

## Can PC2020 be truly synodal?

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Responding to the desperate plight of the Australian church after the sexual abuse crisis, the Australian bishops set up the Plenary Council 2020 (PC2020), the first such in Australia for 80 years. This was a courageous, and indeed inspired, decision. There were two main forms of reaction to it from ordinary lay people, priests and religious (hereafter 'the faithful').

Many were cautiously optimistic, inspired by the leadership of Pope Francis, seeing this as a chance for truly inclusive discussion and for real change. Many others, wounded by past failures of the Bishops, remained deeply sceptical. After many fine words, they said, all would remain the same.

All of the faithful, whether optimistic or sceptical, understand that there are strong divisions among the bishops, with some wanting little real change. The fear is that the 'no change' bishops will prevail.

In spite of widespread scepticism, there was a strong response to Stage 1 of PC2020, with serious communal discussions taking place in parishes and other communities across the country. The PC Secretariat reports that in this stage, which ended in March 2019, 220,000 people were involved and the Secretariat received 17,457 submissions.

### The Changing Mood

Yet a year later, only eight months before the first PC assembly, to many of us it seems clear that the mood has changed. It is widely reported that among the faithful hopes for PC2020 are waning and that cynicism is becoming more widespread. I admit that this is a subjective view, and one based in a single location (Melbourne) – things might be quite different elsewhere. But this change of mood does seem to be evident in the smaller number of submissions to date to Stage 2. By 25 February 2020 there had been only 125 submissions to the writing group that we checked ('How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church that is open to conversion, renewal and reform?').

### Reasons for the Changing Mood

Ordinary Catholics don't talk much about synodality, often described as the process whereby the whole People of God – laity, priests and bishops, and from all walks of life – move forward together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

However, the way they express what they want from PC2020 is indeed synodal:

- (i) that the Council addresses the critical issues facing the Church,
- (ii) that everyone has their say and their voices are heard, and
- (iii) that the faithful are fully represented in the decision-making process.

In this context, there seem to me to be three reasons for the deepening cynicism, related to these three points.

First, all we know about the agenda is that the Bishops will determine it in due course. The faithful have no idea what it will be, nor whether their concerns will be included. There are no signs of any process whereby suggestions made by them, either in Stage 2 submissions or in other ways, will be taken on board.

Last year individuals from a number of Melbourne parishes analysed 30 PC1 submissions provided to them and canvassed a meeting of 62 people from many parishes about their views on the key issues. They found a strong consensus around nine issues, as expressed in a joint parish statement ([senseofthefaithful.org.au](http://senseofthefaithful.org.au)). This process provides limited evidence, but the faithful do have strong views. There should be both open debate and a participatory process for setting the agenda.

Secondly, everyone has had their say in Stage 1, but have their voices been heard? The information flows to date have been highly centralised: in Stage 1 17,547 submissions were received from the grass-roots, while in return the Secretariat has provided a detailed statistical report and several general documents. Lots of detail and generalities can serve to mask rather than reveal the most common views of the faithful, and the need for major changes in the Church.

The specification of the themes for the Writing Groups is a case in point. The individual themes were described in very general and overlapping terms, with wordles (word clouds or collections of words used in the submissions) used to illustrate them. Many have struggled to provide Stage 2 submissions because of the vagueness of the themes.

The third issue has also given rise to serious concern. Given the acknowledged failure of the Australian bishops over a decade or more, it is critical that the faithful are given strong representation in PC2020 and that there is some open process for selecting who will attend.

There has been no discussion of this process. There was, however, deep dismay when it emerged just before Christmas 2019 that this selection process had been delegated to individual bishops. They would select the members of the faithful to attend PC2020 from their dioceses. The bishops are free to determine the selection process, with about 80 representatives to be selected in total.

Given the situation facing the Australian church, it beggars belief that, quietly and without any discussion, the Bishops Commission decided that lay, priest and religious representatives to the Council are to be selected by bishops themselves, at their individual discretion. This decision turned the cynicism meter up several more notches!

#### What can be done?

In my view, there are a number of things that can still be done to make PC2020 a truly synodal event. Some examples are provided below.

The work of the Writing Groups is critical. Their draft reports should be widely circulated, with an inclusive, open process for review and revision. These draft reports need to be a way of involving the faithful in the PC process, and of re-awakening a lively sense of debate about the changes needed. It is welcome that the PC Secretariat is now providing a summary of all submissions to PC2. This might be a good start to the process.

The process for setting the agenda is also critical. The Bishops should publish a draft agenda at an early date, making clear that it is open to debate and to revision after hearing the views of the faithful.

Clause 6 of Can 443 of Canon Law provides that "Others can also be invited as guests to particular councils, if it is expedient in the judgment of the conference of bishops for a plenary council." The Bishops should, in my view, use this clause to invite a significant additional number of the faithful to attend the Council, and to allow them to make presentations on particular issues of concern to them. For example, it would surely be 'expedient' to invite a strong representation of women, selected by some open process, to this particular council.

The Australian Church is divided, both in the Bishops Conference and in the faithful. The old processes of smoothing over divisions and pretending that the centre is still in control will no longer work. We need open debate, airing and discussing the differences in a spirit of good will. Only this will let the Spirit in.