

## Concerned Catholics Public Forum

9 June 2022

### Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture Canberra

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#### Context

Where is the church now?

What can we expect from the second assembly?

What is the future of the church?

I'll start with the original question:

What is the spirit asking of the Australian Church today? The question responded to by over 220,000 people at the beginning of the Plenary process.

#### Reference

Gal 5:22-26

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

The seven gifts of the spirit are wisdom, knowledge, courage, fortitude, understanding, reverence and awe.

Paul in regard to the diversity of gifts of the community.

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#### Address

Are we there yet in a deep listening mode to the Spirit? Is the spirit alive amongst us in the Plenary Council processes?

It depends on who we think the church is! In reading the document *Framework for Motions*, I think it is focussed on the Institutional church, particularly dioceses and parishes. Yet the introduction (no 9) notes *action is needed concerning the viability and sustainability of diocese, parishes, religious institutes and ministries due to changing demographics, personnel and resourcing*. (I'd suggest there are more reasons why more action is needed). The same section notes two reasons for the crisis including the abuse crisis. (I'd suggest the crisis started with *Humanae Vitae*).

But if we see the church as the People of God including the variety of small communities and movements that exist in their own right, who gather for prayer, communion and outreach, then we might approach the current reality in a different way.

I suggest we are not there as a listening and discerning church, a synodal church! From where I sit, our hopes for a new beginning, are someway in the future. But hope we must.

(At the Plenary Council there is still great divergence of views, a lack of real deep listening and respect amongst some participants and even manipulation and ideological interference from within and from outside). It has been a very sobering experience.

**The spirit leads and the spirit is not divided within itself** (Richard Lennan). So we have quite some discernment and prayer to be confident that the spirit is leading us!

I believe that the institutional church is currently at an in-between time, a liminal time and space, and has been since Vatican II some 60 years.

The word 'liminal' means threshold. To be in a liminal space means to be on the precipice of something new but not quite there yet. Being in a liminal space can be incredibly uncomfortable for most people. As often quoted of Pope Francis *we are in a change of era*.

The 'new' for the institutional church is yet to emerge and to be accepted. The struggle is still very evident in the documents produced. The second assembly document is still seeking to pour 'new wine into old wine skins' and I don't believe the old wine skins will hold for much longer.

There are no real propositions for imaginative structural change in the governance of the diocesan or parish community. There is no clear ecclesial theology which acknowledges that each of the baptised shares in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ (Lumen Gentium 20-7). It is yet to be articulated and accepted. It is not there in the Plenary Council documents.

85+% of the People of God have moved on from the current institution. They have made decisions, not just fallen away as No 36 states. There is little vitality in the proposals to encourage a resurgence and return.

There is a slight turning towards the place of women in the church, (possible diaconate) but only a very weak acknowledgement of some of the pain and hurt inflicted on women by church. Proposal 54 still excludes women from being the decision makers about matters which affect them...it simply states their perspectives need to be heard!! By whom? The same section commits the Church in Australia to overcome the assumptions that lead to inequality.

Is it all negative? No. The first tentative steps have been made to keep examining what needs to happen.

There is honest acknowledgement of the complicity of church institutions and individual Christians as participants in colonial attitudes and actions, with the destruction and harming of First Nations people and its long-term impact. There are some practical suggestions, which will require significant education, so as not to become tokenistic.

There is acknowledgement of the harm done by the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and religious and the clerical protection by those in authority and in power and the great need for reform and change. The abused and their families are rightly acknowledged, but not the

pain of every Catholic, whose trust in church authorities has been severely if not irreparably damaged. There is call for continued public lamentation amongst church personnel.

There are encouraging words, like to foster, to review, to encourage, affirm, to form, to commit, to promote, to consider and of course, *where appropriate*.

But as for structural change. At this stage I cannot see it coming from the Plenary Council as the proposals still depend on the actions of individual bishops and priests, trying to pouring new wine into old wineskins. It might come for Pope Francis' Synod on Synodality.

In my curious nature, I've looked at the websites of the 28 Roman Dioceses for how they describe their governance. Within the current diocesan structure it seems to me that there are three active models of diocesan governance and potential for more..

- 1 The complete clerical model, still operative in many dioceses. Where governance is held by the bishop with the support or otherwise of the Council of Priest and the Consultors, all members of the clergy.
- 2 The management model, the bishop see himself managing the diocese with the help of the Vicar General and the financial administrator (Council). In fact, in this model there is confusion between governance and management. The clergy advisors barely get acknowledged.
- 3 A quasi synodal model, where the laity have an advisory role through a diocesan pastoral council along with the council of priests and consultors. Only a couple of dioceses have held diocesan synods or assemblies in recent years. There is call for each diocese to hold a synod within 5 years.
- 4 A collaborative and consultative diocesan leadership. There are examples. A recent French bishop commissioned a lay woman with General delegation. The Archdiocese of Adelaide from 1986 to 2001 operated with a governance team of the bishop, VG, a lay women and a woman religious. It worked.

There is nothing in the latest document *Framework for Motions* which mandates any significant structural change. The word Synodal is used often, e.g. Synodal culture, but no suggestion for concerted change and implementation.

It seems to me in order to be an effective discerning Synodal church, there needs to be structures and processes in order to create such a church. There needs to be an implementation plan, not simply a range of unrelated theological statements and encouragements and more reviews.

To actually create a Vatican II model of church, there needs to be a new theology for the relationship between the hierarchy and the people of God. There needs a concerted mandate to implement such a church. We await in the liminal space for the new to arrive.

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