



CONCERNED CATHOLICS CANBERRA GOULBURN BLOG

The tricky balance of modernising our Church

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Some ask whether Pope Francis is confronting an uphill battle to modernise the Church.

Catholic social media can be as caustic as any when the Pope's critics have their say. And not just the hidden voices of cyberspace. Professional Catholic commentators, like Pope John Paul II's biographer, George Weigel, don't hide their disdain for the 'Francis Agenda'.

In his syndicated columns, picked up regularly by Sydney's 'The Catholic Weekly', Weigel has been critical of many of Pope Francis' attempts to shift the Vatican, and in turn the Church, to a more engaged and relevant institution. Weigel is not a supporter of the current Synod on Synodality. It is no surprise then to find other columnists for 'The Catholic Weekly' taking his lead and approaching the Synod with a defensive rather than open minded attitude. Whether there is an element of 'sour grapes' that this pontificate is advancing what recent ones didn't is anyone's guess.

The modernisation of our Church is essential. It is a tricky balance. The nature of being a church is at its heart a spiritual exercise. It is not just about building an organisation of like-minded people. The future of being a church likewise is a spiritual endeavour.

For this reason, Pope Francis asks the catholic community to discern the direction for the Church. He cautions against limiting this to an organisational strategic planning exercise. Rather he calls us to listen to the ways the Spirit is speaking to us, the world, and in turn, to the direction for the Church.

It requires of us more than just recognising contemporary trends and social movements. It calls for a sense of personal detachment so that we can be open to other perspectives. It also asks of us something that we all find a challenge; that is, to give credence to passionately held opinion that runs against our better instincts. At those times, staying with the tension has a creative potential and provides a pivotal point for change.

Unless we place confidence in this process the alternative becomes a power play that results in division and disaffection. And our Church has had too much of that!

Pope Francis has laid out a pathway for a more relevant and responsive church. A pathway Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn supports.

That said, there appears to be very little local engagement from the diocesan clergy in the synodal process. They are not alone. In his reflections after the October Synod Assembly, Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP, former head of the Dominicans (and a guest speaker next week at Marist and Merici Colleges), said that too few priests worldwide were involved with the Synod. I take this to mean that unless the grassroots of the Church are engaged, the Synod runs the risk of being perceived as an 'elites' talkfest'.

For a Church struggling to remain relevant this would be a disaster.

Australia's bishops need to become more vocally supportive of the Synod. They need to back in Pope Francis in a clear unequivocal fashion. Where there are critics the bishops need to demonstrate the wisdom of the Pope. They need to instigate, innovate and indicate that a synodal Church is emerging. A lack of leadership on their part will further the drift of Catholics from the institution.

At our local level demographics and population changes are shaping a church vastly different from our experience in previous generations. The Celtic Church of my youth and early adult life is in the minority. So too is its 'cultural Catholic' identity. The younger generations that participate regularly in Church practice carry different worldviews from the 'baby boomers'. Some reports indicate that they are more socially conservative and are dismissive of many of the concerns of the 'older generation'.

We need a vehicle to dialogue. We need a mechanism to begin to become a synodal church.

Archbishop Prowse has postponed any establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council until the Synod on Synodality runs its course. That Synod already recognises the importance of pastoral councils.

The synodal process is a way to enable dialogue across generations, different perspectives and between laity and clergy. The time for our diocese to establish a pastoral planning council has arrived!

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