

**Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform ACCCR, Rainchecked meeting 3 April 2020, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture ACCC Canberra.**

Topic: Women in the Church: a critical issue for the Plenary Council

**Dignity and Equality, the time for change is now**

Background Paper prepared for ACCCR Gathering 3 April 2020 Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Canberra ACT.(deferred to a future date.)

I value and respect Pope Francis, he is one of our best Popes and leaders, promoting equality, the gospel message and care of the most vulnerable and the environment. I pray for him. However, he does not always act for equality in the way women expect. He does not seem to understand that women are intelligent, clever, competent, and equal creations in Christ. His understanding of women is an unrealistic ideological one which leads him sometimes to making stereotyped, dismissive and offensive comments. It is cultural but not acceptable.

So, in contrast to the hope the Amazonia Synod brought to the world, the release of Pope Francis's *Querida Amazonia* was met with abject disappointment by many. I can understand and support his emphasis on the environment, but to deny Amazonia married priests after listening to the words of their women and men and getting a two thirds majority vote to act, indicates that he doesn't understand how introducing married priests would have provided life-giving Eucharist to more in a culture where the people of God crave that support in their lives. It also would have been a step towards breaking clericalism and correcting the gender imbalance in our church. It seems as though he doesn't get how both of these issues must be addressed urgently. Surely, he could have done both! The impact of this would have increased the benefits for the environment.

Some say Pope Francis has left the door open for these issues. Well...we want to push that door wide open. Equality for all has greater prominence than ever now and the urgency to make it a reality has never been greater. Women are united in the belief that there can be no justice in a church that does not treat all its members as equal. If our church recognized equality for women, there would be pressure to raise the status of women in countries where human rights are not respected. There is an accountability and justice issue here for the church. On International Women's Day this year baptized women and men, lay and religious, representing countries from across the world made sure they were visible and their voices were heard by demonstrating outside churches, including Australia, under the banner of "Dignity and Equality, the time for change is now." So every step we take starts to push that door further open.

Preparing for the 2020 Plenary and implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission it will be crucial to network with those attending to ensure that after all the time and money spent, we have effective outcomes. Pope Francis' synodal approach is one path to an inclusive church. This approach will only succeed if there

is less episcopate control. This would mean changing Canon law so that deliberative and consultative voting is equal between the baptized and the ordained. Second, women and men must be included in all decision-making; thirdly, as Sr Clare Condon says recognition of different images of God is essential or else we'll be patriarchal forever. Finally, **how** we do this is as important as **what** we do, so we must do it with respectful but authentic communication, equal in Christ. Call out any banal or inane responses, otherwise we are colluding and contributing to the clerical culture that we are trying to change.

In terms of **what** we do, someone who has thought carefully about this is Andrea Dean, former director of the ACBC Office of Participation of Women. She says that all dioceses must establish diocesan pastoral councils; that there should be a national council for the laity with responsibility for the Catholic Church in partnership with the ACBC; that there should be disciplinary measures for priests who limit women's involvement at parish level (parishes where women are no longer 'allowed' on the sanctuary and rural parishes where Eucharistic liturgies are limited); that every diocese should have a women's council whose voices are heard through two representatives at the diocesan pastoral council; and finally that inclusive language is adopted as was recommended in the ACBC Research *Women and Man one in Christ Jesus* (1999). This has still not been realised.

Francis Sullivan, former CEO of the Catholic church's Truth, Justice and Healing Council says, commenting on the gospel passage where Jesus calls for "New wine in new skins" (Matthew 9:17): "Let's shape a Church that constantly asks whether it is fit for purpose. Flexible, adaptive, attractive to the young and inquisitive. That develops ministers, pastors, deacons and priests that we can relate to, aspire to be and select from within our ranks. Let's drink of this new wine that enlivens through affirming the ever-evolving understanding of human nature, its development and manifestations. Let's applaud the wonder of sexuality, embrace it as grace and actively resist attempts to demonize, judge and divide. Let's become the wine skins of hope in a future unshackled from religiosity and enthused with a truth that's set us free" (Address to Concerned Catholics of Canberra-Goulburn. (January 2020)).

Whatever happens it is in our hands: The baptized, invoking the Holy Spirit, must claim their responsibility as the people of God and lead, the time for change is now.

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