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*The shortcomings and challenges  
of the published Agenda  
for the first Plenary Council sessions*

*– A reformist perspective*

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## **Introduction**

The published agenda for the first Plenary Council (PC) sessions is a distressing disappointment. Therefore, it presents a particular challenge for any fair-minded person advocating, in the spirit of Pope Francis, that the Council should be an opportunity for genuine and realistic reform.

This short analysis is a response to that challenge on behalf of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn (CCCG), who have consistently advocated for significant meaningful reform. It is presented under three headings:

- a) The agenda – a professional failure
- b) Responding to the agenda's failures; and
- c) Working with an inadequate agenda.

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## *The agenda – a professional failure*

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Any consideration of the agenda document needs to start with acknowledging the clear and consistent themes of the report on the input received at the submission stage of the Plenary process. The six generic agenda topics in no way acknowledge the serious issues which the Catholic community asked to be addressed by the Plenary Council. It is as if the agenda was devised as a way of avoiding those issues.

The report on the submission stage also noted the deep scepticism and lack of trust that existed in the Catholic community about the process. While there was hope, it was a fragile hope. It was a 'last chance' hope, with all that conveys for both individuals and the institutional church. This agenda contributes little to maintain that hope or retrieve some of the trust that has been lost.

Given all the effort, wisdom and earnest contributions offered by ordinary Catholics throughout the various stages of this protracted process, it is fair to say that the reactions of the vast bulk of ordinary Catholics to the agenda would centre on the following exasperations:

- this is an insipid, timid document that fails to point to the real issues or facilitate meaningful outcomes;
- an agenda is meant to facilitate key issues being brought forward for vigorous examination, this, like so much in this process, confuses and obfuscates rather than illuminates;
- after all the rich input, we get this: 6 generic topics and a series of pedestrian questions that could have been addressed when groups first had discussions, and probably were;
- what a charade was all that 'discernment' talk– they just didn't listen, seemingly didn't want to or are incapable;
- after all that has preceded this point, to have this presented as an agenda for PC discussions is unprofessional and frankly a disgrace;
- a clear demonstration that those responsible for running the PC, and the bishops, are not up to the challenge of proper Synodality, as outlined by Pope Francis; and
- the agenda confirms the worst fears/suspicious of many Australian Catholics about the bona fides of the process and the hierarchy.

An alternate, more hopeful interpretation would be that the agenda is so broad that nothing is off the table. While contravening all best practice, in not being framed to facilitate discussion of the real and critical issues, the agenda could be seen as providing scope for reform advocates (and the Holy Spirit) to draw discussion to issues that would more realistically confront and recognise the need for genuine reform. However, such hope must be considered forlorn. The purported agenda is simply unprofessional and unworthy of any Australian organisation seeking seriously to examine its future.

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## *Responding to the agenda's failures*

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As the formal sessions of the PC are about to start, there are two key learnings from the Plenary process up to this point:

1. The published **agenda is a dismal failure** and, sadly, what the above assessments highlight, is that the trust ordinary Catholics invested in the PC is all but gone; and
2. The inadequacy of the agenda is itself a symptom of a **process that has been fraudulent and manipulated**, as CCCG has previously documented. It does not represent true *Discernment* or reflect the *Synodality* that Pope Francis has outlined and advocated. Catholics know this and it simply adds to the sense of charade about the whole process.

In this situation reform advocates should not squander the strategic advantage they have accrued in pointing to the inadequacies of the process to date, and the real risks involved in proceeding with an anodyne program of discussion and reflection. It is quite possible that PC members who are fair minded and open to genuine discussion and outcomes, could find it useful that some in the PC assembly feel strongly enough to raise these issues at this stage, recognising the ultimate cost to the church in Australia of a Council that may be judged by many to be a sad failure.

The conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that **something must happen** to facilitate meaningful discussions and outcomes. If not, this process will simply wither to be a sad farce. While this view is unlikely to be shared widely among the Australian hierarchy, it is quite possible that several bishops will share some disappointment with the agenda. Similarly, there will no doubt be some fair-minded and objective members of the Plenary Council assembly who will recognise the inadequacies of the agenda and be open to raising discussion on it and seeking some refinements.

### **What is the *Something* that could happen?**

Despite all the input and the critiques of earlier stages in this process, nothing seems to have prompted any recognition on the part of PC organisers that the process has been corrupted, deceitful and manipulated. It can be assumed therefore that the process from here on will not change or be open to real listening, dialogue and discernment. So, the opening session of the PC is the last chance that reform advocates will have to make a point – to put a stake in the ground. Failure to do so will only ensure that the process continues to spiral to an inevitable unedifying end point – with reform advocates seen as complicit in the process. Worse still the hierarchy will be seen to ‘get away’ with this faux discernment process, which they will portray as Synodality. Pope Francis needs advocates ‘in the room’.

*A stand needs to be made therefore at the opening stage of the formal sessions, to deliver a clear message from ordinary Catholics that the process to date, and based on the agenda, has been deficient and unworthy of a church that is meeting in the name of Jesus Christ. This*

*message has to be delivered in blunt terms within the Council and outside of it to the national and international media.*

*But there should be a second part to the message. This should convey clearly that reform advocates earnestly want to participate in a process that has integrity and is conducted in the true spirit of the Synodality of Pope Francis. Reform advocates stand ready to walk with those who share the same earnestness, to discover a mode of church that is faithful to Catholic tradition and relevant to the people of today and the children of tomorrow. Surely, we can all go forward “by staying true to the essence of our Catholic identity while ensuring its relevance for new generations; enabling its voice to be heard to inspire and guide anew”.\* The proposed agenda would not take us to that place, but we do want to walk together with those who are genuine and share that earnestness of the Spirit. We can teach each other things that will help us negotiate that journey. But it must start with an end to the deception and manipulation. It must start with treating all with respect and it must start with true Discernment.*

Such a statement, ideally coming from several PC members, would be a prophetic voice to the assembly. Prophetic, because it would speak Truth, and it would demand attention. It would in effect be echoing the call by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, when they rejected the first version of its program and outline documents. The Holy Spirit will have much to do at the PC and will not be aided by the current documentation and agenda. Reform advocates must speak up to make room for the Spirit.

It should not be overlooked that those Catholics who advocate for reform and have stayed the course in the PC process, will have reasonable expectations that colleagues who are members of the PC, will represent those positions firmly within the PC sessions. The small remaining pools of hope must not be jeopardised.

### **What would replace the proposed agenda?**

It is one thing to say the current agenda is inadequate. It is another matter to propose an alternative and reform advocates must have an alternative agenda to put forward. Such an alternative needs to focus initially on a higher level. Such issues as:

- What is or should be the theological framework/guiding principles for the Catholic Church in Australia?
- How does the Australian church in the current times, give effect to the theology of a pilgrim people and the shared rights and responsibilities endowed on all by the grace of their baptism?

The context for such discussions should be:

- an honest assessment of the demographics of the Australian church now and looking ahead 30 years, mapped against trends for the Australian community; and
- Pope Francis’ insistence on true Synodality and the need for a church that says an emphatic “NO” to clericalism.

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## *Working with an inadequate agenda*

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Notwithstanding the importance of the approach outlined above, it would be realistic to proceed on the basis that the initial PC sessions will proceed according to the currently proposed agenda. So how can this be approached in ways relevant to CCCG's key priorities? The current agenda identifies six broad areas for consideration:

- Conversion
- Prayer
- Formation
- Structures
- Governance
- Institutions

The CCCG submission centred on five key themes for reform of the Catholic Church in Australia. These are:

- A **Transparent** church
- An **Accountable** church
- A **non-clericalist** church
- A properly **Inclusive** church
- A truly **Humble** church

The agenda items are nouns that relate to static topics or categories. The CCCG priorities are attributes or characteristics (adjectives or adverbs) that define or describe the nature of the church and how it functions. In that sense the five CCCG items are relevant as descriptors of each of the six categories, although some have greater relevance to particular agenda items.

Another way of looking at this is to frame the reformist agenda as calling for a non-clericalist, inclusive and humble church, that is transparent and accountable. Such a perspective would recognise that much of the theological/ecclesiological repositioning required of the church is to be discovered in striving for an understanding of *why* the church needs and ought to be, non-clericalist, inclusive and humble, and what this means in practice. These qualities derive from unpacking the essence of the Christ character and the fundamentals of its nature. That is not to diminish the importance and biblical authenticity of being transparent and accountable. It merely serves to highlight that much of the reform richness (and challenge) is to be found in the other three elements.

Unless there is a radical commitment to a different form of church it will be a case of reform in form only and not in the hearts and minds, as it would not be seen to be part of the fundamental theological underpinning of the church. Real change at all levels will require a deep commitment to significant cultural, attitudinal and behavioural change. It is in driving

progress on clericalism, inclusion and a humble church that this challenge is confronted, and numerous small steps identified that are key ingredients of culture change programs.

It is recognised that the hybrid format (virtual and real) to be adopted for the initial sessions will make it very difficult to engage with the whole assembly and build relationships.

Nonetheless, the specific questions listed against the agenda items could fairly be described as tripe, as they are neither insightful nor facilitative. They are selective, have no overarching framework (except perhaps to distract and confuse) and take the process back to where it began.

The following outlines possible approaches to discussion under each agenda topic:

The topic of **Governance** is one which was a particular focus in the CCCG submission, which strongly emphasised Accountability and Transparency. Notably and quite dismissively, neither the agenda or questions make any mention of the Light from the Southern Cross (LSC) report. This is a shameful omission that does no credit to the whole process and those who manage it. The obvious answer to the first question under Governance is the road map set out in the LSC report. Certainly, there can be no meaningful discussion of governance without serious application of transparency, accountability and non-clericalism.

**Conversion:** Bishop Vincent Long, in his recent Dom Helder Camara Lecture, spoke of a church that “desperately need(s)...an inner conversion .... In our mindsets and patterns of action” He suggests this agenda item needs to be reframed to be an “examination of the church’s attitude and treatment of” particular groups, so that “the existing culture of clerical power, dominance and privilege” is confronted. Such an approach would open-up this topic to what is involved in being a properly inclusive, truly humble and non-clericalist church. It would also require that the Australian church recognise it has little credibility or appeal in the Australian community, without responding profoundly to the damage it inflicted on victims and itself by the sexual abuse scandals. The community will need to be thoroughly convinced that it has addressed these matters before it will even begin to listen to the faith message.

**Prayer:** The questions under this topic appear to be premised on a view of the world that is outdated and distorted. The first question might have been asked of peasant communities in the Middle Ages. The second question belies a false interpretation of what multiculturalism in Australia is about. Rather than simply honouring cultural heritage, the policy is about acknowledging those customs and building them into the broader Australian community. That is where the Australian bishops have faltered. Due to their failures of leadership, they have been unable to articulate a Catholicism relevant to Australia. This topic is one that should be considered after all others. It is clear that it needs to be discussed and developed in ways that ensure the focus is non-clericalist, strongly inclusive and truly humble.

**Formation:** Consideration of this topic should follow and reflect the outcome of some of the earlier suggested starting points. It is a vitally important area of discussion but will not be progressed in any productive way if it simply proceeds on the basis of the current vision of church in Australia. This topic is a classic case of requiring what Pope Francis terms a

Change of Era focus, rather than simply an era of change approach. This topic is probably the key to initiating and implementing a program of real change, as it should go to the **What** that is involved in addressing attitudinal, behavioural and general cultural attributes of the current clericalist church and shaping an alternative. Reform of seminaries (or priestly formation) is an absolute stand-out example of both the need and the key to change. All of the five CCCG points of emphasis are highly relevant to this topic. But constructive discussion of it can only sensibly follow the bigger picture discussions.

**Structures and Institutions:** These two agenda topics, while raising matters that need consideration, are in a sense ‘back-end’ issues. The solutions/approaches to these topics can only be re-imagined in the light of what is determined as a result of real consideration of big-picture issues. The five CCCG attributes are particularly relevant to any ultimate considerations of parish, diocesan structures or the organisational framework and missionary objectives of Catholic schools and social service agencies. Those entities will only be respected in the community if they exhibit and operate under the five CCCG attributes.

### **Ensuring influence from outside the PC sessions**

Throughout the PC process an unfortunate truth has been the need to ‘call out’ the inadequacy and deceptiveness of the process. That need remains and will continue throughout the assembly sessions. The Australian Catholic community must continue to speak out in an on-going way. It is paramount that the ‘keep them honest’ approach is continued in the form of media liaison and engagement by people both inside the assembly sessions and those outside.

Reform advocates need to continue to work collaboratively to leverage opportunities to keep the agenda and proceedings relevant and ensure, to the greatest extent possible, that the outcomes are meaningful and significant. This would ideally involve a daily program of media briefings and backgrounding/commentary on discussion topics and emerging outcomes. International media links will be as important in this process as contact with local Australian outlets.

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\* Quote from draft CCCG vision statement prepared by Susan Sullivan, June 2021