

## **Progress Report to Signatories to the Open Letter to the Bishops of Australia (to 23 June 2017)**

cc. Parish Priests, Parish Councils, Newsletter Subscribers

Dear Signatories,

In March 2017, following the ‘wrap-up’ public hearings of the Royal Commission into the Catholic Church in Australia, Catholics for Renewal published an Open Letter to the Bishops of Australia asking them to “Please Listen and Act Now” on seven areas of church life needing urgent attention: governance, clericalism, priestly formation, co-responsibility, participation of women, reconciliation with abuse survivors and their families, and just redress. It also asked for a delegation to Pope Francis to ask him to purge child sexual abuse from the Church and to reform the process for selecting bishops.

The Open Letter was sent to every parish in Australia and published on the Catholics for Renewal website inviting Australian Catholics to signal their support by adding their signatures. Though many parish leaders did not inform their parishioners of the Open letter, up to 23 June 2017 a total of 3876 Australian Catholics from across the nation, including bishops, priests, religious, and laity had signed it online and via hard-copy.<sup>1</sup>

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) held its Plenary Meeting on 4-11 May 2017. Prior to the meeting Catholics for Renewal prepared an Interim Report on the Open Letter and forwarded it to the ACBC. It provided a background on its purpose, process of preparation, response, signatures received to 2 May 2017 (2428), and a full list of the comments received from signatories. The Interim Report asked the bishops to “listen to their people” and noted that since none of the Open Letter’s proposals required deferral to the Holy See or awaiting the Royal Commission’s final report, and all were within the bishops’ competence, immediate action was both possible and necessary.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The sources of the signatories to 23 June 2017 are:

	<b>NSW</b>	<b>VIC</b>	<b>QLD</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>WA</b>	<b>TAS</b>	<b>ACT</b>	<b>NT</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Online</b>	286	448	101	26	28	30	126	0	<b>1045</b>
<b>Hard-copy</b>	635	1546	49	0	1	300	300	0	<b>2831</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>921</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3876</b>

Note: The total does not include signatures from Catholics residing outside Australia.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/Reporting%20OL%20to%20Bishops%20of%20Australia%20with%20App%20comments-%20FINAL%20-%2020May%202017.pdf>

During the ACBC's Plenary Meeting the Open Letter was considered:<sup>3</sup>

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

This was confirmed in a letter to Catholics for Renewal from the General Secretary of the ACBC dated 15 May 2017:

the bishops considered a number of submissions received from Catholic individuals and groups. On behalf of the Bishops Conference, I acknowledge with gratitude the letter and petition from Catholics for Renewal.

The submissions received were invariably concerned with the ways in which the Church might best respond to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and with diverse aspects of Church reform and renewal.

The Plenary Meeting dealt with matters concerning the Royal Commission on three occasions. The bishops decided on some necessary future directions and will continue to respond to what emerges from the Royal Commission. The bishops appreciate that this will likely engage the Church for many years to come, most especially in supporting survivors of abuse and their families, and in ensuring best practice in safeguarding children and vulnerable people.

Wide-ranging advice was received by the Plenary Meeting concerning renewal and reform in the Church. In light of the decision taken by the Bishops Conference last year to hold a Plenary Council for Australia in 2020, the bishops determined that the preparatory consultation for the Plenary Council will provide the best opportunity for all members of the Catholic community in Australia to contribute to discerning and shaping the future of the Church here.

While Catholics for Renewal was pleased to receive this assurance, it was disappointed that the ACBC did not respond to the specific proposals and principal concerns of the signatories, none of which could be construed as unreasonable or undeserving of swift, decisive action.

Catholics for Renewal remains concerned at the further delay in commencing the significant task of rebuilding trust and confidence in the bishops' leadership,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Summary Report at <https://www.catholic.org.au/acbc-media/downloads/plenary-meeting/1935-plenary-summary-may-2017/file>

and of convincing the wider Australian society that our Church can a force for much good. Consequently, on 19 June 2017 Catholics for Renewal sent a follow-up letter to every bishop in Australia indicating its disappointment at the ACBC's decision to further delay the urgent needed actions, and invited each bishop to offer a personal response which could be passed on to the signatories (Link to letter [HERE](#)). To date one bishop has sent a constructive response.

While signatures will no longer be counted, the Open Letter will remain accessible on the Catholics for Renewal website as a continuing reminder of the need for action. Catholics for Renewal sincerely thanks all Australian Catholics who signed and supported the Open Letter and added comments, and will keep them updated on any further developments.

Peter Johnstone OAM, MA (Theol)  
President, Catholics for Renewal  
23 June 2017