

Post Plenary Gleanings

By: Trish Hindmarsh

11th October 2021

It was a joyous surprise to realise we non-members could tune in daily during the Plenary Council to the live streamed Council Mass, celebrated each day by one of the Bishops, and also to the General Assembly sessions (11.00-12.15pm). The exception was Thursday (when closed sessions were held for a day of Lament and Reconciliation).

In addition there were opportunities daily to read John Warhurst's blog and Francis Sullivan's, to listen to Geraldine Doogue's podcast and to tune in each evening to the ACCCR Plenary Tracker. Of course public media coverage generated much interest as well.

There were Reports from each of the ten Plenary groups on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, sharing the fruits of discernment around each group's allocated Question/s from the Agenda. On Saturday fourteen reports were received to cover all the Questions individually with the exception of two- those related to Sexual Abuse and the exclusion from full communion in Church life of those on the margins. (Dealt with in plenary sessions on the Thursday as mentioned above).

The small groups of 30 or so members broke up into smaller groups of six to discern around their allocated Agenda Questions.

I tuned into all these live streamed sessions, read John's blog and watched the Plenary Tracker each night. It was riveting.

It was evident to me as an outsider looking in that:

- Archbishop Tim Costelloe seemed nervous and ill at ease at the beginning while delivering his opening remarks and setting out the parameters. At the end in summing up and outlining the way forward during the next six months, he seemed relaxed and confident, in fact happy with what had been achieved.
- Members expressed that they felt free to speak their minds and obviously did so fearlessly in the daily reports.
- There was an evident atmosphere of mutual respect and great willingness to do one's best for the future of the Church
- Women's voices were well represented even though they were in the minority numerically.
- There were many young and highly articulate members, who were really impressive.
- The issues and hopes expressed in the reports reflected those expressed through the 17,500 submissions. No issues were left unsaid or unacknowledged.

- Great emphasis was given to strengthening parishes as places of missionary outreach and formation for the laity. The richness of small groups in parishes ('communities of communities') was cited often.
- Opportunities for formation of laity and clergy, bishops too, was a constant theme.
- The need for inclusion of all was universally recognised (almost taken for granted as the norm) in the reports.
- The gift of the First Peoples of Australia to the Church and the recognition of that gift was always front of mind during the Council and modelled through the Acknowledgments each day and frequent reference to Aboriginal Catholic cultural understandings and the significance of Aboriginal spirituality as a gift to the Church and the world.
- The exclusion of women from full participation in Church was daily raised as a universally agreed challenge that absolutely must be addressed.
- The need for 'ecological conversion' was considered normative by all. No question.
- Inclusion of LGBTIA+ people was mentioned a number of times in reports but not addressed directly. This remains a fraught area in need of urgent attention. (In the 'too hard basket'?)
- Reform of Church Governance received much attention and there were divided ways of thinking about this. *The Light from the Southern Cross* was named as a key resource in this area, as was the Royal Commission recommendation to 'learn from' the Church's education, health and welfare agencies who have contemporary governance structures in place that meet compliance.
- There was a request from the Governance group for clarification of the term 'Mission' being constantly mentioned in Council and not universally understood. Richard Lennan was invited to speak to this as one of the twenty 'periti' (expert advisors) appointed to the Council. Richard gave a lucid and contextualised interpretation... God's Mission of love is expressed in the creation and unfolding of the Cosmos and is embodied in Jesus who came to found the Kingdom of Love and Peace. We are all called to share in God's Mission of love. The Church is not the Kingdom, but points to the Kingdom. The full text (5 mins worth) is on the Plenary website and well worth the read. Richard's work was quoted many times as groups gave their reports. Julian Porteous commented on that in his blog on Wednesday night saying that this was an 'unusual' interpretation of Mission and he favoured the time-honoured one of the 'Great Commission' ... 'Go into the whole world and preach the Good News, making disciples of all nations'. (Found on the Archdiocesan website).
- Thursday was a closed day, one to remember. Members spoke of the extreme emotion and sorrow they felt in hearing direct testimony from victims of abuse and exclusion. John Warhurst said on the blog and in an interview that he had to 'dig deeper' than he had ever dug in his life that day. John was visibly shaken. Other members said they felt the same. Members speaking in the media eg. Patty Fawcner, spoke of the extreme depths of sorrow and truth-telling of that shared experience. No one could fail to be moved. There seemed to

be a balance struck in needing to maintain confidence for the sake of those who had shared, and the need for as much transparency as possible about the Day of Lament.

-Greg Craven, former Vice-Chancellor of ACU and constitutional lawyer, close friend of Cardinal Pell and other bishops, spoke with Geraldine Doogue on her podcast *Plenary Matters*, accusing a certain elements in the Church of wanting to bring the Bishops down by creating a 'Revolution', tilting at power. He expressed cynicism about the sincerity of some in Council, only wanting to stir up trouble. It was a disturbing interview, quite at variance with the overall sense of mutual respect, discernment and contemplative dialogue seeking to find common ground, or at least mutual respect, even in disagreement.

-The final Homily from Mark Coleridge (available online) was a reflection on the Rich Young Man, the Council and its fidelity to the Spirit.

OVERALL IMPRESSION: Excitement that after four years of intense preparation and work, this first Assembly of the Plenary Council has seen a leap into a more 'synodal' way of being Church. Bishops, clergy, laity, women and men, all ages, were able to discern together, prayerfully and openly in considering the 16 Questions.

There was visible exhaustion after the intensity of the week, but commitment to continue now to engage for the next nine months in preparation for the second Assembly in Sydney, in person, during July 2022.

Everyone acknowledged that the Council processes and organisation were outstanding.

Where to now? The Drafting Committee will take the Proposals put forward this week from each of the groups and form them into motions to be voted on in July. It is assumed there will be some crossover with the Synod on Synodality with preparation for that starting in October and the Synod happening in 2023. Council Plenary Groups will continue to meet and refine their work. Just how this will all happen and what relevance or connection it might have for the wider People of God in Australia needs still to be clarified.

A QUESTION that remains for me: Could this Australian Council become a model of what's possible for the global Church?. We have been able to carry this Council out without a 'walk out' (like happened with the German Synod recently) or without the deep rift between Cardinals from different ends of the doctrinal spectrum that occurred (and remains with a number) at the first session in 2014 of the Synod on the Family, where the synodal process was first introduced by Pope Francis.

The 'spiritual conversations', guided by openness to the Spirit and to one another, seemed to have enabled the members to avoid such excesses, and to engage in genuinely respectful dialogue. Of course there are still 'miles to go before we sleep' in the urgent need for reform and renewal, a reality that seemed to be recognised by all in attendance.

Congratulations are in order for all those who have made this Plenary Council first Assembly possible. It is a relief for many and a cause for gratitude that it appears to have gone so well.

Trish Hindmarsh, Monday 11/10/21

