australia is a very hierarchical organisation, which means its like a pyramid. There's a small number of people at the top and a large number at the bottom. The people at the bottom are saying 'listen to us'.

Servant leadership is another term frequently used by ordinary Catholics. They don't want their bishops.... They want them to be decisive, but they want them to be decisive having listened to the views of ordinary Catholics in the pews around the country. This has been the first opportunity really. There have been surveys, sample surveys. But this... over 200,000 people contributing to over 17,000 submissions in the Plenary Council process.

Crews: And on that leadership John, do average Catholics think there's too much authority coming from the Vatican?

Warhurst: Look, I think so. Although there's a huge support for Pope Francis among ordinary Catholics. So, I think that sure, they would like a church in Australia which has a national identity, an identity of its own.

So, I'm mainly concerned I think with leadership by Australian Catholic bishops. I think they feel that those bishops have been given the go-ahead by Pope Francis to listen and to be humble and to hear what Australian Catholics are saying. The other place of course is in the ordinary local parishes and I think there's plenty of evidence that Australian Catholics also feel that they need to be heard at the local level as well and that they should have a much larger say on what goes on at the local parish level which is the building block of the Church in Australia.

Crews: I'm talking with John Warhurst from Concerned Catholics. John a significant number of people in the survey said it was imperative for the Church to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission. Does that imply they think the Church is dragging its heels?

Warhurst: Ah, yes. I think they feel that... Well to go back to the Royal Commission, I think it was a huge shock for most Australian Catholics. The criminality and the cover ups that were revealed were a huge shock to Australian Catholics. And now they want an accelerated reaction and implementation of the reforms of the Royal Commission.

I don't think the bishops are very good in communicating what they are doing. There is Catholic Professional Standards developments and other developments. But I think the message that's loud and clear is 'get on with it, don't hesitate at all to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission, certainly don't say that things are being referred to Rome in any way, take the bit by the teeth locally and implement these recommendations as quickly as possible'.

Crews: Given everything you've said John it really points to the fact that people in the Australian Church are ready for change, if not yearning for it.

Warhurst: Look yearning's a great word. There's a real appetite. Demanding is not too strong a term either I think.

Crews: Wow. Wow.

Warhurst: They're really demanding it. I think if you go into Catholic Churches around Australia and into Catholic schools as well, you will see Bill, that there really is a desire that all of those values which we hold dear in the wider Australian community, of transparency and accountability and inclusivity – they are the values that Australian Catholics want implemented in their Church. And they're disappointed that it hasn't happened so far, certainly to the extent necessary. And they really want the next year or two, when there'll be a Plenary Council process – beginning this October – they want change to be implemented very enthusiastically.

Crews: What I really got from this survey is how passionate Catholics are about the Church.

Warhurst: Yes, they are. We're a dwindling number, you might say and it's true of many churches. But what's been revealed by this consultation process is that people have enthusiastically involved themselves in the process. Many days and nights of writing submissions, of going to meetings, of having their voice heard, going online, getting back to the organisers. It's been a long process. It's been 12 or 18 months now. And I don't think the enthusiasm has faded over that period. It's pretty remarkable Bill.

Crews: Yes, it is. How likely is, do you think, that the Church will listen and act on the feelings of Australian Catholics?

Warhurst: Well look, I've got my fingers crossed of course. We're never sure, in politics, or religion, whether the leaders have got their listening ears on. But I think they will have all been reading this report, and of the opinions of Australian Catholics, the views of Australian Catholics – I should say the PRAYERFUL opinion of Australian Catholics because they haven't gone into this process lightly. It's been a spiritual process as well as a listening process, Bill. And I think come October, when the meetings begin in earnest, lay Catholics, ordinary Catholics won't have a majority in this Council. We're reliant on bishops to hear the word and other clergy and religious leaders. I'm encouraged. We wouldn't be involved if we didn't think that this is a process that can have very positive outcomes.

Crews: God bless you mate. More strength to you and God bless everybody who replied. Thanks so much for talking to us tonight.

Warhurst: Thanks mate.

Listen to the interview [here](#).

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