Very strong emotions have been displayed publicly as the large majority of Australians who love cricket faced the reality that the leadership of their cherished national team had deliberately engaged in a plan to cheat. In the period of a couple of days feelings ran from punitive outrage to sympathy for the perpetrators as they broke down and apologised for the situation they had caused. Why did this change happen so quickly along with calls for forgiveness? I believe the perception created through the language that was used had a lot to do with it.

Almost immediately commentators referred to the cheating action of the offending players as a mistake, a word that the players also used during their interviews. But this was no mistake. Mistakes occur when a person makes a wrong judgment based on incorrect or insufficient knowledge. Here was a situation where the players involved knew the action was wrong, planned how to achieve it, and did not retreat from their decision during the time before it was enacted. Would the offenders have exhibited such grief and sorrow if it was only a mistake? No, this was a calculated effort to do the wrong thing and at least one of them knew it. Why couldn’t it just be accepted as such?

We all make mistakes and, for this reason, calling this incident a mistake has the effect of helping people to become sympathetic towards the offenders. Perhaps we also find it easier to accept it as a mistake in order to find forgiveness in our hearts after our initial outrage. The reality appears to be that a culture of ‘win at all costs’ had become so endemic in the milieu of the players that sensitivity against deliberately doing wrong had been somewhat deadened.

However, do we need to find excuses or diminish the offence in our minds in order to justify any forgiveness we offer? One of the principal messages of Easter is that the forgiveness of God is unconditional and we are asked to have the same attitude towards others. We shouldn’t need to find a way to show that our forgiveness is reasonable. If we believe and trust in that Easter message then disappointing events like these give us an opportunity to reflect on our own reactions.

John Buggy
The tsunami engulfing the Catholic Church in Australia and elsewhere, as a result of the revelations of clerical misconduct and cover-up, is being stoically resisted, Canute-like, by the church’s hierarchy. If they continue in this vein they will not so much be engulfed as left high and dry as the disillusioned faithful simply stop turning up.

In an effort to make the hierarchy see sense, numbers of good people have come together such as Concerned Catholics of Canberra-Goulburn and Australian Reforming Catholics, as well as many other small informal groups. These people, of good faith and intention, want the Church to change, return to basic inclusive Christian values and provide us with true leadership. Unfortunately their pleas are falling on deaf ears. Senior clerics would not be where they are today if they did not faithfully toe the party line and they find it very difficult to change the top-down attitude that has worked for so many centuries, financed by rivers of gold extracted from faithful and often fearful parishioners. One can hardly blame them. We are all products of our times and circumstances.

However, to be realistic, these celibate old men love to exercise power and use their power to resist change, especially if the change relates to a dilution of their power and, more especially, if women are involved. Power arises out of the control of money and resources. In my view the only way we common-garden parishioners can reduce that power is by cutting off the supply of money. Sure, the Church still has massive investments which it can use, but a donations drought or a plate strike would certainly bring it home to those who need to be made to understand just how strongly we all feel about these things.

I am not suggesting that we deny the clergy/religious our contributions to their living expenses and superannuation, especially those less elevated labourers in the vineyard who tend to our spiritual and often physical needs in times of both crisis and joy. These very worthy men and women need our support, and it is a great pity that women do not make up a larger proportion of these groups, ordained or otherwise. As I understand things, their welfare is provided for from the first of the two collections at mass. The second collection is the one I target and if we lay Catholics (and I admit to being a ‘supermarket Catholic’ these days) do not take decisive action the senior clergy will simply pat us on the head, pretend to listen for a while and, when the dust settles, return to their old ways.

Finally, I have to apologise to poor old mis-represented Canute who ordered the sea to retreat, not as an act of folly, but to demonstrate his impotence to his flatterers, at least as far as tides are concerned. Surely there is a lesson there for our bishops, archbishops, cardinals and popes?

James Gralton
Garran ACT

Letter to:
His Holiness Pope Francis
Vatican City

Your Holiness,

Our prayers go for you to have a good New Year.

On Christmas morning Peggy my wife and I were fortunate to participate in your Midnight Mass. She said that it was reviving her Faith. I am 94 years old and a daily communicant. I was with you in spirit and in hope.

Unfortunately I could not help noticing that WOMEN were absent—Not one to be seen on the Altar, in the Readings, in the Choir; no special area allocated to nuns. My father used to say ‘Women should be placed on a pedestal’. At your Holy Mass, nuns and women were given no consideration at all.

We admire and love you, praying that you might bring out the ‘Reforms’ our church needs.

God is with you,

Joe Sacco
Killara
Communiqué of the Gathering of the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform

Canberra, Friday 23 March

Ten Catholic groups advocating for systemic reform of the Church have met in Canberra today to assert the responsibility of all Catholic people to be heard and to lead in the Church.

The Catholic Church in Australia faces continuing decay unless bishops understand the necessity of the grassroots Catholics to have a central role in the direction and decision-making of the Church.

There needs to be a restoration of trust in and by the bishops in the value of advice and wisdom from ordinary Catholics which for too long has been rejected or at best ignored.

The Coalition will seek a meeting between the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and ACCCR representatives to open the lines of communication to press for the bishops to give effect to the significant recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and to respond to our call for greater involvement of the people of God through the coming Plenary Council 2020.

We also call on the bishops to accept the nomination of a woman as co-chair of the 2020 Plenary Council.

The catastrophe that the Church has experienced with the institutional sexual abuse underlines the need for effective and urgent reform. Yet the response of the bishops so far in its preparation for the 2020 plenary indicates a failure to learn a fundamental lesson of that catastrophe.

That is the need for decisive reforms to the governance structure that remains largely unchanged despite that experience.

The people are as much a part of the church as the bishops and we need to work towards their greater participation.

We propose a summit for all Catholics before the Plenary to cultivate open discussion to assert a mature and frank engagement with the issues confronting the church today.

The program content so far for the Plenary Council indicates they have not understood the recommendations regarding transparency, inclusiveness and accountability.

The place of women in the Church must be given urgent priority so that at this time of crisis in the church, the wisdom and talents of women can fully contribute to the Church.

There will be no successful governance structure without the grassroots people, particularly women, in leadership and decision-making roles.

The 2020 Plenary is a positive step. It is imperative that the faithful be fully involved in preparation of this Plenary Council. But the plenary council must not be used as a delaying tactic in avoiding immediate issues.

The Royal Commission has identified grave deficiencies in the Church's governance. Those deficiencies resulted in the protection of pedophiles and the abuse of further children.

The horror of child sexual abuse, terrible as it is, is but one example of the lack of accountability in the leadership of the church.

Church leaders have to learn to be accountable, transparent and inclusive of all, particularly women. That means listening to the faithful and engaging through structures such as pastoral councils.

There must be greater and continuing attention to the survivors of sexual abuse as well as marginalised people, Australia’s first nations people, refugees and LGBTI people.

Without strong influence and input of the people of God laity, the plenary will be like a departing cruise ship, leaving 95 per cent behind at the dockside.

The ACCCR comprises:
- Catholics Speak Out
- Women and the Australian Church
- Catholics for Renewal
- Inclusive Catholics
- The Friendship Group (Bunbury WA)
- Aggiornamento, Perth
- Australian Reforming Catholics
- Cyber Christian Community (WA)
- Concerned Catholics of Canberra Goulburn
- Rainbow Catholics InterAgency for Ministry

For media comment, contact:
Peter Johnstone 0419 307566
‘Own Goals’ and Catholic Church decline in Australia

Alan Clague

Christianity in Australia has shown a significant decline. This has been attributed to the country’s increasingly secular environment, and perhaps to a response to the paedophilia scandals that have implicated all Australian churches. In the case of the Catholic Church, it would be a grave mistake to blame this decline entirely on these two phenomena. It is crucially important in the forthcoming Plenary Council in 2020 that they are not the main focus of attention. There are some factors imposed upon the faithful that run contrary to the sensus fidelium of Australian Catholics and the cultural norms of Australian society. These form an additional source of alienation of Catholics from the organisation of the Church. They can be considered to be the Church’s ‘own goals’, to use a sporting metaphor, because they have their origin in considered decisions of Church authorities. They are historical relics from earlier times or aberrations from authentic Christianity that have become established in an authoritarian, patriarchal organisation.

There has been much discussion about the issue of celibacy in the clergy and religious, particularly in relation to paedophilia. The Church has always been suspicious of sex, going back to its struggle against Gnosticism, and the theory that original sin was transmitted by sex. Mandatory clerical celibacy was introduced in the 12th century, in part to prevent the clergy stealing Church property. Sex now has greater acceptance by the Church, and prevention of property alienation does not require celibacy. It is no longer supported by the faithful, but is particularly beloved by senior clergy who do not seem to care that it excludes eminently suitable priesthood candidates.

However, it would be wrong to blame celibacy entirely for the destructive evil of paedophilia. The more fundamental evil is the abuse of power, which can be seen in sexual attacks by non-Catholic, non-celibate men of power. Jesus told those who were leaders of his flock to be ‘servants of all’, which in practice is impossible in a patriarchal, hierarchical organisation like the Church. The oppressive use of power by parish priests, by diocesan bishops, and by the Vatican has corrupted the Church in many ways. The protection of paedophile priests by their bishop is merely the latest example of the corruption of power. It can be seen in the authoritarian behaviour of some parish priests and the perversion of diocesan subsidiarity by the Vatican. The early Church had local election of bishops, but this is now a distant memory. There has been a relentless exclusion of women from power ever since the second generation of Church leaders repudiated St Paul’s sharing of power between men and women by forging his name to writings which made women subservient to men. These forged writings have been used by the Church ever since to exclude women from power.

The Australia of today has rejected the protection of paedophiles by the organisations to which they belong. It rejects organisations in which the ordinary members have no voice. It rejects the relegation of women to an inferior status in society. The Catholics of Australia see a priesthood unable to perform its former role in the Church because of reduced vocations, and wonder why women or married men with a priestly vocation are excluded. Hierarchical exercise of power is also at the basis of the single most damaging ‘own goal’ for Australians. Pope Paul VI was advised by his own conservative commission that oral contraception should be permitted. He chose to listen to an ultra-conservative minority, and issued the infamous Humanae Vitae encyclical. This was unacceptable to the vast majority of sexually active Catholics, and many clergy also. They disobeyed the Pope, and the attachment of many to the Church was weakened or destroyed.

Unlike soccer, these ‘own goals’ do not necessarily have a permanent effect on the score, although the damage done by protection of paedophiles by the Church will remain for some time. Australian Reforming Catholics can work to influence the outcome of the Plenary Council in an attempt to change those aspects of Church governance and mindset that are both destructive in modern Australian society and unnecessary remnants of former times.

ALAN CLAGUE is a member of the ARC Secretariat
The Real Crisis of Australian Catholicism

Paul Collins

It is patently obvious that Australian Catholicism is in crisis. The usual analysis is that this has been caused by the appalling mishandling and cover-up of child sexual abuse and the subsequent investigations of the Royal Commission. However, this is only a partial explanation. Catholicism’s problems have a much longer history and go much deeper. They won’t be solved merely by the application of the recommendations of the Commission. A much more radical root and branch reform is needed.

Yet, despite the abuse crisis, Catholicism is still enormously influential in Australia. In the 2016 census 22.6% of the population (totalling 5,291,834 people) self-reported as Catholic. The church employs more than 230,000 people, making it the biggest private employer in the country, bigger than Wesfarmers and bigger than all the banks put together.

It is a major player in the educational, health, aged care and social service sectors. Since the 1830s and for much of our history, it was Catholicism and the other churches that provided the lion’s share of all these services. Government aid and participation was virtually non-existent.

Nowadays the Catholic Church maintains some fifty-two welfare organisations across a range of service provisions: homelessness, refugees, drug, alcohol, gambling, family violence, foster care, disability, counselling, overseas aid and employment. In 2016 the Saint Vincent de Paul Society had 20,736 members and 41,152 volunteers, making it the largest charity in the country providing an enormous range of services. Catholic schools educate some 765,000 students in 1731 primary and secondary schools, or 20.2% of all enrolments. It provides almost a quarter of health and aged care.

The striking thing about all this is that church and state work closely together in the provision of services across all these sectors, with the government providing about seventy percent of funding for all the church’s ministries, except parishes and dioceses. This relationship is unique, with no real parallel anywhere in the world.

But—and this introduces us to the heart of the Catholic crisis—this vast ministerial superstructure is based on increasingly weak ecclesial foundations. The simple fact is that the number of committed Catholics who do the bulk of the church’s work is contracting at an increasing rate. You see this in terms of affiliation with the church. Conscious affiliation, as reflected in the number of self-identifying Catholics in the census, is falling. From a high in 1996 when Catholics made up 27% of the population, in 2011 this had dropped to 25.3% and in 2016 to 22.6%, a drop of 4.4% in twenty years.

You can dig a little deeper and take Mass attendance as a sign of more than nominal commitment. From the 1850s to the 1940s regular Mass attendance sat somewhere between twenty and thirty percent of all Catholics. Except for the immediate post Second World War period, when an extraordinary 75% of Catholics attended Mass on a weekly basis, affiliation has been steadily decreasing since the late-1960s, so that the 2016 figures show only about nine to ten percent of Catholics attend Mass regularly. Of these, 43% were born overseas and these new arrivals have saved Mass attendance figures from catastrophic decline. Even more worrying is the loss of young people: only 9% of fifteen to twenty-nine-year-olds are regular attendees.

Conservative Catholics usually blame this on the renewal promoted by Vatican Council II (1962-65) and its aftermath. This is a mistaken interpretation; in fact, the opposite is true. The world changed in the 1960s with a tectonic shift occurring that involved a radical change in the role and status of women and the advent of feminism, the ascendency of science and technology, a new understanding of sexuality and of gender diversity and fluidity. Vatican II, particularly in the document on The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes) opened-up Catholicism to these emerging realities and laid the foundation for a creative and critical interaction with them.

But then there was a catastrophic failure in leadership. Pope Paul VI really only half-heartedly introduced the Vatican II reforms. The failure was intensified by John Paul II, who introduced an agenda that reflected his own subjective and idiosyncratic vision of Catholicism. His twenty-seven-year-long papacy, followed by that of Benedict XVI, alienated many Catholics.
The bishops appointed by these popes reflected papal agendas and local Catholics increasingly felt, as I argued in my 1991 book *No Set Agenda*, ‘leaderless and bereft’ as the church lost many of its ‘lay and priestly leadership cadre, the people who … [were] essential for it to move into the future’. Many pastoral priests left the ministry, while frustrated lay leaders severed affiliation or drifted away.

Massive failures in leadership are at the heart of Catholicism’s crisis. Pope Francis has lessened Rome’s centralised, smothering grip on the local churches and encouraged local initiative. He has asked the bishops to get beyond their inertia, but they are still claiming that even minor decisions are “beyond their competence” or “inappropriate at this time”. An example is that two and a half months after the Royal Commission handed down its report and recommendations, the bishops still can’t agree on a response to the most damning report ever put together on Australian Catholicism.

Some bishops keep pointing to the 2020 Plenary Council of the Australian Church as the panacea for all Catholicism’s ills. But that is still two-and-a-half years away, and there are already serious divisions among the bishops about the Council and its deliberations. The irresponsibility of the bishops in all this is breath-taking.

Recently the *Australian Book Review* granted me a RAFT Fellowship (Religious Advancement Foundation Trust) to undertake a comprehensive survey of the church’s ministry and its relationship with government funding. It is entitled *God and Caesar in Australia* and it expands on many of the issues mentioned here.

You can read the 8000-word article at [www.australianbookreview.com/subscribe/purchase-magazines](http://www.australianbookreview.com/subscribe/purchase-magazines)

Historian and broadcaster, Paul Collins, has been working for the renewal of the church for forty years. This article appeared in *Pearls & Irritations* 5.3.18.

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**Goodbye, **

**Humanae Vitae**

**Francis Liberalises the Pill**

Sandro Magister

(an extract)

Goodbye, *Humanae Vitae*. Half a century later, the encyclical against artificial methods of birth control that marked the most dramatic moment of the pontificate of Paul VI, rejected by entire episcopates, contested by countless theologians, disobeyed by myriads of faithful, is now giving way to a radical reinterpretation, to a ‘paradigm shift’ undoubtedly desired and encouraged by Pope Francis himself.

Paradox would have it that Paul VI should be the pope whom Jorge Mario Bergoglio admires and praises the most. And precisely (his own words) for the ‘prophetic brilliance’ with which he wrote that encyclical and for his ‘courage in standing up against the majority, in defending moral discipline, in applying a cultural brake, in opposing neo-Malthusianism present and future.’

But the reality is that ‘everything depends on how *Humanae Vitae* is interpreted,’ as Pope Francis never fails to comment. Because ‘the question is not that of changing doctrine, but of digging deep and making sure that pastoral practice takes into account the situations and what persons are able to do.’

His wish becomes command. An authoritative guise has now been given to the new interpretive paradigm of *Humanae Vitae*, with an explicit go-ahead for artificial contraception, by one of the pope’s most respected theologians, Maurizio Chiodi, professor of moral theology at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy and a newly appointed member of the Pontifical Academy for Life, already the author of a book published in 2006, *Etica della vita*, that upheld the legitimacy of artificial procreation.

For the full text, go to: [http://magister.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/2018/01/30/goodbye-humanae-vitae-francis-liberalizes-the-pill/](http://magister.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/2018/01/30/goodbye-humanae-vitae-francis-liberalizes-the-pill/)
Australian bishop urges end to clericalism
– Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen says culture of church contributed to sex abuse crisis in country

Peter Feuerherd

National Catholic Reporter Dec 13, 2017

Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen of Parramatta, Australia, speaking to the National Council of Priests of Australia, urged an end to clericalism in the church and expressed hope that a newly revitalized Catholic clergy would emerge from the sex abuse crisis that has wracked the Catholic Church in Australia. He spoke to the National Council of Priests in Australia, which reprinted his remarks in the December edition of The Swag, its quarterly magazine.

Van Nguyen, 55, a Conventual Franciscan who became Bishop of Parramatta last year, declared in a message to a Royal Commission investigating sex abuse in the Catholic Church that he himself had been abused by church members as an adult. He told the priests’ group that ‘we are in a big mess’ as priests ‘bear the brunt of public anger and distrust in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis. It is one of the hardest times to be a priest.’

He suggested they look to the example of Pope Francis as a vision of priesthood based on a servant, not an authoritarian, model.

After Francis was elected, he eschewed the usual papal trappings and asked for the gathered crowd to pray for him at St. Peter’s Square. That gesture, said Long, ‘was truly the prophetic sign of the century.’

‘The ground under our feet has shifted. There needs to be an attitudinal change at every level, a conversion of mind and heart that conforms us to the spirit of the Gospel, a new wine in new wineskins, not a merely cosmetic change or worse, a retreat into restorationism.’

‘In Australia’, he said, ‘the priesthood no longer enjoys the prestige and the power it once had. For a lot of young people, it is no longer surrounded with the aura of mystique and fascination.’ In response, he urged priests to embrace what he called a model of servant-leader.

The sex abuse crisis was more than the evil acts of individuals. Van Nguyen said the culture of the church contributed to the crisis in Australia. Unless we have the courage to see how far we have drifted from the vision of Jesus, unless we are prepared to go beyond the symptoms and explore the deeper issues that lurk behind the surface, unless we genuinely repent of our sins and face up to the task of reclaiming the innocence and powerlessness of the servant-leader, we will have failed the test of our integrity, discipleship and mission.

Van Nguyen added, ‘When privilege, power and dominance are more evident than love, humility and servanthood in the church, then the very Gospel of the servant Jesus is at risk.’

He urged priests to see their ministry as a counterweight to the human lust for power and domination; to stand, like Jesus, with the outcast and the vulnerable.

‘If one can detect the direction of Pope Francis’ pontificate, it has something to do with the movement from security to boldness, from being inward-looking to looking outward, from preoccupation with the present status and safeguarding our privileges to learning to be vulnerable, and learning to convey God’s compassion to those who are on the edges of society and the church,’ said Van Nguyen.
He asked that priests be willing to ‘bridge the yawning gap between the ideal and the real, between what the church teaches and how the people respond.’

‘The new wine of God’s unconditional love, boundless mercy, radical inclusivity and equality needs to be poured into new wineskins of humility, mutuality, compassion and powerlessness. The old wineskins of triumphalism, authoritarianism and supremacy, abetted by clerical power, superiority, and rigidity, are breaking,’ he said. It is a vocation of the Christian leader to be with his people in their hopes and struggles, anxieties and fears, he said. ‘It is not easy to be in the middle, and to be loyal to both ends of the spectrum, to belong to the church of orthodoxy and yet also to minister in the world of the unorthodox. It truly involves being, as the saying goes, between a rock and the hard place.’

Van Nguyen, who came to Australia as a Vietnamese refugee with his family, said he had a particular interest in the biblical experience of the exile.

‘My personal story of being a refugee, my struggle for a new life in Australia, coupled with my Franciscan heritage have all contributed to the sense of hope which was the legacy of the exile of old and which should inform and enlighten our present exile experience,’ he said. ‘Like the prophets who accompanied their people into exile, who interpreted the signs of the times and led them in the direction of the kingdom—the arc of salvation history if you like—we must do the same for our people in the context of this new millennium.’

He cautioned against focusing on increased vocation numbers as an indication of a healthy priesthood. ‘The strength of our mission does not depend on a cast of thousands. Quality, not quantity, marks our presence. It is substance and not the size of the group that makes the difference. Hence, this time of diminishment can be a blessing in disguise as it makes us reliant less on ourselves but rather on the power of God,’ Van Nguyen said.

He argued that one of the key insights of the Second Vatican Council is that ‘the church is not the church of the ordained but of all the baptized.’ He urged a rethinking of clerical titles, privileges and customs in the church.

‘Furthermore, it is my conviction that the priesthood ‘pedestalized’ is the priesthood dehumanized. It is bound to lead us into the illusion of a messiah complex and an inability to claim our wounded humanity and to minister in partnership. What we need to do is to humanize the priesthood so as best to equip ourselves with relational power for authentic Gospel living and service.’

‘The church’, he said, ‘needs to dismantle the pyramid model of church which promotes the superiority of the ordained and the excessive emphasis on the role of the clergy at the expense of non-ordained and is the root cause of clericalism. It is to acknowledge and to have the courage to die to the old ways of being church that no longer convey effectively the message of the Gospel to the culture in which we live.’

‘Those who predict the death of the priesthood see the sex abuse crisis as the final nail in the coffin. They are half-right’, said Van Nguyen. ‘They fail to see the other side of the equation. The Catholic priesthood is only dying to that which is not of Christ. It is dying to worldly trappings, triumphalism and clericalism; it is rising again to the power of vulnerability, servant-leadership, discipleship of humble service and radical love,’ he said.

Van Nguyen concluded: ‘That model of the exalted, separated and elitist priesthood is drawing its last breaths—at least in many parts of the world, including Australia. There is a better wine that the good Lord has prepared for us.’

Peter Feuerherd is a correspondent for National Catholic Reporter’s Field Hospital series on parish life.

Bishop Long’s full talk is available from the Editor: mknowlden@bigpond.com
Catholic women speak out
Marilyn Hatton and Moira Coombs

Pearls and Irritations 23.12.17

The Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse’s report and its recommendations are essential for the care and protection of children and care of victims and their families. They are also important steps in preventing the perpetuation of the destructive clerical culture that produced the horrifying sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

Catholic women make-up the majority of volunteers and ministerial professionals that are the workforce of the Church. Women in religious orders, theologians, ministers, teachers, nurses, doctors, counsellors, administrators, CEO’s, lawyers and accountants, the mothers, sisters, daughters, colleagues and friends of the victims, are the backbone of the Catholic Church and welcome the recommendations and work of the Royal Commission.

The recommendations, to the extent that it is possible, address issues of reparation, healing, compensation, safety, respect and, most importantly, prevention.

But, as other respected commentators, renewal groups and leaders, including Pope Francis, have stated, sexual abuse is a symptom of a dysfunctional and destructive culture, so any renewal has to firmly address that clerical culture.

This is a big ‘but’, because the faithful women and men of the Church who have worked to change this culture over the years have ‘had enough’ of a blinded episcopate, and this cultural change cannot possibly occur unless the bishops and the laity work together.

Much of what the RC Report recommends rests with the bishops who have proved wanting and broken trust. Even now some bishops don’t demonstrate the cooperation, understanding and energy that will be necessary to imagine the root and branch change required to develop completely new ways of bringing Christ’s message of love and justice to the world. Our world has benefited much from Christianity’s input in the past and nowadays it desperately needs its hope to address the overwhelming challenges of inhumane destructive wars, environmental collapse, poverty and international displacement of millions of peoples.

Women’s equality and participation is a crucial structural issue for breaking the clerical culture in the Catholic Church. It is hard to imagine that abuse would have been so enduring if there had been a gender balance at all levels and offices within the Church. Most mothers and fathers would have protected children.

Women and men participating equally in decision-making at every level in the church’s organisational structure is the only way effective governance and principles of accountability, transparency and inclusiveness will occur. There are ways to rectify this imbalance including review of Canon Law, initiatives such as the return to ministry of married priests, introducing optional celibacy, and women in all forms of ministry, including deaconate and priesthood, would open the doors of our Church to justice and prevent the recent horror occurring again.

So, our plea to women and men of faith, who are understandably fed up, is that wherever you are, inside or outside the Church, we urge you to give the bishops one last chance and join in guiding and supporting them in this root and branch reform that will be so beneficial. Just like Charles Dickens in his novel A Christmas Carol (1843)—set in another time of shocking injustice—urged his characters to give the miserly and unjust Scrooge just one last chance to redeem himself.

There are glimmers of hope to lift flagging spirits. Some bishops have written pastoral letters in response to the Royal Commission Report pledging their commitment and indicating that they have some understanding of what is involved.

The changes that have occurred already through the Royal Commission’s work have put all people in the Kingdom of God on alert and on a steep learning curve.
It is important not to forget that we are all made equal in this kingdom. The laity and priests are church as much as the bishops. It is time for the laity and committed priests to claim that sovereignty and speak out in informed ways for a practice of faith that effectively serves future generations. Listening, dialogue, reframing and shifting the discussion with humility and respect will be crucial.

Archbishop Coleridge has appointed a group to plan and facilitate the Plenary Council of 2020, under the leadership of Lana Turvey-Collins. I spoke with Lana last week and I have to say our interactions gave me hope. She is a clever open-minded person who has an impressive background in cultural change and strategic planning and is an excellent communicator.

While the laity are speaking out and engaging, the Australian bishops will also need to be able to listen and engage in the first instance and be strong and speak up in Rome, although the predictions are that it will be tough for them, Australia could lead this reform internationally there would be many who would support them.

With strong support and planning from the laity, together with the Royal Commission recommendations, they should be well equipped to put the case for change.

They are not without allies in Rome. Archbishop Paul Gallagher knows Australia well, having been our Papal Nuncio until 2014 and he will be sympathetic to the challenge facing the Australian bishops.

Marilyn Hatton is the former coordinator of the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal, was one of the Australian representatives at the 2016 Chicago meeting of International Reforming Priests and Reform Groups and represents Australia on the international group Women’s Ordination Worldwide (WOW) Executive Committee. She is a founding member of Catholics Speak Out.

Moira Coombs is a member of Catholics Speak Out and of Concerned Catholics.

**Off the Main Street; near the shops**

*‘Isn’t that Mrs Average, taking her daily walk to the shops?’*

Her dreams are elephantine; and last night’s dishes sit in the sink, not yet washed

Desires are bottled, so as not to rot, or pour out in a flashing rage at the ordinary.

Weather-like she is sometimes confused; sometimes amused.

Her prayers are so private and silent that only an attentive God can hear them.

Her working-day dreams are a refuge from the delights and un-delights of the ordinary.

Reconstruction is surely short of a resurrection.

On her homely path, weeds grow between the cracks of antique bricks. (Who then will walk on them?).

Daily he inspects her from a distance, always keen not to probe, not to step on the cracks.

Is it only when a full bottle breaks that unspoken tears and dry regrets pour forth like an old wine?

Up-rooted trees are everywhere. Water is in shocking abundance, washing, washing old dreams away.

Streets of tranquillity are now suddenly streets of fears and tears.

Is this what it take to break-open the unspoken? Is this a rude invitation to the invention of new prayer?

Will the mere re-construction of what was, still suffice?

Some of her dreams are metaphors of regret: what she might have been; beyond the ordinary; somewhere beyond the flood.

Her dishes are still in the sink.

*Raymond Jasper Smith*
Many will rush to draw conclusions and try and sum it up long before it is properly digested. Others will be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of issues that need to be addressed.

What is clear, however, without too much analysis, is this: Children were sexually abused by adults who should have cared for them. These crimes were often covered up, excused or not believed. People in positions of power manipulated the truth, protected perpetrators, lied and obfuscated and blatantly misled the public. Institutional reputations were put well ahead of the protection of children.

More than in any other institution, this narrative is the constant, recurring theme in the history of child sexual abuse in Australia’s Catholic Church. The factors that gave abusers access to children and enabled their superiors to be complicit in the crimes and concealment have already been well documented.

This Royal Commission confirms previous reports that cite the lack of accountability and transparency within the church’s culture, the propensity for clericalism to create a self-protective caste where power and privilege are the operating principles for addressing conflict and personal promotion, and, finally, where the image of the institution meant more than the welfare of children. In a sense there is nothing new here.

The current challenge is the struggle to resist the “business as usual” mindset that pervades the attitudes of those who seek to relegate this scandal to history. They take comfort in the church’s statistics that currently indicate that the incidence of clerical abuse of children has all but diminished from its peak in the 1960s to only a few recorded cases in the 2000s. Whether the 30-odd year lag in reporting abuse impacts on this trend is unknown.

The real issue now is whether the ingrained inertia of the institutional church will take hold as the intensity of this public inquiry wanes. Will the church become complacent, even almost relieved that there have been no forced resignations from the senior ranks? Will conservatives seek to peddle a prevailing narrative that pays scant regard to the cultural and sociological factors that have created an institutional climate of arrogant isolation? Will church apologists once again focus exclusively on the deviancy of perpetrators and ignore the causes and contributing factors of the crimes and cover up?

In Australia, the bishops have no place to hide. This Royal Commission has exposed the dysfunction and obfuscation that typified the hierarchy’s approach to the scandal. It has revealed the parlous state of moral leadership from those purporting to be leaders of character and virtue. It has unravelled a history of hypocrisy, shame and corruption.

The commission’s final report is a litany of challenges for a haemorrhaging church losing credibility and influence as once-faithful people walk away. The ramifications directly concern the Vatican. Universal church policies and practices, like mandatory celibacy and the seal of confession, are now sharply in the public gaze, and the responses from church leaders so far are garnering little sympathy or support.

These two issues and the response from church leaders are being held up by many as a clear indication of a church that is still out of touch with community expectations and still not prepared to put the safety of children ahead of its own dogma and traditions. The problem, of course, with the continued intense focus on these issues is that it masks, certainly from the perspective of many, the more significant and game-changing reforms that have been recommended.

For example, recommendations that deal with broader concerns around church governance and the mutual participation of women. If these recommendations are fully implemented, the
ramifications will be far more significant than the suggestions around celibacy and the confessional.

So, too, the commission’s recommendations dealing with seminary training, quality of candidates and the professional supervision of priests and religious. If implemented, these suggestions stand a real chance of changing the very nature of the church in Australia, and, in particular, the way in which priests and religious live and work in their communities.

If we are not careful, continued focus on the confessional and celibacy at the exclusion of other major concerns will only strengthen the hand of those in the church that for years have been lampooning the commission as a ‘get the Catholics’ exercise. It will embolden them to do as little as possible in the hope things will return to “normal” as quickly as possible.

Make no mistake. The Catholic Church must reform itself. Pope Francis knows it and so too do many others. Its biggest enemy is itself. How the commission’s report is received will be the litmus test. It is often said that the church has and will survive any scandal—that it thinks in centuries.

Well, in Australia at least, continuing to adopt that attitude will have it talking to itself in an ever-diminishing circle of influence.

FRANCIS SULLIVAN is the chief executive of Australia’s Truth, Justice and Healing Council. Previously he was secretary general of the Australian Medical Association and chief executive of Catholic Health Australia. He has degrees in theology and politics and is an adjunct professor at the Australian Catholic University, Canberra.

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Towards The Plenary Council in 2020
A Chance to Have Your Say
Annette Spooner

In a hopeful sign of change to come, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) announced in June last year that it would celebrate a Plenary Council for the Church in Australia in 2020. You could be forgiven for not knowing what a Plenary Council is as there hasn’t been one in Australia for over 80 years. For the average Australian Catholic it presents an unprecedented opportunity to have a say in the future of the Catholic Church in Australia. So I set out to find out more.

What is a Plenary Council?

A Plenary Council is a formal meeting of the archbishops, bishops and other church representatives of a country or region, presided over by a delegate of the Apostolic See, who has received special power for that purpose. It is a representation of the entire church.

The purpose of a Plenary Council is to plan the future of the Catholic Church in Australia. It can discuss and legislate on a wide range of issues, including the critical issues of the times. Its aim is to have a more comprehensive discussion of issues, amongst a broader representation of the church, than is possible at the regular plenary meetings held by the ACBC twice a year in May and November.

How often are they held?

Plenary Councils are quite a rare event in Australian history. There have only been four up until now. The most recent one was held in 1937, and prior to that in 1905, 1895 and 1815. Prior to the 2nd Vatican Council there was no requirement for the laity to be included as participants, so the last four Plenary Councils were exclusively male gatherings, with only bishops, theologians and superiors of male religious orders attending. This one promises to be different.

Who are the key organisers?

Archbishop Mark Coleridge, of Brisbane, has been elected to chair a special six-member Bishop’s Commission that will plan and run the Plenary Council. A Plenary Council Executive Committee has been appointed to advise the commission. The 14 member committee consists of eight women and six men (10 of whom are lay people) from across Australia, including Mr Daniel Ang and Br Ian Cribb SJ from our own Broken Bay Diocese. A Plenary Council Facilitation Team, led by Ms Lana Turvey-Collins, will coordinate and guide the preparation.
Who will be invited to participate?

Canon Law sets out quite specifically who ‘must’ and who ‘can’ be called to participate in a Plenary Council. Those who must be called include all active bishops, all vicars general, all Episcopal vicars, major superiors of religious institutes, rectors of Catholic universities, deans of theology and canon law faculties and rectors of major seminaries. Those who can be called include titular bishops retired or living in Australia, other priests and other female and male religious and lay persons. The size of the second group cannot be greater than half the size of the first group. Experts estimate that the total number of participants will be around 260-300 people, with lay non-religious participants (male and female) making up possibly 20% of that number.

Will everyone be able to have a say?

Yes. Archbishop Coleridge has promised ‘Anyone who wants to can have a say, as it was for the Synod in Rome’. He was echoing the comments of the ACBC when it 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’.

Ms Turvey-Collins further noted: ‘It’s an opportunity to engage with all Catholics in Australia – those who lead, those who work in Catholic organisations, those who may feel they don’t have a voice, those who feel they are outside the Church and those who show up every Sunday for Mass – a process inclusive of all.’

What will be discussed?

While the Bishop’s Commission has responsibility for setting the agenda for the Plenary Council, Archbishop Coleridge has expressed the hope ‘that the agenda of our Plenary Council will be the result of genuine consultation within the Church, to be held between now and 2020.’

‘We are going through a time of profound cultural changes’, said Archbishop Coleridge, ‘not only in society but also in the Church. I think we have to accept the fact that Christianity – in the sense of Christianity as the common religion – is over. How do we respond to this situation?’

Some of the issues that Archbishop Coleridge has suggested might be on the agenda include:

- The Church’s response to the findings of the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse;
- Reviewing ordained ministry and the diminishment of our apostolic orders;
- Entrusting responsibility for and leadership of the Church’s mission to the laity;
- The future of our parishes. Do we need a new paradigm?
- How we become a more missionary Church;
- Contemporary issues of justice, peace, development and the environment.

I sincerely hope that the role of women in the church will also be on the agenda.

Why is it not being held until 2020?

The timing of the Council was set by the Bishops when they voted to have a Plenary Council. Of course it takes time to plan such a special event and to gather and collate feedback from a large number of people. But considering that the Catholic Church in Australia is facing what is arguably the greatest crisis in its history, it would be reasonable to think that some urgency in addressing the problems was called for. Much larger international conferences are organised in under a year and today’s technology makes it very quick and easy to collect feedback. I can’t help comparing the church to a commercial organisation in similar circumstances. Imagine a company that was losing customers, and therefore revenue, at an alarming rate and whose reputation had been severely damaged, saying ‘Well let’s sit down in three years’ time and discuss what the problems are and how we can solve them’. I don’t think that company would survive very long.

Will the Plenary Council be successful in bringing about change?

The relevance and success of the Plenary Council will depend largely upon the agenda that is set. We have been promised that this agenda will ‘be the result of genuine consultation within the Church’. So it’s up to all of us. Don’t miss this unique opportunity to have your say about the future of the Catholic Church in Australia.

ANNETTE SPOONER has been a member of the community at St Anthony in the Fields Catholic Church, Terrey Hills, in Sydney for the past 20 years. She has been very involved in youth ministry, coordinated the St Anthony’s Youth Band and Choir (SAYBACS) for nearly 10 years and the youth group itself for a time. She is a passionate advocate for renewal in the Catholic Church.
‘Faith of our Fathers!’

The following extract from David Lodge’s book *How Far Can You Go?* may resonate with Catholics educated in the very black and white Pre-Vatican II era. Hopefully it may also serve as a timely reminder or yardstick of just how far each of us have matured in our own faith journeys.

Before we go any further it would probably be a good idea to explain the metaphysic or world-picture these young people had acquired from their Catholic upbringing and education.

Up there was Heaven; down there was Hell. The name of the game was Salvation, the object to get to Heaven and avoid Hell. It was like Snakes and Ladders: sin sent you plummeting down towards the Pit; the sacraments, good deeds, acts of self-mortification, enabled you to climb back towards the light. Everything you did or thought was subject to spiritual accounting. It was either good, bad or indifferent.

Those who succeeded in the game eliminated the bad and converted as much of the indifferent as possible into the good. For instance, a banal bus journey (indifferent) could be turned to good account by silently reciting the Rosary, unobtrusively fingering the beads in your pocket as you trundled along. To say the Rosary openly and aloud in such a situation was more problematical. If it witnessed to the Faith, even if it excited the derision of non-believers (providing this were borne with patience and forgiveness) it was, of course, Good – indeed heroically virtuous; but if done to impress others, to call attention to your virtue, it was worse than indifferent, it was Bad – spiritual pride, a very slippery snake. Progress towards Heaven was full of such pitfalls. On the whole, a safe rule of thumb was that anything you positively disliked doing was probably Good, and anything you liked doing enormously was probably Bad, or potentially bad – an ‘occasion of sin’.

There were two types of sin, venial and mortal. Venial sins were little sins which only slightly retarded your progress across the board. Mortal sins were huge snakes that sent you slithering back to square one, because if you died in a state of mortal sin, you went to Hell. If, however, you confessed your sins and received absolution through the sacrament of Penance, you shot up the ladder of grace to your original position on the board, though carrying a penalty – a certain amount of punishment awaiting you in the next world. For few Catholics expected that they would have reached the heavenly finishing line by the time they died. Only saints would be in that happy position, and to consider yourself a saint was a sure sign that you weren’t one: there was a snake called Presumption that was just as fatal as the one called Despair. (It really was a most ingenious game.)

No, the vast majority of Catholics expected to spend a certain amount of time in Purgatory first, working off the punishment accruing to sins, venial and mortal, that they had committed in the course of their lives. They would have been forgiven these sins, you understand, through the sacrament of Penance, but there would still be some detention to do in Purgatory.

Purgatory was a kind of penitential transit camp on the way to the gates of Heaven. Most of your deceased relatives were probably there, which was why you prayed for them (there would be no point, after all, in praying for a soul that was in Heaven or Hell). Praying for them was like sending food parcels to refugees, and all the more welcome if you could enclose a few indulgences. An indulgence was a kind of spiritual voucher, obtained by performing some devotional exercise, promising the bearer so much off the punishment due to his sins, e.g. forty days’ remission for saying a certain prayer, or two hundred and forty days for making a certain pilgrimage. ‘Days’ did not refer to time spent in Purgatory (a misconception common in Protestant
a spirit of calculating self-interest was scarcely that. In fact, you could never be quite sure that you had the right disposition, and might spend your entire life collecting invalid indulgences. It was safest, therefore, to dedicate them to the souls in Purgatory, because the generosity of this action would more or less guarantee that you had the right disposition. Of course the indulgences wouldn't then help you when you got to Purgatory, but you hoped that others down below might do you the same service, and that the souls you assisted to heaven would intercede there on your behalf.

The Church of Christ was divided into three great populations, connected to each other by prayer: the Church Militant (on earth), the Church Suffering (in Purgatory) and the Church Triumphant (in Heaven).

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**Review:**

**Trapped in a Closed World: Catholic Culture and Sexual Abuse**  
**Kevin Peoples**  
**Review by Brian Coyne**  
*Catholica* 25 November 2016

*Trapped in a Closed World* is a lived exposé of the poisonous clerical culture dominating life in a typical Catholic seminary in Australia in the 1960s. This endemic culture still exists in some seminaries today.

Told with the tenderness and humour of a memoir, it nonetheless rigorously investigates the extreme beliefs and practices that paved the way for many Catholic priests to sexually abuse those in their care and for the bishops to protect their clergy before victims.

The Catholic beliefs taught in the seminaries date back to medieval times, and have made the Church hierarchical, misogynistic and exclusive. For the young men training to be Catholic priests, this meant being special, being chosen directly by God to serve the institution of the Holy Mother Church.

The God Kevin Peoples met as a seminarian was not the God he knew and loved and wanted to serve. This is his tale, as he struggles with expectation, faith and common sense. Ignorant and innocent at the time of the sexual abuse affecting the community outside the closed gates of Saint Columba’s, Springwood, and especially in his home diocese, Ballarat, Victoria, Kevin makes up for lost time with this *tour de force*. It is an insightful memoir of one young man’s personal struggle to break free from a closed world.

**KEVIN PEOPLES** lives in Melbourne. He is a retired TAFE teacher and has a Master of Arts Degree in Australian History from the University of Melbourne. As a late vocation to the Catholic priesthood, he returned to complete his secondary education at Chevalier College, Bowral, NSW in 1962. He entered Saint Columba’s Seminary, Springwood, in 1964 and left in 1966. He is the author of *Santamaria’s Salesman* (2012) and *From the Top of the Hill* (2016).
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