



# OPEN TO CONVERSION RENEWAL AND REFORM

**Frank Sheehan – parishioner at St Columba’s Ballarat North comments on the discernment paper - HOW IS GOD CALLING US TO BE A CHRIST-CENTRED CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA THAT IS open to Conversion, renewal and reform?**

*After reading this paper, what gives you hope?*

There is a saying that “hope springs eternal”. This article of hope is a response to the Plenary Council and the themes that have been developed from the thousands of contributions to the early call of “what is God asking of the Church in Australia today”.

We have to hope that some worthwhile change will be made to bring the Church into the 21st Century and beyond. Life without hope is a description of hell and who wants to go there. Where is the conversion reform and renewal going to come from? It’s a massive agenda especially taking account of some conflicting views that have been put forward by the original contributors. We have to hope that the entire Church will submit to the will of the Spirit as spoken by the people of the God.

Conversion usually means a change of heart or a change of belief. What then is the Church view about particularly controversial questions? For example, allowing Priests to marry or ordaining married men or ordaining women to the priesthood. What of Priests serving on limited tenure in the Ministry? It is our hope that reform will take place in this area of Church life.

Can we hope that a change of heart will take place to the strict conditions that apply to the Church’s view of marriage or will the traditional view be upheld? Will we invite divorcees and those who have married a second or even a third time to be reconciled with the Church? Some of these people are totally “browned off” by the rebuke given to them. But the Church should still invite them back with open arms.

In the past controversial issues for example the reconciliation of the LBGQTI+ community have been commented on by the hierarchy. This has resulted in the popular view that they are the Church. If we are to have Church that is open to conversion, renewal and reform then calls from the original Contributors have to be taken seriously. Leadership must be more inclusive and synodal. Surely this is not a vain hope?

The call for changes to be made to the liturgical life of the Church especially in regard to the Mass will test the traditional Hierarchy and rank and file. Changes to the liturgy surrounding the Mass featured strongly in the early contributions. The opportunity has been given to renew the liturgy of the Mass. After all the Mass is a centre-point of Catholic faith. This issue presents as one of the crucial elements for the future of the

Church particularly in regard to attracting youth and young parents. They see it as stodgy and unrelated to their everyday lives. The music alone needs to reflect a more modern genre, to have a more modern touch to it. The Sacrament of Reconciliation has also been highlighted in the contributions. The call for the re-introduction of the Third Rite of Reconciliation is another case in point. Any change in these two areas of liturgy will cause consternation in some elements of the Church.

While recognising the ministry of many wonderful Priests, the past has revealed that a great amount of power rests with the Hierarchy and the general body of the Clergy. The resulting clericalism has been described by Pope Francis as denial of the real role of priests and Bishops. The overall Catholic population have been conditioned over decades to rely on the clergy for their spiritual well-being and their moral compass and now to “buck the system” is foreign to that way of thinking. We have to hope the goodwill that motivated the call for the Plenary Council in the first place will bring radical change to Church leadership.

Over many years the Church has collected a lot of baggage not the least being the response to the contemporary issue of the fallout from the Royal Commission on sexual abuse. But what of reviewing and reforming the teachings, traditions and conventions that have occurred over decades and even centuries? Contributors called for the modernisation of Church teachings. In this regard has enough attention been given to the massive advances in science from a theological view point? Some people argue that our knowledge of science brings a new perspective and understanding of Planet Earth and its place in the Universe. Should the Church address this issue and does the new understanding of science challenge some of the teachings of the past?

Change is possible for example, we don't have Limbo anymore and we can eat meat on Friday. These were entrenched in our belief system only a few years ago.

### ***What do you find challenging?***

Hope is an essential ingredient to the whole exercise of the Plenary Council. There is an in-built cynicism within the rank and file that any call for change from the current Church leadership will result in very little difference, if any. They can't be bothered. However, the opportunity has been given to the “the People in the Pews”. So they must grab it with both hands in the hope that their views will be heard.

Even if cynicism exists there is still room for hope and where does this hope come from? Firstly the fact that 220,000 people commented shows that there is a deep rooted desire for change in the way the Church has operated in living memory. A concern has to be expressed as to how all the desires for change can be met in a cohesive way. It is a difficult task to cater for all that has been put forward. It is within the parishes and the dioceses where the bishops and priests need to recognise the unrest that exists within the laity. Church leadership and structures have to change. A structural question arises, should we continue with the term “parish”, or should it be replaced by the term “community” that is made up of a number of centres? The Ballarat Diocese has undergone big change in recent times. The term parish as it existed in the past seems to have been undermined. The opportunity exists now for a new look at the structures that will take the Church into the 21st Century and beyond. This will take the establishment of a more synodal Church leadership that takes account of the Spirit as expressed by the 220,000 people of God. The Plenary Council and the “People of God” have much to think about.