

The Plenary: glints of hope in the dark

A summary of the CCCG Public Forum: Where are we now?

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Where is the church now? And what can we expect from the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council in July?

These were the questions that four of Australia's leading Catholic thinkers addressed at a June 9 forum of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn (CCCG).

The attendance by more than 100 on a cold Canberra night illustrates the appetite among Catholic lay people for deeper knowledge and understanding about what the Plenary may mean for their faith and Church.

The event provided something of a warm-up for the *Plenary Tracker* series of CCCG's online panel sessions involving leading Catholics to be hosted by former broadcaster and Riotact editor Genevieve Jacobs during the Second Assembly from July 3 to July 8.

A marked feature of the recent forum was the consistent expression in eloquent and different ways, of the Church being at a threshold, or turning point in this post-Christendom age.

While the speakers conveyed a generally pessimistic consensus and disenchantment about the Plenary's progress so far, they also expressed glints of cautious hope. The speakers were Sister Clare Condon, a Good Samaritan sister, Andrea Dean, Chair of Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), Paul Collins, celebrated church scholar and historian, and Francis Sullivan, Chair of Catholic Social Services Australia.

'From where I sit,' Sr Clare told the forum, 'our hopes for a new beginning are some way in the future. But hope we must. (At the Plenary Council, she noted, 'there is still great divergence of views, a lack of real deep listening and respect amongst some participants and even manipulation and ideological interference from within and from outside.) It has been a very sobering experience.'

Sr Clare who in May was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Australian Catholic University in recognition of her contribution to social justice and to the Catholic Church in Australia, told the forum she believes the institutional church is currently at an in-between time, a liminal time and space, and has been since Vatican II some 60 years.

There were no real propositions for imaginative structural change in the governance of the diocesan or parish community. And there was no clear ecclesial theology which acknowledged that each of the baptised shares in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ (Lumen Gentium 20-7).

There was 'a slight turning towards the place of women in the church, (possible diaconate) but only a very weak acknowledgement of some of the pain and hurt inflicted on women by

church. Proposal 54 still excludes women from being the decision makers about matters which affect them...it simply states their perspectives need to be heard!! By whom?’

But it's not all negative, says Sr Clare. The first tentative steps have been made to keep examining what needs to happen, in areas such as acknowledgement of the complicity of church institutions and individual Christians in harming of First Nations people; acknowledgement of the harm done by the sexual abuse crisis and the clerical protection by those in authority and the great need for reform and change.

There was nothing however in the latest document *Framework for Motions*, she says, which mandates any significant structural change.

‘To actually create a Vatican II model of church, there needs to be a new theology for the relationship between the hierarchy and the people of God.’

Paul Collins says not to expect a lot out of the Second Assembly. He says the Plenary Council will certainly support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and First Nations’ aspirations. But the core barrier to reform was that the Plenary Council’s canonical procedure was governed by legal constraints with the final say coming from bishops and ultimately the Vatican.

Dr Collins says the Council ‘as a synodal process it was compromised from the start...

‘The much more difficult question is: what is the situation of Australian Catholicism now?... it’s mired in a profound crisis that’s focused on the nature of the church and its leadership, as well as its alienation from contemporary Australian culture....’

Society was moving decisively in a post-Christian direction, ‘although many of our societal values are still underpinned by the Christian tradition and gospel morality... the way in which faith is lived and proclaimed must adapt to the challenges of our society. We no longer live in Christendom.

‘That’s why it is extraordinarily negligent of the PC not to undertake a serious forensic analysis of contemporary Australian culture...

‘It’s in this very moment of despair for many Catholics that the greatest opportunity exists as we move toward the creation of a new way of being church. We are now right in the middle of that process, so let’s not surrender to fear or despair but live, as genuine Christians always do, in hope,’ Dr Collins concluded.

Andrea Dean related that when she surveyed WATAC members about the present and future state of the Church and the Assembly, the responses included that the Church was ‘dying’ and ‘at a crossroads’; on what they expected from the Second Assembly, responses included ‘Old answers to the same questions’; and on the future of the church, members cited need for ‘courage’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘new ways of worship’ and ‘focus on Jesus’.

Ms Dean is a former member of the Sisters of St Joseph order now working in the community sector.

She said renewal of parishes would only come with vibrant parishes and that required paid positions for pastoral associates, youth ministers and liturgy team members and a stop to relying on WEARY volunteers.

Ms Dean produced three props to elaborate her address: a box of tissues to mark her tearful response to a presentation by American reformer Sr Joan Chittister; a first aid booklet to emphasise every attempt at resuscitation is worth it; and a teal-coloured vest... 'Let's become teal Catholics, adult and active, shaping the Church that we want to have. Of course, this teal Church would have a special place for women.

'Let's make it happen,' Ms Dean concluded.

Francis Sullivan AO takes heart from the way the debate so far has started to venture into what have been no-go areas within resolutions grappling with issues of inclusion, be they based on sexuality, gender, marital status or access to ordained ministries. It means that the paradigm is changing. 'There is no longer the sense that the Church is a bulwark, hellbent on resistance. That the curse of clericalism is acknowledged upfront indicates the inertia of the institution is giving way to the inevitable signs of the times.

'It is instructive that the preamble (in Assembly documents) to the section on women's participation specifically notes that the wider society has already arrived at the recognition of equality for women. It acknowledges that there is still more to be done.

'So, this is the Church catching up!'. Mr Sullivan identifies five main points that need to be made in the Second Assembly:

1. The resolutions can go further and deeper in their reach. Amendments are needed.
2. The PC cannot leave the resolutions at the level of aspiration alone. Real resources and practical strategies must accompany the directions of the agreed resolutions.
3. Despite the positive aspects of the resolutions, the bishops have kept the lid on those doctrinal matters that cruel the Church's pastoral effectiveness.
4. It is particularly important to create the seamless continuum between a spiritual search for meaning and our organised expression as Catholics.
5. We need mechanisms to hold ourselves to account. The current emphasis on a synodal model of Church means that accountability is with the faith community.'

Mr Sullivan concluded: 'As Concerned Catholics the opportunity beckons to step forward and shape the Church echoed in these resolutions. If nothing else the PC has the potential to lay out an action plan for change. So, let's get to it!'

PAPERS

[Clare Condon](#)

[Andrea Dean](#)

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