

WRESTLING WITH THE CHURCH HIERARCHY:

engaging with the
Plenary Council
& beyond

JOHN WARHURST



garratt
PUBLISHING



Published in Australia by
Garratt Publishing
32 Glenvale Crescent
Mulgrave, VIC 3170
www.garrattpublishing.com.au

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Cover image and author biography image © Judith Tokley
Text design & typesetting by Mike Kuszla
Edited by Greg Hill

Printed by Tingleman Printers

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ISBN 9781922484031



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

Cataloguing in Publication information for this title is available from the National Library of Australia.

www.nla.gov.au

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*My sincere thanks to the entire
Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn team.*

SAMPLE

ACRONYMS

The acronyms most commonly used in this book are:

(ACBC)	Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
(ACCCR)	Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform
(CC/CCCG)	Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn
(CRA)	Catholic Religious Australia
(GRPT)	Governance Review Project Team
(IAG)	Implementation Advisory Group
(PC)	Plenary Council 2020 or Plenary Council
(RC)	Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse or Royal Commission

FOREWORD

I am extremely grateful to everyone who published my writing over the past four years and who have now given me permission to republish it in this collection. These people include Neve Mahoney on behalf of *Eureka Street*, John Menadue on behalf of *Pearls & Irritations*, Peter Maher on behalf of *The Swag*, Andrew Thorpe on behalf of *The Canberra Times*, and Peter Johnstone, Anthony Mahar, Gabrielle McMullen and Mark Metherell. The Appendices are published with the permission of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, and Fr Stephen Hackett on behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

Sincere thanks to John Bouffler, Terry Fewtrell, Patrice Scales and Joan Warhurst who kindly read some of my new writing. Thanks also to David Hughan and Karen Tayleur of Garratt Publishing and to Greg Hill, my editor, for their enthusiastic support and for greatly improving this manuscript.

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INTRODUCTION

CONCERNED CATHOLICS SPEAK OUT AND LEAN IN

This book is about an individual lay Catholic's involvement in the affairs of his Church in Australia during a most tumultuous time (2017–2020) that fell between the end of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2012–2016, and the Plenary Council, 2018–2021.

It is titled *Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy* because it is a personal account of attempting to come to grips with the power structure of the Church at a time of necessary reform of those structures. The wrestling refers to both trying to understand the implications of those power structures, and to engaging with them in various ways. The engagement includes all manner of activities directed towards reform, including public education, submissions, advocacy, lobbying and opening up the whole reform process through journalism in Church and mainstream media.

Much of the book includes unaltered articles of mine published over this period, supplemented by hitherto unpublished speeches and new material specially written for the occasion of this manuscript.

I have written it at this time not just to document this tumultuous period from the perspective of an insider/outsider to Church affairs, but to continue the struggle for reform in the year of the first Plenary Council assembly in October 2021. The Church hierarchy continues to hold the whip-hand and the voices of lay Catholics continue

to struggle to be heard. At the Plenary Council assembly itself lay delegates, of which I will be one, make up a distinct minority.

This introductory chapter is appropriately titled 'Concerned Catholics Speak Out and Lean In' because it tells the story not just of the contribution of an individual Catholic, but of the reform group that made it possible – Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn – formed in March 2017. This group is a ginger group, a term frequently found within these pages, meaning a group within an organisation, which is dedicated to stirring it up and raising issues from within. Its efforts have included speaking out wherever possible in support of Church reform and taking whatever opportunities presented themselves to engage with the hierarchy and with the official Plenary Council processes.

Where it started (Tuesday Feb 7 2017, Canberra)

The monthly meeting of the Jesuit Discussion Group (JDG) in Canberra met at Xavier House as usual on the first Tuesday evening in February 2017. The discussion turned to what we could do, ahead of the May plenary meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) in Sydney, to influence our Church leaders to release the report of its own Truth, Justice and Healing Council, and to respond appropriately to the report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RC) when it was released. That report was eventually released in December 2017, but its outlines were already clear. We were frustrated and angry at Church complacency and decided the time for discussion was over and the time for action had arrived.

Time was short. After false starts and dinner discussions we had decided by the following month to form a lay group named Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn (CCCG) and to hold a public forum to air our concerns about the parlous state of our Church and to gauge support in the Catholic community. I agreed

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to chair the meeting. In short order we booked a neutral venue – the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACCC) – to encourage participation by alienated Catholics, and arranged for three speakers. These speakers were Marilyn Hatton, a leading member of the Church renewal movement; Kristina Kenneally, former NSW Premier and a committed Catholic reformer; and Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council. Hatton and Sullivan were members of our group.

We announced ourselves as a group of faithful Catholics ‘concerned about a number of governance, cultural and structural issues’ arising from the Royal Commission. We sought ‘an effective voice for lay people in the administration and direction of our church’. We envisioned ourselves as both a ginger group within the Church and a lobby in the public sphere, positioning ourselves between the RC and the forthcoming Plenary Council.

The public meeting on April 27 was a huge success, exceeding our nervous expectations. Singing the popular Catholic hymn ‘People of God’ together settled our nerves and confirmed our Catholic identity. It has since become our anthem. More than 200 crowded into the ACCC chapel that evening and extensive publicity within the Church and the general community followed. While we thought that we would have to cover the costs ourselves, generous donations on the night made that unnecessary. Catholics showed that they were concerned about the crimes being committed in their name and wanted to rectify it.

The outcomes were put to the ACBC, both through our archbishop, Christopher Prowse (who was told of our plans and was present as an invitee) and directly through the secretariat. Since then, Concerned Catholics has built on this initial success, following this path initially within our archdiocese, but increasingly at the national level. Our website has documented our activities and become a resource for all Catholics concerned about renewing their Church.

The wider reception was not entirely warm though. Some in Church circles told us we were unrepresentative. Too old. Too Anglo-Celtic. Where were the young people? Where were the new ethnic communities? These criticisms are not without merit but do not undercut our concerns.

The archbishop has always stressed that we are just one voice. Relations with him have continued to be cordial but have so far generated little practical local action.

Harsher critics called us modernists who must be rejected. But we have experienced little active disruption, the exception being one evening in the Commercial Club in Wagga Wagga when the microphone was taken away by agitators manipulated by priests from the local seminary.

Then there are those on the other side who are critical of us for staying within the Church. Some, by implication, incline to the view that by doing so we are excusing its crimes and reinforcing its authority. For them exit is the only option.

My contribution

Because I am a writer and academic with a long-term research, teaching and publication interest in my Church, I have been able to bring my own voice to Church debates about the future direction of the Catholic Church. My first article in this pursuit appeared within a month, laying down my beliefs. Catholic Citizens Needed Within the Church was published by *Eureka Street* magazine on 23 May 2017.

I consider myself an ordinary Catholic with several advantages which help me to say what needs to be said. My experience includes periods both as a Church insider, though never an employee, and as an outsider.

I bring my skills as a political scientist with almost fifty years experience, and my commitment to democratic values and modern

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civic virtues like inclusiveness, representation and transparency. Equality for women is non-negotiable.

I have considerable experience in public life, in roles such as chair for three years of the Australian Republican Movement, and in the media, including almost 25 years writing weekly for *The Canberra Times*. My experience as a republican advocate taught me valuable lessons. These lessons grew out of the spirited debates, holding disparate members together in one organisation, extreme conservative push-backs and insults, the need to be resilient, looking to the long-term, and ultimately failure, which is a great teacher.

I have held governance roles in the Church for much of my adult life. By 2017, often nominated by bishops, I had served the Church for almost 25 years on various national councils and boards, including the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC), Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA), Marist 180, and Caritas Australia (CA). I had addressed the ACBC, attended a Synod, invited by Archbishop Francis Carroll, and been a member of a Diocesan Pastoral Council, invited by Archbishop Mark Coleridge. I was also a close observer when my wife Joan was the first female CEO of the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) in Canberra.

Earlier key moments

During and prior to the abovementioned experiences, like most lay Catholics I was quite passive, absorbed in family and career, doing my best within established Church structures rather than questioning them. There were awkward moments when I came up against Church hierarchy and power, but generally I shrugged them off.

Returning from a stint as a Jesuit novice in Melbourne to an Arts degree in my native Adelaide at Flinders University, I became President of the university Catholic group, the Aquinas Society, in 1968. There I witnessed the pain and confusion of adult lay Catholics over the papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which outlawed birth control.

During an early academic job in Warrnambool, Victoria, Joan and I sat stunned in Mass during the sermon one Sunday as the parish priest lashed the feminist Women's Electoral Lobby, of which she was an active member, because of its commitment to family planning. That was probably the closest we came to giving the Church away.

Moving to Armidale, my role in lay social justice groups led to my being asked to accompany two women friends to engage the new Bishop, Kevin Manning, over his refusal to allow women to participate in the washing of the feet ceremony on Holy Thursday. Another woman friend was hurt because, as a divorcee, she was denied Communion. Earlier, I had sat beside Bishop Harry Kennedy during diocesan consultations over the Church's enquiry into Wealth Distribution.

National Church bodies

Archbishop Manning recommended my appointment to the ACSJC, thus beginning a long period of rewarding Church service at the national level. There were some tumultuous times, including one occasion when I requested an interview with the then President of the ACBC, Archbishop Carroll, to protest at the peremptory treatment by the chair, Bishop William Brennan, of the female CEO, Sandie Cornish. Archbishop Carroll was welcoming, but I know now what a fruitless gesture I was making. I remember him quietly saying something like: 'Well, that's Bill for you' and that was that. During this period I first met and admired Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba, later unfairly forced out by the Vatican.

Education being the jewel in the Catholic crown, the NCEC was high-level business. I observed closely the role of the Church in mainstream politics, witnessing the internal church politics too. The federal government took the Church very seriously. Privileged

INTRODUCTION

to accompany Joan to NCEC events, I learned from the wily chair, Monsignor Tom Doyle, not to treat the Church hierarchy too deferentially, while also meeting for the first time the chair of the Bishops Committee for Education, Cardinal George Pell, and NCEC member, Bishop Coleridge.

In hindsight, one turning point came when I accompanied Joan to a Summer School in Theology at the American College of the Catholic University of Leuven in 2008. I remember returning invigorated by the curriculum and the whole experience, determined to raise my voice within the Church if the occasion arose. Twelve months later I was again privileged, as board deputy chair, when CSSA undertook a leadership study tour of Rome and parts of Europe, based this time at the Irish College in Leuven.

CSSA also gave me insights into Church politics and into the Church as a lobbyist. Once again, I saw how bishops like Pat Power and several priest-chairs, including Fr Joe Caddy from Melbourne, garnered support from more powerful Church leaders and acted as a bridge to political leaders in fulfilling the Church's social mission. I also met many feisty lay and religious leaders. My links with CSSA continued in various roles until 2020.

Membership of Caritas Australia's national committee (NC) from 2015-2020 was a new and rewarding experience in the international aid and development field. As chair of the nominations committee it also was a learning experience in trying to understand the dynamics of the higher levels of Church hierarchy. The 'board', chaired first by Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ and later by Bishop Christopher Saunders, engaged with the ACBC over several controversial matters to do with its finances, structure, transparency and mission. Eventually that experience was a shattering one, leading to frustration and despair, culminating in the sacking of the whole NC by the bishops.

The Jesuit Discussion Group

Joan and I joined the JDG group in 2013. About 20 Catholics, with Fr Frank Brennan SJ as host, met monthly in a convivial and spiritual environment to discuss a heady mix of theology, spiritual journeys, current affairs and Church politics. It was our first such experience, mixing with friends who shared not just a faith but various progressive perspectives on the Church. We regularly felt overwhelmed by both the theological insights and the contacts in high places within the Church which were revealed by some of the members.

It is invidious to mention individuals by name because I learned from each of them. Some, like Marilyn Hatton and Paul Collins, were long-time members of the Church renewal movement within Australia and across the world. They reported on their engagements with Church leaders and we shared their frustrations. Others, like Francis Sullivan and Judy Tokley, brought with them their personal and professional understandings of the Church's place in the ongoing Royal Commission. Media professionals, like Paul Bongiorno and Mark Metherell, shared political insights. All friends injected their parish, school, public service and Church agency experience into the mix. The names of theologians and archbishops flew around the room and often over our heads.

Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn

A core of the JDG formed the CCCG committee, together with some new faces. It was all a voluntary effort. Our central focus was on hosting public forums with a church renewal emphasis, providing a regular venue for leading progressive Church figures, including CRA leader Sister Ruth Durick, Susan Pascoe, Virginia Bourke, Bishop Vincent Long, Royal Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald, Frank Brennan, Beth Doherty and many others, including our own committee members, Terry Fewtrell and Andrew Phelan.

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Jack de Groot, chair of the Implementation Advisory Group set up by ACBC and CRA, invited me in late 2018 to join its Governance Review Project Team. After fifteen months intense collaboration this committee presented its report, *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-responsibility in the Catholic Church in Australia (LSC)*, to the ACBC and Catholic Religious Australia in May 2020. This report takes up in a measured way many of the themes of the Church renewal movement.

CCCG engaged fully with the PC and I also joined an archdiocesan working group to advise the archbishop. In November 2018 our own public consultation, led by Terry Fewtrell, Di Van Meegan and Sister Clare Condon, produced a substantial submission. We later held several public Zoom conferences to discuss the six Writing and Discernment reports and the possibilities for implementing the LSC in dioceses.

Communicating with a wider audience has always been an important goal. Within the Church we needed to break out of any reliance on an often-conservative Catholic media. Few Catholics read it anyway. Our media releases have led to valuable stories in the mainstream media and over time our voice has become recognised and sought after as an alternative and reliable Catholic voice on church matters.

CCCG was a newcomer to the Church renewal movement, though several of its members had served within it for many years. From March 2018, when we hosted a meeting of the national network, the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) in Canberra, we added our energy to the national renewal movement.

We also used our experience to support colleagues around Australia seeking to create new groups in other dioceses, including Concerned Catholics Wagga Wagga, Concerned Catholics Tasmania and Concerned Catholics Wollongong. The movement, represented

by ACCCR, has grown considerably over the past four years and now numbers about 20 groups.

During this time two interdenominational experiences were formative. One was taking up the presidency of Christians for an Ethical Society in late 2017. The other was my role as auditor with CSSA chair, Maria Harries, for the Health and Integrity in Church and Ministry conference in Melbourne from 27-29 August 2018, hosted by the University of Divinity.

The Plenary Council

The RC and the PC were our bookends. From the very first CCCG looked forward to engaging in the Plenary Council. We met early, before the end of our first year, with Lana Turvey-Collins, leader of the PC Facilitation team, and followed up with an early submission even before they were officially called for. Later, once the formal process was established, we organised a consultation in November 2018 to produce a much larger submission by February 2019. Eventually several of us put our names forward to become a lay delegate for our archdiocese and I was fortunate to be chosen.

We did so with our eyes open and were always realists. Walking away was often an appealing option when it became clear that many in authority were apathetic or openly opposed to our ideas, and that the lay voices at the PC were going to be a small minority. But we have persevered and given the official consultation process a chance to succeed, while not neglecting other avenues towards reform such as direct action with bishops and public lobbying. We have been persistent critics of the weaknesses inherent in the PC processes and till the very end have called for improvements. The initial 12-month delay because of the pandemic was a huge test, and the later switch to a multi-modal format rather than coming together in Adelaide may prove to be equally trying.

From extreme loyalty to exit?

My contributions in this book all assume that someone is listening, and that change is possible within the Church if convincing arguments are made for it. It assumes that the Church can reform itself from within, but that it will require a huge push from the outside by the laity to achieve it. There are a few allies among bishops, but not nearly enough.

The Catholic community is extraordinarily diverse and fragmented. This diversity is encouraged by its diocesan structure. The Church is strong in education, health, social services and aged care and possesses its own two universities and a tertiary college. This means that Church employment is huge. Such employees play a prominent role in internal Church affairs but are often constrained from being critical by institutional loyalties. Ninety per cent of Catholics do not attend church regularly. Therefore those who do are vastly outnumbered by cultural Catholics whose contact with the Church is intermittent at best.

Among Catholics there are many different perspectives on Church renewal. Some are resolutely committed to the traditional status quo. Among these are extreme conservatives. Some others are imbued by a passive attitude towards the clergy and hold the belief that the laity, especially women, are naturally second-class citizens. They cannot envisage another way. Some are comfortable with the status quo, at least in their local parish, sustained by friendships and liturgies and see no need for a bigger picture. Others are inclined towards renewal but exhausted by their past efforts to have the Church embrace Vatican II. They wish us reformers well but are not inclined to be active, or think they are too old, even though they are disillusioned. A huge number, including most younger people, just left and made their lives outside the Church. Of these some are angry at outdated structures or disappointed by conservative Church teachings. Most, including many young people, have just found the

official Church irredeemably out of touch with the modern world as demonstrated by the RC findings. They make up the vast tribe of cultural Catholics.

This leaves those who remain faithful, but are determined to fight for change, like the renewal movement in general and Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn in particular. It is an uncomfortable situation even when surrounded by some like-minded people, lay, religious or clerical. The task is enormous. The chances of wholesale success are slim, especially given the weight of the international structure of the Church, but we believe in giving it a go.

My articles and talks have arisen against the backdrop of either general Church-state relations, such as freedom of religion, same sex marriage or the trial of Cardinal Pell and/or RC and PC developments. Each year since 2017 has been punctuated by Church actions in response to one or other of these. As I write this introduction in December 2020 the Church's response to child sexual abuse remains controversial, many bishops remain intransigent and we are approaching the final stages of preparations for the first PC assembly in October 2021. On all these matters concerned Catholics continue to speak up and engage with their leaders. It is our right and duty to do so.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

I am conscious that Church renewal can only be understood and achieved in the context of the sociology, government, and politics of the Church in Australia.

The Church in Australia is facing an existential crisis, meaning that business as usual is nowhere near good enough. Archbishop Coleridge, ACBC President, has openly recognised this situation, producing the unstable environment within which the renewal movement exists and operates.

The clearest measure of this is numerical decline, whether measured by overall numbers or by church attendance. The numbers have fallen off a cliff and the situation will get worse as they are being inflated now by the older generation, which is passing. Religious and priestly vocations are also below replacement levels. Orders and congregations of nuns, brothers and priests are dying out and foreign priests are taking up the slack.

That does not mean all is 'doom and gloom'. Catholic services are thriving, and new immigrant communities are invigorating some parts of the Church. But parish amalgamations in response to decline are now common.

Patchwork Quilt Church Inhibits National Action

The politics includes the structure of the hierarchical Church and the politics within it. This has been one of my long-term interests. Power in the Church lies with diocesan bishops rather than in any sense with the ACBC at the national level. It is a fragmented, patchwork church, a theme I explored in *Eureka Street* magazine on November 5 2020 in 'Patchwork quilt church inhibits national action'. As a consequence reformers should concentrate their efforts at the parish and diocesan level.

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There is a good reason why the term Australian Catholic Church is frowned upon in official circles. It does not exist. Instead it is a patchwork quilt of fiefdoms called dioceses. It lacks an energising central authority which, when it needs to, can generate and shape a national Church response.

The kindest thing we can say about the Catholic Church in Australia in this regard is that we celebrate diocesan and other differences. The quilt shines forth in different colors and patterns. That has benefits, but it also has limitations. It can reduce the Catholic experience in Australia to a lucky dip.

During the pandemic, Australians have learned a lot about federalism, including the strength of state borders and the limitations of central authority. The national cabinet has worked to respect the independence of the eight state and territory jurisdictions while maintaining some semblance of national cohesion.

Similarly, Australian Catholics are learning a lot about the territorial divisions within our Church as it attempts to pull together in the lead up to our greatest contemporary challenge, the national Plenary Council. If Scott Morrison finds national leadership difficult

then so must Mark Coleridge, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops conference (ACBC), and Tim Costelloe, chair of the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council. They wouldn't even identify with the term national leader.

There are 28 territorial dioceses in Australia, plus the Eastern Rite churches. Imagine if the Australian federal system was dismantled and replaced by that many states and territories. How well would we have dealt with the pandemic and how would we have managed borders? That is the situation we are dealing with within the Church.

We have national Church institutions, such as the ACBC, and in this instance a Bishops Commission and a Facilitation Team for the Plenary Council (PC), but they must direct by persuasion and education.

The case of the PC observing progress towards the goal is a bit like watching the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. The boats are of different sizes and capabilities. Skippers vary in ability. Some seem to be becalmed while others have the wind in their sails. The diocesan fleet is zig-zagging down the coast and spread out over hundreds of kilometres.

Work continues within the central apparatus, including the drafting of the *instrumentum laboris* by a small team, but much of the action and/or inaction is happening within the dioceses. Since selecting their diocesan delegates last year they have moved at varying speeds. The pandemic has been a big problem but not the only problem.

Sunday October 4, 2020 at which time the PC assembly was meant to have started before it was postponed by 12 months, was suggested as the date for the commissioning of delegates in each diocese. While some commissioning ceremonies have occurred, including in Perth, Darwin, Maitland-Newcastle and Armidale, many did not, however, and the chance of some Australia-wide symbolic impetus was lost.

A few dioceses, including Adelaide, have scheduled other events to stimulate interest. Maitland-Newcastle stands out as a diocese which has already called a diocesan synod, 2019-2021, as part of local PC discussions and wider reflection on the state of the Church.

The renewal movement network, led by the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR), continues to call for further transparency and inclusiveness in preparations for the Plenary Council, including a woman co-chair or deputy chair and gender balance and transparency in the preparation of the working document. These are decisions which could be taken collectively by the bishops at their next plenary meeting from 23-27 November.

But there is so much that diocesan bishops can undertake individually. ACCCR has been calling for many months for the urgent establishment by each bishop of diocesan pastoral councils and diocesan synods or both as essential components of diocesan discernment about the PC.

These calls are going largely unheeded. Time is running out.

Some bishops say that they are waiting till after the PC to move in this direction, effectively to see how the wind blows. Like the better Sydney to Hobart skippers they should actively seek out the wind by taking the steps at their disposal rather than sitting back. If they do not the PC fleet risks being becalmed.

Factions and Ginger Groups Within the Church

There are also deep philosophical divisions and factions both within the Church as a whole and among the bishops, themes I took up in *Eureka Street* magazine in both 'Factions and Ginger Groups within

the church' on September 10 2020 and 'Let's talk about the Catholic bishops' on July 17 2018. The renewal movement is often unfairly demonised by bishops while conservative factions are allowed free rein. Both these articles are a call for realism and truthfulness in discussing Church affairs.

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Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, in the middle of his troubles within the Liberal Party, told the NSW State conference of his party that there were no factions among the Liberals.

Knowing full well of the conservative-moderate split within the party and of the fractious relationship within the party between Turnbull and Tony Abbott, the Liberal Party delegates fell about laughing. The laughter was derisory. Facts can't be papered over by sweet talk.

The same is true of the Church in Australia today. This fact must be spoken about openly in the lead up to the Plenary Council assemblies. What is happening at the moment is that certain bishops are condemning members of the Church renewal movement as pressure groups pushing an agenda, while turning a blind eye to the well-known fact that groups with other agendas are widespread within the Church. Condemnation of the renewal movement is a clear attempt to shut down legitimate engagement and debate from some quarters while allowing jockeying, factional politics and agenda-pushing by other conservative groups, including certain bishops, certain Catholic media and other groups embedded in the hierarchical structure of the Church.

My impression is that bishops prefer to deal with individuals. Catholics who organise themselves independently of official Church structures to advance Church renewal are frequently treated with suspicion by the hierarchy.

Trying to shut down the renewal movement is not the work of the Holy Spirit. If it continues it will make for a very lop-sided Plenary

Council. No amount of prayer and discernment will overcome a stacked assembly.

The renewal movement is large and growing numerically and in regional diversity. It has engaged with the Plenary Council through submissions and public discussions from the very beginning. It has also tried, collectively and individually, to engage with bishops and other Church leaders.

Sometimes that engagement has been reciprocated. For instance, in September 2018, after the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) sought a meeting with the Permanent Committee of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, it was granted one by the President of the ACBC, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, accompanied by Lana Turvey-Collins of the PC2020 Facilitation Team. Of the four member ACCCR delegation, the three interstate members flew to Melbourne at their own expense for what turned out to be a prayerful and serious interchange. ACCCR did not get what it wanted, including a woman co-chair of the Plenary Council, but it did get a lengthy hearing.

Presently the renewal movement is attempting, with some difficulty, to engage with the President of the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council, Archbishop Timothy Costelloe. This difficulty reflects the experience that renewal groups often have in attempting to engage with diocesan bishops, including several of the metropolitan archbishops. The correspondence is often fobbed off, sometimes courteously and professionally but sometimes brusquely, as if the groups had no right to exist, much less see their archbishop.

Such rejection is not universal and my own group, Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn in the Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn, has always been granted regular access to its archbishop, vicar-general and other senior Church officials. But the record in

many other dioceses is different. The implicit or even explicit message is to conform or be frozen out.

The Church in Australia is fragmented in various ways, often reflecting international fragmentation. The same is true of its leadership. Networking and pressure group tactics are rife. The range of views within the Church is as broad as that within the political system and Australian society at large.

This means that views range from the Church equivalent of News Corporation to the Church equivalent of *The Guardian*, but with more of the former than the latter.

Whenever a randomly selected group of Catholics gathers there will be diversity of experience and belief so great that the gulf between individuals is massive.

When the selection is not random but selective, as in the case of the PC2020, then, while the gulf will remain, the imbalance towards conservatism will be embedded and the *sensus fidelium* as revealed in the submissions to the PC will not be adequately represented.

What is to be done? For a start we must be honest about the problem. Factions, ginger groups, networking and lobbying are commonplace in the Church among bishops, clergy and religious leaders and are certainly not restricted to the laity, including the renewal movement. There is a battle for control of the agenda under way and no amount of papering over can conceal it.

Catholics at an individual level must strive to voice disagreement while treating each other respectfully and with an equal right to be heard, whatever their official status. Collectively events like the Plenary Council assemblies must be structured to make this more likely by eliminating hierarchy and encouraging diversity.