

## Plenary Council:

### *Definitely not 'business as usual'*



Are our hearts 'burning within us' at the end of the Plenary Council? Well, yes, and no. Some members no doubt breathed a collective sigh of relief that the 'carnival was over' and they could actually get back to what Archbishop Coleridge had declared the Church could never afford to get back to, namely 'business as usual'. For most though, it was a time for integrity to outshine conformity.

**An Historic Wednesday** On the morning of the now famous Wednesday, the midpoint, and flashpoint, of the Council, there occurred what was considered by many to be an eruption of the Holy Spirit, reminiscent of that critical, unanticipated turning point during Vatican II, which resulted in *Gaudium et Spes*. During the morning's voting on Part 4 of the agenda, 'Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men', the 'Deliberative' vote had failed to support the 'Consultative' vote with a required two-thirds majority to pass Motion 4.1. Next, Motion 4.2 was voted down by both voting groups.

This result will go down in history and made headlines across Australia and the world. When the results were read out, from the 277 Council members, about 60 women and some men including some priests and bishops, stood in protest and retired silently to the back of the St Mary's Cathedral College Hall. The Council was at a crossroads. The collective action reflected the alarm, disbelief, dismay and absolute grief, with lamentations and tears, experienced on the floor of the Council at the rejection of what were 'modest' motions. These motions had been included in response to the *sensus fidelium* during the consultative processes leading up to the Council which so unequivocally recognised the full inclusion of women at all levels of Church life as a critical issue. The 'Wednesday action' will go down in Church history as a landmark.

It is to the credit of the Steering Committee, chaired by Bishop Shane Mackinlay, that the decision was taken for a group to redraft the two defeated motions as five separate motions, without dilution of their content. These five motions were resubmitted on the final day of Council and all five passed both the Consultative and Deliberative voting.

There were those commentators who saw this as a revolt, a disobedient challenge to the rightful authority of the Bishops, an 'interruption' to the work of the Spirit. Many saw it as an 'eruption', an out-pouring of power from that same Spirit, a galvanising moment of unforeseen grace. Thankfully the Council as a whole acted with wisdom, unity of purpose and courage in the face of what could have been a divisive, fracturing turn of events.

**Issues welcomed by the Council** The enthusiasm of the Council in its early support for the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics and its ringing endorsement of The Uluru Statement of the Heart, together with stated commitment to *Laudato Si* and ecological conversion, were encouraging but unsurprising features. These issues are largely accepted now within mainstream Australian Catholicism as core, even if there is still much to be done to bring about real commitment to positive change and action. The three Rites of Reconciliation will be revisited, but the Third Rite was somewhat understated as a ceased practice that is dear to the hearts of the Catholic faithful. There was a great deal of attention given to provision of formation for the laity and to some degree the clergy.

**Disappointments** There was a distinct lack of serious attention in the Council agenda and deliberations to the needs and dignity of **LGBTIA+ Catholics**. One is left wondering how the Church will ever face up to this responsibility, which is still in the too hard basket, despite all the work being done by Rainbow Catholics and many others wanting to understand and respond appropriately to the voices of LGBTIQ+ people.

The continuing dilemma of the canonical exclusion of **divorced Catholics** from full sacramental participation is noted with sorrow and remains an unaddressed pastoral issue of great importance.

How will we present the authentic face of the compassionate, all-embracing Christ to the young and alienated while we shirk these responsibilities?

**Lay Preaching at Mass** All motions proposed were passed, with the exception of the one related to Lay Preaching during Eucharist. It is difficult to understand why this should be considered contrary to the will of God in 2021! A closely related issue is women as Deacons, and the Council re-vote was supportive of this (subject to a 'yes' from Pope Francis to women's Ordination to the Diaconate). It is hard to escape the impression that the coupling of the two words 'ordination' and 'women' in the same sentence proves a threat to many hierarchs in our Church. Scripture scholar Mary Coloe, who spoke on Plenary Tracker during the Council, explained that the word 'Ordination' originated in the Roman Empire, not the Gospel, and 'Ordination' was the way in which a person progressed from one 'Order' to another within imperial society.

**Media Coverage and Commentary** Coverage and analysis of the Council as it progressed came from a variety of credible media sources, for example Geraldine Doogue's excellent podcast 'Plenary Matters', and the nightly 'Plenary Tracker', together with Francis Sullivan's and John Warhurst's blogs, were stand outs. These are all available at [PLENARY TRACKER #2 | Garratt Publishing](#). (Courtesy of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn and Garratt Publishing). The daily Live Streams of Masses and Opening Sessions provided during the Council, were appreciated and links remain on the Plenary Council website at [Masses and Livestreams – Plenary Council \(catholic.org.au\)](#).

Parramatta Diocesan Outlook provides links to other valuable commentary by Bishop Vincent Long and Fr Frank Brennan SJ through their Sunday homilies. Dr Paul Collins wrote with his usual fresh insights on the Pearls and Irritations website.

Greg Craven (The Australian, July 9, 2022) penned an isolated, flame-throwing and vitriolic attack on unidentified Plenary Council Members whom he described as ‘a minority of self-serving lay Catholics ...hell bent on wresting control from the Bishops’. Even more colourfully, they were ‘a radical gang of lay bomb-throwers inside what was meant to be a harmonious plenary’. They would moreover, ‘stop at nothing to get their own way’. This is a small-minded, bigoted piece of commentary from a high profile Catholic who should know better than to single out committed fellow Catholics he disagrees with, people who are working hard to take our Church forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the footsteps of Christ. Flame-throwers and bomb-throwers are equally unwelcome during genuine discernment and synodal-style meetings of the kind this Council modelled and which Pope Francis envisions for the Church of the future.

Christopher Lamb, Rome-based reporter for the Tablet, in town for the Plenary Council coverage, saw the Council and its processes as a light for the whole Church, while conceding its seminal nature and necessarily limited outcomes. This was heartening from such a respected Catholic journalist and echoes the remaining sense of optimism that many involved Catholics feel as they look back on those heady days. Christopher Lamb’s 2022 Helder Camara lecture is available [here](#).

In some circles (for example in the pages of *The Catholic Standard* and the *Catholic Weekly*) there is disappointment that the Council failed to sufficiently address what some Catholics consider the most important Church issues- for example, vocations to priesthood and religious life, the dignity of motherhood, and the apostolate of the laity to evangelise within society.

**Where to now?** As Council Members have returned to daily life with all its challenges, we can begin to evaluate the success or otherwise of this momentous event in the life of the Australian Catholic Church.

It is to be hoped that the ACBC will hasten to promote and advance the ten Decrees emanating from the Council’s final session. These Decrees are available on the Plenary Council website at [Plenary Council \(catholic.org.au\)](http://Plenary Council (catholic.org.au)). They require final approval at the ACBC plenary meeting in November and will then be sent to Rome for the Pope’s endorsement before being promulgated across the dioceses of Australia. It is estimate that this approval process could take up to a year. A copy of the official Plenary Council ‘Statement’ is also available on the Plenary Council website above. In the meantime, it is to be expected that delegates to the Council will provide their own diocese with clear and authentic feedback about the process and outcomes. For example, Archbishop Comensoli has written to the

Melbourne Archdiocese sharing his reflections on the Council, see [here](#). As usual, and under Canon Law, the Bishops have the last word, but only the most fool-hardy among them would ignore the *sensus fidelium* expressed by the People of God as we responded since 2018 in our tens of thousands to the invitation to participate in the Council preparation at so many levels.

My Religious Education teacher used to say to us in 1962 when Vatican II was about to begin, 'Girls, it's a glorious time to be alive!' May 2022 prove to be a visionary leap forward on the wings of the Holy Spirit for the Church, our beleaguered but beloved spiritual home, so sorely in need of reform and renewal to be salt and light for the world.

**Dr Trish Hindmarsh, CCT Committee Member**