

We can't put up a sign saying 'business as usual,'*

- Archbishop Coleridge, *The Courier-Mail*, February 8, 2017.

David Timbs

During the final days of the February 2017 Catholic Wrap Up at the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Catholic bishops made a number of undertakings both to the Commission and to their own people. These included commitments to address failures in structure, policy and procedure in order to bring these into compliance with civil requirements and to rebuild institutional trust as an honest corporate citizen. They called upon the Royal Commission to assist them with advice to address the pressing issues of their flawed episcopal governance and culture. No doubt that will be coming very soon in the Commission's Final Report.

The bishops also made it clear that they they accepted responsibility for breaking faith with the people entrusted to them, that the proportions of their failures of leadership were catastrophic. They have signalled that they will strive to be pastors who will listen closely to the concerns of their people, accept the advice and council that the Catholic community will offer them and that they will engage with the faithful in the work of reform and renewal. A specific undertaking on the part of the bishops was to welcome full, active participation by all Australian Catholics in the planning, preparation for and participation in the 2020 National Plenary Council. When papal approval for this general synod is given, Australian Catholics will be looking closely for clear signs that the bishops deliver on their promises.

“If the Church in Australia doesn't see continuous, concerted change from our leaders driven and backed by an active and demanding Catholic Community, then our Church as a religion will become a marginalized rump, stripped of credibility and relevance, left to preach to an ever aging congregation with eyes on an ever dimming here after.”

- Francis Sullivan, CEO of the *Truth Justice and Healing Council*, addressing a *Catalyst for Renewal* gathering at Hunters Hill, NSW, March 10, 2017.

The Catholic bishops of Australia are faced with unprecedented challenges to deliver on the undertakings they made before the Royal Commission Catholic Wrap up in February 2017 and to initiate internal structural and cultural reform as well as necessary civil compliance requirements. As part of this process, the bishops will also need to collaborate closely with their fellow

Catholics to bring about restorative justice and redress for the enormous damage resulting from what Perth Archbishop Timothy Costelloe has termed ‘the catastrophic failure’ of their leadership. They cannot afford to prevaricate, put up smoke screens or to make excuses to avoid the discipline of embarking on a profound conversion in their thinking and governance. An initial step in genuine *metanoia* would be for them to embrace what some are calling a ‘powerful symbolic gesture.’ An example would be a concrete acknowledgment by the bishops that they are, before anything else, members of a community of sisters and brothers, baptised equals, and not branch managers of a stratified multi-national corporation.

It is now a matter of deep concern for many Australian Catholics that, despite years of exposures, revelations, the *Victoria State Inquiry* and a *National Royal Commission*, many of the bishops have not demonstrated clearly that they have grasped the gravity of the underlying issues related to the clerical child sexual abuse and institutional coverup scandals. With a few notable exceptions, it is the bishops collectively who do not comprehend that the real problem is to be found deeply embedded in the culture of clericalism and the lack of social accountability that goes with it.

In the Catholic Church’s hierarchical structure, bishops are accountable only to the Pope, and the Pope is accountable to no one except God. Neither Popes nor bishops are accountable to the rest of the People of God and this dysfunctional social arrangement has created major obstacles in the way of reform. The system of ecclesiastical governance is so profoundly rooted in the conviction that it was divinely willed that it has assumed the status of permanence and unchangeability. Deep systemic reform, therefore, verges on both the unthinkable and the unimaginable.

The bishops at Vatican II could have provided an authoritative correction to all of this. They failed to do it properly then so the hierarchical pyramid theology is back in possession at the expense of the People of God. There is probably no other high governance structure on earth that brackets itself off from the normal expectations of accountability, transparency and responsibility than the episcopal leadership of the Catholic Church. Over the past few years, *Catholics for Renewal* have developed a comprehensive definition of governance which they often use to test the leadership performance of bishops, leaders of religious institutes and to access the health of structures they oversee:

“**Governance** is a term used to describe how organisations are directed, controlled and held to account, encompassing the leadership, authority, accountability, culture and control of an organisation. Good organisations have good governance with high levels of accountability, transparency and inclusiveness of their members, regardless of gender or other diversity.”¹

The bishops and many other religious leaders have shown little understanding of these criteria and have applied them in a very limited way. They seem to be foreign to their self-reflection, their roles and responsibilities in modern society. This has become embarrassingly evident at

the Royal Commission hearings. A number of bishops, priests and religious leaders have demonstrated an astonishing organisational moral blindness by repeatedly describing the rape of children by Church officials as simply an internal disciplinary matter, a ‘mischief,’ ‘misbehaviour’ or a ‘moral lapse.’ Few, if any, have linked the notion of ‘moral lapses’ with the fact that they are crimes in civil law.

This bewilderingly blinkered arrogance and appalling ignorance shown by some of the bishops have come at a great cost. The persuasive power of the Gospel of Jesus has been degraded and diminished by men sworn to be its guardians; the power of the Catholic community to project any effective evangelizing outreach and witness has been compromised; and the bond of trust between bishops and the faithful has been shattered perhaps beyond repair.

Bluntly, this ‘catastrophic failure’ of leadership flows from an intrinsically disordered system of Church governance and a monumental failure of good, honest citizenship in a democratic society. But the failure to understand or accept the principles of responsible, accountable governance probably stems from the sense that these ‘secular’ notions have no legitimacy in any moral estimate of the triple ‘munus,’ or vocation of the bishop: to teach, to sanctify and to rule. They now faced with the fact that their own people are both convinced and appalled that they have failed on all counts.

In May 2017, Catholics for Renewal sent an open letter to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference which included the signatures and summarized comments from over four thousand Australian laity, religious and priests from across the country. The signatories were overwhelmingly supportive, many expressing their deep grief at the betrayal and breach of trust stemming from the failed leadership by their own bishops. The Open Letter presents the Bishops Conference with a program for renewal, asking them to act immediately to:

1. Eradicate **the corrosive culture of clericalism.**
2. Become truly **accountable with full involvement of the faithful**, including diocesan pastoral councils, and assemblies or synods; with pastoral plans and annual reports.
3. Appoint **women to senior diocesan positions.**
4. Hold **diocesan synods, or (preferably) less formal assemblies with community listening sessions**, as part of normal diocesan governance (including the development of diocesan pastoral plans); and particularly, in 2018, to develop the **agenda for the planned 2020 national Plenary Council.**
5. Introduce necessary changes to **priestly formation**, including ongoing development, assessment and registration.
6. **Reconcile publicly and fully with all the victims/survivors of clerical child sexual abuse**, including their families and communities; and commit to just redress.
7. Send **an urgent delegation, including lay persons, to Pope Francis:**
 - i. urging him to **purge child sexual abuse** from the Church: legislating to require bishops to report abusers to civil authorities; and undertaking major canon law reform, including effective disciplinary provisions, and a review of priestly celibacy;

- ii. advising him of the Australian Royal Commission's **exposure of the Church's global dysfunctional governance** and the need for immediate reform; particularly its clericalist culture and lack of accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness, especially the exclusion of women from top decision-making positions; and
- iii. requesting immediate **reform of bishop selection processes** throughout the world, fully including the faithful in identifying the needs of dioceses and local selection criteria.²

The bishops' response to the Open Letter with the over four thousand signatures and hundreds of comments attached was curt, arrogant and ultimately dismissive. Furthermore, they backtracked on the commitment to send a delegation to Rome and to make serious headway in changing their byzantine culture of opaque and unaccountable governance. *Catholics for Renewal* wrote to the bishops protesting their cavalier behavior but without an adequate response. Copies of the letter were sent to the current Nuncio and to the former Nuncio to Australia (2012-2014), Archbishop Paul Gallagher, who was recalled to Rome in 2014 to take up the position of Secretary (for Relations with States) of the Vatican Secretariat of State. *Catholics for Renewal* had enjoyed a very cordial relationship with Gallagher from his time as Nuncio in Australia. Lines of communication between Archbishop Gallagher and *Catholics for Renewal* were maintained so he had sources of information, analysis and comment other than what was provided to him via the filtration processes of the Vatican bureaucracy.

Archbishop Gallagher decided that it was time to have discussions with the Australian bishops so he called Archbishop Denis Hart, President of the ACBC and the VP, Archbishop Mark Coleridge. Neville Owen, former Judge of the Supreme Court (State of Western Australia) and now president of the Bishops' *Truth, Justice and Healing Council* accompanied Hart and Coleridge. In addition to Archbishop Gallagher, the other Vatican officials present were Secretary of State, Cardinal Parolin, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and the Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The discussion were probably suitably frank and robust. They needed to be as Archbishop Coleridge has made it abundantly clear that the Church in Australia is at a tipping point principally as a direct result of the catastrophic clerical child sexual predation scandals:

‘ “And as I said to them at the meeting, we are facing the greatest crisis that the Catholic Church has faced in Australia in its relatively brief history. “The word ‘crisis’ itself means we are under both secular and sacred judgment and we have to respond to that judgment.”³

Francis Sullivan, speaking for the *Truth, Justice and Healing Council* in evidence at the Royal Commission on February 6, 2017, said:

How the Catholic Church dealt with the child sexual abuse is very much the concern and responsibility of today's leadership. The hypocrisy involved in these historic failures is grossly unbecoming a Church which seeks to be, and should be, held to its own

high standard. This data, along with all we have heard over the past four years, can only be interpreted for what it is: . . . a misguided determination by leaders at the time to put the interests of the Church ahead of the most vulnerable; and a corruption of the gospel the Church seeks to profess. As Catholics, we hang our heads in shame.”⁴

Interestingly, the ecclesiastical culture which enabled this chain of disasters is not an ancient one at all but is, rather, the reactionary result of the internal and external challenges over the past few centuries. The dogma of papal infallibility, the rapid ascendancy of sacerdotal clericalism following the French Revolution and, in more recent times, the John Paul II/Benedict XVI retreat from the ecclesial reforms of Vatican II have shifted the Church’s centre of gravity away from the notion of Peoplehood back to that of hierarchical structure. Accountability, transparency and shared responsibility were also shunted sideways and effectively archived.

It is noteworthy now that the Royal Commission has literally compelled the bishops and other religious leaders to present themselves in the forum of public accountability. What is almost incomprehensible for many Catholics was the sight of the bishops expressing extraordinary eagerness for the Royal Commission to educate them in their civil and even ecclesiastical responsibilities and how to conduct themselves as honest ethical citizens in a democratic society. It did not escape notice that, collectively, the bishops have never invited their fellow Catholics to join with them for a serious wide-ranging consultation about the challenges facing the Church and their possible solutions. As the 2020 National Plenary Council approaches, it would be the reasonable expectation of clergy and laity for the bishops to embrace synodality in all its aspects. This will be an enormous challenge for them.

One such challenge will be for the bishops, consciously and as a group, to divest themselves of the residual culture of clerical entitlement, privilege and deference which has been deeply embedded in the Australian episcopal psyche since the late 1800s ecclesiastical coup when the Irish clergy toppled the English Benedictines.⁵ When they stopped listening and learning back then, it became their normalized *modus operandi*. They need also to disabuse themselves of the fiction that at ordination they received an infused ‘grace of office’ that gives them a head start on the rest of the People of God, who have also received the gifts of the Holy Spirit including wisdom, insight and counsel and use them exceptionally well.

Common sense and sound pastoral instinct demand that the bishops accept the fact that there is in many respects a profound difference between the doctrine they teach publicly and what most Catholics actually believe and practice. Acceptance of this would be a healthy starting point and any attempt to rationalise it as the invincible ignorance of the people or the failure of the hierarchy to catechize the people adequately will fail. Doctrine has shifted and it was the Catholics in the pews and on the peripheries who did the shifting. They had worked out decades ago practical solutions to the intractable pastoral, Canonical and theological problems that the Synods of Bishops have been anguishing about particularly in recent years. They had grasped the core of *Amoris Laetitia* well before it was written, so now the Catholic people are waiting for

most of the hierarchy to abandon the defensive rhetoric and to read the signs of the times. This is not crass moral relativism infiltrating the Church, it is the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium* working its grace.

The Australian bishops may not be in a position to resist all Vatican micromanagement, control and command but they can, with a great deal of help, be transformed into the kind of modern pastors envisioned by Vatican II and encouraged by the teachings of Pope Francis.

It is imperative for the bishops to understand that as a result of the clerical sexual abuse of children scandals and other failures of leadership, they have broken faith with their people; they have lost their way as pastors and have forfeited their moral authority. They will have to re-earn all that lost trust and respect. This will depend on a number of critically important admissions as well as demonstrable changes and adjustments over the years leading up to and beyond the 2020 national plenary council. These will include wide ranging inclusive consultation with the Catholic people about the key matters of concern for them. This would be done best and most effectively through regular scheduled parish, deanery, regional and diocesan listening assemblies. Bishops and senior advisers must be at these meetings in person especially at the larger meetings; that bishops commit themselves to the immediate establishment of diocesan pastoral and expanded priests' councils and seek canonical exemptions to mandate parish councils in their dioceses. For the most part, bishops do not have to get permission from Rome to achieve most of these.

The key issues that will inform the development of an agenda for the 2020 Plenary should be the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission, submissions sent to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference by individuals and groups who long for renewal, and above all, feedback from the listening assemblies in the lead up to the plenary council. These will best reflect the local workings of the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*.⁶ Pope Francis recently addressed the Italian bishops on the importance and necessity of stripping themselves of their own prejudices and listen closely to the real situations of their people:

“Let us return to the things that truly count: faith, love for the Lord, service freely rendered with joy.” Such a focus resists “the temptation to reduce Christianity to a series of principles deprived of concreteness and to judge people without listening to them”.⁷

At their May 2017 Plenary Meeting, the ACBC gave the following welcome undertakings:

Consultation and discernment process regarding Plenary Council

The Conference discussed submissions received from Catholics who are calling for renewal and reform in the Church. Some submissions relate to the Church's response to the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, while others concern key aspects of Church life and mission and are more likely to relate to the Plenary Council. The Conference intends that the scope of consultation and discernment processes towards the Plenary Council will be inclusive of the whole

Catholic community in its breadth and diversity. The Conference determined that the matters referred to in recent submissions might properly be referred to the Plenary Council.⁸

Some conclusions

While it is encouraging to see the bishops finally opening up a formerly closed episcopal circle to the counsel, wisdom, insight and shared common faith of their sisters and brothers, it is of paramount importance, a moral imperative, for all dioceses to hold assemblies/synods of their own in preparation for 2020 plenary council: otherwise, it will be a colossal waste of time and resources and will end in disaster. These next three years offer the last chance for the bishops to demonstrate moral courage, credible leadership and to restore some degree of credibility and faith with their people.

During the past year or so, dioceses in various parts of the world have taken up the challenge of Pope Francis to adopt a synodal model of consultation and decision making at the diocesan level: Limerick, Ireland, San Diego, California and Wellington, New Zealand among others have recently conducted successful local synods. The pre-synodal preparation for the Wellington event in particular represents a benchmark of outstanding ecclesiology and pastoral courage.⁹ Other local Churches can learn much from courage, community spirit and vision of these New Zealanders.

To do the necessary, thorough preparation for the Australian national plenary council in 2020 will have to be done systematically and done well. If the real triumph of prophetic insight, sound ecclesiology, of genuine pastoral resolve and common sense are to eventuate, the bishops will have to sit down with their fellow Catholics to listen and to learn. Already, to their credit, the bishops have appointed competent women and men to facilitation and planning committees. While these appointments, with few exceptions, are representative and inclusive, the method of their selection lacks the very transparency and accountability that is central to good governance to which the bishops had committed themselves at the Royal Commission in February 2017. Despite the pledges, ‘Business as usual’ is the message.

The bishops have also promised that everything will be on the table, that everyone will have a voice and that the voice would be heard. Pope Francis has insisted on the same culture and practice of *parrhesia* (frank, fearless, open conversation) at the World Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015. The members of the Synods responded positively and responsibly when, for the first time since 1971, their gatherings were not stage managed. They embraced their authority not only to make promises but to deliver on them. The end result of their lively conversations and often heated debates was Pope Francis’ *Amoris Laetitia*.

In an August 2016 interview Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane spoke of the inspiration behind his efforts to persuade his fellow bishops to announce a National Plenary Council:

“When I went to the synod last October, listening to the very important speech the Pope gave on the morning of October 17 where he spoke about the ‘synodality’ of the Church – **that it’s not just some of the bishops some of the time, but all of the Church all of the time,**” he said. ¹⁰ (Bold mine)

John Warhurst, Chair of the Canberra based Concerned Catholics, recently issued his own caution to the bishops to consult closely and inclusively with their people if the 2020 Synod is to be fruitful: "If the 2020 Plenary Council is not a fully representative assembly of Australian Catholic voices it will prove to be a monumental waste of time and energy." ¹¹

Archbishop Coleridge has set a challenging benchmark for the 2020 National Council which the bishops cannot afford to treat as optional. They have promised not only to listen but to act decisively on the substantive issues raised and discussed in a synodal spirit over the next three years and during 2020 Plenary Council itself. If they renege on these commitments by throwing up their hands and proclaiming in the end that the necessary systemic institutional reforms are ‘beyond their competency’ then they will have compounded their collective dysfunctionality, irretrievably broken a sacred trust and placed their sisters and brothers in end-of-days palliative care.

The late Richard McBrien has often pointed out the distinction between dogma and doctrinal expanations (theology) and has offered a healthy perspective on what the Church can change and what is genuinely beyond its competency. The very few things that are formally revealed are unchangeable. Most is doctrine and it can shift and develop: "When we study history, we realize that there is very, very little about the church that cannot change." ¹²

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- 4) Statement read by Francis Sullivan, CEO, Truth Justice and Healing Council on February 2017 (Accessed 27/05/2017 <http://mediablog.catholic.org.au/statement-from-the-truth-justice-and-healing-council-to-the-royal-commission-as-part-of-case-study-50-catholic-church-authorities-in-australia>). See also, Mark Bowling, “We created the abuse church official leading response to child abuse tells priests it’s time to listen to the community,” the Catholic Leader, April, 2017 (Accessed 27/05/2017 <http://catholicleader.com.au/news/we-created-the-abuse-church-official-leading-response-to-child-sexual-abuse-tells-priests-its-time-to-listen-to-the-community>). Related speeches by Francis Sullivan published on the *Truth, Justice and Healing* website: (Accessed 03/04/2017 <http://www.tjhccouncil.org.au/media/speeches.aspx>). The global dimensions of clerical child sexual abuse and its documented long history in the Catholic Church has recently been exposed in the publication of an unprecedented study by two Australian Catholic academics and cultural historians: Desmond Cahill and Peter Wilkinson , *Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: An Interpretive Review of the Literature and Public Inquiry Reports*. Centre for Global Research School of Global, Urban and Social Studies RMIT UNIVERSITY, MELBOURNE August 2017 (Accessed 26/10/2017 www.rmit.edu.au/content/dam/rmit/documents/news/church-abuse/child-sex-abuse-and-the-catholic-church.pdf)
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- 6) Catholics for Renewal, Open Letter to the Bishops of Australia, 2 May, 2017 (Accessed 01/06/2017 <http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/open-letter>). Final report to the Bishops with comments (Accessed 01/6/2017 <http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/Reporting%20OL%20to%20Bishops%20of%20Australia%20with%20App%20comments-%20FINAL%20-%20202%20May%202017.pdf>).
- 7) “The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.” Pope Francis in: Anthony Spadaro, Interview with Pope Francis August 19, 2013 (Accessed 11/06/2017 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-franc...>). Cindy Wooden, “Faith, love and service are key to bishops’ ministry, pope tells Italians,” *CNS* 24/05/2017 (Accessed 26/05/2017 <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/05/24/faith-love-service-key-bishops-ministry-pope-tells-italians/>). For a local example of Pope Francis’s teaching in practice, see Bishop Vincent Long, “Bishop Vincent Address: the Catholic Church in post Royal Commission Australia,” *Catholic Outlook*, May 29, 2017 (Accessed 31/05/2017 <https://catholicoutlook.org/bishop-vincent-address-catholic-church-post-royal-commission-australia/>). Bishops, 80 year old West African Cardinal Bernardin Gantin said in an interview in 2006, bishops should do more "sitting, listening and praying with their own believers".
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"First of all, I came here knowing it was my first synod and so I wanted to be slow in participating because I wanted to listen attentively to how the pope defined how the synod should go. He said two things: listen attentively with humility but also to speak boldly. So I took my time just to be disciplined that way and I think that the process that was outlined worked well. I don't have the ability to compare with what happened before, but talking to bishops who were here before they have spoken of vast improvement here. I could see why this is considered an improvement because we were given total flexibility, total openness to be able to say what was on our mind in the small groups and in the general assembly, and this is the way adults should work. I think it was a great success just because of process." - Gerard O'Connell, "Cupich: At the Synod, Pope Francis 'Taught Us All How to Walk Together,'" *America Magazine*, Oct 28, 2015.), also

Archbishop Mark Coleridge: 'Archbishop Coleridge has elaborated on the Synod's theme of 'accompaniment.' In an October interview, he said: "If there was any word that came to dominate the language of the synod, it was 'accompaniment'. In other words, you have to walk with people." He then went on to add the inevitable conditional clause: "Church teaching has not been touched at its heart, and it won't be, but that doesn't mean to say it's all or nothing." Coleridge was refreshingly candid about some of the limits to comprehensive solutions to problems which are near insoluble: "It's exploring that difficult but crucial middle ground where we can walk together. We mightn't agree but we can agree that we're human and we can agree that we'll walk together, we'll listen to each other, we might even learn from each other." - CNS, "Synod Report 'Clear and Compassionate,' Archbishop Coleridge," *The Catholic Leader*, October 28, 2015. (Accessed 20/09/2017 <http://catholicleader.com.au/news/synod-report-clear-and-compassionate-archbishop-coleridge-says/>); According to Michael Sean Winters, the Synodal style of few speeches and more group discussions has had a transformative effect on the recent meeting of the USCCB, "Reflections on the USCCB Meeting: Part II," *NCR*, Nov.

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