

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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Plenary INSIGHT

A Daily Blog



NO 11

Monday 20 December 2021

By their fruits

The Plenary Council has taken another step. The First Assembly Proposals from Small Groups and Individual Members, informally known as 'The Fruits of the Assembly', was published in early December. We are still waiting for the full Acts or Proceedings of the Council.

This publication means that the broader Catholic community has another small insight into the direction of the Council as it moves slowly towards the Second Assembly in the first week of July 2022. But there is a lot more to come.

I recommend that everyone with an interest in church affairs reads this document. It contains three types of proposals, treated equally by the document's presentation, and organised around the 16 Agenda Questions.

The first type are the final reports from the 10 Small Groups and for Questions 2 and 4 from the full membership; the second are proposals extracted from the Individual Interventions made by Members during the Council; the third type are proposals moved and seconded privately by individual Members through a mechanism made available for motions. The latter two types are not distinguished from each other in the document.

The document has a raw, unfinished feel to it. The small group reports were compiled under great pressure of time. In terms of 'finish' they generally compare unfavourably, for instance, with the six earlier Writing and Discernment group reports.

Taken together the proposals represent the breadth and diversity of the Church in Australia. This applies especially to the individual proposals, which will come as a shock to many close observers. Those closely following the live streaming of the Council would have already gained some sense of the ideas of the small groups, but the individual proposals will be all new. Some will disappoint church reformers because they suggest a very traditional view of the church. Others will be encouraging.

Presenting the Small Group reports mixed in with the individual interventions and individual proposals diminishes the central collective work of the Assembly. The former should have been given priority in the presentation.

The First Assembly Proposals should be read alongside the Acts/Proceedings. The Small Group reports can then be tied to named individuals. I was a member of Group 9, which delivered reports on Agenda Questions 14 and 16. The individual proposals remain anonymous. They should have been identified to promote transparency. When the Acts are published some of them can be identified; but the private proposals will remain anonymous unless the PC authorities remedy the situation in a later version of this document.

Bishop Shane Mackinlay, Chair of the main committee, the Steering Committee, has spoken to Plenary Council Members in a Coffee Conversation about these First Assembly Proposals and explained the way forward. Comments are now welcome on the proposals, but they can only be made through the concurrent Synod on Synodality process rather than back to the Plenary Council authorities. That can be done until late February.

It would be much more in the spirit of synodality if the Plenary Council authorities called for direct responses; but despite advocacy from the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform that is not the present plan.

In about late February the PC authorities (with Steering committee, Drafting committee and committee of experts working together) will publish the next step. This will be initial drafts of propositions for the Second Assembly. As Archbishop Tim Costelloe, President of the Plenary Council, explained in his introductory message to this document:

‘As initial drafts of propositions become available, they will be shared with Members, Advisors and other Church and Agency leaders for ongoing discernment and feedback. In this way the writing process will be informed and guided by the ongoing prayer, conversation and discernment of the Members and the wider people of God in Australia.’

This is still vague, but it appears that the People of God will not have direct input. The final version of the propositions for July will be published in June, after the bishops have a further look at them in May.

The People of God should pay close attention to the stages in this process. Even if excluded from direct participation church reformers now know (or can find out) the names of the Bishops, the members of the drafting committees, the committee of experts and the whole Plenary Council membership. They should make their opinions loud and clear to them.

In doing so we should all bear in mind that the July Second Assembly will be very short. There will only be four working days. Squeezing in a multitude of propositions will be extremely difficult. It appears that the approach will be to identify thematic focuses, perhaps, as Shane Mackinlay explained, one broad focus for each of the four days.

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