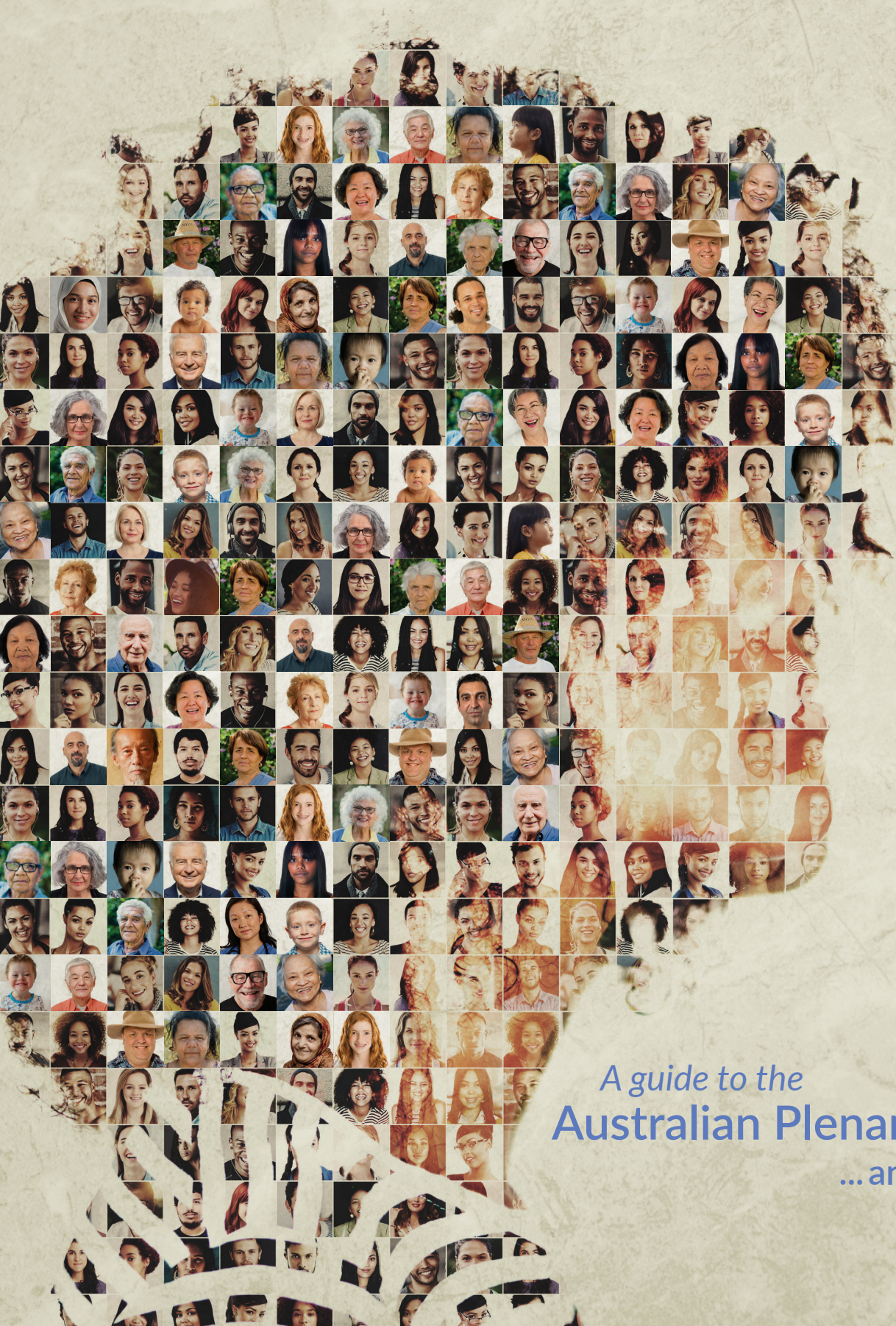


'Stand up! Speak out!'

– Sr Joan Chittister

A Church for All

AUSTRALASIAN CATHOLIC COALITION FOR CHURCH REFORM



A guide to the
Australian Plenary Council
...and beyond

Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform

The Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) was established in 2011; it comprises a network of 19 member organisations across Australia and New Zealand. Member groups are committed to the Catholic faith and foster collaboration and support in seeking renewal of our Church. The Coalition disseminates messages of hope and opportunity for a Church that models the teachings of Jesus. It is guided by Vatican II and the leadership of Pope Francis with a strong commitment to co-responsibility for the Church's mission among all Catholics. The voice of the people must be heard and attended to at all levels in the Church, with synodality ensuring the equality of all, especially women.

ACCCR is particularly concerned that the institutional Church does not yet embody the vision of Vatican II for a truly collegial Church in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances. Rather, it too often appears to be focussed on centralism, legalism, and control with few effective structures for listening and dialogue, and often more concerned with its institutional image and interests than the spirit of Christ.

ACCCR seeks a Church whose leadership and role in the world reflect the teachings of Jesus and model the best of Christian values, a Church which is accountable, transparent and inclusive in its decision-making reflecting the sense of the faith of the people. We seek a model of Church that Jesus expects from us in this millennium, requiring uncommon courage, a commitment to changes in how we do and are church, and openness to radical conversion, reform and renewal.

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FOREWORD

The Australian Plenary: An Agenda for Reform?

The Australian Plenary Council is part of a global movement of reform and renewal longed for by Catholics across the world. The Plenary Council has been called in response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and other challenges and failings; it is an opportunity for significant renewal in the Church in Australia.

As a voice for lay Catholics, the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) convened a series of Convocations in 2021 to promote the Plenary Council and support its task of renewing the Church in Australia. We are all journeying together to the Council and beyond.

In May 2021, the first Convocation of Australian Catholics, conducted during the COVID pandemic, using Zoom technology, featured Sr Joan Chittister OSB. It attracted many thousands who seek change in our Church. Joan called for lay Catholics to be treated 'as equals, as seekers, as spiritual adults. Old styles of worship, old criteria of piety, old ways of relating to the world – good as all of them may once have been – cannot build for us a new Jerusalem in this place in this time... when the forces of history face us with new challenges'. Joan asserted prophetically that Catholicism must grow up, 'beyond the parochial to the global, beyond one system and one tradition, to a broader way of looking at life and its moral, spiritual, ethical frameworks.'

The second Convocation, in August, was opened by Dr Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, the 2021 Senior Australian of the Year,

and addressed by other prominent and thoughtful Catholic leaders: Debra Zanella, Dr Jessie Rogers and Robert Fitzgerald with a concluding summary by Professor Emeritus John Warhurst. With a tighter focus on the Plenary Council as we drew nearer to the first session in October, they addressed issues related to deepening connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions; the Plenary Council in its international context; hearing the voice of the people in the Church; and inclusion, particularly ensuring the equality of women, inclusion of marginalised groups, synodality and governance.

When the agenda for the Plenary Council was published in June this year, it was greeted with widespread dismay and disappointment among Catholics hoping for a serious examination and analysis of the weighty challenges confronting us. We were given a set of unnecessarily general, and sometimes superficial, questions on how we might respond to a broad, unspecified call to action. The questions also lack context and neglect the parlous state of the Church in Australia. Some are stuck in the general discussion of three years ago and appear not to consider the 17,500 submissions. To address these deficiencies, after extensive consultation with its 19 member groups and informed by the public submissions to the Plenary Council process, ACCCR has included a considered response to the agenda questions as the last chapter.

This booklet contains the views of prominent and thoughtful Catholics on the challenges facing the Plenary Council and the

Coalition's response to the agenda proposing necessary changes in our Church.

We now call on Plenary Council members to respond to Pope Francis' hopes for a new era of synodality where we will all walk together, listening to a range of voices. This is the model of Church that Jesus expects from us in this millennium; it will require uncommon courage and a commitment to changes in how we do and are church. For this to happen, we must be open to radical conversion, reform and renewal.

Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform, comprising

Australian Reforming Catholics
Be the Change Aotearoa (NZ)
Cardijn Community Australia
Catholics For Renewal
Catholics Speak Out
Communities of the Way (WA)
Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn
Concerned Catholics Tasmania
Concerned Catholics Wagga Wagga
Concerned Catholics Wollongong
Cyber Christian Community (WA)
For the Innocents
Inclusive Catholics
Rainbow Catholics InterAgency
for Mission
SA Catholics for an Evolving Church
Toowoomba Catholics for
Church Reform
VOCAL (Voices of Catholic
Australian Laity)
WATAC (Women and the
Australian Church)
WWITCH (Women's Wisdom
in the Church)

The Spiritual Mountains of the New Millennium

Joan Chittister, OSB



Joan Chittister is one of the most influential religious and social leaders of our time. For 50 years she has passionately advocated on behalf of peace, human rights, women's issues, and church renewal. A much sought-after speaker, counselor, and clear voice that bridges across all religions, she is also a best-selling author of more than 60 books, hundreds of articles, and an online column for the National Catholic Reporter (USA). Joan has received numerous writing awards and honours for her work, and is a noted international lecturer.

Any reflection on contemporary spiritual life in an era of global issues, ecumenical perspectives and theological development must be made from two perspectives: one social, the other biblical.

Socially, the population of the earth is about 8 billion people. Almost half of them live in Asia. Two-thirds of those live in either of two countries – China and India.

The world's literacy rate has risen 20% from 66% in 1979 to 86% in 2021. The world is growing, is developing, and is not Catholic.

In 1950, less than 30%, one third of the world, lived in cities. Since 2018 over 55% – more than half of them – do.

And all of that means what? It means that religion is not regional anymore. It means that racial colours are not regional anymore. Language is not regional anymore. And, most of all, it means that God speaks in many tongues – not just ours.

It also means that Catholicism must grow up, that things are changing beyond the parochial to the global, beyond one system and one tradition, to a broader way of looking at life and its moral, spiritual, ethical, and social frameworks.

In a global village, respect for all creation is basic and understanding is its key.

As a result, in a world such as this, religion must be about more than documents and doctrines, about rules and religious conventions in a very unconventional world where ecumenism and unity are warring – and at the very same time.

The second perspective out of which I fashion these reflections, then, is a spiritual one. Two spiritual insights challenge contemporary spirituality today.

The first is a Hasidic tale about a disciple who was puzzled by the scripture passage that says that 'children of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai stood afar off from it.'

'Why would they do that?' the disciple asked.

And the Rabbi said, 'The children of Israel stood at a distance from Sinai because they knew that miracles are for those who have little faith! And so, in good heart, they avoided them.'

The lesson is clear: the image of Israelites refusing to approach Sinai and its wonders reminds us not to rely on divine interventions to save us from a changing world.

We must work those miracles ourselves.

The real problem is that what we do depends on what we are inside ourselves, because it is what's in us driving us on that is the real value in what we are.

Secondly, when our own scriptures teach us 'do this in memory of me' over and over again, we must begin to realise that past actions are really past. It is the present that must be continually freshened, stretched, fulfilled now, renewed and reformed now.

What we as a holy people did in ages before this one to scratch out of thick forests and vast lands a missionary church is over now. What it meant to establish a Christian presence in a new world that was antagonistic to it, marks us still.

*God waits for us to come to grips
with what it really means to be
'the Christian community'*

What it took to maintain the faith, to recognise individual rights, to accept as determinative the prisms of difference in the midst of a pluralistic world, tried and tested the humanity of humanity.

What it cost to accept freedom of conscience in a world where states under papal rule, the peace of Augsburg, theocratic theology and wars of religion were long gone and well dead – is for all intents and purposes now basically accomplished.

It is today that God waits for us to come to grips with what it really means to be 'the Christian community' now.

*The forces of history face us
with new challenges.*

No, we are not in transition to a new form of spirituality because we failed in the past. We are in transition to a new form of spiritual life precisely because we succeeded in the past. We succeeded in creating entire Church school systems and Catholic education became mainstream. That was a miracle.

We succeeded in building systems that absorbed immigrants and now we are a pluralistic culture in a pluralistic world. That was a miracle.

Now we must find new meaning, new purpose, new vision, new miracles in a world totally mainstream but changing everywhere now. The deeply spiritual life – not simply pious practices; the challenges of faith – not simply the comforts of ritual; the needs of the present – not

simply our past achievements are the only things that can make the spiritual life truly spiritual again.

We stand on the brink of a millennium that has never known so much violence, and most of all, inhuman inequality.

We need more, now and here, than Christianity warmed over. We need to do more than go to church. We need to work miracles of our own. Why? Anything else is an attempt to pass off as viable the responses of the past rather than accept as scripture the present will of God for us – as equals, as seekers, as spiritual adults, as both men and women in a church that men think they own. Old styles of worship, old criteria of piety, old ways of relating to the world – good as all of them may once have been – cannot build for us a new Jerusalem in this place at this time.

The forces of history face us with new challenges. New visions of equality and community are calling us in this day. The priesthood of the people is a priesthood dearly to be sought if the Church is ever to be church, is ever to be whole. But how? 'If you wish to see the valleys,' the mystic Kahlil Gibran wrote 'climb to the mountain top'. Which means what?

The spiritual life now, as the spiritual life has always been, is about being taken up mountains by the God who leads us always beyond ourselves.

Ancient Greek, Hebrew, Roman and Asian religious mythos, all considered mountains the nearest places on earth to heaven.

Mountains, the teachings claimed, the points where earth touched heaven, were places where the human could touch the divine. Mountains were places where people could contact God!

It is understandable then that there are eight mountains in Israel's history of life with God where the people are brought

to stark challenge and so to new growth: Sinai, Gilboa, Olivet, Moriah, Carmel, Hermon, Gerizim and the Mount of the Beatitudes.

It is these mountains which yet today, I believe, challenge us, too. A few of them we climb with daily devotion; some of them, I believe, we have yet to scale if the spiritual life – if religion/the Church – is to be the catalyst, the prophetic voice in this time that it once was in the past.

Mount Sinai

First, Israel's greatest mountain was Mount Sinai.

It was on Sinai, remember, that God flamed in the burning bush and said to Moses, 'Moses, come no further... stay where you are for where you are is holy ground.'

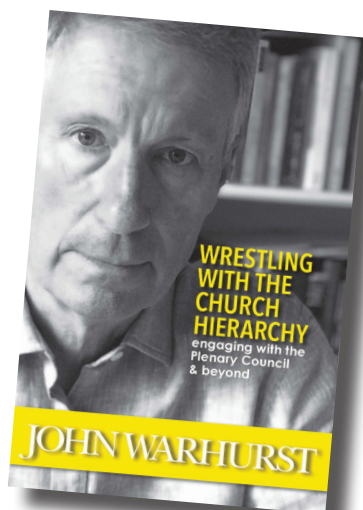
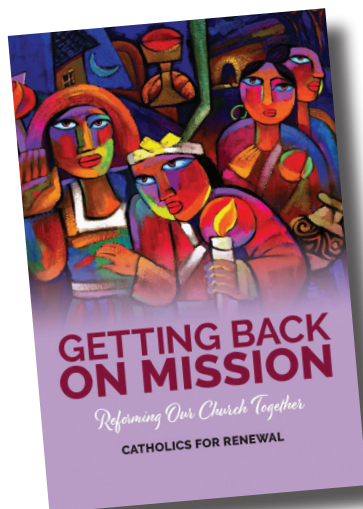
It was on Sinai that Yahweh gave the law that would lead Israel beyond narcissism, beyond its own headstrong ambitions to become its best and truest self.

Sinai is the mountain of spiritual development. What is learned and taught here determines personal development – development that can change the world. It is the mountain Christians know well. For long years, our approach to Sinai – to the will of God – teetered between God's goodness and our concentration on sin – on spiritual control. And so a spirituality centered in negation that discolours sex and gender tended to eclipse the learnings of life around us, yes, but not only.

The mountain of spiritual development also told us that there was a great deal more to life than negation, than 'don't', than fear. There was the love of God and the presence of God everywhere, the call of God to the universal goodness of all races and nations, and the goodness of God for each of us to taste ourselves.

The mountain of spirituality that centred us on the will of God for

Further reading on the Australian Plenary from Garratt Publishing



Getting Back on Mission

The Catholic Church has gone 'off mission'. The scandal and tragedies of clerical child sexual abuse and the cover-up by bishops is symptomatic of a deeply ailing church. Getting Back on Mission focuses on Jesus' mission for the Church; it exposes dysfunctional governance involving a grave lack of accountability and transparency, and the exclusion of the People of God – particularly women.

This is a contribution to the Australian Plenary Council 2020/21. Its purpose is twofold: to get the Church back 'on mission'; and to show how that can be achieved 'together'. The reforms proposed are based on sound evidence and analysis. For Catholics wanting genuine renewal of their Church, this roadmap for change is a must-read and an essential companion book for the Plenary Council.

Getting Back on Mission is forward-looking and founded on trust in the Spirit – it is about hope.

Catholics for Renewal is a group of committed Catholics that has been advocating Church renewal for a decade. A legion of Catholics has supported its work involving surveys, open letters, articles, and public evidence at major government inquiries. Catholics for Renewal believes that the Church will change only if individual Catholics take up the challenge and drive that change – and many renewal groups throughout Australia are doing just that.

Catholics for Renewal is a member of the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform.

'... a realistic, hopeful and authentically Catholic roadmap for the forthcoming Australian Plenary Council...'

– Frank Brennan SJ, AO

'I hope this book helps navigate our Church's sacred pastors to the wisdom and action needed to get us out of this mess.'

– Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland

Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy: Engaging with the Plenary Council & Beyond

John Warhurst's unique perspective as a Church insider-outsider means that he walks a fine line. As an insider, he works within the Church in many leadership and governance roles; as an outsider, he leads ginger groups and lobbies for change through both Church and mainstream media.

Wrestling with the Church Hierarchy is a personal account of attempting to come to grips with the power structure of the Church at a time of necessary reform of those structures. As a forceful but understanding critic, John shows no fear or favour when dealing with Church authorities. He is adamant that the Church needs many more women in leadership positions, greater lay participation in co-responsible governance, and much more extensive transparency and accountability in all aspects of Church affairs, including finance and communications.

John considers the Plenary Council 2021-2022 a crucial once-in-a-generation opportunity to advance these reforms. But it's not the only opportunity. John's message is that the time for dioceses and parishes to introduce reforms is now.

John Warhurst AO is Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University, Chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn (a member of the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform) and a Delegate to the Plenary Council. He was co-author of *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*.

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The Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) is a network of 19 organisations across Australia and New Zealand. Members are committed to the Catholic faith and seek renewal of their Church. During 2021, ACCCR convened a series of convocations to promote the Australian Plenary Council and to support its task of Church renewal.

Keynote speakers at the online convocations offered a path towards a vibrant synodal Church that speaks to – and meets the needs of – the people of God. These convocations, in turn, were the genesis for this reading guide – *A Church for All: A guide to the Australian Plenary Council and Beyond*.

A Church for All presents transcripts from convocation speakers – Joan Chittister, Robert Fitzgerald, Debra Zanella, and John Warhurst – and, importantly, an ACCCR response to the Plenary Council agenda questions with concrete proposals.

The guide also features discussion questions that will provoke further reflection for individuals and groups.

A Church for All is a must-read for anyone concerned about the future of the Catholic Church and presents a valuable 'Guide to the Australian Plenary Council and Beyond'.

*...we, lay people especially,
have to ask ourselves some
big questions. How much
are we prepared to commit
ourselves to refreshing this
Church of ours?*

Geraldine Doogue,
Australian journalist,
ABC radio and television host,
Eureka Street, August 2012

*... the Church as an
institution is in question,
by the state and by the
People of God...*

Prof Hans Zollner SJ,
leading Vatican expert on
clerical child sexual abuse,
The Record, Perth, June 2019



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