

The challenges of representing Catholic Australia

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The Plenary Council First Assembly is only two months away, but uncertainty still remains about the role that its 282 members will play. Not just about what work they will do but what conception of the role they will bring or will be imposed upon them by the authorities. Their designation has changed from delegate to member, freeing them somewhat from the expectation that they will be tied to the views of their diocese or other 'sponsoring' body. But it has not resolved some perceived role confusion both among the members themselves and within the wider Catholic community. This confusion has important consequences.



Main image: Woman in church wearing a face mask and praying with her hands outstretched. Other pray in the background. (Gabriella Clare Marino/Unsplash)

My member formation session last month was told, in the context of discussion about the part that connection with the wider Catholic community would play in the assembly, that the Plenary Council Assembly should ideally be a community but not a bubble. I was struck by this description because it nicely encapsulates the possibilities. There is a sense in which the

membership should bond together to do its “job”, but not to the extent of shutting out the general community. This leaves room for individual members to be a bridge to the broader Catholic community and raises expectations that the Catholic people have a right and duty to communicate with them.

My impression is that the Plenary Council organisers have always leant towards a narrow vision of the assembly. Members have been advised that they have no responsibilities beyond official PC duties. The PC authorities have also not tried to take obvious steps towards encouraging connections between members and the community. For instance, they have not provided public contact addresses, such as email addresses, which would enable the community to contact PC members directly. They have also allowed several members to continue in their role although they have left their dioceses temporarily for travel or study. This breaks the desirable link to community as they are no longer present among “their people”.

The representative role may vary according to the different types of members. Many are ex-officio because they hold positions in dioceses, such as bishops and vicar-generals. Some are there because they are leaders of religious institutes. Lay members were mostly chosen from within dioceses. Some others were chosen from agencies and commissions, like the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council. The origins of all members probably bring with them some expectations that, in an unspecified way, they will connect with and ‘speak for’ those who put them there. But the expectation is vague.

There is also a general expectation that the assembly collectively ‘represents’ the composition and diversity of the church in Australia. Within the existing constraints of Vatican rules for plenary councils this has been done to some extent, but it will not stop legitimate arguments about the representativeness of the assembly. The laity are clearly under-represented, but certainly a wide range of Catholics, by any measure, will come together in early October.

There are different kinds of practical consequences which flow from this role confusion.

Representation is always a fraught concept anyway, as members of parliament know too well.

There is endless debate about what the idea means, both ideally and in the real world. Are representatives casting a personal or conscience vote or are they beholden to a higher force, such as the community/electorate/political party? Ideally members should play a mixed role.

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The members themselves, many of whom are in full-time employment or study and desperately busy, are torn between extensive personal preparation through reading, prayer and discernment and listening to the wider Catholic community. Some have invited the community to contact them.

The interested part of the Catholic community, admittedly a minority, is now also reaching out to its PC members. This is being done by some dioceses, parishes, religious institutes, official and unofficial groups and individuals. This is an admirable development. The last months leading up to the assembly may once again generate a flurry of concrete proposals as suggested by the PC when it published the agenda questions.

The final aspect of community representation to think about is how difficult it will be within the assembly itself as specific ideas circulate quickly in detailed form. There will be a clamour of voices seeking attention so members will have to focus.

This period is when members will rely more and more on each other and their personal intellectual and spiritual resources or on a few close friends or mentors who can be consulted informally and quickly. The opportunities for previously written formal submissions to make an impact will be overtaken for the time being by free-flowing informality.

Once the First Assembly has finished the nine months until the Second Assembly will revert to a more measured pace when the Catholic community has a chance to reflect on what has happened and to give its initial verdict on what has emerged. These will not be fallow months, but rather an opportunity for general principles to be revisited and for priorities either to be reiterated or, in some cases, to be rethought.



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