

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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Plenary INSIGHT

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FORMALITIES ASIDE....

Today has been one without either live streaming or small group work as the whole Plenary Council turns its attention to the crucial Questions 2 and 4, which deal with the church and the wounds of abuse and our reaching out to the vulnerable in society. Much turns on today and just what form any later public statement takes needs considerable thought.

The whole current episcopate is present in the Council, meaning that each of the ten small groups includes about four bishops. Their presence is central to two broad issues which have been discussed through the lead up to the Council, including during the formation sessions: hierarchy and formality.

Because I have been around the national church for several decades I know about a dozen of the bishops in one way or another. Some I consider friends. They treat me as friends do and I hope the reverse is true. Excessive hierarchy and formality doesn't intrude too much.

Both these matters are organisational and cultural issues in broader society, including in families and work situations. I have come across them daily in my life as a university professor. How should students relate to me and how should I relate to my Vice-Chancellor? My preference is to break down hierarchy and formality as much as possible outside ceremonial occasions, but there are pitfalls for all concerned because cultural norms are deeply embedded.

Within the church much church reform, if it includes synodality and co-responsibility, depends on a loosening up of that hierarchy and formality. The matter was widely discussed during the formation sessions without any agreed conclusion because there are many perspectives. But fair to say that a majority of all classes of Plenary Council members, in my estimation, favour less of both hierarchy and formality. But putting that into practice quickly is not easy because the existing culture is embedded in our DNA in various ways. The matter of the use of first names in official identification during the council will now be resolved and implemented before the Second Assembly. At the moment it is formal.

Both hierarchy and formality are on display within the Council. I know some participants, lay, religious and clerical welcome it for religious, cultural and personal reasons.

Each day Mass is celebrated before the working sessions begin. A media release follows, incorporating the remarks the bishop has made during his homily. These media releases are then taken up and distributed more widely by CathNews and other official sources.

Does this matter? First, it gives the bishops a loud and privileged voice compared to other Plenary Council members. Secondly, even with the best will in the world those voices contain perspectives on what the church stands for and how it operates which frame the discussions within the Council.

Could it have been avoided? Perhaps not, because it is the natural order of things. But some consideration could have been given to distributing the masses among a wider range of clergy, including those in outback rural and regional locations. We should have also found a way for the ban on lay women and men preaching to have been finessed in some way, perhaps through alternative liturgies.

There is also the matter of what the broader society expects. It still wants to hear above all from the bishops, including if, and when, the Plenary Council issues a public statement regarding its deliberations today.

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