

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

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Plenary INSIGHT

A Daily Blog



Second Assembly

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WORKING WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES

No 13

The first thing I must say today is that support for members has been phenomenal from within the renewal movement and the community more widely. That encouragement is very moving. My welcome pack even included a card with best wishes from Perth and a note which said: "I hope you have a sense of the prayerful support of many people across the nation as you embark on this important task.". I certainly do.

Just four members were on the plane from Canberra to wintry Sydney, but there were some interesting insights. One, from an unexpected quarter, was that the whole process had been "too orchestrated". From the airport to the hotel our hosts looked after us extremely well. 170 members are staying at the Boulevard Hotel, an iconic Sydney venue, which makes it the major hub. The welcoming party there included an old friend, Sydney Archdiocesan Coordinator, Josephite Sister Jo Brady.

There was a real buzz in the Foyer as Zoom friends caught up for the first time. My first impressions were of the sheer size and diversity of the member group. Ethnic variety is one obvious part of that diversity, most obvious among the clergy. I was also taken by the national character of the gathering as members have flown in from near and far.

It was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday and the first day of NAIDOC Week. Surely that is an omen. Our first substantial votes will be on motions about the place of Indigenous Australians within the church and wider Australian society under the heading: "Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts".

Official openings are important because they can set the tone for what is to follow. This opening carried mixed messages. The Opening Mass was concelebrated by all the bishops and many of the priests, with the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Charles Balvo, as the principal celebrant and Bishop Columba Macbeth-Green of Wilcannia Forbes, giving the homily. The Smoking Ceremony and the Welcome to Country set the scene most appropriately and ATSI Sunday was given appropriate

emphasis. The Universal Prayers we offered included one unambiguous prayer, with political implications, “for all people in Australia, that we will embrace the Uluru Statement from the Heart, so that a First Nations Voice is enshrined in our Australian Constitution, strengthening a fair and truthful relationship between us all.”

There is little doubt, though, that the massed ranks of concelebrating bishops and priests sitting together in the chapel to the pointed exclusion of lay people did emphasise the segmentation within our church between the lay and the ordained. This may reflect our current reality, but it is still contrary to the spirit of synodality and oneness as a church which we should be aiming for.

Plenary Tracker 2 brought together three members, Catherine McAleer, Francis Sullivan and myself, and two observers, Eleanor Flynn and Richard Curtain, representing the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform and the Sense of the Faithful group respectively. We discussed our expectations for the Second Assembly. The overall tone was sombre rather than upbeat because of worries about the disappointing content and tone of the Motions and persistent doubts that this week will be the big step forward that we all have hoped for.

My own approach, despite all the criticisms of the process which I have made in the past, is to work within the framework before me this week to achieve the most productive outcomes; though I am very aware of not being corralled by what another senior member observed to me today was the ‘bureaucratic’ nature of the proceedings. Not sure exactly what that means for me until we get into it. Insurgency takes many forms; this Second Assembly will benefit from insurgency in some form or another.

The second part of the afternoon’s voting will test the church’s response to child sexual abuse. This means that the first day brings together two issues which are among the hardest for the church to get right. By the end of the day the tone may have been set for the whole week. Let’s hope it is a positive one.

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