

Catholics For Renewal Inc.

www.catholicsforrenewal.org.au



Catholics for Renewal

A Renewal Group
Open to the Spirit

This document was prepared by Peter J Wilkinson, President of Catholics for Renewal, with the assistance of current members - Michael Leahy, David Timbs, and John Costa - and former members - Peter Johnstone, Frank Burke, Garry Nolan and Greg Reynolds

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Beginnings

The origin of Catholics for Renewal began with a homily in the Parish of Westernport on a weekend in September 2010. Fr Greg Reynolds, the Parish Priest, stated that he believed it was God's will to include women in the priesthood and that denying women this right equalled 'obstructing the work of the Holy Spirit'.¹

The Archbishop of Melbourne, Denis Hart, whom Greg had informed of his intention to speak out, immediately responded asking him to recant or resign. Greg replied that he would do neither.²

When news reached Greg's former parish of Donvale, two parishioners, Frank Burke and Peter Johnstone, organised a meeting at George Maher House in Clifton Hill on 11 May 2011³ with Greg present, as well as Garry Nolan, Maria McGarvie and Emmy Silvius. The group agreed they had common concerns and decided to establish an action-oriented group with good representation of men and women.

After the meeting, Fr Bruce Duncan CSsR, Peter Wilkinson,⁴ and Maria George⁵ were approached to join the group, and a second meeting was quickly organised for 17 May 2011. The agenda was to consider a set of objectives, a name, and a strategic plan in the form of a petition.⁶ Bruce Duncan and Peter Wilkinson were present at this meeting, presented their observations, and Peter Wilkinson proposed the group's name be Catholics for Renewal.

Following this meeting the group met in Ivanhoe and at St Kevin's Parish presbytery in Templestowe to draft an *Open Letter*⁷. The first draft did not include Pope Benedict. The revised draft, however, addressed Pope Benedict XVI and the Australian bishops on several important issues: the crisis in parish ministry, the failure to implement the synodal vision of Vatican II, the tragedy of clerical child sexual abuse, certain teachings on gender and sexuality, and the Church's patriarchal attitude to women. The *Open Letter* also recommended that diocesan bishop convene a diocesan synod to discuss how the local Church might be a more authentic witness in the 21st century.⁸

¹ <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/catholic-priest-risks-his-future-by-calling-for-women-clergy-20101118-17zb3.html>

² Greg Reynolds did resign as parish priest of Westernport in August 2011 and Archbishop Hart immediately withdrew his faculties. Greg Reynolds resigned from Catholics for Renewal in mid-2013 after his excommunication. He did not want Catholics for Renewal to be compromised. He had already established Inclusive Catholics in late 2011.

³ Minutes of Meeting on 11 May 2011: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Minutes-Church-Renewal-Group-11-May-11.doc>

⁴ Peter Wilkinson was a member of Catholics for Ministry, a renewal group founded by Paul Collins and Frank Purcell. In March 2011 Peter had published a comprehensive report on Catholic Parish Ministry in Australia: <https://www.churchauthority.org/catholica-editorial-the-wilkinson-report/>

⁵ Maria George joined the group in 2014. She was deeply involved with Catalyst for Renewal at the time.

⁶ Agenda for Meeting on 17 May 2011: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Draft-agenda-5-WORD-Doc-for-Renewal-Group-Meeting-7pm-Tues-187May-2011.docx>

⁷ First Draft of Open Letter: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/C4R-18-July-2011-First-Draft-of-Open-Letter-to-Bishops-of-Australia-prepared-at-Ivanhoe-home-of-Maria-McGarvie.doc>

⁸ Final Draft of Open Letter: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/LETTER-TO-POPE-AND-BISHOPS-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-050711.docx>

First initiative - Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI and Catholic Bishops of Australia

As it was known that the Australian bishops were planning to travel to Rome in October 2011 for their obligatory *ad limina* visit, the group decided to call itself Catholics for Renewal and, in prayer, resolved to write an *Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI and the Catholic Bishops of Australia* clearly stating what it saw as the requirements for renewal.

The *Open Letter*⁹ said that it wanted a ‘renewed Church that follows Christ in every way’, a Church ‘committed to authentic collegiality and subsidiarity’, and an ‘open, transparent and accountable Church which rejects every form of discrimination, listens to its people, promotes co-responsibility in every facet of its mission and ministry and is compassionate to its core’.

The *Letter* called for ‘an outward facing Church totally committed to justice, peace, ecumenism and dialogue with other faiths’, a Church which ‘advocates unequivocally for the rights of the oppressed and disadvantaged while tending practically to their needs’, and a Church ‘where there are no more distinctions between male and female (*Gal. 3:28*) and whose leaders read well the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel’.

As a first step towards collegiality and subsidiarity, it called on every bishop to convene a diocesan synod at an early date to discuss how the local church might be a more authentic witness in the 21st century.

In drafting the *Letter*, the group was conscious of the need to determine how it would be delivered to its addressees, and before its circulation for signatures, the group requested a meeting with Archbishop Philip Wilson, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). On 23 July 2011 Archbishop Wilson and ACBC Secretary, Fr Brian Lucas, met with Peter Johnstone (President) and Peter Wilkinson (Vice-President) in Adelaide where they explained the *Open Letter’s* content and intention.

The *Letter* was launched online on 8 July 2011 and hard copies were circulated to 1282 Catholic parishes across Australia. By 3 September 2011 a total of 8164 signatures had been received: 3656 online and 4508 in hard copies from some 200 parishes. Many priests and religious signed the *Open Letter* and the male and female signatories were balanced.¹⁰

Once the signatures were collected, Catholics for Renewal’s President sent a copy of the *Open Letter* with a covering note to Archbishop Wilson, together with the count of signatures, and request that he pass the *Open Letter* to Pope Benedict XVI. In his response, Archbishop Wilson promised that he would do so during the Australian bishops’ *ad limina* visit to Rome in October.¹¹

⁹ Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI and Australian Bishops: URL: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/LETTER-TO-POPE-AND-BISHOPS-FINAL-FOR-PRINT-050711.docx>

¹⁰ Report on Response to Open Letter: <https://www.catholica.com.au/forum/index.php?id=83147> ; <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Bishops-Open-Letter-Background-and-Analysis-final-040911.docx>

¹¹ Letter of ACBC President to Peter Johnstone, 4 October 2011: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Reply-from-Ab-Wilson-re-Open-letter-dated-4-Oct-2011-scaled.jpg> .

Table of signatures to *Open Letter* by State/Territory and Online/hardcopy

| Signatures | NSW | VIC | QLD | SA | WA | TAS | NT | ACT | TOTAL |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| Online | 960 | 1420 | 638 | 241 | 149 | 45 | 9 | 194 | 3656 |
| Hard-copy | 1151 | 2002 | 834 | 301 | 124 | 65 | 0 | 31 | 4508 |
| Total | 2111 | 3422 | 1472 | 542 | 273 | 110 | 9 | 225 | 8164 |
| % of Total | 25.9% | 41.9% | 18.0% | 6.6% | 3.3% | 1.3% | 0.1% | 2.8% | 100% |

On 15 November 2011 Archbishop Wilson advised Peter Johnstone that he had attended the Secretariat of State during the *ad limina* visit and given the *Open Letter* and the Report of signatories to Monsignor Peter Wells, Assessor at the Secretariat of State.¹² When no response had been received from the Secretariat of State for over a year, Peter Johnstone wrote to Mgr Wells and sought a reply.¹³ No reply was ever received.

Incorporation and website

While the group was awaiting responses to the *Open Letter*, on 19 July 2011 it proceeded to register as an incorporated association with Consumer Affairs Victoria (Registration number: A0056409X) and at its first Annual General Meeting the members elected the first office bearers: Peter Johnstone (President), Peter Wilkinson (Vice-President), Frank Burke (Secretary) and Garry Nolan (Treasurer).

By December three new members¹⁴ had joined the group and John Costa had established and was managing a website (www.catholicsforrenewal.org) and interactive communications platform through which the group could share its analyses, editorials and advocacy in Australia and worldwide and receive feedback and suggestions from its readers. John established and Chaired the Communications Subcommittee (ideas incubator) and was Newsletter Editor.¹⁵

Note: Over time the Report on the *Open Letter* was read by 52,609 viewers on the Catholica website.

¹² Secretary of ACBC President to Peter Johnstone, 15 November 2011:

https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Message-to-Peter-Johnstone-from-Secretary-of-ACBC-President-15-November-2011_COPY.pdf ; Responses of Peter Johnstone to ACBC President: URL: https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Responses-of-Peter-Johnstone-to-Archbishop-Wilson-15-November-and-18-November-2011_COPY.pdf

¹³ Email from Peter Johnstone to Mgr Peter Wells, 5 March 2013: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Open-Letter-Follow-up-to-Curia-March-2013.docx>

¹⁴ New members were David Timbs, John Costa, and Vivien Williams.

¹⁵ An unexpected closure of the US-based website platform in September 2023 caused the loss of some important links and necessitated a major reconstruction of its unique and rich content. The current website had recovered some missing links thanks to the Australian website-host, Multimode IT. The website has to date been funded by members and generous donors.

Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR)

The impetus for Church renewal was not confined to Catholics for Renewal alone. Around Australia (and the world) there had sprung up several other such movements, suggesting the need for communication and cooperation in their common cause. To promote an Australian network, over several meetings in Melbourne in 2012, 4 renewal groups – Catholics for Ministry, Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), Catholics for Renewal, and Inclusive Catholics¹⁶ – decided to set up a coalition of renewal groups to be called the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) with 7 core principles:

I – ACCCR is a ‘coalition’ or loose network of independent and autonomous groups who want reform and renewal of the Catholic Church in Australia and throughout the world, so that it becomes more Christ-like and true to gospel values.

II – Only groups committed to church renewal are eligible to become members of ACCCR. Individuals cannot become members. ACCCR respects the autonomy, individual history, and core objectives of each member group.

III – Groups who wish to join the Coalition must accept the *Call Statement (below)*

Call Statement of Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal

Jesus inspired his disciples to form a community to proclaim and live the Good News of love, justice, equality, self-giving and hope. The institutional Church has failed to listen to its people thus alienating many through an emphasis on power, hierarchy, and discrimination, with a lack of transparency and accountability. Australian Catholics have a responsibility to act now in ways that reflect the values of the Gospel, the vision of Vatican II and the best values of Australian society.

Our Call as disciples is to be:

- A Catholic Church that reflects Jesus’ message of love, justice, equality, peace and forgiveness
- A Catholic Church in which all people are directed by their conscience and assume their responsibility for the mission of the Church
- A Catholic Church which inspires its people to recapture an experience of the mystical and the spiritual
- A Catholic Church where God-given authority is used wisely and justly to propagate the teachings of Christ, and respects the role of the People of God
- A Catholic Church where all people, men and women, single and married, minister in a spirit of co-responsibility for the Church
- A Catholic Church that influences Australian society to be ever more just, compassionate and egalitarian

¹⁶ This group was established by Greg Reynolds at end of 2011.

IV – Members of ACCCR will establish a communications network to foster collaboration, offer each other mutual support and, when deemed appropriate, provide a common voice in advocating for Church renewal.

V – ACCCR is not an organisation and does not propose or initiate projects. Only individual members groups may initiate or propose projects,

VI - The ACCCR member group which proposes the project is responsible for setting it up and seeing it through to its conclusion. It may seek the advice of other member groups and request their collaboration and support. Other member groups may choose to endorse the project but are not obliged to do so.

VII - A ‘coordinator’ will be appointed to facilitate communications between member groups, to foster and enhance cooperation and mutual support, and to keep them informed of church renewal activities in Australia and internationally.

The *Call Statement*, designed to be attractive, succinct, accessible and flexible, was carefully discerned to recognise the ‘signs of the times’ and to inspire the People of God, directed by their conscience, to assume co-responsibility and form a critical mass of the faithful for renewal in the Catholic Church in Australia.

The original 4 members of ACCCR expanded when an ACCCR plenary meeting was convened in Canberra on 23 March 2018 to plan a strategic direction and strategic priorities. Present at the meeting were 6 delegates from Catholics for Renewal¹⁷, 12 from Concerned Catholics Canberra-Goulburn, 6 from Australian Reforming Catholics (ARC), 6 from Inclusive Catholics, the Executive Officers of WATAC, and the Editor of *The Swag*, Fr Peter Maher.¹⁸

The agenda for the meeting focused on i) Small Christian Communities, ii) the Royal Commission outcomes/action, iii) the Religious Freedom Panel, iv) women in decision-making, v) a National Catholic Summit, and vi) the Plenary Council 2020/21. The common issues of new ecclesiology and dysfunctional governance permeated all the topics.

By 2019 there were 13 member groups of ACCCR and 20 members groups by 2022, including one New Zealand group. In May 2024, there were 16 members.¹⁹

Submission for a Plenary Council to be held in 2015

The crises facing the Church were becoming increasingly evident in their nature and dimensions, but both were such that isolated local initiatives within the Church were obviously inadequate for addressing them. More comprehensive means of doing so were clearly needed. In the 2012 Winter edition of *The Swag*, Peter Wilkinson (Vice-President) therefore wrote an article asking: ‘Is it time for a National Council of the Australian Catholic

¹⁷ Present at the Canberra Meeting were Peter Johnstone (President and ACCCR Convenor), Peter Wilkinson (Vice-President) Maria McGarvie, David Timbs, Maria George and John Costa

¹⁸ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/first-ACCCR-Forum17-October-2013University-House-ANU-Introductory-comments-ACCR.rtf>

¹⁹ The Group is now called the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform. Catholics for Renewal is no longer a member of ACCCR. <https://accr.com.au/members/>

Church?'.²⁰ He said it was 75 years since the last Plenary Council, enormous changes had taken place in the Universal Church, Australian society was increasingly multicultural and multifaith, attitudes within the local Catholic community on certain faith teachings and practices had changed, and religious identity had shifted markedly. But there had been no national church forum established to bring the People of God in Australia together to discuss the changes, to discern the contemporary mission and ministry of the local church, and to make plans for the years ahead. The result is 'a church drifting, not focused; a church being pushed by circumstances, not led'. He said there are two occasions when a plenary council is necessary: i) when there is need to prepare a pastoral plan; and ii) when a crisis emerges. Both occasions were now present.

Shortly after the article's publication Catholics for Renewal wrote to Archbishop Wilson, President of the ACBC with a Proposal for a 5th Plenary Council to be held in 2015, the 50th Anniversary of the Closing of Vatican II, arguing that 'this would be an important step in starting afresh from Christ through listening to the People of God, encouraging community with the bishops and clergy and promoting the co-responsibility urged by Pope Benedict'.²¹

The new ACBC President, Archbishop Denis Hart, and the ACBC General Secretary, Fr Brian Lucas, met with Peter Johnstone, Peter Wilkinson, Maria McGarvie and Dr Marie Joyce (Visiting Senior Research Fellow at ACU) on 1 June 2012 to discuss the Catholics for Renewal proposal, and at the meeting it was revealed that the Australian bishops had been considering the possibility of 'a plenary council in the context of the Year of Grace'. However, the bishops were uncertain about this proposal and revealed that they had been considering multiple proposals for an ecclesial event since 2007²². Eventually, in 2010, the Conference decided to hold a Year of Grace²³ for prayer and discernment, rather than a plenary council. In reality, it seems that the purpose of the Year of Grace was to assist the bishops to discern whether to convene a plenary council or some other national ecclesial event. The bishops eventually resolved their uncertainty on the proposal and on 29 August 2012 the ACBC President wrote to Peter Johnstone stating very bluntly: 'The ACBC Permanent Committee does not consider that a Plenary Council is opportune at this time'.²⁴ Peter Johnstone responded saying that the times are changing rapidly for the Church in Australia, particularly in light of the recent announcement of a national Royal Commission on Child Abuse.²⁵

It was not until November 2016 that the ACBC was persuaded that a Plenary Council was 'opportune'. In October 2015, Archbishop Coleridge, the ACBC Delegate who had attended the 14th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Synod on the Family in Rome, quoted a simple definition of synodality given by Pope Francis during the Synod: 'not

²⁰ Cf. *The Swag*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Winter 2023, pp. 18-19: <https://catholicchurchreformintl.org/is-it-time-for-a-plenary-or-national-council-of-the-catholic-church-in-australia/>

²¹ Letter to ACBC President with Proposal for Plenary Council in 2015: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Letter-to-ACBC-Pres-et-cc-al-re-Plenary-Council-in-2015-with-attchs-280412.docx>

²² According to Professor Ian Waters, there had been proposals for a 5th 'plenary council' since as early as 1966.

²³ [Pastoral Letter from Archbishop Philip Wilson - On a Year of Grace - ACBC MediaBlog \(catholic.org.au\)](https://www.catholic.org.au/media/blog/pastoral-letter-from-archbishop-philip-wilson-on-a-year-of-grace)

²⁴ Letter of ACBC President to Peter Johnstone, 29 August 2012: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Abp-Hart-reply-to-Cath-f-R-plenary-synod-proposal-290812-2-copy-rotated.jpg> :

²⁵ Letter to ACBC President, 21 November 2012: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Follow-up-Letter-to-ACBC-Pres-re-Plenary-Council-FINAL-221112-AA.docx>

some of bishops some of the time but all of the Church all of the time.’²⁶ Archbishop Coleridge soon persuaded the Conference that, after years of ACBC hesitancy, it was now time to move towards a ‘national ecclesial event’, and in November 2016, by a large majority (30 votes to 6), the ACBC voted to seek the approval of the Apostolic See to hold a plenary council in 2020, the first in 83 years.

The ACBC gave no specific reasons for its decision, but four factors stood out at the time as claimants on their attention: i) Pope Francis’s renewed call for a synodal church; ii) the Royal Commission’s investigation into the Catholic Church’s response to child sexual abuse; iii) the ongoing decline in regular Mass attendance across Australia (12.2 percent in 2011)²⁷ and the continuing downturn in use of the sacraments, particularly Penance and Marriage; and iv) the continuing paucity of local vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Archbishop Coleridge explained to the *Catholic Leader* that the ACBC’s decision was “a recognition that we can no longer put up a sign saying: ‘Business as usual’, for the Royal Commission has made it abundantly clear that ... “the culture has to change, and that bishops and others will have to make bold decisions about the future”.²⁸ He also said in his Knox Lecture that if bishops are to “listen to all the voices and try to bring them into harmony”, synods are necessary, even if they might reveal differences and unresolved issues, be exhausting, and struggle to find the way ahead; because, for all their messiness, synods are a serious process of discernment, can be exhilarating and refreshing in deeper ways, and should produce real fruit” (Knox Lecture, May 2016).²⁹

In July 2017, *The Swag* published Peter Wilkinson’s article on ‘Preparing for the 2020 Australian Plenary Council’ with background information on all the previous ‘particular councils’ and the canonical requirements for a future plenary council.³⁰

On 4 December 2017 Archbishop Coleridge, on behalf of the ACBC President, wrote to the Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops requesting the approval of the Apostolic See to hold a 5th plenary council. On 17 February 2018 the Prefect wrote to the ACBC President, Archbishop Hart, informing him that Pope Francis had given his approval on 13 January 2018.

²⁶ Revealed by Coleridge in his Knox Lecture in May 2016 ([the-knox-lectur21.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#)).

²⁷ In 2016 the Mass attendance rate had fallen to 11.8 per cent. [Mass-attendance-in-Australia-2016-Revised-July-2021.pdf \(catholic.org.au\)](#). In 2021, the average number of people at Mass in Australia on a typical weekend was about 417,300: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Mass-attendance-in-Australia-2021-FINAL.pdf>

²⁸ *Catholic Leader*, [Brisbane Archbishop calls for first synod for entire Catholic Church in Australia since 1937 - The Catholic Leader](#)

²⁹ Knox Lecture in May 2016 ([the-knox-lectur21.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#))

³⁰ [The Swag - FINAL - Preparing for the 2020 Australian Plenary Council.pdf](#); Peter Wilkinson also wrote a series of 10 articles in *The Swag* on all the previous provincial and plenary councils convened in Australia from 1844 to 1937: 1st Provincial Council, 1844: *The Swag*, Vol 25, No 1, Summer 2017; 2nd Provincial Council 1869: *The Swag*, Vol 26, No 1, Autumn 2018 and No 3, Spring 2018; 1st Plenary Council 1885: *The Swag*, Vol 27, No 2, Winter 2018 and No 3, Spring 2018; 2nd Plenary Council, 1895: *The Swag*, Vol 27, No 1, Autumn 2019; 3rd Plenary Council, 1905: *The Swag*, Vol 27, No 3, Spring 2019 and No 4, Summer 2019; 4th Plenary Council, 1937: *The Swag*, Vol 28, No 1, Autumn 2020 and No 2, Winter 2020; 1st Melbourne Provincial Council, 1906: *The Swag*, Vol 28, No 3, Spring 2020. Cf. [Catholica Commentary by Peter Wilkinson: Fourth Plenary Council of Australia & New Zealand, 4-12 Sep 1937 Part 1](#)

On 19 September 2018 three members of Catholics for Renewal - Peter Wilkinson (President), Maria George and David Timbs – met with Archbishop Coleridge and Cathy Jenkins (Director, Melbourne Archdiocese Office of Evangelisation) to discuss a range of issues, including a request for a dispensation from certain aspects of c. 443.³¹ Following the meeting Peter Wilkinson wrote to the ACBC President asking him to make a formal request to the Holy See for the dispensation from c. 443. It was later learnt that the ACBC had accepted this advice.

Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry (2012-13)

While the bishops were trying to make up their minds about a plenary council, one of the issues of major concern to them and to the universal church had bubbled over to the point where governments were feeling forced to intervene: the issue of clerical child sexual abuse. On 17 April 2012 the Victorian Premier announced that an Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and other Non-government Organisations was to be held, and that Public Hearings would be conducted in the Victorian Parliament from 19 October 2012 to 3 June 2013.

Catholics for Renewal immediately prepared a substantial Submission³² identifying multiple *defects* in the Catholic Church's response to child sexual abuse, and three members of Catholics for Renewal gave personal testimony at the Public Hearings.³³ The basic defect in the Church's response, according to the submission, was its failure in its identity-defining mandate of love. This, it was argued, was attributable to its flawed governance practices and the structures administering them.

The Committee found that this response by the Catholic Church constituted a 'betrayal of trust', and adjudged its effects upon the Catholic faithful thus:

³¹ Catholics for Renewal is very supportive of 2020/2021 Plenary Council. It wants to see it succeed. However, it has several concerns. These are:

- a) It must have a clear vision for what the Church in Australia needs to become;
- b) The share in the total membership of the Council for non-religious lay men and women, in balanced numbers, must be at least one third; and
- c) Adequate recognition must be given to those members with a 'consultative' vote.

Catholics for Renewal recommended:

- In order to ensure that non-religious lay women and men, in balanced numbers, have an adequate and representative official voice at the 2020/2021 Plenary Council, the ACBC should request the Holy See to grant a dispensation from some provisions of Canon 443, to: a) allow a total membership of not less than 300 persons, including bishops, other clerics, and religious and non-religious lay men and women; and b) allow the group of non-religious lay men and women, in balanced numbers, to constitute at least one third of the total Council membership. .

³² Catholics for Renewal, Submission to Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry (2012-2013): <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/491744/globalassets/sections-shared/get-involved/historical-inquiries/betrayal-of-trust/submissions/catholics-for-renewal.pdf>

³³ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/C4R-In-person-Presentation-at-Victorian-Parliamentary-Inquiry-23-January-2013.docx> The three members of Catholics for Renewal who made the in-person presentation at the Public Hearing of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry on 23 January 2013 were Peter Johnstone, Frank Burke, and Maria McGarvie.

The betrayal of trust perpetrated at a number of levels of the Church hierarchy is so completely contrary to the stated values of their religion that many parishioners find the betrayal almost impossible to acknowledge (Committee 2013, P. 9).

Moreover, in assessing whether the Catholic Church included in its organisational features factors which particularly disposed its personnel to the risk of committing child abuse, the Committee found that as an organisation it had many of the internal features of an organisation at high risk of its personnel perpetrating criminal child abuse. These features included its:

- trusted role in caring for children
- culture and power
- complex hierarchy and structure
- teachings and beliefs
- processes for responding to allegations—including the failure to report abuse to the police
- response to alleged offenders—including the relocation and movement of offenders and failure to suspend them from their duties (Committee 2013, P. XXXI).

This Report thus gave us reason to feel a degree of vindication in the reasons Catholics for Renewal had submitted to the Inquiry as the underlying factors of clerical sexual abuse of children. But the submission also included proposals to the Committee about what action the government should take in the light of its findings.

A principal *proposal* in the submission was that there must be ‘criminal reporting’ of child sexual abuse, not ‘welfare reporting’, i.e. that reporting of a reasonable belief of child sexual abuse be incumbent upon every adult citizen under criminal law, and not just upon welfare professionals under laws governing their professions.

The *Betrayal of Trust* Report made 15 recommendations in relation to: i) criminal offences, ii) civil law reforms, iii) reportable conduct schemes, iv) child safe organisations, and v) redress. The Victorian Government subsequently committed to implementing all recommendations in the Report. Among those recommendations was 23.1 which would have the effect of modifying the then existing law relating to child abuse (Committee 2013, P. 502):

The Committee recommends that the Victorian Government consider amending Section 326 of the *Crimes Act 1958 (Vic)* to remove the element of ‘gain’, to ensure that a person who fails to report a serious indictable offence involving the abuse of a child will be guilty of an offence.

The Committee also made a finding that the creation of a new offence of ‘child endangerment’ could bring failure to report risk of child abuse within reach of Victorian criminal law:

Finding 23.4 The creation of the offence of child endangerment will impose criminal responsibility on those who act understanding that their action may pose a substantial and unjustifiable risk of harm to children, but who disregarded that risk and acted accordingly (Committee 2013, P. 503).

Pursuant to this finding, the Committee made the following recommendation:

Recommendation 23.2 The Committee recommends that the Victorian Government consider the introduction of a criminal offence relating to child endangerment to cover relevant wanton or reckless behaviour in situations:

- when a person is aware of and consciously disregards a substantial and unjustifiable risk that their acts or omissions placed a child in a situation that might endanger the child's life, health, welfare, morals, or emotional well-being
- where the risk is of such a nature and degree that disregarding the risk would constitute a gross deviation from the standard of conduct that a reasonable person would observe in the situation.

The Committee thus responded positively to our submission that reporting of a perceived risk of child abuse be made a criminal matter under Victorian law.

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2012-2017)

The scandal of clerical child abuse was not removed, however, by the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry, nor by any of the other similar inquiries conducted in other states around that time. As a reform group within the Catholic Church, Catholics for Renewal discerned the increasing exposures of clerical child abuse, and their cover-up by Church authorities as a call from the Spirit to continue our work of illuminating, as far as we were able, the underlying causes of this abuse within the beliefs, structures and practices of the Church. We saw the interventions of governments to abuse-related matters in public institutions like churches as signs of the call of the Spirit to individuals and groups like ours to rise up in defence of our most vulnerable citizens against the predations of institutions that had become corrupt. We therefore welcomed the news that on 12 November 2012, Prime Minister Julia Gillard had established the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, following revelations that the abuse had taken place across the nation.

Catholics for Renewal immediately considered how it might respond, convinced that the fundamental reason for the failure of the Church in Australia was that it was no longer a credible sign of the Kingdom of God, and that its own governance was dysfunctional, having failed to implement Vatican II's vision of a collegial, synodal, and co-responsible church.

In its judgment, the Australian bishops had continued to operate as independent monarchs, had avoided the synodal form of governance which Pope Francis was calling for, and were permeated with the pernicious culture and mindset of 'clericalism'.

Shortly after the establishment of the Royal Commission, Peter Wilkinson (Vice-President of Catholics for Renewal) and Des Cahill (Emeritus Professor, RMIT) were commissioned by Royal Commission Chair, Justice Peter McClellan, to research and publish under the auspices of RMIT an historical perspective on *Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: An*

*Interpretative Review of the Literature and Public Inquiry Reports.*³⁴ At a meeting with the Chair in Ballarat in May 2015 during Case Study 28, Peter Wilkinson was further requested to gather all official documentation on the formation of candidates for the priesthood.

Catholics for Renewal made submissions to the Royal Commission on Issues Paper No. 2: Towards Healing (August 2013)³⁵; Issues Paper No. 6: Redress Scheme (May 2014)³⁶; and the Consultation Paper on Redress and Litigation (January 2015).³⁷ The assistant to the Chair of the Royal Commission, Justice Peter McClellan, contacted the President of Catholics for Renewal, Peter Johnstone, and invited Peter, David Timbs and Maria McGarvie to meet with him in Sydney. The meeting took place on 8 August 2015.³⁸

Issues Paper No. 11: The Catholic Church Final Hearing (February 2016)³⁹ was released on 5 May 2016 and Catholics for Renewal prepared and forwarded its Submission in June 2016.⁴⁰

Up until mid-2016 the Royal Commission had been largely occupied with investigating the thousands of case studies of child sexual abuse in both secular and religious institutions but had done little examination of the underlying causality.

³⁴ Des Cahill and Peter Wilkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: An Interpretative Review of the Literature and Public Inquiry Reports*, RMIT, August 2016. This document contains a review and analysis of 10 Australian and 17 international reports on child sexual abuse in religious settings, a history of the seal of confession, and a history of priestly formation:

https://www.bing.com/search?q=rmit%2C+child+sexual+abuse&cvid=9bcb582765eb481083ebfdcf21dbb950&gs_lcrp=EgRIZGdlKgYIABBFdKyBggAEEUYOTIGCAEQABhAMgYIAhAAGEAyCAGDEOkHGPxV0gEJMTU3NjVqMG0qAllsAIB&FORM=ANAB01&PC=DCTS

Peter Wilkinson (President of Catholics for Renewal) and Des Cahill were later invited to give evidence to the New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in State Care and In the Care of Faith-based Institutions. They presented their evidence in person at a Public Hearing on 8 November 2019 at which Peter Wilkinson referred to a document issued by the Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See on 29 June 2019 titled Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the importance of the Internal Forum and the inviolability of the Sacramental Seal. The English text is readable at:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/tribunals/apost_penit/documents/rc_trib_appen_pro_20190629_for_ointerno_en.html

³⁵ Catholics for Renewal, Submission to The Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in response to Issues Paper 2: Towards Healing, August 2013:

https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/documents/SAC010913final%5B1%5D.pdf

³⁶ Catholics for Renewal, Submission to Royal Commission on Issues Paper No.6: Redress Schemes May 2014:

https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/documents/redress%20submission.pdf

³⁷ Catholics for Renewal, Submission to Royal Commission on Consultation Paper on Redress and Litigation, January 2015:

https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/documents/Redress%20Consultation%20Paper%20-%20CathfR%20submission%20final%20-080315-3.pdf

³⁸ Preparatory Notes for the meeting with Justice Peter McClellan: URL:

<https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/C4R-Preparatory-Notes-for-Meeting-with-RC-Chair-at-Sydney-14-August-050815-1.docx>

³⁹ [https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-](https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/Issues%20Paper%2011%20-%20Catholic%20Church%20Final%20Hearing.pdf)

<list/Issues%20Paper%2011%20-%20Catholic%20Church%20Final%20Hearing.pdf>

⁴⁰ Catholics for Renewal, Submission to Royal Commission on Issues Paper No 11, The Catholic Church Final Hearing, June 2016:

https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/SUBM.2415.001.0001_R.pdf; Abridged Version of Submission, February 2017:

https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/documents/CathfR%20RC%20abridged%20submission%2013%20July16.pdf

The Catholic hierarchy's official line was that the sexual abuse of children was 'a sin', 'a moral failure' and the perpetrators were only 'a few bad apples'. There was nothing wrong with the Church's structures or management practices.

Catholics for Renewal's conclusion, however, was that the principal underlying causes of clerical child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church were its culture of hierarchical clericalism and dysfunctional governance. It also, argued that child sexual abuse was a 'crime' not just a moral lapse and that the Catholic Church's governance structures and procedures were systemically flawed and compromised. The Church had become crippled by its hierarchical authoritarianism, its inflated sense of entitlement and its lack of public accountability and transparency. Furthermore, the Catholic hierarchy had historically claimed that the bishops were the gatekeepers of the highest moral code on earth and that God provides them with a special 'grace of office' to guide them in their calling to teach, rule and sanctify. Catholics for Renewal argued that the Church leadership had fundamentally failed its God-given mandate and that they had led the Church 'off Mission'.⁴¹

The Royal Commission Chair was most interested in the conclusions of Catholics for Renewal, and they suggested that the Royal Commission's inquiries should be directed towards questioning the Catholic bishops about the deeper systemic moral and structural nature of the Catholic Church's autocratic governance, the culture of clericalism and the formation of its clergy. Soon after, a turning point became evident in the direction of the Royal Commission.⁴²

Peter Johnstone gave in-person testimony during the February 2017 Public Hearing on Case Study 50: Institutional review of Catholic Church authorities.⁴³

In its *Final Report*⁴⁴ the Royal Commission accepted the view proposed by Catholics for Renewal and others that dysfunctional governance played a significant role in child sexual abuse within the Church. It made the following call on the Church authorities:

In accordance with contemporary standards of good governance, we encourage the Catholic Church in Australia to explore and develop ways in which its structures and practices of governance may be made more accountable, more transparent, more meaningfully consultative and more participatory, including at the diocesan and parish level (McClellan 2017, 6, 2, P. 44).

⁴¹ The late American historical theologian Richard Gaillardetz, clearly identified the fundamental misunderstanding and mishandling of the clerical child sexual abuse disaster: "The episcopal malfeasance that let bishops cover up instances of sexual abuse was too often motivated by a misguided fear of scandal. The ecclesial preoccupation with the vigorous defence of the church's good reputation blinded too many leaders to the harm that was being done and ended up doing far greater damage to the very reputation they sought to protect." - *An Unfinished Council. Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism*, (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN. 2015) 144.

⁴² Francis Sullivan revealed the underlying causes and enablers of clerical child sexual abuse in Australia: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/guest-voices/australian-church-take-abuse-commission-report-seriously-or-risk-irrelevance>

⁴³ [Case Study 50: Institutional review of Catholic Church authorities | Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse \(childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au\)](https://www.ncronline.org/news/guest-voices/australian-church-take-abuse-commission-report-seriously-or-risk-irrelevance)

⁴⁴ [Final report | Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](https://www.ncronline.org/news/guest-voices/australian-church-take-abuse-commission-report-seriously-or-risk-irrelevance)

The Commission described such failures at the episcopal level in relation to responding to child sexual abuse as ‘catastrophic’ (McClellan 2017, P. 44). The condemnation of both the key selection criterion and their execution of their role is expressed in the severest of terms:

It appears that some candidates for leadership positions have been selected on the basis of their adherence to specific aspects of church doctrine and their commitment to the defence and promotion of the institutional Catholic Church, rather than on their capacity for leadership. This meant that some bishops were ill equipped and unprepared for the challenges of dealing with child sexual abuse and responding to emerging claims. Catholic Church leaders in Australia have prioritised protecting the reputation of the church at the expense of the welfare of individuals when responding to child sexual abuse (McClellan 2017, p. 44).

The Royal Commission also accepted the submission made by Catholics for Renewal and many others that ‘clericalism’ was a key factor in the Catholic Church’s response to child sexual abuse by its clergy. Defining it as ‘the idealisation of the priesthood, and by extension, the idealisation of the Catholic Church’, the Commission condemned clericalism for being ‘linked to a sense of entitlement, superiority and exclusion, and abuse of power’ (McClellan 2017, p. 43). The Commissioners also saw its association with priesthood as a significant contributing factor to priestly abuse:

The theological notion that the priest undergoes an ‘ontological change’ at ordination, so that he is different to ordinary human beings and permanently a priest, is a dangerous component of the culture of clericalism. The notion that the priest is a sacred person contributed to exaggerated levels of unregulated power and trust which perpetrators of child sexual abuse were able to exploit (ibid.).

Grateful though we were to see the Royal Commission embrace so fully the thesis that we and other reformers had been expressing on clericalism, it gave us no pleasure read the Commission’s graphic exposure of the perversity of its effects on the responses of the bishops and religious superiors to child sexual abuse:

Clericalism caused some bishops and religious superiors to identify with perpetrators of child sexual abuse rather than victims and their families, and in some cases led to denial that clergy and religious were capable of child sexual abuse. It was the culture of clericalism that led bishops and religious superiors to attempt to avoid public scandal to protect the reputation of the Catholic Church and the status of the priesthood (ibid.).

The concern of Catholics for Renewal with clerical child sexual abuse had preceded the Royal Commission, and the promotion of reforms recommended by the Commission has remained a significant commitment of the group in the years since its conclusion. Some of the expressions of that commitment are recorded in the following sections.

Recommendations of Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry and Royal Commission

The *Betrayal of Trust* Report⁴⁵ made 15 recommendations to the State Government which accepted all of them and quickly prepared legislation for prevention, response, and access to justice. New laws were introduced for grooming and for persons responsible for criminal reporting, including ministers of religion.

The Royal Commission's *Final Report*⁴⁶ made 21 recommendations specifically directed to the Catholic Church in Australia, including a review of governance and improved criteria for the selection, screening and formation of candidates for the priesthood. A further 27 recommendations were made for all religious institutions in Australia, including Child Safe Standards, complaint handling, and risk assessment.

The Royal Commission and the *Betrayal of Trust* Report both recommended that persons in religious ministry be included in the laws of all jurisdictions as a mandatory reporter group.

Catholics for Renewal endorsed all the recommendations of the Royal Commission and *Betrayal of Trust* and made a submission to the WA State Government in July 2020⁴⁷ endorsing the inclusion of 'persons in religious ministry' in the mandatory reporter group.

In its September 2020 editorial⁴⁸ Catholics for Renewal stated that while it respected and valued the seal of confession, under Christ's Law of Charity, the integrity and safety of the child must take precedence over the integrity of the seal, and therefore Australian law should oblige priests to report their knowledge or belief of allegations acquired in the rite of confession to the civil authorities.

Catholics for Renewal December 2020 editorial⁴⁹ highlighted some of the most horrific findings of the Victorian Inquiry and the Royal Commission, and in evidence presented to the Royal Commission, one archbishop admitted that the cover-up of clerical child sexual abuse was 'bordering on criminal negligence'⁵⁰ while another archbishop, in a 2019 BBC interview, said that the Australian bishops' credibility has been 'shot to pieces'.

⁴⁵ Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry Report, *Betrayal of Trust*: [government response to the fcdc inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/government_response_to_the_fcdc_inquiry_into_the_handling_of_child_abuse_by_religious_and_other_non-government_organisations.pdf) (parliament.vic.gov.au)

⁴⁶ Royal Commission Final Report: <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/child-abuse/final-report>

⁴⁷ Catholics for Renewal, Submission to the WA Parliament on THE CHILDREN AND COMMUNITY SERVICES AMENDMENT BILL 2019:

[https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/lulnquiryPublicSubmissions/D410733D3F8D8A64482585B2002A3471/\\$file/00390_Redacted.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/lulnquiryPublicSubmissions/D410733D3F8D8A64482585B2002A3471/$file/00390_Redacted.pdf)

⁴⁸ Catholics for Renewal, September 2020 Editorial: https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-september-2020.html

⁴⁹ Catholics for Renewal, December 2020 Editorial: https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-december-2020.html

⁵⁰ <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/Case%20Study%2050%20-%20Transcript%20-%20Institutional%20review%20of%20Catholic%20Church%20authorities%20-%20Day%20255%20-%2024022017.pdf>

In early January 2021 the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference published a new *National Response Protocol*⁵¹ to replace the two previous protocols and to be implemented by end-2021. The Victorian Bishops' proposed model for implementing the National Response Protocol in Victoria was set out in a document titled *Pathways Victoria*.⁵² Catholics for Renewal and For the Innocents⁵³ were very doubtful of the ability of this (Cribbes 2021) new scheme to provide justice and healing to victims/survivors of sexual abuse by church personnel, given the abysmal failures of the bishops to respond honestly, justly and pastorally to complainants in the past and the inability of any church-run scheme to overcome the institutional imperatives of self-protection. Furthermore, it had been designed without the input of victims or their supporters. On 14 June 2021 Catholics for Renewal and For the Innocents put forward to the Victorian State Government a proposal for a scheme independent of the Catholic Church for handling complaints of sexual abuse by Catholic Church personnel titled *Let Justice Be Seen To Be Done*.⁵⁴

The proposal conceded that some elements of the *Pathways* scheme could be retained but was very concerned about the Catholic Church's commitment to 'zero tolerance', and the claimed independence of *Pathways'* investigative, adjudicatory, and redress-determining structures and processes. The view of both groups was that the Catholic Church is neither competent nor sufficiently trusted or independent to conduct the juridical aspects of any response scheme. An alternative proposal was the model designed by *Sport Australia*⁵⁵ for responding to victims/survivors which satisfied the juridical requirements of a scheme, although some fleshing out might be required. Neither victims/survivors nor the Church could afford another failed scheme, especially one ultimately controlled by the Church. Such a failure would be seen as a further betrayal of trust which no conceivable effort by the Church could regain.

Unfortunately, the Victorian State Government did not give a response to the proposal due to some internal confusion.

In its December 2023 editorial⁵⁶ Catholics for Renewal expressed serious concern that the Australian bishops and leaders of the religious congregations were not 'walking with but walking away from victims of clerical child sexual abuse' and questioned the sincerity of the 'unreserved apology' in Decree 2 of the Plenary Council⁵⁷ and the commitment 'to doing whatever we can to promote healing for those so gravely harmed and to make the Church a

⁵¹ ACBC and CRA, *The National Response Protocol: Church Authorities in Australia responding to concerns and allegations of child abuse*, Adopted by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in November 2020, Approval of the Holy See requested January 2021, For implementation from February 2021; [NATIONAL RESPONSE PROTOCOL - January 2021.pdf - Google Drive](#)

⁵² <https://www.pathwaysvictoria.com/>

⁵³ *For the Innocents* is a support group for victims of child sexual abuse

⁵⁴ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Pathways-LET-JUSTICE-BE-SEEN-TO-BE-DONE-CLEAN-FINAL-13-June-2021.docx>

⁵⁵ *Change the Routine: Report on the Independent Review into Gymnastics in Australia*, Australian Human Rights Commission, Sydney, 2021: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/change-routine-report-independent-review-gymnastics>

⁵⁶ Catholics for Renewal, [Editorial-December 2023 – Catholics For Renewal](#)

⁵⁷ <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/>

truly safe place for everyone’ and ‘to respond transparently, with justice and compassion, to those who have been abused’.

The editorial stated that the apologies made by the bishops and congregational leaders were anything but ‘unreserved’ but tainted by various conditions: compensation delayed for years, settlements refused under the threat of permanent stays of proceedings if the perpetrator is either dead or demented, and limits on counselling services. Both also continue to conceal the details of what they knew about the abuses and the steps they took to cover them up. To justify this resistance, they argue that they need to protect their finances to support their schools and parishes for the Church’s mission of bringing the ‘good news’ to the poor. Not included in ‘the poor’, we held, are the victims of clerical sexual abuse, who must come to terms with the supposedly ‘reasonable’ limits of justice and compassion in respect of the compensation and redress on offer, lest the dioceses and congregations fall into bankruptcy.

The editorial stated that unless the bishops and the congregational leaders were prepared to abandon their resistance to just redress, and to listen to the Royal Commission’s findings about the role played by the doctrinal and disciplinary aspects of church culture in child sexual abuse, victims were entitled to dismiss such declarations as hypocritical rhetoric. For when the ‘unconditional’ commitment to walk with victims turns out to be conditional, the victims are entitled to feel that the Church is again *walking away* from them.

A similar position to Catholics for Renewal was reflected in the statements of two more authoritative sources. The Synod of Bishops October 2023 ⁵⁸*Letter to the People of God* affirmed that ‘the Church of our time has the duty to listen to those who have been victims of abuse committed by members of the ecclesial body, and to commit herself concretely and structurally to ensuring that this does not happen again’. More recently, Primate of Ireland, Archbishop Dermot Farrell, spoke of a ‘culture of denial’⁵⁹ in the Catholic Church with respect to sexual abuse. Not just the call of the Gospel, but basic human justice, demands that we not dismiss the witness of those who suffered abuse, but recognise their continuing hurt and suffering, and begin to come to terms with the fact that this darkness has roots deep within ourselves. The ordinary faithful have named it for what it is: an open wound. Until we truly own what has happened, the necessary change of heart will remain on the surface – a ‘superficial change of heart’ is no change of heart at all.

The Light from the Southern Cross

A very important effort at fulfilling a recommendation of the Royal Commission was a review of Church governance commissioned by the Australian bishops and conducted by an expert panel. The Governance Review Project Team (GRPT) published its report titled *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia* on 15 August 2020.⁶⁰ It was both comprehensive and detailed and contained 86 practical recommendations. Italian theologian Massimo Faggioli was invited to advise on the

⁵⁸ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2023-10/letter-to-the-people-of-god.html?>

⁵⁹ <https://cathnews.com/2024/09/24/irish-archbishop-says-church-renewal-impossible-until-abuse-crisis-addressed/>

⁶⁰ [The+Light+from+the+Southern+Cross+FINAL+\(15+August+2020\).pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

drafting of the report and on 19 May 2020 wrote that the study's importance goes well beyond the Australia context.⁶¹

Catholics for Renewal responded with its August 2020 Editorial⁶² stating there was 'No time to delay local implementation of the Church Governance Report'.

The exposure of the clerical child sexual abuse scandal for the crisis that it truly was by the media exposés and the official inquiries to which they gave rise made the conduct of an Australian Plenary Council all the more urgent. The publication of its agenda and working document was thus anxiously awaited in all quarters of the Church.

Open Letter to Australian Bishops: *Listen and Act Now*

In March 2017 Catholics for Renewal began its own preparation for the Plenary Council by publishing a second *Open Letter*⁶³ urging the Australian Bishops to 'Listen and Act Now' on 7 critical issues: i) eradicate the corrosive culture of clericalism, ii) commit to accountability, iii) appoint women to senior official positions, iv) hold diocesan synods and assemblies, v) remodel formation for priesthood, vi) apologise publicly to the victims of abuse and their families, and vii) send a delegation (including laity) to Pope Francis to mandate zero tolerance for predator priests and reform of episcopal selections. It also asked each bishop to hold a diocesan synod or assembly prior to the council and for the plenary council organisers to circulate an invitation for submissions.

Catholics for Renewal sent *A Report to the Bishops of Australia on an Open Letter* which contained 244 comments from Australian Catholics,⁶⁴ and sent another Letter to the bishops advising them that the *Open Letter* had received over 3700 signatures.⁶⁵ At the ACBC's May 2017 Plenary Meeting the bishops indicated that some of the issues raised in the *Open Letter*, such as greater transparency, accountability and inclusivity, and greater participation of the faithful in the selection of bishops, could be included in the plenary council's agenda. But the bishops did not want a politicized process for the agenda, for a synod is first and foremost a 'sacred' gathering where the participants open their hearts and minds to the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). It is a moment to discern what the Spirit is saying to our Church at this time. The invitation for submissions appears to have also been considered. The bishops set about their own preparations for the Plenary Council in pursuit of these aims.

⁶¹ Massimo Faggioli; <https://www.ncronline.org/news/guest-voices/new-australian-report-may-help-church-find-its-way-out-abuse-crisis>

⁶² Catholics for Renewal, August 2020 Editorial: [C4R-Editorial-23-August-2020-reconstructed-less-original-image-20241018.pdf](#)

⁶³ Catholics for Renewal, 2017 Open Letter to Australian Bishops: [Open-Letter-Aust-Bps-MASTER-Consultation-Prog-FINAL-17-March-2017_20241009.pdf](#) Cf. *The Swag*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Winter 2017, p.15.

⁶⁴ Catholics for Renewal, *A Report to the Bishops of Australia on an Open Letter from Catholics of Australia: Reporting OL to Bishops of Australia with App comments- FINAL - 2 May 2017.pdf*

⁶⁵ Letter of Peter Johnstone to ACBC response to Open Letter: [20170619 CFR Response to ACBC OL Response 1300-2.pdf](#)

Plenary Council Preparatory Stage

At the ACBC's November 2016 Plenary Meeting the decision was made to establish a special Plenary Council Bishops Commission⁶⁶ and to appoint a 3-person Facilitation Team⁶⁷ who would coordinate and guide the Preparatory Stage. In June 2017 the ACBC also appointed a 14-member Plenary Council Executive Committee⁶⁸ who would advise and work with the Bishops Commission during the Preparatory Stage and set the dates and locations for two sessions⁶⁹ of the Council. These were 11-17 October 2020 in Adelaide, and May 2021 in Sydney.

The two most important preparatory items were: i) setting the agenda, and ii) who to call to the council. The latter was straightforward, as the rules (c. 443) were in the Code of Canon Law. For the agenda, the ACBC stated that it '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'.⁷⁰ Archbishop Coleridge said that he hoped the agenda "will be generated by genuine consultation of the whole Church". But he had already pointed to some issues which he believed would need to be addressed if the Church in Australia is to stop the drift, revive hope and set a vision:

- better understanding the culture in which the Church must proclaim the Gospel
- how to deal with the fact that mass civic Christianity is 'over'
- facing the fact that the Catholic Church is not the power in Australia that it once was
- planning the future of the Church in Australia at a very complex time
- developing and revitalizing parish life and mission
- confronting the critical issues of our times, such as same-sex marriage
- the Church's response to the findings of the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse
- contemporary issues of justice, peace, development and the environment
- becoming a more missionary church, not one retiring behind defensive walls
- reviewing ordained ministry and the diminishment of apostolic orders, and
- examining the relationship between newer and older Catholic communities/parishes.⁷¹

The ACBC had also decided that the general theme for the agenda would be the future of the Catholic Church in Australia using a matrix drawn from *Evangelii Gaudium*:

- What does it mean to be a missionary Church?
- What does it mean to be a merciful and pastoral Church?
- What does it mean to be an inclusive and synodal Church?

⁶⁶ Members of the Plenary Council Bishops Commission were Archbishops Coleridge (Chair), Wilson and Costelloe, and Bishops Long, Kennedy and Tarabay.

⁶⁷ The members of the Facilitation Team were Ms Lana Turvey-Collins, Fr Noel Connolly SSC, and Mr Peter Gates.

⁶⁸ The members of the Plenary Council Executive Committee included a priest, a religious brother, 2 religious sisters, and 10 lay men and women, with a variety of competencies and experiences.

⁶⁹ Neither of these sessions eventuated as planned due to COVID 19. The Adelaide session was held online; and the Sydney event was postponed until July 2022.

⁷⁰ Minutes of ACBC Plenary Meeting, 4-11 May 2017.

⁷¹ *The Catholic Leader*, 17 August 2016

- What does it mean to be a prayerful and discerning Church?
- What does it mean to be a poor Church for the poor?
- What does it mean to be a joyful Church?

Phase 1: Catholics for Renewal's Response to the question: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?*

Phase 1 - Listening and Dialogue - of the Preparatory Stage opened on 20 May 2018 with an invitation to mainly Catholics in Australia to respond to the question: "What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?" It was due to run until 6 March 2019 but was extended to 13 March 2019.

Having advocated for a Plenary Council for so long, Catholics for Renewal believed it was a graced opportunity to renew the Catholic Church in Australia and immediately committed to making a substantial contribution in a formal submission.

With prayer and discernment, the group adopted the methodology of Vatican II: *ressourcement* (returning to the sources), *aggiornamento* (updating), and reading the 'signs of the times'. The title of the submission was *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together* and comprised 5 Parts.

In Part 1 Catholics for Renewal identified what it thought were the critical 'signs of the times', the most significant being that the Church in Australia had gone 'off mission' and must urgently get back to carrying forward the work of Christ – God's mission and the Kingdom of God must be the primary focus of the Plenary Council.

In Part 2 the submission reflected on *Lumen Gentium*⁷² and *Gaudium et Spes*⁷³, the theology of the People of God, Paul's charter of equality and freedom, the laity, and the rights and duties of Christ's faithful. It proposed a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities and made 10 recommendations.

In Part 3 the submission identified the existing dysfunctional governance processes in the Catholic Church, insisted that there would have to be greater inclusion, especially of women, transparency, accountability, co-responsibility, subsidiarity, and synodal structures, especially diocesan pastoral councils and diocesan synods.⁷⁴ Part 3 contained 21 recommendations.

Part 4 called for better pastoral leadership especially from bishops, the eradication of clericalism, and better formation of candidates for the priesthood. It also recommended that

⁷² Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:
https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

⁷³ Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:
https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

⁷⁴ Few dioceses had diocesan pastoral councils in 2018 and only 4 had convened a diocesan synod since Vatican II.

the ACBC request the Holy See to consider voluntary celibacy for diocesan clergy (Royal Commission Rec. 16.18), the ordination of '*virī probati*' (suitable and mature married men of deep faith and proven virtue who are natural leaders and have the support and respect of their local communities), and openness to the ordination of suitable and mature single, married and widowed women to the permanent diaconate.

Part 4 also identified the huge *crisis* in parish ministry, the shortage of priests, inadequate lay pastoral ministers, the impending *disaster* of a massive downturn in Mass attendance, and large numbers of young people baptised and raised as Catholics deidentifying as 'Catholic' in the Census. Part 4 contained 67 recommendations.

Part 5 outlined the canonical processes for calling members to a plenary council and recommended that the ACBC request an exemption from certain aspects of C.443 to ensure that at least one third of those to be called to the Council were non-religious lay men and women, and that these numbers be gender balanced. Part 5 included 17 recommendations.

A series of tables were also included to illustrate the depth of the crisis.

The essence of the submission was an attempt to write a document of substance incorporating all of Catholics for Renewal's previous proposals for reform, but with more data, more careful analysis in the light of the Gospel, more recommendations, and all under the prompting of the Spirit.

Catholics for Renewal called for practical proposals: well-founded on scripture and theology, all 'reasonable' and 'doable', and (for the most part) within the competence of a plenary council. It should be noted that most of the reforms advocated by Catholics for Renewal could be put into effect almost immediately by any diocesan bishop. The submission contained a total of 115 recommendations: some broad, some specific, including some addressed to the processes and voting procedures of the plenary council itself. Together they were intended to make our Church more Christ-centred, so that it could be a credible sign of the Kingdom of God in Australia at this time.

*Getting Back on Mission: Reforming our Church Together*⁷⁵

One of the first to read the submission when it was published was Garry Eastman of Garratt Publishing. At Easter 2019 he called the President, Peter Wilkinson, and asked permission to publish it as a book. Permission was given without hesitation.

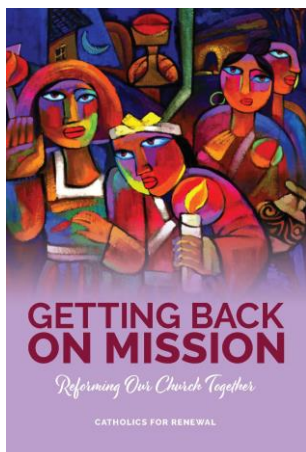
Up to that day, there was no thought that the Catholics for Renewal's ideas, hopes and proposals would one day appear in a book. That it happened was thanks to the board of Garratt Publishing, Garry Eastman, David Hughan, and the staff.

Very quickly a small editing team sprang into action and before long the proofs were being read and checked, photos and artwork selected, and Robert Fitzgerald, former Royal

⁷⁵ <https://garrattpublishing.com.au/blog/post/gbom-the-plenary-council/#:~:text=This%20timely%20and%20crucial%20book,the%20way%20back%20in%202006%20>

Commissioner, invited to write the Foreword and other expert commentators and endorsers invited to write brief comments.

Getting Back on mission – Reforming our Church together



Cover Image

He Q's painting After Resurrection depicts Jesus' disciples – women and men – empowered by their new faith in the Risen Christ, setting out on God's mission to bring the light of the Gospel to the world. It also suggests today's disciples searching for a way to make the Church a true sign of the Kingdom in the 21st century.

It was the hope of Catholics for Renewal that the book would be read widely because, as Frank Brennan wrote, "it provides a realistic, hopeful and authentically Catholic roadmap for the forthcoming Australian Plenary Council".⁷⁶

Pope Francis had earlier said⁷⁷ that 'now is the time to be bold and creative in the task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization', and that any 'proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment'.

Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together was launched at Newman College, University of Melbourne, on 17 September 2019 by Francis Sullivan, a week later it was launched by Chris Geraghty at the Jesuit Parish of North Sydney, and by David Timbs at an International Catholic Reform Network meeting in Warsaw, Poland. It was Catholics for Renewal's contribution to the important task of walking together in a communal search.

⁷⁶ Cf. Endorsements on p. 1 in book

⁷⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html n. 33

Listen to what the Spirit is saying: Final Report of Listening and Dialogue Phase 1

During Phase 1 of the Preparatory Stage the Plenary Council organisers received responses from over 220,000 persons, mainly Australian Catholics, in 17,547 submissions. There were 12,758 individual responses (more female than male) and 4,699 group responses. The Final Report of the Listening and Dialogue Phase titled *Listen to what the Spirit is saying*,⁷⁸ published in July 2019, identified 119 themes or issues and allocated them to a matrix of 6 National Themes for Discernment:

- Open to Conversion, renewal and reform
- A joyful, hope-filled and servant community
- Humble, healing and merciful
- Prayerful and Eucharistic
- Inclusive, participatory and synodal
- Missionary and evangelising.

These would be the foundation for Phase 2 of the Preparatory Stage: *Listening and Discernment*.

However, there was no weighting or ranking provided for the 119 ‘issues’ in the Final Report until March 2020, when the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPD) published the *Diocesan Reports*⁷⁹ of Australia’s 28 territorial dioceses. These showed clearly which were the ‘most prominent’ and ‘most widely discussed’ issues within and across the dioceses. Peter Wilkinson analysed the Diocesan Reports⁸⁰ and found that of the 77 most prominent and widely discussed, the ‘Top Ten’ were:

- i. Greater inclusion of all (# 1 within 27 dioceses and across all 28 dioceses)
- ii. Greater involvement of the laity (across 27 dioceses)
- iii. Remaining faithful to Church teaching (across 26 dioceses)
- iv. Greater role for women (# 1 within 21 dioceses and across 26 dioceses)
- v. Ending compulsory celibacy and allowing priests to marry (# 1 in 15 dioceses and across 26 dioceses)
- vi. Ordination of women (across 26 dioceses)
- vii. Care of neighbour (across 25 dioceses)
- viii. Greater trust, faith and hope in God (across 24 dioceses)
- ix. Greater focus on Jesus Christ (across 24 dioceses)
- x. Better faith formation (across 24 dioceses).

⁷⁸ Plenary Council, Final Report of Phase 1: <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FINAL-BOOK-v7-spread-version-LISTEN-TO-WHAT-THE-SPIRIT-IS-SAYING.pdf>

⁷⁹ Plenary Council, Diocesan Reports: <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/?s=diocesan+reports>

⁸⁰ Peter Wilkinson, [Plenary Council - Diocesan Reports - Priority issues - June 2020 2.docx](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.catholicforrenewal.org%2Ffold_pages%2Fdocuments%2FPlenary%2520Council%2520-%2520Diocesan%2520Reports%2520-%2520Priority%2520issues%2520-%2520June%25202020_2.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK); https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.catholicforrenewal.org%2Ffold_pages%2Fdocuments%2FPlenary%2520Council%2520-%2520Diocesan%2520Reports%2520-%2520Priority%2520issues%2520-%2520June%25202020_2.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

The faithful in the 28 dioceses calling for ‘Greater inclusion for all’ wanted their Church to be more inclusive of persons of all sexual preferences and genders, marginalised persons, refugees and poor persons, and to make them feel included, welcomed, and valued equally, regardless of their sexuality or marital status. They wanted their Church to reach out to these people and be ‘Christ’ to them; to welcome and embrace persons of different ethnicities, cultures, faiths and sexual orientations and promote unity among them; to be more caring and respectful to persons with disabilities, recognising their equality and gifts, and facilitating their access to the sacraments; and to be non-judgemental on relationships (e.g. same-sex) and moral issues (e.g. premarital sex, divorce, and contraception).

The issues relating to women – greater involvement of the laity, greater role for women, ordination of women – would certainly have to be addressed by the Plenary Council.

In November 2019 Catholics for Renewal made a further contribution to Phase II – Listening and Discernment – of the Preparatory Stage with a list of suggestions for priority actions on the 6 Discernment Themes.⁸¹

During 2020 in preparation for the First Assembly of the Plenary Council, Catholics for Renewal President, Peter Wilkinson, prepared an overview of all 28 territorial dioceses in Australia titled *Know the Dioceses in 2020*.⁸² The profiles included information on each diocese’s structures and agencies, schools and educational institutions, welfare bodies, and finances.

Instrumentum laboris and Agenda for Plenary Council

The *Instrumentum laboris* or Working Document for the 5th Plenary Council of Australia, titled *Continuing the Journey*,⁸³ was published in January 2021 and the Agenda⁸⁴ was published shortly after. Catholics for Renewal examined the *Instrumentum laboris (IL)*, found it to be ‘a major disappointment’, and said so in its March 2021 editorial.⁸⁵

The stated purpose of the *IL* was: i) to provide an account of what emerged from the national consultations, and ii) to invite the whole Church, especially the Plenary Delegates⁸⁶, into a deeper discernment and listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit (n. 3). However, measured against these aims it was a ground plan for inertia – a tedious, meandering document lacking *parrhesia* (frankness, lucidity and boldness) and providing no clear vision of how the Church in Australia might become of sign of God’s Kingdom in the nation. And whereas the Royal Commission had taught Australia’s Catholic bishops some basic lessons in

⁸¹ Catholics for Renewal, Priority issues for Discernment Themes: [C4R short subs 1000chars FINAL 281119-1.pdf](#)

⁸² Published sequentially under [Item 99](#) of Catholics For Renewal Website - Document Set page: [Know the Dioceses in 2020, Peter Wilkinson September 2020-2.pdf](#)

⁸³ Plenary Council *Instrumentum laboris*: [PC-IL-210902-single-pages.pdf \(catholic.org.au\)](#)

⁸⁴ Plenary Council Agenda: [Plenary-Council-Agenda.pdf \(catholic.org.au\)](#)

⁸⁵ Catholics for Renewal, March 2021 Editorial: https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-mar-2021.html

⁸⁶ The term ‘delegate’ was incorrect and Catholics for Renewal President, Peter Wilkinson, questioned its use several times. The correct canonical term was ‘member’. The *Instrumentum laboris* included the term ‘delegate’ 11 times in the text.

morality, decency and responsible citizenship in a modern democratic society, the *IL* painted Australian secular society as hostile, threatening, and inimical to church teaching. It failed to organise the rich harvest of wisdom, insight and analysis of the national consultations into a coherent presentation and took us nowhere in particular. It failed to incorporate the priority issues identified by the '*sensus fidei*' of Christ's Australian faithful and did not give sufficient weight to the new governance processes set out in *The Light from the Southern Cross*.

While Archbishop Coleridge said in 2016 that 'everything must be on the table', the *IL* insisted that 'Council delegates will need to distinguish which matters are beyond the competence of a Plenary Council', such as the ordination of women, one of the top priorities in the 17,500 submissions. The *IL* did not provide an 'open' agenda and certainly not an agenda that would achieve genuine reform and renewal in the Church and get it 'back on mission'.

In its September 2021 Editorial on the Plenary Council Agenda, Catholics for Renewal stated that as it stands it is not fit for purpose, cannot be endorsed, and should be replaced with one that embodies the discerned priorities and proposals of Christ's faithful in Australia.⁸⁷ The editorial encouraged those Members who were unhappy with the existing Agenda not to applaud it as directed when officially presented, but to question then and there its fitness for purpose. On Day 1 of the Council two Members, Francis Sullivan and John Warhurst, said that several priority issues were not included in the agenda.

Council Members and Voting at the Plenary Council: Catholics for Renewal concerns and actions to amend these arrangements

The process for selecting so-called 'delegates' for the Council was not uniform. The various local dioceses chose their own processes and, when the organisers published the names of the 257 'delegates' for the 1st Assembly in March 2020, it gave the impression that they had been selected and appointed as 'delegates' of the local bishop.⁸⁸ Unsurprisingly, a preponderance of the lay persons selected were diocesan employees and 'Commissioning Ceremonies for Delegates' were organised in the cathedrals of several dioceses.

Quite early on, Catholics for Renewal had voiced its concern about the term 'delegate', stating that it was inappropriate and canonically incorrect. The correct and canonical term was 'member', as they were 'called' by the President of the Plenary Council, not delegated by the local bishop. When the *Statutes and Regulatory Norms*⁸⁹ for the Council were published in July 2021 it was the term 'member' which was approved by the Holy See.

⁸⁷ Catholics for Renewal September 2021 Editorial on the Plenary Council Agenda: https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-september-2021.html

⁸⁸ Peter Wilkinson, *Plenary Council Members: An Analysis: Plenary-Council-PC-Members-an-analysis-FINAL-26-September-2021.pdf*

⁸⁹ <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/STATUTES-AND-REGULATORY-NORMS-16-July-2021.pdf>

Catholics for Renewal also asked the Council organisers to publish the backgrounds and contact details of the lay members of the Council as many were unknown in their local communities. It argued that there should be opportunities for these members to listen to and engage directly with the faithful. Some Catholic media published a few interviews.

In February 2021 a revised list of 280 Members⁹⁰ was published. They included 39 Members with a deliberative vote (bishops or equivalent) and 241 Members with a consultative vote: 107 priests, 1 deacon, 26 religious sisters, 4 religious brothers, 39 lay men, and 65 lay women. These Members together had the right to legislate for the future Catholic Church in Australia: to have a Christ-centred missionary church which is a credible sign of the Kingdom of God (not mentioned in the agenda), or the Church as it is today – wounded, and for many a countersign of the Kingdom.

In its May 2021 editorial⁹¹ Catholics for Renewal insisted that, if for some reason the deliberative vote went against the consultative vote, the reason(s) should be disclosed. This would become the most contentious issue at the 2nd Assembly of the Council.

First Assembly of Plenary Council (3-10 October 2021 Online): Catholics for Renewal role in its conduct

On the eve of the First Assembly on 3 October 2021, with the Members meeting ‘online’ due to the COVID-19 restrictions, Catholics for Renewal in its September 2021 editorial⁹² was critical of much of the preparatory stage and stated that ‘the roadmap to renewal depends on three essentials: synodality (journeying together), discernment (listening and dialogue) and *parrhesia* (speaking frankly, clearly, and boldly). One of the restrictions placed on Members was requiring them to take the onerous Oath of Fidelity (Statute 20).⁹³ Catholics for Renewal requested that the Oath be replaced with a simple Profession of Faith allowing Members to speak freely.

During the 6 days of the First Assembly, the Catholic community had limited access to the Plenary Sessions. To provide more insight, Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, Garratt Publishing, and several other renewal groups auspiced the daily online *Plenary Tracker*⁹⁴ and several Council Members wrote *daily blogs*⁹⁵.

On *Plenary Tracker* Council Members Claire Victory (Vinnies), John Warhurst, and Francis Sullivan (Catholic Social Services) highlighted the ‘unfinished business’ around child sexual abuse, insisting that a minimalist approach of simply legislating safeguarding processes and

⁹⁰ <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/members/> This was later modified to 277 Members.

⁹¹ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-may-2021.html

⁹² https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/september-28-2021-editorial.html

⁹³

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19880701_professio-fidei_en.html

⁹⁴ <https://www.garrattpublishing.com.au/plenary-tracker-1-oct-2021/>

⁹⁵ <https://concernedcatholicscanberra.org/new-page-69>

procedures was totally inadequate. The Council had to address church culture, as well as governance policies and structures that facilitated the abuse and allowed the cover-up.

At the 3rd National Convocation of Catholics webinar organised by [ACCCR](#)⁹⁶ several Council Members, expressed disappointment with the process of the 1st Assembly and urged the organisers of the 2nd Assembly to learn from the deficiencies, urging that it not be conducted like a directed retreat but as a gathering of all the dioceses where the key issues for reform and renewal, especially around church culture and governance, are properly addressed and acted on. ABC presenter Geraldine Doogue said it was "a graced moment"⁹⁷ but a work still in progress.

The First Assembly closed on 9 October 2021 with the publication of a document titled *The Journey so Far*.⁹⁸ It stated that in the period before the Second Assembly there will be "continuing reflection by the Members of the Council, and 'consultation with the wider Church community', as we develop propositions for presentation to the Second Assembly of the Council next July".

On 8 December 2021 another document titled *First Assembly Proposals from Small Groups and Individual Members*⁹⁹ (often referred to as 'The Fruits' document) was published. It contained the proposals from the 10 Small Group reports in response to the 16 Questions in the First Assembly Agenda, as well as 78 proposals from individual members.¹⁰⁰

In the *Statutes* there was provision for three types of motion: those prepared by the Drafting Committee (Art. 23), motions on procedure (Art 24), and 'other motions' from individual members requiring a seconder and consideration by the plenary assembly (Art. 25). When several individual members submitted motions on Day 1, the President addressed the Assembly on Day 3 at Session 7 and ruled that motions from individual members would no longer be accepted, but only 'proposals': so long as they had a seconder, and the proposals were submitted to the Small Groups for discernment. However, none of the 78 proposals of Individual members were submitted to the Small Groups for discernment, nor were they recorded in the Minutes of the following days. They only appeared in the *Fruits* document.

In preparation for the 2nd Assembly, the Drafting Committee, in collaboration with the theological and other advisors, prepared the *Framework of Motions*¹⁰¹ document in May 2022, which was circulated to the Members of the Council for their discernment. Within two weeks 616 amendments had been submitted and these were consolidated to 38 amendments in the *Motions and Amendments*¹⁰² document published on 29 June 2022.

In the *Journey so Far* document of 9 October 2021 the President had promised there would be 'consultation with the wider Church community'. The Council *timeline*¹⁰³ had also said there would be consultations with the 'local churches' from October to February and

⁹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpdiEAoVZnk>

⁹⁷ <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/assessing-the-plenary--a-work-in-progress>

⁹⁸ [First-Assembly-Concluding-Statement-FINAL.pdf \(catholic.org.au\)](#)

⁹⁹ [First Assembly Proposals with Appendix.pdf - Google Drive](#)

¹⁰⁰ The 78 'proposals' of individual Members were not recorded in the *Acts of the First General Assembly (3-10 October 2021) of the 5th Plenary Council of Australia*.

¹⁰¹ [FINAL Framework for Motions.pdf - Google Drive](#)

¹⁰² [FINAL Motions and Amendments 29 June 2022.pdf - Google Drive](#)

¹⁰³ https://www.catholic.org.au/images/Extended_Timeline_-_Synod_of_Bishops_and_Plenary_Council.pdf

another message stated that ‘all the People of God will be able to **read, reflect on, and pray with** the revised propositions when they are released at Easter 2022’.¹⁰⁴

This did not take place: only the Members, ‘Advisors and other Church and Agency leaders’ were consulted. The wider community consultation was diverted to the ‘local consultations for the 2023 Synod on Synodality’.

In its 15 February 2022 editorial¹⁰⁵ Catholics for Renewal noted that it had surveyed the websites of all 28 Australian territorial dioceses and found scant enthusiasm for local consultations for the Synod: only 4 had referred to the Synod and just 3 were actively promoting Synod diocesan consultations. Catholics for Renewal considered this to be a national disgrace, unacceptable, and an insult to Pope Francis and his and Vatican II’s vision for a synodal church in the 21st century. We therefore urged Council organisers to revise their plan and extend an invitation to the whole Catholic community to prepare submissions to the Synod on Synodality.

Second Assembly of Plenary Council (3-9 July 2022 at St Mary’s College, Sydney): Catholics for Renewal role in its conduct

Prior to the Opening of the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council in Sydney on 3 July 2022 there was to be ‘contemplative dialogue’ between the Council Members and the wider community. This did not take place. The Council Secretary also indicated that any changes emerging from the Second Assembly will likely be ‘modest’ and that ordinary Catholics should ‘tailor their expectations in anticipation of inevitable disappointment and disillusionment’.¹⁰⁶

Catholics for Renewal disagreed strongly with this suggestion, for when the Council was first proposed, Archbishop Coleridge¹⁰⁷ had said ‘we can no longer put up a sign saying ‘business as usual’ for the culture has to change, and the bishops and others will have to make bold decisions about the future’. Over 200,000 Australian Catholics had made it abundantly clear that they wanted and expected bold decisions and culture change.

In its May 2022 editorial¹⁰⁸ Catholics for Renewal called on ordinary Catholics to ‘maintain your high expectations for this Plenary Council and, if necessary, raise them even higher. And should the outcome of the Council fail your expectations and produce nothing but ‘modest changes’, that will be time to speak out more strongly and openly – with *parrhesia* – to obtain the substantive changes and bold decisions that are so desperately needed’.

¹⁰⁴ <https://mailchi.mp/70e8af482110/plenary-post-edition-15-march-8-8472021>

¹⁰⁵ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-february2-2022.html

¹⁰⁶ <https://garrattpublishing.com.au/blog/post/the-plenary-and-the-people/>

¹⁰⁷ <https://catholicleader.com.au/news/brisbane-archbishop-calls-for-first-synod-for-entire-catholic-church-in-australia-since-1937/>

¹⁰⁸ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-may-2022.html

There were 277 Members in attendance for the Second General Assembly: 46 bishops or equivalent with a deliberative vote, and 231 with a consultative vote. An analysis of all Members¹⁰⁹ showed: 187 males (67.5%) and 90 females (32.5%); 37 laymen (13.4%) and 66 laywomen (23.8%); 44 bishops (15.9%), 101 priests (36.5%) and 1 deacon (0.45); 4 religious brothers (1.4%) and 24 religious sisters (8.7%).

Before the Members to discern and vote on were 38 Motions and Amendments to Motions structured in 8 Parts:

1. Reconciliations: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts;
2. Choosing Repentance – Seeking Healing;
3. Called by Christ – Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples;
4. Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men;
5. Communion in Grace: Sacrament to the World;
6. Formation and Leadership for Mission and Ministry;
7. At the Service of Communion, Participation, and Mission: Governance; and
8. Integral Ecology and Conversion for the Sake of our Common Home.

The Voting process would begin with the General Vote, be followed by the Consultative Vote and then the Deliberative Vote. For Motions and Amendments to Motions to be passed a two-thirds majority of Deliberative Votes was required.

In its June 2022 editorial¹¹⁰ Catholics for Renewal said the Motions were no match for the Church's crisis: too tentative in defining the crisis, too timid in the solutions proposed, and offering insufficient hope for the needed renewal. It stated seven explicit concerns: on the role of women in the Church, the inclusion of women in governance, failure to acknowledge clerical sexual abuse as a systemic problem, failure to include marginalised groups, using the classroom for evangelising and catechising, an overly meek approach to building relationships with other Christian and non-Christian faith communities, and persons with no faith or religious affiliation, and the timid proposals to address the crisis in the sacramental life of church communities. Catholics for Renewal pleaded for the Members to see their role as being to implement the mandate of Vatican II: to 'scrutinise the signs of the times', and to plan the Gospel path to Church renewal in the light of those signs.

Probably the highest priority 'sign of the times' was the equal dignity of women and men derived from Baptism. St Paul told the Christians in Galatia "there is no longer ... male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:27-28). Pope Francis said 'a society that is unable to give the woman her place does not move forward'¹¹¹ and during the Second Assembly this became the most contentious issue and the turning point for the direction of the Council. *The Concluding Statement*¹¹² noted: 'At a pivotal juncture in the assembly, some of these differences helped move the Council from *having* a process to *being-in* process; from following an agenda to following the Holy Spirit into the unknown'.

¹⁰⁹ Included in the membership were 7 religious bishops (2.5%) and 19 religious priests (6.9%).

¹¹⁰ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-june-2022.html

¹¹¹ <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/45850>

¹¹² <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jieDZjTrfF2EuHTuM4a6lrEQdbV3j5RT/view>

Following the close of the Second Assembly Catholics for Renewal stated in its August 2022 editorial¹¹³ that Australian society is characterised by a hunger for freedom, social justice, prosperity, and racial and sexual equality. And while the Spirit calls the Church in Australia to stand for human dignity and to model ways of expressing freedom that satisfy the yearnings of all its members, the strong rhetoric about social justice is stripped of credibility when the Church is miserly in its compensation of victims of clerical child sexual abuse, and cruel in the procedures to which it subjects them in pursuing justice.

Decrees of Fifth Plenary Council of Australia: Catholics for Renewal response

The Plenary Council enacted 10 Decrees.¹¹⁴ Many were modest but good: endorsement of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Decree 1); commitment to just and compassionate response to victims of sexual abuse (Decree 2)¹¹⁵; solidarity, welcoming and compassion for those hurt and marginalised, and ecumenical and inter-faith outreach (Decree 3); commitment to give women decision-making roles in church bodies, recognition of their contributions, and openness to diaconal ministry if Holy See approves (Decree 4); pre-eminence of liturgical worship, the family as the primary faith formator of children, and central role of parish community in faith formation of adult catechumens (Decree 5); better leadership from bishops and priests, end to clericalism, and stronger parish communities (Decree 6); synodal reforms (Decree 7); priority for integral ecology and action on climate change (Decree 8); reports on implementation (Decree 9); and recycling of some decrees of 4th Plenary Council (Decree 10).

However, there were some notable omissions and built-in delays. The Council said nothing on celibacy or married priests (Decree 5), did not call for mandated diocesan pastoral councils (Decree 7), and said nothing concerning formation for the priesthood.¹¹⁶ However, in clear acceptance of the principle of ‘subsidiarity’, it committed to each diocese (and eparchy) planning and convening a diocesan synod within 5 years of the close of the Council (Decree 7, 5, b), and discerning how to implement the various specific decrees in the local context. Two national working groups would also be established (Decree 6).¹¹⁷

In its November 2022 editorial¹¹⁸ Catholics for Renewal accepted that the Fifth Plenary Council had given the Church in Australia a credible roadmap to renewal but insisted that the diocesan bishops now had to give their local faithful full co-responsible participation in the journey ahead via diocesan synods. In its December 2022 editorial¹¹⁹ Catholics for Renewal again reaffirmed that ‘when the Church treats women equally a dynamic

¹¹³ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-november-2022.html

¹¹⁴ [Carrying Forward the Plenary Council - Plenary Decrees Pastoral Study Guide FINAL.pdf - Google Drive](#)

¹¹⁵ Unfortunately, the Assembly’s Ritual of Lament was not shared publicly.

¹¹⁶ All the Council said was that a revised edition of the Australian *Ratio nationalis* had been sent to the Holy See in May 2022 prior to the Second Assembly.

¹¹⁷ The 5-Volume *Acts and Decrees of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia* were approved by the Australian Bishops in November 2022 and sent to the Holy See. They are still waiting for approval.

¹¹⁸ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-november-2022.html

¹¹⁹ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-december-2022.html

evolutionary process is triggered, women and men are both lifted, and all creation is brought to perfection’.

In its August 2024 editorial¹²⁰ Catholics for Renewal urged the Members of the Synod on Synodality to oblige the bishops and religious superiors who have charge of seminaries to provide greater opportunities for lay and religious women to have a more significant role in the selection, instruction and formation of future priests.

Referendum on Voice to Parliament: Catholics for Renewal response to this sign of the times

The Catholic Church has a chequered history with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Pope John Paul II, in a [landmark 1986 address](#),¹²¹ spoke of the richness and pride of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture whilst highlighting the injustices and challenges that Australia’s First Peoples faced. In response to the 1997 *Bringing Them Home Report*,¹²² the Australian Catholic bishops issued a formal apology for the Church’s role in the Stolen Generations, and in 2006 Pope Benedict XVI called again for Australians to continue down the path of reconciliation. Pope Francis called for deep respect for Indigenous Peoples and their culture in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*¹²³ and highlighted the need to learn and draw from their views of the world in which we all live.

In May 2021 the ACBC told the Commonwealth Government that a ‘structure that reaches as many First Peoples as possible and provides a very clear and open pathway for people to contribute their views to local, regional, and national consultation processes’ would be good.¹²⁴

The Plenary Council strongly reaffirmed its commitment towards recognition, reconciliation, and justice, and explicitly apologised to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples for the part it played in the harms they had suffered. It fully endorsed the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*¹²⁵ to give them ‘a voice’ to enhance and improve their lives.

Catholics for Renewal welcomed recent positive responses from the ACBC on the plight of First Nations Peoples, agreed with Archbishop Coleridge that ‘an Indigenous Voice to Parliament is a vital next step on a national journey that’s come a long way and still has a

¹²⁰ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/editorial/>

¹²¹ [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia.html#:~:text=To%20Aborigines%20and%20Torres%20Strait,%2C%201986\)%20%7C%20John%20Paul%20II&text=Dear%20Brothers%20and%20Sisters%2C,Torres%20Strait%20Islanders%20of%20Australia](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia.html#:~:text=To%20Aborigines%20and%20Torres%20Strait,%2C%201986)%20%7C%20John%20Paul%20II&text=Dear%20Brothers%20and%20Sisters%2C,Torres%20Strait%20Islanders%20of%20Australia)

¹²² <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/projects/bringing-them-home-report-1997>

¹²³ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

¹²⁴ [ACBC-Indigenous-Voice-to-Parliament.pdf](#)

¹²⁵ <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>

long way to go'.¹²⁶ In its February 2023 editorial¹²⁷ supported a Yes vote to change the Australian Constitution and establish a Voice to Parliament.

In October 2023 Australia found itself in an acrimonious political and cultural debate on the Referendum for and Indigenous Voice to Parliament. As activists argued for Yes and No votes, media commentators engaged in hyperbole, and constitutional lawyers disagreed, First Nations Peoples were in great pain. The outcome of the vote was tragic.

Same-sex Marriage Postal Survey: Catholics for Renewal response to another sign of the times

Over many years the views of the Australian people on matters of human rights had matured considerably. This was very evident in the postal survey on marriage equality. Many Christian leaders publicly opposed same-sex marriage – including most of the Catholic bishops on doctrinal grounds – but a high proportion of Christian citizens, including Catholics, showed support for marriage equality. Just two Catholic bishops¹²⁸ said the survey was ‘an opportunity for us to listen to what the Spirit is saying through the signs of the times’ and to vote for ‘what you believe will be best for our Australian community – now and into future generations’.

The President of Catholics for Renewal,¹²⁹ Peter Johnstone, encouraged Catholics to listen to the message of both bishops: ‘Let us pray, discern and act with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.’

In its Submission to the Freedom of Religion Review Panel¹³⁰ in February 2018 Catholics for Renewal stated that it ‘did not consider that the civil and religious liberties of the Catholic Church and other religious groups were violated by the recent amendments to the *Commonwealth Marriage Act 1961*’.

¹²⁶ [Bishops’ statement calls for ‘new engagement’ with First Peoples - ACBC MediaBlog](#); [Bishops issue statement on Indigenous Voice to Parliament - ACBC MediaBlog](#)

¹²⁷ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-february-2023.html

¹²⁸ <https://catholicoutlook.org/bishop-vincents-pastoral-letter-sex-marriage-postal-survey/>

¹²⁹ <https://johnmenadue.com/peter-johnstone-catholicscan-definitely-vote-yes/>

¹³⁰ Submission to Freedom of Religion Review Panel, 14 February 2018: https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/documents/Freedom%20of%20Religion%20Review%20Submission%20-%20FINAL%20ed%20-%20160218.pdf

Freedom of Religion or enlistment of state power to enable persistence in discriminatory practices in the name of inscrutable doctrines? Catholics for Renewal response to another sign of the times

Catholics for Renewal has long been engaged in a campaign to ensure that the human right to freedom of religion, established by the United Nations and accepted by all member countries, is not abused by the Catholic church in Australia firstly to protect controversial doctrines from the scrutiny warranted by the signs of the times, and secondly to discriminate against vulnerable individuals targeted or otherwise affected by such doctrines. The following is an account of the legal background to this campaign, and of our action as part of it.

The [Constitution of Australia](#)¹³¹ prohibits the Commonwealth from establishing laws which create, force or prohibit any religion. It also restricts the Commonwealth from using religion as a qualifier or test to holding public office. Australian State and Territory Governments can, however, pass laws impeding religious freedoms.

The [Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986](#)¹³² defines discrimination as: ‘any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin that has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation’. However, the Act does provide for general religious exemptions with the various federal and state human rights Acts to protect freedom of religion by permitting what would otherwise be considered discrimination if it is in the context of ‘an act or practice of a body established for religious purposes that conforms to the doctrines, tenets or beliefs of that religion or is necessary to avoid injury to the religious sensitivities of adherents of that religion’. A particularly sensitive exemption was ‘in connection with employment as a member of the staff of an institution that is conducted in accordance with the doctrines, tenets, beliefs or teachings of a particular religion or creed.’

Following the 2017 same-sex marriage legislation the *Freedom of Religion Review Panel* was established by the Commonwealth government to examine the suitability of current religious freedom protections, specifically within the context of the new [Marriage Amendment \(Definition and Religious Freedoms\) Act 2017](#).¹³³ The Panel commenced their task in January 2018 and Catholics for Renewal prepared both a comprehensive submission and a request for an online interview with the Panel.

¹³¹ [The Australian Constitution – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](#) Cf. Section 116: “The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.”

¹³² [AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION ACT 1986 \(austlii.edu.au\)](#)

¹³³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage_Amendment_\(Definition_and_Religious_Freedoms\)_Act_2017](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage_Amendment_(Definition_and_Religious_Freedoms)_Act_2017)

In its Submission to the Review Panel¹³⁴ Catholics for Renewal argued that the State should not prevent Catholics or persons of other faiths or creeds from being able to freely practise their religion, so long as that practice does not unfairly prejudice the rights of others. The State's primary responsibility is to protect the human rights of all its citizens. Therefore, the religious doctrines, beliefs and practices of any religion, including those of the Catholic Church, should not cause or permit unfair discrimination against other members of the broader society who do not share the same doctrines, beliefs and practices. Given clearly changing Australian societal values the question should not be about extending exemptions to the legislation but justifying their continuance.

The Submission expressed particular concern about giving Catholic education authorities an exemption to discriminate against LGBTIQ+ employees, especially if there were in a same-sex marriage. It also endorsed the Royal Commission's recommendation that religious ministers (including Catholic priests) should not be exempted from reporting allegations of child sexual abuse to civil authorities (even if known in sacrament of confession) if it endangers the rights and wellbeing of innocent children.

The Panel Report was submitted to the Turnbull government in May 2018 but there was no response until December 2018 when it accepted 15 recommendations. But the Turnbull government called for further review by the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) which invited submissions on the first and second exposure drafts of 3 draft bills: *the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021, the Religious Discrimination (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2021, the Human Rights Legislation Amendment Bill 2021.*

Between the First and Second Assemblies of the Plenary Council the Federal Government introduced the *Religious Discrimination Bill 2021*. It was responding to the request of leaders of many religious institutions – including Australia's Catholic bishops – wanting legislation to protect them and their beliefs against discrimination on the basis of religion and have the right to discriminate against individual persons and override their human rights. The Bill was clearly directed towards enabling these institutions to discriminate against LGBTIQ+ persons.¹³⁵ The evidence available indicated that the bishops were at odds with vast numbers of lay Catholics on this issue.

In the 17,500 submissions to the Plenary Council over 200,000 Catholics had given the highest priority to one issue: the need for 'greater inclusion for all'.¹³⁶ If the Plenary Council wanted to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia at this time, the bishops would have to abandon their pursuit of such a discriminatory agenda. A Christ-like church is one that reaches out to everyone, welcomes everyone, and makes everyone feel equally valued.

In its 2 February 2022 editorial¹³⁷ Catholics for Renewal called for a review of Catholic Church teaching on homosexuality in the light of modern scientific understanding and urged the bishops to reflect more carefully on the Kingdom of God and what it means: 'The

¹³⁴ Submission to Religious Discrimination Bill: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/C4R-SUBMISSION-ON-RELIGIOUS-DISCRIMINATION-BILL-final.pdf>

¹³⁵ Documentation relating to LGBTIQ+ Persons: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/C4R-Appendices-with-Documentation-on-LGBTIQ-Persons.docx>

¹³⁶ Australian Catholics' sensus fidei: Priority Issues for the Plenary Council. Peter Wilkinson, June 2020 [HERE](#)

¹³⁷ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-february-2022.html

Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17). There is no 'Good News' in discrimination.

Catholics for Renewal made another Submission to the ALRC 'On the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 and Related Legislation'¹³⁸ on 18 January 2022 arguing that 'the state in a modern liberal democracy is incompetent to adjudicate religious questions, and thus to settle religious disputes such as those in favour of any of the contending parties. It accepted the argument of two eminent scholars, Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure, that the mistake commonly made in defining secularism is that we think that it 'has to do with the relation of the state and religion'. This is wrong. In fact it has to do with 'the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity' and 'the appropriate posture of the state in a plural democracy to the religious, social and cultural diversity present in that democracy' (Maclure and Taylor 2011 Kindle Edn., 419). *Catholics for Renewal* accepted the definition of the role of the secular state proposed by these two scholars: 'We shall argue that respect for the moral equality of individuals and the protection of freedom of conscience and of religion constitute the two major aims of secularism today' (Maclure and Taylor 2011 Kindle Edn., loc. 40). In a society which, being secular, no longer accords ultimate authority on moral questions to a state religion, religion does not trump state authority on such questions. But neither does secularism accord to the state the authority to trump religion on these questions. For this reason, we argued that the issue of discrimination had to be argued in terms of the state's duty to protect its citizens from serious harm requiring it to limit the religious freedom claimed *in this case*.

Catholics for Renewal did not accept that the *Religious Discrimination Bill 2021* is needed to ensure that 'religious bodies may generally act in accordance with their faith' and expressed serious concern that the Bill enhances the power of institutions to override human rights, which by definition are *individual*, not *institutional*, in certain cases: one such case being the non-heterosexual community of vulnerable individuals. The proper role of the secular state, we argued, is to protect its citizens from harm and that state is bound to provide such protection where the relevant scientific evidence warrants it, even if that means limiting the freedom of religious institutions. To allow religious bodies to discriminate against non-heterosexual individuals would be to fail to protect the moral equality of such individuals. This would be protecting institutional rather than individual rights. The results of the marriage equality plebiscite discredited all claims by religious leaders to be speaking on behalf of the individuals composing their congregations in seeking freedom under this Bill to continue such discrimination.

Under intense scrutiny the Morrison government shelved the Bill in December 2021 but made it an election promise for the 2022 election. In March 2024 the Albanese government offered to reintroduce another religious discrimination Bill but only if there was bipartisan agreement.

In February 2021 Catholics for Renewal made a Submission to the Victorian Government on the

¹³⁸ Moreover, the age has passed when the secular state in which there was an 'established religion', such as in the United Kingdom, could yield jurisdiction on such questions to that religion. Submission of Catholics for Renewal, 18 January 2022:

*Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020*¹³⁹ arguing Christian religious teaching, based on the assumption that heterosexuality was the only normal form of sexuality and that all other forms were psychiatrically and morally deviant, was shown to be false by the modern sciences of both psychiatry and biology^{140 & 141}. According to both these sciences, there is a range of sexualities that must, according to the standards of their disciplines, be regarded as normal. In Bills such as this, many secular States have renounced this false assumption about the nature of sexualities they previously condemned as deviant. They now assert the basic human right of subjects of the relevant sexualities to be protected from practices which would condemn the sexualities themselves or seek to suppress or overturn them.

At the invitation of the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) on 23 February 2023 Catholics for Renewal made another *Submission on the Consultation Paper on Religious Educational Institutions and Anti-discrimination laws*.¹⁴² The religious groups – including the Catholic bishops – who had failed to secure support for the traditional definition of marriage now wanted to regain some of the influence over public policy that they lost in the plebiscite, especially some of their former power to discriminate against non-heterosexual citizens. The Catholic Church was anxious to protect its teaching on homosexuality and its ability to teach it in Catholic educational institutions. Though a majority of Catholics voted in favour of marriage equality, the Catholic bishops claimed that any ban on teaching its doctrine on homosexuality would offend the religious susceptibilities of Catholic school communities and offend the religious freedom of their members. But the scientific assumptions about the nature of homosexuality underpinning the doctrine had changed, undermining the doctrine itself. The determination of doctrinal positions in a free society, Catholics for Renewal submitted, is the competence and the right of the relevant faith group, not of the secular state. The secular state has a duty to protect that right, but only to the extent that the right does not infringe prior rights of other citizens. In relation to this Bill, Catholics for Renewal submitted that ‘human rights’ being, by definition, individual rights, the right the secular state is

¹³⁹ Submission to Victorian Government on the *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020*, 27 January 2021:

https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/documents/Submissiion%20to%20VIC%20Parliament%20on%20Change%20or%20Suppression%20Practices%20Prohibition%20Bill%202020.pdf

¹⁴⁰ In its Statement of Compatibility, the Bill cites recent research in the form of complaints to the Health Complaints Commissioner and a report by eminent bodies: The Health Complaints Commissioner (HCC) highlighted the severity of these harms, including long-term psychological harm and distress. The Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC), La Trobe University, and Gay & Lesbian Health Vic released a report in October 2018 which also highlighted the harm caused by change or suppression practices (p. 4684).

It should be noted here that in Australia on October 15, 1973, the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Federal Council declared that homosexuality was not an illness. It was the first such body in the world to do so. In its 2013 Edition, the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) no longer defined homosexuality as a mental disorder. The science of psychiatry is thus unequivocal in its present view of homosexuality as a normal condition rather than a disorder.

¹⁴¹ Recent works in the field of biology expressing this view of non-heterosexual orientations as normal include Bruce Bagemihl (2000), *BIOLOGICAL EXUBERANCE: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, (Stonewall Inn Editions, St. Martin's Press, Chicago), and Sullivan, Bill (2020), ' **Stop calling it a choice: Biological factors drive homosexuality. In *The Conversation*** <https://theconversation.com/stop-calling-it-a-choice-biological-factors-drive-homosexuality-122764>.

¹⁴² <https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Catholics-for-Renewal-Inc-ADL-submission.pdf>

competent and obliged to protect is the right of the *individual* to their sexual identity, not the right of Catholic *institutions* to religious freedom. Moreover, Catholics for Renewal pointed out that the Catholic church, in claiming the right to discriminate against non-heterosexuals under the banner of religious freedom, needed to beware that this freedom was not a two-edged sword: the right to religious freedom also entails respect for the rights of dissidents within religious communities.

The other federal Bill on which Catholics for Renewal made a submission relating to religious freedom was the *Exposure Draft of The Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023*¹⁴³. The position put in this submission was the following:

We [Catholics for Renewal] submit the Catholic church's official doctrine that 'the inclination [to homosexuality] must be seen as an objective disorder' (*Homosexualitatis Problema*, CDF 1986), and that morally 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered'¹⁴⁴ (Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 2357)

- (a) will fall foul of the proposed legislation, and
- (b) that no exemption should be granted to teach it on the relevant media platforms, and
- (c) that, if it is to be taught on those platforms, the bill ought to be amended to require the church (and other religious bodies teaching it on such platforms) to accompany the teaching with an acknowledgment that modern psychiatry has ceased to regard homosexuality as a disorder, and instead regards it as falling on the spectrum of normal sexuality.

That it is the Church's teaching on homosexuality that requires reform, not civil laws affecting religious freedom, has been the position of Catholics for Renewal throughout its history, a position which has been put to both civil and ecclesiastical law makers.

¹⁴³ Catholics for Renewal, Submission on Exposure Draft: <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/C4R-SUBMISSION-on-Exposure-Draft-of-Communication-Legislation-Amendment-Misinformation-and-Disinformation-Bill-2023.docx>

¹⁴⁴ The Congregation [now Dicastery] for the Doctrine of the Faith (DCF), the Vatican ministry for safeguarding doctrine, extends this disorder to the condition of the person inclined to such acts: "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder. Therefore, special concern and pastoral attention should be directed toward those who have this condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not." Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Homosexualitatis Problema* (Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons; hereafter HP), (1 October 1986), 3. Quoted in Nickoloff, J. B. (2009). "INTRINSICALLY DISORDERED": GAY PEOPLE AND THE HOLINESS OF THE CHURCH. Santa Clara University, Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education and the Religious Studies Department Santa Clara University..

Diocesan Synods and Diocesan Pastoral Councils: Catholics for Renewal appraisal of response to relevant Plenary Council decrees

In accord with the principle of subsidiarity the bishops wanted each local Church to determine for itself the appropriate means to apply the Council's decrees in the local context. However, in its June 2023 editorial¹⁴⁵ Catholics for Renewal had detected very little movement in the planning and convening of diocesan synods among the 28 territorial dioceses in Australia, even though all the bishops had pledged to convene them within 5 years of the close of the Plenary Council.

In the first 12 months after the close of the Council just three dioceses had plans to convene a synod (Parramatta, Brisbane and Geraldton) while 3 others had held a diocesan assembly (Sandhurst, Port Pirie and Brisbane). In 26 months after the close of the Council only two (Parramatta, Brisbane) had held a diocesan synod and only one other (Adelaide) was planning a synod. Four had held an assembly (Adelaide, Perth, Port Pirie and Sandhurst) but no others were being planned.

In its September 2023 editorial¹⁴⁶ Catholics for Renewal referred to the *Gleeson Report*¹⁴⁷ which found that up to September 2021 the bishops of only 18 of Australia's 28 territorial dioceses had ever established a Diocesan Pastoral Council, and few had lasted for long periods.

Decree 7 of the Plenary Council¹⁴⁸ strongly endorsed Pope Francis' call for greater participation of all Christ's faithful in a more synodal church and called for 'all dioceses and eparchies to establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council.' It also 'affirmed the continuing work of the ACBC and NCPR to develop guidelines and provide resources for the establishing and flourishing of Diocesan Pastoral Councils, Parish Pastoral Councils, and other appropriate synodal structures' (5, c). Though it did not mandate DPCs it was the strongest call in Australian church history for bishops to establish this 'most appropriate permanent structure for implementing synodality' at the diocesan level.

In July 2023 just five territorial dioceses had a functioning DPC.¹⁴⁹ If the National Catholic Synodal Life Roundtable, which Decree 7 recommended be established to bring together those dioceses with Diocesan Pastoral Councils (Article 2), is to be fully representative, it will need many more dioceses with DPCs.

In its September 2023 editorial Catholics for Renewal strongly encouraged those diocesan bishops who do not have a Diocesan Pastoral Council to immediately begin planning for this

¹⁴⁵ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-june-2023.html

¹⁴⁶ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/editorial-september-2023/>

¹⁴⁷ https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Report_Diocesan-Pastoral-Councils_-_Damian-Gleeson.pdf

¹⁴⁸ <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Decree-7-At-the-Service-of-Communion-Participation-and-Mission-Governance.pdf>

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Diocesan-Pastoral-Councils-functioning-at-1-July-2023-FINAL-20230901.pdf>

important permanent structure which can help guide them in addressing the pastoral needs of their diocese, including those that the ACBC had already agreed to, namely: i) analysing the multiple structures and needs of parishes; and ii) establishing formation programmes, pathways and ministry opportunities specifically for pastoral associates. The NCPR also published [two reports](#) in August 2023¹⁵⁰ providing various models for diocesan and parish pastoral councils.

In September 2024, however, only 5 dioceses had a functioning Diocesan Pastoral Council - Adelaide, Ballarat, Bathurst, Parramatta and Sandhurst – while Perth was planning one.

International partnerships engaged in by Catholics for Renewal

Catholics for Renewal has engaged with many international networks over many years.

Catholic Church Reform International (CCRI)¹⁵¹ was founded in 2013 by two US citizens, Rene Reid and the celebrated Vatican II journalist and author, Robert Kaiser (since deceased). They sought to create an international network of like-minded renewal groups in order to promote a common reform advocacy platform. Catholics for Renewal participated as an advisor in discussion groups and assisted in preparing a submission to the 2014 Synod of Bishops Synod on the Family. In 2014 Catholics for Renewal decided to give preference to ICRN and withdrew as an advisor. It remains in contact with CCRI.

International Catholic Reform Network (ICRN)¹⁵² was jointly founded in 2013 by Fr Helmut Schüller of the Archdiocese of Vienna and co-founder of *Pfarrer-Initiative*, and Fr Tony Flannery CSsR the co-founder of *The Association of Catholic Priests Ireland*. Other national priest groups were invited to join including the German *Pfarrer-Initiative*, *The National Council of Priests of Australia*¹⁵³ and the *Association of United States Catholic Priests*,¹⁵⁴ as well as non-clerical groups, including *Future Church* (USA), *Catholics for Ministry* and *Catholics for Renewal* (Australia), *We are Church* (Ireland), *Society for Open Christianity for the 21st Century* (Slovakia) and *The Forum for Dialogue* (Poland). ICRN quickly became a very credible coalition pressing for the support and renewal of local faith communities and advocating for the full realisation of the vision and reforms of Vatican II. Since 2013 four ICRN international conferences have been held: in Brigenz, Austria (2013) Limerick, Ireland (2015), Chicago, USA (2016), Pezinok, Slovakia (2018), and Warsaw, Poland (2019). Catholics for Renewal participated in the 4 latter conferences where valuable collaborative partnerships were formed.

Spirit Unbounded¹⁵⁵ is a global, ecumenical group calling for the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to reform its structures and teaching to better reflect Jesus's message and to protect the marginalised. It operates online advocating for human rights in the emerging Catholic

¹⁵⁰ <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/resptogovrev/>

¹⁵¹ <https://catholicchurchreformintl.org/>

¹⁵² <https://icrn.info/>

¹⁵³ <https://nationalcouncilofpriests.com.au/>

¹⁵⁴ <https://auscp.org/>

¹⁵⁵ <https://spiritunbounded.org/>

Church. It maintains that the hierarchical model is broken, yet the Spirit is unbounded. Catholics for Renewal joined Spirit Unbounded as a Companion on the Road in 2023 and its Vice-President, Gail Grossman Freyne, participated in several Spirit Unbounded events in Rome prior to the First Assembly of the Synod on Synodality.

International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)¹⁵⁶ is an Australian organisation which in 2007 set out to build a global movement to abolish nuclear weapons. In 2017, through a coalition of non-government organisations in 100 countries, it developed the UN-sponsored Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) which was negotiated with the participation of more than 135 nations. Catholics for Renewal identified 'Australia and the nuclear threat' as a significant 'sign of the times' in *Getting Back on Mission* and supported Pope Francis' statement that 'the escalation of the arms race continues unabated and the price of modernizing and developing weaponry, not only nuclear weapons, represent a considerable expense for nations. As a result, the real priorities facing our human family, such as the fight against poverty, the promotion of peace, the undertaking of educational, ecological and healthcare projects and the development of human rights are relegated to second place.'¹⁵⁷ It also supported Pope Francis's statement that 'Nuclear weapons exist in the service of a mentality of fear that affects not only the parties in conflict but the entire human race. Weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, create nothing but a false sense of security. They cannot constitute the basis for peaceful coexistence between members of the human family.'¹⁵⁸ Catholics for Renewal is one of many Catholic groups who signed the ICAN Interfaith Open Letter¹⁵⁹ in support of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Catholics for Renewal's President, Peter Wilkinson, has written to Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen, Chairman of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service, many times urging the Commission to prepare a Social Justice Statement on this important issue.

Synod of Bishops: Synod on Synodality: Catholics for Renewal responses

Pope Francis called the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops in October 2022 to discuss the theme 'For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission'. He extended the Synod to two Assemblies with the closing date of October 2024. Also included in the 364 Members of the Synod were 54 lay and religious women with the right to a consultative vote. This was a significant change to the structure of the Synod of Bishops,¹⁶⁰ and an important legacy of Pope Francis, who had also appointed several women to senior positions in the dicasteries of the Apostolic See.

¹⁵⁶ <https://icanw.org.au/>

¹⁵⁷ [To Participants in the International Symposium "Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament" \(10 November 2017\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#)

¹⁵⁸ [Message of the Holy Father to the President of the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards their Total Elimination \[New York, 27-31 March 2017\] \(23 March 2017\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#)

¹⁵⁹ <https://icanw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Interfaith-Open-Letter-on-TPNW-2020.pdf>

¹⁶⁰ https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/old_pages/editorial-april-2023.html

On 15 August 2022 Catholics for Renewal made a substantial *Submission to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops on the Theme of the Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*.¹⁶¹ It made it very clear that in the experience of the Australian Church, nothing has brought the faith of ordinary Australian Catholics closer to pernicious cant than the phenomenon of clerical child sexual abuse, and no amount of pious rhetoric or ritual hand-wringing can restore the credibility forfeited by the scandalous perpetration of these evils, and their hypocritical cover-up by Church authorities. The only action of the Spirit evident in this tragedy was the work of the secular Royal Commission.

The Submission stated that if the Catholic Church in Australia is to claim to be a *communion*, the bishops, individually and then collectively must first make a full apology, including setting out its sins and crimes as an institution. To say I/we are sorry 'that it happened' is not an apology, for we are all sorry that it happened. The bishops must also be checked from using the collective term 'the Church' when apportioning blame when it rests on them. It is up to the bishops to apologise and no one else. There must be detailed truth-telling because without the truth there can be no healing and without healing there can be no communion. Clericalism in all its expressions is a gross violation of sacred communion.

The Submission also said that Australian society is characterised by a hunger for freedom, social justice, prosperity, and racial and sexual equality, and the Church's mission cannot be to preserve a form of hierarchical authority that denies freedom even to its own members. It must model ways of expressing freedom that satisfy the yearnings of all members. Its strong rhetoric about social justice is stripped of credibility when the Church is miserly in its compensation of victims of clerical child sexual abuse, and cruel in the procedures to which it subjects them in pursuing justice. Past sins must be repented of, and humble listening engaged in, if its mission is to draw these peoples into Church communion. The institutional Church is throwing dust in its own eyes if it pretends that anything less than total equality of women with men will fulfil the call of the Spirit and stem the exodus of women from Australian ecclesial assemblies.

On 28 October 2023, after the close of the First Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the Synod Secretariat published a *Synthesis Report*¹⁶² setting out the Convergences, Matters for Consideration, and Proposals on a wide range of issues. Pope Francis assigned ten of the more contentious issues to Study Groups for further discernment, including formation for priesthood¹⁶³ and diaconate for women.

In October 2023 Catholics for Renewal published a special editorial on the diaconate for women¹⁶⁴ citing strong evidence for female deacons in the early Church (Rom 16:1-2). Furthermore, in 1995 the Canon Law Society of America had concluded that the magisterium could decide to ordain women to the permanent diaconate with few canonical

¹⁶¹ Submission to Synod on Synodality: [Catholics For Renewal - Submission to Synod of Bishops - FINAL - 15 August 2022-5.docx](https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Catholics-For-Renewal-Submission-to-Synod-of-Bishops-FINAL-15-August-2022-5.docx) (live.com)

¹⁶² <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>

¹⁶³ [Editorial, August-23 2024 – Catholics For Renewal](https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Editorial-August-23-2024-Catholics-For-Renewal.pdf)

Cf. Peter Wilkinson's series of articles published in *The Swag* on 'Catholic Seminaries in Australia: 1935-2023': Vol. 31, Nos 2,3,4; Vol. 32, Nos 1,2,3,4

¹⁶⁴ October 2023 editorial: Diaconate for women: <https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/October-2023-Editorial-The-Diaconate-for-Women-Print-version-FINAL.pdf>

adjustments required, and in 2002 the International Theological Commission stated that the magisterium had competence to make a final decision on the issue.¹⁶⁵

Pope Francis initiated two commissions to study the diaconate for women in 2016 and 2020 but neither report has been made public. Catholics for Renewal strongly supported the recommendation of the Brisbane Archdiocese that ‘the Church prioritise the question of the diaconate for women to settle the issue, [for the] ordination to the order of deacon configures the person ordained to the person of Christ as servant, not priest’.¹⁶⁶ The principal reasons why the Church should restore women to ordained diaconate are a renewed understanding of the Baptismal equality of all, the signs of the times and the current ministerial needs of the Church.

On 3 May 2024, in response to the invitation of the Synod Secretariat to respond to the question - How can we be a synodal Church in mission? – Catholics for Renewal offered ‘*One Australian Perspective*’.¹⁶⁷ It provided a theological basis for a synodal church in mission and showed ways of making the church more synodal in diocesan and parish structures with much greater participation of women, including ordination to the diaconate. It also called for urgency to resolve these important issues.

In its May 2024 editorial¹⁶⁸ Catholics for Renewal restated its view that the Catholic Church in Australia had gone ‘off mission’ and for it to be an effective and credible sign of the Reign of God it must undergo a profound conversion at every level of its being, discern anew the signs of the times and reengage with the mission God has given it. It had to be a synodal Church: ‘*not some of the bishops some of the time, but all of the Church all of the time*’.¹⁶⁹ Catholics for Renewal called for episcopal conferences to be transformed into an authentic synodal structure as Pope Francis had done with the Synod of Bishops.

The Synod *Synthesis Report* called for a normative culture of transparency and accountability and effective synodal structures at every level of church life, especially in parishes and dioceses. They must include diocesan synods, pastoral councils, reports and pastoral plans, and parish pastoral councils with strong connections to the diocesan plans.

In its August 2024 editorial¹⁷⁰ Catholics for Renewal expressed serious concerns as to whether the Catholic Church in Australia and worldwide was, in the foreseeable future, actually capable of achieving the essential reforms needed through synodal and co-responsible processes. It recognised that church reform has often lagged changing realities and times for centuries, but there were now strong indications that the Church in Australia had stalled and was in a holding position, blocked from going forward by clericalism, hesitancy about the synodal model, and in particular refusal to commit to co-

¹⁶⁵ [Ministry of Deaconesses – International Theological Commission 2003 - Women Deacons](#)

¹⁶⁶ [Plenary Council assembly reaches decision day about the Church role of women - The Catholic Leader](#)

¹⁶⁷ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/C4R-A-Synodal-Church-in-mission-One-Australian-Response-FINAL-03052024-1.pdf>

¹⁶⁸ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/editorial-may-2024/>

¹⁶⁹ Pope Francis’s address on synodality at the 2015 Synod on the Family.

¹⁷⁰ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/editorial-august-2024/>

responsibility.¹⁷¹ Could it be a ‘Clayton’s Synod?’ – a shadow of what it might have been or might become? Had the Catholic Church’s journey towards real renewal failed?

To successfully renew and reform the Church Pope Francis is showing, via the Synod on Synodality, how synodality is to be done in practice. Catholics for Renewal constantly urges the Australian bishops to give their local faithful the opportunity to participate and engage directly in synodal approaches, such as diocesan synods and assemblies, and diocesan and parish pastoral councils.

Catholics for Renewal is most encouraged by the immediate approval by Pope Francis of the *Final Statement* of the Synod on Synodality¹⁷² on 26 October 2024 making it part of the Magisterium – the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church. Many of its directives require the local diocesan bishop to take immediate action on structures and procedures in his diocese. In its Christmas Message to the Australian Bishops Catholics for Renewal rebuked the bishops for their staggering inertia on convening diocesan synods and urged them to immediately implement the synodal requirements of the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality.¹⁷³ Any decisions he makes personally within the Episcopal Conference will also obligate him to follow through.

On 25 January 2025, Catholics for Renewal President, Peter Wilkinson, wrote a final letter to the Archbishop of Melbourne, Peter Comensoli, requesting him to implement the required synodal structures and processes for transparency, accountability and evaluation for the Melbourne Archdiocese.¹⁷⁴

Wind-up of Catholics for Renewal

At a recent Committee meeting of Catholics for Renewal, after many months of deep discernment and with much anguish and mixed feelings, the difficult decision was made to wind-up the association and cancel its incorporation on 31 January 2025. This was confirmed with a Special Resolution at the Annual General Meeting on 20 November 2024.

For more than 14 years Catholics for Renewal, like the mouse that roared, has advocated relentlessly for the renewal of the Catholic Church in Australia and beyond. It did this with numerous editorials and submissions to church and government authorities.

Its most important contribution to renewal was the submission made to the Plenary Council in March 2019, subsequently published in book form by Garratt Publishing with the title *Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together*.¹⁷⁵ It was the culmination of many

¹⁷¹ At 25 November 2024, only 6 of 28 Australian territorial dioceses have committed to a synodal and co-responsible governance approach..

¹⁷² [ENG---Documento-finale traduzione-di-lavoro.pdf](#)

¹⁷³ A Christmas Message to the Catholic Diocesan Bishops of the Local Church in Australia 20241206; https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/C4R-A-Christmas-Message-to-the-Diocesan-Bishops-of-Australia-FINAL_linked-20241205-2030hrs.pdf

¹⁷⁴ <https://catholicsforrenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/C4R-Letter-to-Archbishop-Peter-Comensoli-FINAL-20250122.pdf>

¹⁷⁵ [Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together | Garratt Publishing](#)

years of prayer, discernment, research and writing and brought together the essentials of the reform and renewal that was being called for. Its recommendations still stand strong.

While the story of Catholics for Renewal may be that of just one particular renewal group, there is the bigger story of a 'renewal movement' in the Catholic Church in Australia, and an even bigger story of a worldwide 'renewal movement' in the Catholic Church in countries such as Ireland, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, England and the United States. As Catholics for Renewal bows out, we are hopeful and confident that the 'renewal movement' here in Australia and worldwide will continue.

Appendices

Appendix 1. List of Members of Catholics for Renewal

During the 14 years Catholics for Renewal was in existence, from 11 April 2011 to 31 January 2025, there have been 26 members: 8 original and 18 at later stages. Another was in the process of becoming a member.

Their names, the offices they held, and the period of their membership are recorded below.

Original Members of C4R

Frank Burke (2011-2015; Secretary 2011-2015))
 Peter Johnstone (2011-2023; President 2011-2017)
 Garry Nolan (2011-2020; Treasurer 2011-2019; President 2019-2020)
 Fr Greg Reynolds (2011-2013)
 Maria McGarvie (2011-2020)
 Emmy Silvius (2011-2012)
 Fr Bruce Duncan CSsR (2011-2023)
 Peter Wilkinson (2011-2025: Vice-President 2011-2017; President 2017-2019; 2020-2025)

Later Members

Maria George (RIP) (2014-2020; Secretary 2015-2020)
 David Timbs (2012-2025; Treasurer 2020-2025; Secretary 2023-2025)
 John Costa (2011-2025)
 Vivien Williams (2012-2019)
 Di Brebner (2018-2018)
 Richard Curtain (2013-2017)
 Sauro Antonelli (2013-2014)
 Fiona Lynch (2018-2021; Vice-President 2019-2020)
 Gail Grossman Freyne (2020-2025; Vice-President 2020-2025)
 David Hughan (2019-2025)
 Bob Dixon (2018-2019)
 Michael Leahy (2018-2025)
 Peter Seal (2015-2025)
 Frank Purcell (RIP) (2021-2023)
 Jacinta Bright (2021-2022)
 Patricia Boylan (2021-2024)
 Rhonda O'Connor (2021-2023)
 Rose-Marie Prosser (2016-2023; Secretary 2020-2023)
 Wayne McGough (in process)

Appendix 2

Chronological List of Meetings held from April 2011 to November 2024

| Type of Meeting | Place | Date | Members present |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| First Meeting – Frank Burke, Peter Johnstone, Greg Reynolds (to plan 1 st Meeting) | George Maher House, Clifton Hill | Late April 2011 | 3 |
| 1st Meeting of Renewal Group* | George Maher House, Clifton Hill | 11 May 2011 | 6 |
| 2 nd Meeting of Renewal Group** | Maria McGarvie home | 17 May 2011 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Maria McGarvie home | 1 June 2011 | |
| Meeting with ACBC President (+Wilson) & General Secretary (Lucas) | Bishops House, Adelaide | 23 July 2011 | 2 |
| Catholics for Renewal -Committee*** | Campion Centre, Kew | 18 August 2011 | 7 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Campion Centre, Kew | 29 August 2011 | 7 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Campion Centre, Kew | 13 September 2011 | ? |
| Workshop on Church Renewal (ACCCR)** | St Francis Pastoral Centre | 21 January 2012 | 16 |
| Lunch Meeting at ACBC Secretariate | ACBC Canberra | 28 May 2012 | 8 |
| Meeting with ACBC President (+Hart) & General Secretary (Lucas) | James Goold House, East Melbourne | 1 June 2012 | 3 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | St Kevin’s Templestowe | 12 September 2012 | 5 |
| Catholics for Renewal – AGM** | Ivanhoe (at McGarvie) | 1 November 2012 | ? |
| Meeting with Bishop Geoff Robinson | John Garratt Publishing | 29 November 2012 | 4 |
| Catholics for Renewal -Committee* | St Kevin’s Templestowe | 5 December 2012 | 6 |
| Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry | Parliament House VIC | 23 January 2013 | 4 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | St Kevin’s Templestowe | 6 February 2013 | ? |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | St Kevin’s Templestowe | 6 March 2013 | 5 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Parish Meeting** (Submission to Bishops) | Glen Waverley St Leonards’s Parish | 14 April 2013 | 25 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | St Kevin’s Templestowe | 27 May 2013 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee Strategic Planning Meeting** (VW) | St Francis Pastoral Centre | 19 June 2013 | ? |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | St Francis Pastoral Centre | 22 July 2013 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | St Francis Pastoral Centre | 2 October 2013 | 9 |
| ACCCR – National Meeting | University House, Canberra | 17 October 2013 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – AGM** | YTU Study Centre | 28 November 2013 | 6 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | YTU Study Centre | 28 November 2015 | 6 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Elwood Parish House | 26 February 2014 | 9 |

| | | | |
|--|------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|
| Meeting with Bishop Paul Bird | Ballarat Cathedral | 14 March 2014 | 3 (PJ, PW, FB) |
| ACCCR ** (Missing Paul Collins Report) | St Columba's School, Elwood | 15 March 2014 | 12 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Campion Centre, Kew | 16 April 2014 | 7 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Campion Centre, Kew | 16 June 2014 | 5 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Campion Centre, Kew | 20 August 2014 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | Campion Centre, Kew | 15 October 2014 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – AGM*** | Campion Centre, Kew | 26 November 2014 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Planning Workshop | Campion Centre, Kew | 6 December 2014 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Parish House - Elwood | 17 December 2014 | ? |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Campion Centre, Kew | 18 February 2015 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | ? | 15 April 2015 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | ? | 17 June 2015 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | ? | 19 August 2015 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | ? | 21 October 2015 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – AGM* | Campion Centre, Kew | 25 November 2015 | 5 |
| Meeting with Truth, Justice and Healing Council (Owen, Proust, Sullivan) | ? | Last week of October 2016 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Campion Centre, Kew | 6 October 2016 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – AGM* | Campion Centre, Kew | 23 November 2016 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Jesuit College, Parkville | 22 March 2017 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Jesuit College, Parkville | 11 May 2017 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Uniting Age Well, Kingsville | 10 July 2017 | 9 |
| Meeting with Richard Gaillardetz | Restaurant, Carlton | 5 September 2017 | 2 (PJ & PW) |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Jesuit College, Parkville | 21 September 2017 | 6 |
| Catholics for Renewal – AGM | Jesuit College, Parkville | 22 November 2017 | 9 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Jesuit College, Parkville | 22 November 2017 | 9 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Jesuit College - Parkville | 24 January 2018 | 6 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Parkville Presbytery | 16 March 2018 | 7 |
| ACCCR – National Meeting** | 'The Pavilion', Canberra | 23 March 2018 | 5 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Parkville Presbytery | 28 March 2018 | 9 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Parkville Presbytery | 23 May 2018 | |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Rose-Marie Prosser Home | 7 June 2018 | 8 |
| Meeting of ICRN | Pesinok, Slovakia | 11-15 June 2018 | 1 - DT |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | Parkville Presbytery | 25 July 2018 | |
| Meeting in Ballarat with Ballarat Catholics | Diocesan Hall, Ballarat | 29 July 2018 | 3 -PJ, MG,PW |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Arthur St, Hughesdale | 2 August 2018 | 10 |

| | | | |
|---|---|----------------------|--------|
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | St Francis Pastoral Centre | 27 August 2018 | 10 |
| Meeting with ACCCR Reps and ACBC President (+Coleridge) & Lana Turvey-Collins | Jesuit College of Spirituality, Parkville | 18 September 2018 | |
| Meeting with ACBC President (+ Mark Coleridge) & Cathy Jenkins (CAM) | St Francis Pastoral Centre | 19 September 2018 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Parkville Presbytery | 24 September 2018 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal - AGM | Parkville Presbytery | 29 November 2018 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Parkville Presbytery | 29 September 2018 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Jesuit College, Parkville | 19 March 2019 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Parkville Presbytery | 22 May 2019 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Amarco Retirement Village, Kingsville | 3 July 2019 | 9 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Amarco Retirement Village, Kingsville | 14 August 2019 | 8? |
| Meeting of ICRN | Warsaw, Poland | 22-27 September 2019 | 1 - DT |
| Catholics for Renewal – AGM | Parkville Presbytery | 25 September 2019 | 11 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Parkville Presbytery | 25 September 2019 | 11 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Parkville Presbytery | 6 November 2019 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Parkville Presbytery | 25 November 2019 | |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | ? | 4 December 2019 | ? |
| Catholics for Renewal – Special GM | Parkville Presbytery | 30 January 2020 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Parkville Presbytery | 30 January 2020 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Parkville Presbytery | 27 February 2020 | 7 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | Parkville Presbytery | 26 March 2020 | |
| ACCCR – Strategy Meeting | Canberra | 3 April 2020 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Zoom | 6 April 2020 | 11 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Zoom | 6 May 2020 | |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 1 July 2020 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 4 August 2020 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Zoom | 9 September 2020 | 11 |
| Catholics for Renewal – AGM | Zoom | 21 October 2020 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Zoom | 21 October 2020 | |
| ACCCR – Strategy Meeting | Zoom | 7 December 2020 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee* | Zoom | 9 December 2020 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 10 February 2021 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 14 April 2021 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 16 May 2021 | |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 16 June 2021 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Zoom | 25 August 2021 | |
| Catholics for Renewal - AGM | Zoom | 27 October 2021 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | Zoom | 27 October 2021` | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 8 December 2021 | 7 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Zoom | 21 February 2022 | 12 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 6 April 2022 | 9 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 1 June 2022 | 8 |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Zoom | 20 July 2022 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Zoom | 3 August 2022 | |
| ACCCR – Reps Meeting | Zoom | 18 August 2022 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee*** | Zoom | 5 October 2022 | |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 14 December 2022 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 1 February 2023 | 9 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 20 February 2023 | |
| ACCCR – Representatives Meeting | Zoom | 23 February 2023 | 4 C4R |
| Meeting with Pastoral Associates | Greensborough Parish | ? March 2023 | 3 C4R |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 29 March 2023 | 10 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Kensington (at Gail's home) | 6 June 2023 | 9 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 19 July 2023 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 20 September 2023 | 5 |
| Catholics for Renewal - AGM | Zoom | 22 November 2023 | 7 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 22 November 2023 | 7 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Zoom | 31 January 2024 | |
| Meeting with WWHITCH, SOF, C4R | Zoom | 7 February 2024 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Zoom | 27 March 2024 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Zoom | 29 May 2024 | |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee | Zoom | 31 July 2024 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal – Committee** | Zoom | 11 September 2024 | 6 |
| Catholics for Renewal - AGM | Zoom | 27 November 2024 | 8 |
| Catholics for Renewal - Committee | Zoom | 27 November 2024 | 8 |

NOTE:

- Missing Notice and Agenda of Meeting
- ** Missing Minutes of Meeting
- *** Missing Notice, Agenda and Minutes,

Appendix 3

Newsletter Updates and Editorials: 1 July 2014- December 2024

Newsletter Update No. 1, 19 June 2014 (Test format only)
 Newsletter Update No. 2, 1 July 2014
 Newsletter Update No. 3, 2 August 2014
 Newsletter Update No. 4, 1 September 2014
 Newsletter Update No. 5, 1 October 2014
 Newsletter Update No. 6, 1 November 2014
 Circular No. 1, 21 November 2014
 Newsletter Update No. 7, 15 December 2014
 Newsletter Update No. 1, 11 January 2015
 Newsletter Update No. 2, 8 February 2015
 Newsletter Update No. 3, 7 March 2015
 Newsletter Update No. 4, 5 April 2015
 Newsletter Update No. 5, 12 May 2015
 Editorial 6, 13 June 2015 - Church's strongest supporters its most vocal internal critics
 Editorial 7, 11 July 2015 - The Synod, the People and the *Sensus Fidelium*
 Editorial 8, 22 August 2015 - "Angst or Optimism? "
 Editorial 9, September 2015 - The 14th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Rome, 4-25 October 2015 - "The vocation and mission of the family in the Church "
 Editorial 10, 16 October 2015 - The Synod on the Family – what’s really happening?
 Editorial 11, December 2015 - Synod on the Family - What Next?
 Editorial 1, February 2016 - *Spotlight on our Church*
 Editorial 2, March 2016 - Law, Morality, Ethics & Bishops
 Editorial 3, April 2016 - *Amoris Laetitia*: Now for the Discernment
 Editorial 4, August 2016 - A Church united by Christian faith
 Editorial 5, September 2016 - Online Survey
 Editorial 1, May 2017 - Open Letter to the Bishops of Australia
 Editorial 30 August 2017 - A Synodal Church or ‘Business as Usual’?
 Editorial November 2017 - Circling the Wagons (or an Ill-informed Australian Plenary Council)
 Editorial 25 November 2017 - Catholic Church 2020 Plenary Council: bishops must tap into the grassroots without delay
 Editorial 23 December 2017 - A Christmas Message from the Royal Commission
 Editorial February 2018 - Getting Catholic Church renewal happening now
 Editorial May 2018 - Seeking Christ-like leadership: Inclusive, Transparent, and Accountable
 Editorial September 2018 - Response of Australian bishops and religious leaders is more dithering
 Editorial November 2018 - Synodality: the medium is the message
 Editorial December 2018 - All we want for Christmas is

Editorial March 2019 - Getting back on Mission

Editorial November 2019 - NZ Royal Commission - Invited Australian Input

Editorial December 2019 - How should PC2020 listen to what the *sensus fidelium* is saying?

Editorial January 2020 - Are our Bishops listening?

Editorial February 2020 - The Rights and Responsibilities of Christ's Faithful in Australia

Editorial March 2020 - 5th Australian Catholic Plenary Council: Has the diversity of voices been called?

Editorial April 2020 - Priorities for the Plenary Council agenda

Editorial, May 2020 - Reform or Retreat?

Editorial June 2020 - Subsidiarity – Just a principle or a new reality?

Editorial July 2020 - Signs of the Times – Leading where?

Editorial August 2020 - No time for delay in local implementation of Church governance report

Editorial September 2020 - Royal Commission, Mandatory Reporting and Seal of Confession

Editorial October 2020 - Francis on Women: The Need for Discernment

Editorial December 2020 - Advent – Waiting with hope for Church renewal

Editorial February 2021 - Synodality – the inclusive element

Editorial March 2021 - *Instrumentum Laboris* – a major disappointment

Editorial May 2021 - Plenary Council contributions and concerns

Editorial July 2021 - Renewing the Archdiocese of Melbourne

Editorial: September 2021 - Plenary Council Agenda: fit for purpose?

Editorial 28 September 2021 - 5th Plenary Council: what hope for success?

Editorial 6 December 2021 - *Do not be afraid. See, I am doing a new thing!* (Isaiah, 43: 1, 19)

Editorial 2 February 2022 - There is no Good News in discrimination

Editorial 18 February 2022 - Australian Bishops blank Pope Francis

Editorial 26 May 2022 - Vatican II's call for synods and councils and the Australian response

Editorial 20 June 2022 - Plenary Council Motions: no match for the Church's crisis

Editorial August 2022 - Which way towards a Synodal Church?

Editorial November 2022 - Fifth Plenary Council of Australia - a turning point?

Editorial December 2022 - Witnessing Gender Equality in the Church: When?

Editorial February 2023 - A Voice to Parliament – Divider or Unifier?

Editorial April 2023 - The Legacy of Pope Francis: 10 years on

Editorial June 2023 - Diocesan Synods: Getting the Preparations Underway

Editorial July 2023 - *Instrumentum Laboris*: hopes and fears

Editorial-September 2023 - Diocesan Pastoral Councils – the most appropriate permanent structure for implementing synodality

Editorial October 2023 - The Diaconate for Women: the time has come

Editorial 8 December 2023 - Walking with or walking away from victims of clerical child sexual abuse?

Editorial May 2024 - Catholics for Renewal's Response to A Synodal Church in Mission

Editorial August 2024 - Are the Australian Plenary Council and Synod on Synodality achieving renewal and reform?

Editorial 23 August 2024 - Women's involvement needed in the formation of future priests

Editorial November 2024 - IS THE CATHOLIC CHURCH GETTING BACK ON MISSION?

Editorial 22 December 2024 - A Christmas message to the Catholic Diocesan Bishops of the local churches in Australia