



Knockers or Rockers of the Barque of Peter?

By [TRISH HINDMARSH](#) | On 15 July 2020

*Let's not entirely knock the six Theme Papers from the Plenary Council Writing Groups. Short-comings? Of course. Are they a faithful representation of the *sensus fidelium* expressed through the 220,000 participants in the Plenary lead up? Yes, and no. Could other, more competent people had been working on them? No doubt. Are humans capable of reaching genuine consensus when confronted with a variety of worldviews, back ground experience and formation? Hopefully, but only with difficulty, patience, prayer, study and dollops of respectful listening. I came to some sharp realization of all this as a member of the Writing Group for the theme, 'Conversion, Renewal and Reform'.*

It was challenging for me to work at a deep level with Catholics from totally different faith experiences ... converts too young to be steeped in Vatican 2, knowing nothing from lived experience of those hope-filled years after the Council when the Adelaide Diocese set up its Diocesan Pastoral Council; the Australian Justice and Peace Commission was founded; the laity hungered for formation; the liturgy took on renewed life and immediacy; prophetic voices were being heard from the basic Christian communities in Latin America; the religious orders were refounding themselves in response to the call to go out to the peripheries with Good News to the poor; ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue were flourishing.

We older, Vatican 2 Catholics in the group were among 'newer', youthful and fresh-faced Catholics for whom the Theology of the Body, loyalty to the tradition and its authority and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament are compelling fundamentals of Catholic culture. We did share common ground... a desire to listen to the Spirit; the power of prayer and the grace of the sacraments; a love for Christ; hope for a faith-filled future for our children ... During the months of work and reflection, we also came to consensus regarding how critical to God's mission are ecological conversion; openness to our First Peoples and their wisdom; reformed governance structures for a renewed, 'synodal' church; and recognition of how antithetical to the conversion, renewal and reform of the church are the structural 'sins' of clericalism and the exclusion of women.

The alternative to patient, respectful dialogue, to negotiated pathways through discernment, is factionalism, isolated self-righteousness, echo-chambers where the 'friend of my friend is my friend and the enemy of my friend is my enemy'. If we insist only on reinforcing our own position, without a willingness to sit together in our parishes, dioceses, homes and local cafes, engaged in fellowship and dialogue, face-to-face or online, difficult, tedious and utterly frustrating as that can be, we are left with division and dead ends. Ultimately a failure to engage in respectful, skilled processes of dialogue and negotiation leads to the sort of sabre rattling that we are seeing, terrifyingly, right now in our nation and across our planet.

The world needs the church to model a better way to go about the human business of peaceful coexistence, seeking alternatives to conflict and war. No-one needs to risk a schism in our own church because of unwillingness to enter into dialogue with one another. The People of God in Australia, at the Bishops' invitation to speak their minds, universally identified Christ, as the Way, the Truth and the Life, the ground of our common faith. They took up the invitation to dialogue and discern together, and spoke their truth openly, in their thousands, rejoicing in the opportunity at last to express their hopes for a more engaged, credible church.

It was Gaudium et Spes that offered 'dialogue' to the Church as one of the most important tools in bringing the Good News alive:

By virtue of her mission to shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message, and to unify under one Spirit all people of whatever nation, race or culture, the Church stands forth as a sign of that fraternity which allows honest dialogue and gives it vigor. Let there be unity in what is necessary; freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case.

That mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. For the bonds which unite the faithful are mightier than anything dividing them. (Parag. 92)

Working with a group of people who agree with oneself is a walk in the park, compared with the reality of working towards collaboration and mutual understanding in a divergent group, with sharply different interpretations of Catholicism. It requires more than human skill and wisdom. It is a call to carry the cross. The impulse to 'correct', to cut across people, to impose oneself is there. So too is the responsibility to courageously 'speak the truth' as one sees it. As the baptized we are as Paul puts it, 'One in Christ Jesus', but our Catholic Church is a 'broad church'. The net cast out into the deep contains all that the sea can turn up ... the uneducated and the highly educated; the more progressive and traditionalist, the poor and the wealthy, saints and sinners, the old, middle aged and young, people from every culture and ethnic background. There is no-one of good will excluded from the invitation to follow Christ. This is the nature of our church, and we need to 'deal with it'.

We do not have a perfect pathway into the Council, and many are disappointed about that. But it is as Robert Fitzgerald put it on Compass, 'the only show in town' ... a unique opportunity to convert, renew and reform our church.

'Behold I make all things new' is God's promise in the Apocalypse; I consider myself blessed to have been part of the listening, dialogue and discernment Plenary processes across Australia. I say to the Bishops, 'Fear not!' We are in this together. You do not have to have all the answers; as the baptised, we are co-responsible. The People of God have spoken from their deepest hopes and often their desperation for a converted, renewed and reformed Church. This historic moment is ours to claim. Collegiality between church leadership and the 99% who make up lay membership, can bring the Church to real connectivity with the needs of our time and our place. The change that can result, even if limited, is far preferable to a resistant, dying church.

If, at the very least, a genuinely 'synodal' style can become the 'new normal' for our church, with inbuilt opportunities for constant dialogue and discernment, that will be a great leap forward ... or to use a COVID phrase, something 'not to be sneezed at'.



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Trish has a lively interest in justice, peace and ecology and is a member of the Catholic Earthcare Australia Advisory Committee. She spent six years as a senior consultant working with groups of schools within the Sydney Catholic Education Office and five years as Director of Catholic Education in Tasmania. Her doctoral studies relate to education for ecological sustainability within Catholic school settings.

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