

## **THE PLENARY COUNCIL *Instrumentum laboris*: IS IT REALLY A HANDY TOOL KIT?**

From the beginning of March 2021 we had the Plenary's working document to hand: a 207-point list of considerations preparatory to the opening of the Plenary in October, seven months ahead.

Writing in March 2018 under the title 'Prioritising agenda' for the Plenary, I asked what meaningful objective could be met within the timeframe. At that time the opening was scheduled for October 2020. The covid pandemic forced a rescheduling to October 2021. The timeframe remains pressing, and in respect of issues raised here, sadly inadequate.

### ***A broad spectrum***

The *Instrumentum laboris* identifies the following major topics within its ambit (the numbering is not from the IL):

1. renewing a Christ-centred Church that heals and warms hearts;
2. strengthening practices of discernment and synodality;
3. the call to co-responsibility in mission and governance;
4. embedding a response to the Royal Commission;
5. renewing and supporting the ordained ministry;
6. promoting discipleship in parishes, families and young people;
7. forming prayerful and Eucharistic communities;
8. engaging in society for the service of all;
9. proclaiming the Gospel in a change of era;
10. renewing the Church's solidarity with First Australians and those on the margins of society;
11. promoting an integral ecology of life for all persons, societies and our common home, the earth.

Most of these topics are so large and/or complex as well as of pressing importance that each could form matter for a council of its own. Most of the topics must also be discussed within the context and limitations of canonical (2,3) and doctrinal (1,5) parameters as well as of societal expectations (4,8,10,11).

No appropriately conciliar treatment of such a broad range of complex issues could be expected from a seven-day gathering of delegates who have not been selected on grounds of formal expertise in such matters.

The *Instrumentum* itself intimates that consideration of the listed topics will in the meantime suggest "the skeleton of an agenda" for the first assembly of the Plenary Council in October 2021 (see IL15).

Accordingly there is no point at this late stage to presenting a litany of complaint regarding issues identified in IL or omitted from IL. However, while we wait to see what flesh is to be put on the skeleton, the *Instrumentum* does invite further "discernment" (this term occurs over 50 times in IL) in the development of an agenda.

### ***Discernment***

Discernment has been a process much advocated in recent years by Pope Francis as a critical function within Christian life. He champions it, of course, in tune with his personal story as a Jesuit. Jesuits direct their lives by what they discern of the way they are going. Lay people also have been showing themselves confident in what discernment of their own ways reveals to them of their church.

This, along with a more enlightened "sense of faith" (*sensus fidei*), has been drawing lay people to find avenues whereby their experience of "being church" might reach to the minds and hearts of those among them ordained as bishops. Is the canonical dictum (*Catholic*

*Catechism* 888-896) that bishops are ordained to “teach, govern, and sanctify” the “faithful” adequate? ...self-explanatory? ...life-enhancing? ...biblically endorsed?

Among the vowed religious and the laity, of course, recent decades have seen an astonishing growth of theologically, biblically, and canonically educated members. They run Catholic universities, teach across the broad spectrum of Catholicism, publish informative, probing, and uplifting books, and participate in and frequently lead public debate.

The potential value of many lay people’s experience and expertise is unprecedented, and at this stage perhaps we can only hope that their insights and values enrich the conciliar process.

The preceding is not to downplay the significance of what standard “good” Catholics – or “bad” Catholics, for that matter – could offer the process of discernment. But for now it is simpler for me to reflect on advocacy in areas within easy reach.

### ***Overreaching clerical control***

One preliminary observation in the *Instrumentum* caused surprise: in the early years of this century “the idea of a plenary council was mooted but the suggestion did not initially win the support of the bishops.” (IL 17) In more recent years informed commentators have asserted the persistence of such an attitude. One is left to surmise what inhibition may be the cause of such hesitancy.

For me this is pointing to reluctance, on the one hand, to initiate public discussion of matters adjudged likely to be unsettling for parishioners and, on the other, to expose foundational dogmatic issues to debate. Anxiety regarding the latter seems to find expression in paragraphs on discernment itself.

Thus we read that no “special groups” exist within the Church “who have access to knowledge which is not available to others” (IL 24). Any requisite knowledge is in the keeping of the bishops as “successors of the apostles”. When “teaching in communion with each other and with the successor of Peter, [bishops] have a particular role in safeguarding and articulating Catholic faith and morals, and in governing the Church.”

For all its familiarity, this Catholic teaching remains both comprehensive and, in this context, may we say it stands out like a red flag beside the road to the future of the church in this country. But how appropriately does it stand beside the final words of the same paragraph:

“It is now the task and privilege of all the Plenary Council delegates to open themselves to the Holy Spirit as together they seek to hear the Spirit’s voice sounding through every dimension of the Plenary Council journey.”

29 points later this charismatic factor is again invoked to settle “some unease about relations between clergy and laity” (IL 53). All in the church enjoy charisms, with the result that “a very healthy relationship” between clergy and laity will exist once this is recognised.

Recognition includes, however, an acknowledgement that the charisms of one group, namely the clergy, are complementary to those of the other, namely, the laity, whom the clergy continue to “govern”. This does nothing to settle unease arising from the laity’s now inbuilt sense that the clergy have it all their own way.

### ***The priesthood problem***

On a day-to-day basis, the laity recognise the priests as the clergy, and they are aware of the stresses that have multiplied in the lives of priests. Nonetheless lay people mostly remain unaware that the gravest of their priests’ stresses relates to what the *Instrumentum* identifies as “priestly identity and theology” (IL 50).

In other avocations unease or distress commonly arises from issues of management, conditions of employment, unrealistic expectations... Priests are exposed to the same but, on

top of that, in recent decades they have also observed theological disputes about the specifically priestly character of their profession and religious calling.

The *Instrumentum* registers but does not enlarge on this dimension of parish life nor signal addressing its significance in the Plenary. None of the bishops, however, can be unaware of theological issues attaching to priesthood.

In fact, one might have duly expected to encounter some acknowledgement of the desperate language used as far back as 1992 when Pope John Paul II addressed this issue in *I will give you shepherds* (no.11).

Acknowledging “the crisis of priestly identity”, he insisted that “a correct and in-depth awareness of the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood is the path which must be taken.”

No such path has emerged. Dispute, debate, scouring uncertainties continue. Numbers within the priesthood continue to decline – by death and departures – and this alongside collapsed numbers of new candidates. It is very difficult to discuss “newer ways of being parish” (IL 45) while neglecting or avoiding the basic question about priesthood.

### ***Making a convenience of charisms***

The *Instrumentum* glosses over the lack of information here by invoking a reference to “different but complementary charisms” enjoyed by clergy and laity (IL 53). Indeed, appeal to the charismatic element is a convenient, if minor, thread throughout the *Instrumentum*, but this thread cannot take the strain of what “charism” stands for in Paul’s reckoning.

On the basis of the Vatican Council’s encomium of “the Spirit” who “furnishes the church with hierarchical and charismatic gifts” (*Lumen gentium* 4, IL 8), the *Instrumentum* establishes its *modus operandi* in the development of a discussion about a church that embraces both ordained and non-ordained members. Within this scheme the church is furnished with those who, by virtue of the Spirit, teach, sanctify, and govern those others who lack a Spirit-endowed capacity to teach, sanctify or govern.

Paul’s instruction on the matter of charism occurs at 1 Corinthians 12:4-6. Of this LG refers only to verse 4: “there are varieties of gifts [*charisms*], but the same Spirit.” On its own this statement appears to open a vista of Spirit-endowed Christians all contributing what each has to offer in the interplay of being members of the one body of Christ. But who has what function within this body? Does it matter?

### ***Charisms for Paul***

Paul thinks so. 28 verses later he concludes his reflection with the questions: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?” In line with these queries, and in harmony, as I thought, with Paul’s line of thinking, I once wrote a book with the title *Are All Christians Ministers?*

My answer to this question being in the negative, one or two reviewers unsurprisingly gave the book a negative appraisal but among numerous positive assessments perhaps the most significant comment was by the highly respected Robert Imbelli of Boston College in *Commonweal* (12 March 1993):

“the thrust of his analysis moves beyond hardened institutional polarisations to recover the radical newness of the New Testament vision.”

And the radical issue exposed and closed here by Paul was that “ministries” (verse 5, usually translated today merely as “services”) are for people like Paul and “co-workers” such as Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:5), Timothy (16:10, “doing the work of the Lord just as I am”), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3, who “struggled beside me in the work of the gospel”).

Such “ministry” is a charism or gift of the Spirit summoning some to “the work” and is different from the broader and diverse range of other charisms enriching members of any Christian group. Our translations of Paul’s Greek word here (*energēmata*) is “activities”.

And how do we know that “activities” are essentially different from “ministries”? We can know that Paul intended to make a distinction between the two terms – and thus expressed a distinction in regard to who does what in the church – by the way he structured his statements here (1 Corinthians 12:4-6: illustrating in the following the structural elements only, not a full translation). Thus :

“there are different kinds of gifts (charisms):

“both (*kai*) ministries (*diakoniae*)

“and (*kai*) activities (*energēmata*)”

### ***Distinguishing between gifts***

Paul intends to emphasise that the first bundle of charisms are those that he and his evangelising team received: and generally identified by him as “work [hard!]”. In addition, both in this letter and especially in 2 Corinthians he exposes the very special values attaching to evangelising work by designating it *diakonia* (ministry) and naming those commissioned to it *diakono*i (ministers).

The second bundle of gifts is so varied that he spends five verses giving examples of what he finds it convenient to call “activities (*energēmata*: needing “energy”!)

Unfortunately our translations fail to bring out the distinction Paul establishes here. Readers of the text – including virtually all theologians and even the exegetical commentators – take no notice of the *kai/kai* combination, whereas this is the basic Greek construction for saying “both/and” (and still is today!)

For some reason, the first *kai* appears to be ignored, this inviting the reader to think that church members are enriched by different kinds of gifts, call them what you like (*diakonai*... *energēmata*...), and there is no differentiation among gospel activities engaged in by believers. I wrote something to this effect in my research volume of 1990, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*.

In re-addressing the issue in preparing to write *Are All Christians Ministers?* I suddenly found it necessary to consider the significance of the *kai/kai*, a consideration that has brought us to this juncture. This passage has long been a debating ground when it should really be recognised as the feeding ground for developing pastoral policies and practices.

### ***Getting charisms wrong***

Most famously, perhaps, the neglect of the *kai/kai* drew Karl Barth to conclude from this Pauline paragraph (1 Corinthians 12:4-6) that the charisms are the ministries/‘services’, which are the activities, this leading to the conclusion that in the great charismatic mix there is no room or call for offices with their overbearing authority: “either all are office-bearers or none, and if all, then only as servants.” This is so because all “activities/*energēmata*” are wrongly assumed to be also “*diakonai*/ministries”.

Conclusions of this kind are still widely upheld today but have to be downplayed or, better, entirely abandoned by reason of the re-interpretation of the Greek *diakon*- words.

### ***Getting charisms right***

Understood in line with Paul’s widespread use of the terms, in this passage they can only be read as contrasting with “activities” because *diakonai* designates the apostolic offices to which he and other evangelical preachers have been appointed within communities of their time or, like Paul, by call of the Lord and the power of the Spirit.

*The Anchor Yale Bible* commentary on this letter by Joseph Fitzmyer (2008) basically acknowledges the necessity of this understanding (citing Collins but without a mention of *kai/kai*!). The Louvain scholar of the Reformation era, Willem van Est (1542-1613) – designated “doctor fundatissimus” by Pope Benedict XIV – also wrote to this effect in identifying “gifts/*charismata*” in this passage as a genus, with “ministries/*diakoniae*” and “activities/*energēmata*” as two species within the field of gifts.

### ***Charisms in the Instrumentum***

This interlude on the passage 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 may appear to distance us from matters pursued in the *Instrumentum*. The interlude, however, has been necessary in the light of assumptions in the document concerning “hierarchical and charismatic gifts” within the church. While this phrase has been inherited from the Second Vatican Council (LG 4), it remains a distortion of Paul’s understanding of charisms in this passage.

Basically, it is a huge assumption to present notions of precisely “hierarchy” and of individual “hierarchical” offices being advocated in the New Testament (IL 8). The most that can be said about such “sacred office (*hier/archy*)” is that we can recognise in this term Spirit-endorsed evangelical endeavours like those of Paul but of our “hierarchy” there is no sign.

### ***The misconceived “servant” theme***

A further and more damaging misconception represented throughout the *Instrumentum* is the “servant” theme. This too arises from the century-old misreading of *diakon-* words as expressing notions of lowly and benevolent *service*. This misconception is also implanted in the Vatican Council’s document on the church in the depiction of the role of the bishop as an office that is essentially a *servitium* “in the strict sense of the term”, this being called in the New Testament *diakonia* (LG 24).<sup>1</sup>

Certainly the proclamation of the gospel within and beyond the church is essentially identified in Paul’s writings as *diakonia*. Through this terminology, however, Paul was expressing in various contexts various aspects of meaning long expressed in pre-Christian Greek as pertaining to the transmission of meaning from one person to another, of the transmission of message from one realm of existence to another as in from the heavens to earth, of the authenticity of the message conveyed, and of the fidelity of the messenger to his or her task.

In none of the usage, however, did the *diakonia* terms express notions of lowly and loving service in response to the needs of others. In contexts suggesting this to readers of passages in the New Testament the implication of the Greek phrasing is always of the agent/*diakonos* carrying out duties or commissions. A recent discussion of this usage is in “The Rhetorical Value of Διᾱκον- in Matthew 25:44”.<sup>2</sup>

### ***“not to be served but to serve”***

On a number of occasions in gospel narrative the terms refer to activities of household servants, nowhere more importantly than at Mark 10:43, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant /*diakonos*.”

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<sup>1</sup> The misconception was countered in my *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: OUP, 1990), a semantic study subsequently endorsed by A. Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), with its re-interpretation adopted in the 3rd edition 2000 of the Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Its relevance to church and ministry is central to *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* issued by The Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England (GS Misc 854, 2007). I have addressed many exegetical issues and ecclesiological implications of this Greek term in five other books and many articles.

<sup>2</sup> B. J. Koet et al., edd., *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 31-43.

So often preachers urge neophytes to heed a message here of humble service to all in all circumstances. But the servant/*diakonos* term enters the discourse for the purpose of maintaining a connection with the context of the teaching begun at verse 38ff.

Thus Jesus is comparing discipleship – so profoundly misunderstood in the grandiose aspirations of James and John to sit with Jesus in his “glory” (verse 37) – with membership within Gentile kingdoms (pre-eminently, of course, Rome’s empire). There everything works by power and, as needed, by oppression. But discipleship is different. It is a power vacuum. Another factor governs activity. In Jesus’ own case this is to carry out (*diakon-*, verse 45) his mandate from God.

Again here we have to make allowance for misreadings of this passage in documents of the Vatican Council, and principally in its final message to the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), assuring the world that “the church is not motivated by an earthly ambition but is interested in one thing only – to carry on the work of Christ ... to serve (*diakon-*) and not to be served (*diakon-*).” (n.4, referencing Mark 10.45)

### ***The service syndrome***

The *Instrumentum* is permeated with the service syndrome. And I present that here as a misreading of the Greek Testament.<sup>3</sup> So is much of the contemporary theology of ministry, both Roman Catholic (whether magisterial, academic, or merely popular) and ecumenical. And the *Instrumentum* has now set this misreading as the dominant theme of its progress towards renewal.

Had the document advocated *diakonia* in line with the values Paul had sought to advocate for the benefit of the infant gatherings of the first Gentile Christians (pre-eminently 2 Corinthians 3-6), renewal today would have been a simpler, more rewarding and self-motivating experience for us, the church. As things are, we are too like the proverbial ship needing to turn away from shallow waters but unable to master its own momentum.

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<sup>3</sup> This is the theme of papers I have recently published under the title *Dismantling the Servant Paradigm; Recovering the Forgotten Heritage of Early Christian Ministry* (Generis Publishing: [www.generis-publishing.com](http://www.generis-publishing.com), 2020).