

Plenary Council reveals a diversity that is both enriching and challenging



Sister Patty Fawkner SGS. Image: Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

When the Catholic Church in Australia gathered online for the first General Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council earlier this month, Congregational Leader Patty Fawkner participated as a Council Member.

“Here come the Catholics; here comes everyone.” Whether or not the great Irish writer James Joyce actually said these words, as is often claimed, is a moot point. But it’s too good a line not to use in describing my experience of the first General Assembly of the Plenary Council (<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/>), which was held from October 3-10.

Such diversity! Diversity of race, role and rite; diversity of age, gender, perspective, spirituality and theology. It was a diversity that enriched and a diversity that challenged in equal measure.

Diversity can unravel into chaos. However, the process used during the Assembly ensured that this was not the case.

Participants constantly called on the Spirit in a process of spiritual conversation

We silently prayed before we spoke and respectfully listened to the reflections of each member of the small breakout group to which we were assigned.

For me, another aspect that contained the diverse perspectives was the focus on mission. Even if groups were discussing structures, formation, governance, prayer – all was in the service of mission.

Of the 26 participants in my group, 17 were clerics (an Archbishop, Bishops, priests and deacon) and there were nine laity, six of whom were women, including myself as the only Religious woman. Not much variety there, but what we lacked in diversity of role, we made up in diverse perspectives.

At our first meeting, our skilled facilitator asked each of us how we wished to be addressed and each of us asked to be called by our Christian name. This might seem a tiny matter, but to me it was hugely symbolic and encouraging.

The absence of titles – a significant chink in the hierarchical structure – fostered a sense of mutuality and collaboration.

In an interview (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wB9s3fpjrso>) for the daily *Plenary Wrap*, I was asked where I saw the Spirit working during my Assembly conversations. I recognised the presence of the Spirit when I witnessed courage, patience, kindness and wisdom.

Here are two examples among so many.

One man spoke courageously of the abuse by a priest he experienced as a 14-year-old. I found his sharing wrenching, profound, and – paradoxically – precious. And this, two days after the report on historical sexual abuse within the Church in France, a report that was shocking and numbing in the extreme claiming that up to 220,000 children had been abused by clergy and religious.

I recognised real patience on the part of the clergy. In no way did they dominate the conversation and actually seemed to hold back in sharing their views until after most others had spoken. A reflective listening stance from so many was palpable.

Each day time was given to interventions – both written and spoken. I was fortunate to be able to make a three-minute intervention early in the week. By the last day there were close to 60 interventions of which only a small percentage were able to be delivered verbally.

In my intervention, I invited the nearly 280 Plenary Council Members to imagine a Church which allowed the suppressed feminine to flourish, to reclaim the faith of our mothers as well as our fathers, and to be inclusive with our language for humanity and for the Divine.

What if we allowed women to break open the Word of Scripture and to speak from their experience, the experience of more than half the faithful?

Other interventions spoke of the desire for women to proclaim and preach the Gospel.

It is my experience that as soon as the issue of women in the Church is raised, unhelpful presumptions inevitably follow. In subsequent interventions, other women said that the “push” for women’s involvement was a play for power and a competitive struggle with men. There was a presumption, false I believe, that discussion about women being more involved in decision-making in the Church was advocating for women’s ordination.

Some interventions spoke of the complementarity of women. I believe complementarity talk does a disservice to women, generally relegating them to a subservient role in the private domain rather than the public sphere. My desire is for a Church in which women and men, one in Christ Jesus, become mutual, collaborative servant leaders.

In my intervention I noted that the choice of female Plenary Council members from the more than 30 Australian dioceses was at times at the expense of lay men. They were fewer in number, recalling a concern expressed in one of the six thematic discernment papers leading to the Assembly for the “missing men” who no longer participate in contemporary Church life.

It occurs to me that because of this Plenary Council event, the Catholic Church in Australia is irrevocably changed, and echoing Archbishop Mark Coleridge, we can't return to “business as usual”.

It is 84 years since the last Plenary Council in Australia. In historical terms, a relatively brief period. Those gathered in 1937 – clerics all – would never have imagined that the next Plenary Council would have been ‘online’ (whatever that meant) and that the mix of attendees would have included First Nations People, non-Europeans, married deacons and, most startling of all, women.

Apart from presiding at the daily Eucharist, women were involved in every aspect of the Plenary Council journey, as organisers, facilitators, chairs and members. Their contribution was essential.

Change is slow, and permanent change that much slower. With the constant plea for a more inclusive Church – for women, remarried divorcees and members of the LGBTIQ+ community – we can but wonder who might be present at a future Sixth Plenary Council. I anticipate that when we say, “Here come the Catholics,” the “everyone” who comes will be even more inclusive and diverse. One lives in hope.

Interviews during the Plenary Council:

Sister Patty Fawkner SGS

Assembly 1 – Friday Plenary Wrap, Prayer and Contemplation, click here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wB9s3fpjrso>).

Assembly 1 – Plenary Week Wrap, click here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aXQjWlrIRU>).

Sister Clare Condon SGS

Plenary Matters podcast, click here (<https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/plenary-matters-ep-8-looking-to-the-future/id1587458085?i=1000537947134>).

ABC Religion and Ethics Report, click here (<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/religionandethicsreport/analysis-of-the-2021-historical-catholic-summit/13570686>).

The second General Assembly of the Plenary Council is scheduled to take place in Sydney from July 4-9, 2022.

Patty Fawkner

Good Samaritan Sister Patty Fawkner is the Congregational Leader of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan. She is an adult educator, writer and facilitator with formal tertiary qualifications in arts, education, theology and spirituality. Patty is interested in exploring what wisdom the Christian tradition has for contemporary issues. She has an abiding interest in questions of justice and spirituality.
