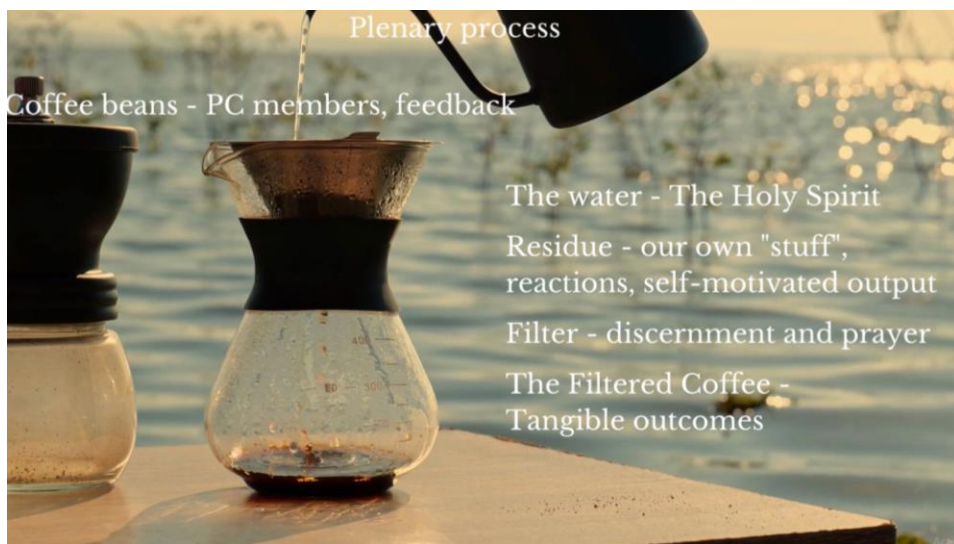


Presentation to Concerned Catholics – Outcomes of the Plenary Council 10 Sep 2022

Thanks and outline.

As an engineer and researcher, I tend towards the question – did we achieve what we set out to achieve in this Plenary Council? Given the purpose of the Council being was to discern (as members) where the Holy Spirit is guiding the Australian Church at this present time, are we able to say now as where the Church is being drawn to post the Fifth Plenary Council?

I'll come back to this, but first I'd like to share a little bit of my own experience at the Council. I like to start with this slide though – an image of a coffee percolator.



It is a reminder to me and those I speak to, that this is a process that involves the Spirit. This is not a secular process, something where we aim to realign the Church to world values. To me this image depicts what I think Plenary Council process is meant to be. In its purest form, it's a spiritual process, involving discernment, prayer stillness and patience. A gentle process that seeks to know where the Spirit is leading the Church. A process in which the Holy Spirit is the instigator, the water that draws the flavour from the coffee beans - the members, the faith community, the feedback - and we as members, gently allow it to be percolated, in us and through our conversations, to then seep out through discernment into outcomes, at the Council and post Council follow-up. The coffee sludge is our 'reactions', our egos and own issues that we need to filter out. Were we to remove the filter, our discernment - we might wind up with sludge in coffee, aspects that are not good for the Church. Or if we end up

creating what we think is a good cup of coffee, a Church to our ideals, it might turn out not to be the result we expect.

I'd like to resist making the process as though it was an automatic coffee machine – we know what we want, a latte, or a cappuccino, and essentially that we believe we know how the Church needs to be, that we are right, they are wrong and we try to push the right buttons to produce this Church.

So, back to my experiences. (Photo of Assembly members) - As time goes by and I continue to reflect on my experiences of the Second Assembly, I find key aspects of the experience have solidified. I can summarise these under three or four words – grateful, bruised, “Spirited”, and hopeful.

Firstly, I am grateful to have been part of it – as one of the first women included in a Plenary Council; as a layperson; as someone who was not in charge of a significant aspect of the Catholic Church but just “one of the faithful”. The inclusion of these member categories in the final delegation is in itself a great step forward. Yes well overdue, and frustrating as it might be that we have only just got to this point - but we are here. The recognition that women need to be part of the conversation of moving forward as a Church, and that we need to involve the everyday “congregation”, are all concrete evidence of change in the heavily patriarchal, heavily hierarchical Church.

I also experienced quite significant bruising on “that Wednesday” where all Motions relating to the involvement of women did not reach the two-third majority required for them to pass. Most would agree that there was nothing particularly controversial in the Motions involving women and so to have them so emphatically rejected on the first go, was just crushing. Till now I need to consciously reset my view from the bitter aftertaste of knowing there were many in the Council, (and so in the Church) that disagreed that women’s role in the Church needs to be “stable, publicly recognised, appropriately resourced”... That the pain felt by women who felt excluded and neglected did not need to be articulated to Rome. That even when there was no identified reason for not including women as deacons, there were many that felt justified in rejecting the Motion, just because they were not comfortable with women being involved. There was so much that was wrong about that first vote, that eventually was righted, but not without leaving significant pain and shock in its wake.

Yet the star of the Council, as it needed to be, was the Spirit. There was a sense in me of BW and AW; a “Before Wednesday” and “After Wednesday” sense of the engagement of the Spirit. Prior to Wednesday, the members were very much doing our thing. It’s not that the Spirit was around then, it’s just that we weren’t challenged by what was unfolding, we were in control, things were progressing generally as expected and so perhaps the awareness and reliance on the Spirit wasn’t as great. After Wednesday, it seemed we were all given a bit of a start. The “best laid plans”, the stringent planning of the Steering Committee... and yet we found ourselves teetering on a precipice. If those standing in protest that Wednesday did not return to our seats, it certainly would have jeopardised the completion of the Council. And each “side” of the argument seemed convinced we were right. And so the Spirit of unity, the Spirit of compassion, the Spirit of compromise, moved in the Council – and tangibly. Soon, members with vehemently differing views, were digging deep within ourselves to find a means to unity, to set right something which shocked and disappointed many members, both clergy and laity. Examples of unity included a clearer sense of listening in the room, a more direct engaging with those of opposing views. Some personal examples - I was moved to reach out and apologise to a member with different views whom I hadn’t listened to well. We hugged good bye at the end, and I was left in awe of the Spirit, as neither of us had changed views, but we could see there was something bigger there, beyond these views. Another example, a Bishop, open and willing to listen, yet who identified as someone very uncomfortable with female deacons became more open to it while I, though very much for women deacons, encouraged him to vote against it if that’s what he thought the Spirit was saying to him.

So I am left with hope – that we have started the conversation and there is movement in the right direction; that we had a clear experience that we are not doing this on our own; that I met many clergy and laity who feel a deep sense of wanting change. I’m also left somewhat amused. Repeatedly in life we see, the Spirit using our life circumstances to draw us into places of discomfort and challenge to instigate spiritual growth. Yet in the very place we sought Spirit involvement explicitly, it seems we might have taken the Spirit for granted. And we were shown up.

Did the process allow true discernment? Did we as members hear and respond to the Spirit? Not all was done in the Spirit of listening and discerning. Yet the Wednesday incident has

convinced me that we were opened to, and opened by, the Spirit, Wednesday onward, if not before.

Now, looking at what was passed and what this all means. (Slide of powerpoint summary of Motions, explanation of voting process). In a rough summary of key points, the Motions sought to recognise the deep hurt caused by the Church to victims of abuse and Indigenous communities, to draw from the richness of Indigenous and Eastern Church faith practices. To maintain faith relevance by recognising the signs of the times, and better appreciating lay and youth contributions. To enhance preaching and better form clergy, to utilise lay preaching outside the Eucharist, and to use inclusive language. To appreciate and enhance the role of women, and - given Pope approval - support female deacons. To better utilise the three Rites of Reconciliation. To establish synodal leadership and optimise the use of Catholic Social Teachings and to defend human life especially through the focussed care of environment. Which included having a Laudato Si Action by 2030, a clear and direct action that addressed a socially prominent issue.

There were several factors I believed that helped create an effective Plenary Council. Among others, the smaller group discussions helped open conversation in a safe place with more opportunities to discuss, challenge and disagree with each other. Interventions on the floor enabled all sides of the arguments to be brought to the attention of all members. The less prominent engagement from Archbishops and Bishops (i.e., not presenting their views) minimised members from feeling corralled into a particular view. Simple but powerful prayer sessions helped centre us and remind us of the context in which we were there.

There were factors that did not help to bring about effective outcomes as well –there was the notable avoidance of raising issues that were not included in the Agenda but were very much of concern to everyday Catholics. I would have loved to have seen a session or a day dedicated to discussion of these topics, even if they were not to be official Motions. It might have helped members to be reminded, as tensions rose and views splintered, of the need for real listening on both sides. I think we got into combative modes at times. I would have also loved to have seen more use of the Chapel by members, for personal prayer in addition to the Communal prayer, to help reset, to centre ourselves for deep listening. Of most importance I believe was the lack of real opportunity/time to challenge views, discuss at depth some of the more controversial Motions. We were trained in the lead up to the Council Assemblies, to

look for the “Spirit Overflow”, yet there was little time for this advanced levels of conversation, with a sense also that to challenge a view might appear as an unwillingness to listen to an opposing view. While it was helpful to not have direct views expressed generally from the Deliberative Voters (i.e., generally the Bishops) it conversely might have been helpful to have some opportunity for dialogue with the Bishops to better hear how they are hearing the interventions and so how they might vote. A chance to engage in discussion. Going back to the times of the Apostles, according to Scripture, decisions were made through discussion and even argument, alongside the voting.

In short, not necessarily being critical as there were reasonable limitations of time, but the process was constrained by time and a lack of more in-depth “arguing” of key aspects. Yet, I believe, as with any aspect of faith, the Spirit came through in the end and it was a valid and productive process.

And in answer to my initial question – What does this all mean in terms of where the Spirit is leading the Australian Church? What is the Church in Australia in fact, and how does it respond to this discerned leadership? As an Australian Church, we are influenced by a laid back society, one that is somewhat resistant to an authoritarian approach, and this contrasts with the more hierarchical Vatican approach. The heavily divergent views expressed in Part 4 of the Motions (Equal Dignity of Women and Men) are reflected more generally in broader issues of the Church. There seem to be two distinct groups forming: those comfortable with the current modus operandum, and draw significant meaning and spiritual strength from Church traditions and its patriarchal leadership; with a tendency towards a more conservative or orthodox expression of faith and formal prayer, contrast with those that are seeking meaning amidst current worldly issues and finding modern ways to relate their faith to disinterested children and others; those who see faith through a filter of social justice and a more worldly compassion, and so feel challenged by Church structures, teachings and approaches unfamiliar to the modern world. The former group appears somewhat uncomfortable or suspicious of even the concept of a Plenary Council and somewhat keen to dismiss or diminish Council outcomes, the latter group appears somewhat aghast at the rigidity of rules and the lack of more direct involvement of the everyday Catholic, and bemoan the subtlety and timidity of the outcomes.

The outcomes of the Plenary Council were uncontentious enough to not have a major impact on groups disenchanted or disinterested in the Church. The two groups most likely to be affected by the outcomes of the Plenary are those already strong in the faith and invested in the Church - as well as those not overly interested in the faith but saw the Church's influence as a factor in an unsatisfactory aspect of their lives that needed change. That is, those who were passionate about certain issues but not overly Catholic, might have paid particular attention due to the Church influence on views on that issue. In this regard, both groups will probably be deflated. Virtually none of the passed Motions are game changes.

But - I do believe they help till the soil. They humble the Church through recognition of fault. They prepare us for a time when women will be seen as integral to Church structure and function. They mould us to see beyond an Anglo-Saxon practice of faith. They widen our outlook, from human dominance to interdependence and care for our surroundings. No, they don't produce quick enough results of course, but let's not forget, this, in the end this is about faith. And rarely does God answer prayer without using the chance for us to grow in faith.

So, do we know now where the Spirit is leading? Yes and no. There were many questions that needed answering but were not addressed. And this remains an issue. But also, when we sought guidance from the Spirit at the onset of this Plenary journey, we more broadly sought to create a Church that will be life-giving, an authentic reflection of Christ, a place to belong. I feel the Council has opened that gate to us seeking a place of soft-heartedness, and other-centredness, one that seeks to understand the other view, a place that seeks Truth. While St Paul and St Peter argued over circumcision, through the benefit of time and a continuing understanding of our faith, we can see now that perhaps neither view really matters. Faith and relationship with God go far beyond many such issues or specific practices or traditions. The focus remains on the use of faith to bring people to experience God's love. If, in our endeavour to point out faith-related fallacies, we harden our hearts in self-righteousness or lose focus on God, *we* then become the "faith-fallacy" if you like. So I think the drawing of the Spirit in this Council was as much about our individual growth as the more defined issues.

Will any of it make a difference? Individually, yes if we look to listen more, to each other and the Spirit. For those invested in their faith, the possibility of seeing in the future a more Catholic Church in its truest sense, is likely to sustain their hope. For those aching for change to address specific issues, short-term disappointment could lead to some disengagement. Yet

typical of Christ, flipping over world expectations, giving Israel a crucified King rather than a battle-savvy, strong and victorious king, perhaps it is those disengaged who will in the end, be the spark that rekindles the fire. In both those in and out of the Church.