

First Thoughts on *Towards the Second Assembly*

Peter Sheehan, for Sense of the Faithful

Introduction

In many respects this is a highly quality document, pulled together by a range of contributors with great expertise and commitment to the Church. In this way it is reminiscent of the Six Themes documents of 2021. But in many substantive respects it is very disappointing, in large part reflecting the appalling process at the First Assembly, which provides the inputs to the Writing Group. There was no discernment process for individual contributions, and less that one full day was allowed for groups to prepare recommendations about the questions that they had been assigned. In spite of the expertise put into it, the document is heavily compromised by the quality of the inputs.

General Comments

(i) *Lack of any sense of crisis or urgency.* This is very much a business-as-usual document, with some changes recommended along the way, but certainly not a revival plan for a Church in crisis. It lacks any sense of the urgency conveyed by Pope Francis or by the reality on the ground in Australia.

(ii) *Proud and comfortable, not humble.* Reflecting this point, there is little or no recognition (other than in relation to sexual abuse) of the Church's failings, or of the beam in the Church's eye.

(iii) *A timid, follower document.* It shows no ambitions to play a leading role in helping the Church respond to the 'change of era', and operates squarely within existing teaching and discipline. Nor is there any recognition of change processes taking place elsewhere in the Church, eg in Europe and Latin America.

(iv) *The centrality of mission.* Current rhetoric about the Church's mission to evangelise (make the Gospel present) is plentiful, but the reality of who we are called to be in today's world does not give the document its primary character. Our mission to make the Gospel of Jesus meaningful and present in every aspect of human life, within the Church and in the whole world, requires insight, work and passion. Mission, understood in the full Catholic sense, embraces the many dimensions of who we are. It underpins and brings integration to all our commitments. This is not well understood, and in the current document, mission remains just one of the items under consideration.

Major Omissions

(i) *The Role of Women.* This is a glaring omission, especially given its centrality to many submissions to the Council. The one page covering the role of women (B3, page 12) starts by saying that the Council respects the teaching of the Church that precludes women from the priesthood (and the episcopacy and the papacy!) and then says three things: women should be 'appropriately represented' at all levels of governance, their perspectives should be always considered (especially on matters which affect them) and they should be considered as deacons, if the Pope changes the rules. This will be widely seen as very weak response to this critical issue.

(ii) *Clericalism and the Role of the Laity.* No mention of clericalism or of the inevitably changing balance of clergy and lay in the Church, but some generic discussion of formation for both groups.

(iii) *Inclusion.* The discussion of inclusion is particularly weak. These two quotes are about the only mentions:

Go out to the peripheries, within and beyond parishes, to create opportunities for those who may be overlooked, including those who are widowed or orphaned, those with a disability, those who are divorced and remarried, those who feel they are not accepted because of the sexuality or gender identity, and all those who experience marginalisation. (A3 6 (d))

Especially important are those who hold a grievance against us (cf. Mt 5:23), those who feel marginalised by the Church, those who are victims of abuse, women, those who are divorced and remarried and those who feel they are not accepted because of their sexuality or gender identity. Listening converts us and enables genuine encounter. After truly listening, not just to the words and the feelings but especially to the voice of the Spirit whispering in the conversation, what concrete missionary action we are called to do next will become clear. (C2 3)

This failure to provide any guidance about how to address issues of exclusion, many of which arise directly from the Church's teaching, will be widely regarded as disappointing.

(iv) *The Future of Parishes*. Many parishes around Australia are in turmoil and decline, with the number of priests falling sharply, the faithful disillusioned and no guidance from Church leaders about possible responses. Again, in this document there is no real discussion of the future of parishes or the massive challenges they face.

Major Strengths

(i) *The Context and Theological Background*. In each of the nine sections in the document with this title are strong and inspiring, but in comparison to these the material that follows looks weak. Perhaps this reflects the isolation of the *periti* from the key debates affecting the future of the Australian Church.

(ii) *Indigenous Peoples*. Again, the section on indigenous peoples (A1) is very strong, perhaps because the relevant groups had prepared well in advance of the First Assembly.

(iii) *Governance*. The material on governance (eg B2), such as the emphasis on Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Council, is important, again reflecting the earlier work from the *Light from the Southern Cross*.

(iv) *Ministry of Preaching and the Third Rite*. The calls to establish such a ministry (D3), open to both men and women and to preach at the Eucharist (subject to amendment of canon 767), and to reinstate the Third Rite are welcome. In my view this is so in spite of the fact that the section on liturgy (D1) is really a call to reinstate the past.

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