

# Strapped in for the Plenary Council ride

John Warhurst 26 August 2021

Those of us who are members of the Plenary Council are now strapped in for what looks likely to be an uncertain ride. Some members, having concluded their initial formal formation and training, are now meeting in officially organised discussion sessions to build up their preparation for the first assembly which is now just over a month away. The wider community is also making final efforts by whatever means are possible to make its concerns known to members, including through the official Microsoft Teams website.



Since their selection early last year the ground has been shifting under the feet of PC members under the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic. First the assembly was delayed by twelve months. Then it was reduced from a national face-to-face assembly in Adelaide to a mixed-mode assembly conducted virtually from five hubs in the major state metropolitan cities. Ten

days ago, it was changed again to a fully virtual assembly in which members will be based in isolation in their homes, supplemented by very limited social gatherings in some centres where that is permitted by government regulations. The situation remains fluid, but the members are increasingly isolated.

The metaphor 'strapped in for the ride' has several meanings, each of which emphasises the fact that the members have almost no ability to influence the journey we find ourselves on. We are passengers in a vehicle which has been imported from Rome to facilitate the task of discerning the future of the church in Australia. The Plenary Council vehicle is not Australian-made, although the Australian authorities have been allowed to make some minor local modifications.

The consequence of the changes which have been made under the duress of the pandemic are enormous and should not be overlooked. They make the chance of successful outcomes, however they might be defined, much more problematic. Yet the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has deliberately downplayed the latest change towards the bottom of a media release headed 'Technology in place for first plenary council assembly'. The leader of the Plenary Council Facilitation team, Lana Turvey-Collins, described the latest change as a 'pivot' rather than a 'detour'.

PC members, other than bishops, still remain in the dark about significant matters, which appear to have been decided by the bishops months ago. These include the list of non-voting experts and observers. The PC assembly process has failed to be a model for the synodality under which it ought to be conducted. There has been little transparency or accountability. Decisions continue to be made by a few behind closed doors.

There has been considerable bonhomie in the PC gatherings so far. But this warmth and good humour cannot disguise the fact that the hierarchical character of the 'old' church continues to be embedded in the modes of operation and culture of this supposedly synodal event. PC members can't escape it. Undue deference to those in authority remains.

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The tension between the naturally laid-back character of mainstream Australia, on which we pride ourselves, and the ecclesial formality of internal church events remains unresolved. The equality of the People of God is hard to put into practice if church titles, like Archbishop and

Bishop, get in the way. My hope remains that the Australian character will find some way to democratise proceedings.

The new format also exacerbates the pressures of time under which the PC Assembly will conduct its business. Time was at a premium already, but the intense ‘working individually from home’ format may necessitate further reducing the official working time.

The final crucial element, not well understood by the broader Catholic community, is the Spiritual Conversations method. This special approach to decision-making – involving structured talking and deep listening – differentiates this event from secular occasions, even parliamentary sittings which begin with the Lord’s Prayer. It also goes beyond the normal prayerful approach usually undertaken at meetings of church boards and parish councils, which might begin and end with a prayer and include a spiritual reflection.

During the Plenary Council prayer will be both communal and personal, interspersed between other elements of the assembly. There will be a period of prayer between the consultative and deliberative voting. The deliberations themselves will be tightly framed by the Spiritual Conversations method, which determines the order, length and approach of all contributions.

This discernment method is well understood by some PC members, but to many others it is quite new and the skills must be learnt and practised. It is a framework which, to be successful, must prove itself as not unduly limiting. It will be a failure if it inhibits the full expression of the voices of the faithful, which were so wonderfully on display during the early consultation phase of the PC process. That process enabled 17,500 submissions to be made.

Those holding authority in the church, including those responsible for the PC, seem to have forgotten the priorities evident in those submissions when they constructed the Working Document and the subsequent Agenda Questions.

The PC ride is about to begin. It will only reach its potential of revitalising the church in Australia if its members are not too tightly strapped in. The assembly process must allow voices to be heard and never become an unnecessary straight-jacket on the journey.



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Main image: Virtual house of God (CHBD/Getty Images)