

# John Menadue – Pearls and Irritations

## JOHN WARHURST. Why I am not leaving the Catholic Church

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*Not only am I not leaving the Catholic church, but I am redoubling my efforts to join with others in making the case for much needed reforms. At heart I believe it is an institution worth working within to improve because it does way more good than harm in Australian society. For me the church is both a community and a formal institution. The twin crises of child sexual abuse and leadership failure by covering it up have certainly shaken my faith in the formal institution part. But while that has been happening my spiritual and social life within the broader Catholic community has remained strong.*

I think I'm loyal by instinct, not just in a church setting, and inclined to get involved in organisations for the long haul. The grass is always greener over the other side, but my instinct has always been to play with the cards you have been dealt and to try to make a positive contribution to society in that way. I realise that's very prosaic, but it is part of my character.

To be a Catholic has various meanings for me, including sharing values and friendships with fellow Catholics. At the local and personal level that finds expression in various ways.

Within a parish setting my wife Joan and I have been fortunate enough to find respectful and rewarding relations with numerous clergy and to share the admirable faith that shapes fellow Catholics to be community-minded and generous with their time to help others, especially the most vulnerable, through association with Vinnies, Caritas and other networks.

We've also been fortunate enough in recent times to share a monthly discussion group with fellow Catholics from different parishes. This social and intellectual network leads us to question our identity sometimes but also to learn more about both our faith and our church in a 'warts and all' way that can be inspiring but also challenging. Our involvement in the church reform group, Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, grew out of this discussion group.

There is also a very lonely aspect to being Catholic. By and large our closest friends don't share our faith and most of our extended family, with a few notable exceptions, have fallen away from their upbringing and made either a dramatic departure or slowly drifted away. I'm very conscious that younger family members don't share our commitments and understand they have very cogent reasons why they shouldn't. I'm sad that, like dying religious orders, many Catholic families are dying. We will probably be the last.

Catholic role models in academic life are few and far between too. Mainstream universities just don't highlight personal faith. I've had some inspirations though, and it is always a thrill to come across in church fellow academics whose life and work I admire. I've also been involved with Catholic university colleges, seeing their struggles and successes in helping young students to lead more ethical lives.

Alongside my life within the Catholic community the institutional church has granted me opportunities to work alongside many wonderful people at the national board level, mainly in social justice areas. For 25 years now, in three different fields (social justice and human

rights, social services and international aid and development) I've accepted these invitations enthusiastically and always been thrilled to be associated with their mission.

I'm now in a position where I'm wearing several different hats. It can be an uncomfortable position, but to my mind intellectually defensible. Nevertheless, I know it could eventually turn out either to be untenable or a complete dead end. If this happens I will either be invited to leave or will walk away, without regrets, not from Catholic life or the local church, but from active participation in the larger institutional church.

This means I'm continuing my work within the institutional church, even taking on new and more senior responsibilities in an official governance review, doing all I can to reform it from within by making it more inclusive, transparent and participatory. For me a non-hierarchical and less clerical church in which lay people, especially women, are treated as equals is non-negotiable.

This is a position adopted by Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, though not without trepidation. We see ourselves as a ginger group within the church, making serious and time-consuming efforts to take advantage of opportunities like dialogue with bishops and make submissions to the Plenary Council 2020, and a lobby group from without trying to press the case in the general community, so shaping the official church indirectly.

Doing it this way has advantages because we can bring our church experiences to bear on all we do. The little power we have is given some extra leverage because we are speaking as insiders. We are, however, still in a position of great weakness. Many of us are doing so with considerable unease and in the likelihood of being greatly disappointed.

Speaking strictly for myself I am 'having a crack' in the great Australian tradition. I'm giving it a go. In doing so I have been greatly buoyed by the explicit and implicit support of so many friends and colleagues as well as complete strangers. I believe there is a greater hunger for church reform among many of my generation of Catholics than is widely recognised. But there is also a great tiredness in the face of past disappointments and what seem like insuperable odds. To many in church authority we are dispensable and surplus to requirements and they are not afraid to tell us that. But we will not be moved.

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