

RELIGION

The careful choreography of plenary

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25 October 2021

The First Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council held few surprises. The program made sure of it. Proceedings were carefully choreographed and the agenda was deliberately anodyne. It took several days before participants found their feet. The 'deep listening' process of scripture reflection and sharing in small groups did engender a spirit of collegiality. At the same time, it constrained free flowing discussion and overwhelmed any effective canvassing of the issues confronting the Church. The upshot was a week devoid of strategic focus.

Given that so much time was spent on prayerful reflection, not enough was available to the task at hand. The Catholic community had supplied 17,500 submissions in an initial consultation phase. Yet the Plenary was not presented with any report on what those submissions contained, nor was it presented with any draft resolutions from the submissions. It can only be assumed that the Bishops Steering Group deemed the submissions to be of insignificant value to the Assembly. The expert theologians, scripture scholars, canonists and public policy advisors were kept at a distance. It was as if the participants were meant to start from scratch.

What did emerge was the diversity of views over the role and purpose of the Church. Again, no surprise there! Though more important was the lack of clarity over the actual starting point for the conversation. Participants were constantly reminded that Pope Francis was calling for a Church motivated by a 'missionary impulse'. It seemed fair to assume therefore that the task was to imagine what that looks like for the Church now and into the future. Yet the daily feedback from the working groups roamed far and wide from personal devotional practices all the way to cutting edge pastoral outreach. Again, no surprises when you give Catholics free rein!

The situation would be less distressing if there had been an overt recognition of the crisis the Church faces. A crisis that is both of its own making and one that prompts

questions about religious belief in our world today. This crisis needs to be addressed by the Plenary Council in two fundamental areas: internal organisation and pastoral disposition. On the first, the organisational life of the Church has already been the subject of intense scrutiny by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. One of the seventeen volumes of the Final Report dealt specifically with the Catholic Church. It contained clear recommendations for governance and culture. Following this, the bishops and religious leaders commissioned a two-year study that produced *The Light From the Southern Cross* report into governance and cultural issues. These two reports outline a similar roadmap for change. But the elephant in the room is the authority of bishops.

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Almost before the ink dried on the reports some bishops dismissed their recommendations as an attack on episcopal authority. Some even went as far to say that the reports would make the Catholic Church too 'Anglican'! Talk of shared governance models and expanding the influential role of the laity, especially women, was a bridge too far for those content with 'business as usual'. This despite the evidence that most indicators the Church was going backwards. Calls for Church leaders to introduce measures enhancing best practice accountability and transparency, vital to regaining the public trust lost after the abuse scandal and cover ups, continue to be met with shrill warnings about erosion of episcopal control.

This issue must be faced head on. Whether the Church can embark on a new missionary strategy is dependent on getting its own house in order. That is, demonstrating that the culture to conceal and deal in the dark is over. That best practice governance is commonplace. That transparency in how decisions are made and by whom is the norm. That the laity, especially more women, are effectively involved in and jointly accountable for the life and future direction of the Church. These are the obvious indicators of a changed culture and structure. One that has some chance of being believed when they say 'trust us'!

On the issue of the pastoral disposition of the Church the way forward is more fraught. The mindset and culture of our Church is still based on an outmoded understanding of personhood. Our Christian anthropology has not kept pace with the insights of the human sciences and contemporary understandings of personal development, including around sexuality, gender identity and its diversity. This is a fundamental disconnect for the Church in the Western world. It puts at risk the effectiveness of its mission. This is particularly the case for the Church's relevance to young people exploring their place in the world; or in bridging the chasm with the LGBTIQ+ people in their full participation in the life of the Church; or in embracing divorced and remarried Catholics, including their reception of the Eucharist. A more nuanced theology of personhood would better inform our pastoral practice and deliver a genuinely inclusive, compassionate missionary outreach.

This is what the Plenary Council must address. Building trust is a two-way street. Being trusted to act in an ethical manner, both in its business and organisational dealings and in the dealings with people, in and out of the Church, is non-negotiable. Reaching out with compassion, affirming people, being for others, goes to the heart of a 'missionary impulse'. Doing it without conditions goes to the heart of the Gospel. Anything less looks like 'business as usual'.



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source: <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/the-careful-choreography-of-plenary#>