

*My*  
**'HARD**  
*Journey*  
**QUESTIONS**  
*through*  
**BORN**  
*the*  
**OF**  
*Plenary*  
**LOVE'**

**JOHN WARHURST**





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*For Joan*

SAMPLE

## FOREWORD

Thanks to all those who have given me permission to republish: David Halliday (*Eureka Street*), Andrew Thorpe (*Canberra Times*), Jeanine Doyle (*Catholic Voice*), John Menadue (*Pearls & Irritations*) and Judy Tokley (*The Record*) as well as to *La Croix* and *The Swag*, which have reprinted articles. Thanks to CCCG and Garratt Publishing for publishing my Plenary Council blog. Thanks to Terry Fewtrell, Kevin Liston, Francis Sullivan, Judy Tokley and Joan Warhurst for reading drafts of some of the unpublished work. I remain responsible for the content. Thanks once again to Garratt Publishing, especially David Hugan, Karen Tayleur, Greg Hill and others for their encouragement and wonderful care and enthusiasm for my manuscript.

# ACRONYMS

ACBC	Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
ACCCR	Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform
CRA	Catholic Religious Australia
CCCG	Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn
LSC	Light from the Southern Cross report
NATSICC	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council
PC	Plenary Council

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# CHAPTER ONE

## A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

### **The story so far**

This is my personal story as an insider/outsider wrestling with the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. Reform was happening and I found the twin roles I previously undertook (see *Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy: engaging with the Plenary Council and Beyond*) were continuing into 2021. I still wanted to continue my part in making a difference as aspects of each role shaded into the other.

The first half of 2021 year was the lull before the storm, before the clash became real. In the second half of the year, as Plenary Council (PC) member formation for the First Assembly began, it was almost as if my two roles – official and reformer – were stalking one another.

As a PC member working within the Church, and a lobby group leader operating outside Church institutions, the pressure of walking the thin line of connection between the two intensified during the year. In a Church that valued transparency the pressure would not have been so great, but the code of secrecy surrounding internal Church business meant that I was prevented from revealing to my reform colleagues matters of process that should have been public anyway. I kept confidential the knowledge gained through my PC membership, but it was ethically challenging because often there was no need for the confidentiality which was insisted upon. It hurt me that I couldn't share important information with my reform colleagues. This lack of sharing occurred because of the unnecessary

struggle every outsider faced to do a simple thing like making contact with PC members, whose contact details were kept private for so-called privacy concerns. The authorities should have encouraged rather than prevented such contact.

Beginning in early 2017, this is also the story of the Church reform group ‘Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn’ (CCCCG) – an organisation for which I was the foundation chair in March 2017. Some members of the team have been thanked in my first account of our efforts, *Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy: engaging with the Plenary Council and Beyond*. I want to now thank some other members of the team, including Kevin Vassarotti, our Treasurer, Joan Warhurst, our secretary, and Rod Page, who managed our communications with parish communities within the archdiocese. The whole team of 20, together since 2017, remained indispensable to our achievements.

*Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy* was finally completed, with last-minute additions, in January 2021 and became available in early May. In Canberra CCCC hosted a launch of a book by Genevieve Jacobs, a prominent local Catholic who had interviewed me many times about politics and elections on the local ABC. As part of her new regional digital news platform, RiotACT, we had last spoken in my lounge room on the Sunday morning after the 2019 ACT elections. Our Master of Ceremonies, Terry Fewtrell, noted that it was from wrestling that the phrase ‘No holds barred’ came, and our publisher, David Hughan, thanked me for my continued commitment to being an agent of change. Genevieve herself reflected that there was no more valuable person than the one who asks hard questions born of love. Later, Andrew Hamilton described the book as a bracing picture of intractability and inertia. I am proud that he described the overall tone of my writing as ‘not polemical but explanatory and persuasive, respectful of persons and positive in proposing necessary reform’.

Four years on we knew so much more and had come a long way, but we also all knew there was more work to do.

### **The 2021 Year**

The year 2021 was like the previous four years crammed into one. The growth of the national Church reform movement, combined with the restrictions on local public gatherings, meant that the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) played a larger role for me during 2021. Local work in Canberra-Goulburn continued, but when Zoom conferences became the preferred method of gathering and communication it made sense for these to be national and international events rather than local/regional ones.

Before this happened, though, CCCG presented one last significant Zoom forum for the year in April which illustrated our approach. Our chosen topic was the urgent need for a diocesan pastoral council in our archdiocese. We had been advocating for one since we began our efforts in 2017 and we wanted to engage with Archbishop Prowse about it. He agreed to nominating two senior priests, heads of deaneries, as his representatives. We then presented a background paper prepared by Terry Fewtrell on the innovative introduction of such a council in Canberra-Goulburn, and offered two speakers – Fr Richard Lennan from Boston College and Andrea Dean, president of Women and the Australian Church. But their positive arguments failed to generate a quick breakthrough. One of our members, Andrew Phelan, was asked to join an archdiocesan working group on governance chaired by the Vicar-General, but any progress in Church reform was always frustratingly slow.

As the Plenary Council First Assembly, delayed until October 2021, drew closer, ACCCR thought through just what its own strategy would be. Eventually, after considerable internal discussion

and dispute, the Assembly emerged as an important focus, but never the only one.

I held two overlapping roles within ACCCR. The first was as chair of the Planning Group of ten, which discussed general strategy. The second was as a member of the smaller Convocations Project Group. This latter team was tasked, under the leadership of Kevin Liston from South Australian Catholics for an Evolving Church, with implementing Kevin's idea of holding three Convocations of Catholics on 'The Future of Catholicism in Australia' during 2021. These convocations, in the spirit of lay-led public discussion of Church reform, set out to support the official lead-up to the First PC Assembly, but also to model what lay Catholics could manage under their own steam. This was a bottom-up rather than a top-down process. Our aim also was to widen the circle of lay Catholics who were concerned about Church reform and to empower individuals by showing them the depth of support for their own reforming values and aspirations.

The first Convocation, held on the morning of Sunday 2 May, featured American Benedictine sister, Joan Chittister, from Erie, Pennsylvania. It was a huge test of what was possible for the reform movement, and our credibility hung on it. It was also a test of our resources. For the first time – facilitated by Andrea Dean, ACCCR co-convenor and president of WATAC – we engaged in a crowd-funding exercise to raise the necessary funds. Our supporters showed their great generosity and through that means we raised more than \$10,000.

This was ACCCR's biggest public organisational test. It involved considerable financial and logistic support from our constituent groups and the recruitment of new partners. Garratt Publishing, headed by David Hughan, took responsibility for advertising and communication and much more. David also joined the Convocations project team. Catholic Religious Australia (CRA), the peak body

for religious institutes, joined us too to offer unparalleled links to religious orders and congregations of nuns, brothers and priests. By the time of the second convocation the Society of St Vincent de Paul had also become an official supporter.

Joan Chittister gave a powerful talk titled 'The Spiritual Mountains of the New Millenium'. It was a huge success. Her presentation reached a vast audience both that morning and through the reach of the recorded version. Her theme was that Catholicism must grow up and individual Catholics must stand up and speak out.

Joan's presence was a challenge to the hierarchy, given that the previous year she had been 'disinvited' as a keynote speaker to a national education conference in Melbourne by Archbishop Peter Comensoli. At this time her supporters then organised a privately sponsored Australian tour, which proved impossible to carry out due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The president of the ACBC, Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, generously provided an official welcome.

The second convocation on the evening of Thursday 26 August 2021 was aimed more directly at influencing the coming Plenary Council. We were very conscious that Joan Chittister was a very hard act to follow. The Senior Australian of the Year, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, offered the welcoming remarks as a recognition of Indigenous spirituality. Four speakers were chosen, including Robert Fitzgerald, Debra Zanella and Jessie Rogers from Ireland to cover a range of topics. Sister Rosie Joyce was forced to withdraw because of illness. Fitzgerald signified the link to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Zanella illustrated the centrality of the place of women in Church decision-making, and Rogers symbolised the international character of Church reform.

To drive home the Church reform message, ACCCR published the talks from the first and second convocations in time for their



distribution to all PC members well before the first assembly. The book was titled *A Church for All: A Guide to the Australian Plenary Council* and it was published in record time by Garratt Publishing. Equally record-breaking was the inclusion in the book of the ACCCR response to the official PC Agenda Questions, which were released in June.

Free copies of *A Church for All* were sent to each diocesan bishop and later offered to each PC member. With the support of the PC authorities, a copy of the ACCCR response was placed on the Assembly website. Individual ACCCR member groups distributed the book widely within dioceses. It remained the most comprehensive commentary on the Agenda Questions from any source.

On 9 September 2021, ACCCR launched *A Church for All* with major contributions by Francis Sullivan and Claire Victory. I responded on behalf of the authors and later received encouraging feedback from colleagues like Robert Fitzgerald, Paul Bongiorno, and Anne Walker (CRA), who enquired about how best to encourage CRA members to contact PC members.

ACCCR then partnered CCCG in presenting Plenary Tracker, a highly successful daily analysis by Zoom of the Assembly each evening from 3-10 October 2021. The Tracker program, presented by community leader and former Canberra ABC host, Genevieve Jacobs, combined news, critique, and advocacy with challenging discussions with PC members and close observers from the Church community. ACCCR accepted the principles of my scoping paper as the basis for this event. Once again Garratt Publishing was crucial to its success and once again it was possible only with generous financial support from both ACCCR and CCCG.

This idea for a Plenary Tracker had grown out of longstanding discussion within ACCCR about how best the reform movement might direct public attention to the PC Assembly. Various ideas were canvassed from 2018 onwards, including counter-events,

fringe events, protests, and critical media coverage. We discussed possibilities with the late Dr John Sabine and Rod and Susan Page even visited the proposed location in Adelaide. These proposals drew on international and local experience of how NGOs and lobby groups approached events as diverse as Vatican synods, global political summits and political party conferences.

*Plenary Tracker* attracted 3,500 registrations. The recorded version was even more popular than each evening's program. Many supporters were Convocations of Catholics registrants. The Plenary Tracker analyses were supported by my blog, *Plenary Insight*, and another blog – *Plenary Speaking* – hosted by my CCCG colleague and fellow PC member Francis Sullivan, the Chair of Catholic Social Services Australia. Both blogs were distributed widely each afternoon during the Assembly. I appeared twice on *Plenary Tracker* and was also interviewed on another program with which we were closely associated, *Plenary Matters*, a daily podcast hosted by prominent Catholic national religious affairs broadcaster Geraldine Doogue.

The third and final convocation was held after the Assembly on 18 November. This was even more professional and ambitious than the first two and once again we in ACCCR resorted to crowdfunding to finance the event. It was hosted by Ellen Fanning – of ABC's *The Drum* – who had facilitated the Integrity in Ministry conference in Melbourne in 2018. The panellists in the first part, reflecting on the PC First Assembly, were PC members Claire Victory, Nimmi Candappa, Virginia Bourke and Francis Sullivan. Those in the second part, looking forward to the Second Assembly and the parallel Synod of Bishops consultation, were Robert Fitzgerald, Eleanor Flynn, Kevin Liston, Susan Pascoe and me.

The reform movement had a big year in 2021. Looking back, it achieved beyond our expectations. But we ended the year realising that the journey had just begun, and our achievements were still limited. We had all developed an approach of steely resilience.