

Third Convocation of Catholics (online)

on

The Future of Catholicism in Australia

18 November 2021

Summary of Comments in the Chat function

This is a precis of the 350 comments made in the Chat function. Summary statements are interspersed occasionally with direct quotes from the Chat. For ease of reading, comments are grouped under selected headings although they do not always fit neatly there. Let the reader be gracious in understanding this!

Comments opened with numerous greetings.

Inclusion

Inclusion stood out as the predominant issue on participants' minds. Many expressed strong and deeply felt appeals for inclusion relating to women (over 50% of Catholics), LGBTI+ people and their families, repartnered people and others. Blatant discrimination, sidelining and put-downs are endemic. These ongoing practices are a shameful embarrassment. The hurt was palpable.

"The indicator of progress and success would be for me to be able to tell my gay adult daughter that she is welcome in the Church and there are no barriers anymore."

The refusal to ordain women is seen as a maintenance of male hegemony. The rationalisation is groundless. Exclusion and exceptionalism are prominent features of the Church which sees itself as an exception to many of the usual norms of social and community behaviour. Not everyone is welcome.

There were strong calls for lay Catholics, especially women, to be engaged in decision-making at all levels including in a remodelled ACBC (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference).

"Progress for me would mean that I am asked for my opinions on church matters and listened to by my local parish clergy."

Plenary Council

Catholics widely feel that inclusion of the currently marginalised in Church life should be a major outcome alongside a strong demand for practical results. There is an expectation that matters beyond the jurisdiction of the ACBC should be referred to Rome.

Lack of communication is an issue for many as well as a fear that the outcomes will be determined by the bishops, no matter what anybody else says. All members should have equal standing. There is grave fear that this will be a lost opportunity

'If we could only harness the incredible energy and faith so evident in the original discussions and submissions to the Plenary Council, there's so much we could achieve together.'

Synodality

Catholics want real engagement and co-responsibility with stewardship shared by lay and clergy. In the absence of action from the hierarchy, lay people need to create an inclusive Church, beginning with small groups - a church that listens to and welcomes all. Experience shows that ground-breaking action can come from such groups where people relate personally and work out realistic ways to care for each other and for the natural world. There were calls to organise Root & Branch style DIY synods without the constraints of the Synod on Synodality process. Most Catholics know little or nothing about the Plenary Council or Synod on Synodality.

“Throw off the mantle of subservience”.

“To be a Christian is a dangerous business - getting involved with the living God means we don't have faith in a box, we need to allow the Spirit to blow us where it will!”

Governance and Leadership

Participants were scathing about the misuse of power in the Church. Trust, integrity, accountability, transparency and equality are essential for restoring credibility. Lay Catholics must be at the heart of decision-making processes as we seek to have the best available people around every table. Many good things are happening but they do not yet address the current crisis. Servant leadership is too seldom seen in the Australian Church.

“I would like a Church that doesn't need to be called to account by civil society but is a leader in living and promoting Catholic principles.”

“I sense that these panellists are our leaders in the Catholic Church”.

Church

Catholics want Diocesan and Parish Pastorals Councils. Many regard the communities where they live and work as their Churches. The Church is alive, but not only in the pews.

“We are the Church.”

The Church is often an obstacle between people and God. Participants appreciated our faith being spoken of in a down-to-earth, intelligent way and found it uplifting. Those who resist renewal are likened to climate-change deniers. Participants perceived a crisis of authority, not of faith. Fear is a significant element in the resistance to change.

“The current change of era demands we move from being a flock seeking the service of its shepherds to a community where we all proclaim and transmit the Good News of God's Kingdom”.

“Together we the church, shall rise again, if we keep going where the flowers bloom”.

“Lay Catholics are leading the way; maybe that is where the Church's integrity will be restored.”

Catholics are moving beyond seeing the Mass as the hallmark of being ‘Catholic’. We bless more people through practising Gospel values than we do through the Mass.

“I would like to see the Church walking in the footsteps of Jesus, at one with the people; a more Christian church, focused and active in following the example of Jesus; with less emphasis on traditions and ceremonies; less emphasis on authority; and more on doing what Jesus taught.”

Catholics expect Church teaching to evolve in the light of new insights and understandings from scripture scholarship and scientific research. The discordance between many official positions of the Church and what most Catholics believe is a cancer under the skin.

Mission

Lay people, living and working in the secular world, often show more authentic faith than the hierarchy who are apart. Demonstrated acceptance and care for one another would proclaim a Gospel Church based on Jesus.

“The Church will increasingly become more irrelevant to the majority of people as it fails to speak to the world in a way that resonates with their lives.”

Bishops

As prophetic voices during the Plenary Council, bishops were missing in action. Some hoped this was because they were listening for what lay Catholics would offer! Open reflection on difficult questions at this Convocation was medicine for participants. To be a work of the Spirit, discernment must be free, without authoritarian restrictions.

Valuing the vulnerable and marginalised should first evoke a response of care and welcome. But there is a clear perception that the first action of bishops on hearing of child sexual abuse is to call in the lawyers. There is a broad hope that bishops will relinquish some of their power and recognise the wishes of lay Catholics at the Plenary Council for the good of the people and the Church.

“I feel sorry for the bishops who cannot recognize Jesus in the laity and the world, who can't see the Word in the world!”

Liturgy and Bible

Catholics want inclusive language. Current liturgical standards were much criticised, for exclusive archaic and nonsensical language. Alternative liturgies for occasions such as home Masses were requested as is Communion for all on special occasions like funerals. There was a call for schools to ensure that students understand Biblical perspectives in relation to historical facts and the role of myths, legend and traditions.

“Just imagine how amazing it would be if we were able to open up the doors and our arms to all, invite everyone to come to the table. We need to practice the gospel in actions not just words”.

Parish life

Soul-destroying parishes and poor homilies leave people bored and hasten disengagement. Gospel-inspired parishes grow; regulation or tradition based parishes fade away. Too often, the priest conforms the parish to his liking instead of serving it. Thus, the long-term life of the parish is undermined.

Clergy

There were calls for women deacons and a change from seminary training to an apprenticeship model with community decision-sharing experience for priests.

Comments concluded with many expressions of appreciation to presenters and panellists and support people.

Typical of these comments.

“My mind is buzzing - my heart is filled once again with hope”.

“You have renewed my faith in WE the church”.