

What did Australia's Plenary Council achieve?

Catholics wanting renewal are clearly the majority, prominent lay leaders have emerged and many of the bishops "get" the real issues



The Plenary Council (PC) is over and the time has come for assessments. What did it achieve? In positive terms it brought together an enormously generous group of people whose dedication to Catholicism is extraordinary. It also demonstrated the diverse complexity of the community. As PC member John Warhurst commented: 'In political terms we [Catholics] range from One Nation to the Greens and everything in between' (Blog, 9 July). That's true, but PC votes consistently indicated that the large majority of Catholics strongly support church renewal. Out of 277 members, the most those opposed to renewal could

muster was 65 even when you count the *juxta modum* votes as 'no' votes. The PC's most positive achievement was its strong support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart, calling for a First Nations voice to Parliament to be enshrined in Australia's constitution. In some ways Catholics are ahead of the general community on First Nations concerns. The reason: this has been an issue for the church for decades and was pushed by pioneers like Shirley 'Mum Shir!' Smith, Ted Kennedy and many others, making it central to mainstream Catholicism. On the issue of equality, the PC eventually semi-caught-up with the 20th century in a vote on a set of re-drafted motions supporting equal dignity for women and men. Perth archbishop Costelloe, in an understatement, commented: 'There is a long way to go ...in understanding the proper role of women in the life of the Church.' Exactly, archbishop! But the problem is that Catholicism has long resisted equality as a 'feminist plot' so that we've now just caught-up with the 1970s. As Costelloe admitted 'there's still a long way to go' to get the church into the 21st century.

This debate takes us to the core weakness of the PC. Because some bishops and laity have long resisted the basic reforms of Vatican II, particularly that of living in the real world as mandated by *Gaudium et spes* ('The Church in the Modern World'), we are endlessly at a disadvantage, always playing catch-up. As someone said, we're entangled in 'pathetic incrementalism.' For example, there are a set of motions asking bishops to establish diocesan pastoral councils and parish councils, structures already legislated in the Code of Canon Law (canons 511-514 and 536). Another example: the PC encourages all Catholics 'to accept Pope Francis' invitation to join the Laudato Si' Action Platform...as a vehicle...for their ecological conversion. 'But the environmental movement developed plans like these decades ago, while the church has been stymied by some Catholics talking about ecology as 'pagan religion' filling a spiritual void in the post-Christian West and claiming that global warming is 'the hysteria of alarmists. 'This, despite the fact that Catholicism has had an ecological theology and spirituality for more than fifty years with thinkers like Thomas Berry. Here in Australia, we'd already developed a theological approach and the term 'environmental conversion' actually originated here. Environmentalists moved-on years ago to real issues like winding-down coal mining, stopping native forest logging, confronting global warming and overpopulation.

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