

## **Response to Papers from Terry Fewtrell and Andrew Phelan: Writing and Discernment Papers – Where to from here?**

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That important question “*What is GOD asking of the Church in Australia at this time?*” has been asked again and again throughout the Plenary Council process.

But, of course, how do we know that the discernment papers that have been reviewed are filled with a genuine summary of the experiences of the length and breadth of the Australian Church?

The two papers we have listened to this evening speak to the interesting divisions we are experiencing in our church, and it makes for a fraught, and sociologically fascinating Plenary Council process. But is it worthwhile? Or is the PC simply an expensive public relations exercise being undertaken by the Bishops conference in reparation for the sins exposed by the Royal Commission?

And what if God or Holy Spirit asks us to do the unorthodox, to turn over the proverbial tables in the synagogue?

It seems from the discernment papers that according to the people of God the spirit wants to see more discussion on the problems of clericalism, women’s participation, healing for abuse survivors, exploration of questions of lay participation, inclusiveness, humility.

And what about the poor?

Francis, when elected Pope, was told by Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummus to ‘not forget about the poor’.

Francis’ blueprint has been that he wants a poor church, for the poor. He wants shepherds that smell like their sheep.

Sadly, while we have some wonderful leaders in our episcopacy here, we also have leaders, well-meaning as they may be, getting up at conferences saying things like: ‘Sometimes I think I should get out of my big house, my big office and out into the streets.’

We have bishops who live in spacious multi-bedroom apartments while empty presbyteries fill their dioceses. These facts ring hollow when the same bishops don their fleeces and beanies for the Vinnies CEO sleepout.

This is where it gets a bit confusing. We seem to be a church incapable of warming hearts and minds, more concerned with the physical accoutrements of the buildings that nobody really visits anymore. We need servant leadership, not princes in palaces. Recently I was interviewed by ABC about women in the church, and they emphasised the idea of women being cardinals, indeed, princesses of the church. This is technically possible since it doesn't require ordination, and even Pope John Paul II is said to have thought about making Mother Teresa a Cardinal. However, the ABC seemed fixated on the idea and couldn't be persuaded that this might not be the silver-bullet solution to all of the gender power imbalances in our church. As much as I am all for a greater role for women in decision-making, it needs to be done right. We don't need princes or princesses either – we need people to wash feet, we need new models of servant leadership.

Therefore, with all these competing interests, it will be hard to condense advice to the Plenary Council down to something that really will be transformative for such a fractured church. We need to know that this is a job we can finish. Indeed, the two papers we have listened to this evening point to some very obvious flaws in a process that can never be perfect.

I suppose if I can sum up my own hope for the Plenary Council is that those who will vote, that is the Bishops, and those who will participate in the main event, will listen carefully to the *"sensus fidelium"*, trusting that they have consulted their consciences and have discerned what God is asking of the Church. And then, we need to accept that the bishops are the only ones that have a vote. When the vote takes place and the findings are sent to Rome, how confident can we be that change will occur? Will the changes be window dressing? Will this be like the Second Vatican Council, a breath of fresh air that those who seek a remnant church simply want to extinguish with copious amounts of incense?

On the particular day I started preparing this response, I noticed with interest that a young person from the Parramatta Diocese had started a Change.org petition on social media in a bizarre and ill-informed attempt to get Bishop Vincent Long van Nguyen OFM Conv removed as Bishop of that diocese. Distressed people from the Diocese of Parramatta were so incensed that their spelling suffered – most couldn't spell the word Parramatta, and they decried the supposed efforts of the Bishop to introduce Gender Ideology and Atheism into religious education in Diocesan schools, and accused him of wanting the

Eucharist referred to as Bread and Wine throughout the diocese. He was also accused of bullying priests who defended traditional marriage. This commentary was concerning in the very least of which because none of it is true, the information about Catholic Education had been taken from that most reliable source of journalistic integrity the *Sunday Telegraph*, and not one of the people who commented had any idea about theology, or even the fact that a change.org petition would affect absolutely nothing if the Apostolic Nuncio wasn't aware of it. This example, of which I could provide many, goes some way toward illustrating how deep the divide is between Catholics, almost amounting to all-out schism.

So much of the outcome of this Plenary Council will be wrapped up in, indeed, depend upon our image of church. And with such a broad church, and with a recognition of its diversity, my main hope would be that after the Plenary Council has run its course, that the Church in Australia might become a place where, however fleetingly, people may continue to, or perhaps for the first time experience something of Jesus within her embrace.

When I was researching for my book *All the beautiful things*, I found many insightful phrases, quotes, books, reasons that people had to say about their reasons for remaining.

There was Francis Sullivan, a member of this group who wrote that despite all the failings that he was staying, because, "where else would he go?"

I read another book called *Attachments: Letters from a Most Unlikely Friendship*, where after some years of friendship former actress and author Ailsa Piper writes a letter to Monsignor Tony Doherty where she is trying to make sense of the Church, particularly considering the sexual abuse scandals.

In her letter to Doherty, she refers to the Church as a 'bullying father'. Doherty expresses his hurt and surprise, and writes the most beautiful response:

*It's a curious thing: a frequent image of the church that comes to mind for me is that of a frail, aged mother grown old with her faults and limitations, her superstitions and rock like prejudices but one who has given life to me and who I love with a passion.... . . To describe this gigantic network of good and bad, fragile and strong, arrogant and unsure, self-satisfied and battlers as a bullying father is a little disconcerting. One of the colourful Gospel images is of a large net of odd fish, pulled up on a beach. I prefer that. We're a pretty mixed lot you*

*know. If I am passionately committed to one thing is to explain to you how difficult it is to wrestle with the ambiguities and tensions within the church today, while at the same time holding onto integrity and being a genuine minister of the Gospel.*

And finally, this quote from author Brennan Manning really sums up for me one of the biggest problems we have as a church in his book “The Furious Longing for God”. He writes:

*The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.*

So. Jesus as our model for our lifestyle. It seems obvious, but it’s still missing from much of the Plenary Council process.

I want to end with a short snippet from my book that has helped me in those moments when I have had deep questions.

*It was 2013 and the conclave that would elect Francis had not yet begun. In the lively social media commentary around #conclave2013, a meme emerged in Spanish with a cartoon of a grumpy looking cardinal with a thought bubble. In this image the window to the Sistine Chapel is closed and the thought bubble reads: ‘Twitter will be completely prohibited from the conclave.’ Outside the window is a frantic dove, knocking on the glass. ‘Let me in’, says the dove, ‘I’m not twitter, I’m the Holy Spirit.’*

*Yet, we can perhaps all agree that the Holy Spirit was present that day when Francis was elected, and we can only hope that the Plenary Council too ends up being a spirit-led process.*

*Whatever of our scales we need to shed as a Church in order to be renewed, it will need courage and vision. There remains a seed of hope in my heart; a sense that, if I leave, more will be lost than gained.*

*My friends, I want to be part of a solution, a reformation, a rebuilding.*

*As I finish this writing journey, I am reminded of the words of poet James McAuley’s ‘In a late hour’. Once again, it is by gathering together fragments, words and thoughts of the wide, expansive communion that is the Catholic Church that gives me the impetus, energy and hope to start again.*

*In the poem, McAuley writes:*

*While the stars run distracted*

*And from wounds deep rancours flow*

*While the mystery is enacted*

*I will not let you go.*