

Catholics push for change as Australian church launches summit

TERRY FEWTRELL

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The revelations and findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse shocked Australian Catholics. Not only the depravity of what occurred but also the criminal deceit of the cover-ups.

The problems were systemic, cultural and pervasive. The response of church leadership in Australia to this is in stark contrast to how their German counterparts have responded.

Issues such as clericalism and the lack of governance were linked directly in the commission findings as significant contributors to the abuse and its concealment. These are issues many Catholics already had identified as contrary to Gospel values and needing reform.

Other outdated views and practices, such as rejection of women in decision-making and leadership roles, and the seemingly belligerent exclusion of divorced and gay people, led others to conclude their church had become an increasingly irrelevant entity, much removed from its mission to bring people into relationship with a loving God.

When in 2017 Australian Catholics were invited to make submissions to a process of inquiry and review, the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, they made clear the church needed significant reform. Those submissions were rich in suggestions for change based on sound Catholic theology.

One reasonably would think that as this review process moves into its substantive assembly stage this week, its agenda would reflect at least in part these major concerns of the Catholic community. Unfortunately, it does not. Instead the agenda and the procedures are respectively timid and restricting. They hardly facilitate discussion and consideration of what should be key issues.

This is a dangerous course for the Australian church and its bishops. An acknowledged element of the initial input from the Catholic community was its lack of trust and confidence in the bishops. Australian Catholics continue to invest great hope for the council. They have taken it seriously and expect serious, meaningful outcomes. The people continue to have hope, but the bishops seem driven by fear.

The Catholic Church in Germany presents a striking alternative. In 2019 that faith community embarked on a similar review exercise, having recently dealt with a

damaging report on sexual abuse. The German bishops began a synod process for their church and lay groups were quick off the mark in setting out what ought to be on the agenda.

The local bishops have managed that process in a very different manner, acknowledging the issues ordinary Catholics want discussed. The de facto leader of the German church, Cardinal Reinhold Marx, set the tone by stating the synod would tackle three key issues arising from the clerical abuse crisis: priestly celibacy; the church's teaching on sexual morality; and a reduction of clerical power.

Since then the focus has shifted to the following four matters: power and separation of powers in the church; life in succeeding relationships – living love in sexuality and partnership; priestly existence today; and women in ministries and offices in the church. It didn't take long for some to express their unease about opening up these topics for general discussion. Pope Francis wrote a letter to the Catholics of Germany urging them to journey together and listen to the Spirit.

All of which makes this a more honest and relevant event than its Australian counterpart. That can be said confidently on the basis of the report issued after the initial input received from Australian Catholics. The German issues are as much Australian issues but Australian voices, it seems, are not to be heard.

There are several reasons for this. First, the views of Australian and German Catholics are based on a shared motivation to remove encumbrances and outdated traditions that inhibit the central message of the Gospels.

Second, German laity have a respected role in the local church through representative structures that give them a seat at the table with the local hierarchy. This contrasts with the Australian situation where lay Catholics have no such authentic voice and the input they offer often is demeaned or dismissed.

Finally, a clear difference between the German and Australian churches is the disposition of the local bishops to engage with and handle criticism and debate. German bishops seem unfazed by such interactions. Australia's bishops, on the other hand, often appear fearful and uncomfortable in dealing with such intellectual and faith discourse. With few exceptions they are not disposed to such engagement.

So, Catholics in Australia and Germany share similar views on the need for reform. But each faces different processes and likely outcomes. Of course, much that may be raised in either jurisdiction would be able to be reformed only centrally. However, Pope Francis wants local bishops to engage with their people and bring forward their concerns and how they can best be met.

The German process at least is honest. The Australian process is intent on hiding and pretending realities are different. It is at risk of failing the “fair dinkum” test.

Terry Fewtrell is a Canberra writer and active in Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn.

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