



CULTURAL CHANGE – SATURDAY, 9 OCTOBER 2021

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Blog by Francis Sullivan, CSSA Chair

Take heart, the drumbeats of change are echoing through the Plenary Council. Reports on the Assembly's work are making the cases for change. Across many of the working groups, there are calls for solidarity with the aspirations of First Nations people for constitutional recognition; adoption of innovative models for lay/clerical governance; expansion of programs for contemporary lay and religious formation (academic and other); professional supervision for clergy and Church workers and importantly, the expansion of the influential participation of women, including consideration of women deacons. So, thankfully, these issues are on the table and cannot be discarded or ignored.


That said, our Church attitude and culture appears to be based on an outdated understanding of personhood. In other words, the understanding of Christian anthropology has not kept pace with the insights of the human sciences and contemporary understandings of personal development, including around gender and its diversity. It underpins why there is such a disconnect with the Church in the western world at least. It risks rendering our attempts at missionary outreach to be far less effective than they could be. Whether we are talking about being relevant to young people as they explore their place in the world or bridging the chasm with LGBTIQ+ people and their full participation in the life of the Church. A more nuanced understanding of personhood would better inform our pastoral practice, including resolving the issue of access to the reception of the Eucharist for divorced and remarried Catholics.

The late Bishop Geoffrey Robinson spent years leading a more enlightened and pastorally driven whole of Church response to the sex abuse scandal. He penned a book-length reflection entitled "Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church".

It stirred the pot. He was not popular with some of his episcopal colleagues or with Catholics unsettled by his critique. But his main points still stand. Whether consciously or not, the Church culture posits real power with men and clerics in particular. It dismisses the insidious effects of denying human sexuality and its repression. It scapegoats the influences of homosexuality and pays lip service to the equality of women at all levels. Those in positions of power and influence have been found to misuse or ignore canon laws that would have revealed the abuse of their authority.

This is a cultural problem. We are still by instinct a closed system, with our own codes of conduct and entitlement. Some are more privileged than others and have better access to real influence and decision making than others. The inertia that characterises the organisation can be devastating for those who long to be identified with a vibrant and welcoming Church.

The upshot is that the best will in the world will not break through if we remain isolated from the best insights into human development and interpersonal growth. To break through, we definitely need a "missionary impulse". We can't remain content as a "people set apart" as if an alternative universe somehow is attractive. So far, the numbers just don't prove it.



At the heart of our current crisis is the disinterest of the wider society, including those Catholics who have drifted from meaningful participation. Disinterest tells us plainly that we need to become relevant and relatable. At the same time, we need honest appraisals of the attitudes the Church projects to people who feel at odds with a conventional understanding of being "a good Catholic". Despite some pastors best efforts, there are still undertones of discrimination and judgment. This is divisive and ultimately counterproductive to any actions motivated by a 'missionary impulse'.

The Plenary Council has a unique opportunity to overtly express the heart of our Church. The deliberations of this First Assembly suggest we are well on the way in this important journey. Pope Francis calls us to the "art of accompaniment". He draws on the book of Exodus, saying that accompaniment "teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other". The image is poignant and speaks of staying with the other in a spirit of reverence for their dignity and worth.

Talking about ourselves with only ourselves won't help. We will need to be informed about the emerging understandings of personhood. We need better access to the insights of applied theologies in this field if ultimately our Church can shift to being relevant and relatable as a Church of the Now!

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