

## **Catholic bishops' agenda 'insipid, timid'**

**15 August 2021**

The Catholic Church in Australia is in steep decline yet the most important summit of the church for many decades is set to avoid the pressing need for significant reforms.

This is the view of the local church ginger group, Concerned Catholics of Canberra Goulburn, which says that just two months out from the Church's Plenary Council there is scant evidence that the ruling bishops are proposing meaningful change.

For the past four years, Concerned Catholics has been urging bishops to consider a substantial agenda for systemic reforms to make the church more transparent and accountable and to do away with its male-dominated clericalist culture.

The Chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, Emeritus Professor John Warhurst AO, said many thinking Catholics around Australia were despairing at the bishops' refusal to acknowledge the serious issues which the community asked to be addressed.

'Despite the potent recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse and the drift of the church towards irrelevance, the bishops' proposed agenda for the historic Plenary Council Assembly lacks substance and concrete proposals,' Professor Warhurst said.

'In a comprehensive paper put to the bishops in 2017, Concerned Catholics proposed five key aspirations for the church: transparency, accountability, a non-clericalist church which is a properly inclusive church and truly humble.

'But as a new analysis of the Plenary agenda states, "It is as if the agenda was devised as a way of avoiding those issues".

The analysis by Canberra author and organisational consultant, Terry Fewtrell, finds that the proposed agenda for the plenary "is an insipid, timid document that fails to point to the real issues or facilitate meaningful outcomes".

'Frankly, the agenda for the Plenary Council is an embarrassment with which no professional Australian organisation would want to be associated. To propose such an agenda after a protracted consultation process is a disgrace professionally and an insult to the many ordinary Catholics who participated in the Plenary Council process in good faith,' Mr Fewtrell said.

'This agenda tells us that the Australian bishops are lost. They either don't want to face up to the real issues or they don't know how to do it. Also, the process used is hardly consistent with the synodality that Pope Francis advocates,' he said.

'The Plenary Council opens in early October and Pope Francis needs advocates in the room. A stand needs to be made therefore at the opening stage of the formal sessions, to deliver a clear message from ordinary Catholics that the process to date, and based on the agenda, has been deficient and unworthy of a church that is meeting in the name of Jesus Christ.

'A second part to the message should convey clearly that reform advocates earnestly want to participate in a process that has integrity and is conducted in the true spirit of the synodality of Pope Francis,' Mr Fewtrell said.

Professor Warhurst said that the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR), of which Concerned Catholics is a member, had also expressed deep disappointment at the agenda's failure to reflect the views expressed by many Catholics during the national consultation and "discernment".

The agenda "does not even reflect the prospects for change implied in the *Instrumentum Laboris* that we were told would shape the agenda and offers limited scope for necessary and wide-ranging reform and renewal", ACCCR stated.

ACCCR will host its second Zoom convocation on The Future of Catholicism in Australia on 26 August at 7.30 pm.