

After the Plenary

[Geraldine Doogue](#) 27 July 2022

What did the Plenary Council mean exactly, and what comes next for the church? Secretary to the Council, Fr David Ranson, offers a rich and bracingly realistic set of observations about the Plenary. As secretary, Fr David was deeply absorbed in the lead-up, in the events of the week itself and now in assessing what comes next. He might surprise you with his judgements. They're delivered by a man with an acute sense of Church procedures but also with an eye to possibilities.

Geraldine: How are you?

David: Still exhausted Geraldine... But I think it wasn't only just the week...there was a great deal of work required leading up to the second assembly [that was] increasing in demand for the last six months..... Meeting in person in the second assembly was something of an unknown and therefore demanded a great deal of preparation...it was a great privilege to be able to be part of such a team.

G: Yes. I hope you really mean that because I think it must have been an amazing– I mean in other words, it's almost a compliment to the scale and the solemnity of that, that you are still exhausted... Was it what you thought it would be?

D: Yes and no. Because I'd been involved, particularly over the last six months in this role as secretary, we had a clear enough sense of how the days might unfold. We knew the agenda, which as you know was contained in the motions and in their amendments that had been developed and articulated prior to the week. So there was a general sense of what needed to be done through the week and the organisation was really at the service of enabling what we knew needed to be achieved to be so achieved.

But of course, thankfully, the best plans get thrown into disarray, which is a positive thing, and as you will know of course, come the third day, which is very interesting really from a spiritual perspective because in a retreat context it's always the third day that the dissembling and reassembling takes place and true to form, on the third day of the second general assembly, things were disrupted. But I do think that our capacity to attend to that disruption was in no small way supported by the work and the planning that had gone in. I think if we hadn't had planned and organised it as thoroughly as we had, we may not have been able to let all of that go.

G: What do you mean?

D: Well I think our capacity to attend to the disruption that occurred, rightly, in the middle of

the week–

G: Sort of silent protest?

D: Well, not so much the silent protest, but the disarray that was created–

G: I see.

D: –by the failure of the most important part, not to be–

G: Passed by the deliberative vote?

D: Yes, not to be as endorsed as initially had been hoped. There's a lot to say about that, we might come back to that, But because things were, I think, so well organised and we had thought through things so thoroughly, we were able to let go of what we had planned, paradoxically, and enter into a different kind of way of proceeding–

G: Redoing the agenda, which meant redoing the drafting committee, etc etc, that's what you mean, the detail?

D: Yes all of that, and changing the order of things and changing the way in which the sessions were actually used. And so from Wednesday on we used the sessions in a very different way than we had before then. But as I say I think that was all very much an outcome of the thoroughness with which we'd thought through things. So on one level, yes it was as we thought it might be, but on the other hand, thankfully, it was quite different in the end than what we had thought. So it was holding these two things together.

G: Yes. I mean, people like Sr Patty Fawkner [member of PC steering committee and head of Sisters of Good Samaritans] wrote a quite deep essay just last week remarking on the 'profound visceral sadness' she felt that day when that vote came through.... I'm reading here: 'What is it about women and the church?' There were so many other motions that went through, some, you know, rather challenging, about the nature of the organisation of the church...missionary behaviour...and then boom! 'On the third day of the assembly the vote on Part 4 of the *Motions and Amendments* document, *Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men*, failed to reach the required two-thirds majority.' So she was stunned. Then fortunately she was revived by what occurred in the change by Friday. But I know from speaking to her she won't ever forget that moment.

D: No. It was a very powerful experience and it was very visceral. I think to put it into context, however, is important. We have to remember that in fact that section, that part that the council was considering, only just got through on the consultative vote. So there was a lot of reservation about it. Now the other thing of course it's very important to remember in all of this...it was a text that was being discussed, it wasn't the dignity of women that was under question. The Plenary Council had always been committed to the affirming the equal dignity of women and men.... So it was the text not the principle that was at question. The text was problematic. And I think the text was problematic because it sought to say too much in the one narrative. Now it barely got through the consultative vote for that reason, and then it didn't receive the two thirds required majority in the deliberative vote. However, even that is complex because the number of yeses in the deliberative vote in fact in total was sufficient, but there were a number of yeses–

G: Yes But.

D: –with qualifications, which reduced the two thirds majority required. So it’s quite a complex voting system, but as I say, look it was the text that didn’t pass, not the principle.... The fact that the text didn’t pass, and the subsequent motion, meant all of a sudden people realised the council didn’t have anything to say about the equal dignity of men and women. And I think that, as it were, sent a shock of horror through the members that this council may not have anything to say about the equal dignity of men and women. And that of course would not be acceptable at all. And it was because these two votes didn’t achieve their qualified majority that we really had to stop and say, look we are committed to saying something about the equal dignity of men and women, we cannot not say something about the equal dignity... The Plenary Council has been committed to this from day one. Now the text before us can’t deliver on that so we have to think of another way of coming to it so that the council can have something to say about the equal dignity of men and women. And as you know by the end of the week, it was able to say something very positive about that principle.

G: And look, I mean, we won’t continue to labour it, but that way you’ve described it, the nuances of that, are about, I presume, sort of the perceptions of power in the church, that’s what Patty Fawcner starts to think about... It was an important moment of working out what sort of church would go ahead, the sensibility of the Australian church, wouldn’t you agree?

D: Yes and there’s no way in which the church could go forward, and there’s no way in which the Plenary Council could finish, without saying something about the equal dignity of men and women. I mean that’s an essential affirmation. And there was no, as I say, there was no doubt that that needed to occur. The text itself was problematic and the text itself was refined. More significantly though than that, I think the disarray and the horror as it were that spread through the room, that we may not have anything to say, not only forced the members to reconsider what needed to happen in order to be able to say something, but it also very importantly changed the whole methodology of the week itself, not just around that issue but around all the subsequent issues–

G: In terms of collaboration, is that what you mean?

D: We changed the way in which we conducted the sessions, so that they were far more participative, far more engaging. And you could sense the change in the mood of the council after that because people were now far more active and engaged than they had been on the first two days. So not only did it end up with the result of a better text about the equal dignity of men and women, but it also changed our way of participating.

G: So what are the lessons then from this, for say the international synod process that we’re involved in as well?

D: Yes I think there’s a lot to learn. I think the Australian experience has a lot to teach. And that is that these types of events do need a great deal of planning, but they also need a very significant amount of flexibility. And ideally, we would have much more than a week. The process was highly constrained by the limitations of time. Five days was really not sufficient and the fact that we were able to enter into the process, have it disrupted, recalibrate the process, and still come through with an outcome in five days is really nothing short of miraculous. Really we needed at least two to three weeks to be able to do each of these very

significant considerations their justice. So if one were to do it again in the future, I think one would be looking at committing much more time together, but allow that much more active engagement and participation so that people have the sense of actually shaping something in the moment, rather than simply being passive recipients of something that's already been as it were thought through.... The last couple of days was really energising because people did have the sense they were actually shaping what was being said. And so we developed a very simple process by which that could occur and I think it was very effective. And that I think would be the lesson that we could take forward into other occasions.

G: Yes... to sort of start with a blank slate in some ways, you're wondering about whether that is the right way to go as well. Could you develop that idea please?

D: Yes well this was always one of the great difficulties that this event had, and I'm not sure that it was ever quite resolved. The Australian Catholic Bishops asked the Holy See for a plenary council and were granted the capacity to stage a plenary council. However, in many ways, right from the beginning there was confusion as to whether this was to be a plenary council or a synod. The two are very different kinds of forums, the two are not the same. And in many ways I think as a synod this process, this event, worked very, very well. As a plenary council, I think it was very limited in its outcome. But as a synod, yes, a synod starts with this process of listening and of discernment such as to be able to identify key themes that have most significance to people at this time. And I think as a synod, the event worked very, very well. But I'm not sure that you start a plenary council with a blank agenda. I think a plenary council, which is legislative in character and which is about developing common practice throughout an entire region, needs to start with an agenda.

G: So we were a bit utopian, were we?

D: Yeah, that is... I think the better way to have gone about it would have been to have thought through the staging of a national synod, which is I think what in fact happened, and then upon reflection of that, several years later, a plenary council would be held, to determine what might be legislated for shared practice across the country in respect to those issues that may have emerged through the synod.

G: So this next stage of going to the Vatican for review, I don't know what the proper term is, do you anticipate any surprises, given that you said to us before it began, be ready for some surprises. Well, that did happen on day three! But do you anticipate any surprises now coming from the next stage of the process before we hear back?

D: No I wouldn't, I think that the difficulty will be more that the Holy See will wonder, well what is it that made that a plenary council? It was a great synod, but what is it in fact that's legislative, or able to be legislative? So the outcomes of the entire process, wonderful kinds of outcomes, they're great stepping stones into the future, very difficult in fact to legislate. They're not of that order. And so I think Rome would be surprised by the absence of legislative instruments—

G: You're going to have to help us to understand, what would have been – like I thought there were several things there, like the roundtable for discussion, all of that—

D: Ah yes, but they don't need a plenary council, they could have easily been thought through. And that's a wonderful initiative and all power to it being realised, but it's not affecting the shared practice across the entire country. In fact the things that may have been

the basis for such change of common practice in fact never saw the light of day. So I'm thinking of things like seminary formation, which would have been quite possible for a plenary council to legislate, so that there's a standard practice across all seminaries in Australia. That never saw the light of day. And so what we've ended up with is a series of wonderful aspirations and possibilities and opportunities, not legislative in nature. So I don't think there will be any difficulty with the Holy See affirming what has taken place. There's nothing terribly contentious in what's being put forward. The Holy See doesn't give its approval, it gives its what they call 'recognitio', its review, so it will review what went on, but I would imagine that it will be surprised by the fact that there isn't more legislative agency in the outcomes.

G: Right.

D: And that's where we come back to this confusion I think between...have we actually had a plenary council or have we in fact had a synod under the name of a plenary council?

G: Well, has it been good for the church, do you think as a senior priest, will it boost the faith?

D: Yes I think it has been good. I think it has had merit. I think that the experience of the week is historic, whatever of the outcomes, and whatever of these minor issues of distinctions between synods and councils and all the rest. The Church in Australia I don't think can be the same for having had that week, especially for those who were in that room. Now there are very few other opportunities for all the bishops of Australia along with the senior clergy and religious and lay leadership to all be in the room together, to all be praying together, to all be considering very important issues together. I don't know of any other event in the life, in the history of the Church in Australia, where that's actually occurred. It has occurred now. It occurred through that week. And that week represented a considerable journey for everybody in that room. So I think that that is a very powerful experience, and a very constructive and positive experience that in fact has changed the Church in Australia. Now we might not see the measurement of that change for some time to come, but I don't think the Church in Australia can enter into a week like that, in the way that it did, and the way that it came through, without a very profound change taking place.

The outcomes are positive, the outcomes as I say are general really, even though there might be a few more concrete suggestions, generally the outcomes are aspirational, but they nonetheless give the Church in Australia a sense of direction and a sense of priority. I think there are a lot of other things that didn't see the light of day, that we will need to consider in a different kind of forum. But I think the challenge will be now to take those outcomes and to implement them in local ways. And that's going to be the real challenge because part of the outcome of a gathering like this is what we call its reception. And I'm not sure how it will all be received throughout the entire church. I think we'll see considerable diversity of reaction and diversity of approach and variety of implementation. And that's something for us to be concerned about, I think, because the whole purpose of a plenary council is to achieve consistency and coherence of practice. But I'm not sure that that consistency of practice can in fact be achieved by this event.

G: Well David, that's a very good overview, bracing, considered, and I very much thank you for your time. And I do hope that you fully recover and feel immensely enlivened in

the future.

D: Thanks Geraldine.

The audio of this conversation appeared on [The Plenary Matters podcast on Sunday, 24 July](#).

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