

# Pearls and Irritations

## Plenary Council fails to embrace Pope Francis's social vision

By Bruce Duncan

Jun 29, 2022



Image: Wikimedia Commons

*Many Catholics are concerned that the current Plenary Council is overly focused on internal Church matters and neglecting Pope Francis's call to engage more vigorously with pressing social issues in dialogue and collaboration with all people of good will.*

Some 278 Catholic bishops, clergy, religious personnel and lay people will meet as members of an unprecedented Plenary Council during 3-9 July to finalise the resolutions of their first assembly last year. However the May working document 'Framework for Motions', despite much worthy content, especially on Indigenous affairs, relies on a narrow notion of mission overly focused on inner-church issues at the expense of the wider social engagement that Francis emphasises.

In the Conclave before he was elected Pope, Francis said he had 'the impression that Jesus was locked inside the Church and he was knocking to get out' to serve the poor, the hungry, the sick.

Instead Francis envisages the Church like a 'field hospital', and engaging in the struggle for universal human and ecological wellbeing, as he highlighted in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*.

'The Church's evangelising mission finds outward fulfilment in the transformation of our world and in the care of creation', he wrote on World Mission Day on 6 January 2021. This mission involves the personal responses we make in our daily lives, he wrote in *Joy of the Gospel* (#188), but also 'working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty' and to advance the integral development of the poor. This is not a sectarian mobilisation. Francis insists that Catholics cooperate with all people of good will, with other Christians, with those of other religions or of none, in the urgent tasks of recovering from the pandemic to build a more just and equitable international order, and avert impending catastrophes from threats of war and climate change. he wrote in September 2021, 'care for our Mother Earth and building a society of solidarity as fratelli tutti or siblings all are not only not foreign to our faith; they are a concrete realisation of it.'

Also puzzling is how the Framework for Motions overlooks the specifically secular mission of lay women and men in their daily work, occupations, communities and families. Merely a single paragraph calls for deepening the 'lay apostolate in the world based on attentiveness to the "signs of the times", scriptural reflection, prayerful communal discernment and a commitment to engagement with the broader Australian community through listening and dialogue' (#80). But it does not explain why this secular involvement is so crucially significant, especially for Pope Francis.

Let me explain. The paragraph refers to the famous see-judge-act process developed by a Belgian priest, Canon Joseph Cardijn, nearly a century ago for use by young working women and men in factories and workplaces. Cardijn formed groups to discuss their life and work issues ('see'), to reflect together using a Gospel passage for spiritual guidance ('judge') and then to take action to change situations ('act').

It was a circular process of empowerment for people to take charge of their lives and challenge unjust practices. It became known as the Young Christian Workers Movement and spread internationally, even to Australia, especially in Melbourne and Adelaide. Based on people's personal experiences, it linked faith cogently with their real life issues, giving them strength and courage to make often difficult decisions but acting always on their own responsibility. This method often empowered people for the rest of their lives and careers.

Pope Francis himself relies heavily on the Cardijn methods, which were refined in Latin America from the 1940s, particularly in the liberation theology movements in the 1960s. For six decades, such methods were extensively used in preparing the decennial continental meetings of the Latin American Catholic Bishops (CELAM).

As Cardinal Bergoglio, Francis had steered the 2007 Aparecida Conference of CELAM in Brazil and supervised the writing of the Aparecida Document, explicitly using the see-judge-act framework. Francis still uses the see-judge-act methodology in his writings and talks. The Amazon Synod in 2019 again used this process of engagement with social and cultural realities, including the plight of the Indigenous and River peoples, the alarming impact of climate change and the devastation of the Amazon itself.

Francis has explicitly recast this see-judge-act method into the process of synodality and discernment, calling the whole Church to learn this way of listening carefully to others, especially the excluded or marginalised.

## Learning processes for a wider sense of mission: ‘read the Gospel, in our lives’.

Francis urges a ‘cultural revolution’ in the church, to undertake ‘the slow work of changing structures, through participation in public dialogue, where decisions are made that affect the lives of the most vulnerable.’ He said that the social apostolate is to empower people “‘to promote processes and to encourage hope”, to help communities grow, to be aware of their rights, to apply their talents, and create their own futures’. He dreams of a Church that does not stand aloof from life, from life, but immerses herself in today’s problems and needs, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God.’

His notion of mission is thus not confined to inner-church matters. At opening of the 2021-2023 Synod on Synodality he said that the Vatican Council understood mission as including ‘apostolic commitment to the world of today’, but warned that this was opposed to ‘proselytism’. In an address to Catechists on 27 September 2013, he insisted: ‘What attracts is our witness... Words come.... But witness comes first: people should see the Gospel, read the Gospel, in our lives.’

Francis elsewhere regrets that the role of lay missionaries often remains tied to tasks within the Church,” (Joy of the Gospel, #102) and reiterates that ‘the essential vocation and mission of the lay faithful is to strive that earthly realities and all human activity may be transformed by the Gospel’ (#201). He calls for ‘a church that serves, that leaves home and goes forth from its places of worship, goes forth from its sacristies, in order to accompany life... to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation.’ The Church must be prepared to speak out firmly in defence of human rights and the common good. (Fratelli tutti, #276).

Bruce Duncan is a Redemptorist priest and emeritus lecturer in social justice studies at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne. He is former editor of Social Policy Connections. Republished from Eureka Street, 22 June.



BRUCE DUNCAN

Bruce Duncan is a Redemptorist priest and lectures in history and social ethics at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne. He was one of the founders in 2005 of the ecumenical advocacy organisation, Social Policy Connections.