

**What has been the significance of Plenary Council to the Church and the broader Australian community so far? What more can we expect from the final session?**

**Roundtable with Julian Butler and Geraldine Doogue**

**John Warhurst**

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The Second Assembly is looming. It is now too late to regret any part of the last four years or what has not been done. We are nearly there. We are now in a brief lull between the response by Plenary Council Members to the Framework for Motions document and the final set of officially accepted amendments to the motions.

The Catholic community set out four years ago to address the future of the church in Australia and we were told that nothing would be off the table. The process was driven by the critical state of the Church and by the revelations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia.

We should not forget these origins. Nor should we forget the tremendous amount and quality of work undertaken by Church authorities, the whole Catholic community, and the church renewal movement. That is why we should maintain high aspirations.

Julian Butler is right to remind us that we are a deeply divided Church community. That explains much about the caution and contradictions within the Framework for Motions document. We are more than diverse; on some matters we are polarized. This context is not unique to Australia and is well understood by Pope Francis. Synodality, his proposed approach to resolving such deep differences, will be sorely tested within the Plenary Council.

Julian also celebrates the consultation and prayerful decision-making within the council as an achievement in itself. That is true. He sees it as the 'real' revolution and downplays the realism of expecting concrete outcomes in structures, practice and doctrine. That is where we part company. I see some concrete outcomes as essential and that is what lay women and men, priests and religious have been led to expect. At every stage we have been invited to submit concrete proposals.

As a lay PC Member and renewal movement participant I have observed some progress through discernment and consultation. The Church has shifted. Lay people have been empowered. We have begun to imagine a new sense of ourselves, in Geraldine Doogue's beautiful formulation, as rightful contributors and recognised stalwarts. But advocacy and lobbying from renewal groups has been equally important.

Ironically, I have also witnessed, side by side with expressions of synodality within the Plenary Council processes, revelations of the continued exercise of old-fashioned authority by the Church hierarchy. The bishops have expected precedence. This unintended consequence of the Plenary Council process is more than a little disappointing. New ways of relating to one another have been grafted onto an old Church.

If synodality means a respectful and level playing field for all voices to speak and to be heard, then we have not seen enough of it. We have also seen far too little transparency, with the consequence of diminishing interest among an already disengaged wider Catholic community. Catholics, especially women and young people, see their Church lagging woefully behind broader community standards.

Geraldine is right to celebrate some green shoots. But some of those green shoots, like much-needed affirmations of support for synodal structures like diocesan and parish councils will have to

be fought for against resistance, which is often buttressed by references to Vatican rules and Canon Law.

Progress from the PC will also be limited by three additional factors. The first is that the process remains tight and rushed. The timetable is crazily pressured as the Second Assembly tries to complete its tasks in limited time.

The second is a lack of personnel and resources. The Church remains in financial crisis, though the community is rarely let in on this secret by the authorities. Good ideas should not be flicked to church agencies for further research and advice; but if they are these agencies, like the National Centre for Pastoral Research, should be properly resourced to take on these tasks; which they are not.

Furthermore, the Church in Australia remains as it always has been: a sprawling patchwork of dioceses, parishes, religious institutes and agencies. This will mean that the future of the Church in Australia, whatever you think it should be, will be highly fragmented. The Church at the national level, including the Plenary Council apparatus, remains decidedly weaker than it should be.

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