

OPINION

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Catholics say no then yes to women

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The Catholic church's structure is notoriously male, clerical and hierarchical. Its Plenary Council, its highest policy-making body, contains a minority of women. Last week it achieved public controversy over its treatment of an agenda item called "Witnessing to the equal dignity of women and men". This section was not just of great public interest, but its treatment changed the dynamics of the whole council and perhaps the whole church for the better.

The bishops first rejected this section on women's dignity and rights altogether, and then, following a remarkable silent protest by some women members and their male supporters, accepted an equivalent rewritten version. By then further damage had been done to the church's already tarnished reputation, just after the Census results reported a steep dip in church allegiance. This immediate brand damage will only be reversed slowly. It was a massive own goal.

The meeting procedures are unique. There are two types of voting, consultative or advisory votes by all members, including all of the women members (lay women and religious sisters), followed by a deliberative and final vote by the male bishops alone. This is roughly equivalent to having two houses of parliament, like the much larger House of Representatives and the smaller Senate, though sitting in the same room. Secondly, motions and amendments must achieve a two-thirds majority, in the interests of stability and unity, rather than just a simple majority of 50% +1. To complicate matters even further there are three voting options, Yes, No, and Yes with reservations, which counts as a No. All this makes agreement harder.

The process dealing with women in the church proceeded in three stages. On Tuesday the original text and several associated motions and amendments were considered. There were spirited debates and polarised exchanges between those wanting change and conservatives committed to more traditional roles for women in the church. Those who wanted stronger statements about women successfully introduced a review of the lack of progress in implementing the pioneering reformist church report, Woman and Man (2000). Those wanting more cautious motions defeated an amendment calling actively for women to be allowed to become deacons (a more junior and separate ministry to priests) rather than just following on from any Vatican decision. Also defeated were a motion calling on each diocese, led by a bishop, to foster new opportunities for women and an amendment acknowledging the "frustration and disappointments expressed by many members about women's exclusion from ordination". Ordination to the priesthood itself was out of bounds and not considered at all. The prevailing feeling among members afterwards was that the section on women's rights was on balance weaker.

The first business on Wednesday morning was the bishops' vote. The section achieved a majority of the bishops but failed to reach the required two-thirds majority. We broke for morning tea and let the impact sink in. There was a lot of outrage, distress, tears and anger among women members. By the time we were due to return a spontaneous insurgency led to about 60 members, mainly women but some men, standing silently around the entrance to the hall rather than taking our places. Some voiced their concerns strongly and with great emotion to those sitting down in the hall, and it became clear that the agenda had to be set aside. Over lunch emergency meetings were held by the bishops and by the women demanding change.

After lunch various groups and leaders reported back. None of the dissenting bishops was willing to give any indication of why they had rejected the section. This failure was entirely unsatisfactory and totally lacking in transparency. The productive outcome, however, was that it was agreed that the

day's agenda would be set aside, the first bishops' vote would be rescinded, and a new writing group, taking all concerns into account, would produce a revised section which did not dilute the original. This revision was included in Friday's agenda.

Everyone, including many bishops, was shaken, and shocked, by the events of Wednesday. The remainder of the council proceedings were much less orchestrated. Eventually, on Friday, a somewhat subdued council clearly passed the revised motions on women as did the bishops, to acclamation, later in the day.

The church committed itself to a package of proposals: to give appropriate recognition of women in decision-making structures, to support new opportunities in ministry for women, to overcoming assumptions, cultures and language that lead to inequality for women, to implementing Woman and Man more fully (after more than 20 years delay), and to examine how best to bring about women deacons, if the Vatican gives approval for the whole church. The latter is only the second time this has happened world-wide, after the trail-blazing Amazon Synod in the Latin American church in 2019. This decision gained international church attention.

This is all mediocre stuff in the context of modern civic practices to close the gap between women and men. The traditionally male, hierarchical Catholic Church still lags way behind wider society in the promotion of the rights of women. Furthermore, the domestic elements of the package must be implemented, and having women deacons depends on Vatican approval. The proof will eventually come in outcomes not fancy words. The prevailing clerical male culture of the church must change for this to happen.

We still don't know whether this will be a blip or a game-changer, but the Catholic sector, 20% of the community, can't afford to be left behind in achieving equal rights for women.

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