



EQUALITY OF DIGNITY OF WOMEN TAKES A STEP FORWARD – FRIDAY, 8 JULY 2022

Blog by Francis Sullivan, CSSA Chair

I am just in from the official celebratory dinner. It was held in the Cathedral College Hall the very same room where the Assembly conducted its daytime sessions. It was a fun night. Council members, Plenary staff and support crews mixed freely after what has been an exacting week.

At the beginning of this week, I made the point that the success of Assembly motions would come down to wordsmithing. At a very practical level that was true. But it does not tell the entire story. Most of the proposed motions did pass with a tweaking of a phrase or with the addition of a concept here and there. This usually was to satisfy someone's 'pet issue' or give the nod to a particular interest group. However, this was not the case with the issue of the treatment of women by the Assembly.

When the bishops voted down all the motions dealing with the equality of dignity for women the reaction was visceral. As it should have been. No other issue has been more consistently front of mind in the years of consultation for the Plenary Council. No other issue stood as a testament to the Church's approach to contemporary Western life. Wordsmithing would never be sufficient to turn around the self-imposed Plenary crisis of the episcopal 'no vote'! Only attitudinal change would.


Almost immediately after the Wednesday morning tea break protest, the dynamics shifted. A tangible change in attitude and approach moved across the workings of the Assembly. Council members realised the stakes were high. None more so than the bishops. Although we will never know what led them to make such a damaging decision, it was clear to me that whatever was to return for a second round of voting was going to be received by the bishops in a completely different light.

And what was put back on the table was different. It was pleasing to see that not only were the motions grounded in the equality of dignity between women and men, but there was recognition of the need for the 'protection of the personal dignity and rights of women.' An acknowledgement that the right to participate in Church decision-making structures, for example, is equally shared between women and men. This is a paradigm shift.

So too is the commitment in the motions to enhance the role of women by overcoming the cultural and other assumptions that lead to inequality. Again, an open acknowledgement that the injustice experienced by women in the Church has deep structural, attitudinal and behavioural roots.

As a further indicator of the breakdown in episcopal resistance, the motion calling for openness by the bishops to the prospect of women deacons passed with an overwhelming majority.

Whether this episcopal about-face will 'cut through' in the public square is probably doubtful. Actions always speak louder than words.



I have a few reflections spinning around in my head that I will post next week. Thank you to all who have made contact this week. It has been an honour to be a member of the Plenary Council.

I want to sign off with just one further thought. As we sat through the sessions and sought to discern what the Spirit was saying, I was acutely aware of the intensity of the experience for the members. We carried with us the intimate voices of those we love, those we know who have made pleas for change, those who have lost hope and those who fear hope's fate. For me, crafting the motions was far more than a philosophical exercise. It is probably best described as placing an existential lens over the words. A desire to see in print what can expand in meaning into inclusive and welcoming tones that captures the lives of people in all their circumstances, hopes, aspirations and need.

The Assembly was continually asked to see how the motions could lead to a more Christ-centred Church. Without those quiet, tenderly held voices coming to the table, I couldn't see how that Church would arrive.

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