

Plenary Council rocket science a matter of trust

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Politicians vying for office and churches planning plenary councils sing from the same handbooks. As with rocket launches, where the early stage rockets fall away leaving the manned capsule to go into orbit, political parties put great time and energy into the preparation of policies, running focus groups, and attracting good candidates. When the election campaign begins they drop these activities. Candidates cross the nation offering goodies, shooting down rivals and trying to get the party across the line. The election won, the trimmed ship of state sails on unencumbered.

This is commonly true also of church synods and councils. In the case of the 2020 Catholic Plenary Council, a facilitation team was empowered to seek submissions, design processes of reflection, encourage individuals and congregations to take part, and analyse the results.

At the next stage it has invited interested people to help prepare working papers on the key themes. These papers will inform the agenda of the council and its deliberations.

In both political and church processes, as with launching rockets, the focus of the process is placed on the final goal of winning power or making wise decisions. The preliminary processes are seen and evaluated through this lens. What is valuable at each stage is gathered into the next and the initial processes are then dropped. From the point of view of the executive committees this tightness of focus is both logical and necessary.

From the perspective of rocket riders, lay Catholics or citizens, however, the effectiveness of the process depends on the trust in which government, bishops or management are held. In rocketry, if trust is lacking in the competence or understanding of people working at any level of the project, no one will sign off on or sit in the final stage rocket without revisiting the earlier stages. Similarly, if people do not trust the wisdom, honesty or courage of political leaders or bishops, they will not trust the processes or people managing them unless they are completely transparent.

In current Australian and Catholic public life at the moment that kind of trust appears to be lacking. Disengagement from politics and cynicism about politicians' honesty attend the political environment in many nations. In the Catholic Church, too, the crimes of sexual abuse and its cover up have weakened trust in the governance at a time when it faces challenges from diminished numbers, ageing and institutional arthritis.

In such situations any narrow focus on the final result of the process will dismay those attracted by the initial promises of consultation. The initial stages of consultation must be part of a wider commitment to consult those affected by the decisions finally made. In Australian federal politics few signs of this are evident. In response, state and local government and business groups have taken initiatives of their own to address aspects of climate change and Indigenous neglect.

In the Catholic Church the inclusive and consultative processes in the early stages of preparation for the Plenary Council are a vast improvement on previous practice. They express the desire to involve Catholics in the council. If these processes are simply dropped on completion and not kept alive in the church, however, the trust they have engendered will be lost. Space must be made for groups of Catholics to meet at local levels to continue conversation about the issues raised in the submissions. This demands a commitment by the Catholic Church.

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In the present climate transparency is also essential. At a minimum all the Catholics who were encouraged to take part in the process should be able to read the submissions and have available a broad analysis of the frequency with which particular recommendations are made, particularly those that raise controversial theological questions.

The bureaucratic temptation is always to minimise conflict by using generalised language. Support for the ordination of woman, for example, can be described as support for women to have a stronger place in the church. Such specific issues can then be allowed to disappear in the working documents presented to the delegates to the council. Transparency demands that the working documents be open to comparison with the submissions.

Bishops, priests and church officials will form a large majority of delegates to the council. That is understandable, given the distinctive place of bishops in the Catholic Church, and the international as well as local significance of the council. But the imbalance between lay and clerical, between men and women, has also generated mistrust and disengagement by many Catholics. This makes it all the more important that the Council be seen clearly as a step in a continuing reform of the Catholic Church through encouraging the local initiatives that were part of its preparation.

In a world where trust has been lost, transparency and encouragement of free conversation are necessary for its recovery. That is true both of the federal government and of the Catholic Church.



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