

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

John Warhurst AO, Chair, Concerned Catholics Canberra - Goulburn

Plenary INSIGHT

A Daily Blog



Second Assembly

Friday 8 July 2022

LOOK FOR WHAT YOU CAN LIVE WITH

No 18

Today was effectively the final day of the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council, although there is a one-hour session followed by a public Closing Mass tomorrow morning. Then it's all off home. The bishops are going on retreat in Mittagong. Some PC members will be back at work on Monday, while the lucky ones will have a few days off.

The diversity of the Plenary Council members remained my abiding impression. I have always said that Catholics in Australia are as diverse as the whole Australian community. In political terms we range from One Nation to the Greens and everything in between. That's the scale of the synodal task in building consensus. In tonight's Plenary Tracker I made the point that even if you kicked all of the bishops, clerics and religious out of the room, the polarization within the lay Catholic community would still be immense. That is the challenge of walking together in respectful synodal relationships.

The approach of the Assembly to Covid protection measures, like wearing masks, is a good example. Despite repeated entreaties from the top table, mask wearing would not have got above 75%. There were notable examples of church leaders among those who were defiantly resistant and demonstrated no leadership. It is just a small example to show that the differences among us relate not just to church matters.

I have realistic hopes for the outcomes of the Plenary Council following the Second Assembly. It is a difficult pill for anyone to swallow that the next decade is one of Implementation. Those who want to transform the Church must buckle down to holding the church leadership accountable during the next decade. I was a guest on [Plenary Tracker](#) tonight. Another of tonight's guests, Dr Tracey McEwan, Vice-President of Women and the Australian Church quite reasonably posed the fate of Woman and Man, the church's consultation and research report (1999) as a salutary

warning of inaction. More than two decades later, the Plenary Council has called on the Church to “implement more fully the undertakings made by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC)”. That miserable record should make the ACBC shame-faced and wipe the smile off our faces.

The review and implementation, with interim reports in 2023 and 2025 and a final report in 2027, five years after this Second Assembly, will now be coordinated by a new national synodal body (Motion 9), which was under considerable threat before it was finally reborn in a new model as not a structure but an approach. This occurred in the discussion yesterday of Part 7 on Governance. That is a warning sign of much work to be done.

Effectively, the new model of the national Church sketched out by the Plenary Council (see the diagram attached to the [Motions and Amendments](#) document, has the heavy lifting done by a triumvirate of the ACBC, Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons. The first test will be to get true synodality within those three bodies as the past record has been that the ACBC treats CRA with disrespect. Already one Archbishop suggested today that the implementation should be left to the ACBC and its Bishops’ Commissions rather than the new body just agreed too. Not a good sign.

Among the themes wrapped up today was Part 4 on Women and the Church. The revised document, an amazing effort by a four-person writing group, which had to deal overnight with input from 29 of the 30 tables as it attempted to build consensus around the wreckage of its failure on Wednesday. It was largely successful in doing this and the new document was the underpinning of a fresh document which successfully passed through both consultative and deliberative votes to an enormous sigh of relief from the whole Assembly. One of its author’s Sister Melissa Dwyer, was also on Plenary Tracker tonight. Its reception will be the first test for the Assembly in the Catholic community and the public media. The further ‘brand’ damage has already been enormous; but give this new document a chance.

This morning I spoke about the Plenary Council on ABC South East in my own Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn. As it was NAIDOC Week, all guests were asked to name an appropriate song. My choice was “From Little Things Big Things Grow” by Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly. At the moment the outcomes of the Plenary Council are a small thing; my hope is that it can grow.

As I previously thought, much of the anguish and tension came in sorting the perfect from the good. That has its difficulties. As the chair, Bishop Shane Mackinlay, said to Members this morning, with some understandable exasperation in his voice as he was pulled this way and that by competing visions and special pleading: look for ‘What you can live with’. Many in the Catholic community, however, are looking for what they can fall in love with. That is the challenge.

It would be remiss of me at this time not to thank all readers for your encouragement and the 270 Second Assembly members for allowing me to be with them. It has been my pleasure.

JOHN WARHURST AO
Plenary Council Member
Chair Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn
8 July 2022