

Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn
LAUNCH

Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy: Engaging with the Plenary Council and Beyond

By John Warhurst

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Ladies and gentlemen, good evening – I am very honoured to be here for the launch of John's book, *Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy*.

I acknowledge that we meet on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and to any other elders who may be present. I commit myself to ongoing acts of reconciliation.

When I think about being a Catholic, I return to similar places as, perhaps, many of you do.

I remember St Brigid's Quandialla, a tiny wooden church in Western NSW.

I remember Father Cork's interminable sermons on hot summer mornings as the varnish on the seats got slightly sticky, and the day Stan Nowlan stood up, and announced that since he had several hundred sheep to drench in the yards, he'd be leaving, thank you Father.

I remember when Father Greg Beath took the angel statues down from the altar and stood them, instead, in the confessional boxes halfway down the church, thereby shocking, so to speak, the be-Jesuses out of everyone not expecting to see them looming there.

I remember cups of tea and kindness and chocolate slice outside the church, my mother's picnic basket and the white cedar trees she planted in the churchyard.

I remember us all there – the neighbours and the cousins and Father Brown who'd been a Rat of Tobruk and smoked too much and drove too fast and tried to teach me how to do the cryptic crossword – unsuccessfully.

At school with the Loreto nuns I remember women of courage and brilliance, who taught me self-belief and social justice.

I remember, as many of you do, a culture, a world, a way of being that was distinctively Australian and Catholic. A world that formed and shaped so many of us.

What is left? What, now, is left?

An empty vessel? All sound and fury, signifying nothing? How has the promise of Vatican II ebbed away?

It's been a hard decade or two, hasn't it?

We've learned that the church of our childhoods concealed monstrous sins of commission and omission, sins literally beyond our imagining.

In following Christ's gospel of radical equality and humanity we've discovered we are no longer willing to accept that as Orwell would have it, all animals are equal but some are more equal than othersthat many of us will always be deeply, intrinsically, and no matter what we do and what our human gifts are..... less than.

We have seen a seemingly impregnable social edifice crumble before our eyes under the weight of those realisations.

The Church of two thousand years, the church so big and beautiful and sprawling in all its mad rich diversity and spectacular embroidered history is shrivelling in this country until its voice may be no more than a ghost on the wind, sighing away across the water.

But at its head we see a leadership often more willing to batten down the hatches than to admit that it is catastrophically wounded, that the water is rushing in on every side.

John's book argues precisely this: that the hierarchical Australian church is now all but fatally flawed because of its failure at multiple levels to commit to the principles of equality, transparency and truthfulness that are central to Australian life, and commonly held values by the whole Australian community.

It's a conundrum, this. Catholic schools burst at the seams with children, both Catholic and not, whose parents want them to be morally grounded, taught compassion and regard for others, and educated well as whole human beings.

A generation is being shaped by those values – while being unlikely to call themselves Catholics – including perhaps my own children, who are great on the social justice values, less aligned to the actual faith.

Catholic hospitals and Catholic social services are vigorous and much-loved providers of essential human care, underpinned by respect for fundamental human dignity, as are agencies like Caritas and Vinnies – among the most trusted names in Australia.

So the lay Catholics who are overwhelmingly now running these places seem to be getting something right in terms of utility and trust for the community as a whole – but the pews are increasingly empty ...and John notes that church attendance is essentially in freefall.

You know this – over the past 20 years church attendance among Catholics born in Australia and other English-speaking countries has almost halved.

One third of those attending are between 60 and 74; Mass attendance on a typical Sunday is 11.8 per cent of Catholics (9.5 per cent of men and less than 6 per cent of those aged between 20 and 34.

What growth there is happens among people of non-English speaking backgrounds – and arguably that is also subject to generational change.

I sometimes look around me on Saturday nights at Sacred Heart Cootamundra and count who will be left in another 20 years.

Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy is an attempt to dig deeply into what is going so wrong – and whether there is any hope for change.

It comes from the perspective of someone whose loyalty to the church is unquestioned but not unquestioning – and as a journalist I am bound to repeat what all of you know – that there is no more valuable person than the one who asks hard questions born of love.

John makes, in this book, such fundamental arguments that they would seem nonsensical if applied to any other institution in Australia.

He says that we need many more women in leadership positions – and this in a church that is, practically speaking, run by women in this country who represent more than 60% of most congregations.

Kristina Keneally has been urging women for some time to consider the impact of withdrawing their volunteer labour. Imagine if we stopped washing the linen, doing the flowers... running the confirmation classes... providing Scripture lessons... secretarial services... and staffing St Vincent de Paul...

Kristina told me she had been editing and even writing her parish priest's sermons... I invite you to imagine a situation where a male senator would be asked to do that for a female church leader...

But of course, the highest advisory levels in the church are occupied by men and men only and will, by virtue of our bodies alone, always exclude women. Always. We are made in the image of Christ, except when it comes to leadership.

John says that we need much greater lay participation and co-responsible governance – and this in a church where vocations have slowed to a trickle for decades and where many religious orders are in danger of complete extinction.

And yet, recent responses from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to the *Light from the Southern Cross* report on Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia say that the hierarchical structure of the church remains a given... that there can be no really substantial change even where willing, able, qualified and committed lay people stand ready to serve.

John says that we need greater transparency and accountability in all aspects of Church affairs including finance and communications – and this in a church that has concealed the most grievous criminal acts of abuse and often attempted to compensate for them, when caught out, with derisory sums for the lives destroyed.

There are the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse, which specifically identified the hierarchical nature of the church, coupled with its lack of governance, in creating “a culture of

deferential obedience” in which the protection of paedophile priests was left unchallenged.

But at a much more mundane level than this, as John notes, even Catholic media in this country and indeed this archdiocese is subject to seemingly mysterious forces of external control – responsible some years ago for removing those pesky letters to the editor from the Catholic Voice. And please note I do not blame the actual editors for this.

If you’ll permit me a side note on this, several years ago I was among a number of local journalists summoned to hear the archdiocesan response to mandatory reporting laws which would include breaking the seal of confession.

There was robust discussion with the archbishop and as I walked out with a senior priest, I turned to him and said – this won’t fly with the parents you know. Discussion on dogma aside, the parents and teachers won’t have it.

And the response I got? “Well, that depends on how you report it, Genevieve”. As though it was my duty as a Catholic to toe the line and bring others to heel. I did not, I reported the truth. My task as a journalist is to ready the pertinent facts, not form part of the mechanism of manipulation.

And it didn’t go down well in the pews and the schoolyard as we all know.

So, in this context, what does the forthcoming Plenary Council mean for Australian Catholics? Will the church genuinely listen to all voices? Will it be a time of change and hope? Or even of vigorously contested ideas?

Or will a self-selecting group huddle round the fires of the past and convince themselves once again that turning ever more closely inwards is the solution to a dangerous world where everything is someone else’s fault?

In October 2021, the Catholic Church in Australia will gather for the first Assembly of the Plenary Council to be held since the second Vatican Council.

We are told... that when the decision to hold a Plenary Council was announced, the entire People of God in Australia began preparing for this historic moment by listening to God and by listening to one another’s stories of faith.

In 2020, more than 280 members for the Plenary Council of Australia were announced, including members nominated by dioceses, eparchies, ordinariates, leaders of religious congregations, some church ministries and a personal prelature to represent local churches.

Interesting language about the entire people of God – thanks to six years of classics with the nuns, I’m fairly sure I know who the eparchies and ordinariates are, and personal prelatitudes... but those words alone speak to who is preparing these documents quite strongly on their own.

Remember those figures about who is attending Mass? Just 11 per cent of those who identify as Catholics, heavily skewed towards older people... so I think it remains to be seen how diverse and representative of the whole of the Catholic church the delegates will be.

So where are there grounds for hope beyond the Plenary Council – come what may of that process, which I fervently hope will be good, vigorous, open and fruitful?

John says of himself that he wants to be an optimist rather than a nag – and to use the good old Australian phrase – good luck with that in the current situation.

There are of course, renewal movements – and I guess that a good many of you have been part of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn – there is the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church reform.

There are capable, intelligent and passionately committed people waiting to serve and that must be good for the church as a whole – and among them priests, lay people and religious, deeply motivated by love and service.

The goodness of the church in the heart of its people is still palpable, evidenced by their refusal to give up caring, fighting and hoping – if only somebody would listen.

Controversial Benedictine nun Sister Joan Chittister recently told the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform that

“There are one of two ways that this can end. The bishops can embrace the concerns and the need for resolution or they continue to ignore the laity – at

which point the church will some day wake up in the morning and find out that the church is in fact gone.”

Or in the words of MacBeth,

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

I commend *Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy* to you as thinking Catholics who remain within the fold – who like John are hanging on – even if by our fingernails – but finding hope and working for change.