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For Immediate Release

Voices of the Faithful Rise Up to Be Heard

A full house of over 150 of the Catholic faithful gathered together at Yarra Theological Union (University of Divinity) in Melbourne to explore a range of issues that face the Church in Australia at the Voices of Hope and Challenge Conference 15 -17 November.

Together, these ‘Voices of Hope and Challenge’ heard from, and shared their thoughts and opinions, with an eclectic range of speakers that included Bishop Vincent Long, Dr. Noel Connolly ssc, Professor John Warhurst AO, Adelaide’s Dr. Pat Fox rsm, ACU’s Associate Professor Robyn Horner, noted journalist Paul Bongiorno, Dr. Andrew Hamilton sj, Alicia Deak, and YTU scholars Associate Professor Mary Coloe pbvm and Dr. Rosemarie Joyce csb.

Vincent Long stated forcefully the situation of the Church in Australia, “We are at ground zero.” Change must happen if we are to rise from the ashes of the Royal Commission and the scandal of abuse.

Noel Connolly spoke about the *sensus fidei fidelium* (the sense of the faith of the faithful), describing this as an “instinct for God.” Using both the Documents of Vatican II and the words of Pope Francis he spoke of the importance of the whole people of God for discerning God’s Spirit. Both Vincent and Noel explained the meaning of a New Testament word used by Pope Francis, *parrhesia*, *to speak up with boldness*.

John Warhurst AO, addressed the conference on “Inclusive, transparent and responsible governance in the Church.” John highlighted a recommendation of the Royal Commission that the Catholic Church “should conduct a national review of the governance and management structures of dioceses and parishes, including in relation to issues of transparency, accountability, consultation and participation of lay men and women.” He spoke through personal experience of the difficulty in challenging ancient processes and structures. “Holding Church authority accountable for good governance is also personally challenging and sometimes we are just not up to the challenge. It can involve interpersonal conflict and discomfort.”

Robyn Horner addressed the question, “Will our Faith have Young People?” Robyn spoke of the changing models of Religious Education as we now have a secular and pluralistic society where, according to the 2016 census, 30% of the population identify

themselves as “no religion.” In such a complex society our schools need to be safe places, with a strong Catholic identity, where young people can explore and make meaning of their lives, negotiating a Catholic identity within a secular, pluralist society.

Andy Hamilton explored clericalism and the poor relationships that result. Among other points Andy noted that, “central to clericalism is a strong emphasis on hierarchy, understood in a way that stresses the difference between lay people and priests, and the authority of priests over lay people in matters pertaining to church life...The difference between clergy and laity is expressed in the exclusion of lay people from governance and from liturgical roles.” He then took one parish as an example where in recent years clericalism and manipulation led to abuse with tragic consequences.

Alicia Deak, is the Ignatian Coordinator at St Ignatius College Geelong, responsible for formation of staff, students and parents. She shared her experience as a young woman finding her place in the Church. Alicia spoke with passion about her teaching and involvement in the Jesuit Social Justice Program.

Mary Coloe spoke on “Women’s History: Disciples, Apostles, and Deacons.” Mary provided evidence from the New Testament that women were called deacons, leaders, and apostles (16:1-2, 7). She also pointed out that there were no priests or rite of ordination in the New Testament, but there was “the breaking of the bread” and the Lord’s Supper. Then, in Patristic writings, ancient liturgies, and archeology, there is evidence that women were included in ecclesiastical orders, they were ordained, and that they were known to have titles today associated with deacons, priests and two were named ‘*episkope*’. These historical facts have only been published in the past twenty years, and she argued that the only reasons women are not ministers of the Word, and Eucharist is because “men make up the rules.”

Rosie Joyce, as a Canon lawyer, explained that Canon Law is not Divine Law, and can be changed, as it has been in the past e.g. the death penalty. Some of the laws that need to be re-examined are related to Church governance, which at present is restricted to clerics. The Royal Commission pointed to Church governance as an area that needs to be reviewed.

Patricia Fox spoke of the experience of inclusive governance in the Adelaide Church following Vatican II. After the Council, Archbishop Gleeson set up A *Diocesan*

Pastoral Council, A Council of Priests, A College of Consultors, and instructed that every parish was to have a Parish Pastoral Council.

This model of more inclusive and consultative governance continued under Archbishop Len Faulkner. It came as a surprise to Pat that the Adelaide church experience was unique. She presumed that other dioceses across Australia would be operating similarly to enact the teachings of Vatican II. She concluded with the challenging words of Pope Francis - “that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions that cannot be evaded.” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 104)

Paul Bongiorno, a well-known journalist and commentator, spoke on “Being Church beyond the Royal Commission.” Paul drew on his theological qualifications from the Pontifical Urban University in Rome, to speak of the invigorating spirit of Vatican II, but noted that this vision was undermined by the pontificates of Popes John-Paul II and Benedict XVI. Paul also observed that Cardinal George Pell exerted great influence over the Australian Church, and in the appointment of Australian bishops. Paul sees signs of hope in the more pastoral style of Pope Francis and in his writings. Alongside this there are groups of lay people emerging, who are finding ways to make their voices heard, such as Concerned Catholics and Catholics for Renewal. He quoted from the first letter of Pope Francis to the People of God, wanting “active and assertive Catholics”. Paul challenged all participants: “No more ‘sheeple’ or quiet Australian Catholics.”

In addition to the papers given by these speakers, there was time for questions, group discussion, and an Open Forum facilitated by Sr. Bernadette Keating pbvm.

The Conference, sponsored by Yarra Theological College, Garratt Publishing and Catholics for Renewal, demonstrated the clear desire of people in and out of the pews to contribute to the future of the Australian Catholic Church and to the Plenary Council’s efforts to make meaningful and lasting reform. A clear statement of outcomes, that represent the voices of those involved, will be shared with Bishops, and the Plenary Council writing Groups shortly.

Four notable issues that arose in the discussions and Open Forum were:

- The full equality of women in the Church through their appointment to positions of Governance, and ordination to the diaconate and priesthood.
- The Church, its leaders and people, must model the essence of Christianity within a secular and pluralist society. This will entail a seismic shift in traditional culture and governance, if we are to get back on the mission of Jesus.
- The reform of priestly formation which will involve an inclusive committee of competent lay, religious and ordained people. This committee will examine current practice and investigate other models such as priestly formation within the community of the faithful, rather than a segregated seminary.
- Clericalism must be eradicated, and leaders must listen to the People of God, with the aid of structures such as diocesan and parish pastoral councils, and regular assemblies and synods. All diocesan bishops, in preparing for the Plenary Council, should conduct diocesan assemblies urgently to hear the ‘sense of faith’ of their diocesan faithful.

Presentations, papers and full list of outcome statements from the conference will be published as they become available on <https://ytu.edu.au/voices-of-hope-and-challenge-conference-2019/>

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'People of God' break-out group

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