

What we might hope from the Catholic Plenary Council!

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You are hopeless. You are not listening to me.

When my disabled son was about 22 years old he had a big list of medical problems and a correspondingly big list of medical specialists whom we consulted once every two or three months. On one such occasion he and I sat side by side in a space not unlike an old fashioned milk bar booth. We sat on a bench with a wall behind us. I sat against another wall while Nathan had a passage way beside him. Across the table from us the doctor had a bench to himself. In front of me I had a manilla folder containing some notes I wanted to mention to the doctor.

As soon as we had exchanged “good mornings” Nathan picked up my manilla folder and dropped it on the floor, well out of my reach. I said: “this is not what you promised”. “Sorry Dad”, he said. He then eyeballed the learned professor – for such the doctor was – and said: “you’re hopeless”. I felt it was my turn to say something but before I found my first word Nathan continued: “you don’t listen to me”. I didn’t think then and I still don’t think that the doctor was hopeless but “you don’t listen to me” was right on the money and I was not going to say anything that might weaken it. We departed and our GP found us a more congenial specialist.

If ever I’m sitting across the table from our Australian bishops I should start the conversation off with: “you’re hopeless”. I would be applying this to the bishops as a team, not to individual bishops. A modern bishop has almost two jobs to do and for some the two may be irreconcilable. The bishop has been selected, educated, mentored, to be the undisputed monarch of his little kingdom. At the same time he is given the job to lead his subjects away from this pattern of community to something more like the secular aspects of modern life – a job that can only be done as part of a national team of bishops; it is this second job at which our bishops are hopeless. In my fantasy conversation with our bishops I will not say: “You don’t listen to me”. I will say that you don’t listen to the 90% of Australian born Catholics who wordlessly but with penetrating eloquence tell you every weekend that you are failing; they do this by not coming to Mass.

Two things of value, relevant here, might be learned from the Second Vatican Council. Firstly, the bishops refused to accept the agenda prepared for them. Not only that, but they insisted that the new agenda be prepared by completely new people so they got to discuss the real issues facing the church and the world and not the empty piosities offered to them. Secondly, the first item on their (new) agenda was the liturgy. The bishops voted for real change and for uncomfortable changes to their own job descriptions. But when they got home they stopped listening to Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, Edward Schillebeeckx, Yves Congar, Cardinal Suenens and the rest and resumed listening to their personally hand picked advisers, Vicar General, Right Reverend Monsignori, Very Reverend Monsignori and all agreed: “we don’t need any of that brave

stuff around here”. The uncomfortable changes were largely passed on to the priests, many of whom were unable to live with them. This was not only in Australia but just about everywhere in the world.

Our bishops are not equipped to lead the church this century. They are wrongly chosen, wrongly educated, wrongly mentored. There are moves afoot to give lay Catholics a part in selecting bishops; the problem with that could be that some Rubber Stamps might be found from among loyal members of congregations who will endorse what is suggested to them. It may take about ten years to devise some mechanism for having the opinions of lay Catholics given proper weight. In the short term we should take interim steps. Every new bishop should be a priest who is active in parish work in the diocese. On a particular day all such priests should assemble early in the day and vote – a bit like papal elections – and vote repeatedly until someone has a two thirds majority. He is then bishop for ten years and may be elected again next time if that’s what the priests think. At the five year mark a delegation of lay Catholics should meet to assess and report on the bishop’s work, strictly in terms of Jesus’ instructions in Luke’s gospel chap. 22, verses 25-27.

The best thing the participants might be able to do is to scuttle the Plenary Council. Our church needs an honest no-holds-barred look at itself and Plenary Council plans so far suggest that this will not be it. Perhaps the Plenary Council should expend its energy on working out how such an assembly could be brought into being and how it would work. A look at the Australian Federation Conventions of the 1890’s might be helpful; we are hoping to make a new City of God as they were hoping to make a new nation. We might also learn from the people who drew up the Uluru statement “from the heart”. You could say that the status of lay Catholics is very similar to the status of indigenous Australians in society and they, indigenous Australians, have found a promising road towards improvement.