

Building the Church We Need

Week Four: Expectations for the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council

Yarra Theological Union

23 May, 7.30-9.00pm

## Francis Sullivan AO

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Friends change is coming!

This is not only my expectation, but it will be our reality.

As we approach the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council it is helpful to take stock of the state of play.

It is vital to acknowledge that we are doing Church now! We are authentic now!

The risk is that some reduce the notion of church to the institutional structure of the clerical, hierarchical organisation.

That is not the Church. We are the Church. A pilgrim people, seeking God in sincerity and honesty. We are a faith community living with uncertainty and a sense of the incomplete. But living in hope and sustained by love.

So, when we discuss the Plenary Council, let's do so from a position of confidence - adult Catholics, capable and committed.

My observations from the 'cheap seats' is that the PC organisers have been on a roller coaster from the word go.

Even though the Catholic community was told that 'everything was on the table' for consideration the reality was always going to be far less.

Even though Canon law explicitly makes clear that a Plenary Council is a meeting of the Churches, the bishops act as if it is ultimately their meeting, where their approval, their power of veto, hangs over all the deliberations.

Well before the PC began there were many bishops and their private advisors very anxious over what the PC would raise and how they, as bishops, were going to have to deal with controversial issues when they already have one arm tied behind their backs by the Vatican.

Given the recent history of Papal Nuncios in Australia and their propensity to deliver a 'school principal' styled lecture to assemblies of bishops, the episcopal anxiety is not all unfounded.

So the PC organisers have struggled to maintain any momentum throughout the PC process as many local bishops have almost run dead on instilling enthusiasm for the Council and particularly for active groups seeking to energise local Catholic communities in the dialogue and discerning processes.

So much so that most active Catholics don't have the PC on their radar, nor do they hold out much hope for the outcomes.

Frankly the wider catholic community has been sidelined by the organisers. The lack of transparency and accountability to the broader Catholic community has rendered them voiceless at a time when Pope Francis is encouraging the very opposite.

The complications of Covid rendered the First Assembly to be far less than it could have been. Not enough time was given to genuine discussion and debate on substantial issues. Too much time was given over to reflection and discernment sessions that in turn became ponderous rather than definitive.

Summary documents, both prior to the Assembly and after, were contestable in their content and confused over basic themes.

There may have been a widespread acknowledgement that we the people are the Church, but when push came to shove the fall-back position was still of an hierarchical, clerical organisation that presumes power is unevenly exercised and is unaccountable.

That said, there is no reason to expect that the status quo will remain.

We are told that within a week the draft resolutions for the Second Assembly will be released.

If they are consistent with the directions of the First Assembly, then the Church in Australia will not be the same after the PC concludes.

Why am I so confident?

Well, there are three main reasons.

Firstly, the inevitable tension between the conservative instinct of the institution and the disruptive stimulus of Pope Francis' plea for a missionary impulse did play out in the First Assembly.

That is, delegates of all persuasions unashamedly sort a vibrant, engaged and relevant Church for our times and beyond. The championing for the Church of days past was left at the fringes.

Yes, there were a variety of nuances on how the Church can be more relevant and how pastoral engagement can be enacted, but the fact that they must be progressed was not in dispute.

This is a solid foundation for common effort.

Secondly, lay people at the PC want to be involved, taken seriously and given the resources to participate to the full. They have turned up and now want to stand up, alongside the clergy, in leading the Church in the communion of effort.

This too indicates that the spirit of Catholicity, the seeking of unity across diversity, is alive and well.

Thirdly, the summary document from the First Assembly was not crafted to ignore any of the contentious issues raised in the sessions. Yes, the wordsmithing was cautious, but it did keep the conversation going and did not explicitly shut things down.

And this is a crucial point.

Delegates have been asked to remain open-minded and respectful of differing viewpoints. That applies to the bishops as well.

Therefore I certainly do not take the summary document as a definitive expression of the mind of the delegates.

Rather, I see it as the opening of a yet to be completed conversation.

Where language has been used too tentatively or too exclusively, the opportunity to explore, expand and expound needs to be grasped.

It has provided multiple pathways to advance change and innovation.

Innovations in Church governance are on the table. So too is the glaring chasm between mainstream Catholicism and marginalised groups. Ignorance is no longer an option.

In other words, the Genie is out of the bottle and can't be put back.

So that said, where to from here?

1. Play the long game.

PC organisers are already flagging a two- pronged approach to issues raised from the First Assembly.

Some resolutions will address fairly universally accepted issues, Urulu Statement from the Heart. There should be little need for debate, rather a resounding endorsement early in the Assembly.

Other issues will be massaged so that the delegates agree to endorse an in- principle direction and leave open the debate for an agreed future date.

This should not be dismissed as buck passing or defeatism.

It needs to be seen as an opportunity to isolate issues that matter, that are complex and do require an array of inputs for consideration to be given the dedicated effort and time for resolution.

One of those is women deacons.

In the past the bishops have dismissed any serious examination of this. They did because they can.

Now, the energy to take this forward is within the PC.

It is absolutely vital that the PC does not 'outsource' its role to the bishops.

Delegates must insist on action plans to not only address the issues at hand but also to publicly report on progress. It must involve consultation and dialogue.

Importantly, this latter process must remain transparent and accountable to the PC delegates and the broader Church. It cannot slip to being an internal ACBC and CRA controlled exercise.

If nothing else the PC has demonstrated that we are far more than a composite of the ACBC and CRA when it comes to active Church players.

## 2. Engagement with the draft resolutions.

It is important to keep your voices consistent and persistent.

Calls for change have been heard and need still to be heard.

Whether it is the integration of women into governance roles, or the introduction of DPC in dioceses the first point is to acknowledge the vital nature of this innovation. Then just as importantly is to emphasise that best practice organisational learnings are applied from the outset.

Having said that, these changes should herald a new way of engaging in Catholic practice. They should be the vehicles through which a more representative and democratically based decision-making model can take shape across the Australian church.

So, now is the time to develop those points, to press for their expansion and further inclusions into action plans and institutional features.

## 3. Maintain your territory

The most promising feature of the current state of play is that delegates are discussing issues of church governance, the full participation of women, genuine integration of excluded people and the strains on clergy and religious.

Without resolutions that directly address these urgent issues, the PC would have failed.

And if it failed, we delegates would have failed to stand our ground on the issues we identified and what measures we acknowledged needed to be progressed.

This means that we should join those who are pressing for a further Assembly of the PC beyond this July.

Without prosecuting the importance of issues before the PC again, suffice to say that the First Assembly delivered far too little and as a consequence it has squeezed what is possible to resolve in the Second Assembly.

A Third Assembly offers the opportunity to advance the structural and cultural challenges facing our Church. It affords delegates more time to come to terms with the wide array of issues before them.

A final point about our shared Catholic project.

Pope Francis has called on Catholics to recognise the change of era for the Church.

He values realities before ideas.

He dreams of a humble, less doctrinaire Church.

He claims that the margins are our centre.

He urges us to follow the missionary impulse, and not to get caught in ideology or cultural comforts.

He is asking us to embrace a spirituality at home with uncertainty and a sense of the incomplete.

In other words, he wants Catholic identity to be less certain of itself and more enmeshed in the daily 'to and fro' of life.

Our shared Catholic project will reflect Francis' words when those who are estranged can look us in the face and say, 'your heart has changed; you see me!'

