

ARTICLE

A call to the Plenary Council of the Church

By Garry Everett
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An old fable told the story of two great universities: the University of No Questions; and the University of No Answers. In the former, one only learned the correct answers to time honoured questions. In the latter, one only learned to ask questions. In a real university one should learn both, as well as developing new answers to new questions. Much of our lives involves the asking and answering of questions.

Asking questions is a skill that requires careful attention if the full import of the question is to be conveyed. In politics we know of the “Dorothy Dixers” which are not real questions, but manipulations which are designed to place the answerer in a good light. The “hypothetical question” is often asked with no intention of any answer being sought or valued. The “probing question” seeks to move a discussion forward, and the “unexpected question”, often changes the focus of inquiry.

Asking good questions is at the heart of the task facing the Australian Catholic Church’s Plenary Council meeting later this year. In fact, the Agenda for the Council is shaped by 16 central questions, grouped under 6 headings. Each of the questions begins with the word “How...?” This is a technique presumably employed to keep the focus on some forms of strategic responses----- answers as opposed to excuses or lamentations. However, a “How” question presumes that a great deal of knowledge, or an understanding of the problem or issue, is possessed and shared by those attempting to answer the question.

The first question to be discussed by the Council reads: “How might we better accompany one another on the journey of personal and communal conversion which mission in Australia requires”?

An analysis of this question reveals a number of component parts. The word “better” indicates that all the current ways are known, have been evaluated, and have been found wanting in some ways. Better ways must be new ways. The words “personal and communal” indicate vastly different dimensions of “conversion”, which will require different answers. Finally, the phrase “mission in Australia” assumes that all participants possess a great deal of knowledge about Australian society and all of its challenges, to say nothing about how those challenges will shape the nature of mission.

This first question could conceivably occupy the entire first five days of the Council’s deliberations.

“The new is elsewhere” is an axiom, a self-evident truth. I first encountered the axiom in the field of cultural anthropology where it was employed to explore the notion of cultural change. All 16 questions to be confronted by the Council must take this axiom to heart, because it tells us that not only does “better” mean new, but it also tells us that we won’t find the new in our current practices, nor thinking. Some challenge! Recall that Einstein claimed that our current thinking has brought us to where we are, but to go beyond that, we must act differently.

There is an inherent dilemma in the Council’s processes as revealed by the 16 questions.

Put simply, the questions all begin with “How might we/the Church...” This indicates a rational systematic way of thinking, but it also excludes God, which in the process of discernment is a contradiction. An alternative way would be to ask: “How might God...?” and to use the process of

prophetic imagination, rather than the logical sequential process outlined in the questions. In this context, imagination means “to receive, entertain and host images of reality that are outside the accepted given”. The source of such images is God who is not always best accessed by the mind but rather by the heart, the spirit and the imagination.

A final observation on the questions notes that the word “Love” does not appear.

In a Church in which the central law and teaching is about Love, this seems somewhat strange. It seems that pride of place has been given to the intellect, to analysis, and to strategising.

At the heart of the Christian mission is Love, but that is not obvious in the 16 questions. Jesus kept it brief: “Love God and love your neighbour as yourself”. St Paul expanded it: “Love is patient, love is kind...”

One hopes that the Council will imagine how Love might transform our world.

Discerning what God might want is a very difficult process. Whilst some attending the Council may be well skilled in the process many will not be, despite some recent exposure to it.

I wish the Council well as it tries to discern the ways forward. I leave the final counsel to St Paul who wrote: “Judge nothing until God brings to light hidden things of darkness and makes manifest the counsels of the heart”.

Garry Everett is a retired educator, a cradle Catholic, and is interested in the processes of change, particularly in the Church.