

Concerned Catholics Tasmania Inc.

20 September 2023

The President
The Australasian Catholic Press Association
mary.brazell@parracatholic.org
Attention: Mr Neil Helmore

Dear Mr Helmore

Bishop Philip Kennedy Memorial Award for Overall Excellence in a Catholic Publication

We write as members of the Church in the Archdiocese of Hobart regarding this recent award presented by the Australasian Catholic Press Association, and the coverage of same in CathNews.

In Tasmania, generally we are pleased when our successes are justifiably recognised on the national and international stage. However, the presentation of the *Bishop Philip Kennedy Memorial Award for Overall Excellence in a Catholic Publication* to the *Catholic Standard* has been met with dismay and the decision to make the award is perplexing, particularly how the judges concluded that it “eminently reflects the uniqueness and richness of the Catholic community of Australia’s only island state”. Terms such as “excellent balance” and “diverse content” are out of touch with the ordinary Catholic experience of our monthly newspaper.

In writing this letter, we do wish to acknowledge that the *Catholic Standard* is, as the ACPA President notes, achieved “with limited resources”. We are a small diocese with a small media team, and we are not questioning the dedication and commitment of those who work for the publication. There is some very good, well written content. Our concerns are with the vision for the paper and whether it is indeed fulfilling the mission of a Catholic publication.

It seems clear that the judges were not fully aware of a number of features of our Catholic paper. It is a paper without “balance” or “diverse content” and does little to help readers engage with current issues and the Church’s mission here, for example:

- It gave scant attention to the Plenary and has largely ignored the Synod, thereby failing to inform readers about the significance of such events for the future of the Church or exposing them to some of the key issues that were discussed at the Plenary, or that will be debated at the Synod.
- How will Tasmanian Catholics hear of such things as the steps taken to include lay participation in the Synod and understand the significance of this, or be informed of the key issues outlined in the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod (remembering that part of the synodal process is meant to be reporting back to the faithful at all stages and encouraging debate)?
- In addition, the *Catholic Standard* has done nothing to help us prepare for the Voice referendum through formation in Catholic social teachings. Not even the ACBC Statement on the matter was published or referenced.

- Whilst we enjoy some limited news of Pope Francis, there is no mention of his pastoral focus and emphasis in relation to such things as marriage, access to eucharist for the divorced, clericalism, Church hierarchy or the place of women in the Church.
- Significant encyclicals or documents are rarely mentioned and not 'broken open' to educate and form the faithful. Likewise, there is little space for current thought that might encourage informed debate, or any direction to possible readings or resources. There is no avenue from opinion such as through letters to the editor.

There is an apparent bias, however, with extensive reporting on conservative events, such as one in which a presentation by a prominent climate change sceptic, which included strong criticism of *Laudato Si'*, was given full page coverage. Likewise, a recent event on 'wokery' received the full page treatment. Other events, such as those organised by our association to promote understanding and debate on the Plenary or the Synod, or to break open *Laudato Si'*, or to educate on Catholic social teachings and the Voice, are not permitted to be promoted through the *Catholic Standard* and are not reported upon.

It seems to us that *the Catholic Standard* does a good job in reporting on events and opinions pertaining to the "official" Church (the Archbishop and diocesan agencies), as it should. It is community building to have achievements, historical milestones and personal stories celebrated in picture and story. However, it has a long way to go to meet the judges' assertion that it provides us with "informative, uplifting, relevant and diverse content".

It has been said that the *Catholic Standard* is the official newspaper of the Archdiocese and must reflect the official view. Yet our Pope urges honest and constructive debate and an openness to contrary views. We can assure you that the Catholic community in Tasmania has a richness and diversity that is, sadly, *not* reflected in the narrow view and agenda of the *Catholic Standard*. The reported "current circulation of 22,000" may be correct, but accounts from parishes, and particularly from schools, make it embarrassingly clear that readership is a small fraction of this.

The *Catholic Standard* tells a part of our story; it does not enhance our growth, nor does it inspire us to delve into its pages.

We urge your association to continue to seek the common good. In order for your association's awards to retain significance, the recipients need to be seen by the faithful as worthy of those awards. Consequently, we suggest that the eligibility criteria need to be published and coupled to rigorous verification processes. We maintain that, had your association cast its net more widely, it would have discovered that the *Catholic Standard* newspaper is not held in high regard by many of the lay faithful and clergy in Tasmania and that fact, in our view, has the potential to diminish your association's reputation here in Tasmania.

Our hope in raising our concerns is that something good will come of it.

Yours sincerely



Susan Chen

Chair - Concerned Catholics Tasmania