

## Concerned Catholics CG Public Forum 9 June 2022

### Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture Canberra

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You've asked two questions: Where is the church now? And what can we expect from the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council (PC)? Because it's easiest, I'll take the second question first. My answer is simple: don't expect a lot!

The PC will certainly support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and First Nations' aspirations. The church has a good record here particularly due to the leadership of the committed women and men of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island ministry and support from many bishops, clergy and laity. There might even be an apology for the way First Nation peoples were treated by settler society and the church.

The PC will also probably recommend that all dioceses and parishes establish pastoral councils, which is odd given they were already called for by Vatican II and are recommended in canons 511-514 for dioceses and in canon 536 for parishes. An advance would be for the Plenary to make their decisions binding on church authority rather than purely consultative. However, fear not, that won't happen!

The Plenary will also issue a statement supporting something of the ecological vision of the encyclical *Laudato si'*. But it will focus on humankind, despite Pope Francis' comment "the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism, unconcerned for other creatures." It will certainly not make practical recommendations supporting withdrawal from coal mining, gas production and logging old growth forests, let alone focusing on population impacts on the environment.

The core of the problem is that the PC is a canonical procedure governed by legal constraints with the final say coming from bishops and ultimately the Vatican. It is most certainly *not* a synodal process in which all the baptised have a genuinely active voice. When the bishops decided to hold a PC bound by canon law rather than an assembly of the faithful, they knew exactly what they were doing. As a synodal process it was compromised from the start.

The much more difficult question is: what is the situation of Australian Catholicism now? Answer: it's mired in a profound crisis that's focused on the nature of the church and its leadership, as well as its alienation from contemporary Australian culture. This process has been in train pretty much since the beginning of the papacy of John Paul II in 1978 and continues today. It involves several elements.

The core of the problem is that as Catholics we're involved in a deep-seated, long-term shift from a 17<sup>th</sup> century divine right, absolutist, hierarchical model of church to a baptism-based, Vatican II, people of God, community model. Despite all the consultation work and the participation of 220,000 Catholics and more than 17,000 submissions, the PC is still an expression of the old, monarchical church which effectively cripples it from tackling the real ministerial and pastoral problems highlighted by the consultation.

In terms of secular culture, we face a society that is moving decisively in a post-Christian direction, although many of our societal values are still underpinned by the Christian tradition and gospel morality. This means that the way in which faith is lived and proclaimed must adapt to the challenges of our society. We no longer live in Christendom.

That's why it is extraordinarily negligent of the PC not to undertake a serious forensic analysis of contemporary Australian culture. In order to live our faith creatively, minister effectively and proclaim the gospel and our Christian values in a way that they will be heard, we need 'to understand the signs of the times'.

The impact of the sexual abuse crisis and the attempts to deny it cannot be underestimated and there has been a recognition of this by the PC. But there is strong resistance by church authorities to confronting the need for a serious rethink of our moral and theological presuppositions about sexuality and gender.

There has also been endless talk about 'clericalism', but no evidence that serious measures have been taken by seminaries and priest-formation systems to counter this, given that many young priests seem to adopt an almost in-your-face clericalist attitude.

While the Catholic renewal movement through organisations like Concerned Catholics Canberra-Goulburn and ACCCR have done an enormous work trying to get the PC to address basic issues of ministry, participation and governance, my fear is that unless basic theological and ecclesiological issues are confronted, nothing of substance will happen.

We also need to remember our historical context. We are engaged in a long process of mutation as the church shifts from the monarchical/hierarchical structure to the recovery of the New Testament and early church/people of God/community model, adapted to contemporary social reality. To pass through this mutation will take time, probably a century or more, and what will emerge will be very different, but guided by the Holy Spirit infused tradition, it will still be profoundly Catholic.

The genuine source of our hope is the Catholic theological notion of tradition. Tradition is not so much the *content* of belief, as it is the *process* of living and developing faith. Tradition "helps us see ourselves as part of a long historical progression that is moving toward the future. The Catholic tradition...[has] deep historical roots [that] give it a strength and durability that provides a firm foundation to work toward something new" (Paul Collins, *Papal Power* ((1997), p 126) and that is precisely what we're doing now.

It's in this very moment of despair for many Catholics that the greatest opportunity exists as we move toward the creation of a new way of being church. We are now right in the middle of that process, so let's not surrender to fear or despair but live, as genuine Christians always do, in hope.

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