

## **Church reform is systemic not personal**

Discussions within the Australian Catholic Church's Plenary Council showed deep fault lines between reformers and those wedded to the status quo

By John Warhurst | Australia July 23, 2022

Listening to various interventions and discussions within the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council reminded me that there are deep fault lines between reformers and those wedded to the status quo.

When those, like myself, seeking reform speak of systemic change to church structures those opposed to change see disrespect towards those holding positions like bishop and priest within the established order.

When reformers seek the equality of women in governance and ministry those opposed to change see disrespect towards lay men and male religious as well as to other women.

Many, perhaps most, occupants of these positions do not see it that way just as many men do not see the advancement of women as devaluing their position or role within the church.

That was clear at the Assembly where warm friendships and relationships were the norm.

But it is an enduring point of view which must be addressed because it lay behind many passionate viewpoints expressed during the Assembly.

Reformers are bemused by these defences of the status quo which seem to be deeply held and impenetrable because they are embedded in our culture.

This approach to defending the status quo is not restricted to the Church. The monarchy-republic debate is an example. Republicans are often criticised for being disrespectful of the Queen.

Closer to home I was once taken to task by one of the children of a Governor-General for being critical of him for defending the status quo.

We came to amicable agreement that rather than being personal I was just arguing for systemic change and the Governor-General was a representative of the monarchical structure I was seeking to change.

The now controversial Part 4 of the Motions and Amendments for the Second Assembly on "Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men" is a case in point.

Some members clearly misunderstood or misinterpreted the title of this section. It was not about men at all. The bulk of the text and all the motions were about advancing the role of women in the church.

Yet some members saw the thrust of this section as disrespectful to men. This led to pleading from the floor to expand references to men in the document.

We even heard one suggestion from a man that the Assembly should create a separate section on the dignity of men. These interventions were not taken up thankfully.

The inequalities that stem from hierarchy

More powerfully the Assembly heard from some women that the document was disrespectful to those women who did not seek or hold positions in ministry or governance within the church.

This explains the references in the text to those women who are "joyful, happy and thriving in their service to Christ and the Church" and to the many references to 'the domestic church'.

This view also explains the failure of the Assembly to pass, on the first run through on the Tuesday afternoon, Motion 4.6:

That each Australian diocese and eparchy foster new opportunities for women to participate in ministries and roles that are stable, publicly recognised, resourced with appropriate formation including theological education and commissioned by the bishop. These ministries and roles should engage with the most important aspects of diocesan and parish life and have a real impact on those communities.

This motion was seen by some opponents as preferencing one group of women over another.

It later re-emerged in the revised version (Motion 4.3):

That each Australian diocese and eparchy commits to supporting, with appropriate formation and recognition, new opportunities for women to participate in ministries that engage with the most important aspects of diocesan and parish life.

The deep division between those reformers who concentrate on the systemic aspects of the church and those who take proposals to change the church as a personal affront also permeated discussion of clericalism at the Assembly.

Such clericalism, preference for the ordained over the non-ordained People of God, underpins the inequalities that stem from hierarchy within the Church.

References to what Pope Francis has frequently called "the evils of clericalism" were a lightning rod to some defenders of the status quo within the Assembly. There was little enough discussion of clericalism anyway, but what made it into the text offended some members.

We heard some impassioned statements about holding in great esteem the priests and bishops in the room as if the calls for reform were disrespectful of them as a group. That is just not

true, even if a minority are offended.

We also heard some strong statements from the floor against the language of anti-clericalism, despite Pope Francis' condemnation.

They generally passed without rebuttal as they did not seem germane to the motions under discussion and, ultimately, they were not persuasive.

But they do reflect deep sensitivities towards what is seen as a personal attack among those opposed to reform.

The point should be repeated. Reformers are not 'playing the man', but are seeking systemic and structural change within the church.

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