

Concerned Catholics Public Forum

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Where We Are At Leading Into the Second Assembly

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I find the draft resolutions for the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council to be a poignant expression of the state of our Church.

They are a composite of aspirations based on a broadly held understanding that change is not just desirable but essential.

Some of the resolutions are tentative at best. Others advance the state of play considerably. They can all lay claim to moving in a new direction.

There will be debate over the extent to which the resolutions get to the heart of the challenges confronting the Church. That debate will need to continue well beyond the Second Assembly, preferably in a yet to be decided Third Assembly.

The very fact that the resolutions are grappling with issues of inclusion, be they based on sexuality, gender, marital status or access to ordained ministries, means that the paradigm is changing.

There is no longer the sense that the Church is a bulwark, hellbent on resistance.

That the curse of clericalism is acknowledged upfront indicates the inertia of the institution is giving way to the inevitable signs of the times.

It is instructive that the preamble to the section on women's participation specifically notes that the wider society has already arrived at the recognition of equality for women. It acknowledges that there is still more to be done.

So, this is the Church catching up!

There are further indications that change is underway.

The Plenary process has been too tightly controlled by the Bishops. That said, the contingent of laity, including the presence and influence of women, has been a first.

Despite the 'stacking' of lay member PC positions by particular bishops and the fact that too many lay people on the Church payroll occupied positions at the expense of Catholics

working and living beyond the organisational structures of the Church, the issues around lay participation in governance and decision making have not been sidelined.

This reflects the widespread recognition that the clerically controlled organisational structure has run its course. It is a plain acknowledgement that best practice decision making processes should become commonplace for the institution.

In a most practical way, the PC members are indicating that the Church can no longer seek to super spiritualise its operations and in turn excuse the dysfunctional management practices that have led to cover ups and corrupt behaviour.

This is a clear expression that 'business as usual' will no longer be tolerated.

And even though many bishops and their advisors bristled at the recommendations of *The Light From the Southern Cross Report*, the resolutions again acknowledge the directions contained in that report.

This is another indication that the tendency for episcopal push back on reform has itself been put in the corner.

The prickly issues of sexuality, gender and the full participation of women have not been swept under the carpet.

Try as some might, the women's diaconate issue is now on the table. Even with a typical cautious proviso from the Bishops, the fact that it needs attention and may well be introduced is another sign that change is coming.

The realpolitik of the current state of our Church leads to formal positions that reek of compromise and gradual reform.

At the same time, it shows that the inertia and resistance to issues that for many decades have been marginalised and left simmering on the fringes, is now breaking down.

Interestingly, this is the way reform happens in the Church. As Yves Congar OP famously wrote, 'enduring reform begins at the margins of Church life.'

Pope Francis exhorts us to go to those margins with hearts of mercy, not dogma.

I think this is what he means when he urges us to follow a missionary instinct.

The bringing of the disparate and the diverse into the whole is the Catholic exercise.

The architecture of language, symbolism and imagery, is the Catholic imagination forming unity across differences.

In that context, how do we approach the Second Assembly and beyond.

I think there are five main points.

1. The resolutions can go further and deeper in their reach. Amendments are needed.

This makes the Assembly process messy, but necessary. Debate on the floor is important. Otherwise, you could be forgiven for believing that the resolutions before the Assembly are those that have passed muster with the Bishops and nothing more!

In that light it is imperative to place markers in the sand over the use of language. At its most fundamental, language conveys an attitude, a disposition if you will.

So, it is simply unacceptable to reduce the issue of women's participation to the notion of equality of dignity when the fundamental point is the equality of rights.

Likewise, the resolutions that recognise groups experiencing marginalisation need to take the next step and acknowledge the deep-seated Church culture that perpetuates the marginalisation.

2. The PC cannot leave the resolutions at the level of aspiration alone. To do so will only give rise questions over the authentic resolve of the PC. Real resources and practical strategies must accompany the directions of the agreed resolutions.

For example, it is one thing to call for the formation of adults and another to leave it to the ill-equipped universities or to the ad hoc initiatives of some Catholic groups and parishes.

If this is a priority area then its needs serious attention, planning and resourcing.

There also needs to be appropriate formation, based on adult learning pedagogy and spiritual purpose, not old school catechesis or high-brow overly academic approaches.

3. Despite the positive aspects of the resolutions, the bishops have kept the lid on those doctrinal matters that cruel the Church's pastoral effectiveness.

This is not new, but it once again indicates the lack of imagination in the face of declining participation rates and the widespread questioning by Catholics of church teachings.

Absent from the resolutions is the plight of the 'silent generations of Catholics' who have left formal participation with the Church.

It is as if they are in the 'too hard basket' and now the focus must be only on the remnant.

Why people have left, why the younger generations have disappeared, why the spiritual needs of the community are being satisfied beyond the Church are questions not addressed by the PC to date.

Unless there is a deliberate attempt to open discussion within the Catholic community on these issues, the very flashpoints for the Church in everyday Australian life and culture, they will continue to drive a wedge between the institution and decent, good-willed people.

4. It is particularly important to create the seamless continuum between a spiritual search for meaning and our organised expression as Catholics.

The desire for reform is not a mere political exercise, rather it is an expression of our deep faith commitment.

It is grounded in a theological understanding of revelation and ecclesiology. It is an expression of our Tradition on the move.

Our end game should take heed of Kevin Treston's counsel in his latest book, *Telling Our Faith Stories*, where he says that:

"a reform of Church governance and jurisdiction without reform of their theological foundations will always lack doctrinal credibility. Church structures should reflect beliefs not the reverse." (Telling Our Faith Stories, p.152)

5. We need mechanisms to hold ourselves to account.

The current emphasis on a synodal model of Church means that accountability is with the faith community.

Given the history of concealment and exclusivity in decision-making, an inclusive culture of transparent governance and policy making must be demonstrable.

It would be a retrograde step to leave this only at the feet of the bishops.

The engagement of diocesan pastoral councils, with agreed goals and pastoral outcomes reporting back to the faith community could form the basis for a more widespread and accountable mechanism.

As Concerned Catholics the opportunity beckons to step forward and shape the Church echoed in these resolutions. If nothing else the PC has the potential to lay out an action plan for change. So, let's get to it!