
Real learnings from the Plenary Council assemblies and processes

– An ordinary Catholic's perspective

Background

Various assessments have been written of the outcomes and experience of the Plenary Council (PC). Some look at the outcomes and learnings in the context of moving forward. Most have been written by those who were either 'in the room' or closely associated with the organisation of the Council.

This perspective is from an ordinary Catholic, one who followed the process closely and engaged with it. This involvement included facilitating the gathering of input and preparation of the CCCG submission to the first stage of the process, and close scrutiny and analysis of the subsequent documentation culminating in the final assembly sessions.

Overall Assessment of Outcomes

For all the effort involved, the PC outcomes can fairly be described as modest and qualified. Notable achievements were the strong endorsement and support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart, recognition of Aboriginal people, their ancient culture and deep spirituality, and the theology and practical application of Pope Francis' Laudato Si encyclical. It is interesting to note that while expressions of the church's mission in today's Australia, both of these matters had strong community/political overtones. On most other fronts the words in the motions passed by the Council are aspirational, with very little hard commitment to reform initiatives. The motion finally passed on the role of women in the church is notable, not for what it says ought to be done, but as a seemingly shared platform for future discussion and consideration.

In terms of the five key points in the CCCG submission which called for church that is Transparent, Accountable, Non-clerical, Inclusive and Humble, there was modest recognition of the need for the church to be more open and accountable, but this was somewhat muted and did not lead to any strong endorsement of the Report from the Light of the Southern Cross. The commitment to establishing Diocesan Pastoral Councils was arguably weaker than the requirement outlined in the documents of Vatican II 60 years ago. The need to address the 'evil' of clericalism was brushed aside with no meaningful reference

in the final motions and the references to a church that is Inclusive and Humble were obscure, bordering on opaque.

The focus of this assessment, however, is on the processes of the Plenary, which extend from the very first call for submissions from all Catholics to each of the intermediate stages leading to the two assemblies.

Learnings

Writing in his blog for the critical Wednesday of assembly 2, when the crisis emerged, Bishop Richard Umbers stated: “*Synodality in the Church in Australia began that day*”. While this is an encouraging reference, indicating the synodal experience was significant and foreshadowing its continuance, it is also a clear, if unintended, recognition that the process that had proceeded that day was certainly **not** synodality in practice. Ironically this is an assessment consistent with the analyses and critiques that Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn had painstakingly offered throughout the whole Plenary process. These commentaries were pre

viously ignored. Now they have been vindicated.

Frank Brennan SJ referred to the critical Wednesday’s proceedings as a moment when “the bishops were forced to stop and listen to the cry of the people in the room”, in what was “an example of a Church seeking to overcome the mentality of clericalism”. There is certainly much evidence of clericalism being systemic throughout earlier stages of the Plenary, during which much of the original input from the people ‘not in the room’ was washed away or ignored. That input remains the deposit of faith wisdom that the Australian bishops do not want to acknowledge. Having been ignored it will now become a volatile factor in the efforts of the Australian church to ‘sell’ the outcomes from the Plenary.

It is salutary to look back on the original document of this process, the report on the input contained in the 17,000+ submissions lodged by faithful earnest Catholics. On reflection this was probably the only truly honest document produced in the lead-up to the Plenary assemblies. I say this notwithstanding that public access to the submissions, although promised was never provided. Nevertheless the input from lay Catholics comes through so strongly and consistently in advocating for meaningful reform. We can now look back and realise that the name given to the document, *Listening to what the Spirit said*, was a cynical hoax as most of what was put by ordinary Catholics was subsequently ignored.

Key issues identified in the report included clericalism, celibacy – the shortage of priests, and lack of leadership from the bishops. These topics never made it to the business end of the assemblies and in most cases the other preliminary documents at the Discernment and Instrumentum Laboris stages were often blatant, if not deceitful, in sweeping them off to the peripheries. Certainly, the artificial and tightly controlled process that produced formal motions to be considered by the final assembly ensured that topics which key influential people did not want discussed, didn’t make it to the table for open discussion.

Secretary of the Plenary Council for the later stages and the lead into assembly 2, Fr. David Ransom observes that it would have been better to “allow that much more active

engagement and participation so that people have the sense of actually shaping something in the moment, rather than simply being passive recipients of something...". He noted that "the last couple of days was (sic) really energising because people did have the sense they were actually shaping what was being said". He added: "There are a lot of other things that didn't see the light of day, that we will need to consider in a different kind of forum"

All agree it was the Wednesday 'stand-off' that prompted the abrupt change from running an agenda with only 'cleared and blessed' motions, to one that leveraged the real passions, skills and commitment of those attending. Archbishop Mark Coleridge described this as a moment of "real peril" and it is now commonly represented as a moment of intervention by the Holy Spirit. But all Catholics should pause to reflect before accepting this narrative.

During his recent trip to Canada, Pope Francis told his fellow Canadian Jesuits: "When one says 'synodal Church' the expression is redundant: **the Church is either synodal or it is not Church**". So the issues raised by Australian Catholics, but manipulated out of the Plenary process, become a real challenge for Australia's bishops. This goes not just to acknowledgement of the issues raised, but to the manner in which they are dealt with. Pope Francis is quite clear that censoring or preselecting material, is not synodal. And yet it is clear there were repeated and blatant examples of this occurring in the earlier stages.

Discernment and the working of the Holy Spirit were much overused, confused and conflated terms throughout this whole process. The input from the People of God at the submission stage, was badged as the product of the Spirit, but it became input that seemingly could be put aside. In other instances, the inspiration of the Spirit was invoked for documents that, by any objective, professional and fair analysis, were a poor reflection on the intelligence, theological awareness and honesty of those who participated in the process. They were confused in structure and sequence and poorly written.

This remained a disturbing feature of the whole Plenary Council process – the inability to produce documents that spoke clearly and honestly. Rather than illuminating and clarifying, they were mired in confusion and double speak. The *Instrumentum Laboris* that was meant to point the way to meaningful agendas was dense, at times inscrutable, repetitive verbiage. It is as if there is an institutional failure to express both theological and procedural thoughts clearly and with what could reasonably be expected - an Australian straightforward simplicity. If synodality is to be meaningful in the Australian context it is essential that this problem is fixed.

What is being passed off here as the Spirit's blessing invoked to rescue a moment - the Wednesday incident, which ought not and would not have been necessary, had fair and reasonable practice been applied throughout. The work of the Holy Spirit is about more than saving the reputations of a group of implacable bishops who don't want to hear what they had decided they didn't want to hear. The poignancy and pain witnessed by women in the church was set out in the original document summarising input from ordinary Catholics. If that had been truly valued the circumstances of the Wednesday would have been very different. If the Holy Spirit truly was at work, the logic is that the message was one for the bishops.

The message may have been consistent with what Pope Francis told that group of Jesuits in Canada recently: synodality is not about “a pre-selection of material” or censoring things that some “did not consider appropriate”. It was just these types of characteristics that shaped the framing, processes and formulations of the Plenary. It makes one ponder what might have been possible if the strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the agenda for assembly 1 had prompted a similar stand-off by members at the start of the assembly processes. All this points to the need for very clear and transparent procedures for the foreshadowed synodal roundtable that is to take this process forward.

Plenary member, Claire Victory, saw the events of the Wednesday as inspiring and empowering to lay Catholics. She also hopes that the events “will encourage our bishops to be more open and honest with the people of the Church...that they will seek our counsel more and include us in discussions and decision-making, both informally and through structural changes”. Significantly she went on to urge that (at least some of) the bishops be emboldened and gain “the moral authority and the sense of solidarity that they need to resist the powerful minority within their own ranks” to speak out on issues.

This will clearly be an indicator of the future good intentions of the bishops. There needs to be an end to the immature, yet tightly enforced, code of ‘group think’ among the bishops which prevents individuals from expressing publicly their own authentic opinions on church issues. The Australia Catholic community wants mature discussions, not childish avoidance.

Some commentary by international observers has tended to laud the Australian process as being exemplary, mostly on the basis of how the Wednesday incident was handled and its influence on subsequent proceedings. It would be unfair on all those Australian Catholics who took the trouble to lodge their earnest submissions to expect them to uncritically accept that depiction. Indeed, the worry is that many bishops will see it as a validation of what they are keen to portray as synodality in practice, when in fact it was dishonest and unprofessional conduct that led to the situation.

Conclusion

The Australian Catholic laity are at the very same point as they were when this process started – presented with aspirational statements that bishops say they support, but no concrete evidence to demonstrate that things will be different. And little to engender real confidence that Australia’s bishops are any more reliable and worthy of confidence. This was no Pentecost. If you were not in the room your views counted for little at the input stage and at the end of the process. The challenge will be for those who were ‘in the room’ to ensure it all leads somewhere.

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