

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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Plenary INSIGHT

A Daily Blog



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THE MESSY BUSINESS OF DISCERNMENT

Where are we up to? The reports back from the small groups and the draft minutes from the first Plenary Session greeted the Plenary Council members when they woke up this morning. Only then did the members of each of the ten 'large' small groups learn in full how the other nine were going. Catching up and checking in is a substantial exercise. The draft minutes run to 35 pages including appendices.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge tells the story of his light bulb moment when he was in Rome for the Synod of Bishops on the Family. 'For the first time – certainly at a Roman Synod – I saw discernment in action. It was messy and unpredictable; at the halfway mark it looked very unlikely that we would achieve anything worth achieving. Yet at the end we did produce something which wasn't the last word, but was a real contribution to the ongoing journey of the church.'

A step forwards towards a real contribution to the ongoing journey of the church in Australia must be the aspiration of this First Assembly. The notes reveal that the members are knuckling down to the task, speaking openly, revealing their inner feelings, and making constructive suggestions. Some of the discussions have gone back to basic concepts. As we go about our discussions, I am holding Mark's reflection lightly at the back of my mind.

One big structural problem, which should have been foreseen, has been revealed. Because fourteen questions into ten groups doesn't fit, four of the groups, including mine, have been asked to address two questions in the limited time available. Questions 1 (personal and communal conversion) and 5 (ecological conversion), 7 (diverse liturgical traditions) and 10 (clerical formation), 9 (formation of ordained ministers) and 12 (better structures for mission), and 14 (governance) and 16 (social services, health care and aged care) are being addressed in a single group. These 'pairs' also cut across the six themes (Conversion, Prayer, Formation, Structures, Governance and Institutions) within the Agenda Questions.

The groups are each approaching their dilemma in different ways, by considering dividing their time or integrating their discussion. Clearly some radical options have been considered, including splitting these groups into two. All sixteen questions are related to some extent by the church's mission, so there is scope for creative linking of the pairs of questions. There is also scope for reimagining the questions. Some early tentative steps have also been taken to suggest appropriate resources to insert into our early discussions.

The live streaming today captured the reports back from groups by spokespersons who had been chosen yesterday by their groups, not appointed by the organisers. After the live streaming ended there were a total of sixteen individual interventions, twelve pre-organised and four spontaneous. These were diverse, but one thread was strong, though not unanimous: thoughtful and passionate advocacy for women preaching.

Like many members I continue to benefit from reinforcement and encouragement from within and outside the Council membership. My Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn colleague, Francis Sullivan, whose brave initial Intervention yesterday morning on the issue of women's participation in governance and ordained ministries made me so proud, has written in his blog, [Plenary Speaking](#), of the same phenomenon. Heartfelt thanks to all once again. We are sharing responsibility together.

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