

DAVID TIMBS. Australia's bishops are presently visiting the Pope. What are they telling him and will Australia's ordinary Catholics ever find out?

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Australia's bishops are currently in Rome for their regular 'ad limina' visit to the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul. Their last visit was in 2011. While there they will meet Pope Francis, have meetings with many of the Vatican dicasteries (government departments), be briefed on Vatican policy, and in turn will background the Vatican bureaucrats on how they see the state of the Church in Australia. But what will they be telling the Pope and the bureaucrats? Will it accord with what Australia's lay Catholics have been saying and thinking?

For years Australian lay Catholics have been watching and enduring their Church go through the agony of a slow drawn-out slide into an abyss: the exposure of the widespread sexual abuse of innocent children by priests and religious brothers, the cover-up of these crimes by a parade of bishops, the humiliation of their leaders before a Parliamentary Inquiry and a Royal Commission, and the shame of the unjust official redress for victims and survivors of the abuse.

Through it all, ordinary Catholics have been meeting, discussing, and discerning what went wrong and what needed to be done. But their efforts were taking place in vacuum, for their bishops were not interested in listening to them. They believed that knew it all. They had nothing to learn.

However, two years ago, the bishops decided to convene a Plenary Council, a national gathering of all the dioceses and eparchies (Eastern Rite Catholic dioceses) of the nation and the first in over 80 years, and indicated they were at last, prepared to listen. At Pentecost 2018, the bishops invited Australian Catholics provide input to the Council – through submissions and their stories. It was an invitation to review on a national scale how the Church is measuring up in fulfilling its mission. The result was staggering. By the end of acceptances, Catholic individuals and groups had sent in excess of 17, 000 submissions. A preparatory committee has identified six [themes](#) distilled from these submissions.

But how many bishops have studied them at depth and any reasonable submission behind them? The likelihood is few of them. If the bishops as a group have not acquainted themselves with the real state of the Church and its challenges as they are reflected and articulated in listening sessions with their people and the Submissions, then what on earth have they been telling the Pope apart from the scripted narrative about their isolation, persecution by secular authorities, attacks on freedom of religion and the mass disengagement of their people? Australian Catholics have the right to know exactly what the bishops had to say to the Pope and in particular what are their hopes for the 20/21 National Plenary.

The original stated reasons for a Synod and the sudden call for consultation with the laity are twofold: firstly, the 'damage done to the Church' resulting from the disclosures of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and secondly, the dramatic alienation of so many Catholics throughout the country that has led to a drastic decline in practice. For well over a decade before the RC and the great exodus, the bishops had resisted calls for a national Synod. The standard response to pleas, if at all, was always that the time was 'not opportune'. Why haven't they been talking to the Catholic Faithful? They have a right to know the answer to that one too.

Now that it is the 'opportune time', the bishops should acknowledge that a realistic starting point to the Synod is that practically no one either in the Church or in civil society trusts them then work from there. They have lost their moral traction among the People of God and in society. In the words of Bishops Conference president Mark Coleridge, the bishops' credibility is '[shot to pieces](#)'. Since the Royal Commission, it has eroded even further as a result of the deep internal divisions that have polarised them and rendered them ineffectual. The Conference is split clean down the middle on the matter of leadership. Coleridge has the presidency only because of his seniority over Fisher. The diocesan websites are also indicators of the divided loyalties and [patchy support](#) that the Plenary has with the bishops.

Without close monitoring by the mainly lay [Implementation Advisory Group](#), the Plenary Council could very easily become simply more window-dressing, a legitimisation for business as usual and the crushing of the last hopes of the Catholic people. The bishops must come clean and it is not an option.

Canon Law # 399 requires every diocesan bishop to complete a five yearly (*Quinquennial*) report to the Holy See providing an honest, transparent and detailed account of the current state of their diocese, its financial status, its pastoral challenges, the means to resolve them together with an informed pastoral plan. Catholics have the right to see these reports and the right to know the full, unadorned truth about how their local Church is faring. Catholics also have the right to know what the Pope and the heads of Vatican departments have had to say to the bishops. This is not a matter of commercial in confidence. The Church is a faith community not a corporation.

After the Royal Commission the bishops pledged that their behaviour and governance practices would be marked by transparency, accountability and inclusion. Where are they now? The situation is looking very much like what happened at the last Roman visit by the Australian bishops in 1999 when they all signed a document entitled 'A Statement of Conclusions' that did not even mention what practically every Catholic in the country was aware of, namely, the rapidly emerging clerical child sexual abuse scandal. The little that is known about what transpired at the Papal audience on June 24 is couched in the stock journalese found in the current [Catholic Weekly](#). The report notes that the discussions were "frank, emotional and deeply encouraging".

Finally, there is a urgent and pressing need for the bishops to publicly and unambiguously repudiate the toxic culture of self-referential clericalism that alienates them from the Faithful, that suffocates them, stunts them and the acolytes who are sucked into it. A striking example of this plague is Melbourne Archbishop Peter Comensoli's autocratic behaviour in the recent banning of American Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister from addressing a Catholic [education conference](#).

Ironically, Comensoli demonstrated his hubris when he described the bishops' meeting with the Pope as "spiritually intense, deeply honest, pastorally astute, free and frank" [Wow](#), while at the same time denying Joan Chittister from having the same kind of animated conversation with her fellow educators or with Comensoli himself. The editors of La Croix International write that Comensoli is not acting like a rouge: "[His views](#) generally reflect the widening divide between the church's leadership and many everyday Catholics." Comensoli needs to explain to Australian Catholics his reasons for banning Joan Chittister. They have a right to know.

The Archbishop must also be tone deaf to the April 2, 2019 exhortation of the Pope he has just met, “A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a [museum](#).” Essential to the purging of systemic clericalism that is demanded is a good dose of unfamiliar humility informed by speedy establishment of collaborative leadership structures and consultative bodies, as well as the adoption of protocols and procedures of accountability and transparency that have been urged, even mandated, by both the Second Vatican Council and Canon Law.

The Australian Catholic people want and need the Plenary Council to succeed in bringing about the kind of deep spiritual renewal and necessary organisational reform that will assist the People of God in this country to navigate their way out of the fog and inertia of the last half century.

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