

Toward a transparent, inclusive and humble church

John Warhurst AO, Chair, Concerned Catholics Canberra - Goulburn

Plenary **INSIGHT** A Daily Blog



Second Assembly

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SOME DISAPPOINTED HOPES

No 15

Today was a hard day. Hard in the sense of keenly contested discussion about Parts 3 and 4 of the [Motions and Amendments](#) and hard in the other sense of being quite arduous, because the volume of material on the table for determination meant we were very busy.

The members were not the only ones under pressure. The Drafting Committee was too, because of the number of motions coming from the tables just before lunch for afternoon discussions. Consequently, we started fifteen minutes late in the afternoon because we were just not ready. The chairs were also under pressure because of the complexity of interrelated motions. But the members were serene and understanding and the liturgists wrapped us in their spiritual warmth.

Most of all it was hard in the sense of some disappointed hopes. The renewal movement had a mixed day in terms of outcomes despite some brave and articulate speeches to important motions. This led to understandable stress and some tears afterwards. Amidst it all one good response came from those who insisted that the official photographers record the angst as well as the joy. Nothing is to be gained from presenting the Second Assembly as a love fest. There is some harmony, sharing and listening, but there is also a lot of disputation, which should not be glossed over. We are, after all, talking about the future of the church in Australia. Some of the traditionalists probably thought that they had a hard day too when some of their hopes weren't realised.

The day began with the first package of deliberative votes by the bishops (Parts 0, 1 and 2), the results of which were officially released later in the day. The bishops overturned the consultative vote on 0.1 and confirmed all the later votes on 1 and 2. I was engaged in scrutineering, which, for anyone who has undertaken this role at political elections, concentrates the mind. The six sets of 45 paper ballots were double checked, and in one case triple checked, by multiple scrutineers, just to make sure no mistakes were made. We took our jobs very seriously.

Unfortunately, I was so distracted that I missed what I was later told were beautifully crafted and quite passionate talks by two of the periti. Columban missionary priest, Patrick McInerney, an inter-

faith specialist, spoke on “Called by Christ-Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples”, while Good Samaritan Sister, Clare Condon, talked on “Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men”; as an enlightening prelude to the afternoon business.

On both Parts 1 and 2 the Second Assembly was divided between alternative visions of the future of the church in a way that meant that two-thirds majorities in consultative votes were hard to come by in order to give several motions and amendments what is called a qualified majority. Fortunately, several attempts to excise reference to “those who identify as LGBTIQ+” from a motion about “thinking and praying for those who have experienced marginalisation within the Church” failed.

I was also faced with dealing with some motions that I thought were far from perfect, but included elements that I believed needed to be recognised. This happened with the general introduction to Part 3 which included statements about life and death issues and sexuality which I concluded were both inappropriate and unwise for the church. For example, I told my small group that this applied to a statement which linked “contraception, abortion, reproductive technologies and euthanasia” in one package. We know that the practice of most Australian Catholics warmly embraces forms of contraception, and reproductive technologies such as IVF. The Plenary Council should not be in the business of calling their beliefs and actions into doubt.

The story of the motions about women and men in the Church cannot be told in full here. But in time it certainly will be because it is one aspect of the work of the Second Assembly in which wider Australian society will take a big interest. Despite the best efforts of those whose vision of the future Church I share, only scraps of what women who desire equality in the Church survived.

The problem of finding qualified (two-thirds) majorities meant that progress was hard going. Reference to the [Woman and Man](#) Report (1999) and the Social Justice statement of the same name (2001) was successfully introduced and the guarded initial reference to the female diaconate survived. But getting the Plenary Council to support the admission of women to the diaconate and/or to hear the “frustration and disappointment expressed by many members about women’s exclusion from ordination” fell short of two-thirds support despite achieving healthy majorities.

Not surprisingly the mood remained sombre and painful and will stay that way for many members on these issues. I am now writing at the end of the day after an official dinner with a Christian Unity and Interfaith Dialogue theme. Our official guests gave gracious and entertaining speeches as did those other faith leaders who graced us with their greetings and support by video.

JOHN WARHURST AO

Plenary Council Member

Chair Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn

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