

## Plenary Council 2020. A Progress Report

27 March 2020

One of the most remarkable aspects of contemporary Australian Catholicism is the committed and unshakeable loyalty of a small, active group of people to the vision of renewal proposed by Vatican Council II. Despite the tedious and, at times, vicious culture war waged against the Council by a tiny group of reactionary Catholics and their bishop allies and the widespread, on-going leadership failure of most of the rest of the bishops appointed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, these people have remained true to the Vatican II vision of the church.

As the historian, theologian and cardinal, John Henry Newman pointed out, it was the faithful, not the bishops who in the fourth century saved the church from the Arian heresy. “The Catholic people,” Newman says, “in the length and breadth of Christendom, were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not...We are obliged to say that the governing body of the Church came short, and the governed were pre-eminent in faith, zeal, courage, and constancy” (*Arians of the Fourth Century*). He could be talking about Vatican II Catholics.

It was on the basis of this fidelity that Newman developed his theology of the *sensus fidei fidelium* (literally ‘the sense of faith of the faithful’), a theological teaching that has become increasingly important in the lead-up to the Plenary. The doctrine has roots deep in the Catholic tradition, and in 2014 the International Theological Commission defined it: “The faithful have an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables them to recognise and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and practice and to reject what is false...[This] gift of faith received in the communion of the church, is called the *sensus fidei*, and it enables Christians to fulfil their prophetic calling.”

What we see in Australia is the fidelity of Vatican II Catholics in contrast to the largescale failure of fear-filled bishops to exercise that “prophetic calling.” We saw 220,000 of these loyal people in action across the country in 2018-2019, as they participated in diocesan and parish groups answering the forthcoming Plenary Council’s open-ended question, “What is God asking of the Australian church?”

Needless to say, this nebulous question produced a plethora of discordant or, at best, semi-connected answers and issues. These were reduced by the Plenary organizers into six rather bland “national themes for discernment.”

To give some substance to these themes, six “discernment and writing groups” were set-up with the task of drafting thematic papers towards forming the agenda for the Plenary, but given the nebulous themes, you wonder what the groups could produce besides pious platitudes. Also established—largely on the recommendation of the sexual abuse Royal Commission—was a group to review church governance. The membership of this group was qualified and informed, but like the work of the writing groups, we still await the publication of their recommendations.

On 23 March 2020 Perth archbishop, Timothy Costelloe released a list of those who were invited to attend the Plenary. This list includes those who attend *ex officio* and those who have been invited. According to Costelloe, canon law decrees that “bishops, vicars general, episcopal vicars, heads of seminaries and theological institutions, and leaders of religious congregations” must attend. According to Peter Wilkinson’s count, about 274 people will

attend. Of these 144 are clerics (56.3% of total), 77 are lay women—27 religious sisters and 50 non-religious women—which is 30.1% of the total and 53 are lay men which is 13.7% of the total.

Costelloe says it was “important to prioritise lay people—and especially lay women.” He said that the fifty lay women and thirty-one men invitees “far surpasses anything seen before,” not surprising since the last Plenary was held eighty-three years ago in 1937 and that was an essentially clerical council under the 1917 Code of Canon Law

But it’s not just a matter of numbers. It is also a question of the kind of attitudes that attendees bring to the discussion. Certainly, the majority of the religious sisters and brothers attending the Plenary will support Vatican II renewal. This is probably true also of many of the priests.

The bishops and *ex officio* attendees and invited laypeople are a more complex group. Certainly, there are very few people from active renewal groups; John Warhurst from Concerned Catholics: Canberra-Goulburn is the only one I can spot. Without a doubt there are *ex officio* participants—including several bishops—and invitees who sympathise with the Vatican II vision, but I suspect they are a minority. I also note the presence of some prominent “culture warriors” of the right.

Another issue is the appointment of people employed by the church. Certainly, many of these are professionals, but the fact that they are employed by bishops or church bodies means they have to be careful. Whatever their real sympathies, usually they’re not going to go out on a limb to support renewal, or oppose their bishop. On my count at least twenty-one of the eighty-one lay appointees either work directly for the church, or for para-church organizations.

Turning now to the issues that the Plenary will consider: the organizers say that the church’s primary focus should be “missionary and evangelizing.” The fundamental task of a missionary church is to be out-going, open to all. To achieve this, Australian Catholics need the facility to think, speak and relate in ways that make sense of belief in terms of contemporary culture and rhetoric. However, despite the Plenary’s claims to be missionary, there seems to be little, either theologically or sociologically, about mission and how Australian culture and society are to be evangelized. The whole feel is inward-looking and self-enclosed.

Even though the bishops and Plenary administrators initially refused to release the 17,457 individual and group submissions they received—an extraordinary response from faithful Catholics—we do know that many were focused on aspects of church governance and structure, as well as enhancing the ministerial and ecclesial role of women, all of which is partly reflected in the second summary topic that the church be “inclusive, participatory and synodal.”

The most that can be said for the other topics—that the church be prayerful, eucharistic, humble, healing, merciful, joyful, hope-filled, and open to conversion, renewal and reform—is that they are so nebulous, pietistic and vague as to render them useless for any coherent discussion, let alone teasing out the underlying ecclesiological, cultural and sociological issues. These are sentiments with which everyone agrees, but they are certainly not the basis for a serious discussion leading to reform and renewal.

What is clear is that many bishops, most likely the majority, are indifferent to the Plenary. A small number actively oppose it. In fact, most bishops have shown little or no enthusiasm, and since the initial consultation they have done virtually nothing in their dioceses to promote

further preparatory discussion among priests and people. Some are busy setting all types of limits for topics that can be discussed.

An example of this is Bishop Anthony Randazzo, recently appointed to Broken Bay diocese, and for five years in the 1980s a minor official in the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the old Holy Office of the Inquisition. Speaking explicitly about the consultation phase in preparation for the Plenary, Randazzo casts anyone suggesting real change as calling for a "new church." He told *The Catholic Weekly* (September 30, 2019): "I must be honest that when I hear the cry for 'a new Church' it distresses me more than a little. [It]...incites us to throw away what exists. To cast away the Church would be to reject Christ himself and to renounce our faith in Him as the Saviour of the world."

This is classical Holy Office, Joseph Ratzinger-style argumentation. Cast the view you oppose in its most extreme form, reduce it to absurdity, then you can easily reject it. According to Randazzo, anyone suggesting any type of ecclesial change is really advocating for a "new church" and that involves rejecting Christ "as the Saviour of the world." This is nonsense, but it's the classical Holy Office approach. Here I speak from experience.

Perhaps some of Randazzo's "new church" topics are those advocated by the National Council of Priests in their submission to the Plenary. The NCP supported lifting mandatory celibacy and allowing former Catholic priests who left to marry to return to ministry.

NCP chairman, Father Paddy Sykes, spoke of the Plenary being "bit of a stacked deck" of delegates opposed to genuine reform, particularly in the area of priestly ministry. He highlights the flaws in the process: "The question is, whose names have been moved forward" and whose names excluded? As so often in the Australian church, there was a total absence of transparency and accountability.

I suspect that in several dioceses the delegates will be not only the predictable conservatives, but also enthusiastic, sincere and zealous young people whose enthusiasm is wonderful, but who perhaps don't appreciate the experience that older, committed Vatican II Catholics bring to church governance and ministry.

Finally, the bishops are the only ones with a deliberative vote. Everyone else has a consultative vote. But because the whole affair will be public—apparently it will be live-streamed—then the bishops will look bad if they don't follow consultative votes. Canon law actually requires decision makers to have serious regard to consultative votes (Canon 127). However, ignoring the faithful never seems to have worried them much in the past.

I'm not over-optimistic about the Plenary. I wish I had more faith, but experience has taught me to be sceptical. But perhaps, in the end we'll be saved by "an act of God", the COVID-19 virus lock-down. You just never know!

*This report was prepared by Paul Collins for the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCCR).*