

4 October 2021

Listening – 4 October 2021

Blog by Francis Sullivan, CSSA Chair

Today's sessions have stressed the importance of listening as the key to the discernment process. Not as simple as it sounds. I certainly have entered this process having read plenty and talked to many. We were asked to take this seriously and I assume most members have likewise done some homework and sought the views of others. The degree to which members have been involved in support groups, discussion nights or even formal renewal organisations will vary. What probably doesn't differ is the sincerity of their involvement and desire to help bring about change.

That is why I am perplexed by those who express concern that the Plenary Council could simply be a political play and a tussle akin to factional politics.

To reduce Church dynamics to that of mere politics is too simplistic. Of course, there will be strongly held views. These often come from very educated people, theologically trained and pastorally experienced. Others are widely read or have lived through tough times and struggled to remain engaged with the Church, and so express themselves accordingly.

There will be people who have grown frustrated by what they have encountered as the rigidity of the Church, its judgmental tone and absolutist postures. They, too, can express disenchantment, even despair that their sense of belonging is being undermined.

There are others too who feel unsettled by challenges to their understanding of Church and religious practice. They likewise express trepidations over the future of the Church through the lens of what has worked for them and the communities they belong to.

These are not political statements, nor are they weaponised chants to either bring down or fortify the institution, as if they are part of some political crusade. Nor are they shots over the bows of episcopal authority.

For me, they are genuine voices that cry out to be heard. They are the groans of a people wanting to cultivate a place of nurture and spiritual and moral direction. A place that is inclusive and respectful of differences. A place that actually makes real our belief that God is love, and we are here to explore how love works.

Some bishops, for years now, have been concerned that the Plenary Council will be used to weaken the notion of an episcopal led Church.

Frankly, we don't have the time to entertain that reactionary approach.

We do need bishops and laypeople to stand shoulder and shoulder together, looking in the same direction, implementing a strategy of mission that builds unity across differences.

To that end, the Assembly will need to get down to specifics. As I indicated in my blog yesterday, I raised the issue of women's participation in governance and ordained ministries in the Open Assembly today.

I will respect the privacy of those discussions but be reassured that many members have contacted me expressing support for this issue and indicated their desire to advance it in the course of the Assembly's dialogues.

We also began the small group process this afternoon. I have been allocated to a group that is exploring two questions:

(1) How might we better accompany one another on the journey of personal and communal conversion, which mission in Australia requires?

(2) How might the Church in Australia respond to the call to 'ecological conversion'? How can we express and promote a commitment to an 'integral ecology of life' in all its dimensions, with particular attention to the more vulnerable people and environments in our country and region?

Francis Sullivan