



Plenary Council 2020

Submission by

Australian Reforming Catholics

Preamble

Australian Reforming Catholics was founded with a constitution in the year 2000 and was later established as a corporate entity. Its purpose has been to educate Catholics about the spirit of Vatican II and to speak out about attempts by those within the Church, especially by the hierarchy, who have attempted to diminish the intentions of that Vatican Council. In recent years there has been so much additional scandal that has compromised the integrity of the institutional Church. Significant reform is required urgently if the Church is to be and to be seen as a witness to the teachings of Jesus Christ both now and into the future.

Australian Reforming Catholics (ARC) consists of hundreds of practising Catholics across Australia who look to and desire major reform of the Catholic Church. These Catholics comprise lay people, priests, religious, and some retired bishops who pay an annual fee to belong to the organisation and who thereby support its publications and activities. Many others support what we do but, for various reasons, are unable to be financial members. We educate through our website, e-mail, and our quarterly newsletter *Arvoice*. We attempt to get our message out regarding the need for reform through public media when appropriate.

While we see that gathering the viewpoints of all Catholics through the process of preparation for the Plenary Council as an important step, we have no illusion about the difficulty of achieving genuine reform. Bishops in Australia are well known for simply ignoring approaches and ideas from the laity in particular, mostly not even acknowledging them with a reply. Unless the Plenary Council brings about a significant culture change then the future of the Catholic Church in Australia is fairly grim.

In the preparation of this submission some twenty-two members of ARC came together to map out the main headings of concern and develop the details contained with each. Then the submission was compiled and refined by them so that it was seen to reflect the views of the membership, given that we have conducted surveys of members previously. The whole membership reviewed this document before it was submitted.

Our Main Areas of Concern

Clericalism

Clericalism with its origins in the fourth century is seen as the principal evil in the Catholic Church today. It was identified by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse as the major cause of the sexual abuse of children. Clericalism is the assumed exclusive status and sense of prestige pertaining to the

ordained over that of the non-ordained. It incorporates the belief that the ordained are ontologically different and, therefore, superior and “set apart”. It results in a sense of entitlement with the potential for an abuse of power over others. It incorporates exclusively into itself many of the charisms of the Spirit that rightly belong to all the baptised.

We consider that the following should be addressed in order to eradicate clericalism from the Church and to promote an authentic Priesthood of Service:

1. Training

Qualified women should be involved as teachers and lecturers in seminaries in order to overcome strong patriarchal perspectives. Seminarians should be given supervised pastoral experience in dealing with families during their training. Issues of sexuality should be formally addressed so that celibacy is dealt with in a “whole of life” context.

2. Quality of candidates for the priesthood

Professional assessment of candidates should be part of the selection process. Candidates should be encouraged to have some work experience prior to entering a seminary or during their training. The level of maturity of candidates immediately before ordination should be assessed with great professional care.

3. Optional celibacy

We strongly support the recommendation of the Royal Commission to allow diocesan priests to marry and we strongly support the return to active ministry of priests who have married. Pope Francis has already encouraged bishops in South America to ordain married men in order to meet critical pastoral needs. Celibacy is not essential for priesthood.

4. Ordination of Women

We strongly support the ordination of women to both the diaconate and the priesthood. We see this as a principal area of justice and equality since no cogent reasons have been given why this cannot be the case. The 1976 prohibition against the ordination of women has been shown to have been scripturally and theologically flawed. Women make up more than half of the People of God and the charisms of women are largely undervalued and under-utilised.

5. Inculturation of priests drawn from other countries

There are significant problems associated with this practice. It appears that little attempt has been made to assist these priests to adapt to the Australian culture and orientation towards faith. They often come from societies very different from our own, preach pre-

Vatican II theology, and have patronising attitudes to their parishioners along with misogynistic approaches to women. This broad practice of filling clergy gaps should cease, restricted to perhaps a few cases where it is very clear that these deficiencies do not exist. Otherwise, continuing to live/minister out of a “caste” system, may only perpetuate clericalism and patriarchy.

Church Governance

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states emphatically that the People of God are the Church yet they still have very little influence over its culture, what it teaches and practises, and how it is governed. The Pope is the Bishop of Rome and, as such, he is the first among equals when it comes to governance. All bishops have the primary responsibility to govern their own dioceses with accountability and transparency, including in the process the lay people who make up the People of God.

Therefore:

Applying the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity, all bishops, supported by the Australian Bishops Conference, must take responsibility for governance of their dioceses. They should seek to change Canon Law where it limits their appropriate authority to do so.

Every Diocese must have a Diocesan Council and each parish a Parish Council elected by parishioners. Councils must have total transparency and integrity in their decision-making processes.

While accepting that the Church is not a democracy as such, the nomination and election of Bishops must be undertaken in a democratic manner involving Diocesan and Parish Councils. It must be accepted that bishops and their people are co-responsible for the mission of our Church.

Given the co-responsibility, it is imperative that full consultation takes place with Parish Councils before new pastors are appointed. Parish plans and financial reports should be made available to parishioners to ensure transparency of decision-making.

Faith Formation and Rational Belief

We believe that miracles and some events in the Bible are often presented as metaphors and we request that all clergy and religious teachers understand these metaphors. To do so requires the eyes of faith to see the mystery in these writings. Pastors need to distinguish between history and myths in order to lead people to a deeper understanding of faith.

We believe that many Church doctrines were formulated according to the best minds of the times. But today, with a vastly improved knowledge of literary forms and biblical criticism, we have a right to demand that many of these doctrines/teachings be reformulated in order to be

accepted as reasonable for an educated person. Here are just some examples.

Original sin: This doctrine has been associated with the essential need for Baptism and therefore a dependence on the Church for salvation. It requires entire reformulation away from the mythical account of Eve eating forbidden fruit.

Virgin birth: God’s presence in the world is a profound mystery to human reason. Naïve and absolute interpretations do not assist faith. There are many instances contained in similar pagan beliefs where revered people are described as having been born to virgins.

The Assumption: This is a doctrine framed in a totally outdated cosmology that makes it lack meaning in an educated world. It also has no basis in Scripture.

Infallibility: The common interpretation preached is that of papal infallibility rather than the Vatican II emphasis on the infallibility of the whole People of God in interpreting revelation. Personal infallibility is not accepted by the majority of Catholics.

Divorce and remarriage: Most people believe that many annulments are merely “Catholic divorces”, given the problematic gathering of evidence to prove the factual non-event of an invalid marriage. The process for achieving annulments is often disproportionately traumatic for all the parties involved. Denial of the sacraments to those who re-marry without an annulment is often a grave injustice.

Teaching against pre-marital sex, masturbation, contraception etc.: Major difficulties arise from a long-standing defective theology of sexuality and of “nature. It should be remembered that the Church had, in centuries past, a betrothal ceremony for those intending marriage and who co-habited before marriage. It is time to revisit approaches to this important life stage.

Unless doctrines/teachings such as these are reformulated, people will find them a hindrance to identifying with the Catholic Church and many more will continue to leave it.

In order to move forward in faith formation, we believe that people need to be encouraged to question their faith in order to gain a mature understanding of it. Unfortunately, too much preaching and emphasis on doctrines tend to keep people trapped in the same notion of the faith that was presented to them as children. The content of some central doctrines (e.g. the Trinity) were designed to help people understand the mysteries of God and of our faith. They were not absolute definitions.

We believe that Faith Formation is not simply about learning doctrines (as in the Catholic Catechism) but it is about forming a relationship and an encounter with Christ, and then becoming missionary disciples of Christ.

We believe recent generations need to be listened to so that the Church can:

- ◆ understand how the Spirit is working in their lives
- ◆ learn to embrace what is important to them
- ◆ encourage them, if they so desire, to develop a meaningful faith for themselves

We know that so many of the recent generations have not found meaning in the way the faith is presented. The hierarchy of the Church need to listen very seriously to people who say they are spiritual but not religious.

Spirituality, Prayer and Conscience

We believe what Karl Rahner said: “The *Christian of the future will be a mystic* or he *will not exist at all.*”

We believe that it is important for people to practise a contemplative life of prayer which can lead to action and promote love in our troubled world. Prayer is the means of going from this world to an awareness of another world, which can enrich this world. Put another way, it is important to move from a dualistic way of thinking about the secular and the sacred, and to find ways of seeing the sacred in everything. The Church needs to preach and support this.

It is important to develop a richer understanding of conscience, including the primacy of conscience. Any faith formation that does not integrate the findings of both the social and the physical sciences will continue to be irrelevant to people in the modern world. More than ever previously, there are many people who have acquired knowledge and skills that everyone could learn from, including the clergy. The notion that the Church is always right needs to be humbly dispelled.

Ambivalence and Disingenuity in Culture and Preaching

We wish to draw attention to the many instances where the hierarchy appear to be less than fully honest in their teaching and preaching, seemingly with the intention of appearing to be loyal to traditional Church doctrine as they understand it. For example, we strongly request that, following the Plenary Council, the bishops commission a study of human sexuality and develop a theology that enables them to show leadership and communicate the message of Jesus to a modern world.

Homosexuality: The leaders of our Church still feign ignorance of this issue, despite all the evidence to the contrary. They know that homosexuality is a normal condition in nature but continue to refer to LGBTIQ people as “disordered” so that they are in line with the Catechism of the Catholic Church. An entirely new approach is necessary in order for the Church to show that it embraces equality and non-discrimination in responding to the spiritual needs of every baptised person.

Contraception: The directive of *Humanae Vitae* effectively putting a ban on all forms of artificial contraception never became a ‘received’ teaching by the People of God. Therefore, it was not a teaching. Although

many bishops, moral theologians, and pastors knew this they did not, in so many cases, lift a finger to ease the burden on Australian families. This scandal exists today even though most Catholics have moved beyond it along with a large proportion leaving the Church because of it. This error in this teaching must be formally recognised.

Child Sexual Abuse: The hierarchy claimed that the problem was restricted to a few ‘bad apples’ when they knew that they were covering up so many instances of abuse. They were putting the protection against scandal above the lives of innocent children and then had the gall to ask the faithful to do reparation for these sins of the bishops and clergy. Agreement to report all instances of sexual abuse to the police must be mandatory. The Church cannot recover credibility while its practices cover up crimes.

Divorce and Remarriage: Independently of all other considerations, there is widespread acceptance of the equal status of divorced, remarried and LGBTIQ people in our society. Marital and partnership breakdowns occur owing to a host of societal forces that were not present at the time of Jesus. The Church cannot preach mercy and lifetime condemnation at the same time.

Supporting Change: Stating a need for changes on particular issues is totally inadequate if not followed up by appropriate and effective action. For example, how can a parish community be truly inclusive and welcoming to the marginalised, especially if divorcees, LGBTIQ and non-Catholics in good faith are denied the sacrament of the Eucharist when present during a Catholic Mass? The past doctrinal divisions of the major Christian Churches are now far less significant than persons in good faith wanting to express their solidarity with Jesus Christ unencumbered by the tradition that they happened to be born into. Fortunately, many Catholic priests accept this but are careful not to support or condone it through fear of retribution.

The credibility of the Catholic Church, so compromised by the Royal Commission, cannot be rescued unless matters like the above are seriously addressed.

The Plenary Council Process – we have a say but who decides?

The Plenary Council is a good step in itself if designed to analyse and deal with the many structural and theological difficulties that now face the Australian Catholic Church. However, that process must, in itself, have integrity, be professional in its approach and be transparent. The Canonical process needs to be augmented, allowing for much greater participation directly by the laity. There should be equal numbers of men and women, their total being the same as the number of clergy represented. A woman as co-chair of the Council should be appointed to assist in preventing gender biased perspectives. It will create a worse situation for the Church if the input is not handled and interpreted carefully, if the nature and extent of the input is not revealed, and if decisions arising from that input are not in general accord with it.

Our initial concerns about the process include the following:

Gaining the Input

While people can make individual submissions, the most reflective input is stimulated by the groups talking with one another. However, the time allowed for this in the parish meetings is very brief and leads to words being thrown in to get something on paper before people have had a chance to gain comfort in expressing themselves with others that they may not know well.

One of the issues associated with gaining input from young people is that they are educated more creatively, using and living with modern technologies which may clash with a Church-family approach that does not readily allow for creative religious expression and sharing of faith.

Only a small percentage of those who identify as Catholic (perhaps as little as 10%) are effectively drawn into the parish discussions because they attend Mass regularly. There are insufficient formal arrangements in place to gain the input of the other 90% who are not regular Mass-goers. How do we understand the needs of those who feel their spiritual yearnings are not met by the Church into which they were baptised? There appears to be no broad media information that would enable or facilitate this. The dioceses need to be paying for some advertising and short TV announcements to show that input to the Plenary Council is really desired and not just from Church-goers.

Hearing the Input

The institution of the Church generally favours the clerical faith experience over the wider faith experience of lay people.

Clergy and religious will be the large majority called by the Council who will discuss and interpret the diverse input that is provided. The smaller proportion of lay people will be selected from those who are active in Church affairs, many of whom will be influenced by their need to remain in good standing with their pastors or employers. Even for clergy who want change or reform, it is difficult for them to break from their training and formation to translate what has been said to them without filtering it significantly.

The process of the Plenary Council needs to accept that there will be pain in the listening and adapting to the needs of the people, just as people in families need to listen and adjust to the perspectives of one another.

Decision-making

We are aware that there will be matters that may not get into the agenda of the Plenary Council and are concerned about how that will be decided.

We are also very concerned about how the extent and weight of opinion given by the total number of people

who respond will be openly reported. This is where transparency is paramount. If the final decision-makers, whom we expect to be only clerics, deviate from the People of God as a whole on any major aspect then it is vital that this is known and the reason for it documented. We expect and demand that there will be a rigorous and professional methodology used in the gathering and interpretation of what is presented to the Plenary Council.

We understand that, of the people called into the Council, some will have a consultative vote and some will have a deliberative vote. It is of great concern to us that, at this stage, it has not been decided who and how many will have a deliberative vote. Our confidence in the whole process will be enhanced or otherwise when we know who makes up this cohort. If people suspect that critical issues are not likely to be addressed seriously or decision-making is stalled into the future then the effect will be worse than if we never had such a Plenary Council.

Can the Church be brave enough?

We need a church where the clergy are more of a service to the people. How can the clergy let go of their power? How can the hierarchical pyramid be turned upside down as Pope Francis has expressed?

The Church needs to be person-centred on the person of Jesus and on his simple but profound teaching. We need to be in relationship with each other and in a dynamic, flexible community of believers. We need diversity. The Christian community needs to embrace the features of the human family with all its diversity - married, de facto, divorced, gay etc. All accepted for who they are in the love of the family. The maturity issue looms large in every family. We are all in the process of maturing. Just as children often can have insights that parents need to hear through 'trial and error', so too the Church parish family needs to listen to the younger members.

This is opposed to the 'hierarchical' model of Church that has increasingly become more centralised. We need a family church, a relational church, a dynamic notion of relationship. This is where the Spirit is. Without this, the Catholic Church in Australia will continue to decline.

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