

Archbishop Mark Coleridge  
Chairman,  
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Dear Archbishop,

We write this letter to provide you with a number of suggestions and requests arising from discussions within our parish of St Kevin's Templestowe, Victoria. In doing so we are inspired by Pope Francis who, in his letter to the Church in Chile on 31 May 2018, reiterated his words to young people in Maipu on 28 January 2017:

"Holy Mother the Church today needs the faithful People of God to challenge us [ ... ] you need to take out your adult ID card, as spiritual adults, and have the courage to tell us 'I like this,' 'this is the way I think we should go,' 'that's not going to work,' ...Tell us what you feel and think."

In that recent letter he also wrote:

"The People of God does not have first, second or third-class Christians. Their participation is not a question of goodwill, concessions, rather it is constitutive of the nature of the Church."

The context in which this letter is driven by two evident but disturbing facts both of which have equal significance. The pain and guilt arising from the clerical sexual abuse scandal is felt by the whole Church. Generations of the Catholic community are appalled by these failings and many of all ages are moving away from the Church. The image of the Church within the Australian community has plummeted.

This scandal is a symptom of deep-seated problems in a period of rapid social, cultural, intellectual and technological change. The gap between the 'official' Church as represented by the Bishops and the broader People of God has been growing for many years. Fundamental reform is urgently needed. We are grateful that you Archbishop Coleridge, have stressed that the Church needs large-scale cultural and institutional change, and can no longer afford 'business as usual'.

In this spirit we address three matters below.

## **Response to the Sexual Abuse Crisis**

We accept that the laity have been complacent. For more than a decade, we have heard that bad things were happening in our parishes, schools and Catholic institutions and were being covered up. In hindsight we as Catholics did not demand strongly enough that more open and democratic processes be put in place, that the Spirit be let in. We do so now.

- **Apology.** We ask that the Church provide a genuine, public and generous apology to all those affected, along the lines of that provided by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the victims of the 'Stolen Generation'. We note that Prime Minister Turnbull has promised a national apology to those affected by institutional sexual abuse. A formal apology from the Catholic Church could be associated with that national response, or be a separate event in a place such as Ballarat.
- **Early release of TJHC reports.** We support the calls for the early release of the four reports presented to you by the Truth, Justice and Healing Council. We recognise that the matters covered by these reports are complex, and that time is needed to fully study them. Nevertheless, if our new processes are to be open and transparent, these reports need to be put in the public domain as soon as possible, to enable all priests and lay people within the

Church, and indeed the broader Australian community, to be fully informed.

- **Regular, public reports on implementation progress.** In our view a regular program of public reporting on progress in implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission within the Church is vital. This reporting should be to the Church as a whole and to the Australian community, and also cover steps towards achieving such broader cultural change within the Church that will preclude the repetition of such evils.

## **Much greater involvement of the laity, both women and men, in critical positions and decisions.**

We see this as central to real cultural change, and as providing the Church with a much stronger base on which to move forward. Three examples are noted:

**The selection of bishops.** For some months a process has been underway to select a new Archbishop for Melbourne. By contrast with the call for open and transparent governance, this process has been totally opaque. Other communions, such as the Anglican Church, have more open and consultative processes, from which we could learn. This in no way reflects on the recent appointment of the Archbishop of Melbourne, the Reverend Peter Comensoli and we look forward to his investiture in Melbourne next month. However, he does not know us and we do not know him. Given the low regard many of the Church have for Bishops, this is an unfair start for him.

- **Formation of the Church's position on public issues.** The Bishops often express a position on behalf of the Church on many political matters and on issues of public morality and legislation, such as the national same-sex marriage legislation and the Victorian assisted dying legislation. These are often issues on which there is a wide range of diverse but well-informed views within the Catholic community. It is not appropriate for the Bishops to speak for the People of God as a whole without a proper consultation and decision-making process.
- **The crisis in the Ministry.** For several decades, a dominant issue facing the Church in Australia has been the crisis in the priestly ministry. The supply of new priests into a male, celibate priesthood has dried up and many parishes are suffering from the shortage of pastors.
  - There has been no consultation with the whole Church about the options for addressing this vital matter. Many Catholics believe that part of the solution lies in allowing a much broader range of the faithful - such as men and women, whether married or single - to enter priestly ministry. It is quite unsatisfactory to say that these options are not available without a frank and open consultation about the reasons for this view and of the other options for addressing this crisis.

## **The Plenary Council**

We welcome the establishment of the Plenary Council, and hope that it helps to bring about some of the changes needed in the Church. We will certainly do all we can to contribute to its success.

It is important to recognise, nevertheless, that the Plenary Council is not the model of more open and transparent governance that will fully involve the faithful in decision making within the Church. Indeed, it is a structure established under Canon Law which consolidates decision making in the hands of the bishops and other religious leaders. Such leaders must make up at least two thirds of the delegates at the Council and only they have a vote on final decisions. The remaining one-third includes priests, laity and retired bishops, presumably as selected by the bishops.

If the Plenary Council is to be a success, and to be a forerunner to more participatory models for the future, we suggest that it is vital to set up an independent body to identify, through rigorous and consultative processes, the views and concerns of committed Catholics. Such a body could be on the model of the successful Truth, Justice and Healing Council. We suggest that the Council will only receive credible advice about the considered views of the faithful through the work of such a body independent of the Council and through public discussion of their reports.

Clearly the need for change is not an option and it must involve the pastors and the wider laity. This must see the Bishops engaging in a genuine way with the Church community by listening and acting so that the Church as a whole can move forward. Should this happen then the goodness that is occurring in so many parishes, schools and institutions can become the focus of acting out the message of Christ.

There will no doubt be many other parishes across the Nation that will echo similar concerns and along with them we look forward to your response. These are offered in a constructive way so that the Church can be revitalized in the spirit of God and optimism

Yours sincerely, etc

Cc: Archbishop Tim Costelloe  
Archbishop Elect Peter Comensoli