

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Hard Questions Born of Love – My Journey Through the Plenary*

By John Warhurst

May 2022

As the title suggests, *Hard Questions Born of Love --- My Journey Through the Plenary*, is no sentimental love story. But it is a testament of devotion to a cause. An eloquent advocate for Catholic Church reform in Australia, the author John Warhurst, has laid out in exhaustive and absorbing detail the five-year pursuits of concrete reform in the Church.

This is a journey that has yet to produce concrete reforms of the kind sought by Warhurst and the growing ranks of reform supporters, yet his record of the many pitfalls and modest achievements along the path serve to highlight the rationale and virtue of the case for reform.

His continued advocacy for reform is the more notable given the apathy and resistance to change of most bishops, even as mass attendances continue to shrink and despite the persuasive recommendations for reform put by the 2013 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse.

The book traces the development of the case for reform from the establishment of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn in 2017 through the numerous meetings, convocations, papers, webinars and articles by Warhurst and supporters he has led and inspired since, in league with the Australasian Coalition for Catholic Church Reform, in preparation for the Plenary Council.

The Plenary has been sold as a synodal journey – clerics and lay people walking together in the mode proposed by Pope Francis.

That shared journey has so far faltered, many would say failed, as most bishops seemed unable to accept a central role for women, rejected secular notions of democracy and a greater voice for the laity, and set an agenda for the first assembly which largely ignored and disrespected the thrust of many of the 17,500 submissions made in the Plenary consultation phase.

But as *Hard Questions Born of Love* demonstrates, the principles and power of the arguments put by Warhurst and writers such as Terry Fewtrell and Paul Collins, will not be going away whatever the outcome of the Plenary.

In looking to the second Plenary assembly in July, Warhurst says he remains ‘determined but anxious’. His experience of Church engagement over the past five years has shattered his confidence in Church consultative mechanisms. Yet he insists: ‘At all times we must continue to shine a spotlight on the crisis of the Church in Australia today at all levels.’.

Reform is just beginning, despite continued conservative attachment to the status quo.

‘Fake synodality, manipulated by the hierarchy, will prove to be worse than no synodality at all,’ he writes in a personal conclusion.

The Plenary discussions have exposed the tensions between the spiritual and secular. Warhurst has sought to coax the Church leadership to deploy the power of Christ's love in the modern world.

But as he says: ‘I can't buy the argument that we should rely on the Holy Spirit alone. My Catholic upbringing taught me to pray as if it all depended on God, but to work as if it all depended on you.’

Mark Metherell

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*Hard Questions Born of Love --- My Journey Through the Plenary* is published by Garratt Publishing. Email orders: [sales@garrattpublishing.com.au](mailto:sales@garrattpublishing.com.au).