

The Plenary Council begins now

Why Australia's recent experience with the global "synodal process" is important for the Catholic Church throughout the world

By Massimo Faggioli | United States 26 July 2022

You do not need a time machine to understand the drama of Vatican Council II, which took place from 1962-1965. It is sufficient to take a look at what happened from July 3-9 in Sydney at the second assembly of the [Fifth Plenary Council](#) for Australia.

This was the first plenary council for Catholics "down under" in 80 years and one of the most significant ecclesial experiences for Pope Francis' vision of a synodal Church.

Unfortunately, I could not be in Australia for this big event. But through media accounts and my conversations with participants who were in the room, I can say -- as a Church historian and theologian interested in synodality -- this was truly an historic event.

I have made four extended Church-related visits to Australia since 2016 and served as external advisors for the task force that drafted the 2020 document the "[Light of the Southern Cross](#)" (one of the reports with proposals for the Plenary Council).

Despite the undeniable gap between some of the proposals in the "Light of the Southern Cross" and the final documents of the Plenary Council, I can honestly say that I was not disappointed with what happened earlier this month in Sydney.

The Six P's

One way to look at the Fifth Plenary Council is to consider [what it achieved](#) compared to the expectations and the needs of the Catholic Church in Australia and Australian society.

Another way to look at it is what the Plenary Council can teach to the "synodal process" that the pope has launched.

This is still unfolding in some countries and will culminate with the international assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 in Rome. And surely the synodal process will continue even after that.

I think there are six important takeaways for other Churches preparing their synodal gatherings around the world. They are the Six P's.

Preparation, People, Procedure, Polarization, Prayer, and Post-plenary process.

1. Preparation

The Fifth Plenary Council took a long time to imagine, propose, organize, prepare, and celebrate. It will also take time to absorb it.

The first ideas about a Plenary Council for Australia go back to a time even before Francis was elected pope; one of the proponents was then Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide more than ten years ago, when synodality was not exactly popular with the ecclesiastical establishment or in the Vatican.

The proposals for a Plenary Council not just survived but were made stronger by the storm of the Royal Commission on the scandal of abuse in the Church.

It took much of the energy of then-president of the Australian bishops' conference, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, to overcome the resistance and opposition and to announce the Plenary Council in 2018.

After a long process of preparation in the local churches, the [first assembly](#) took place on October 3-10, 2021.

I heard that the [second assembly](#) itself was exhausting, but the preparation more so. In the couple of weeks prior to the assembly, the drafting committee met almost every second day to consider amendments, and each of those meetings lasted several hours.

The drafting committee had met for months before the celebration of the second assembly: in fact, since January. The steering committee met constantly.

Synodality is about listening to the Holy Spirit, but it takes hard work to make that listening possible, and patient collaboration between different members of the church: theologians were an irreplaceable part of the success.

The Plenary Council owes a lot to Australian theologians who worked tirelessly and generously.

2. People

The Plenary Council for Australia was an experience of less than 300 delegates representing the entire People of God in a way that was fuller and richer than the concept of political representation.

Christopher Lamb of the [Tablet](#), who attended the second assembly in Australia, noted that new leadership emerged during the synodal process.

Bishop Tim Costelloe, the recently elected president of the bishops' conference and the Plenary Council president, was out of action for most of the week seemingly due to the lingering effects of COVID. He was confined to his hotel room, but that did not stop the Council.

Bishop Shane Mackinlay of Sandhurst (Bendigo), his deputy, showed attention to the details of the drafts and the operation of the Council. He skillfully helped rescue the assembly from a crisis on July 6 when it was disrupted over a vote on the role of women.

But it was actually the people in the assembly that saved the Plenary Council. The idea of breaking into small groups was very clever.

The "spiritual conversation" activity, which took up a big chunk of the day, fostered deep sharing. Peoples' understanding of certain issues also shifted over the course of the week.

Similar to what happened at Vatican II, the people of the Council were not just the bishops and voting members.

There was a global and ecumenical presence of observers: the cardinals from Myanmar (Charles Bo) and New Zealand (John Dew), the papal nuncio (Archbishop Charles Balvo), and the president of the Australian council of churches.

The periti or theological advisors were allowed to sit behind the observers. Moreover, the people of the Plenary Council were also those who offered a critical voice that kept the process honest.

There were groups of concerned Catholics active on social media, the daily blog entries of prominent Catholics, and thoughtful voices in the mass media. This was a critical component in a positive way.

3. Procedure

Similar to what happened during the first session of the Second Vatican Council, there was a moment of crisis at the Plenary Council when simply going by book could not do.

A vast majority of the bishops at Vatican II -- but a little less than the required two thirds -- voted on November 20, 1962 to scrap the prepared schema on Revelation, *De fontibus revelationis*.

A literal interpretation of the rules would have allowed the Council to continue discussions on a document rejected by a large majority.

But John XXIII decided to intervene because he saw the mind of the Council. He thus put aside *De fontibus revelationis* to the delight, among others, of a young Joseph Ratzinger. Pope John's decision opened the path to what would become the constitution *Dei Verbum*.

Sixty years later, at the Fifth Plenary Council for Australia, the disruption on July 6 was over the [deliberative vote](#) on "Part 4: Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men".

The motion failed because it was not supported by the required two-thirds majority of the bishops. It was an immensely painful moment.

The response in the room was immediate; it was just before morning teatime, and the vote occasioned deep grief, consternation and tears.

There is little history in Catholicism of this type of (mostly) lay-led "insurgency". But something similar happened at Vatican II. Archbishop Coleridge (who knows the conciliar history quite well) realized what was happening and in interviews later he cited the crisis from November 1962.

Bishop Mackinlay, the Deputy President of the Plenary Council, saw that the program could not continue as it was. After morning tea, 60 or so people (mostly women, two bishops, some priests and lay men) stood at the back of the hall as a form of protest.

Bishop Mackinlay announced that the program would be revised and that there would be further discussion of Part 4. He said the bishops would meet with the Steering Committee over lunch to discuss a way forward.

Part 4 of the document was then revised by a new drafting team with a minor revision, without using the language of "complementarity". It was re-introduced to the assembly on Friday and gained very strong support.

Credit should be given to the goodwill of many of the bishops who were seeking a way through. There was a definite strategy planned right from the start by a conservative group to stop all the creative motions, but it did not work.

As happened at Vatican II, the strategy of saying no to everything that challenges the status quo does not work in well-prepared and well-led ecclesial assemblies. The procedure in Australia worked and it was able to overcome the crisis.

Still, there is the need to reflect theologically and canonically on the distinctions between consultative/deliberative and decision making/taking.

This is something very important for the theological commission for the 2023 assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which has a very important meeting in Rome this coming September.

Finding a way to overcome the blow-up after the bishops' negative deliberative vote on women showed that a further step of reception by the whole assembly is needed after the deliberative vote.

In a synodal Church, consultation and deliberation must be understood as a circular relationship.

4. Polarization

The real challenge of synodality is getting past ecclesial polarization occasioned by tiny conservative minorities without feeding into it.

It is well known, for example, what Australia's most influential churchman in post-Vatican II era, Cardinal George Pell, thought about the Plenary Council during the last decade

. But reacting to it from what I would call a naïve "leftish" stance only feeds the polarization and the division of the Church and hampers the onward movement, which the Plenary Council advanced in significant ways.

Those who wrote with chagrin about "[the woke Catholicism of the Plenary Council](#)" show how disappointed they are that the Fifth Plenary Council developed in an ecclesial spirit, able to overcome the mannerism and ideology of Church politics.

Synodality is the way to defeat polarization in the Church: not just because it shows, in the physical and liturgical setting, the real size and import of tiny but vocal minorities, but also because it helps reflect in an ecclesial, non-reactive way on the issues these vocal minorities raise.

5. Prayer

Way back in the early days of preparation, the bishops' Executive Committee emphasized the vital importance of prayer. And it has been constantly pushed.

The daily structure of the Plenary Council included prayer time in the assembly hall, and on the various themes there were "spiritual conversations" where people shared what the Spirit was saying to them.

Prayerful atmosphere precludes any chance for ranting and raving. Synodal dialogue is not to be like a parliamentary debate—winner takes all.

6. Products and post-plenary process

Some have said that the final results are bland, but I do not see it that way.

The assembly called for a return of the Third Form of the Rite of Penance and the revision of the current English translation of the Roman Missal. It affirmed the equality of women and called for their appointment to leadership bodies.

And motions related to the First Nations peoples and climate change were also quite positive signs.

But the Plenary Council and synodal moments are not just about the proposals that are passed. The Plenary Council is part of the synodal movement which is "the container" that's taking the Church forward. And this synodal structure is taking the Church forward.

Perhaps, looking at Australia, the Church has seen in this instance the limitations of a Plenary Council structure because it is hampered by a legal approach and may not best serve communal discernment.

Francis's use of synods (at the local, national, and universal level) seems a better option. But he will not be able to ignore what happened in Australia (and in Germany).

[Geraldine Doogue](#), the noted commentator on Church affairs in Australia, said the Plenary Council made "progress" in her eyes.

"I have always had a rather blunt assessment of Plenary Council success, amid my rather demoralized Church. If it changes the laity's views about its own role in the Church of the future, it can mark itself as successful, whatever the qualifications," she wrote in *The Australian*.

"I think the verdict is in," Doogue concluded.

Just as important as this ecclesial event's final deliberations will be the process of its reception.

The Fifth Plenary Council for Australia will have to be studied historically. Judging it too quickly as a success or failure based on what it produced would be a materialistic downplaying of an ecclesial event which was unthinkable only ten years ago.

After the fourth and final session of Vatican II was brought to a conclusion on December 8, 1965, many key bishops and theological advisors at the Council said it was just the beginning of a beginning (for example, Karl Rahner), and that Vatican II was only about to start (Bernard Häring).

This is true also for what happened in Australia over the last few years and culminated in the Sydney assembly of July 2022. The Fifth Plenary Council is over, but in some sense it begins now.

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