

Listen to what the Spirit is saying – An Assessment

Background

The official report on the 17,000+ submissions to the Plenary Council is entitled: Listen to what the Spirit is saying – Final Report for the Plenary Council Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue. It is intended as the summary document that informs the Writing and Discernment Groups that are to undertake the next stage of the preparatory work leading to the Council.

The report runs to 300 pages, has 18 chapters and 20 appendices. The authors of the report are listed as Trudy Dantis, Paul Bowell, Stephen Reid and Leith Dudfield. All are employees of the National Centre for Pastoral Research, being respectively Director, Research Assistants and Research Officer.

General Comments

It must be said upfront that the task of reading and distilling the import of 17,000 submissions and to then communicate that deposit to another group, who may or may not have read all/some/few submissions, is an extremely challenging one. Establishing a workable and consistent methodology for reading and capturing the essence of contributions is itself problematic. The risk with such exercises is that genuine and serious concepts and ideas are often summarised down to a simple proposition or categorised into various groupings which only serve to be evaluated in a quantifiable manner.

The structure of the report is based on the evaluation of submissions through the lens of various topics, which form the chapters of the report. The chapters (topics) listed at Appendix A, are themselves significant in that they perhaps reveal a framework that the Plenary Council may adopt for its deliberations. However, there is no obvious connection with the topics identified as the six themes that seemingly constitute the next phase of Discernment. It seems that the framework for engaging, inviting and assessing lay input changes at each step of the process.

In each of the chapters the report purports to identify the key/most raised issues, along with other ideas, seemingly sometimes raised by only a few. Each chapter includes an ill-defined section headed *Questions for Plenary Council*, although the tag line states that these are a sample of questions participants asked. It is difficult to determine the weight that is being put on these listings (see later comments).

A somewhat informal hierarchy of referencing is used in the document, providing some indication of the strength or numbers of submissions supporting a particular approach or idea. This terminology ranges from statements such as “very strong support” through to “a few”, with gradations along the way, such as “a significant number”, “a major narrative”, “a noteworthy number”, “a large number of participants”, “many” and “some”. Often it is stated, in cases where there may be “very strong support”, that there are also “a good number” who opposed a particular proposition. Then there is reference simply to “participants”, neither specified nor quantified, who have particular views – usually traditionalist in character. Given these vagaries, it is hard to know how to assess or quantify support in some cases. However, there are several instances where the document seems to indicate that an issue or proposition has attracted very strong support and endorsement.

A pictorial/visual summary of the input to each of the Writing and Theme Groups is presented in the report at Appendices 15 to 20. However, these appear to provide only a superficial analysis.

The following observations are made, therefore, in the recognition that the task itself was monumental and the take-out from the overall body of submissions is inevitably going to be influenced to some extent by the perspectives brought to the task by the individuals undertaking it.

In preparing this overview I have worked with the five key topics around which the Concerned Catholics submission was built, namely the need for a church that is **transparent, accountable, non-clericalist, inclusive and humble**. These are principally addressed in chapters 5,6,7,8,9,10,16 and 17.

Major/Key Topics

Based on the language used in the report it would be reasonable to list the following as major or key issues identified in the submissions.

- **Celibacy** is stated as one of the “most frequently raised themes” with broad support for married male priests (Ch. 6 p.67).
- The **ordination of women** received “considerable support from a large group of participants” (Ch. 6).
- **Clericalism** was a theme “most widely discussed by participants” (CH 7 p.81). The reporting group has inserted their own definition of Clericalism, which states that Clericalism is an “attitude” and tends to downplay its true nature. The definition used in the CCCG submission is stronger and more realistic. Appendix B refers.
- **Lack of leadership from the Australian bishops** was a “call from many participants”, along with demands for transparency and changes in leadership and church decision making (Ch 7).
- “A strong desire” for **Diocesan Pastoral Councils** (Ch.7).
- “A significant number” stated it was imperative for church to **implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission and follow its recommendations** (Ch.8).
- The need for **Inclusiveness** was “a major narrative” (Ch.9).
- **Radical change to the structure and model of leadership described as “inverting the pyramid”** was seen to be of “critical importance” Ch. 16 p 172).

Other Relevant Observations

- Chapter 6 deals with the Sacraments, but the report speaks principally of only Holy Orders and Marriage – this is claimed to accurately reflect the thrust of submissions. However, it is curious that no mention is made of Baptism. While it may be true that detailed reference to Baptism was not made in many submissions (including CCCG) the fact remains that it is the importance of the meaning of Baptism that informs much of the agenda put by reformist groups. The net result of this omission is that there is no real sense of the seminal emphasis of a Vatican II model of church.
- In both Chapters 4 and 5 there is a sense that greater emphasis is given to a traditionalist approach to faith formation and calls for the return of pre-Vatican II

liturgical practices, including Latin masses. One of the proposed questions for the Council is: Why not introduce one Latin mass per week?

- As indicated above, “a significant number” stated it was imperative the church implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission and follow its recommendations. However, in the Conclusion to Ch. 8, there is merely the statement that “some participants” emphasised the need for the church to follow the recommendations of the Royal Commission – seemingly on par with the “some” who voiced concerns that the reporting of the crisis needed to be more balanced!
- Chapter 9 deals with Inclusiveness, but it is curious that there is only one mention of “Women” under this topic. Other references, in Chs 6 and 7, indicate that there was “very strong” support for properly acknowledging and enhancing the role of women.
- This chapter also includes the statement that participants (unquantified) are concerned that not enough is being done to defend religious freedom. Among the list of Questions for the PC under Chapter 9 is the rather puzzling question: How will the Catholic Church resist the seemingly irresistible move from freedom of religion to freedom of worship?
- Many participants stressed the need for the hierarchy to listen more to the laity and to be more compassionate and less driven by doctrine (Ch. 12).
- There was strong support evident for transparency and shared decision making at the parish level (Ch. 15)
- Chapter 16, Bringing the church into the 21st century, outlined “a significant call” for modernising church teaching in areas of birth control, IVF, Same Sex Marriage and Changes in the concept of Sin.
- A further key element to emerge in Chapter 16 was support for what the report describes as “radical change” involving inverting the pyramid of church which “was seen to be of critical importance”.

Input regarding the processes of the Plenary Council

Chapter 17 of the report is rather telling in that it outlines views offered by “a substantial number of responses” expressing scepticism about the Plenary Council itself. It notes that “many” were cynical of the processes, the lack of lay decision making, being structurally undemocratic, largely a waste of time and unlikely to result in change. The exclusion of women (and especially religious women) from decision making and representation was considered unacceptable by “a noteworthy number”. The bishops have been warned – their credibility is on the line.

Overall Assessment

The report certainly covers a broad range of views and underscores the quite divergent visions of church that are apparent in the Australian church. In an overall sense, the report does convey a multitude of calls for change and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the major thrust of those calls is in a reformist direction. There is certainly a healthy sense of dissatisfaction with the current predicament of the church and a recognition that things must change.

Despite a sense in some parts that the report appears to advance a traditionist view, on reflection this could be seen as a form of rear-guard action in the face of what is an overwhelming call for reform and change and an apparent acceptance by the people that

there must be significant and meaningful change. In other words, the people of the Australian church are ready for change, if not yearning for it.

Based on this view, it is reasonable to state that the agenda advanced in the CCCG submission is broadly consistent with the overall call for change. This is encouraging and opens up an interesting dynamic for the next stages.

Agreement around the real nature of Clericalism is required as the definition proffered in the report is too mild and does not get to the real impact of attitudes, behaviours and structures. On this topic and on the need for an “inverted pyramid” of structure, the views advanced by CCCG and others are closer to those expressed by Pope Francis than are the dispositions of the Australian church leadership.

I began this exercise sceptical, believing that the report on the submissions would probably emasculate the calls for reform. My conclusion is that does not appear to have happened, despite some obvious efforts to confuse and downplay reform needs. My assessment is that it likely became impossible to seriously sustain such an approach. The call for reform is clearly overwhelming. Moreover, the report itself can form a useful baseline (in the absence of publication of the submissions themselves) against which the outcomes of the Plenary Council can be judged publicly.

Going Forward

The input from the people, as reflected in the report and the submissions, can therefore be characterised as putting the pressure on the bishops to be brave and meet the challenge for reform. This is a good development. It might also go some way to explaining why the bishops have so intruded themselves into the Discernment phase, by stacking the membership of the Writing and Theme groups. It is possible to see this a desperate step by a group of men who fear, or do not know how to meet, the challenges before them, and so are intent on emasculating the overall outcome from the Listening phase.

If this is correct it will be difficult to sustain this position. The papers that are scheduled to emerge from the Writing and Theme Groups will be one of several key indicators as to whether the overwhelming demand for change is being heard and acted upon. Another will be whether there is any progress/concessions on broadening the representation of women and others for the Plenary Council. These are matters worth pursuing.

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Appendix A- Major chapters of the report:

Chapter 4: Love God, Love Neighbour

Chapter 5: The Mass

Chapter 6: Sacraments

Chapter 7: Leadership and Church Governance

Chapter 8: Sexual Abuse and the Royal Commission

Chapter 9: Social Justice and the Environment

Chapter 10: Outreach
Chapter 11: Evangelisation
Chapter 12: More Listening
Chapter 13: Youth Ministry
Chapter 14: Catholic Education in Schools
Chapter 15: Parishes
Chapter 16: Bringing the Church into the 21st Century
Chapter 17: Better Plenary Council Process
Chapter 18: Conclusion

Appendix B Definition of Clericalism

Ch 7 extract: Definition of Clericalism

We defined clericalism as an attitude among laity and ordained that the ordained is somehow superior, “above”, worthy of more respect, has an entitlement to more authority, a power of veto over lay decisions as desired, less accountability and less transparency in decision-making than the non-ordained are entitled to by virtue of their Baptism. This attitude can be overt or more subtle.

Top-down, clericalist governance does not serve the silent majority, nor the marginalised, nor those in minority groups. Clericalism is self-serving; it is not “doing the right thing”.

Definition of Clericalism used in CCCG submission:

Clericalism is a perversion of priestly mission and humility, into priestly and hierarchical power and exclusiveness. It is a toxic mix of attitudes, dispositions, behaviours and judgements that have come to characterise an entrenched male, celibate priestly class, distracted by perceived status rather than driven by real service. Clericalism has become a prevailing characteristic of church culture and it is often the attitudes of lay groups that encourage and sustain it.