

# Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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## Plenary INSIGHT

A Daily Blog



Second Assembly

Monday 4 July 2022

### THERE'S ENCOURAGING MEAT ON THE BONES

#### No 14

When the bishops cast their first deliberative votes on Tuesday morning, they will have one conundrum and two meaty sets of motions to consider. But before getting to that could I report on the colour and light of the day itself at St Mary's Cathedral College Hall.

By 8.00am just about everyone had squeezed into the large meeting room for an 8.30am start. We were told to wear warm and comfortable clothes and that gave the assembly a relaxed feel. I wore my mask, but 90% did not. Let's hope that is not an error with drastic consequences.

Picture 30 tables big enough to fit eight or nine members each. Looming over us is the very large screen with about 30 or more members, by my count, joining online for various reasons, including Covid infection. Some of these are in hotels in Sydney, while others are on their home ground.

Around the edges are the main dais for the chairpersons, the "top" table with the Secretary of the Plenary Council, David Ranson; the technical IT table led by Maggie Tiongson; the scrutineers table, including the Voting Officer, Virginia Bourke; the large Secretariat table; and a Help desk. There are more big screens scattered around and colourful banners. Liturgical experts, who have done a great job, hover to be called upon. The periti are in another room altogether. At one end, on a raised platform are the distinguished observers, including Cardinals Bo (Burma) and Dew and other Christian leaders.

I took the opportunity to introduce myself to New Zealand Cardinal John Dew, whose progressive style ("Call me John") I have long admired. I am on Table 3 with a Ukrainian rite bishop, an Australian Latin Rite bishop, a Maronite Vicar, a religious sister, a male religious leader, and two other lay people, one a woman. That's a snapshot of the Australian church, although distorted by the selection criteria to include only two women on a table of eight.

I am paired with Sister Mel Dwyer from Brisbane to act as a scrutineer. We covered Part 2 in Session 4 after afternoon tea. With online voting it just means 'sighting' the official count on the screen, but we do sign off so our signatures will go into the archives.

We learnt a lot during the day, including that there was apparent goodwill aplenty, a very tight schedule, mixed experiences with Spiritual Conversations, technical problems which can always be overcome, and lots more catching up to do. I thought that moving motions from the table groups would be next to impossible given the tight schedule, but I was proved wrong. Though initially there were no amendments in the official Motions and Amendments to either the general introduction or the first two Parts, some managed to emerge. One at least was a very important development in my view because it was concrete and had real bite.

The Introductory motion (0.1) drew two Interventions to explain the identity and plead the cause of both the Eastern Rite churches and the Ministerial Public Juridic Persons. The first intervention found some flaws in the text and may have inadvertently caused the surprise failure of the motion to gain a qualified majority. It was also a lesson for many members that the "Yes with Reservations" vote is actually a No for counting purposes. The consultative vote surprisingly failed by one vote to reach a two-thirds majority.

In the afternoon Part One on Reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Catholics the motions were passed with one small amendment. There was no real opposition. The highlight for me were the two note-worthy Interventions by Indigenous members which held the room in the palm of their hands. They were preceded by two effective episcopal Interventions. There was so much support that we finished the session early.

The motions in Part two on the church response to child sexual abuse drew two important amendments, including one on ongoing pastoral and spiritual support and accompaniment. Even more important in my view was a new clause (f) added to Motion 2.1 as follows:

*Requests the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons, with assistance from appropriate experts, to study, acknowledge and address systemic factors which have facilitated abuse within the church.*

This was the sort of tough, concrete proposal which goes some way to addressing the cultural factors deep behind church crimes and leadership failures. Notably, more than once the language of "a good start" was used in Interventions which sought to probe church failures.

Meanwhile, I am finishing this blog after a night out with a tableful of Assembly members. Deepening these relationships across the church will pay off in multiple ways in the church of the future. We return to our hotel bedraggled after battling what is unbelievably dire Sydney weather.

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