



# arcvoice

A Report from Australian Reforming Catholics Inc.

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## Looking backwards to the future

If you want to find out the priorities for consideration by our bishops at the forthcoming Plenary Council, then the just released *Instrumentum Laboris* will not enlighten you. This document entitled 'Continuing the Journey' is to be the basis for the agenda. It touches on almost everything that was addressed in the thousands of submissions made already and it feeds it all back to you without any particular emphasis. However, the role of women is hardly mentioned, nor is the lack of hierarchical leadership that led to the current crisis.

You could say that we should be glad that so much is covered in it but, given that it will not be possible for large sections of it to be treated in any detail at the Plenary Council, an indication of what is seen as most pressing would be heartening. For example, there is no mention of the need for a plan to deal with the ever-dwindling practice of the faith through regular Mass attendance or to deal with the critical shortage of priests that is becoming worse as so many are close to retirement. There does not appear to be a sense of urgency about anything.

Of perhaps greater concern is the tone in which some issues are outlined. The constant reference to secularism as a major evil to be opposed is an indication of a mindset out of touch with Pope Francis. Since 2016, Pope Francis has shifted the focus away from open confrontation with secularism, towards a more pastoral and social action-oriented approach. However, in this document, with no recognition of any internal causes, secularism is blamed for Catholics not accepting Church teaching, along with the mass media shaping a 'popular culture' (para 47). This viewpoint is backed up by only referring to the submissions which 'expressed concern that Church teachings and traditions are at risk of being undermined by calls for reform proposed by some and threats from the increasingly secular political and cultural life in Australia'.

The comments on the need for engagement with young people are quite mystifying. The document lumps together secularisation (again) with emerging technologies and a 'digital culture' (whatever that means) as if they are evils that the young have to deal with. It speaks of the problem of 'assimilation' for migrant youth when multiculturalism has been enlightened social philosophy and government policy for over forty years.

Reflecting on the fact that so many Catholics find it difficult to follow parts of Church teaching, particularly as it relates to family and relationships, the implied solution is 'more spiritual direction and formation in prayer' so that we can 'live as Christ's disciples'. It suggests that this should be supported by a renewal in preaching! (Safety first—as no women are allowed to preach).

The bishops have reminded us in this document that they do not have the 'competence' to determine 'matters that touch on the universal doctrine and discipline of the Church' (para 110). Even so, does it seem that they are even likely to make any significant recommendations to Rome that is within their competence regarding these matters which could really lead us forward?

*John Buggy*

### IN THIS ISSUE

Editorial .. 1

Letters .. 2-3

John Buggy: ACCCR .. 4-5

ACCCR Supports Convocations of Laity .. 6

Alan Clague: *Diocesan Bishops should not be 'promoted' to larger Dioceses* .. 7

Michael Kelly: *Obituary for Bishop Geoff Robinson* .. 8-9

John Buggy: *Bishop Bede Heather RIP* .. 9

Robert Mickens: *Catholic women are still relegated to second class* .. 10-11

Brooke Robb: *Keeping the Faith* .. 12-13

Patricia Fresen: *An Ordained Woman Priest* .. 13

John Collins: *The Plenary Council* .. 14

Anthony Martin: *Unutilised/overlooked Resources* .. 15

Subscription Form, Secretariat, Have your Say,  
ARC website ... 16

## Letters to the Editor

As one of the 90% of non-church-goers, I am responding to your editorial. Our Bishop gave us a COVID19 Dispensation from Mass till the end of September (and there are still restrictions with bookings etc). Will I go back? No.

The main problem for me is language—in particular the translation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Latin Mass, especially the words ‘ad multos’ to mean ‘for many’. It does in Latin. In my youth in the 1950s ‘for many’ meant that we could proudly say we (RCs) were the only ones to have the right formula for getting to heaven—‘outside the Church (RC) there is no salvation’.

Then along came Vatican II with its emphasis on reconsidering the message of Jesus—Jesus died for all! Now with this ‘beautiful’ language in the Mass we find again that Jesus died for many (mainly RCs). At the last two Requiem Masses I attended, the priest invited only those in ‘good standing with the Church (RC), to come to communion’. Is that the teaching of Jesus?

Have our Church fathers considered what the Church’s language does to folk (younger than me) who use Texting, Twitter etc. etc. to communicate in what I consider is not basic English, and not properly spelt! Mass language is now a foreign tongue used only by the blokes dressed in drag—how can we take them seriously? If I need a Church ‘fix’ one minute of a ‘Mass for you at home’ is enough to send me to Netflix. If you want people like me to come back to Church, use simple local language that reflect the teachings of Jesus especially that, in his name, everyone is welcome.

**Margie White**  
**Yandina, Qld.**

Without doubt the December edition of *ARCVOICE* was a fitting finale to a tumultuous year inside and outside the Church. (It should be essential reading for all the Bishops.)

Once again the commentary by Margaret Knowlden was inspiring and evocative. If there ever was a call to action, then this is the time for URGENT and real reform!

Likewise the article by Chris Sodoti ‘Will I go back to Mass?’ certainly resonated for me. However, it is fairly certain there would be many others that would identify with this dilemma.

Whether they have the fortitude to admit to this is problematic? Maybe there are some similarities here with the excellent poem by Robert Frost: *The Road Not Taken* (see page 11).

**Drew Porter**  
**Wagga Wagga NSW**

As always *ARCVOICE* has brave and passionate views and feelings about the state of our beloved Church and the rich culture we have lived over many years.

Thanks to Chris Sidoti for naming an aspect of today’s Church that is a continuing conflict for me—the richness and value as a living and vibrant faith community has changed over the last 20 years, as Chris says: ‘the problem is that the experience of worshipping in community is so bad!’

We are victims of faint-hearted Bishops (maybe there are a couple who are endeavouring to be vibrant); most won’t listen to the people or enable them to take responsibility within the Church. They are invested in clericalism and have no motivation to welcome women into leadership within the Australian church. We are victims. Instead we have priests from many different countries coming into our Australian parishes where the foreign languages are a big barrier for us and, even worse still, their theology is what we had 50 years ago. There has been no thought or courtesy or eagerness from many of them to KNOW our Australian church that they have come to serve. They too are victims of our Bishops who don’t seem to have a passion for an authentic Australian church and their lack of leadership to keep the Church EVOLVING. Rome and the domination of clericalism and their fear of evolution is becoming very destructive. The whole of creation is in the motion of ‘evolving - keeping up with the times’ and being brave to talk about and change as new concepts evolve through contemplation, revelation and acting for the greater good is not alive. *Laudato Si* is a big question in point. Pope Francis’ contribution to the modern world is an incredible impetus to bring unity, spirituality and awareness to the absolute treasure of Creation and this magnificent Blue Planet that we ALL CREATURES AND CREATION belong to. We have responsibility as an intelligent species living on it to Care for the Earth and to Care for the Poor within it, noting daily all the destruction through climate-change and greed from despotic power people. How much of this revolutionary document is made alive in our Church communities each week?

We are ‘Resurrection people’. We have hope, faith, love and, even in this confusing time of COVID pandemic, we TRUST that all the sacrifices and goodwill of most of our leaders and general population will bring us through it. I pray the same for our neighbours all around the world. Bless us all.

**Leonie Martin RSM**  
**North Turrumurra NSW**

**A**RCVoice No 79 has many great articles, all very relevant to the crisis in our Church. I liked it all, especially your editorial and your acknowledgement of the wonderful late Susan Ryan.

John Buggy's Christmas Message was very good and thought-provoking, putting an adult perspective on these infancy narratives is such a change from concentrating on the appeal to children. It brings a deeper understanding of our Christian values.

Francis Sullivan and Gideon Goosen's perspectives on our low chances of reform were realistic but they did provide some hope for a possible different way of reform. For example, Francis' challenge to revise the plenary process prior to the actual Plenary Council; in Gideon's case, by appealing to the 40-45% of the 'non-practising' laity who might be open to education, thus empowering them to change. These disconnected Catholics have been ignored so far.

I was really impressed with Chris Sidoti's understanding about disenchanted Catholics who have not previously been able to make a decision to stop participating in the Mass. But now, because of COVID, they might not be able to find good reasons to return when the pandemic is over.

*Maureen Ryan  
Hazelbrook NSW*

**I** can remember when our third baby died during labour in the Catholic Hospital in Forbes, the local priest came to see me and tried to console me by saying: 'I suppose you think this baby won't be going to Heaven because it wasn't baptised, but you would have had it baptised if it had lived wouldn't you?'

I told him that of course we would have had our baby baptised, our older two children were baptised and anyway I didn't believe in a God who wouldn't let an innocent baby into Heaven if it wasn't baptised. I then copped a lecture on 'the baptism of desire' and was assured that our baby would certainly have gone straight to Heaven because we would have had it baptised if it had lived. (In fact, even though the baby was dead, the sister-in-charge had already baptised our baby as soon as it was born.)

Looking back on it all, knowing that this priest meant well, I now think how terribly patronising he was. It could have been so different. As it turned out we were not allowed to have a funeral in the Church 'because the baby wasn't baptised' and yet, by law, we had to have a burial because the baby was full term.

*Anna Flynn  
Milton NSW*

## Sowing the seeds of 'Catholic Guilt'

75-year-old Maurice recalls his First Confession

**T**he difficulty came with the first Confession itself. I had been taught and told exactly how to enter the Confessional, where to kneel and how to address the priest on the other side through the separating grill behind which he sat. But I was surprised when I discovered it was impossible to see his face and I could only hear his voice. Following my rehearsals, I started out: 'Bless me Father, for I have sinned and this is my first Confession.' This is how it went thereafter. 'Tell me boy, are there any mortal sins that you have committed, because as this is your first Confession, we won't worry about the venial sins, which I'm sure are very minor.' 'But Father, I don't think I have committed any mortal sins,' I replied. I knew them all and certainly hadn't killed anybody or anything like that. 'But do you know all your Commandments?' 'Yes I do, Father.' 'Then tell them to me,' and I recited them quickly. At which point he said 'Well have you had any arguments or rows with your parents?' 'Oh yes, but nothing serious,' I said. 'There's the mortal sin you have committed. Honour your father and your mother is what you are supposed to do and having rows is not the way to honour them. But, if you truly repent of your sin, I shall give you absolution. Do you truly repent?' 'Yes Father, I do repent.' 'In that case dear boy you must for your penance say just three *Hail Marys* here.' 'But Father,' I replied timorously, 'I only know one. Or two, if you count *Hail Holy Queen*.'

*Maurice Cronly  
UK*

# Towards a statement of beliefs for Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR)

As you know, ARC is one of 19 Church reform groups seeking to influence Church leaders and these groups are attempting to show their unity under the title of Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) since one of the groups is in New Zealand. I proposed some time ago that it would be good if we could illustrate more clearly the beliefs that we hold in common in response to our understanding of Vatican II and the spirit that has flowed from it especially as evidenced in the statements of Pope Francis.

I drew up an initial draft to enable discussion and, after some comments from ACCCR member representatives, the second version is set out below. We hope that a final version can be endorsed by everyone. In the meantime, I would like you to consider it carefully and send any comments or what you would like to see changed or added. Please send them directly to me:

John Buggy. [jbuggy@ozemail.com.au](mailto:jbuggy@ozemail.com.au)

## ACCCR and the beliefs that unite us:

It is often said that as member groups of ACCCR we should ‘speak truth to power’ as a united coalition, but to do this very effectively we need to be able to identify clearly the major beliefs that define our response to the reform begun by Vatican II.

Our common beliefs could be better expressed by a series of statements that reflect what we truly believe and are able to declare confidently, particularly when we ‘speak truth to power’.

As members of ACCCR we hold that the following is needed in order to bring about much needed Catholic Church reform:

1. A revised theology of Church as the People of God served by its pastoral leaders in accordance with the vision of the Second Vatican Council;
2. A revised theology of priestly ministry that recognises the equality of men and women and eschews all forms of clericalism;
3. A pastoral theology of revelation based on Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* with its emphasis on the ongoing nature of revelation in a changing world understood more and more by new scientific understandings;
4. A scholarly approach to the Sacred Scriptures in accordance with scriptural insights gained over the past century or more;
5. A renewed theology of the Trinitarian God as Mystery that emphasises the love and mercy of the divine and the equality of all in status and dignity;
6. A broader theology of evil and individual and social sinfulness that overcomes the limitations of the concept of original sin and incorporates insights from contemporary theological, scriptural, psychological and sociological understandings;
7. A contemporary pastoral theology of women and the feminine that highlights their equality and participation in human and ecclesial affairs;
8. A revised theology of sex and sexuality in moving beyond the one-sex and two-sex understandings of the historical past and views sexuality in terms of a loving and life-giving encounter of the other, incorporating the fact of different sexual orientations;
9. A revised theology of the universe and the environment given by God for our care and enjoyment in ensuring its sustainability.

As members of ACCCR we adhere to the following with relation to this much needed reform and would hope that it is or becomes reflected in Church teaching and/or practice:

## In relation to #1:

The Catholic Church was not founded by Jesus as a hierarchy. The people are the Church and its pastors are its servants (*Lumen Gentium, II*). Pope Francis constantly refers to an ‘upturned pyramid’ as an illustration for this. Vatican II requires its leaders to listen to the sense of faith of the faithful and to be accountable, transparent and inclusive in their decision-making.

As a consequence, any non-remunerative arrangements that are designed to enable participation by non-clerics in decision-making must be by right and also provide the actual opportunity for them to do so. Such decision-making or decision-influencing positions of non-clerics, including councils and synods, should be obtained through nomination/election by their peers.

## In relation to #2:

Bishops and priests are not changed ontologically through ordination. All the People of God have exactly the same human dignity and ability to respond to the Holy Spirit and should be respected in this way.

## In relation to #3:

Because revelation is ongoing, we believe that the Church must be open to the possible sources of that revelation. Through this, our understanding of the content of our faith progresses over time. All teaching of the faith should be predicated on the understanding that faith and reason are compatible. Doctrines are to enable understanding but they are not the faith and they develop over time along with new knowledge.

Church teaching does change over time and needs to do so because it is sometimes incorrect or ill-informed.

## In relation to #4:

Any understanding of the truth in sacred scripture must be interpreted by taking account of the literary forms in which it is written (*Dei Verbum III, 12*).

Scripture teaches religious truth rather than historical or literal truth.

## In relation to #5:

God is a mystery, the depth of which is unknown in this life. Fundamentalist and over-anthropomorphic depictions of God performing actions that defy the laws of nature are incompatible with reason.

## In relation to #6:

God is love and his mercy is infinite. In the dynamic, evolutionary perspective of Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes, 5*) creation becomes the continuous act of God’s love by which he draws it, and humankind as part of it, into eternal union with him. Apart from wilful rejection of his love, the notion that anyone is condemned for all eternity is quite inconsistent with this.

The whole understanding of inherited sin, personal sin, and societal sin (e.g., lack of care of the earth) needs to be totally re-examined.

## In relation to #7:

All human beings are equal in status and dignity. They all have the right to be free and self-actualise, to speak openly, to act according to their conscience, to marry, and form relationships in harmony with the needs and rights of others.

Given the equality of men and women, there is no cogent reason why any man or woman, single or married, per se cannot be ordained to the priesthood.

## In relation to #8:

All truly loving relationships are important. However, relationships and marriages do fail but people need relationships to sustain them throughout life. People should not be shut off from the sacramental life of the Church for any reason if they genuinely desire otherwise.

Homosexuality is not a state of being ‘objectively disordered’. People who do not identify as heterosexual must be respected and given the same human rights as those who do.

## In relation to #9:

Care for the earth, the environment and the sustainability of life within it is of utmost importance (constantly emphasised by Pope Francis). People have the right to limit the size of their families in this context. The Church’s official teaching on contraception is not valid because the faithful overall have not accepted it.

etc., etc, . . .

**John Buggy**  
**V.2, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

## ACCCR Supports Convocations of Laity

ACCCR (Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform) is supporting several convocations this year under the auspices of CCG (Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn), WATAC (Women and the Australian Church) and SACCEC (SA Catholics for an Evolving Church).

As a contribution to the success of the Plenary Council, the convocations will seek to achieve the following aims:

- To give a voice to Catholics, promote critical thinking and build personal confidence through sharing ideas and perspectives, particularly in the light of Vatican II and the leadership of Pope Francis;
- To promote a vision for the future of Catholicism, informed by the lives of ordinary people;
- To address the role of women in the Church and gender balance in decision making;
- To promote justice with special regard to the treatment of LGBTIQ people;
- To identify necessary areas of improvement in accountability, transparency and inclusiveness – particularly the role of the laity;
- To explore Church teachings that hinder participation by Catholics;
- To assist the bishops of Australia in understanding the priorities and concerns of the faithful.

### The Strategic aims are:

- ◆ Reach as wide an audience as possible with an imaginable and credible message;
- ◆ Initiate and support lay movements for renewal and reform;
- ◆ Get the attention of the bishops with a view to informing the proceedings of the Plenary Council;
- ◆ Reiterate the need for governance reform in the Australian Church.

It is planned to use Zoom or a similar platform connecting local face-to-face groups, and individuals logging in.

The planners are looking for visionary ideas, local and overseas, especially from Pope Francis, the German Synodal process and the Amazon Synod, on synodality, subsidiarity, inclusiveness, transparency and accountability. They aim to get the Church back on mission—show there is a way forward for the hierarchy and the people of God, focus on the Coalition's established priorities and show we are part of a universal movement.

Sister Joan Chittister is being invited as speaker for the first convocation set for **9.00 am on Sunday the 2nd of May 2021** (Australian Eastern Standard Time) to run for 1.5 hours. Breakout groups connecting individuals or for a group gathered at one location will be set up.

The dates for two further convocations have been set to aid promotion of a series rather than a one-off. These are: Thursday 26 August 2021 and Thursday 4 November 2021, both at 7.00pm (Melbourne/Canberra time).

# Diocesan Bishops should not be ‘promoted’ to larger Dioceses

Alan Clague

In the early Church, bishops were chosen locally from local clergy, and remained as pastor to their flock. Two well-known examples of this were St Augustine of Hippo and St Martin of Tours, both of whom were drafted against their wishes by their congregations. The transfer of bishops was explicitly forbidden by the Council of Nicaea in 325AD, and reiterated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD. This was changed in the second millennium, although not formally repealed. In 1198, Pope Innocent III claimed the right to translate and depose bishops. This weakened the bond between a bishop and his congregations, and began to establish a ‘career path’ for bishops within the Church to be ‘promoted’ to more prestigious appointments.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the problem of ‘social climbing and careerism’ was addressed by the dean of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Bernadin Gantin, following on from a comment by Cardinal Vincenzo Fagiolo: ‘The bishop is not a functionary, a temp, a transitional bureaucrat preparing for other more prestigious positions.’ Cardinal Gantin said ‘On his appointment, the bishop must be a father and a pastor for the people of God. ... Once a bishop is appointed to a particular See, he must generally and in principle stay there forever.’ In reference to cardinals, he also said that in Asia and Africa there are no so-called cardinalates, in

that the purple is conferred on the person, and that should be the case everywhere, even in the West. His comments were endorsed at the time by the then-Cardinal Ratzinger, saying: ‘To be a bishop should not be considered a career with a number of steps, moving from one seat to another, but a very humble service.’ However, it was questioned by other senior Vatican figures. Pope Francis has also condemned ‘careerism’ at all levels of the clergy on many occasions.

‘The Light from the Southern Cross’, the report commissioned by the Australian Catholic Bishops and Religious Superiors promoting co-responsible governance in the Catholic Church in Australia, makes no mention of the undesirability of diocesan Bishops shifting dioceses. It is clearly not proposed to discuss the issue in the forthcoming Plenary Council. It is more difficult to understand why it was not mentioned in the ‘Catholics for Renewal’ publication ‘Getting Back on Mission’. In the chapter ‘Bishops and the Episcopate’ it is recommended that ‘the Plenary Council encourage the co-responsible participation of Christ’s faithful in the selection process of their own bishop(s)’, but no comment about the undesirability of transfer of a diocesan bishop to a different diocese. Yet ‘careerism’ is fundamentally a facet of ‘clericalism’ which has been condemned by all. It is important to note that I have specified ‘diocesan bishops’ and would also include coadjutor bishops with right of succession, but not assistant bishops.

Transfer of diocesan bishops is an issue that has important implications for the softening of the pervading influence of clericalism within the Catholic Church, and should be taken up by church reform groups such as those associated in the ACCCR (Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform).

ALAN CLAGUE is a member of the ARC Secretariat

## All ARC members invited to ACCCR Zoom Meeting

The member representatives of the 19 Church reform groups that make up ACCCR are meeting via Zoom to discuss initiatives planned for 2021.

The meeting will be held at 7.00 pm on Tuesday the 30th of March and on this occasion any member belonging to any of these groups is invited to attend.

The ARC Secretariat strongly recommends that you attend this meeting if you can in order to be informed of the combined actions to pursue Church reform.

Along with other representatives, Maureen Ryan and John Buggy will be addressing some issues.

The invitation is extended to you as an observer as only member representatives are permitted to speak in order to manage the meeting in 90 minutes. Therefore you would need to keep your microphone muted.

If you wish to attend or need advice on how to set up Zoom, please contact John Buggy on 0419 217 543 or e-mail [jbuggy@ozemail.com.au](mailto:jbuggy@ozemail.com.au) so that we can connect you on the night.

# Vale Bishop Geoffrey Robinson

## Francis Sullivan

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson died on 29 December 2020 aged 83. In this subdued time of Christmas and New Year celebrations, the sombre news of his passing seems quite apposite. He was a talented, sensitive man who cherished his priestly vocation.

Despite his academic achievements and scholarly output, Geoffrey Robinson was humble, often understated and reluctant to occupy the limelight. As an internationally regarded canonist and trailblazer for the just treatment of victims of clerical sexual abuse, he regularly found himself at the frontier of church/state relations: a place populated by power brokers and vested interests. His quiet, polite demeanour and formidable intellect usually paved the way for a collegial approach to problem-solving. It was this strength of character along with a capacity to negotiate the multitude of stakeholders that comprise the Catholic Church, that led the bishops and religious leaders to turn to Robinson to lead a new approach in the handling of child sexual abuse.

Public revelations of the scandal were more commonplace by the 1980s and the bishops and religious leaders seemed clueless, even incompetent, in handling the moral and legal aspects of the abuse cases. Criminal accusations were dealt with behind closed doors, victims were disbelieved almost by default, allegations were fiercely defended and Church authorities instinctively took the side of perpetrators lest the image of the Church be put at risk. When settlements were made, they were usually paltry and the details were kept secret. In short, the Church authorities were driven by risk management, not moral leadership. The interests of the institution, both reputational and financial, were paramount and the aversion to involving the police was universal.

Robinson's appointment in the early 1990s to chair a committee to review and recommend on the handling of sex abuse matters was the turning point for the Church. It was a shrewd appointment. For too long the rubrics of canon law had been ignored by the bishops. So too their ethical obligations to victims. Robinson was exquisitely qualified to not only rectify but to reform the situation.

He spearheaded a far-reaching and effective change to the protocols for complaints handling and the violations of professional standards. This was all the more impressive for the fact that very entrenched and powerful interest groups wanted nothing to do with a more transparent and accountable approach. He was adamant that the needs of the victim, not the interests of the institution, should shape a pastoral as opposed to a legalistic protocol. He actively engaged with victims, something which up to that point was alien to Church policymaking.



He consulted widely with Church bodies, civil authorities and community stakeholders. This broke new ground for a Church more comfortable with its separatist stance. In 1997, the new national policy, *Towards Healing*, was adopted across the country by dioceses and religious orders. It was lauded for its capacity to craft restorative measures for victims according to their circumstances. It introduced the requirement that victims receive a formal apology and a reparation package. It encouraged the reporting of suspected perpetrators to the police. In

addition, it called for compliance with professional standards in Church workplaces and for safety guidelines and measures wherever children were involved with Church agencies.

The protocol was expanded to include any vulnerable person involved in Church activities. Robinson had effectively overseen a paradigm shift that placed the victim as the priority and insisted on a contemporary best practice approach to child safety. The fact that only the Archdiocese of Melbourne did not take up the protocol was a testament to his leadership and credibility. *Towards Healing* was a world first in the handling of sex abuse cases and was replicated in other Western countries.

Robinson was a serious man, introspective and considered. He gave the impression that the labours of life wore a heavy toll on his spirit. Yet his

experience with the sex abuse scandal changed him. In an odd way, it liberated him. He was a prophet. A reluctant and shy one at that, but never timid to speak his mind. He was every bit a bishop of the Second Vatican Council. The notion that somehow the Church should act as a bulwark against modernity was alien to his thinking and vocation. After his days in episcopal office, he used his expansive intellect and writing skills to explore avenues through which the Church could more effectively engage with modern Australian life. He was particularly perturbed by the growing disinterest of Catholics with their Church and the schism between its teachings on sexuality and the lived experience of ordinary Catholics.

He was convinced that the Church needed a Third Vatican Council. The abuse scandal had laid bare the corruption and complicity within the Church's culture. It had revealed the fragility of the institution's integrity. Moreover, the abuse revelations only further fuelled the growing discontent amongst Catholics as the Church struggled to keep pace with advances in the social and biological sciences. Unless an open and honest dialogue was undertaken, Robinson feared the relevancy of the Church in the West was at severe risk.

His writings ranged from the abuse of power and authority in the Church to matters of sexuality, gender and marriage. He strove to find a pathway for Catholics who felt at odds with their Church through no fault of their own. His instinct was pastoral and his imagination was creative and refreshing. He was not always popular with the reactionary elements within the Church, nor with bishops who bristled at his

suggestions for reform. His persistence was a testament to his deep commitment to the Gospel and to the naming of inconvenient truths. That he gave time to study, reflect, write, pray and publish speaks of a desire to make a difference and to effect change for those who were the subject of discriminatory and naïve attitudes. It seemed that his time with victims of sexual abuse awakened in him a sensitivity to the plight of anyone struggling to be heard and respected. He was one that did listen. And he has been respected widely for his openness and honesty.

In his final years, he was once again embroiled in the sex abuse scandal. This time as an expert witness for the Royal Commission. His expertise and experience were invaluable as the Commission came to terms with the history of the Church's response to the crisis. His testimony was frank and compelling. As it happens it now stands as his last commentary on what has been the most destructive influence on the credibility of the Church he so faithfully served.

His was a voice that echoed the spirit of the Gospel—a siren for truth and justice. His legacy will sit comfortably with the style of missionary Church Pope Francis proclaims. He was a loyal and obedient servant, a courageous and dedicated disciple.

FRANCIS JOHN SULLIVAN AO is a teacher, administrator and leader in health care organisations, who was CEO of the Catholic Church in Australia's Truth, Justice and Healing Council, in addition to being the previous Secretary-General of the Australian Medical Association. This article was published on *Pearls & Irritations* (5.1.21).

## Bishop Bede Heather

May he rest in peace



**I**t is with great sadness that we learned of the death of Bishop Bede, the first bishop of Parramatta. A truly humble, very approachable and gentle man who stood out because of his engaging personality.

He was able to overcome the clerical 'standoffishness' that characterised the relationship between professors and students when he taught scripture at the seminaries of Springwood and Manly. He carried that into his ministry as bishop.

He lived out his retirement in a small cabin within a caravan park and always welcomed a visit and a chat.

He was very interested in Church reform and was a member and strong supporter of ARC for many years.

*John Buggy*

# Catholic women are still relegated to second class

Robert Mickens

‘Holy Mother Church, ever deepening her contemplation and understanding of the mysteries of human salvation over the long course of history, has always taught in various, though sometimes veiled ways, that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Holy Mother of God, was the first human being, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to make her Son and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, really and truly present to those who would become His disciples, during His earthly life and throughout all ages until the end of time.’

One day, in maybe 50 or 100 years from now, those words, or others similar to them, but probably even lengthier, will be the preamble to the papal encyclical or conciliar document that will finally open the ordained priesthood to women.

Then there will be paragraphs about Mary of Magdala, who was the first to proclaim the real presence of the Risen Christ to the ‘other’ apostles...

Seriously. Women’s ordination is going to happen eventually, because the Church has not been able to come up with a single convincing argument to justify its continued perpetuation of institutional and institutionalized misogyny, except to say: ‘we’ve always done it this way’.

But when the Church finally rids itself of a sufficient number of clerics and clericalists who are defending the Church’s relegation of women to second-class citizenship, there will be a pope or ecumenical council—probably with a number of married bishops—who will have the courage and holy will to finally approve a female priesthood.

## Church teaching never changes

But they will never, ever admit that they are changing the Church’s perennial teaching. And they will never confess that the former teaching was wrong.

No. Like Pope Francis writes in his recent *‘motu proprio’* to juridically recognize what at least two or three generations of Catholics have witnessed for decades—namely, that women are readers at Mass

(lectors) and girls are altar servers (acolytes)—, the document allowing for women priests will talk about ‘the needs of the times’ and ‘doctrinal development’ and ‘a consolidated practice’...

Some will object and say this is impossible, even preposterous. They will point out, correctly, that John Paul II ‘closed the door’ on women’s ordination, as Francis has acknowledged on numerous occasions. But the clever Jesuit pope knows full well that closed doors can always be opened.

## Taking the door off the hinges

And with the new *‘motu proprio’* and the accompanying letter that he sent to Cardinal Luis Ladaria, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the pope has not just opened a door (in this case to formally institute women lectors and acolytes). He’s begun taking it off the hinges so it can never be closed again.

‘Offering lay persons of both sexes the possibility of accessing the ministries of the Acolyte and the Lector (*sic*), by virtue of their participation in the baptismal priesthood, will increase the recognition, also through a liturgical act (institution), of the valuable contribution that a great number of lay persons, including women, have offered to the life and mission of the Church for a very long time,’ the pope notes in his letter to the CDF prefect.

These lines come shortly after Francis trots out the classic two-tier system of Church ministry and uses some clever wordsmithing to justify why the top tier still excludes women:

A clearer distinction between the attributions of what are today called ‘non-ordained (or lay) ministries’ and ‘ordained ministries’ makes it possible to dissolve the reservation of the former to men alone.

If, with regard to ordained ministries, the Church ‘does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination’ (cf. Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, 22 May 1994), for non-ordained ministries it is possible, and today it seems opportune, to overcome this reservation.

This reservation made sense in a particular context, but it can be reconsidered in new contexts, always having as its criterion fidelity to Christ’s mandate and the desire to live and proclaim the Gospel transmitted by the Apostles and entrusted to the Church so that it may be listened to in a religious manner, kept in a holy manner and faithfully proclaimed.

The problem here is that Baptism is the prime sacrament and the only one necessary for one to be instituted in a particular ministry—whether that be conferred ‘through a liturgical act (institution)’ or ordination.

### ‘There is neither male nor female’

There is no theological rationale or divine command to allow women access to some ministries, but then deny them access to others. These are man-made dispositions, especially because Jesus never conferred a ‘priesthood’ as we know it today on anyone.

The only ‘criterion’ that allowed the Church to lift the ‘reservation’ to men alone in these other ministries, the pope says, was ‘fidelity to Christ’s mandate and the desire to live and proclaim the Gospel... so that it may be listened to in a religious manner, kept in a holy manner and faithfully proclaimed’.

Either men and women are equal through Baptism or they are not. St. Paul says, ‘there is neither male nor female’ (Gal 3, 28). Through this prime sacrament all are called to holiness.

The Church has developed the sacrament of Holy Orders, often in an exaggerated manner, which has led, in effect, to the construction of a two-class system of how one attains holiness, provides ministry or exercises ecclesial authority (oversight).

### Universal call to holiness vs. higher states of life

For many centuries, and even in our own day, the priesthood and religious consecration were considered ‘higher states of life’ compared to the ‘merely baptized’.

But the Second Vatican Council formally confirmed the ‘doctrinal development’ of what is called the ‘universal call to holiness’ based solely on being baptized in Christ.

Yet, the two classes distinction of Church ministry remains. And women remain the only baptized members who are excluded from the First-Class status of the ordained.

It seems kind of silly to make a big deal about the legal change that Pope Francis has decreed regarding formal recognition of women performing ministries that they have been doing for decades.

Subtle and slippery theologians will still be able to bend the theological pretzel in whichever way they like to support or refute what the pope has just done. It doesn’t matter.

The Catholic Church will eventually ordain women—to the diaconate and to the priesthood—because it is the right and holy thing to do. And also, because a Church that excludes from one-half or more of its members from fully responding to God’s call to ministry, is a crippled Church.

And in the ‘new contexts’ of our evolving and developing world, it is suicidal to even think it is possible to keep women in the second-class section of the People of God. The Church that does so in this day and age is doomed to become a sect.

But don’t despair. There is the Holy Spirit. And she won’t let that happen.

Published in *La Croix International* on 17 January 2021

## The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

# Keeping the Faith

Brooke Robb

**Hundreds of Catholic women are quietly leading their progressive parishes—despite denouncements from the Vatican**

On June 29, 2002, seven women and two bishops were aboard a boat on the Danube river near Passau, Germany, with a plan to alter the course of history. On a body of water in no official diocese, nor in front of a governing body that might invalidate them, Pia Brunner, Ida Raming, Iris Müller, Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, Adeline Theresia Roitinger, Gisela Forster, and a woman under the assumed name of ‘Angela White’ were ordained Roman Catholic priests by Bishops Ferdinand Regelsberger and Rómulo Antonio Braschi. This was a radical act.

These seven women are believed to be some of the first to be given the right to oversee a parish since Ludmila Javorová was ordained in the 1970s in Czechoslovakia as part of the underground Catholic churches that sprung up under Communist control. All of the women on that boat had been baptized, gone through similar theological training as their male counterparts, and spent the requisite years getting their master’s degrees in divinity; some had served as nuns, and some as Catholic school teachers for several decades.

Still, the church forbids the ordination of women to the priesthood, and so the ‘Danube Seven’, as they’re now known, were all excommunicated after they refused to nullify their ordination by July 22, the day of the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.

For the uninitiated, excommunication goes something like this: The Danube Seven, and other women ordained after them, received word from the Vatican stating that they had violated canon law (the set of principles enforced by the hierarchical authorities of the Catholic church) and so were forbidden from administering sacraments. Some who lived in a convent or were teaching in a parish school were kicked out or fired immediately, in some instances without severance. The social fallout was harsh, too: A few were told by their priest superiors that their sin in being ordained was equal to a clergy member sexually abusing a child.

A ‘calling,’ or an inherent pull of the soul toward God and discipleship, plays a large role in the Roman Catholic faith—one that is not unique to men. Many of the women called to the clergy describe it as a spiritual awakening that they first began to sense as a small child, listening to homilies from the church pews. For others, it was the urgent and necessary desire to be a part of the Catholic communities who dedicate themselves to nursing the sick, giving back to the poor, teaching the young. This is a reason enough to remain within a religion whose operatives have banished them; in effect, they answer to a higher power. As Jennifer O’Malley, a woman priest from Long Beach, California, explains, ‘I have stayed because being Catholic is part of who I am. Leaving would be abandoning who I am, my call to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church, and my call to be a voice for gender justice in our world.’ Neither threats nor exile nor fear of unemployment stopped the Danube Seven or those who came after them from answering the call. They looked outside the strictures of the Roman Catholic Church and started their own independent Catholic churches and communities, beginning a movement for others like them who did not agree with the strict doctrines of the church, but who also were dedicated to its devotion to empathy, forgiveness, and divine love.

Today, there are approximately 145 women Catholic priests in the U.S. and about 204 worldwide, according to the Roman Catholic Womenpriests organization, ranging from as young as about 35 into their 70s and older. These women are supported by RCWP, which holds conferences and demonstrations, and helps them with the task of fundraising for their churches as well as the postgraduate education that potential candidates for the Womenpriests clergy must complete. Every woman priest candidate must do the same work and schooling as required by a male in the seminary. The Womenpriests are adamant that their movement is not about being ‘anti-men,’ but instead, building a community that values inclusion. As O’Malley notes: ‘Ordaining women means changing the structure of things so that the people in the pews can have a larger voice in the decision-making process—at our churches, everyone is welcome to the table regardless of gender or sexuality.’ Aside from their duty to God, what is most important to these women is dissolving those lines drawn in the sand by the Catholic hierarchy. ‘Gender being more important than one’s humanity in serving humanity is deeply troubling,’ says Nancy Corran, the former pastor at the Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community in San Diego. ‘The ‘girls keep

out' of the priesthood is a man-made construction; a reality ordered by men, not ordained by God.'

The Italian photographer Giulia Bianchi first attended a service led by Diane Dougherty in Atlanta in 2012. Having grown up Catholic, she found herself personally moved by the RCWP and its cause. For the better part of the ensuing six years, Bianchi has been traveling around the world photographing these women priests, spending time with them, and learning about their journeys into the priesthood. She's met women priests who are married to other women, women priests with children, women priests who believe in abortion, and women priests who are vehemently opposed. She's met women priests who have been mailed death threats. In 2016, after Pope Francis stated that the decision on banning women from the priesthood was likely finite, Bianchi put up posters featuring her images around the city of Rome. She is currently working on publishing a book of her images, part of what she has named the *Women Priests Project*, and in June her work will be on display at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art in Chicago.

'When you see a spiritual authority in a female body, that's powerful,' Bianchi says. 'I have to say, the first time I saw it, I cried.' The image of a woman leading a mass and giving communion (or one in any

high-ranking leadership role within the church) is one of pure fantasy for most people who have grown up in the Catholic church and school system. Biblical stories and Gospel passages are mostly told with female names in the footnotes; women are spoken about only as saints, nuns, and saved sinners, usually in devout service to the male hierarchy of the church. Though the number of people working in the mainstream U.S. Catholic church has been shrinking, the Catholic women's representation and participation in society, particularly in America—where they serve as nuns or laypeople, as volunteers in inner cities and schools, community centers, and hospitals—has a direct effect on the next generation of leaders.

As Bianchi came to realize, their stories are just as important as their presence. 'This project is really about breaking down the stereotypes of women in the church and listening to what they have to say,' she says. 'Let's challenge what the church says is sacred, what the church says is pure. Let's listen to one another, and let's acknowledge that the idea that women are not good enough to be in a position of power in the church, or that their body is shameful, or that they can't define Catholicism on their own terms, is bullshit.'

This article was published in *Vogue* on 4 May 2018

## An Ordained Woman Priest

**P**atricia Fresen (born 7 December 1940) is a writer, a South African Catholic theologian, and a former nun. Her parents were from Germany and Ireland. After school, she became a member of the Dominican Order. She studied theology, pedagogy and languages and subsequently became a teacher. She was then sent to Rome to study theology and later worked in Pretoria in a Catholic seminary as teacher in Homiletics, Systematic theology and Spirituality, and then at St Augustine's College in Johannesburg.

Bishop Romulo Antonio Braschi conducted an ordination ceremony for Patricia in Barcelona in 2003. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had previously decreed that the 'attempted ordination of women' by Romulo Braschi was null and void and, as a result, imposed the penalty of excommunication on him and those who received ordination from him for reasons including the 'attempted ordination' as well as participating in schism. Together with German writers and theologians Gisela Forster and Ida Raming, Patricia has been head of the international organisation **Roman Catholic Womenpriests International**, which promotes the ordination of women as Catholic priests.

In 2011, WATAC (Women and the Australian Church) were privileged to have Patricia Fresen as guest speaker at their annual conference at Canterbury Race Course, NSW. She was everything we could hope for in a priest—down-to-earth, compassionate, approachable, humorous. If only

.....

For health reasons Patricia has returned to South Africa.

*Editor*

# The Plenary Council

## *Instrumentum laboris:*

### Is it a handy tool kit?

John Collins

From the beginning of March 2021 we had the Plenary's working document (for reference here, IL) to hand: a 207-point list of considerations preparatory to the opening of the Plenary in October, seven months ahead.

Writing in March 2018 under the title 'Prioritising agenda' for the Plenary, I asked what meaningful objective could be met within the timeframe. In March 2018 the opening was scheduled for October 2020. The covid pandemic forced a rescheduling to October 2021. The timeframe remains pressing.

The IL identifies the following major topics within its ambit (the numbering is not from the IL):

1. renewing a Christ-centred Church that heals and warms hearts;
2. strengthening practices of discernment and synodality;
3. the call to co-responsibility in mission and governance;
4. embedding a response to the Royal Commission;
5. renewing and supporting the ordained ministry;
6. promoting discipleship in parishes, families and young people;
7. forming prayerful and Eucharistic communities;
8. engaging in society for the service of all;
9. proclaiming the Gospel in a change of era;
10. renewing the Church's solidarity with First Australians and those on the margins of society;
11. promoting an integral ecology of life for all persons, societies and our common home, the earth.

Most of these topics are so large and/or complex as well as of pressing importance that each could form matter for a council of its own. Most of the topics must also be discussed within the context and limitations of canonical (2,3) and doctrinal (1,5) parameters as well as of societal expectations (4,8,10,11).

No appropriately conciliar treatment of such a broad range of complex issues could be expected from a 7-day gathering of delegates who have not been selected on grounds of formal expertise in such matters.

The IL itself intimates that consideration of the listed topics will in the meantime suggest 'the skeleton of an agenda' for the first assembly of the Plenary Council in October 2021 (see IL15).

Accordingly there is no point to developing a litany of complaint regarding issues identified in IL or omitted from IL. However, while we wait to see what flesh is to be put on the skeleton, IL does invite further 'discernment' (this term occurs over 50 times in IL) in the development of an agenda.

Discernment has been a process much advocated in recent years as a critical function within Christian life by Pope Francis. And, with an increasing awareness of the relevance to community life of 'the sense of faith' (the *sensus fidei*), lay members of the church are increasingly drawn to find avenues whereby the relevance of their experience of 'being church' might reach the minds and hearts of those ordained as bishops to 'teach, govern, and sanctify' them (*Catholic Catechism* 888-896).

Among the vowed religious and the laity, of course, recent decades have seen an astonishing growth of theologically, biblically, and canonically educated members. They run Catholic universities, teach across the broad spectrum of Catholicism, publish informative, probing, and uplifting books, and participate in and frequently lead public debate. The potential value of their experience and expertise is enormous, and at this stage perhaps we can only hope that their values enrich the conciliar process.

The preceding is not to ignore or undervalue the significance of what 'good Catholics' – or 'bad' Catholics, for that matter – could offer the process of discernment. But for now it is simpler for me to reflect on advocacy in areas within easy reach.

One early observation caused surprise: in the early years of this century 'the idea of a plenary council was mooted but the suggestion did not initially win the support of the bishops.' (IL 17) In more recent years of this century informed commentators have asserted the persistence of this attitude. In this situation one can only surmise what inhibition may be the cause of such hesitancy.

For me this is pointing to a reluctance, on the one hand, to initiate public discussion of matters that may unsettle parishioners and, on the other, to expose foundational dogmatic issues to debate. Anxiety regarding the latter seems to find expression in paragraphs on discernment (IL 24).

Thus we read that no 'special groups' exist within the Church 'who have access to knowledge which is not available to others.' Any requisite knowledge is in the keeping of the bishops as 'successors of the apostles'. When 'teaching in communion with each other and with the successor of Peter, [bishops] have a particular role in safeguarding and articulating Catholic faith and morals, and in governing the Church.'

For all its familiarity, this Catholic teaching remains both comprehensive and, in this context, may we say, a red flag. How comfortably does it sit with the final words of the same paragraph:

**'It is now the task and privilege of all the Plenary Council delegates to open themselves to the Holy Spirit as together they seek to hear the Spirit's voice sounding through every dimension of the Plenary Council journey.'**

Dr John Collins, Emeritus Lecturer  
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He is a long-standing Member of ARC.

# Unutilised/overlooked Resources

Anthony Martin

I wrote to *ARCVoice* several years ago, expressing the opinion that, if the Church wanted some ultra-meaningful input as to why the institution is in serious numerical decline, it could do no better than survey its ex-priests, of whom there was and is no shortage. Of the several I know and have known, they are without exception men of high intelligence and integrity, who harbour no, or surprisingly low, levels of ill-will towards Catholicism. My impression has been that they would be amenable to considering still contributing in some negotiated clerical capacity... if asked. That is, in a context of some semblance of their no longer being *persona non grata* within the Church. So far as I know, none have received even a hint of such an invitation!

In the interim, the shortage has got worse, as evidenced by the moderate surprise one usually now receives, whenever one attends the average parish church, of seeing an Ozzie celebrant... and an increasingly elderly one at that. A stumbling block for the situation arguably not being otherwise seems to be the issue of married, non-celibate (male) clergy being simply untenable. This of course is despite—to the best of my knowledge—the majority, if not all of the apostles failing to so comply. The fact of Simon (Peter) having a mother-in-law, whom Jesus healed, points indirectly but clearly to this state of affairs. My understanding is that the expectation back then, of a Jewish male being married well before the expiration of his teenage years, was strong and routine in that culture.

I cast my mind back some decades, when the present priest shortage was perhaps perceived as being ‘in the wind’. A cautious approach was then allocated to, or adopted by Bishop Guilford-Young in out-of-the-spotlight Tasmania, to accept variants of the ‘just out of school’ and equivalent candidates, for certain training and some form of ordination. My recollection is that such graduates served the Church without noticeable complaint from the faithful.

In recent years I’ve attended Mass in a NSW rural town, conducted by a priest who had been a family man and Anglican minister. His children were adults, and his wife I think had either died or entered some sort of a convent setting. I sensed that no-one was supposed to know or dwell on the reality of discrete wangling around the necessary clauses relating to celibacy in canon law, having been seen fit to pragmatically engage in. At least within that diocese, a worthy purpose of handling the there-existing—and on a broader front, impending—reduced manpower problem was devised, to the complete acceptance of parishioners... who, we are constantly told, are the Church! What masochistic streak impedes the local and Vatican hierarchy from legitimating equivalent now-excluded individuals from amongst their own flock on a broader front, or come up with feasible concessional ideas to permit existing clergy

some latitude, so that they could consider some other option, apart from their irrevocable exit?

Former priests, who may now be, or have been married, or at least some I feel sure, would welcome the opportunity to resume ministry on a selective part-time basis, while remaining—like their Greek and other Orthodox confreres—in their married or alternate circumstances. This would require a change of attitudinal climate on the part of the earthly power-holders! How sad is it, that the prevailing lose-lose scenario must pertain, until such times as the number of potentially applicable ex-priests falls away from old age, or for the reason of the undue duration since departure?

Another perhaps not-unrelated matter, also concerning hierarchical change of disposition, was a cause of widespread regret when several years ago Bishop Bill Morris was sacked from his post in the priest-starved, enormous Diocese of Toowoomba. His downfall was ostensibly brought about for uttering the thoroughly appropriate opinion that thought be given to women having a greater role in the ministry of the Church. By way of end-result for him, contrast Pope Francis’ much publicised and memorable mid-flight (from Brazil) interview, with a number of journalists a couple of years ago. There he expressed pretty much the identical opinion. Yet, where do we see the revered Francis reinstating his summarily disenfranchised Australian brother bishop?

From my perspective, there’s no shortage of starting points for getting the barque sailing ahead once more. The very recent appointment of a French Xaviere Missionary Sister as the first woman Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops—with equally notable entitlement to be an official voting delegate to the Synod—is one such. It is an encouraging example of the sort of desperately needed change that I’m wanting to identify. I speculate on the difficulty that the Pope may have experienced in this one tiny reform, and would like to think he will go one huge step further; i.e. to declare (perhaps her) the first female Cardinal... a measure that is canonically allowable; although for now he cannot declare her a priest or bishop! How sensational would that be? Ponder for a moment, the chagrin of the curial conservatives! It would surely be outweighed by the adulation of the secular world press of all stripes.

Again, the Pope’s thrust at last year’s much publicised Amazon Synod was viewed by many, unofficially, as a pioneering move in the direction of female deacons and married priests. It is only in January this year that Francis, by way of an ‘Apostolic Letter’, reformed Canon Law to legitimate women performing lector, reader and acolyte roles! Seems unbelievable, but true. I guess we shouldn’t hold our breath on the Cardinal front... but who knows?

The impediment to faster change, I assert, is nothing more than an entrenched and consciously perpetuated rigidity, which Francis is thankfully not fostering. Let’s hope that we don’t have to wait decades more, until the populace of Africa and South America reaches Western educational levels conducive to greater capability in mature discernment, before the male tide at the top really turns.

ANTHONY MARTIN Is a retired dentist is a retired dentist. He spent the first half of his life as a practising Catholic and the rest following a diverse range of belief systems, while maintaining some connections with Catholicism.

## Have your say!

ARC*Voice* is a report of news, opinion and reflection on the renewal and reform currently experienced in the Catholic Church.

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