Any chance for Ecumenism in the quest for reform?

If you were to ask any number of Catholics what they understand to be the differences in belief between Catholics and other Christian churches you would probably find that most are stumped for an answer. Senior Catholics remember the times when mixed marriages were frowned upon and most Catholics would not even consider attending any ceremony in a non-Catholic church. To do so could indicate that one is associating with heretical positions.

Attitudes have changed but some mindsets still hold us back. We often forget, when referring to the Second Vatican Council simply as Vatican II, that it was an Ecumenical Council. The word ‘ecumenical’ tends to get lost. Perhaps the blockage preventing further progress stems from the fact that the Decree on Ecumenism from Vatican II did not effectively move past the notion that the Catholic Church is the only true church and that Christian unity could only be obtained under the one Pope. Is this an assumption that makes us hesitant to even raise the matter with our non-Catholic friends in order to avoid embarrassment? We could be surprised to discover how much of real importance in belief we share with members of non-Catholic traditions.

This leads me to highlight an interesting unintended consequence of my attempt to draw out what unites us in common belief among the Catholic Church reform organisations with which we are affiliated. In the previous issue of *Arcvoice*, I outlined a range of beliefs that could go towards a minimum set that could be endorsed by the 19 organisations that make up the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR). In attempting to draw comment I was surprised to gain such unsolicited support from two highly committed and knowledgeable people from outside our Catholic tradition (See Eric Stevenson page 2, Mike Nelson page 7).

One of the things that the Decree on Ecumenism did advocate was the need for Catholics and members of other Christian denominations to pray together. Such activity allows people to dialogue and reflect, thereby breaking down ignorant prejudice. ‘There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart’ (Ch II, 7). The very revered late Bishop Bede Heather showed this in practice. It is reported that in his retirement he would go on one Sunday to the Catholic church, the next to the Uniting church and another to the Anglican church.

We stress the need for the Catholic Church to reform itself, but in so doing, isn’t the unity of the Christian message as it is presented to the world of even greater importance. The whole of Christianity needs reforming if we are to reflect organisationally the true spirit of Jesus.

*John Buggy*
Letter to the Editor

ARC and its Rationale for a Belief System that Helps Reform
A Critique by a Non-Catholic

In the March 2021 Issue No.80 of Arcvoice, John Buggy lists nine draft statements along with explanations which provide a rationale for reform. They also contain some very helpful declarations for those of us who are not Catholics and who belong to unorthodox communities. I write on behalf of those who are pursuing theological reform outside of the established institutions. The nine draft statements indicate that there is a high degree of affinity between the aims of ARC and secular groups of progressive religious thought. My critique of John’s nine statements highlights that affinity.

STATEMENTS 1 & 2: I have no particular comment about the Second Vatican Council’s theology of Church but with regard to any form of spiritual leadership, we would agree that the installation of a candidate must recognise the equality of men and women and avoid all forms of clericalism.

STATEMENT No. 3. An ongoing understanding of a changing world certainly must remain informed by new scientific discovery. Doctrines formulated in the past quickly reach their use-by date. If quoted in isolation they therefore provide an unreliable basis for faith.

STATEMENT No. 4. We are in total agreement that any understanding of scripture must be interpreted by taking account of literary forms and that scripture teaches religious rather than historical or literal truth.

STATEMENT No. 5. We yield to each other the freedom to pursue our individual understanding of the ‘God’ word. We therefore oppose the insistence of fundamentalist and anthropomorphic doctrines being regarded as normative.

STATEMENT No. 6. Further to Statement No. 3 above, we totally agree that the doctrine of original sin is an unsatisfactory approach to explaining human failure and how to cope with it. The traditional doctrine of the atonement is inconsistent and contradictory, lacking in insights from psychology, sociology, etc., etc.

STATEMENT No. 7. We totally agree that all human beings are equal in status and dignity! This includes an acknowledgement concerning women and their equality together with our protest concerning their exclusion from positions of significance in both religious and non-religious situations. It is also a clear statement about the rights of women in our own religious communities.

STATEMENT No. 8. Our total agreement regarding loving relationships includes acceptance by secular as well as church communities of persons of differing sexual orientations, and of the variety of positive intimate relationships that are possible among them.

STATEMENT No. 9. Given our response to Statement No 5 above, we subscribe to the need for a revised explanation of our evolving environment for which we have a solemn responsibility to care, and for the world which we are privileged to enjoy while ensuring its sustainability. (We have no reason to proscribe contraception in this context.)

So, in summary, I find that an exceptionally high proportion of the issues raised in the nine statements are applicable to progressive religion outside of orthodoxy. I suggest therefore that, based on our similar approach to belief and practice, there is a pleasing sense of unanimity between the way ARC is expressing these beliefs and those of my other progressive religious friends. Thank you, John, for your helpful article.

Eric Stevenson
Former Uniting Church Minister
and Member of the Centre for Progressive Religious Thought (C.P.R.T.)
Hans Küng: a theologian for everyone

Paul Collins

Hans Küng died last Tuesday aged 93. I had the honour of knowing him as a friend. He was a rare breed: a theologian who spoke to people of diverse beliefs and none.

It’s not often that you get a chance to improve a world-famous Swiss-German theologian’s English as you drive along the Reuther Freeway in Detroit, Michigan in your Volkswagen Golf. Yes, I know ‘world-famous’ is not a term that you usually apply to theologians, but this was 1983 and the theologian in question was writing op-eds for the New York Times, was being interviewed by all the major US networks, was giving lectures all over the country and was Visiting Distinguished Professor at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. I was his temporary amanuensis and occasional driver.

‘Paul, make sure I speak proper “English” English, not American English,’ he said as we drove to yet another lecture. I took as our guide to ‘proper’ English some of the patter arias from Gilbert and Sullivan. No one can write tongue-twisting English like Sir William Schwenck Gilbert, and Küng took to the modern major general and Sir Joseph Porter, KCB like a duck to water. He was fascinated that the British navy minister was called ‘First Lord of the Admiralty,’ and he loved the ‘three little girls from the ladies’ sem-in-air-ry’.

Born in Sursee, Switzerland, in March 1928, into a middle-class family, Küng was the eldest of seven with five sisters. Deciding to be a priest at age 11, he studied for the Diocese of Basel and was educated at Rome’s Gregorian University, the Sorbonne and the Institut Catholique de Paris. In his Memoirs he says that he grew up ‘in the time of Adolf Hitler’s seizure of power and the threat to our national and personal freedom’ in Switzerland and that, he says, ‘shaped my early years’. Freedom of thought and speech were primary values for him.

His doctorate was on the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth’s theology of justification, the notion that faith alone saves us, not what we do, what Luther called our good ‘works’. Küng showed that there was no real conflict between Protestants and Catholics on this fundamental doctrine, a position widely accepted nowadays.

He was ordained in 1954 and in 1960 he was appointed a remarkably young professor of Fundamental and later Catholic Theology at Tübingen University, Germany’s equivalent to Cambridge. Pope John XXIII had called the Second Vatican Council in 1959 and Küng was perfectly placed to set an agenda for it.

A prolific writer, in 1960 he published The Council, Reform and Reunion which set out a clear agenda for Vatican II with a strong ecumenical flavour. This was re-enforced by his book Structures of the Church (1962) and together with his lectures to packed audiences across the world, including Australia in 1971, these books had a profound influence on the subsequent history of the Council and Catholicism. John XXIII appointed him a conciliar peritus (expert advisor).

Küng believed theology must underpin and explain belief and should always be in the public square. Catholicism, he said, had to transcend post-Reformation controversies, reconcile with Protestants and retreat from the First Vatican Council’s (1870) definition of papal infallibility. He wanted an open church with a married clergy, women in all ministries and the abandonment of outdated practices that contradicted the Gospel. He was critical of the many vacillations of Paul VI (+1978) after Vatican II – the pope’s nickname was ‘Hamlet’ – and he openly repudiated the attempt of John Paul II to re-interpret the Council in line with his own idiosyncratic theories.

In The Church (1967) and specifically in Infallible? An Inquiry (1971) Küng argued that infallible propositions are impossible. His approach was historical and he maintained that, rather than the pope being infallible, the church is ‘indefectible’, that is that despite errors and misjudgements, in the long term it will remain true to God’s Word and Jesus’ teaching. The Vatican was outraged.

The result: in late-1979 Küng was stripped of his licence to teach as a ‘Catholic theologian’, but not of his good standing as a priest. In the early-1980s he went through a difficult period, as the second volume of his Memoirs Disputed Truth shows.
Nevertheless, there was widespread support for him across the European and Anglo-American Catholic, Protestant and secular worlds, and it was around that time that I met him in the US. Having lost his Catholic chair, Tübingen University appointed him to a new chair of Ecumenical Theology which he occupied for the rest of his life.

After 1980 he published some of his best books: Does God Exist? (1980) confronting that precise question; On Being a Christian (1984) takes us back to the historical Jesus and the implications of his teaching; and Christianity and the world religions (1986) highlighting Küng’s profound ecumenism. There are also books on Mozart, Freud, dying with dignity, Islam, Judaism and global ethics. His two volumes of Memoirs (2003 and 2008) and his Can We Save the Catholic Church? (2013) conclude a bibliography of some 34 books.

In his later years he put much of his energy into the Global Ethics Foundation, that is committed to bringing world religions together to contribute to peace and the welfare of society by establishing a basic set of common values.

Some have claimed that Küng was arrogant. I suspect part of that is that he was Swiss-German and he could be abrupt and brusque. He certainly liked talking. I remember a dinner party when he discoursed for an hour on the role of women in the church, addressing all his remarks to the men present, all priests, completely ignoring the two women there. The hostess was an experienced Catholic educator and the other a distinguished Dominican sister. Eventually, it was the nun who exploded and rightly told him some home truths about chauvinist theologians and women in the church. To his credit, Küng copped it sweet, largely saved by his sense of humour.

He remained a priest in good standing throughout his life. He worked enormously hard and had an excellent exercise regimen. Socially, he was wonderful company. His biographer Robert Nowell says ‘He combined the very qualities that many of the Catholic church’s detractors have regarded as totally incompatible: a passion for truth and loyalty to Rome, an open-minded willingness to accept the fruits of critical inquiry, and adherence to what from the outside was seen as a closed dogmatic system.’

I simply remember him as a man of deep faith, a thoughtful friend – I have several handwritten notes from him – as well as an articulate man of integrity for whom truth was only norm, a man of prodigious energy and commitment above all to the message of Jesus and the genuine tradition of Catholicism. He was truly a theologian ‘for all seasons’.

PAUL COLLINS is an historian, broadcaster and writer and is a regular contributor to ARCVoice.

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Clericalism

These stories must be legion

♦ I remember a long-time parish pastor who each and every Christmas angrily accused the packed-to-overflowing congregation of being so inconsiderate and stupid as to all come to the same mass!! He said that they should have spread themselves out over all the Christmas masses. Most of these people were obviously hanging onto their connection with the sacramental life of the church by coming to their annual mass at Christmas. Needless to say, crowds at Christmas are no longer ‘a problem’. MR

♦ My grandson, who is being brought up by his brave single mum, was at mass as part of his sacramental preparation when the new pastor declared several times in the homily that the only real families had both mothers and fathers and other styles of families were not part of God’s plan. So hurt and angry was my grandson that that was the end of the Sacramental preparations and any future church attendance by him. MR

♦ A priest in England in the mid-fifties announced: ‘Would the person who put a halfpenny in the plate last week please come and fetch it. We don’t want that sort of money.’ He showed a total lack to sensitivity to the reality that parents would have distributed a few coppers to their children as an example of ‘giving’. MK

♦ … and another priest who chose the Children’s First Communion Mass to give a sermon on ‘the evils of rape’. MK
The None-Makers:
Is Anybody Minding the Store?
George Wilson

Why people are tempted to leave the Church and what can be done to help them stay.

They are people who have given up their prior affiliation with any Church denomination. And among them the largest number are ‘former Catholics’. This bracing fact elicits great gobs of hand-wringing, as well it should. They are then often followed by lofty theories aimed at explaining the phenomenon.

The sexual abuse of children by priests is the most obvious and is surely a powerful factor. That is followed by supposedly misguided understanding of what the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was really all about; long-winded attacks on never-defined Modernism or Americanism; mushy guitar Masses; etc., etc. Such efforts may contain elements of truth. No era of the Church’s sinful story should go without attempts at understanding.

‘Since culture is a human creation and is therefore marked by sin, it too needs to be ‘healed, ennobled and perfected’,” John Paul II reminded us. He surely included different eras of Church culture as well. We are all pilgrims still on the way.

The role of pastoral experience

I am not qualified to offer a scientific assessment of the causes that might explain the emergence of the nones. My intent is, rather, to lift up evidence that might be overlooked because it is anecdotal. My years of experience as a Church consultant indicate that, in spite of all the theorizing, we could be overlooking a far more likely explanation for the rise of many of the nones: the actual pastoral experience of the faithful in the pews.

The departure of the nones might be better explained by the way they are ministered to by all too many contemporary clerics. Self-important clerics are quite effective none-makers. To name them as such in no way detracts from the caring service of most of our priests; it only highlights it.

Random conversations with friends and fellow priests over the years illustrate the issue and put flesh on these deliberately provocative words. In each case the names of both the parishes and the offending clerics have been deleted, more in order to protect parishioners from retaliation than to shield the perpetrator.

Example A: The new pastor at ‘St. Esmeralda’

People at the St. Esmeralda were recently shocked to hear of the sudden death of a cherished fellow parishioner at age 49. At her funeral the church was as full as COVID restrictions allowed. The recently appointed young pastor began the distribution of Communion with these words: ‘If you are not a Catholic you are asked to remain in your seat.’ With any pastoral sense of the situation he might have simply said nothing. He was addressing guests, after all; people practising one of the most sacred spiritual works of mercy.

Then, as if that were not enough, he went on to say, ‘And if you are a Catholic who has not received the sacrament of Reconciliation in the past year, you are requested to do the same...’ The woman who told me of this experience has raised five children in the faith and worked on parish projects for over 25 years. She was, quite appropriately, furious. She was tempted to walk out but, like everyone else in the Church, long years of faithful practice were too powerful.

Example B: The anti-birth control zealot

At another parish in another unnamed diocese the young pastor begins the Sunday liturgy by shouting at the congregation, ‘Anyone in this church this morning who is practicing birth control, GET OUT! You are going directly to Hell!’ The only thing that could account for the congregation not walking out and becoming nones is their deep faith in a Jesus the poor cleric has apparently never met.

These examples are admittedly extreme. But that should not be an excuse for ignoring their existence.

On a less heart-thumping level, it is quite common for many of the faithful to watch helplessly as their spiritually healthy parish, built by the hard work of caring pastors, was destroyed within months by a self-important autocrat. And YouTube surfers can easily find Savonarolas whose bitter harangues hardly reflect the joy of the risen Jesus.

A final story will surely resonate with all too many parents doing their best to help their growing sons and daughter to appreciate the joy of sharing in the
life of their Church. The ‘Sullivans’ were delighted that their son Tom, home on spring break from college, chose to join them for Sunday liturgy. It was Easter Sunday and the school hall was packed. The new young curate proceeds to preach, not on the most joyous event in the Church’s story, but—on the dangers of reading The Da Vinci Code... Tom leans over to his dad and says, ‘That does it, Dad’.

A systemic failure

Such stories, besides evoking anger, give rise to the question in my title: ‘Who is minding the store?’ Is anybody? How can such pastoral malfeasance—for it is nothing less than that—be allowed to continue?

One answer comes from a fine pastor and personal friend. We were having breakfast in his rectory after a mid-week liturgy, sharing priest tales. He told me his own vocation story. ‘Harry’ had completed law school and was in practice. He even reached the point of running for public office in his state (he was defeated). All along he had been wrestling with a call to the priesthood. He finally entered the seminary and was ordained. At the time of our conversation he was pastor of a burgeoning city parish as well as one of his bishop’s top advisors.

‘In light of my professional experience I was shocked to discover that as a priest I had no accountability to anyone. As pastor I could do just about anything I wanted to. I was answerable to no one’—he told me. ‘As a lawyer or doctor—or truck-driver, plumber, or cashier in a convenience store, for that matter—such a thing was unimaginable,’ Harry continued.

Who’s minding the store, indeed? There is much pious vocational literature highlighting the lofty position of the priesthood as one of the Church’s greatest treasures. Laudable enough. But if what the laity experience is not priestly sensitivity that supports their faith but autocratic clericalism, the increase in the numbers of nones becomes ever more understandable.

Not a haphazard phenomenon

We have always had instances of autocratic pastors, of course. In pre-Vatican II times it was not uncommon for the laity to be subjected to the whims of a pastor entrenched there for decades and decades. What is different today is that such behavior is not happenstance. It is being systematically cultivated, to the point of having its own name: the ‘reform of the reform.’ We hear disturbing reports of bishops, even cardinals, openly calling for Pope Francis to be removed.

Less evident are local bishops who quietly but actively support seminary professors who teach their students that Vatican II was not a movement inspired by the Holy Spirit but a mistake that must be corrected—or, worse, a diabolical plot to destroy the Church.

Beyond diagnosis: help from history

This is a painful story. It would be easy to walk away, as many have done. Or to stay, crouched in fear for the future. The Good News of the risen Jesus calls for bold challenge to these distortions of his message of hope and joy. But by whom? Conferences of bishops tend to be silent about such matters.

That leaves a small number of brave pastoral bishops and pastors quietly swimming against the tide—and parishioners ready to be called out of their slumber to claim the authority of their baptism and speak truth to power. It is not enough to expect Pope Francis to carry the whole burden through successive appointments of leaders who will support his vision.

The synodality he fervently promotes will not take flesh until the faithful call for the establishment of effective pastoral councils at all levels of church life. Accountability for autocratic pastoring won’t happen until the actual experience of the faithful finds a hearing before ministry boards made up of clergy and lay members who are empowered to celebrate the performance of sensitive pastors attuned to the journey of their people—and call to account the autocrats. One would think that the quality of performance by their priests would be one of the highest priorities for bishops...

GEORGE WILSON is a Jesuit priest and retired ecclesiologist who lives in Baltimore. He is the author of Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood (Liturgical Press, 2008).

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Twelve Rules for Living a Better Life
Reverend Bill Crews

This straight-talking and uplifting memoir is also a guide to living a better life and becoming a better human being—through compassion, tolerance, acceptance and love. It is for the secular and the spiritual alike; it’s for those who believe and those who don’t or can’t; it is much-needed and timely manifesto on being a better human and how to play it forward.

Bill Crews has been included in the National Trust's list of 100 National Living Treasures.

As a Uniting Church minister he has a lot to show Catholic priests how they too could truly live out their vocations.
Lapsed or Unchurched?

Mike Nelson

I really like John Buggy’s article regarding beliefs (ARCvoice 80) and agree with it in almost every particular, although it is clear to me that Jesus did not found a church of any kind, let alone a peculiar Catholic Church! My specific comments are more about context and direction and based on the fact that many of us have walked away from the Church and the local church to which, in varying degrees we have been committed. I have taken to referring to myself as a member of the 'unchurched' who have, while retaining our basic Christian belief, rejected the institution to some degree or other.

The traditional way of referring to people such as myself is ‘lapsed’. But this term implies that the basic belief has been rejected through no fault of the institution and that the rejection is purely voluntary. Use of the word ‘unchurched’ implies that the rejection is based on experiences and insights that have led the unchurched to turn away from the institution with moral repugnance at the behaviour of Church functionaries and with anger at the institution’s treatment of those who question the doctrine, teaching and authority of that institution. Therefore, my comments are from the perspective of the 'unchurched' who have walked or run away, many after a lifetime of adherence to the institution.

A comment about context may provide some light on the issues involved, because it is clear that, not only in Australia but across the globe, the world has walked away from the church which once occupied a position of respect at all levels of society from the local village or municipality to the highest councils of the land. Just this morning I was discussing with a Brazilian friend the rise of the evangelical/fundamentalist movement which now constitutes some 30% of the population of Brazil. This is the 'new church' in a country which was declared by John Paul II the 'jewel in the Crown of the Catholic Church', and this US-inspired fundamentalism has replaced the Catholic Church in terms of political and social power in that country, all in a few short 30-40 years.

A similar phenomenon has been occurring here, albeit not at the same rate or to the same extent, but we do have a Pentecostal Prime Minister. The institutional church, as opposed to the fundamentalist church is in terminal decline in Brazil, and in Australia ordinary people and perhaps, many in authority are now accepting fundamentalist doctrines and attitudes as archetypically Christian—and rejecting them! In addition, the emergence of multiculturalism and the acceptance of a variety of faiths and religious practices in our societies have further weakened the Christian social edifice that buttressed the standing of the institutional church. The consequences have crept up on our societies and, like the frog in the pot of warming hot water, we have not noticed that the church is becoming an alien institution, with growing numbers of walkers or unchurched men and women who now ignore the institution and its functionaries. Can I further instance the virtual disappearance of the church from active engagement in counselling, trauma, psychological and clinical services? Many of these continue to bear a name and formal link with the church but no longer have any active engagement with the institution, apart from bureaucratic processes such as annual reports, etc etc.

Now what's this got to do with my comment on John's article? Well, he has made a number of clear and positive belief propositions, all of which I agree with and some of which I wholeheartedly support. I think that the functionaries will be frightened by what he has outlined and will dismiss them. Hopefully, the organisations that make up the coalition of church reformers will support his efforts to formulate a set of beliefs that unite them and thereby provide a sound contrast with the fundamentalists. Is it expecting too much for the Plenary Council to provide an opportunity for frank discussion and that the issue of people leaving the church will have equal if not more importance than the issue of people joining the institution? I would argue that this latter issue is a reflection of the forces driving the former issue—the unchurching of the people of God. What is really needed is an elevation and valuing and respecting of creativity in the lives of the people of God, which will drive a discernment of God's will for the institution, which may include its destruction. The church must die to itself in order to become the body of the people of God.

Sorry to conclude on such a sombre note, which no doubt reflects where I am in relation to the institution. I would to God wish that it were otherwise, but fear that the Church is currently in self-destruct mode!!

MIKE NELSON is a former Anglican priest of the High Church tradition with a keen interest in Church reform. He has spent time in Brazil along with his Brazilian wife.
‘Stop suppressing Catholics’, outspoken nun tells Australian church leaders

Farrah Tomazin
The Age May 16, 2021

A n outspoken US nun who was recently embroiled in a censorship row with Melbourne’s Archbishop has warned Australia’s Catholic Church it faces an inevitable decline unless it stops suppressing rank-and-file members pushing for reform.

The nation’s bishops are under pressure to overhaul the church after years of sex scandals and internal unrest, and one of America’s most prominent Benedictine nuns, Sister Joan Chittister, has now renewed calls for women to be ordained and for laypeople to be given more power over their parishes, declaring that the church needs to ‘grow up’ if it wants to thrive.

Such reforms were meant to be thrashed out at the most significant conference Australian Catholic bishops have held in 80 years, the Plenary Council, which is scheduled to take place in October.

However, working documents prepared for the event have prompted concerns that some of the more contentious issues on the agenda could be cast aside or not addressed properly by the bishops, despite past assurances that ‘everything is on the table’.

‘Everyone knows that the church in Australia needs a major overhaul of its governance, culture and structures, but instead of setting out a clear, concise and coherent blueprint for reform, this document is a ground plan for inertia,’ said Catholics for Renewal president Peter Wilkinson. ‘It is very disappointing.’

In a speech to a 3000-strong audience this month, Sister Joan added: ‘Catholicism must grow up, beyond the parochial to the global, beyond one system and one tradition to a broader way of looking at life ... Why not married priests, women priests, or women cardinals?’

Sister Joan is a writer, feminist and theologian who has spent 50 years advocating for social justice and church reform. However, the prominent US nun found herself at the centre of an Australian censorship saga two years ago, when she was disendorsed from speaking at a Catholic education conference soon after Melbourne Archbishop Peter Comensoli learnt of plans to include her.

The snub prompted a fierce backlash from rank-and-file Catholics, but the Archdiocese initially sought to dismiss the matter as a misunderstanding, saying the Archbishop had simply requested ‘that more names aligned to the themes of a national Catholic education conference be considered’.

Sister Joan disagreed, describing the episode as an ‘insult’ to the Catholic education system. ‘Of course it was censorship; there wasn’t any doubt about that,’ she said this week. ‘Nobody has a right to tell anybody else what to think. That is not helpful to any organisation – state or church. You’re only burning it down from the bottom up if you do that.’

Sister Joan’s appearance in Australia comes at a critical moment for the church ahead of October’s Plenary Council. Expectations were high in the wake of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse, which found the hierarchical nature of the church, coupled with its lack of governance, had created ‘a culture of deferential obedience’ in which the protection of paedophile priests was left unchallenged.

However, rank-and-file Catholics have become increasingly concerned about the church’s will to change. Such fears were compounded in March when a working document prepared for the Plenary Council did not give enough credence to critical issues that members have been seeking to address.

FARRAH TOMAZIN Tomazin is a senior journalist and investigative reporter with interests in politics, social justice and legal affairs.
Priesthood, Reimagined
Mary Kate Holman

In 2002, a group of seven Catholic women gathered on a cruise ship on the Danube River. There, in a ceremony led by three male bishops, outside the jurisdiction of any diocese, they were ordained as priests. According to the Church’s Code of Canon Law, this was illicit: only men can receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. But the women, who liken their defiance to an act of civil disobedience, insist to this day that their ordinations are valid. Known as the ‘Danube Seven,’ they gave birth to a movement, active mainly in the United States and Canada, that has since ordained nearly two hundred womenpriests. For all the attention it attracted two decades ago, the Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) movement remains poorly understood today.

Fortunately, cultural historian Jill Peterfeso’s book, Womanpriest: Tradition and Transgression in the Contemporary Roman Catholic Church, has stepped in to fill that gap. Her ethnographic account, based on five years of interviews, digital questionnaires, and participant-observation of liturgies, offers the most measured analysis of RCWP to date.

Neither sensationalizing the women as heroic renegades nor condemning them as fringe heretics, Peterfeso instead offers readers a nuanced portrait of their lives and worship spaces, letting them speak for themselves. From the start, Peterfeso reserves judgment on the question of whether these women ‘count’ as Catholic priests. That question, she writes, is ancillary to her work.

Instead, Peterfeso shows how womenpriests can serve as a prism for rethinking broader issues in the Church. Gender and sexuality are among the most pressing, as are clericalism, money, and power. Each comes into sharper focus when seen from the relatively ‘marginal’ perspective of the womenpriests, as the periphery of the institutional Church grants a clarity unavailable at the center. Most of the sacramental practices of the RCWP would be familiar to contemporary Catholics. They gather parishioners around the Eucharistic table on Sundays, celebrate marriages, anoint the sick, and offer reconciliation.

Though their ordinations trigger immediate excommunication, womenpriests insist on their identity as valid Roman Catholics; their institutional freedom from the Vatican enables them to reimagine certain elements of Catholic practice they find troubling. Gone, for example, is the requirement of priestly celibacy. Many womenpriests are mothers and grandmothers, and some are in committed lesbian relationships. They also take a more open, inclusive approach to Catholic sacraments, officiating at sacramental marriages for same-sex couples and offering the Eucharist to all, regardless of age, marital status, or religious affiliation. Just as important as womenpriests’ service to local communities is their commitment to broader reform within the Catholic Church.

As activists, they aim to revive the stalled debate on women’s ordination, moving it from the Vatican’s all-male Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to the ‘court of public opinion’. They do so, they claim, by speaking directly to the hearts and minds of lay Catholics, often through direct action. In their view, reforming the priesthood and the hierarchy requires something more radical than incrementalism or technocratic change: for RCWP a woman acting in persona Christi is not just a fantasy that could be, but a reality that already is.

Peterfeso notes that much of RCWP’s push for reform emerges from the wreckage of the sex-abuse crisis. She explains that the male priestly body has become a troubling symbol for traumatized laypeople, particularly victims, inspiring ‘fear and distrust’ rather than fostering connection to Christ. Likewise, for many, the altar is no longer a sign of fellowship and communion but one of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Female bodies, though, can testify to a ‘new potential’ for the priesthood. Peterfeso witnesses one moving scene in which adult daughters vest their newly ordained mother, gently adjusting her priestly garments as she envelops them in a ‘giant bear hug.’ This distinctly maternal act broadens the symbol of the priesthood to embrace a richer, fuller range of
human experience—one that simply isn’t possible when ordination is limited to celibate men alone.

While womenpriests proclaim their resistance to clericalism at every turn, it nonetheless remains a serious challenge for their ministry. Peterfeso explains that the tension between their spiritual charism and institutional authority emerges constantly, often in seemingly mundane ways. Take the question of whether they should wear Roman collars, which presents a kind of Catch-22: ‘If [womenpriests] claim an indelible, essential transformation,’ Peterfeso writes, ‘they fall into the clerical power trap they seek to avoid; if they do not claim a transformation, they may lose some of their ordained authenticity.’

To blur these distinctions, at least during the liturgy, most womenpriests invite worshippers to co-consecrate the Eucharist. Their sacramental authority thus becomes not an exclusive, personal privilege but a communal gift. Peterfeso also highlights the ways in which some male Catholic priests quietly participate in the RCWP movement themselves. A few serve womenpriests as unofficial mentors.

There’s a limit, though, to what these relationships can accomplish institutionally. Because priests depend on Rome for everything from job placements to housing and health insurance, they are not free to reveal these relationships publicly. Nor can they voice public support for women’s ordination. (The recent laicization of Roy Bourgeois and the excommunication of Ed Cachia, both outspoken proponents, indicate how little the Vatican tolerates dissent on the issue.) While womenpriests must forfeit institutional legitimacy and security for the freedom to speak out, at least they do not have to keep secrets. Independence, though, presents its own set of problems.

Because womenpriests cannot count on a diocese for support, they must rely on their own means instead. (Peterfeso notes that in one sense, this makes them ‘worker-priests’.) As a result, womenpriests tend to be predominantly white, upper-middle-class, and well-educated. Their poise and professional polish can certainly confer legitimacy and trust, and in some sense reflect their longing for recognition from Rome. But it also shrinks the pool of eligible candidates, decidedly less marginalized than some of the populations RCWP seeks to serve.

As I made my way through Womanpriest, my imagination flickered with the idea of a Church as inclusive and edgy as RCWP, but also as large, all-embracing, and well-financed as the global Catholic Church headquartered in the Vatican. A pipe dream, no doubt, but one that got me thinking.

Why, I wondered, should these well-intentioned, pastorally minded, theologically articulate Catholics be forced to violate canon law and endure excommunication in order to respond to their vocations? The question is especially urgent now, as Pope Francis continues to call for synodality, a ‘journeying together’ that requires parrhesia, or frank, honest discussion. How can that happen when certain questions are already declared off-limits?

Womenpriests are not a panacea for the Church’s every ill. But their inclusive approach to the sacraments, their experiments with democratic leadership, and their collaborative relationships with laypeople have already done a great service beyond themselves.

Their example can help Catholics envision a Church that is at once more universal and capable of change.

I’d been a little apprehensive about the arrival of our new parish priest, about to follow in the footsteps of very reformist predecessors. He commenced a homily with a story about a young girl who asked her mother about the origin of the human race and was regaled with an account of the Adam and Eve story. At this stage, I confess to be ready to leave! However, our priest continued, telling how the little girl went on to ask her father the same question and he introduced her to the story of evolution. (I was feeling more relaxed, now). The little girl then returned to her mother and said that Daddy told me we came from monkeys. Her mother replied: ‘I was referring to my side of the family and not his!’ The congregation erupted in laughter. Our new parish priest is continuing to impress.

Comment from an ARC member
The struggle for real reform in the Australian Catholic Church: Catholics and their bishops are at odds

Terry Fewtrell

Australians should be concerned about what is happening currently in the Catholic Church. Catholics are engaged in a review of their church in this country, yet there is growing evidence the process is being manipulated.

Clericalism is dealt with in a manner that understates its real significance. It is implied as being a problem in only some places and there is no comprehension of its very real cultural, structural, and behavioural elements. It is a perspective on clericalism that is decidedly clericalist. In seeking to downplay it, the document succeeds in proving the opposite.

What makes the minimisation of clericalism issues more perplexing is that it is one matter about which Pope Francis has been quite explicit and categorical saying: “Clericalism is an evil… to say ‘No’ to sexual abuse is to say an emphatic ‘No’ to all forms of clericalism.”

Every Australian and Catholic should ask themselves: Why is the Australian church trying to duck this issue?

It is a similar picture with governance where reform is needed to bring transparency and accountability to a church structure that is antiquated and opaque, and effectively aids ‘the cover-up’. In response to the Royal Commission, the bishops established a governance review team to shed light and clarity on how these matters could be addressed. That group reported last August – *The Light from the Southern Cross* – providing a roadmap for reform in these areas.

But again, the latest pre-agenda Plenary document makes little mention of what has been internationally praised as showing the way forward for the church, not just in Australia but worldwide. Rather than leverage the clarity and insight it provides, the emphasis is on confusing and deflecting, in what can reasonably be assessed as a delaying tactic.

Given all that has happened in the past 10 years, it is breath-taking that an official Catholic church document, supposedly aimed at facilitating constructive decision making, could so blatantly attempt to minimise, confound, and deflect the need for reform in these areas. Lay Catholics will not stand for it and neither should the broader Australian community.

If we are to believe him, President of the Australian Bishops Conference, Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, says that ‘business as usual’ outcomes from the Plenary are out of the question. He describes the process as coming at “a moment of crisis” for the church. He is not wrong. But how will he bridge the gap and achieve meaningful and real reform outcomes?

He seems to think the Holy Spirit is on the job with him. One would hope he is right. He says that
to even have established a Plenary Council process is evidence of the work of the Spirit. As the person who championed the calling of a Plenary Council, Coleridge is probably well placed to claim it is the work of the Spirit, as he better than anyone would know the strength of the resistance from his brother bishops to its establishment.

The whole process has been presented to Catholics as principally about listening to what the Spirit is saying. The term that covers this process is religious Discernment – a venerable tradition in the line of Ignatius and Benedict, dating back to the 6th century. Sadly, the process and its evident manipulation at various stages is giving this ancient practice a bad name. As the earnest evidence put forward by the People of God in Australia has been ground down to a gruel, it is becoming stark that the clerics seem compelled to insist they manage the franchise on the Holy Spirit.

There must be some frank and honest conversation about Discernment both prior to and at the start of the formal Plenary sessions. The views of the bulk of ordinary lay Catholics must be expressed in the agenda for the formal discussion sessions. Ultimately, we know that the bishops will make the big decisions, but increasingly it is evident they don’t even want there to be a perception that they may be at odds with the laity.

A key message from lay Catholics at the submission stage was the stark lack of confidence that they have in their bishops. Attempts to minimise aspects of Royal Commission findings are dangerous. There is already enough evidence that the Australian bishops are on a very curious, if not calamitous path, digging-in on positions that are rejected by their people and by the Pope. Watch this space. Ordinary Catholics certainly are, and they invite all Australians to join them.

TERRY FEWTRELL is a long-time resident of Canberra and long-term Catholic. Terry led the consultation process initiated by Concerned Catholics of Canberra Goulburn and was lead author of its submission to the Plenary Council.

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**We All Know It’s Wrong**

John Crothers

I know, and you know, we all know it’s wrong
Time to get moving, we’ve waited too long
It won’t be easy, we need to be strong
Cause I know, and you know, we all know it’s wrong

There is something we need to say
To the leaders of our Church today,
There’s a problem you need to face
And it just won’t go away
You talk of equal dignity for all in our community
But the women are seldom heard
It’s the men who have the say

Perhaps it was that way before
But we don’t accept it anymore,
It’s time to bring about the change
So please don’t let us down
Surely now you must concede
That women too are born to lead
And if there’s still more proof you need
Just take a look around

To hear the song with music, go to:
We All Know It’s Wrong - YouTube
In his opening address to the Brisbane Plenary Council Assembly in October 2019, Archbishop Mark Coleridge said ‘We cannot stay where we are. It is not business as usual. We must be open to the dislocations of God. Everyone here is at least as important as Coleridge.’ All were encouraged to make submissions to the Plenary Council. In a pamphlet entitled ‘Your Voice Matters’ it was stated ‘The Church cannot listen if no-one speaks. This is why it is important that everyone without exception has the chance and takes the opportunity to participate in the preparation stage and submit a response.’

Analysis of Australia-wide submissions showed strong support for reform of a range of Church governance issues and for social reforms. In the ‘Snapshot Report’ on conversion, renewal and reform, social reform topics mentioned prominently included support for married priests, women priests, remarried divorcees and same sex marriage. It is significant that the issue of contraception was not mentioned, given that Australian Catholics have the same sized families as the rest of the population. Perhaps it is an indication that Catholics are no longer interested in what the Pope has to say in this matter.

With this encouraging background, the Plenary Council Instrumentum Laboris, outlining a program for the Plenary Council was eagerly awaited. However, in the contents, these social reform issues were handled tangentially, looking at them from the viewpoint of their being a deviation from the Church’s teaching that required remediation. There was no indication that analysis of the Australian sensus fidei would be seriously evaluated and reported. In paragraph 62, the need for renewed catechesis in the Church’s teaching on contraception is stated. Its answer to the issues of divorced and remarried Catholics and those in same sex relationships is to devise a long-term plan to evangelise the community and catechise the faithful on the sanctity of life, the nature of the human person, sexuality, marriage and family.

Paragraphs 54 and 55 are devoted to the contribution and role of women in the Church. It acknowledges the preponderance of women in Church affairs, but their under-representation in formal leadership and decision-making roles. However, in relation to the critical issue of ordination of women, it states that it is ‘challenging’ for some, and refers to ‘the Church’s formal teaching on this matter’. People did respond to the invitation to contribute, but simply ran up against an impenetrable wall of dismissal. Hopes have been dashed.

The only reasonable interpretation of these statements is that the issues on sexuality and the priesthood, where a majority of Catholics would appear to be wanting change, will not even be discussed because the Australian bishops oppose change or do not wish to antagonise the Vatican. This unwillingness of the bishops to discuss issues of importance to their fellow Catholics removes the opportunity for the Australian Catholic community to have its opinion acknowledged within Australia and heard within the world Catholic community. Discussion of the issues does not necessitate making a request to change canon law or similar dramatic gesture. It could simply be a statement of the beliefs of a modern, egalitarian, Christian community that has discarded the prejudices of previous times. It is as Archbishop Coleridge stated: ‘We cannot stay where we are. It is not business as usual.’

Jesus, the good shepherd, left his 99 sheep in the fold to look for his one lost sheep. In Australia, with 12% attendance at Sunday mass, we have 88 sheep that have been lost. How many of these have left because of the Church’s attitude to remarried divorcees, contraception or sexuality, or because women are considered unsuitable for the priesthood? A more loving, inclusive Church would at least give some lost sheep hope to be able to re-enter a receptive sheepfold.

ALAN CLAGUE is a member of the ARC Secretariat
Catholic Guilt
Noelene Uren

The youngest of ten children, my nearest sibling, Kathleen, five years older than me, I spent the first five years of my life on an isolated property in the far west of NSW. With my three brothers and most of my sisters having reached adulthood and left home, Dad moved his remaining family to a small farm on the outskirts of Parramatta.

I had never encountered children of my own age so was painfully shy. Sent by bus with my two sisters still of school age into the nearest Catholic school in Parramatta, my life became a series of hurdles. I was six by then, but as I had never been to school I was put into Kindergarten. I had barely worked out that when the Nuns saw that I didn’t fit Kindy so promoted me to 1st class. My perceived problem was that I could read fluently, courtesy of an older sister, so I didn’t really belong in 1st class either. A few months there and it was decided, as I had turned seven, that 2nd class was the place for me, and that’s when my problems really began.

It was the First Communion class. The green catechism, the Ten Commandments, these were drilled daily along with the most important part, ‘Examination of conscience’. For if we were to be in that desired state of grace to receive Holy Communion we must first make our Confession, a terrifying thought. I loved the graceful church that was the old St Patrick’s in Parramatta, but was afraid of the tiny, dark confessional boxes. I was afraid of a lot of things, including the fact that I was obviously a sinner.

But how to know what sins to confess? The commandments were no help at all. What did I know of strange gods? Wasn’t there only one? Taking God’s name in vain? All I knew of vain was that was what Kath called me when I stood in front of the mirror. Little did she know my dark-haired, hazel-eyed self desperately just wanted to be one of the blue-eyed blondes the Nuns always chose for their pageants. Keep holy the Sabbath? Little chance of not doing that in my Irish Catholic family. Honour my father and mother? I wasn’t sure how one did that, Mum and Dad were just there, my safe haven in this bewildering world they had thrust me into.

Then there was Thou shalt not kill. My big brothers had gone away to war, presumably to kill our enemy. Dad often killed a chook for our Sunday dinner and Mum was always delighted when she killed the mice that invaded our kitchen. I decided that commandment was best left alone, as was the one about adultery as no-one seemed inclined to explain that to me. Thou shalt not steal? I understood that one, but the next three I decided to leave alone as well as they didn’t make sense.

So I was left with two sins. Bing Crosby, a favourite in our house, sang, ‘It’s a Sin to Tell a Lie’. So I decided that must be right. I would also confess to stealing a pencil. I hadn’t, but it seemed to be a satisfactory sin. I made my first confession. The priest obviously agreed I was a sinner and told me to say three Hail Marys. I was now ready for the exciting part.

Tomorrow I would wear the new white dress my eldest sister had made me. Not frilly, as I would have liked, but then Mum said I wasn’t the frilly type. I would also wear my sister’s veil and to go with my long white socks a brand new pair of white shoes. I had never had white shoes before, black being more practical, but white they were as this was such a special occasion. I was determined not to be vain about them; that was surely a sin.

From then on I would never take lightly the receiving of Holy Communion. But neither would I ever completely shake off that Catholic guilt, so instilled in that little girl from the Bush, who until then had not been aware that she was, indeed, a sinner.

Noelene Uren is a member of ARC Secretariat
This book is dedicated to all those women and men who have never stopped believing that the Catholic Church will one day be more open and more inclusive.

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual places or people, past or present, is completely coincidental.

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Please feel free to email this manuscript to anyone you think might like to read it. If you have enjoyed this novel, or it has raised some issues for you, I would love to hear your thoughts.

You can email me at:
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JOHN CROTHERS is the former Parish Priest of Penshurst. He is now retired and lives in Kiama, NSW.

Francis Moloney, *Broken For You*

Melbourne: Coventry Press 2018

**DID JESUS ORDAIN ANYONE AT THE LAST SUPPER?**

**REVIEWED BY:** GIDEON GOOSEN

This slim volume by Francis Moloney is basically three articles he wrote for journals which are now produced in book form. The three chapters are about Jesus in the Bible, The Catholic Priesthood, and Pope Francis and the Word of God.

The second chapter on priesthood caught my eye because it sheds new light on the topic and debunks the unsubstantiated belief that Jesus ordained the apostles at the Last Supper. For years we were told this on Holy Thursday and many still believe it. Moloney sets out to show that this is against the historical and exegetical evidence.

Moloney is a well-known international exegete and authority who taught at both the Australian Catholic University and the Catholic University of America. He is an expert on Johannine literature.

He points out the striking fact that the word ‘priest’ (hiereus, sacerdos) is nowhere used in the New Testament for anyone except Jesus who is our High Priest. In spite of many ministries in the New Testament times, no mention is made of the person who presides at the Eucharist, the priest. He also maintains that the terms episkopos, presbyteros and diakonos are all administrative offices not associated with the cultic aspects of Christianity. In the 1st century an emerging hierarchy was becoming apparent but not the priesthood. Only in the 2nd century did the emergence of a priestly ministry become visible. He cites some early Christian writers in support of his opinion.

At a time when we are reviewing many firmly held biases, this book is well worth a read for those who want to deepen their understanding of how Christianity and its structures developed.

GIDEON GOOSEN is a Sydney-based theologian whose most recent book is *Clericalism: Stories from the Pews*, 2020.
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