

The Plenary Council: was all that effort worthwhile?

Spirituality in the Pub, Melbourne, March 1st 2023

Placet iuxta Modum

My short answer to the question “was all that effort worthwhile?” is Placet iuxta Modum (Yes with reservations). I’m not being a smart Alec in saying that. Placet iuxta Modum, a well-known phrase in religious communities and church synods, was one of the three voting options at the Plenary Council (the others were Placet [Yes] and Non Placet[No]). It caused a lot of trouble because it was counted as a ‘No’ vote and caused the downfall of some motions, including the notorious one on the Equal Dignity of Women and Men on the Wednesday of the Second Assembly. For the remainder of the Assembly the bishops (the deliberative voters) agreed not to use that option.

‘Placet iuxta Modum’ just about summarizes my views. PC members were advised that it meant ‘Yes with reservations’, while other definitions include ‘It is not entirely pleasing’ or ‘A qualified but essentially positive vote’. My conclusion is Yes, but not entirely happy, but you must be willing to put the PC in the context of decades-long reform of the institutional church.

When I received this evening’s invitation, I also asked some of my PC mates for their opinion, now that eight months have passed since the Second Assembly closed; we have been meeting regularly since before the First Assembly. Some gave me their answers to the question and permission to quote them.

A woman religious institute leader put it this way:

‘I think it was worth it in the sense that it strengthened the resolve of good people to keep up the good fight. I think it made a lot of us less passive and less afraid to speak our truth. Its hard to see at this stage practical outcomes, but I think that many have been put on notice that it can’t be business as usual. Also, the ‘silent protest’ was a Spirit-inspired moment and the response by Shane Mackinlay showed a level of adulthood that will become the norm-I hope’.

Lay member 1 had a different take:

'At the conclusion I was inspired by the experience and would have answered a resounding YES. With so little action around so many Dioceses to date-, now I would say I'm not so sure. I think those few bishops and those few Dioceses who are ploughing the fields for the seeds of the Plenary Council to be sown right now-were already moving in that direction. The rest are still stuck in the farmhouse or have lost the keys to the tractor'.

Lay member 2 was more positive:

...I think that it was able to prove that there is interest in and commitment to the Catholic Church from lay people as well as ordained and religious across the country. Through the initial data collection phase, it enabled all people to speak honestly and from the heart about what they believed the Catholic Church should embrace moving forward and leave behind. The council assemblies themselves gathered in one room a snapshot of the diversity and richness within the Catholic Church in Australia. Those present showed an openness and willingness to sit beside, listen to and journey with others that think differently, in pursuit of the common goal of shaping the life and work of the Catholic Church in Australia, into the future. Having read the document for the Continental Stage of the international synod, much of what was flagged through the Plenary Council process is echoed in the document. It is both affirming and reassuring. Is there more to be done-Yes. Will it take all of us-Yes. Was it worth it-Yes'.

Lay member 3 thought likewise:

My opinion only: Yes! It got people thinking, talking and working together (not just PC members-it got more people working at BEING the Church rather than merely spectating and pointing to the hierarchy to do something! If handled well the groundswell from the 'bottom' will form and serve the church for years to come'.

These four responses probably fall into the category of two 'Yes' and two 'Yes with reservations'. They point out the measures by which conclusions could be reached. One is cultural change and another is practical outcomes. Some focus on the assemblies, while others relate as well to the earlier consultations.

The Efforts

Thinking back over the efforts leaves my head spinning. There was just so much effort by so many for so long.

- The institutional church devoted considerable resources over four years to PC organisation to the detriment of funding other activities at the ACBC and its agencies and in dioceses. Yet there has been no financial accounting that I am aware of.
- Submissions were made by 17,500 Catholics representing 200,000 others. Some of them, such as Getting Back on Mission by C4R, were very substantial.
- The National Pastoral Research Centre summarised the submissions and did much more.
- The PC Executive Committee, the Facilitation Team, and many others gave considerable service.
- The 72 members of the six Writing and Discernment groups did likewise under considerable pressure of time.
- One small official group, led by Archbishop Tim Costelloe, wrote the Instrumentum Laboris or Working Document.
- Diocesan and parish-level activities included contacts, assemblies, Zoom conferences, talks and discussions.
- The church reform movement made the PC its main focus for three years. This included the successful Convocation of Catholics series and the ACCCR booklet, 'A Church for All'.
- Plenary Council members themselves numbered about 280. Their individual contributions included:
 - Applications and selection;
 - Training and formation;
 - Informal group meetings;
 - Official evening 'coffee conversations';
 - First Assembly participation by Zoom for a week;
 - Second Assembly participation in person in Sydney for a week;
 - Blogs and reports back.
- Plenary Tracker 1 and 2 ran each night of the two assemblies. This highly professional effort by Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn to run a sort of '7.30 Report' for the PC was an amazing achievement and drew a terrific and heartfelt response from the Catholic community.

- **Follow Up submissions by members and the general Catholic community, including ACCCR, included (often at speed):**
On the Working Document;
On the Draft Agenda
- **Catholic Religious Australia conversations;**
- **Many others.**

The Two PC Assemblies

- **Selection of members. I was grateful to be there and the representation was diverse, but lay members were selected not elected. Some ‘delegations’ were so obviously stacked with conservative members that it became a topic of conversation among PC members;**
- **Church employees were too numerous among lay members, including many senior advisers to bishops;**
- **The decision-making process was a significant handbrake on progress, but also against extreme conservatism. In a polarized church, 2/3rds majorities set a high bar;**
- **The ‘Fruits’ document issued after the first assembly was not a true reflection of the central communal discussion in that assembly. It was skewed by individual submissions facilitated behind the scenes by a conservative group. I raised this with the official governance committee without making any impact;**
- **The ‘silent’ protest by 60 members on the Wednesday of the second assembly, which I was proud to be part of, was a key synodal moment;**
- **International coverage was positive; sometimes uncritically positive.**

The Outcomes and Decrees

Achievements:

- Support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart and Indigenous spirituality within the church;
- Support for Laudato Si action plans;
- Progress on welcoming Women deacons;
- Support for a more inclusive new translation of the liturgy;
- Support for Third Rite of Reconciliation;
- General support for synodality;
- Regular diocesan synods and assemblies.

Disappointments:

- Defeat for lay preaching (but 20 bishops supported it anyway);
- Lack of attention to radical inclusiveness (e.g. LGBTQIA+; divorced and remarried);
- General lack of boldness;
- General timidity as far as Vatican oversight was concerned.

Implementation

Particular:

The PC second assembly endorsed an Implementation process involving regular reviews over five years until 2027. A National Synodal Roundtable was endorsed to cover this review.

The November 2022 ACBC meeting referred reviews to its Commissions and Committees. No word on the synodal roundtable. This was a disappointing setback.

General:

The PC was a national event, but there is no 'national church'. The church is the Catholic Church in Australia not the Australian Church. The ACBC is deliberately weak. This is a major limitation for PC implementation across Australia.

We are a fragmented church in so many ways (I am not talking about polarization). There is the diocesan/religious divide and the geographical division into 34 dioceses. There are also the Eastern churches. This provides

opportunities for reform initiatives, but also condemns reform to being piecemeal,

Authority (executive, legislative and judicial) still lies with bishops and priests. This situation can be finessed in favourable circumstances, but in the wrong hands can have awful outcomes.

Synodality is still skin deep and much argued about (an on-going conversation even as the Synod of Bishops proceeds).

‘Walking Together’ in a synodal church can be interpreted in many ways. Unfortunately, lay Catholics are walking together in relays alongside a single runner (the hierarchy). That is deliberate. For instance, PC members have no ongoing standing. Most, if not all, have not even been invited to play an ongoing role within their dioceses.

Some, without encouragement, have attempted to play a role. I’m thinking here of the Statement of Solidarity with LGBTQIA+ Catholics, initiated by Max Stephens, who is here tonight, and signed by 46 former members of the PC. If you are interested in this project, see the December issue of The Swag magazine or see me or Max.

The PC process, for instance, has involved many distinct groups of lay people, often selected by bishops.

- Submissions;
- Working groups;
- PC members;
- Synod members;

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On the other hand, bishops are the constant factor. ‘Walking together’ cannot be episodic or temporary, but, to bear fruit, requires constant engagement and listening to each other by ordained, religious and lay people over many years.

Synodal structures are necessary to do this, but they are often resisted or watered down by those in authority. I’m talking here, for instance, of diocesan and parish pastoral councils.

Further Remarks:

Synod of Bishops, 2021-2024

Despite Cardinal Pell's dramatic denunciations, the Synod has many attractive features, including the documentation and the debates, but the local Australian consultation was much less successful. The Catholic community was clearly running out of petrol on the consultation journey (hundreds not thousands of submissions).

Was it an encouragement or distraction from the PC implementation?

Pity it was not held before the PC (but that cuts both ways).

Decline and Change in the Church in Australia (Briefly!)

The decline in the church continues by most measures, e.g., Census figures and church attendance figures.

More importantly demographic change in the Church in Australia is relentlessly underway.

The PC needs to be embedded in the Eastern Churches and, more importantly, in newly arriving communities in Australia within in the Western church to be successful.

Conclusion

'Yes with reservations' for me (Placet iuxta Modum)

I committed myself with open eyes to work for reform in an insider/outsider role.

Resilience is important. 'Burn out' is a real problem.

The 'pulse of the church' is encouraging.

We are engaged in a 'long game'.

Synodality and hierarchy are an odd couple which don't sit easily together.

There must be cultural change and as a ‘church of employees’ (several hundred thousand Catholics are employed by the Church and thus contractually bound), this is problematic.

I have outlined some PC achievements and many impediments.

The dynamics of the parallel struggle over the Indigenous Voice to Parliament are an insight into church reform, which ultimately is about changing the constitution of the church. I have signed on to that bigger project.

John Warhurst

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