

Forward to the Second Plenary Council Assembly

- [John Warhurst](#)
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The 280 Plenary Council (PC) Members have just taken another major step towards the Second Assembly in Sydney on 3-9 July. Yet it is difficult to have a proper public conversation about this step because it has taken place behind closed doors.

On 28 February, the PC authorities published *Towards the Second Assembly: A Working Document for Members*. They also advised Members on how to approach their task of discernment, asking us to respond by 4 April. Feedback and input from Members, said Bishop Shane Mackinlay, Vice-President of the Council, was critical, but that, in revising the document, 'important contributions' would also be made by 'various committees and advisors'.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference will consider the revised document at its May meeting, after responses by Members are considered by the Drafting Committee. The final resolutions for the Second Assembly will then be released publicly at the beginning of June for public discussion.

Towards the Second Assembly comes a long way under the guidance of the four writing groups, whose membership has not been made public, although Members were informed and the names of the Drafting Committee and the periti are no secret. Though it is a mixed bag, it is probably the best document emerging from the PC, making it even more frustrating that it is not in the public domain.

The PC authorities remain resolute that the process will remain 'in house' as far as possible. The document is addressed to the Members alone and we have been discouraged from making it more widely available. We have been advised that it is not a secret document and that we are not gagged, but that we should not pass it on to others. It is none the less in limited public circulation.

'The wider Catholic community should be able to read and discuss *Towards the Second Assembly*. Yet it is officially prevented from doing so. It is not too late for this decision to be reversed. Meanwhile Catholics should try to get hold of a copy.'

The PC authorities must have heard the many voices from the wider Catholic community over the past four years urging a broader involvement in its deliberations. But those voices have been deliberately excluded in favour of a discernment bubble. PC Members have never been directly asked their opinion of this approach, though some of us have registered our disagreement on this point to no avail.

The wider Catholic community is 'on the outer' from the time of the release of the *Fruits of the First Assembly* in December 2021 until the release of the final proposals for the Second Assembly in June 2022. For six whole months the discernment and discussion will officially be private and the final outcomes of the Second Assembly will be the poorer for it. This will make the final four weeks more hectic than it should be.

Towards the Second Assembly has four sections: Communion, Diversity and Participation; Ecclesial Leadership and Governance; Missionary Disciples in the World; and Reconciliation, Compassion for the Wounded and Care for our Common Home.

Each section includes general context and theological background, concrete proposals, and recommendations for further deliberation. The whole document is just thirty well-spaced pages. The prime resource was the *Fruits* document, which was a low point in the PC deliberations. Under these circumstances the writing teams have done quite well though there is unnecessary overlap between the sections.

Strengths include proposals for those aspects on which the views of the First Assembly were quite clear. These include (Section A.1) supporting and acting upon the recommendations by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Commission (NATSICC). But the same writing group (Section A.3) has produced a much weaker section on inclusiveness, which buries critical communities in a grab bag of 'those who are overlooked' and on the 'peripheries'. This grab bag includes widows and orphans, those with a disability, those who are divorced and remarried and those who feel they are not accepted because of their sexuality or gender identity.

Not only are some groups overlooked, but the language is dismissive, not facing up to the church teachings and behaviour responsible for excluding people because of their marriage status, sexuality or gender identity. It is not a case merely of people 'feeling' that they are not accepted by the Church.

Section B on church leadership and governance contains the same mixture of strengths and weaknesses. The section on 'The Practice of Synodality' (B.2) makes strong suggestions about diocesan synods, diocesan pastoral councils, parish pastoral councils and on implementing *The Light from the Southern Cross* report. It also proposes an innovative National Catholic Synodal Leadership Council. However, the very next section (B.3) on 'Women and the Church' is unacceptably cautious, despite partially taking up the cause of women deacons. It repeats without apology that it is 20 years with little action since the Church's *Women and Man* report and includes platitudes about women being given their 'due' place in the church. Relying on Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Women* is patronising. Section C includes some wise analysis on formation and culture. But C.2 makes the mistake, while recognising positive values in Australian culture, that the Church must learn from these values 'in order to restore lost credibility'. *The Light from the Southern Cross* report made clear that acceptance of the best secular values is not just about restoring lost credibility but is the right thing to do!

C.2 also rightly emphasises the value of listening, but repeats in similar terms the catch-all lumping together of a range of people who ‘feel’ marginalised by the Church. The Church must recognise that it does marginalise many groups and it is not just a case of the feelings of such groups.

There is much more. The wider Catholic community should be able to read and discuss *Towards the Second Assembly*. Yet it is officially prevented from doing so. It is not too late for this decision to be reversed. Meanwhile Catholics should try to get hold of a copy.

PC Members themselves should be able to discuss the document with the wider community in addition to other Members. I have benefitted enormously from doing so in my own discernment and I will continue to do so against the wishes of the Church authorities. It just makes common sense.



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Taken from “Eureka Street”