**Presentation to CCCG Amazon Synod Forum– Outline Narrative**

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**Learnings from the Amazon Synod:**

Principal media interest has been in the recommendations re ordination of married men and introduction of women deacons. However, Francis seemed to have a broader and deeper agenda – he wanted to showcase Synodality and how it can be used to make the church relevant to particular contexts.

His response says that churches shouldn’t look to him to solve every problem. His principal message from the Synod was that Bishops Conferences should exercise leadership and seek to do what is best to promote the Gospel in their communities. Francis wants a church that engages with and celebrates indigenous cultures. We should advance the great opportunities to develop an authentically Australian/Aboriginal spirituality.

Re the topical recommendations: Francis didn’t say Yes, but he didn’t say No. What he did say was that bishops’ conferences, if they believe particular changes are needed and require approval by ‘the relevant authority’ (him), then they should make submissions and seek those approvals.

This is a positive, but I believe accurate, interpretation of the Synod outcomes. If we look at the bigger picture, there are reasons to be encouraged from the outcomes of the Synod and the response of Francis. We should see it as putting more pressure on the Australian bishops to realistically assess the local situation and show leadership in implementing change. Real change must start with an honest collaborative review. This is what the Australian Plenary Council should be.

If we take this message from the Amazon Synod, we should see also in tandem with the message of the Pope’s Letter to the People of God in 2018. There he asks ordinary catholics to be ‘Active and Assertive’ in pushing for change, particularly the removal of clericalism. The implication in his message was that he couldn’t really rely on the bishops to do that and he needs the laity to apply pressure. Combined, these two messages are empowering and encouraging, especially in the context of the Plenary Council (PC). We should leverage confidence and purpose from them, and we should drive hard to ensure the PC has integrity as a review mechanism.

**Recent Plenary Council Developments**

A Although the submissions to the PC have not been released, the report **summarising the input from the submissions** has been published on the PC website. My review of that document is at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5930ee9129687f4cfdcebf6a/t/5e5cc6cf9d9d61249deb1e22/1583138516508/200402+-+BACKGROUND+PAPER+-+Listen+to+what+the+spirit+is+saying+-+Terry+Fewtrell.pdf> on the CCCG website.

I concluded that a reasonable and fair analysis of submission summaries points to the following:

* The Australian catholic community has made it very clear it wants real and meaningful reform across the board in the Australian church. The report that I prepared and on which my conclusions are based is on the CCCG website.
* The agenda that CCCG put forward in its submission is shared by the bulk of submissions and the Australian catholic community.
* The bishops have been told what the people think and want. It is evident that the People have great expectations and hope. The burden of that hope now rests on the bishops. If they ignore or reject it, they will find themselves in the very strange position of being offside with the Pope and alienated from their flock. An unsustainable position. We most remind them of this.

B One area of obvious concern arising from the submission stage is **clericalism** and specifically its definition. The official summary of submissions presents a definition of clericalism that minimises the reality of this disease. It refers to it as “an attitude”, when in reality it is much more than that and better described as ‘a toxic mix of attitudes, dispositions, behaviours and judgements ….’ (as defined in the CCCG submission). We need to call out this minimising and confront the reality of what the Pope is asking in calling for us all to “say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism”.

C The **six Themes** identified since the submission phase do not naturally fit with the principal input from laity. These themes are:

* Missionary and Evangelising;
* Inclusive, Participatory and Synodal;
* Prayerful and Eucharistic;
* Humble, Healing and Merciful;
* A joy-filled and Hopeful and Servant Community; and
* Open to Conversion, Renewal and Reform.

There is doubt as to whether they were devised as output from the submission phase or simply a construct decided arbitrarily by the bishops. While the key planks of the reform input can be allocated across the themes, there remains the suspicion that they were constructed to diffuse much of the input received. We are entitled to be suspicious about this.

D The **composition of the Theme and Discernment Writing groups** is another area of concern. The membership announced initially contains significant clerical representation. Lay representatives are predominantly drawn from catholics employed by the church in various roles. This results in those nominees being open to an obvious charge that they are potentially compromised as they have a latent conflict of interest. Are they really independent or able to be pressured by virtue of their employment being at risk if they express dissenting views? As long as there is a perception, there is a problem.

These concerns are only heightened by the rather extraordinary step taken by the bishops to allocate themselves liberally across the 6 groups. This has changed the balance of composition of many groups to be now weighted in favour of clergy. It can be seen as a case of clerical thuggery to stack the groups, in some cases with two archbishops plus others. It is not as if the bishops are excluded from opportunities to contribute in the formal sessions of the PC. Indeed, given that they are the only decision makers in the process, one wonders why the felt the need to insert themselves so crudely into this stage – unless of course they were so alarmed at the lay input at the submission stage that the move is explained by panic. Certainly, it only serves to heighten the initial concerns about pressure.

Having become members of each group, there is disturbing evidence emerging from the process that bishops, while insisting that a group cannot meet without their presence, then fail in some cases to attend arranged meetings, frustrating and delaying deliberations.

E The **role of the Writing groups is unclear**. Supposedly they are to produce background or context papers on each of the themes prior to the formal Plenary sessions. The extent to which these will shape the agenda for the PC is not clear. The groups are seeking very brief input as part of the Discernment phase, although there has been official acknowledgement that, contrary to the submission phase, very few catholics have participated in this stage of the process. There are several concerns with this part of the overall process:

1. As evident in the official report on submissions, the voice of Australian catholics was expressed very clearly and consistently. It is reasonable to conclude that for most catholics this later Discernment phase is not looked on positively. There is a sense in which the catholic community is of a mind that: We have told you in very clear terms what we think and what we expect – now get on with it!
2. ‘Discernment’ is being used liberally about this phase, but there is reasonable suspicion as to the good will that is being shown here, as there is a clear sense that the wholesome nuggets of good advice provided at the submission stage are simply being ground down and perhaps over-milled in this later stage. The likely result is an output akin to over-processed food – devoid of nutrition and flavour. The worry is that discernment is being used to mask this process.
3. There is real uncertainty as to how the report of the Governance Review Project Team, due around mid-April, will feed into the Theme groups’ work and output. It is critical that the Project Team’s report, which is to include both general principle and detailed recommendations on governance, culture and leadership at the diocesan and parish level, is effectively integrated into the inputs leading to the PC.

F The overall **composition and process for determining those attending the formal PC** sessions remain opaque. While the names have been announced of official office-holders and representatives of religious orders and those selected by each diocese to attend, there has been no statement as to whether earlier requests to the bishops and by them to Rome for increased lay representation/numbers, have been successful. So, too there has been silence on another question that was asked regarding the possibility of a female co-chair for the formal sessions. Information dribbles out in ways that give little confidence as to overall coherence and integrity. We remain dependent upon crumbs falling from the table.

The attendees nominated for each diocese are formally described as ‘delegates’, however it is not at all clear in what sense they can be accurately so described. Specifically, whose delegates are they? Certainly, they have not been selected by the people of a diocese and so can’t reasonably be described as delegates of the diocesan lay community. The processes for selecting those attendees were seemingly at the gift of the bishop, regardless of what form of meagre selection process may have been adopted. Overall, the percentage of women attending the PC will be well short of numbers that would reflect their real presence and rightful role in the church. This, more than anything, reflects the current clericalist mindset of the church.

The use of the term ‘delegate’ is a distortion if not a deliberate deception. It can be seen as trying to create the impression of *elected* representation - seeking a veneer of legitimacy for an inadequate process. Why does there need to be such confusion or deception?

It is also worth noting that some evidence is emerging of panic among traditionalist groups. There have been reports of aggressive and bullying behaviour, both within the PC process and among lay groups preparing input. We should leverage off this to present the reform agenda as drawing on sound biblical and ecclesial foundations, contrasting our positive and engaging approach to the fearful, defensive and internally focussed church and world views of traditionalists.

**Moving Forward**

As outlined, there are real and substantial issues with the way the PC process is unfolding. Sadly, Australian catholics have reason to doubt the good will of their bishops. That is the reality of the situation and the bishops need to acknowledge that and work to win the confidence of their people. To do so, however, will require courage and leadership on behalf of the bishops, individually and as a group. This is the reality of the cultural and governance mess that the church has allowed itself to fall into.

Faced with this situation it is not for Australian catholics to ‘go quiet’ on these issues. Rather it is essential that we are ‘Active and Assertive’ as the Pope has asked of us and also constructive. It is for the bishops to deal with the consequences. So,

* We need to continue to **call out inadequacies and deceptions in the process** leading to the PC and during it. And not apologise for doing so.
* We also need to **continue to forcefully call for the change agenda** that CCCG has advocated in its submission. We should do so confident in the knowledge that it is shared broadly across the Australian catholic community.
* **We have allies**. The hope we are investing in the PC needs to be made clear and the burden of that must rest on the bishops. The fact that the Pope is strongly committed to much of that agenda, as is also the broader Australian community in the wake of the sexual abuse scandal and the Royal Commission findings, needs to be driven home repeatedly to the **bishops. Effectively, they are on their own**. Going nowhere. We need to confront them with that reality.
* But we also need to be **strategic** and deal with them individually and in groups. While there may be a strong rump of traditionalists who will oppose any meaningful reform, they are not necessarily a majority. Many other bishops are probably simply lost, confused, if not bewildered, as to what to do and how to retrieve the situation. We need to reach out to this group and gain their confidence. We **need to draw them into realising that they can trust the People of God in Australia**, who are pointing the way to a renewed church that is transparent, accountable, non-clericalist, inclusive and humble.
* We must **always be open to walk together to achieve that**. Our hope needs to give them hope. But it starts with plain truths.

The **next benchmark** is likely to be the papers that emerge from the Theme groups. If they do not point to the realities and facilitate an agenda and a way forward to reform, we should reject them and so should those who will be attending the PC. As happened with the papers circulated for the first session of Vatican II, we should call for fresh thinking and new drafts that will facilitate fresh and real reform.

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