

## Rewriting History?

**I don't want to appear to be overly negative but after reading the announcement in the recent Plenary Council Newsletter that 'The origins of the Council go back almost 20 years, as the Australian bishops considered St John Paul II's call in his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* for the Church to consider its place in contemporary society,' I find it hard not to be. This statement is a little rich. Yes, there may have been some consideration given to holding a Plenary Council to consider the apostolic letter, but I think the reality is that the Royal Commission that exposed the litany of "sins" of the Church in Australia highlighted the need for a close examination of the practices of the Church, not to consider the place of the Church in a modern Australia, but as a means to engage with people in order to keep the 'boat afloat.' The Church is in crisis. My concern is that with the little time that has passed since the Royal Commission, the existing oligarchs of the Church have regained a sense of authority and feel confident enough to reassert their power positions, perhaps with some small concessions to the laity.**

**The choice of the Plenary Council as the implement to make decisions for the future, the lack of enthusiasm shown by many clergy and dioceses, and the lack of publication of the submissions indicates to me that it is business as usual amongst the hierarchy of the church. Using St John Paul II's apostolic letter as justification for calling the Plenary Council is unfortunate. St John**

Paul 11 was hardly the model of a consultative leader that the hierarchy should be following. His notion of a Synodal Church was at odds with Francis's vision. His unwillingness to address the pressing issues of the time have contributed to the place the church is in at present. I hope I am wrong but are we being prepared for some peripheral change and substantive change will be avoided at all cost.

Jim Quillinan, in his latest 'Along the Track' entitled 'A Special Moment' says **'Giving the laity roles in the liturgy is not enough, handing over some**

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**tasks in the parish is not enough. Who should be invited to serve and minister in our faith communities? Where are the women in our church life, ministry and leadership? Clericalism is the new catchcry, but there is actually a clericalism and an anti-clericalism in the Church at the same time. A warped view of what constitutes the People of God has fostered an accountability crisis. We have relied too much on the bishops and priests, handing responsibility over rather than working in genuine collaboration. The sexual abuse crisis is still here. Although some major steps have been implemented to address child safety and protection, what that crisis highlighted about our Church has not sunk in. A top priority ought to be reforming power sharing structures and decision-making processes about our church and its mission.'**

**Reforming power sharing structures is critical to any on-going change. The odds are against this happening. The instances where powerful people hand over or share their power in a meaningful way with those they rule, are few and far between. We should not hold our breath. The Bishops will be called on to make changes that will effect them and their positions in the Church and the broader community. It is hard to see that happening.**

**It is easy for me and others to talk negatively about the Plenary Council process, do nothing, fail to see the many good things that people of faith do and think all is hopeless. Quillinan goes on to say ‘If we are to create spaces which help us become sensitive to the small moments of grace in our lives, we need to develop together rituals and gatherings which enable us to touch the sacred in our lives, rituals which encourage reflection and contemplation. Such gatherings can be a very powerful aid to our faith development. But for many, traditional rituals and liturgies that we have inherited are out of date, inflexible. The language of our inherited rituals does not speak to us, some even find it alienating. Perhaps the way forward is for small gatherings sharing the small moments of grace in our lives.’ My current experience of Church and the Masses I have attended recently is that they are increasingly ‘small gatherings.’ Unfortunately there is very little sharing.**

**Whether the Bishops were motivated by a desire to consider St John Paul 11’s letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, may be irrelevant if the decisions coming out of the Ple-**

**nary Council wash over the underlying issues that exist in the Church today. *To carry on essentially in the same way will be catastrophic.***

**Tom Smyth. Former Catholic School Principal.**

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