

What did the Plenary Council achieve?

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The Plenary Council (PC) is over and the time has come for assessments. What did it achieve? In positive terms it brought together an enormously generous group of people whose dedication to Catholicism is extraordinary. It also demonstrated the diverse complexity of the community. As PC member John Warhurst commented: 'In political terms we [Catholics] range from One Nation to the Greens and everything in between' (Blog, 9 July).

That's true, but PC votes consistently indicated that the large majority of Catholics strongly support church renewal. Out of 277 members, the most those opposed to renewal could muster was 65 even when you count the *juxta modum* votes as 'no' votes.

The PC's most positive achievement was its strong support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart, calling for a First Nations voice to Parliament to be enshrined in Australia's constitution. In some ways Catholics are ahead of the general community on First Nations concerns. The reason: this has been an issue for the church for decades and was pushed by pioneers like Shirley 'Mum Shirl' Smith, Ted Kennedy and many others, making it central to mainstream Catholicism

On the issue of equality, the PC eventually semi-caught-up with the 20th century in a vote on a set of re-drafted motions supporting equal dignity for women and men. Perth archbishop Costelloe, in an understatement, commented: 'There is a long way to go ...in understanding the proper role of women in the life of the Church.' Exactly, archbishop!

But the problem is that Catholicism has long resisted equality as a 'feminist plot' so that we've now just caught-up with the 1970s. As Costelloe admitted 'there's still a long way to go' to get the church into the 21st century.

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This debate takes us to the core weakness of the PC. Because some bishops and laity have long resisted the basic reforms of Vatican II, particularly that of living in the real world as mandated by *Gaudium et spes* ('The Church in the Modern World'), we are endlessly at a disadvantage, always playing catch-up. As someone said, we're entangled in 'pathetic incrementalism.' For example, there are a set of motions asking bishops to establish diocesan pastoral councils and parish councils, structures *already* legislated in the Code of Canon Law

(canons 511-514 and 536).

Another example: the PC encourages all Catholics ‘to accept Pope Francis’ invitation to join the Laudato Si’ Action Platform...as a vehicle...for their ecological conversion.’ But the environmental movement developed plans like these decades ago, while the church has been stymied by some Catholics talking about ecology as ‘pagan religion’ filling a spiritual void in the post-Christian West and claiming that global warming is ‘the hysteria of alarmists.’

This, despite the fact that Catholicism has had an ecological theology and spirituality for more than fifty years with thinkers like Thomas Berry. Here in Australia, we’d already developed a theological approach and the term ‘environmental conversion’ actually originated here.

Environmentalists moved-on years ago to real issues like winding-down coal mining, stopping native forest logging, confronting global warming and overpopulation. The PC’s ‘integral ecology’ sounds like something from the 1980s. Again, the church is lagging behind the world and pious platitudes are meaningless as we face environmental catastrophe.

Sure, I understand that all the PC could do was to act within the constraints of canon law and find formulations on which members could agree. Sadly, the process was flawed from the beginning and major issues facing the local church were simply ignored.

For instance, there was no forensic analysis of contemporary Australian society. The church must understand the world to speak to it. We live, as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor says in a secular world where religion and God are literally expelled from the public sphere and relegated to the private. Public spaces, Taylor says, have been ‘emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality.’

He says we have moved ‘from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one possibility among others. God is no longer axiomatic.’ The contemporary assumption is that religion is fading away as science explains everything and people search for their own meaning and ethical norms.

Given this context, the PC’s failure to consider questions regarding gender and sexuality was a mistake. These questions are, to use Taylor’s word, ‘axiomatic’ for people today and can’t be ignored. For young people the church’s irrelevance is demonstrated by the fact that it stubbornly resists these issues.

Again, if the hard work had been done several decades ago, we wouldn’t be dealing, as Francis Sullivan says, with some PC members’ ‘gobsmacking level of political correctness over the politics of sex and gender...As if making any reference to “those who identify as LGBTIQ+” is somehow running counter to the missionary outreach of the Church beggar’s belief’ (Blog, 5 July).

Another issue that was largely ignored was the priesthood and the question of ordination itself, especially in light of the fact that over 55% of all priests now working in Australian parishes are foreign born. The anodyne motion on priesthood says nothing new, and seminaries, the seedbeds of clericalism, were hardly mentioned.

Again, this is one of those unaddressed issues from decades ago. Its not that some of us haven't asked questions. My first public disagreement in the mid-1980s with the then Father George Pell was over his approach to formation in the Melbourne seminary.

So, while thankful for what was achieved, the PC simply side-stepped the major issues facing Australian Catholicism. But all is not lost. Awareness has been raised, Catholics wanting renewal are clearly the majority, prominent lay leaders have emerged and many of the bishops 'get' the real issues. And there's always Sancta Sophia, the Holy Spirit, guiding us.

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