

ARTICLE

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Ferment in the Catholic Church

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There is ferment beneath the surface within the Catholic Church in Australia. With Cardinal George Pell in retirement there is less interest in the church, despite public intervention by certain leaders over matters like Covid- 19 pandemic arrangements, euthanasia legislation and that perennial topic, school funding.

But despite attention being further submerged because of lockdowns and border closures, the biggest event in church history is imminent. On Sunday October 2 the opening ceremony will be held for the Fifth Plenary Council for Australia, discussing ('discerning' in church-speak) the Future of the Church in Australia.

More than 300 voting and non-voting members will come together virtually for the week-long First Assembly of this landmark event. Smaller meetings will continue until the Second Assembly in Sydney in July 2022 and the flow on will continue for years, if not decades.

The broad context is three-fold: the continued decline of and growing diversity and polarization within the church, the inspirational and creative leadership of Pope Francis, and the damning report for the church of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Why should the wider community be interested in the church's internal affairs? Because even in its wounded and depleted state the Catholic Church remains a major part of Australia's society, economy and politics. One quarter of Australians owe either current or historical allegiance to its norms and rules. Its culture is deeply embedded in the Australian psyche. Its school education system is the biggest outside of the public system and has educated many of the country's corporate, professional and political leaders. It is a major provider of community services in health, social services and aged care. It runs a large international aid and development agency.

The church doesn't like to admit its own internal politics even exists, but polarization and dissent mean the future of the church in Australia, and internationally, is highly contested. Church attendance is at a record low level. Many of its lay membership are flexing their muscles over the hierarchical leadership entrenched within the church. The composition of the church has changed dramatically because of the impact of immigration on its ranks. This means cultural differences among Australian Catholics continue to grow. Such differences are played out at all levels of the church.

Over a three-year preparation period, extended by twelve months because of the pandemic, all these issues have surfaced. Despite scepticism about any form of official consultation in modern society (we have all been disappointed too often) the process began by engendering great enthusiasm. The involvement of more than 200,000 people led to 17,500 submissions.

Some of the issues raised were unique to a church organisation and involved ideas about spirituality, worship and evangelisation. Some related to the organisation of parishes, the provision of education and social services, and the role of training for internal office holders, including clergy.

Many, however, reflected issues central to debates in wider society, including the role of women in decision-making; inclusion of minorities; making leaders accountable; having lay leaders alongside

clergy; and greater transparency, including in financial affairs, policy making and church communications and media.

These issues grew out of widespread acceptance by lay Catholics of modern ideas which have become community norms. Many had been stewing within the Catholic community since the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. Many are also debated within other churches and faith communities.

This massive exercise was followed by successive distillations of the issues until several months ago a set of sixteen questions emerged as an official agenda. These questions are organised around six themes: conversion, prayer, formation, structure, governance and institutions. They are all broad and open to interpretation, such as “How might we recast governance at every level of the church in Australia in a more missionary key?” or “How might the church in Australia respond to the call to ecological conversion?”.

To seek answers to these questions the 282 voting members will initially work for six days. They will be advised by a team of experts. Concrete proposals have been called for from both members and the wider community. There are already thousands. The daily plenary sessions will be live streamed as a bridge to the wider community and various media and blogs will report on developments.

Many controversies have dogged the progress of this event. The composition of the assembly, heavily weighted towards male officialdom, has rightly been criticised. The voices of lay Catholics, solicited by the initial process, have been dulled by those in charge. The format is testing, and the evolution of the agenda has not been transparent nor open enough. It is a new process grafted onto an old church.

This period of transition, to use the words of Pope Francis, will be challenging for all concerned, but there is good will and a sense of occasion among most participants as they aim for constructive outcomes.

There is a natural fear that this may be a case of the apparently irresistible force of reform meeting the immovable object which is the status quo. The question, “Can you teach an old dog new tricks?” is a reasonable one. The Plenary Council is also a national event, trapped between the international Catholic authorities and the power of local diocesan bishops.

The counter to this pessimism is that, given official talk of a church in crisis, the expectations of the Catholic community have been raised to a high level. Unless some hoped-for reforms are set in train these expectations will be dashed. Trust and moral authority will be lost forever.

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