

A strong voice of the faithful for Church renewal

On Thursday 17th October 2013, forty-five committed Catholics from Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra and rural Victoria gathered to attend a Forum hosted by the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal (ACCCR) at University House ANU Canberra.

This Forum was the ACCCR's first public event and was attended by representatives of the four Coalition partners and twenty parishes as well as priests and journalists, including Frank Brennan, Pat Power, Donella Johnston, Paul Collins, John Warhurst, Maria McGarvie, Greg Reynolds, Judith and Paul Bongiorno, Bernice Moore, Peter Johnstone, Peter Wilkinson, Margaret and Frank Purcell, Cecilia Merrigan, Peter Maher, Vivien Williams, John Costa, Alma Limbrick, Marg Burchell, Jan Richards, Len and Carol Blabut, and Maree Kennedy with support from Geraldine Doogue and others. The Forum was the culmination of eighteen months' effort to develop an effective approach for a lay-led renewal, building a strong common purpose and voice in the Australian Catholic Church.

The current ACCCR includes Catholics for Ministry (CfM), Catholics for Renewal (CathfR), Women and the Australian Catholic Church (WATAC), and Inclusive Catholics (IC). These groups have been working for years for reform in the Catholic Church through petitions attracting thousands of signatures, media interviews and responses, conferences, publications, submissions to reviews and enquiries, public meetings, and maintaining dialogue with the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) who are consistently unable to respond to concerns raised claiming that they have no power to act and that their hands are tied by the Vatican.

ACCCR partners started working in partnerships in about 2009 and while we seemingly didn't make much difference in the institutional Church, it did somehow strengthen all of us.

By the end of 2011, driven by the escalating horror and irresponsibility of the sexual child abuse; frustrated and shamed by the limited competency of the institutional Church and its refusal to address the structural issues like compulsory celibacy that created a clerical and destructive culture; and also driven by a new courage following the visit of Dr Patricia Fresen, former Dominican nun and ordained Catholic bishop, we decided we would have to take responsibility and lead. Our view was, this is our church and the precious faith that has sustained us through life is being mishandled and destroyed. We have to act now to ensure that the gift of faith as we know it will pass to future generations.

On 17 December 2011, a week before Christmas (fired by desperation) representatives from CfM and WATAC flew to a meeting hosted by CathfR in Melbourne.

The idea of the faithful taking responsibility, leading renewal and speaking out was articulated in all sorts of ways at this feisty meeting. We saw the need to build a bridge to the future and we all agreed that if we were to lead, we had to articulate a narrative that pointed to the essence and elements of the Church we all yearned for. Our discussion was pretty frank, fearless and productive. We set a process in place to develop and agree a draft narrative that reflected the discussion of the meeting. Then we went home for Christmas.

In January, we all went back to Melbourne and, facilitated by Tony Di Pietro, we workshopped and refined the draft and the Call to Renewal Statement included below is the product of our heartfelt deliberations.

At that point we also agreed to work in partnership and establish the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal (ACCCR). This means we support each other for the common purpose of renewal, but still continue our particular core work. It is new way of working and requires considerable humility and discipline. I am sure all of us would agree it has been a rich and humbling experience in which we have learned much. This is the statement we agreed upon:

An Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal, ACCCR *

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

The Coalition (as of 21 January 2012) included Catholics for Ministry (CfM), Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), Catholics for Renewal (CathfR) and Inclusive Catholics (IC). Each of the groups has its own focus and history and all are united in the call for renewal in the Church. The Coalition is open to other groups who share this vision and identify with the call for Church renewal.

All the research carried out by our constituent Coalition groups shows that women and married men in ministry will have to play a central role in a future Catholic Church in Australia. Women as mothers, teachers, nurses, and carers have been and still are the backbone of the Church and many are called to ministry, but are still denied. The institutional Catholic Church's discrimination against women through denying them ministry and leadership, when the scholarship indicates that there is no scriptural or traditional barrier to this, is not only unjust but it also diminishes the status of women, thus continually impacting on the daily lives and health of women and children, particularly in developing countries where the Church is so influential.

Married men and women in ministry and leadership are central to renewal in the Catholic Church. Not only because these are issues of justice, but because without women and men, married and celibate in ministry and governance, there is no possibility of changing the

hypocritical and discriminatory culture that has developed in an all male clerical hierarchy. The institutional Church's exclusion of women and married men from ministry and leadership has contributed to its destructive and authoritarian culture.

It is important to note that the sort of renewal we envisage revisits our rich history. As Pope Francis has emphasised it is about the need to recapture the tradition of Jesus, it is not new, it is about correcting the imbalance and, in Vatican II terms, recognising the signs of the times. It is about attitudinal change and a shift in consciousness, confidence and focus. It is about the renewal of hope and energy and moving beyond disempowerment.

The idea of the Forum arose after Paul Collins and I returned from the election of Pope Francis where Paul had been covering the election for the ABC, SBS, Seven and other commercial media, and I had been working with two other reform groups, Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) and International Movement we are Church (IMWAC). These groups were trying to get the voice of the faithful into the media prior to the Papal election. In a later conversation about how we might take it further, Frank Brennan suggested talking to the parishes. In June, CfM developed a proposal in consultation with our Coalition partners.

The Forum process set out to build a critical mass of the faithful who understood the idea of a lay-led renewal building a strong common purpose and voice and creating a groundswell and momentum for renewal. Our risk and the effort to initiate such an event were absolutely affirmed by people's attendance, input and evaluation of the day, as well as the wealth of thoughtful and practical suggestions contributed that are spirit-filled.

As a result of the ACCCR Forum we now have forty-five people who form a solid foundation for renewal and who have a clear understanding of the elements of the Call to Renewal Statement and how it can be used in small communities and parishes to provide the shift in consciousness and energy necessary for effective lay-led renewal in the Australian Catholic Church. The Forum directly addressed each of the elements of the Call to Renewal Statement by looking at a number of issues:

- (1) Getting back to the fundamentals of our faith: Seizing the Francis moment/hope.
- (2) Co-responsibility in ministry.
- (3) Recapturing the mystical and spiritual.
- (4) Ensuring formation in the Spirit of Vatican II and in the Christian spiritual tradition
- (5) Reforming church governance.
- (6) Affirming and Developing the Call Statement

Each issue was discussed and ideas gathered for future action. This very comprehensive body of thought and information will be further analysed into what can be done immediately and there is much in this category; and what will take longer and require the expanding of work undertaken in the Forum into a more comprehensive action plan.

We have already established the ACCCR email networking list. Frank Purcell's Vatican II Parish Charter is also a useful resource, email: fpurcell@mcmmedia.com.au. We invite others to join the ACCCR network to both receive the monthly ACCCR update of action or connect with others who will assist them to implement aspects of the Call Statement in their parish or community. You can find out more by contacting us at: www.catholicsforministry.com.au – click on 'contact'.

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