

Light from the Southern Cross- A Catalyst for Conversation

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“The Contribution of the Light from the Southern Cross to the Plenary Council and Beyond”

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Introductory Remarks

Mission and Identity must sit together always. Governance is part of the identity of an organisation and therefore inseparable from its mission. What you are determines what you can effectively preach and what you walk past also defines your identity. The internal identity and the external mission of any organisation, including the church, are inextricably linked. Proclaiming the Word of God effectively depends on the church living by that Word and listening to the Holy Spirit.

The Light from the Southern Cross (LSC), which is often, including in its own sub-title “Promoting Co-Responsible Governance for the Church in Australia”, called a report on governance, can be read too narrowly. It is a report not just about governance, defined as the way an organisation rules itself and makes decisions, but about the indirect ingredients of decision-making such as culture, leadership and formation. It is also about related matters such as inclusion and freedom of expression.

Governance can be dismissed too easily as about purely internal administration and mechanics. The LSC is certainly not mainly about the mechanics of governance, though these aspects are addressed and often quite detailed recommendations made. As the Plenary Council (PC) Working Document says it is about cultural reform as recommended by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Context: LSC and PC

The LSC (May 2020) and the first PC Assembly (October 2021) are the two bookends of my discussion. This covers a period of about seventeen months.

There are two main links between the LSC and the PC. One link is the three direct ways in which the LSC has been picked up or prefigured by the PC

process itself. These include the six PC Writing and Discernment papers, which were published just before LSC in early 2020 but looked towards it, quite often favourably; the PC Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*), which was published in March 2021; and the PC Agenda which was released in June 2021. This agenda is the final distillation.

The second link is indirect. The LSC writing process was always framed by the PC. We were always constantly aware of the pressure of time. Its tight fifteen-month timetable was limited by the May 2020 deadline, which was determined by the timetable of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) with the PC in mind. The bishops wanted to respond to the report and, as writers we realised that it would need time to be taken up meaningfully. The ACBC officially responded late in 2020 after its next meeting in November of that year and addressed each of the LSC recommendations.

The ACBC was grateful for what it called the “remarkable work” of the Governance Review Project Team and announced that the LSC would make “an important contribution to the future governance of the Catholic Church in Australia”. The report would be “offered to delegates [members of the PC] among various materials informing them”. Those other materials included Holy Scripture and church teachings, including Vatican 2

The LSC should be judged not just on its recommendations, but also on its text. The official ACBC response included rejection of some LSC recommendations, including (R. 39) the establishment of a national centre for Catholic leadership and governance. Such recommendations could still be raised at the PC by other non-episcopal members if they discern it to be a positive development, but realistically they are effectively ‘damaged propositions’ because the ACBC, whose members hold the deliberative votes, has already declared its hand.

The LSC team itself described the PC as one avenue, but only one, for their recommendations to be considered. On occasions the LSC left open whether the PC or the ACBC implement one of its recommendations. This was the case, for instance, with recommendations 50 and 51 mandating that each diocese have a diocesan pastoral council or its equivalent.

Eventually the 12-month delay in the PC Assembly because of the COVID-19 pandemic cut both ways. It allowed time for further valuable discussion, such as this discussion today, but it may have delayed any implementation until

after 2022 as it was common to hear church leaders say they would wait to hear what the PC had to say on any subject.

The Passage of Time

Time marches on in several ways. It would appear that the emphasis of the LSC on synodality and co-responsible governance has been strengthened by recent announcements by the Vatican. The decision to delay the 2022 Synod of Bishops by 12 months until 2023 and to require every diocese in the universal church to consult with the People of God through the mechanism of a synod, beginning in October 2021, just after the first PC Assembly from 3-10 October has both practical and deeper consequences. Archbishop Mark Coleridge has already told PC members during their training that the Vatican decision has implications for the PC. It also impacts on LSC R 56 regarding the regular calling of Diocesan Synods within five years of the conclusion of the PC and every ten years thereafter. That recommendation may now seem conservative.

Within Australia evolutionary change at the diocesan and parish level cannot be restrained. In its official response to LSC in December 2020 the ACBC inclined to the belief that some of the LSC recommendations were already in place. In May 2021 the ACBC meeting reported that many of the LSC recommendations had already been implemented, although no further details were provided. This is a constant theme.

The LSC team was well aware that the church is necessarily in a continual state of flux and that natural evolution would continue regardless. The LSC report was written at one moment in time.

One problem for the PC, as it was for the LSC team, will be that the church in Australia lacks a reliable inventory of the state of play. The LSC addressed this question in a limited way by conducting a survey through the National Centre for Pastoral Research to establish some initial facts about matters like the presence, composition and constitutions of Diocesan Finance and Pastoral Councils. Our church, even just the diocesan side of it, is a fragmented mosaic in which our perception is necessarily opaque.

The question is basically one of timing, but it is also about the way recommendations are implemented. The basic premise of all LSC recommendations is that co-responsible governance and synodality should underpin them. If this approach is truly present among decision-makers and if the faithful are genuinely involved in the crafting of the implementation,

whether it be diocese, parish or religious community, then the sooner this is done the better.

But a word of caution. Three months out from the first PC Assembly which is to discuss these matters it would seem to be sensible, where possible, to at least wait for whatever wisdom emerges from the PC by June 2022. Dioceses should not be reinventing the wheel or jumping the gun.

The legitimacy and stature of the PC may be undermined if it is sidelined as church leaders of whatever description embark on reforms without a commitment to synodality and co-responsibility. In these cases the horse may have bolted by the time the initial PC deliberations have concluded. Church leaders are called to be patient and not to rush.

For instance, in relation to one frequently controversial and often painful matter, parish reconfiguration, R 70 makes clear that “the people in each parish or group of parishes affected by a proposal be consulted and provided with opportunities to meet together to discuss options”. The location and staffing of Mass centres are perhaps the issues which directly concern the largest number of church-going Catholics. Two PC Agenda questions (Q 11 and 12), at least, relate to parishes and it would be unfortunate if major reconfiguring, such as parish amalgamations, took place before the PC discussion and without true co-responsibility and synodality.

Concrete proposals

The LSC made 86 major recommendations, which included many detailed ones. The PC Agenda comprises 16 questions under six headings. What is the relationship between the two?

In publishing its agenda the PC has asked its members “to develop concrete proposals to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia at this time, having regard to the following agenda questions”.

The term “concrete” is not defined, which leaves a major question for refinement in the months to come. It is an elusive question. Concrete has shades of meaning in this context. PC discussions presumably need to be “concrete” yet also at a level of generality which would enable general principles to be examined and local conditions to be considered.

This was an issue which was canvassed internally within the LSC team. We vacillated between giving specific examples to illustrate our recommendations,

while being wary of being too tied to any particular examples, knowing the limitations of our knowledge.

The idea of Diocesan Pastoral Councils is a good illustration. LSC made general recommendations (R. 50-55), but recognized that one size does not fit all. The ACBC then made several recommendations of its own for further study and investigation, including creating a Reference Group.

However, on the face of it the LSC is full of concrete recommendations. They cover a wide range of topics, only the questions on prayer (PC Agenda Section 2, Qs 6-7) seemingly beyond its remit. The LSC is one model of how to proceed in relation to concrete proposals. But just what “concrete” means is not self-evident and may lead to disagreements.

There are many concrete recommendations related to matters to do with Safeguarding of children and vulnerable persons, which might be considered under PC Q. 2 “How might we heal the wounds of abuse...”. See, for example, LSC Rs 22-27 and 86 about audit and risk and the National Response Protocol.

The recommendations on inclusivity (LSC R 15-21), a theme not adequately addressed by the PC Agenda, relate directly and indirectly to women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Catholics who are divorced and remarried, and other minorities. Perhaps Q 3 about First Nations peoples and Q 4 about the church meeting “the needs of the most vulnerable” are places where the LSC suggestions should make a contribution.

The final four sections of the PC Agenda on Formation Qs (Qs 8-10), Structures (Qs 11-12), Governance (Qs 13-14) and Institutions (Qs 15-16) are central to the LSC Report. The PC Agenda questions cover a wide range and at times are almost open-ended.

The three questions on Formation do not directly address matters of synodality and co-responsibility or their obverse, clericalism, priestly and episcopal authority and hierarchy, but there is definite scope for the inclusion of this approach, central to LSC thinking, in concrete proposals by PC members.

The two questions on Structures are very broad. While Q 11 is directly related to parishes, Q 12 extends the discussion of “better structures” to religious orders, the PJPs and new communities. The LSC did not examine these areas of the church but recommends co-responsibility and synodality as guides to cultural and structural change. R 67, acknowledging that widespread ignorance

exists, recommends that “each diocese conduct an audit to identify all associations of Christ’s faithful” with a view to regulating safeguarding.

To the ordinary Catholic (and probably to many leaders and church office-holders) the existing structures, much less better structures, of religious orders, PJPs and new communities are foreign (and specialised) territory. The experience and expertise of the PC will be stretched on such matters.

References in LSC to religious orders, the PJPs and new communities are mostly peripheral. The LSC was designed for that half of the church which comprises dioceses and parishes, while recognising overlaps with the other half of the church just discussed. Some of its recommendations do have general applicability though, such as those relating to formation and safeguarding.

LSC R 66 does directly address the diversity of the church. Under the heading “Managing Relationships” it tentatively recommends:

That the ACBC, CRA and AMPJP jointly commission a study to investigate means by which:

Their activities and responsibilities can be coordinated in the interests of efficiency, economy and the pursuit of good governance, especially in the areas of risk management; and

While recognising the separate identities and independence of each, seeks to build on the ‘one voice’ approach utilised during the Royal Commission through the coordinating role of the TJHC.

This is a big task, at the highest level, but one the PC should keep in mind. There is likely to be considerable resistance from established entities and ways of doing things. The church in Australia would move towards a new shape if this direction was to be followed.

The two questions on Governance are broad. Q 14 (“How might we recast governance at every level of the Church in Australia in a more missionary key”) is extremely broad. Q 13 (“How might the People of God, lay and ordained, women and men, approach governance in the spirit of synodality and co-responsibility for more effective proclamation of the Gospel”) offers enormous scope to the PC members and implies the suggestion that recasting church governance is a required task of the PC.

Overlooked LSC themes and the PC Agenda Questions

There are some specific LSC matters not addressed so far by the PC Agenda. These include greater co-responsibility and synodality within Australia in the selection of bishops (Rs 8-9) and more transparency in regards to episcopal ad limina visits to Rome (R 7).

There are also some overlooked LSC cultural matters of a general kind which go to creating the conditions under which co-responsibility and synodality will thrive. These include the important link between the inclusion of all the People of God in the life of the church and co-responsibility (Rs 15-21) and the necessity of genuine freedom of expression within the church. R. 63 recommends that “Catholic media...encourage the exchange of diverse views conducive to dialogue and discernment amongst all the People of God”. This LSC recommendation is in line with the principles underpinning the Spiritual Conversations central to the methodology of the PC and its wider application to church life would be welcomed.

Proposals for whom? Authority in the Church

We should be honest. Authority and division of responsibility within the church remains opaque. It is often not clear who can/should do things. One aspect of concrete proposals, like any course of action, is that the person, office or institution responsible for implementation should be identified. If a change to Canon Law is required that should be specified.

The LSC tried to do that, although sometimes even it was unsure where authority lay. The PC could use LSC as a model in this regard and should try to specify who should be responsible for taking initiatives on concrete proposals. This is not just a practical task but a necessary element of holding leaders accountable.

The official response of the bishops to LSC made clear that individual diocesan bishops remain supreme in responsibility and that dioceses (defined by diocesan boundaries) are the prime organisational unit. The ACBC response explained that the history of the church in Australia suggested that national initiatives were doomed to failure.

All PC discussion should bear this admonition/advice in mind. Any challenge to this state of mind will need serious momentum within the PC. While the PC is a “national” event the church in Australia is not national at all. Indeed one of the main general criticisms by the bishops of the LSC was that it did not

understand the role of the ACBC, the only 'national' episcopal body, which was not an overseer or regulator of dioceses.

This means that the direct link between the LSC and the PC is primarily at the diocesan level and this includes any PC recommendations (see PC Qs 11-12) related to the future of the parish as an organisational unit.

The PC Assembly Itself

The PC is a wonderful opportunity but with limitations. Bearing in mind the Holy Spirit and the good-will, life experience and personal characteristics of members, the structure and operation of the PC Assembly itself also helps to shape the contribution that LSC might make. The dynamics of the PC Assembly remain unclear and it may be, for instance, that PC members choose, or are asked, to specialise by working in sub-committees.

Three elements stand out. It is multi-modal, short and spiritual in character.

The Covid-19 pandemic has dictated that the first assembly will be conducted out of five hubs (the major state capital cities) with the whole 282 members gathering together online for one two-hour plenary session each day.

The work of the assembly will be conducted over six days, which means time is short. The time could be divided in many ways, but as a rough guide, as the 16 PC Agenda Questions are divided into six sections, that might mean one day per section. The three-hour daylight saving time difference between Perth and the eastern states shortens the work days.

The operational procedure is based on the Spiritual Conversation method, which is prayerful, discerning and thorough, but not built for speed. Many delegates must be trained to use this method effectively.

The PC Assembly will only be the beginning of discernment of the future by the church in Australia, but these three characteristics do limit any immediate expected outcomes. By comparison the LSC team met monthly for 12 months and then concluded with a week-long think tank.

Conclusion

The LSC report is an optimistic and helpful document in line with the thinking of Pope Francis. It also seeks to be of practical assistance to our church.

It will make an important contribution to the PC during the next 12 months and beyond if it adds light to the deliberations. Building on the sense of the

faithful and previous church documents it makes the case for governance reform, cultural change and new approaches to formation in a future church.

The LSC report begins an enlightened discussion about the nature of the church in Australia and makes concrete proposals about how a new co-responsible and synodal approach to governance might be implemented.

If the PC gives wider recognition to LSC it may enable individual church leaders (bishops, priests, congregational leaders, PJP leaders and new community leaders, wherever located) and importantly the whole Catholic community, to follow such a co-responsible and synodal path. This is where ongoing discussion and discernment beyond the PC is likely to take place, perhaps in diocesan synods and parish assemblies as recommended by LSC.

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