

Catholics for renewal: August 10th, 2022

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In early December, 1998, John Bathersby, then Archbishop of Brisbane, addressed the priests of the Archdiocese at their annual meeting at the local seminary. He had just returned from Rome where, with fourteen of his Australian episcopal colleagues, he had completed his ad limina visit to the Vatican. He said that the meetings between the bishops and the officials of the various Roman congregations had been cordial and mutually enlightening.

At the end of these meetings the Australian bishops were presented with what purported to be a series of eight chapters of reflections which the Roman Curia had drawn from their dialogue with the bishops. This document was called the “Statement of Conclusions”. In contrast, however, with the cordial dialogue which the bishops had entered into with the Vatican officials, there was a wide-ranging and sometimes scathing critique of the current situation of the Catholic Church in Australia. There was, the document said, a crisis of faith, a crisis in Christology, challenges to Christian anthropology, moral problems and problems in ecclesiology. It was imperative that the bishops exercise vigilance in all these areas and particularly over the liturgy. The request of the bishops for greater freedom in permitting the Third Rite of Reconciliation was summarily dismissed.

Archbishop Bathurst said that his initial reaction was one of surprise and disappointment. Then he was irritated and more than a little annoyed. Finally, he said: “I was very, very angry”. How did this “Statement of Conclusions” represent in any way the dialogue that had taken place between the bishops and the officials of the various congregations? It was as if the document had been written in advance of the bishops’ visit in general terms and then specified to particularise critically the Catholic Church in Australia.

This, of course, was more than twenty years ago. One hopes that under Pope Francis’ reforms Vatican officials are now less insensitive and omnipotent than they were in 1998. But in convoking a canonical Plenary Council the Australian Bishops ultimately chose to involve themselves with a process that is controlled by the Roman Curia through the lens of canons 439 to 446 of the Code of Canon Law. There the proportions of lay membership are specified, as is the agenda, and the final motions and recommendations, even after they have passed through the Australian bishops’ hands, are subject to further review and editing by the Roman Curia. Thus, in the “Note on Motions and Amendments” that Bishop Shane Mackinlay distributed to Council members immediately prior to the second session of the Plenary Council, he warned the members that all amendments and, presumably, the original motions, had to be “consistent with Church law and teaching”, thereby excluding, for instance, any consideration of Church teaching on clerical celibacy, on homosexuality, on contraception and IVF, on divorce and remarriage and access to the Eucharist, to say nothing, of course, on the ordination of women to the priesthood – in short, most of the “hot button” issues afflicting the universal – and the Australian – Church. And this despite Pope Francis’ expressed desire to see renewal in the Church coming from the “bottom up” rather than imposed from on high.

Of course, one may say that, in a clerically dominated assembly that a Plenary Council inevitably is, it was hardly likely that any radical vote on these issues would have achieved the two thirds majority that was required in a consultative vote, let alone in the bishops’ definitive vote. But it would have been interesting, even challenging, to see what a more synodal and less canonical representative gathering of the Australian Church might have thought of the Church’s current teaching on these “hot button” issues. But, alas, in convoking the limited synodality of a Plenary Council rather than, for instance, the full blown synodality of the German “Synodal Way” , the Australian bishops precluded even the discussion of these issues.

With all these controverted issues thereby excluded from the agenda, it was inevitable that the issues that the Plenary Council members did discuss and vote upon might seem somewhat anodyne and predictable. So, the members overwhelmingly supported the Uluru Statement and recommended liturgical variations for indigenous congregations. They also, equally predictably, endorsed the papal encyclical, “Laudato Si”, and directed that working groups be established in parishes and other Catholic institutions to implement its recommendations. There was, once again, a heartfelt apology to the victims of clergy sexual abuse and to those many others whom the Church’s insensitivity and dogmatism had marginalised and disenfranchised. There was a recognition that formation

programmes must be expanded to include laity as well as clergy. There was even an acceptance that more synodal modes of governance must be implemented at the parish, the diocesan and even the national level. And, of course, finally, belatedly, and not without initial reservations and hesitations on the part of some of the bishops, there was a recognition that men and women are equal not only in God's eyes but also within the Church, and that much needs to be done to remedy long-standing failures to acknowledge and accept feminine charisms and provide opportunities for them to flourish in the Church.

Granted, then, the limitations of the agenda, granted, too, the dominant clerical and, therefore, male membership of the Council, and remembering that the shadow of the relevant canons and the ultimate review of the Roman Curia hangs over a Plenary Council, it would have been surprising if more radical motions and recommendations had emerged from the assembly. What was endorsed was, more or less inevitably, at least in terms of "bottom up" renewal, more or less anodyne. The only newsworthy item to be reported in the secular press was the initial reluctance of some of the bishops to assent to the equality of men and women and the protest this evoked from sixty members of the assembly.

There were, however, some signs of genuine progress, mainly apart from the major motions. There was a renewed call (already prescribed by Canon Law) for diocesan pastoral councils and parish pastoral councils in each diocese and parish. There was support, again belatedly, for women deacons if this is authorised by the Pope (but not otherwise for women preaching in the liturgy). There was a call for new and, presumably, inclusive translations of the liturgical texts. There was a recognition, again despite some initial opposition, that the LGBTIQA + community should be acknowledged specifically and not just in general terms as a group that has been marginalised and disenfranchised in the Church. In genuinely synodal fashion, it was recommended that a roundtable (and not just the bishops' conference) be established to ensure that the practical outcomes of the Council be implemented and reviewed. This was eventually endorsed even though initially one third of the bishops voted against it.

And finally, harking back to 1998, there was a request, directed to Pope Francis, that the conditions governing the Third Rite of Reconciliation be relaxed. I think it may be an index of the success, or otherwise, of the Plenary Council – and the declining dominance of the Vatican Curia under Pope Francis – how this particular request will be received. If these conditions are relaxed and the Third Rite is more widely available, then the bishops will feel vindicated in choosing an official Church assembly, the Plenary Council, rather than a more representative model like the German "Synodal Way". One of the advantages of playing the canonical game is that one is more likely to gain approval from the Vatican.

In the final analysis, then, the Plenary Council may be assessed as a limited success – a beta plus! May I suggest five reasons for this assessment.

First of all, because, despite the reservations of some bishops, there was a Plenary Council. It did actually take place, even though it was limited in its synodality. The President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, is to be congratulated and thanked for insisting subsequent to the Royal Commission that such a council was necessary. Bishop Shane Mackinlay is also to be thanked for rescuing the Council after the Wednesday debacle and shepherding it to its conclusion.

Secondly, not only was there a Council, but there was as great a proportion of lay members as was permitted by the relevant canons. It was not confined to bishops and clerics.

Thirdly, a healthy proportion of these lay members were women, and when, more or less as a body with their supporters, they protested, the bishops listened and amended their ways.

Fourthly, that on obvious issues like the Uluru Statement, like “Laudato Si” and ecology, like an apology to the survivors of sexual abuse and to other disenfranchised groups, the Council ticked the boxes.

And finally, despite the fact that the Council was male and clerically dominated, and despite the fact that, apart from its ex-officio members the other members were not really representative but selected by the various bishops and dioceses, a wide diversity of views seems to have been entertained, and interactions were generally respectful and harmonious. Signs of incipient synodality were apparent.

The limitations of the Council arose mainly from the fact that it was a Plenary Council and that therefore it was constrained both by the canonical norms and the accompanying oversight of the Roman Curia.

As a result, more or less inevitably, again five reasons:

The Council was male and clerically dominated.

The lay membership was limited.

The membership of the Council was selective rather than representative.

The agenda was significantly constrained in that the issues for discussion had to be in accord with Church teaching.

And finally, many of the “hot button” issues like clerical celibacy, LGBTIQ+ issues, contraception and access to the new reproductive technologies, divorce and remarriage, the ordination of women to the priesthood etc were thereby excluded from the agenda and, at best, merely mentioned in passing.

But, despite these very significant limitations, there was at least a beginning of synodality. What could have been if the bishops had expanded their vision and ignored the canons is exemplified by the German “Synodal Way”. In such an assembly there are equal numbers

of clergy and laity, issues like power in the Church and the Church's teaching on sexuality are high on the agenda, and the Vatican Curia is welcomed, not as a master and overseer, but as a partner and sounding board in the "bottom up" journey to Church renewal and reform.