

## **Chair's fourth Annual Report**

Good morning, everyone. As chair, I officially open the fourth annual general meeting of Concerned Catholics Tasmania Inc.

Thank you, Peter for the acknowledgment of country. I, too, pay my respects to elders, past and present. Thank you, Cathy, for your thought provoking reflection.

To the comments made by Chris, I would simply add that Carey's journey with CCT began at its inception on 7 December 2019 when 60 Catholics from around Tasmania met at St Patrick's College to share our concern for the church in Tasmania. I well remember he spoke with honesty about his experiences, his deep concerns and scepticism about the church's capacity for reform. Yet, both he and Judy joined a committee to investigate the possibility of a Concerned Catholics Tasmania movement. Both then joined the Board and their contribution has been foundational in the establishment and growth of CCT.

We miss you Carey and we ask the Lord to enfold Judy and her family with grace and love and may Carey's faith, integrity and courage sustain us all.

In less than three months' time, our Archbishop will tender his resignation. Our hope is that we will soon have an archbishop who is pastoral, inclusive and open to the needs of the laity in Tasmania. The attributes we are hoping for in our next archbishop are published on our website. We have shared those hopes with the Apostolic Nuncio and more recently with Archbishop Tim Costelloe, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference.

The temptation is to coast along until our next archbishop takes up office. However, the hardships and difficulties our members and associates are experiencing remain to be addressed.

Just last week, we were alerted to a conference to be held in Hobart, Launceston, Adelaide, and Perth, entitled "Church and State". Archbishop Porteous will be one of the 11 male speakers and 1 female speaker. The advertising material reveals that the Archbishop has again aligned our Church with conservative political organisations which are ideologically motivated and insistent upon promoting some and excluding others, which is foreign to the message of the Gospels and Pope Francis's call for an inclusive church. We can be very proud of Catholic social teaching and its preferential option for the poor. Pope Francis shows us how to link faith and culture and participate in the public square. Importantly, our CCT independent voice is needed to contest the perception that our Archbishop speaks for all Catholics in Tasmania.

CCT's focus and hope for the future is centred on the Synod on Synodality, the first session of which was held in October 2023 and attended by our guest speaker, Sandie

Cornish whose experiences and reflections we will soon hear. The Synthesis report which emanated from that session has been open for consultation around the world at the Diocesan level since 1 February 2024.

Having heard nothing concerning that consultation process by 12 February, CCT wrote to the Archbishop and we were pleasantly surprised to be invited to provide input to the Diocesan response document. The committee has been working on a proposed response, which will be shared with you after our session with Sandie, and your input sought, with the aim to meet the deadline of 30 March.

Francis Sullivan who has addressed our organisation in the past recently wrote in Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulbourn newsletter in relation to the synod, that

*the church's focus on structures, doctrine, ritual and practice must not obscure the deeper things these elements are designed to hold and express. That is, the way of Jesus, the presence to us all and all humanity – in, with and through the reality of our lives, of a God who is love. And that energy of love sees all, holds all and heals all. For the Church to represent anything contrary to this is a travesty of it, and of our call and responsibility. The Synod on Synodality is the opportunity to let go and reimagine a truly authentic response to the Gospel.*

Other concerns CCT addressed during the year included:

- (a) Low morale and poor culture in Catholic education. Prompted by requests at the last AGM, CCT wrote to the Archbishop raising concerns about the leadership of Catholic education in Tasmania. They were based on multiple complaints and anxieties that Catholics and other stakeholders across the state have shared with us. These include parishioners, parents, grand-parents, TCEO staff, Catholic Education Tasmania (CET) staff in schools, and Union officials. We asked for an independent investigation to identify the nature of the current culture in CET. The archbishop, however, was satisfied with the results of an internal investigation, which essentially told him there was nothing to be concerned about.
- (b) Regional Gatherings were held on July 15 and attended by more than 80 people. The theme, “The winter doldrums of our church” provided plenty of scope for table sharing.
- (c) Support for the Submission by *Catholics for Renewal* on the Exposure Draft of the Australian Government’s Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023: We wrote that in Tasmania, we have concerns regarding the current Catholic Church senior leadership, which is openly committed to implementing the traditional doctrine of the Church that condemns homosexuality as an ‘objective disorder’ and homosexual acts as morally

‘disordered’. This teaching has the potential to damage the human dignity and rights of staff, clients and students in the Catholic Diocese who identify as LGBTIQ+.

- (d) In July, CCT sought information about the proposed archdiocesan response to the formation needs of the faithful in the matter of the upcoming referendum. The archbishop’s response was to refer to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) Statement of May 11. A search of our archdiocesan website, and The Catholic Standard, did not find any reference to this important guiding document. We are not sure how the ACBC Statement can “encourage everyone to read and discuss the Uluru Statement” when the ACBC statement of encouragement was not promulgated in our archdiocese. The Statement concluded: In particular, we recommend that Catholic parishes, schools and agencies arrange opportunities for people to come together to read and discuss the Uluru Statement. CCT is unaware of any such initiatives, and, indeed, whether “parishes, school and agencies” were alerted to this recommendation of the ACBC.
- (e) In the absence of Archdiocesan leadership, CCT organised a regional gathering to assist members and supporters to discern a faith-based response to the referendum. This was well attended, and the resulting discernment encouraged CCT to prepare an Opinion piece for the Mercury newspaper, which was published in the days leading up to the referendum.
- (f) In September we wrote to the Australasian Catholic Press Association in response to the “Overall Excellence in a Publication Award” won by the Standard. While praising the Standard for some of its reporting, we noted there had been scant attention given to the Plenary Council, Synod and the Voice referendum. We complained that there is limited news about Pope Francis’s pastoral focus, eg access to the Eucharist for the divorced, his views on clericalism and the place of women in the church. Encyclicals are rarely mentioned and not broken open. No response was received.
- (g) The Executive Director of Catholic Education, Dr Gerard Gaskin, received national media attention on 4 December 2023, after posting an article on the Archdiocese of Hobart website questioning the Consent and Respectful Relationships Education (CRRE) measure, a new measure announced by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in the Health and Physical Education learning area. CCT provided members with a paper raising concerns about Dr Gaskin’s narrow interpretation of consent education as being about sexual activity.
- (h) Year 11 and 12 Religious Education continues to be controversial: At our last AGM, members raised concerns about an entirely new curriculum being introduced by CET that was traditionalist and was being added to an already onerous senior

secondary curriculum. Under pressure, CET was forced to shelve their plans at least temporarily. However, they turned their attention to the Year 12 pre-tertiary Studies in Religion course and attempted to dictate to the Catholic Colleges that only Judeo-Christian religions and ethical issues from a Catholic Christian perspective be taught. As a result of teachers complaining, a small group of retired senior Catholic educators wrote to the Tasmanian Assessment, Standards & Certification (TASC) Board expressing concern. Indications are that CET has had to back off once again.

- (i) Proposed Banning of Conversion Practices Bill Tasmania: In February, CCT prepared a detailed submission to the Attorney General arguing that we could not support the Bill because it does not achieve the noble objectives, we had hoped it would achieve, as it does not effectively address the damage caused by sexual orientation and gender identity conversion practices.
- (j) Representations to politicians about the ongoing plight of asylum seekers and refugees, particularly in Papua New Guinea is ongoing, both by letter and in person.

CCT continues to look for opportunities for Catholics in Tasmania to gather for formation and conversations at local, national, and international levels about our spirituality and how best that might be lived out. ACCCR sponsored conversations with leading international theologians, national forums on the Synod etc. sometimes feature our committee member, Trish Hindmarsh.

Given that there could be momentous change in our church in Tasmania in the year ahead with the installation of the next Archbishop and outcomes from the Synod in October 2024, we look forward to actively participating in a church (to quote Pope Francis) “moving not occasionally but structurally towards a synodal church, an open square where all can feel at home and participate.”

Before I conclude, I would like to thank all those who are helping us on the CCT journey.

Thank you, our members and supporters. Your attendance and membership greatly encourage the committee. Continue to let us know what aspects of Church you would like us to address.

Thank you to all our committee members for your hard work this year.

To Vin, thanks for your wisdom and keeping us up to date regarding refugee concerns.

To Trish, thank you for your tireless efforts, razor sharp mind, depth of theological understanding and knowledge of church life in so many areas.

To Donna, thank you for your ongoing work as treasurer and the planning for these annual events.

To Sue Hyslop, thank you for your energy as Secretary being the conduit for disseminating information to and gathering responses from members and others.

To Judy for your work in keeping the website up to date.

To Chris, our vice president, editor of our Newsletter who can always be relied upon to give sage advice, thank you.

To Cathy, who, sadly, is resigning from the committee. Thank you for your wise input especially around the psychological needs of children and your concern for refugees and asylum seekers. We will miss your contribution.

To Peter, organiser of our committee Reflection Day and Ann Brereton who has taken on the role of minutes secretary for the committee. Thank you.

To Kim, thanks for your many hours of research, your analysis and understanding of complex issues, and drafting efforts.

We have two vacancies on the committee (Cathy and Carey) and encourage you to give serious thought to joining us. In particular, we need voices from the north and north west since Kim and I now live in Hobart. If you don't wish to volunteer, you might like to nominate someone else with their consent. Because of the late notice, both positions will be appointed by the committee until next year's AGM.

To everyone, your presence here today and support during the year is very encouraging and enlivening for us. We do ask that you pray and think about how CCT might best achieve its aims and please communicate that to us.

May the joy and peace of Christ be with you and remain with you always.