

# How the Plenary might resolve the unresolvable

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At one level a lot is riding on this Plenary Council. Only the fifth such Council in the Australian church history, there is a great sense of anticipation among a wide variety of groups: those estranged from the church, priests looking for direction for their own parishes, women bereft of opportunities to express their faith and seeking a look-in, parents of uninterested children desperate for ways of bridging the gap between church traditions and modernity, those ostracised from the church, as well as those not wanting any changes at all.



Main image: Woman raising hand at convention (Klaus Vedfelt / Getty Images)

All are looking on with interest at one of the most formal consultative processes within the church. Will it or won't it produce tangible output that will help direct the church into the post-Royal Commission, post-Covid era, and help bring about deeper faith across a wider congregation?

The extent to which any outcome can contribute to that goal is out of the immediate control of the present Plenary Council. While the Council, through its definition can set binding canonical laws for the related region (i.e. Australia), the laws and norms applicable in this process are still limited. That is, it is likely discussion will be restrained to the particular areas addressable by a local Church.

In this context, many pleas within more than 17,000 submissions collated for inclusion may be pie-in-the-sky ideals that are sidelined in the PC discussions. These include calls for broader interpretations of scripture, a gentler approach to those who are at odds with

church teachings, practical suggestions for dealing with priest shortages, and more detailed suggestions around responsible church governance.

This presents a challenge for heeding the call by Pope Francis for a [church of synodality](#), centred on mutual listening and learning. Plenary members must take care that the Council will not be a one-sided conversation or a show of mutual listening constrained to a Church-defined 2000-year-old script.

Some argue that issues, such as women's ordination, divorce, views on homosexuality, are not worth discussing in the PC given the clear teachings of the church on these. Yet this runs the risk of ignoring raw feedback.

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Consider these excerpts from submissions from the [Final Report for the Plenary Council Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue](#):

*'Women are treated in a tokenistic manner and are angered by this...'*

*'If men and women are made in the image and likeness of God, we must start to ordain women', '(We need) to break down the human construct that we use as tools to gain power and manipulate',*

*'Where is the mercy and forgiveness when we deprive divorcees who have remarried commune?'*

*'As a layperson, the Church's decision to vilify homosexuals and not attack a consumerist culture suggests that the Church likes punching down, not up...'*

On the other hand, a PC is not simply a process to accept all suggestions and ideas. The question remains: how does a PC navigate the conundrum of being clearly 'open to the Spirit' across these new submissions, while honouring earlier Spirit-led discernment that produced long-accepted stances and teachings of the church?

One answer was presented at a member formation session: a 'Spirit overflow', which is a notion of holding the tension between conflicting views by staying sincerely open to another viewpoint, while continuing to speak from our own heart and understanding. Members can then, ideally, expect a resolution to the unresolvable that goes beyond human capabilities.

Members of the PC would do well to remember their foremost calling is to discern where the Holy Spirit is calling the Australian Church. That doesn't mean limiting or restricting that discernment to what members consider possible for the church to address.

While recognising that the nature of this PC, which inhibits making changes to some issues, may be at odds to synodality, plenary members can still stay focused on discernment of the Spirit, irrespective of how practical they think they outcome might be.

Because while practical outcomes are a defined criteria for a successful PC, the road to these outcomes might not be clear. Members simply need to present themselves at the PC, each with individual takes on various issues, moulded through formation, and supported by the prayer of the wider faith community. They come, ready to listen to the other voices, not through the head or the ears, but through a stillness and a willingness to absorb the points being made by the other.

As with the Magic Eye stereogram images of the 90s, it is the role of members to look beyond the obvious or central issues facing the Church, to look for the 3D sense of God forming the church within the discussion. The role of members is to look for God, rather than focusing on a particular issue. There is wisdom in the Biblical caution of not putting new wine into old wineskins. Sometimes the current wineskins are just no longer suitable to hold the richness of the wine that is the faith. The focus for many on the Plenary Council is not on retaining the wineskins; it is the wine that is the focus.

I heard a comment, expressed separately by both a Plenary Council member as well as a couple of wise and grounded laywomen I was chatting to, that seemed to put the whole Plenary Council journey into some perspective: 'this council is just one of many ways in which church reform can be facilitated.' It helped alleviate some of the angst that has been building up about how it will all turn out.

In the same way, the council members trust that God's Spirit will speak through them, and the Spirit will also speak through other members, as well as through the PC process. The process began with the National Consultation, will continue through the Plenary Council and progress into the future through continued Spirit-led discussion and action between the Church's hierarchy and the faithful.



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