

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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Plenary INSIGHT A Daily Blog



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LOTS OF PREPARATION BUT STILL IN THE DARK

Even before discussing my expectations of the Plenary Council, it is important to set the scene. I began my formation as a member in late June, more than 12 months after I had first been notified of my appointment, and since then I have learnt a lot. I have had one face-to-face meeting with my fellow members from Canberra-Goulburn, but other than that my whole experience has been online.

The formation session was full of technical training on how to manoeuvre around Microsoft Teams and introductions to small group work. The former is crucial to the whole enterprise and those most technically adept may prove to be the most effective. The latter is equally important because more than 50 per cent of the member's time 'at work' will be in these groups of 10 or sometimes 30.

It also featured lectures on the Spiritual Conversations methodology by Br Ian Cribb SJ, on the PC Statutes and Regulatory Norms, and on the psychology of small groups.

Slowly we began to meet other members. I discovered that I knew a few people, mostly because I have been in and around national church agencies for decades. I still feel isolated, but many others must feel even more so. Some say the church in Australia is a small world, and I know what they mean, but most of us Catholics live in silos of one sort or another. This applies to lay Catholics especially and puts us at a disadvantage in a gathering of about 280 members, composed of clerics, religious and lay.

It has dawned on me that the Spiritual Conversations method may turn out to be the greatest influence on the outcomes of this council. This is a unique ecclesiastical event and quite foreign to anyone who expected a meeting or a conference like they may have experienced elsewhere in their professional life outside the church. Some friends and colleagues swear to me that the method, based on deep listening and discernment, will work and will not

prevent open and robust conversations about the issues of the day for a church in crisis. I will take that on trust, and I will be entering the Council tentatively with just two or three practice sessions under my belt.

The small group work will be based loosely around 14 of the 16 Agenda Questions. The other two will be discussed in a Plenary next Thursday. Why that is the case has not been explained. That's another feature of this whole exercise. Members outside the inner circle take what they are given. The framework has not been open for discussion by all.

No one yet knows which question they will be allocated to discuss. Recently we were asked to submit our preferences, ranked one to six, among the questions. I have heard we may get one of our two highest preferences, but that is just rumour. We've also been told that we can switch groups if we feel it is not working for us. Naturally members are anxious and remain pretty ignorant about these vital matters. It seems that too much has come with a rush in these last few weeks. This includes a Code of Conduct. More on that next time.

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