



SIGNS OF HOPE, BUT ROOM FOR MORE – MONDAY, 4 JULY 2022

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Blog by Francis Sullivan, CSSA Chair

The first day of the Second Assembly showed just how far the official Church has travelled. Motions were considered that actively acknowledged the history of abuse and discrimination against First Nations people and the victims of child sexual assault. Motions that in themselves were no longer contentious speaks volumes for the level of awareness and social consciousness the Church now brings to its actions and lack of action. The results of the voting will be made known tomorrow.

Beneath the debate on these issues lies the confronting reality that the culture of the Church can be discriminatory and exclusive. It is a culture fed by defensiveness and an instinct of self-containment that leads to arrogance. This is not the attitude Pope Francis calls for, nor is it the character Jesus portrayed.


At assemblies like this, the resolutions all come down to words. Language is a powerful tool. It can liberate or constrain. It can be expansive or small-minded. I fear that the institution's approach to the sex abuse scandal still suffers from a cautious, defensive instinct, forever seeking to contextualise the crimes and relegate them to history. Too often, our lamentations confuse our discomfort with the pain of the victims rather than standing in a vulnerable space free of explanations and justifications.

In other words, the Church still tends to merely incorporate the incidences of abuse into its ongoing story rather than letting the scandal confront its very nature and, in turn, its culture. It shies from debates about any implicit institutional biases or even how episcopal authority can be corrosive of genuine systemic reform.

Unless there is a comprehensive acknowledgement of the cultural factors that led to the scandal that concealed its realities and facilitated the evasion from police and other authorities, the institutional response will always appear limp and bureaucratic.

The Royal Commission specifically listed 16 recommendations for the Church. The bishops and religious leaders bristle that a secular body can be so affronting. But if it weren't for the public inquiry, the Church would not even consider compliance with its safeguarding standards. That said, it still struggles to get national compliance with its complaints protocols. Bishops and religious leaders have too much say over how the supposedly independent safeguarding agency operates and in turn, what resources it is given. Again, the culture of control rears its head.

Tomorrow, I hope to speak to a motion before the Assembly relating to how the Church comes to terms with people experiencing marginalisation, such as LGBTIQ+ persons. For so many of us, this is a pivotal moment at this Assembly. It is one thing to claim that everyone has dignity, even equality of dignity. But it is another, stronger claim to acknowledge their equality of rights. The right to participate fully in our Church must not be based on sexuality or gender identity, nor on marital status. Our society has shown



us how to effect equality, and the Church needs to learn from it, not stand apart and continue to discriminate and humiliate.

So, fingers crossed for tomorrow!

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