

The Working Document: An Initial Response

Sense of the Faithful Editorial Committee

The Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) 'seeks to offer an account of what the People of God have expressed' in what it describes as the National Consultation. It also aims to provide a guide to delegates for the forthcoming Plenary Council of Australia (PC) but 'it does not seek to be the final word'. The authors state that the document 'offers a broad, but by no means exhaustive, perspective on the present-day situation of the Church in Australia'.

The Working Document covers a lot of ground relevant to the PC, including a theological reflection and a note on Sister Mary MacKillop as a model of Australian discipleship. However, in our view, whether as an account of the views expressed by the faithful or as a guide to PC participants, the Working Document falls seriously short. The sense of urgency conveyed in many of the submissions from the faithful has been lost. This urgency was better conveyed in the six Working Group reports (here) which were inputs to the Working Document. The issues are never sharply defined, in a way to inform a serious discernment process at the PC.

This is a compromise document from a complacent Church, pretty comfortable with itself, and not a document for a gathering of a Church in crisis.

The document is replete with general statements of intent and avoids identifying specific issues that the PC participants need to discuss and act on. As a result no view emerges of the priority or relative importance of the various matters discussed. It is hard to see how a well-defined agenda can emerge from this document, as it stands.

The document's lack of focus presumably reflects the fact that there are major divisions within the People of God in Australia, and within the episcopate, about what the key issues are and what reforms are needed. A crucial issue for the PC is how to manage this conflict, through working with the Holy Spirit, to generate real renewal of the Church within Australia.

Pope Francis on Dealing with Conflict in Discernment

In his 2020 book *Let Us Dream: The path to a better future*¹ Pope Francis distinguishes two common ways of dealing with conflict in a discernment process. One is for the participants to wrap themselves in the banner of one side or the other, which only exacerbates the conflicts. The other is to avoid engaging in conflict altogether, denying the tensions involved and washing one's hands of them. In our view, the Working Document largely adopts the second approach.

By contrast, Francis argues that the best course of action in a discernment process is for reconcilers instead to 'endure' the conflict. They should face the conflict head on, and through discernment, see beyond the surface reasons for disagreement to help others to see the possibility of a new synthesis. This synthesis does not involve destroying either pole but preserving what is good and valid in both sides in a new perspective. In this way, Francis notes that solutions to what have been intractable problems can come forth in ways that are unexpected and unforeseen. This is the challenge facing all PC participants, but especially the bishops.

In *Let Us Dream* Francis offers a simple framework for the discernment process. The book is organised around three processes: a 'time to see', 'time to choose' and a 'time to act'², and the Working Document acknowledges the value of this process (para 156).

¹ Pope Francis, 2020, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* in conversation with Austen Ivereigh, Simon & Shuster UK, London, p 57.

² This is a variant of the Cardijn principles for Catholic Action of 'see, judge and act', widely used in the Australian Church in earlier times.

For creative discernment to work at the PC, the real challenges need to be clearly documented, to help the members to see the realities facing the Australian Church. A range of responses need to be defined, covering a range of conflicting perspectives, as a basis for judgement. Finally, there needs to be a truly synodal discussion, in which the members 'endure' the tensions in the search for new ways forward. Only then can the Council 'speak and act with that *parrhesia*, that boldness and courage, which are a gift of the Holy Spirit' (para 197), and for which Pope Francis has often called.

The limits of discussion at the Council

The Working Document acknowledges that many submissions raised issues where 'people of faith and goodwill find themselves, or those that they love, in conflict with the teachings of the church' (para 108). The paper suggests that 'the Council participants may need to distinguish which matters touch on the universal doctrine and discipline of the Church and are, therefore, beyond the competence of a Plenary Council or individual dioceses to determine' (para 110).

Some matters are a settled part of the Church's magisterium. Others would require a change of universal law or practice. Other matters again might be referred to the Holy See as recommendations, or for determination (para 110).

Pope Francis has stated in his recent book in 2020 that 'tradition is not a museum, true religion is not a freezer and doctrine is not static but grows and develops ...'.³ He goes on to say that those who claim that 'God spoke once and for all time' hear the word 'discernment' and 'worry that it is a fancy way of ignoring the rules or some other clever modern ruse to downgrade the Church' (p 57).

The Working Document has a strong tendency to say that, in areas where there is such a 'settled' position (eg ordination of women, married clergy, LGBTI, divorced people attending the sacraments), we should accept the Church's position but deal nicely with the people involved. All this leaves it unclear what limits for discussion at the PC are being proposed.

The reality is that true renewal will require some changes in the existing teaching and discipline of the Church. Clearly the limits of action of the Australian Bishops must be recognised and a central focus given to matters on which immediate action is possible. But discussion on other matters should be encouraged, with the Australian position on these issues conveyed to the universal Church for consideration.

Conclusion

For the PC process to work, difficult issues must be brought out into the open, backed by solid evidence to show what the nature and scale of the reality is. This will generate tensions among the PC participants, because some have expectations of major change and some resist real change. Genuine discernment requires that PC participants experience this tension based on stark differences. We suggest that the agenda for the PC must bring the real issues to the fore, so that the conflicts can be addressed and genuine discernment take place.