

Looking to future governance of our Church

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During the week, I participated in a Webinar entitled 'The Light from The Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia'. Zoom conferences and webinars are now a common place for those of us enduring pandemic lockdowns.

This Webinar was run out of the offices of a large law firm in Sydney.

The proceedings were chaired by the distinguished Australian broadcaster, Geraldine Doogue. More than 150 committed Catholics tuned in. There was quite a buzz to the proceedings. And most of the time, the technology worked well.

Geraldine introduced the keynote presenter, Francois Kunc, who is a judge of the New South Wales Supreme Court.

He had the unenviable task of providing a 15-minute overview of the [208-page report](#) containing 86 recommendations for improved governance of the Catholic Church in Australia. I was one of nine responders.

The other responders included three of the key authors who were part of the seven-member Governance Review Project Team commissioned to provide this report to the Church's Implementation Advisory Group which had been set up by our bishops after the royal commission.

Another responder was one of the theological advisers to the review team.

The discussion was lively, informed, and respectful. Men and women were at the table in equal numbers. Appropriately, the laity heavily outnumbered the clergy.

But something wasn't quite right.

There was no bishop on the panel. We were told that invitations had been extended, but to no avail. Like most things in the Church, there's probably a back story.

But I was left thinking that a discussion about co-responsible governance in the Catholic Church could well do with a couple of bishops at the table.

Most of us who spoke would have been in our 60s. When looking to future governance of our church, it's probably best to start as we'd want to finish. If co-responsibility is to work, bishops and young people will need to be at the table.

This report had been presented to our bishops at the last minute before their last conference in May 2020.

Instead of publishing it promptly, the bishops decided that they wanted to sit on it until their next meeting in November 2020. The report in draft form was leaked fairly soon after the bishops completed their meeting in May.

Following the leak, the bishops did a rethink on their schedule. On 12 June 2020, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, announced that the bishops 'would provide their feedback before 17 July'.

He wrote:

'After this feedback has been received, the report will be amended. The amended version will then be published in late July or early August, accompanied by a reading guide. This version will be widely available, and people are encouraged to read the full report (and not just the recommendations) and to provide feedback to their local bishop to help him in shaping his response.'

That's the last we heard from our bishops before the Webinar went ahead on 19 August. Late last Friday, two days after the Webinar, the bishops finally published the revised report.

If co-responsible governance of our Church is to be a reality, we all have to do better than this. And we all have to get moving if bishops are to receive feedback and formulate their own responses in time for their November meeting.

The introduction to the report states:

'The Catholic Church in Australia has been one of the epicentres of the sex abuse crisis in the global Church. But the Church in Australia is also trying to find a path through and out of this crisis in ways that reflect the needs of the society in which it lives.'

'The Catholic tradition holds that the Holy Spirit guides all into the truth. In its search for the path of truth, the Church in Australia seeks to be guided by the light of the Holy Spirit; a light symbolised by the great Constellation of the Southern Cross.'

'That path and light offers a comprehensive approach to governance issues raised by the abuse crisis and the broader need for cultural change.'

The responders in the Webinar included Catholic lay people with outstanding credentials in governance in the corporate sector and in the public sector. And they love their Church.

As they spoke, I had a sense that whatever our differences, we all saw our Church as the privileged and graced place to break open the Word prophetically, to break the bread welcoming all sinners to the table, to constitute ourselves as the Body of Christ nourished by the sacraments, to serve the world, especially the poor, and to honour tradition and experience.

In truth, a strong motivation detectable in the group was a passionate desire for Catholic parents and grandparents to be able to hand on this uplifting and grounded vision, this fragile vessel, this responsibly governed community to their children and grandchildren.

But upcoming generations will be attracted only if we are able to provide both Good News and good governance.

The responders were all used to church documents handed down from on high. But they were excited by the mix of good theology and good governance in this report.

They enjoyed the conversation they heard between civil and ecclesial virtues, between civil and ecclesial experience, and between civil and ecclesial perspectives.

Being of the Church and of the world, they knew that each domain had much to contribute to human flourishing. Make no mistake: the Church needed the help of the State and the eyes of the world to address the plague of child sexual abuse.

The warning was sounded. It's all very well to speak about co-responsibility. But mature adult lay people will embark upon co-responsibility only if there is a sharing of authority. How is authority to be shared in the Catholic tradition when decisions are still made ultimately by the bishop(s)?

In the wake of the royal commission, the challenge is now urgent, but even those Catholics still committed to their church have despaired of how to respond.

One responder said, 'We've been brought up to be passive Catholics even if we've been active in civil life'.

Another spoke of his life changing experience when he came to Redfern parish in inner Sydney with Fr Ted Kennedy who offered completely open engagement with all comers while insisting that we always be open to the poor.

Francis Sullivan who had been CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council that interacted with the royal commission on behalf of the Australian church acknowledged that some Catholics (including some bishops) might fear that any discussion of co-responsible governance might lead to a non-episcopal led church.

One participant asked how change would affect those Catholics who saw no need for change at all.

Next day, I read a report from Cardinal George Pell speaking on a US Webinar saying, 'The more you adapt to the world, the faster the Catholic Church goes out of business.'

Francis Sullivan thought the authors of this report were wanting 'a relevant Church which can nourish our lives'.

The report notes something as ancient as the reading from St. Paul's First Letter to the Church in Corinth:

'Too often, the (Pauline) image of the body and its many parts has been overshadowed by the image of the Petrine promise in Matthew 16:18-19.

'Here, the responsibility received by Peter to be the rock on which the Church is built, receiving the keys of the kingdom of heaven, binding and loosening on earth and in heaven, has weighed so heavily (and sometimes literally) on bishops and priests that they have neglected the legitimate and crucial contributions of the rest of the body.

'Good governance must be built not only on the legitimate authority (not power) of the priest or bishop in his diocese or parish but on the mutual respect for the rightful contribution of all members of the body of Christ, animated by the Spirit.'

When we do have the opportunity to reflect on this report with our bishops and with the young, we need to ask: How can this tradition, this way of life, this community of faith be made fit for purpose and attractive to the young and to those disillusioned by all they have heard in the wake of the royal commission?

We need examples of what works and what's affordable. We need to respond to Pope Francis's call to synodality which 'involves the active participation of all members of the Church in its processes of discernment, consultation and co-operation at every level of decision-making and mission.'

The Webinar participants enjoyed this observation by an American commentator: 'To embrace synodality is not a call to do away with hierarchical leadership. The Church is not a democracy. But neither is the Church a monarchy wherein local bishops, bishops' conferences, or even the Pope rule by fiat.'

Earlier in the day before the Webinar, I had presided at the requiem mass of a man with a wife, nine children, and 19 grandchildren.

The Melbourne lockdown restrictions precluded the attendance of the grandchildren at Church.

Using the available technology, they livestreamed their reflections on their beloved granddad and their prayers of the faithful into the Church and out on to the airwaves to the hundreds of virtual congregants.

Each of the 19 grandchildren spoke and prayed aloud. The vitality and spirituality of their involvement in the liturgy was palpable. If they'd been in the Church, we probably would not have heard from each one of them, and we'd have been the poorer for that.

With technology, good governance, synodality and the action of the Spirit, together, co-responsibly, let's pray that we might constitute the Church which Christ constantly builds, re-builds, and re-shapes on the rock of Peter.

Let's maintain our faith and our hope that 'the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it' and that it cannot be undermined from within.

Like Paul in his Letter to the Romans, we might then acclaim 'How rich are the depths of God – how deep his wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods!'

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