



## LIGHT FROM THE SOUTHERN CROSS – SUNDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2021

10 October 2021

**Blog by Francis Sullivan, CSSA Chair**

**(Final entry)**

I have left the First Assembly of the Plenary Council optimistic that change is coming. What that looks like is unclear. Plenty of balls have been tossed in the air. Resolutions have been crafted somewhat hastily. But the Show is moving and the collective imagination has been ignited.

Councillors have been positive and constructive. The magnitude of the task is dawning as the diversity of views and appreciations of the role and purpose of the Church percolate through the discernment groups' reports and the interventions from Members. I assumed that this was always going to be the case. The organisers deliberately designed a process that would elicit the varieties of ways Catholics understand their faith, their practice and their Church. So, to that end, the Assembly has done its job.

Yet, the real job is to confront the crisis the Church faces. A crisis that is both of its own making but also one that asks squarely what is the value of religious faith in our world today? People have left the Church either through disgust with the history of abuse scandals or because they no longer relate to it for various reasons. Certainly, on the latter, it seems Pope Francis wants the Church to make the shift from its usual propositional stance to one of mission. A shift that emphasises mercy and compassion before seeking to engage in a dialogue of ideas and philosophy.


When it comes to the abuse scandals, the Church has nowhere to hide. The civil authorities did what the Church could not do for itself. That is, fess up! The culture of the institution is ingrained with a self-protective instinct. There are endless excuses why those in positions of authority and influence did not discharge their duties morally and legally. There is an almost knee jerk submission by the laity to senior clerics that stifles honesty and perpetuates secrecy and concealment. Church leaders and their advisors take an "institution first" risk management approach to victims' complaints and abuse allegations. This is a culture that is prepared to set itself up against the world to the very point that it paid lip service to the laws of the land and the dictates of human decency.

It is this culture that must change and change quickly.

Calls for improved governance come straight from the Royal Commission's damning finding on the Church leadership. Calls for increased participation of women in governance and ministries, like the diaconate, come from revelations at the Royal Commission over the toxic influences of clericalism. These are just two areas that must be addressed upfront.

Let's not kid ourselves; with all the best will in the world, these issues will be strongly contested. That contest will be held within the context where Councillors are grappling with the balance between a restorationist/rehabilitation instinct and a reimagination/reformist instinct. It's time for a "Catholic Third Way" in order to triangulate these tectonic plates on which the Assembly teeters.

In a structure as conservative as the Church, gradual change is in itself a major step forward. However, some steps have already been laid out clearly by the Royal Commission findings and they must be



implemented in full and seen to be. Otherwise, the same instinct to dismiss criticism as unwanted and misguided will only further entrench distrust and have the Church itself dismissed and unwanted.

Fortunately, there is a considered and intelligent roadmap available. The *Light From the Southern Cross* Report, commissioned by the bishops and religious leaders, published in 2020, outlines measures to improve Church governance within the confines of the Canon law. It addresses the findings of the Royal Commission and instils contemporary standards of accountability and transparency. It offers solutions to the paucity of formation of Catholic adults and it suggests measures for the renewal of seminaries. Frankly, it has done the work but awaits the nerve from church leaders to be implemented in full across the whole Church.

Councillors could do themselves a big favour between now and next July's Second Assembly. They could read it!

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