

# Sense of the Faithful Newsletter No 9 - 7 November 2022

We have just updated the [Sense of the Faithful](#) website to focus on 15 reflections from key participants in the Plenary Council. We have highlighted seven points from these reflections and comments on where the Catholic Church in Australia is heading after the Plenary Council.

## Where to from here? Seven Points

### 1. Towards a new way of being the Church in Australia

One striking feature of almost all responses is that the practice of the Second Assembly was transformational and may usher in a new way of being the Church in Australia. In spite of a far from transparent preparatory process, most members celebrated an openness, relatively free debate and a sense of equality between bishops and laity in the Assembly. There was a shared spirituality and an awareness of a common cause, guided by the Spirit, to find the best outcomes for Australia. Many members commented that the Assembly gave them a new sense of what 'synodality' can mean, and that processes within the Australian Church will never be the same.

### 2. The dramatic shift mid-week

This new sense of openness seems to have been substantially driven by the events of Wednesday 6 July 2022, which were seen by many as a dramatic Spirit-driven disruption of the established process. There was much distress, not only about failure to recognise the position of women but also about the future of the Council itself. As the Secretary to the Council noted (David Ranson (5)), after this disruption the processes of the Assembly were changed to make them 'far more participative, far more engaging'. Why it took this disruption to adopt truly participatory processes is unclear.

What is clear is that these events changed the views of many of the participants, both episcopal and lay. While the changes to the wording of the motions in relation to the position of women can only be described as minor, the views of many members changed sharply. For example, the original motion 4.6, on new opportunities for women in ministry, achieved only 39.6% support in the consultative vote and 62.8% in the deliberative vote on 6 July 2022. In the final vote on Friday 8 July on a slightly edited version of this motion (now 4.3) support levels of 87.6% and 97.7% for the two types of votes respectively were achieved.

### 3. Addressing divergent views through creative tension

Pope Francis has long argued that it is vital not only to recognise divergent views within the Church but to address them directly rather than avoiding them. The resulting 'creative tension' can be both painful and highly productive in enabling a new shared position to be achieved. There seems to have been evidence of this process at work in the events at the Council from Wednesday 6 July on. Many members and observers saw a process of creative tension at work in the Australian Church for the first time at the Plenary Council and see this as the beginnings of a new synodality that can help shape a better future.

### 4. Some important motions passed – now to implementation

It is clear that in a number of areas, important motions have been passed at the Council. These include:

- the recognition of the spirituality of indigenous peoples and support for a Voice in the Constitution,
- action on the environment and on *Laudato Si'*,
- the establishment of Diocesan Pastoral Councils and other synodal processes,
- the development of new opportunities for women in ministry, and
- progress on the use of the Third Rite of Reconciliation, the reform of the language used in the liturgy and the ordination of women as deacons.

This raises critical issues of implementation, in two aspects. The first concerns the implementation of these and other specific directions agreed to by the Council. Given that very few if any of the Council's decisions will be legislated, will they actually be put into practice or will they be largely ignored, as the follow-up reverts to individual dioceses and parishes? The second is the continuation of new, truly participatory processes emerging from the Council. It seems likely that these two issues will be closely linked, and that further development of ongoing synodal processes will be necessary if the decisions of the Fifth Plenary Council are to be truly implemented.

## **5. Only a beginning – many major issues not addressed**

Many members and observers of the Plenary Council, ranging from Archbishop Fisher (2) to Paul Collins (9) and Bill Uren (12), have stressed that many crucial issues were not addressed. While emphases differ, common items include:

- Lack of any serious analysis of the needs of the Australian community, and indeed the global community, which the Church exists to serve
- As a result, little attention was paid to the roles of lay Catholics (including religious) whose primary mission is to that broader community
- Many questions about clericalism, the decline of vocations to the ordained priesthood and changes to the criteria for ordination (e.g., married male and female priests) that might increase the supply of priests were side-stepped
- Largely ignoring the poor and the marginalised
- Failing to address questions of gender and sexuality, areas in which the Church's perceived stance is most at odds with the conscience of many Catholics and other Australians, and
- Ignoring the ongoing collapse of the existing parish model and the need for urgent changes to that model.

## **6. Different views on mission**

Some observers (eg Therese D'Orsa (10)) have noted that few of the conclusions of the Council flowed from a clear and shared understanding of the Church's mission. Indeed, there seem to be two strands in understanding mission emerging from the Council. One strand stresses evangelisation in the sense of numbers of converts to Christ and argues for new programs to rebuild the numbers of active faithful. The other strand places primary emphasis on Church reform and renewal, with a broader sense of Christ's mission to the suffering world, and sees this as central to rebuilding participation, especially of the young and the disaffected, in the life of the Church.

## **7. Renewing the scriptural basis of change**

One notable feature of the Council documents, and especially of the Motions put before the Second Assembly, is the very limited reliance on the Word of God to guide our adaptation to the 'new epoch' identified by Pope Francis. To highlight that limitation, and to illustrate the potential benefits of contemporary scriptural understanding to our ongoing synodal processes, we include at (8) a short paper prepared by Fr Frank Moloney as background to the discussion of Theme 4.

## **Reflections on the Plenary Council: a selection**

### **Episcopal PC Members**

[1. Peter Comensoli – Letter to Christ's faithful](#)

[2. Anthony Fisher – A week of positives and negatives for the Plenary](#)

[3. Vincent Long – Reflection on the final assembly of the Plenary Council](#)

### Other PC members

[4. Patty Fawcner – What is it about women and the Church?](#)

[5. David Ranson – After the Plenary](#)

[6. John Warhurst – Church reform is systemic not personal](#)

### PC periti

[7. Frank Brennan – Homily, 10 July 2022](#)

[8. Frank Moloney – The Word of God and Theme 4](#)

### Observers – Australian

[9. Paul Collins – What did the Plenary Council Achieve?](#)

[10. Therese D’Orsa – Mission constitutes the Church community](#)

[11. Trish Hindmarsh – Definitely not ‘business as usual’](#)

[12. Bill Uren – Catholics for renewal: 10 August 2022](#)

[13. Marilyn Hatton – A groundbreaking week in the Australian Church](#)

### Observers – International

[14. Christopher Lamb – The Outsider Pope](#)

[15. Massimo Faggoli – The Plenary Council begins now](#)

## Our current focus

Our small Sense of the Faithful is conducting a review of diocesan websites using the list of issues that the PC Motions identified as important matters for the Church to respond and do not require any reference to the Vatican to implement now. These issues have been identified by Peter Wilkinson (Catholics for Renewal). Our next step is to look at the diocesan syntheses for the 2023 Bishops’ Synod in Rome to see if the issues below have been mentioned. We plan to present these results in early 2023.

<b>Questions on diocesan website content</b>
Does the diocesan website make reference to the NATSICC Position Paper?
Does the diocesan website identify ways of promoting ecumenical and interfaith relationships?
Does the diocesan website refer to actions for ‘women to be heard, have role in decision making, be valued publicly, and properly remunerated’? (eg activities for women related to formation and opportunities in ministry, and implementing the 2000 Social Justice Statement)
Does the diocesan website promote the new ministries of Lector, Acolyte and Catechist?
Does the diocesan website refer to actions to develop/strengthen strategic policies to support lay ministry/leadership formation?
Does the diocesan website refer to the setting up of or support for (1) a diocesan pastoral council or (2) parish synodal structures such as parish pastoral councils?
Does the diocesan website refer to the diocese or parishes signing on to the Laudato Si Platform and developing Laudato Si Action Plans?