

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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Plenary INSIGHT

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A FEW LESSONS LEARNED...

The closing Mass tomorrow from Brisbane will bring this historic First Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council to an end. Only the final production and distribution of the proposal papers remains. Then it all starts again as the run up to the Second Assembly begins. It is time to offer initial reflections upon both the process and the outcomes.

This has been a massive exercise of which the church should be proud; a shout out to everyone involved, especially those behind the scenes. These include the Facilitation Team, the technical advisers, the chairs, the group facilitators, the expert advisers, and the Steering Committee. Many people have worked hard into the evenings to make morning deadlines; to turn around the paperwork; the technical support has largely been effective, coping with a membership often challenged by technology; the members have applied themselves diligently and raced to digest it all on the run.

Its broader impact on the sociology and dynamics of the church in Australia is incalculable. Networks and recognition of common interests have developed on all sides. We remain a 'house divided', in the words of one member, but some silos have been broken down. There will be unpredictable consequences into the next year and beyond. The life of the church may be enlivened and may never be the same. However, there will be the great temptation to move back to business as usual; resist it!

As an example of synodality in action the First Assembly process should be examined for its lessons before the next stage of the process is set in concrete. These lessons should not be forgotten.

The general lesson is the most important. The process did not fully model the transparency and accountability which should be at the heart of synodality. The People of God, including the members, were excluded from the process at times when they should have been included. The consequence was that chances to make the process better were lost.

There were also some particular lessons.

The 16 Agenda Questions were too bland and did not do justice to the 17,500 submissions and the community ferment which surrounded the consultation process. Some issues, like the role of women in decision-making, were not tackled head on.

The decision to squeeze fourteen of the questions into ten groups, creating double-pronged group agendas, generally led to outcomes less than optimal. The late allocation of members into each group on the Saturday morning prior to the Assembly made their job even harder in terms of appropriate preparation.

The decision to take both institutional child sexual abuse and reaching out to the most vulnerable (Qs 2 and 4) into one special plenary session created an intense and moving occasion, but it also led to some confusion and loss of focus.

From the wider Catholic community's perspective one other issue which stands out is that vagueness about the notion of 'representation' remains. It may never be resolved because each member approached their role differently, though we were warned not to consider ourselves representatives (because that term had a parliamentary whiff).

This variety was shown by what members brought to the table in both the small group work and the Interventions. Some interventions were like parliamentarians speaking to their electorates. I have no problem with that.

My impression was, for instance, that the members of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council brought a strong sense of representing the Indigenous community and did so successfully. Some Eastern Rite members also showed a strong sense of identity and spoke for their communities. Rural members, including bishops, made appeals on behalf of their suffering people.

The church reform movement should bear all these lessons in mind. As we intervene in the on-going discussions and implementation of proposals, the process, that is the way things are done, should be at the front of our minds.

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