

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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Plenary INSIGHT A Daily Blog



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DOES THE AGENDA REFLECT THE HARD WORK IN THE 17,500 SUBMISSIONS?

The Plenary Council operates both plenary, that is for all members, and small group sessions. The action began on the first day with a plenary session, the first 75 minutes of which was live streamed. This public part was in some aspects truly inspirational, but largely involved the formalities. These included the requisite profession of faith signed by all members.

The remainder of the session included the first statements, known as Interventions, by members. Then the council went back behind closed doors. This was the chance for members to state their opinion on the controversial Agenda Questions, the starting point of proceedings. The background was the many calls by the church reform movement to throw out the agenda as unfit for purpose. Today, Terry Fewtrell, in the Australian newspaper, reiterated the timidity of the Agenda.

My intention was to take the opportunity to draw a line in the sand by recording for posterity that there was a serious disconnect between the voices of the faithful, voiced with enormous passion and effort, and the final 'distilled' version. In doing so I was expressing a widely held view among council members. It had to be said if the Assembly was not to drift into 'business as usual' mode.

Members took their chance with alacrity. Eleven spoke to their written statements and another five spontaneously. Both the speakers and the content were diverse, much of it fresh but some reflecting newspaper debates. Bishops were prominent. Topics were varied, including marriage, secular society and young people, and some not easily pigeon-holed. An increased role for women in the church was taken up by various speakers, lay and religious, and pointed references made to the minority representation of women (89) and laity (91).

I urged respect for the submissions made during the consultative process.

I wish to urge the Plenary Council to remember and respect the 17,500 submissions made during the consultative process. Priorities emerged clearly during the process [such as inclusiveness and equality for women in church governance]. I do not believe that these priorities and proposals have been

reflected clearly enough in the official 16 Agenda Questions. I do not know why the Agenda Questions have disregarded the force of the submissions and because the process of drafting the Agenda Questions was neither synodal nor transparent we may never know.

Small group work then began in the afternoon in ten groupings and the first directions to emerge will be reported on Tuesday. This spiritual conversation process has been compared to the Camino pilgrimage, that is long and slow and proceeding at varied pace, rather than a quick fix. Br Ian Cribb SJ, an enthusiastic proponent, has been wary about how well the methodology can work under virtual conditions rather than face to face, and another Jesuit has cautioned me that 'spiritual conversation presumes a lot of things before it bears genuine fruit'.

I'll give it every chance. My first experience was a learning experience. Both my 'large' small group of 28 and my 'smaller' small group of nine represented the diversity of the church in Australia: geographical; Latin and Eastern rites; gender; age; profession; clerical, religious and lay. Members feel privileged, excited, determined, overwhelmed, daunted, and challenged (one or all of the above), but generally ready for the task before them.

A couple of final points. The work of the council is supported by many chairs (Theresa Simon from Sydney today), facilitators and technical advisers, coordinated by the Facilitation Team. They can make or break the council and, as anyone with experience in this field knows, may even materially affect the shape of the outcomes. The role of the twenty periti or experts is very much a work in process. While some are clear that their role means that 'we don't speak until we are spoken to', others are uncertain. It just shows that we are all learning as we go.

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