

# Assessing the Plenary: A work in progress

Geraldine Doogue 15 November 2021

How do I assess our Plenary Council thus far? Or make sense of its related word-of-the-moment, *synodality*? With apologies to Churchill, dare I hope it is the 'end of the beginning'? But of what precisely? A priest-friend distilled the challenge rather well last week to me: what would success look like?

Humbly I say that is a work-in-progress but no apologies for that. For me, it offers the chance to review identities within the Church, to re-consider self-description or roles played over decades. The prize could be enabling some thriving to emerge out of the demoralisation of the last decade. Wouldn't that be a blessing?

Who would facilitate such a significant process? No one group will manage alone. Catholic lay-people will need to discern (the other in-word) how to reconfigure their rights and responsibilities as believers. Their consecrated sisters and brothers will also need to commit themselves willingly to that same process, to different relationships. It may well be the journey of their lives for both groups, a graced moment.

Words like rights and responsibilities reek of political language and worry people. But no, I don't imagine the Plenary as some sort of ersatz Parliament, which is more the Anglican way and which alienates some Catholics. Above all, rights and responsibilities surely reek of citizenship, a much more inviting notion, more in keeping with being a pilgrim. It prompts new expectations, new liberation yet asks in return, a commitment to duty, a break from passivity.

Of course the modern world doesn't like the word 'duty' much, too reminiscent of authoritarianism, of docility, or paternalism. However, a need to imagine the appropriate duties that would be required of a fully engaged and admitted laity lies at the core of where we stand right now, perusing the Plenary.

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threw themselves into the structure provided, all together, confident they were trying their best, determined not to waste a good crisis.'

How will lay-people step up? How will consecrated brothers and sisters learn to reset their relationships, still heavily governed by the *honour of service*, a source of pride already for many?

As Churchill knew back in 1940 when he challenged demoralised Britons under threat from Hitler, the task beyond mere words was herculean, with uncertain outcomes. But the words mattered then and do now.

Yes, I do live in hope that an invigorated Church in Australia is possible to achieve. I do recognise the effort required. I *think* the Plenary could be a critical step. That the event took place at all matters. Astonishingly, its sometimes brittle processes prevailed, amidst a pandemic, requiring impressive technical adaptation by many people.

Forgive the sentimentality, but what Australian didn't hold his/her breath as the full scope of transmission began to unfold, over the wide, brown land? Would the centre hold? It did, mostly, though I never took it for granted, based on bitter experience elsewhere.

The commitment over the week was amazing to see. Most, I suspect, survived a personal digital panic of some sort during the week after which the whole Plenary began to seem a bit like 'the little train that could'. My God, it might work!

What's more, the various pandemic-inspired restrictions actually conferred less distractions. Focus was sharper, in my view, time-giving more generous. The Church was the beneficiary, maybe considerably more than the original plan of an Adelaide assembly.

As I ponder it all, three separate quotes have been sustaining me, referring both to the wider synodal process initiated by Pope Francis and to our own Plenary.

One is from Fr Santiago Madrigal SJ, published in *Church Life* (Oct 21): 'The Pope has set a next goal for the whole Church, which we can express in the famous verses of Antonio Machado: *Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar* (Wayfarer, the path is not there, it is to be made by walking).

Another from Fr Brian Lucas, in *Eureka Street* (Oct 21), referring to the Pope's address to the Mozambique Jesuit community in 2019: 'Great shepherds give people a lot of freedom. The good shepherd knows how to lead his flock without enslaving it to rules that deaden people. The shepherd has the ability to go in front of the flock to show the way, stay in the middle of

the flock to see what happens within and also be at the rear of the flock to make sure no-one is left behind.'

The last is from Massimo Faggioli, the Italian theologian-commentator, in *La Croix* (October 21): 'Being a 'listening Church' does not mean just listening to one another or listening to the Holy Spirit. It also means listening to what culture — religious and secular — has to say to the Church.'

Listening to my own desires and hopes, I decided the test would be: will I change during the week, in some way? Will I see myself differently as a Catholic Australian?

I think I did. The ex-priest and commentator Kevin Liston felt that lay Catholics came out of the shadows and found their own voices... 'a shift from the Church of the bishops to the Church of the people and the bishops'. We heard women and men speak from their hearts, unworried by hierarchical rank, he said, simply ready to contribute to a narrative that made sense to us Australians.

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I wasn't 'behind the wall', as it were. That is, I don't know what happened when the 11am live streaming stopped. But the clear sense was, people didn't check themselves and their thoughts, but threw themselves into the structure provided, all together, confident they were trying their best, determined not to waste a good crisis.

We simply don't yet know how those copious ideas will be sorted and distilled. That is yet to come. I will keep my eyes and ears open. I will accord the organisers, certainly at this stage, the trust of imagining they're facing their duties ethically. I desperately hope that holds true.

One very active parishioner I know professed a range of sceptical responses. Without fully disagreeing, I said I was ready to suspend my concerns... till July next year. Amidst all my insecurities, I am prepared to start walking on that path mentioned by Pope Francis, despite the lack of a good map.

More than at any other time since the years immediately post Vatican Two, I sense new skin being donned, to see what it feels like.

With others in my own and surrounding parishes, we'll try to explore what this relatively new word to Catholics, 'synodality' means at the very local level. The Pope's sense that it is 'one of

the most precious inheritances of the Second Vatican Council' rings true, even though the concept of synodality is not found explicitly in the Council documents. However, as Fr Madriaga explores, the essential conciliarity or synodality of the Church exemplified by the gathering at Vat 2, and remembering the history of Church meetings over centuries, underpins the whole idea.

'Synodality, as a constitutive dimension of the Church, offers us the most adequate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself,' according to the Vatican document issued just before the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome.

A Church that journeys together, amidst a synodal process, must be lived at various levels: walking together, the people, the bishops and the Pope, it emphasises.

How will all the discerning – in those spiritual conversations promoted so well by Brother Ian Cribb SJ – lead to decisions that must surely involve *yielding* notions of self and calling?

Indeed without shifts in attitudes among consecrated brothers and sisters, any potential shifts among laity will wither on the vine. If the Church is to observably think differently of itself – and persuade the culture around it that new skin is being donned – self-identification among a wide range of Catholics will need to occur. Much is to come.

It is worth the effort of trying. Hostility to the Church and believers is generally recognised as its greatest threat. I beg to differ. Indifference is the demon, which was well-and-truly abroad in our culture even before the scandals of child abuse.

The Plenary Council is an antidote to indifference. Let the journey towards that elusive success begin.



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