

EDITORIAL



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Plenary Council challenges and opportunities

The success of the Plenary Council is seen very differently by various groups taking very different positions on ecclesiology, sacramental theology and Christian anthropology. Broadly the two contested positions are the belief that Vatican II and the synodal church Pope Francis is promoting is predicated on the equal value of each of the baptised in every aspect of church life including the area of governance. The other view depends on the hierarchical nature of the church and a Pope John Paul II view of the unique role of the ordained to guide and govern.

These are not easily reconciled and indeed may be the death of the plenary council. The fault lines are already surfacing in the writing groups. It may be an extreme example, but it is interesting to note that in the list of those assigned to the group writing the paper on Missionary and Evangelising, Archbishop Porteous appears, but his name is not amongst the contributors on the final paper. We are left to wonder why.

Is it that the group failed to listen to the 'guidance' of the bishop on opening up church governance to lay people, ecumenical and multifaith co-operation, recommendation that women participate at all levels of church ministry including deaconate or the use of the term 'LGBT'?

We don't know what caused the bishop to dissent from the document but it does sit as a stark reminder of the challenges ahead for those who think the discernment and consultation process is commonly understood by all involved. It is shaping up as a power battle despite the language used generally.

We can get an insight into the Bishop Porteous' thinking from his Catholic Weekly article, Plenary 2020: the creeping clericalisation of the laity (April 1, 2020) where he says:

It is important to note that when a lay person takes on an ecclesial role, it is in union with and under the direction of the ordained ministry. An ecclesial role for the lay person does not exist in its own right.

He goes on: What has in fact occurred within the Church especially over the past 50 years has been referred to as the 'clericalisation of the laity'. This attitude continues to drive current attitudes among some that lay people should assume more roles of ministry and governance within the Church. Focus on this goal blurs the fundamental role of the lay person in the mission of the Church.

And then: The Council [Vatican II] considers that the primary role of the lay person is to be found in the world, rather than within the ecclesial environment.

Bishop Porteous believes the layperson's role is in the world and not in church governance at all. This is in striking contrast with the great majority of the most important identified themes of the 220,000 people involved in the submissions which was analysed by Peter Wilkinson in The Swag (Winter 2020).

Will the Plenary Council be reduced to a fight for ideas and the losers walking out on the others? Will the many thousands of hours of volunteer work by many thousands of lay members be ignored by the ordained at the Council under the Porteous principle that the laity need guidance from the bishops to take their rightful place in the world (rather than within the ecclesial environment)? Let's hope not.



The opportunities are expressed in the many thousands of Catholics still engaged in the process believing their voices are valuable and should be heard. The opportunities are evident in those many women and men who claim their baptismal status as spirit-filled just as at the first Pentecost when the Spirit descended on the whole community and the wisdom and gifts of all were put into service each according to their calling, not their sex, race, culture, language, gender identity or sexual orientation.

Can the Australian church seize these opportunities to re-found itself before it's too late? Time will tell.

In this edition of The Swag there are some interesting articles to continue your thinking and reflection on gospel centred prayer and action. Sr Patty Fawcner SGS explores the role of women in the church; Ed Campion reflects on the Hunters Hill meeting 50 years ago from which emerged the National Council of Priests; Richard R Gaillardetz analyses the Australian Church governance report, The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia and Peter Griffin unpacks Indigenous Sovereignty. There is much more. Enjoy the journey through articles about faith, love and justice.

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