



## GOING TO THE SECOND ASSEMBLY – SUNDAY, 3 JULY 2022

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**Blog by Francis Sullivan, CSSA Chair**

Well, the litmus test has arrived. Will the Catholic Church in Australia make a shift towards the estranged and disaffected, or will there be business as usual? After a decade of revelations about sex abuse scandals, criminal convictions, and court-ruled payouts to its victims, the institution limps towards the second assembly of the Plenary Council less unified, less popular, and less certain of itself than ever before. The bishops' hyper control of the Plenary processes speaks volumes for an organisation under threat, both from within and without. The general disinterest in the Plenary Council from ordinary Catholics and the general community is palpable. Yet, the official line is that the Holy Spirit has something to say if we only stop and listen. So, how will we know if the Spirit has been heard?

Catholics "voting with their feet" is the single most telling aspect of contemporary Catholicism. Under 10 per cent of Catholics choose to worship on a weekend. They have left for multiple reasons, but overall, the institutional Church no longer can hold their interest or passion. Their pursuit of decent and good lives, commitment to raising healthy families and contributing to their communities and workplaces no longer includes a conventional Catholic lifestyle. They want a meaningful existence, and it seems the Church no longer fits the bill. It is as if the God they seek no longer resides in the pews, and the Divine voice is no longer heard in the doctrines and public positions of the institution. There is no point returning home like prodigal children when that home is in a foreign land and time.

Unless this drift of Catholics from the Church is not confronted, understood, and meaningfully addressed, the Plenary Council outcomes will boil down to an "insider talkfest".

Sociologists have observed the downward trend of allegiance to the Church for decades. Even the much-lauded Second Vatican Council did not alter the momentum of Catholics leaving their practice and dissociation from the public positions of the institution, particularly on matters of sexuality, marriage, and gender identification. It is as if the Church continues to function through a stance of resistance rather than incorporate the benefits of discovery through the human and social sciences into its theology and sacramental practice.

Sadly, the upshot has seen divorced people, same-sex attracted and gender-diverse persons and even those who have used IVF to bring life into the world be placed at odds with a Church that insists life be conducted within a normative framework. The Church's refusal to accommodate these lived realities marginalises and eventually alienates people. It is humiliating and discriminatory. Nothing could be more contrary to the witness and message of Jesus than a Church culture that leaves people at the margins, judged to be less than others and excluded from the sacramental life.



Pope Francis has exhorted us to follow the "missionary impulse". Yves Congar OP famously said that true reform starts at the margins. Both speak of shifting the normative paradigm. This Second Assembly, despite the heavily orchestrated draft motions, the truncated consultations, the dubious administration of amendments and submissions, can still stand up for those humiliated and hurt by the Church. It can still affirm what theologians articulate as a contemporary Catholic human anthropology where sexuality and gender are no longer barriers to full participation in the communion and ministries of the Church. And it can boldly claim that equality of dignity brings with it equality of rights to participate in a Church that seeks to reflect the Spirit of Jesus to the world.

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