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## Assembly of the Plenary Council needs to deliver reform

**Blog by Francis Sullivan, CSSA Chair**

I am a delegate for the Plenary Council which starts with the First Assembly from 3rd to 10th October.

Because I am locked down in Canberra, like the majority of delegates, I will be attending all sessions online. Not my preference but it is what it is!

I intend to send out a blog at the end of each day. It will be my reflections on the discussions held and the evolution of the agenda.

Speaking of agenda there has already been a fair bit of disquiet over what actually will be discussed at the Assembly. When the Plenary Council got underway over four years ago the organisers encouraged Catholics to get involved. We were asked to “discern” what God was asking of the Church in Australia.

A tall order indeed! That said, the organisers received 17,500 submissions covering the views of well over 200,000 Catholics. Impressive in anyone’s language.

Since then, the submissions were distilled into six thematic papers for discussion within the Church.

Ultimately the Assembly is presented with 16 broadly based questions. They are somewhat anodyne and difficult to see where the specific issues raised in the submissions will be brought to the table. But brought to the table they must. There has been too much consultation for issues to be swept aside or placed in the ‘too hard basket’.

I, like other delegates will enter the Assembly open-minded, with a disposition to respectfully listen and then discuss issues without prejudice.

At the same time, this is a time for our Church to face facts. We are in crisis. On any indicator, be it participation rates, financial health or public influence, the Church is in decline. The sex abuse scandal has eroded the public’s trust in the Church. Ordinary Catholics likewise have been confronted by the shameful cover-ups, secrecy and deceit that characterised the scandal. The moral failure of the Church leadership was castigated by the Royal Commissioners.

Unless we confront, head-on, the culture that enabled the scandal to go on for so long, I fear that we will continue to see the decline and irrelevancy of the Church in my lifetime.

These days a common catch cry is that there is no synodality without spirituality.

Pope Francis wants the spirit of synodality to echo the humble, listening Church he has often spoken about. He calls for a poor Church of the poor.

This must be our starting point. We need to shed the vestiges of the medieval authority structure, the entitlements of clericalism and the male dominated decision making and policy formulation processes.

We need a Church that better reflects the diversity and composition of the communities it seeks to serve.

A Church that has an institutional instinct to be missionary, not propositional.

A Church that doesn't insist on people fitting into a predetermined mould, but rather is a place where unity across differences is its hallmark.

A Church where compassion, not convention, is the term of engagement with society.

Well, the dialogue begins this Sunday and I am keen to be involved. After my years working for the Truth Justice and Healing Council, I feel privileged to have this opportunity to once again contribute to my Church which has been so integral to my life and how I go about life. Please feel free to respond to my blogs and let's pray that the Spirit gets a say too!

Francis Sullivan