

## When bishops play dirty nobody wins

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The Australian Catholic Church's Plenary Council is heading for the rocks amid sharp recriminations. By refusing to deal openly with legitimate criticisms of an indefensible process, Australia's bishops are being more than stubborn. They are revealing their latent opposition to Pope Francis.

What was meant to be a showcase of genuine listening and walking together is unravelling with an unedifying lack of goodwill from the bishops. Francis has work to do if his local bishops are to be on-side with his call for a synodal church.

The bishops called a Plenary Council in 2018 in the wake of the Royal Commission. It was meant to be a long overdue reset and an opportunity for the local church to take stock and adjust its course. President of the Australian Bishops Conference, Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, has proclaimed loudly to local and international media that 'business as usual' outcomes are not an option.

Coleridge is an outspoken supporter of Pope Francis and his emphasis on Synodality – a model that Francis invokes to describe a church in the spirit of Vatican II, that respectfully engages all the People of God, listens genuinely to their voices, and moves forward together. In this Coleridge is a stand-out among the Australian bishops, as some give the impression of having reached a point where they are prepared to 'sit out' the rest of this pontificate in the hope the next will return to a more comfortable orthodoxy. Not that they would admit that, but their actions, or sometimes lack of action, betray them.

These differences seem to be playing into the management of the Plenary, which has admittedly been severely impacted by the pandemic. The first Assembly meeting was delayed a year and finally held 'virtually' in October 2021. Plans and draft resolutions are now emerging for the Second and final Assembly in July 2022 and it is this *First Fruits* document that has finally provoked outrage from large parts of the Catholic community, with calls it be withdrawn.

This latest document shares a characteristic of others released during the process, in giving the clear impression that there is an invisible hand, intent on ensuring real issues are avoided and meaningful change is pushed off the table. On this occasion various propositions and ideas are being advanced 'out of the blue' and certainly without any obvious connection to discussion at the October Assembly. They are unattributed to individuals or discussion groups, and Members report they are at odds with the general thrust and focus of discussions in the First Assembly. Not surprising the propositions are skewed towards a traditionalist view.

Individual Members of the Assembly have objected to the lack of provenance and transparency in the document and sought clarification as to the origin of certain propositions. Their enquiries and objections have been ignored – a stock standard approach for the Australian hierarchy.

Part of the problem may be explained by the confusion that surrounded the winding up of the First Assembly and a failure to outline clearly how proceedings from the 2021 gathering would be distilled and brought forward to the 2022 Assembly. A subsequent lack of communication with Members left the impression the process was suspiciously opaque, even secretive. A lesson from each stage of this process has been that to take things on trust is to be repaid with deceit and manipulation.

A Plenary Council is effectively a mechanism from the Middle Ages, based on a monarchical and triumphalist model of church, with ridiculously antiquated statutes and procedural rules. Membership was expanded from its historical size, which essentially covered clergy and religious, to a small number of lay representatives from each diocese, selected by the local bishop. There was never any doubt about who controlled the numbers. In the end however, the attempt to bolt-on some semblance of consultative engagement with the wider People of God was perhaps a forlorn hope – with goodwill not part of the hierarchy's tool kit, it was probably never going to work.

The process began in 2018 with submissions from more than 17,000 groups and individuals. These revealed that the Catholic community was highly engaged and the document that summarised the overall input was clear in stating there was a widespread call for significant reform. Equally there was strong and strident criticism of the Australian bishops, along with deep distrust and lack of confidence in their leadership.

Sadly, the reasons for that distrust and lack of confidence soon manifested themselves in subsequent stages leading to the agenda for the first Assembly. In 2020, despite retaining absolute decision-making authority, senior bishops in an unexpected move, inserted themselves into a series of writing groups. Leaks from some groups indicated that their input was forceful, and in some cases overbearing. The resulting confusing papers led ultimately to a pre-agenda document which lacked a consistent logic, being variously described as contorted, confounding, and opaque. It seemed aimed to confuse and confound - bearing all the hallmarks of conflicted shared authorship.

The agenda that finally emerged was simplistic and, by professional standards, not fit for purpose. Whereas the archaic statutes of the Plenary required that 'the agenda be received with acclamation', several strong objections were registered, along with calls for its revision. These were dismissed but the agenda's inadequacies became increasingly obvious as the week-long session unfolded. The unprofessional manipulation and deception that has now emerged is just the latest in a process purporting to seek genuine sharing and listening in the name of the Holy Spirit. But procedural integrity is not the only matter of concern.

There are real issues of substance that the bishops seemingly do not want considered seriously. Among these are the role of women and clericalism, described by the Royal Commission as a major contributing factor to the sexual abuse scandal. Pope Francis has

been very clear in referring to it as ‘an evil’ that must be removed from the church. However, the Australian church is attempting to downplay the significance of clericalism and essentially dismiss it as a major problem. They are doing this by defining it very narrowly, suggesting it is rare, when it is cultural and widespread.

It is on matters like this that the ‘cover-up’, so much a part of the local church’s response to the sexual abuse scandal, is being re-run as a key finding of the Royal Commission is massaged away. It is also clear that an agenda very different to Pope Francis is being revealed.

Australian Catholics are realists about the pace of change in their church. They know they must fight against a force of institutional inertia. However what ordinary Catholics are rightly indignant about is the blatant manipulation and deception that seems to emerge repeatedly. This is the direct antithesis of Pope Francis’ Synodality. Worrying though, the local bishops seem determined to present the Plenary as a model of Synodality.

Complicating the whole Plenary process is a recent initiative of Francis to hold a global Synod on Synodality. He has commissioned a process that seeks input from every diocese in the world, culminating in a major assembly in Rome in 2023. Cynically, the Australian bishops have decided to restrict opportunities for separate input to this process and plan to pass-off the outcomes from the compromised Plenary as expressing the views of the Australian church. They don’t just want to manipulate one process, but two.

All Australians, not just Catholics, should be worried by these developments. They amount to a betrayal of commitments to reform in the face of the Royal Commission report. They would also render Australia a laggard when it comes to injecting ideas and theological insight to a major international process. This gets to the nub of the overall problem. The bulk of Australia’s bishops are defensive, fearful and lack the imagination to grasp the need for change and how it might look. The irony is that their people and their boss, Pope Francis, are open to these challenges.

Unless there is decisive intervention soon from key moderate bishops, not only will the Plenary Council unravel but things are likely to get a lot messier for everyone.

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