



A 'MISSIONARY IMPULSE' MUST DRIVE US – TUESDAY, 5 JULY 2022

5 July 2022

Blog by Francis Sullivan, CSSA Chair


Today was a tough one! Maddening actually! The main theme was inclusion. The motions under consideration concentrated on the experiences of exclusion for the LGBTQI+ community and women from access to the diaconate. Both issues are indicative of the cultural misalignment of the Church with contemporary Australia.

I don't know why I was so surprised by the Assembly's hesitancy on these issues. Whenever the discussion turns to the equal dignity of women and men, any translation of this into their equal rights to participate as ordained deacons becomes weaponised and divisive. As many women mentioned to me, even this concession seems so hard! Yet during the day I heard from bishops, priests and pastoral assistants from across the country over how women, consecrated or not, are leading local parish liturgical and pastoral programs, performing chaplaincy roles, conducting professional canonical services and crucial diocesan duties. Literally keeping the Church presence alive in many settings. Yet, formally calling for the women to be considered for the diaconate is a bridge too far. Little wonder so many women and men feel frustrated, angry and alienated.

Assembly members were also asked to consider whether it was right to specifically include people who identify as LGBTIQ+ as a distinct category along with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, those divorced and others who have suffered abuse of any form as experiencing marginalisation within the Church. I would have thought this to be straight forward. Not so in this Assembly. Even though I heard from senior clerics how bishops are putting in place dedicated chaplains for 'those who identify as LGBTIQ+'. Some Assembly members' level of political correctness over the politics of sex and gender is gobsmacking. As if making any reference to 'those who identify as LGBTIQ+' is somehow running counter to the missionary outreach of the Church beggars belief.

I joined with other Assembly members to place on the record the formal recognition of those who identify as LGBTIQ+ in the introductory statement to the section entitled, 'Called By Christ - Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples.' In fairness to the drafters of this section, the phrase had already been included in the text but Assembly members were presented with a motion to have it removed! Fortunately, common sense did prevail.

Both of these instances are indicative of the dilemma facing the Church. Pastoral outreach is the main game. Political correctness is not. Pope Francis keeps urging for a 'missionary impulse' to drive the Church in post-modern times. For me, that means engaging with the context of 'this change of era' as the Pope calls it. That is, facing those realities and upholding the dignity of people in the circumstances in which we encounter them. It means building a sense of community, creating just relationships, sharing resources and trying to leave no one behind as the pace of modern living risks ever greater social and personal isolation and fragmentation.



The Assembly heard from Archbishops and religious sisters that the recent Census maps a Church in decline and suffering from the suffocating effects of secularisation. No news there! It is fair to say that the Assembly is not being presented with a roadmap out of this phenomenon. Maybe because there isn't one, or if there is, it is not the path of resistance and clinging to practices that are plainly not working.

The respected US teacher and writer Margaret Wheatley, in her recent book, 'Who Do You Choose To Be', correlates organisations with living organisms that adjust and change to their environments in order to preserve their inner cell. She says that the identity of the living organism has the very function to change in order to save itself. That change is inevitable and to not change is fatal. Sound familiar? The history of our Church is one where it always integrates into the world, adapts, changes and incorporates the unfolding truth. Now is no time for putting heads in the sand. No time for knee-jerk reactions. No time for stubborn resistance. The Spirit is moving, not standing still. We risk being left behind as an unmoored God moves on!

Fr Richard Rohr often speaks of an 'emerging Church'. One guided by an alternative orthodoxy, inclusive, humble and with attention to the Universal Christ. For me, that is the pathway forward. Clinging to the wreckage is not a sane option.

Even though the second full day of the Assembly was wrought with angst, I believe the members know that change is inevitable in all its faces. The frustration is always with the timeline!

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