

Lifting the clouds on PC 2020

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The Australian Plenary Council Assemblies which were to meet at the end of this year and the beginning of next have been postponed for a year because of Covid-19. This gives more time for the Church as a whole (clergy and laity, Church officials and ordinary members) to better shape agendas and procedures leading up to the Council itself.

After the initial enthusiasm for whole Church participation in the first phase of preparation for the Council as shown by the 220,000 responses to questions posed by the steering Committee, it seems that PC 2020 scepticism and/or exhaustion set in. There were too many signs that nothing much would change in respect of governance, the role of women, synodal deliberation on crucial issues in the Church – etc., etc.

Groups for change like Catholics for Renewal and the Sense of the Faithful network kept pushing for the sorts of agenda items highlighted in the Joint Parishes statement endorsed by our Parish last year. But those of us involved in these things remained heavy of heart about the will and capacity of our episcopal leaders to entertain the radical changes in Church structures and Church culture to which Pope Francis has been calling us.

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Recently, however, two things lifted the clouds a little, for me at any rate. First, I read an article in the American National Catholic Reporter (NCR), which hailed the Australian Church as leading the way in a new phase of address to the international sexual abuse crisis. Massimo Faggioli, the author, pointed out that the Church's leaders had accepted the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission on child sexual abuse as applied to the Catholic Church and had taken steps towards addressing the abuse in all aspects of theology and Church governance at all levels. (See Massimo Faggioli article: <https://www.ncronline.org> May 19, 2020.)

That much I knew already. But Faggioli told me more about the review of the Church which the bishops had entrusted to an Implementation Advisory Group which in turn had established a Governance Review Project Team (GRPT). Just more Committees with the same old male clerical players? Well, no. Faggioli himself was invited from overseas to serve as an external advisor to the Team which consisted of 18 members – 14 Australian and global lay Catholics (including women – I'm missing the exact numbers) and four clergy members. A woman was appointed as the executive officer of the Advisory Group.

The review, a document of over 200 pages, entitled *Light from the Southern Cross*, was presented to the bishops at the end of May. It was to have been kept under wraps while our bishops digested it. The clouds lowered again when I learned that the rank and file of the laity would be denied access and the chance to discuss the report until at least the next bishops' Plenary in November. But the review fell off a bus overseas and interested Australian laypersons can now access it¹. The introduction to the report and the recommendations are available here (link to SoF website). Two excellent summaries of the review are: 1) Joshua J. McElwee, in NCR, 3 June headed 'Australian bishops' report advocates major changes to church governance'². 2) Richard R. Gaillardetz, "May the

¹ See 03 FINAL Southern Cross Report 010520 Single Page – Copy [or https://international.la-croix.com/uploads/files/03-FINAL-Southern-Cross-Report-010520-SinglePage.pdf](https://international.la-croix.com/uploads/files/03-FINAL-Southern-Cross-Report-010520-SinglePage.pdf).

² <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/australian-bishops-report-advocates-major-changes-church-governance>

Global Church Discover 'Light from the Southern Cross'³. Review and analysis of a potentially ground-breaking document on Church governance". I found this scrolling down the list of articles in the weekly newsletter of *Pearls and Irritations*, Saturday 6/06/2020.

Those summaries have lifted some clouds. They show that at least some of our episcopal leaders have realised that deep cultural and structural changes in our Church are necessary to address the trends towards its self-destruction in the next few years. The findings and recommendations must have a massive influence as the agendas for PC2020-22 are drawn up and decisions about delegates to the Assemblies are revised.

Lifting the clouds 2: Reports from the Discernment and Writing Groups

And so too for the other piece of cloud-lifting news. The six thematic papers from the Discernment and Writing Groups which were set up to reflect and report on two stages of consultations for PC2020 were released on Pentecost Sunday.⁴ This is not the place to attempt a hurried summary of these papers. Suffice to say that like the Light from the Southern Cross Report, the thematic papers provide a basis for far-reaching change in major areas of Church life in Australia – and again, in directions anticipated in the Joint Parishes' statement. But again also, we await the response of our bishops.

In the meantime, the materials are all on the table (or at least on the web) equipping rank and file members of the Church to participate with energy rekindled by hope, in framing agendas for the Plenary Council and voicing 'the sense of the faithful' on the issues it will consider. It really is up to us: Synodality, which Pope Francis has called for, remains an empty slogan for as long as we ordinary Catholics do not stir ourselves out of PC 2020 scepticism!

Over to you/us!

³ <https://johnmenadue.com/richard-r-gaillardetz-a-promising-roadmap-for-ecclesial-reform-and-conversion-one-of-the-worlds-top-ecclesialogists-analyzes-an-unprecedented-church-governance-report/>

⁴ The Writing Group reports are available at <https://bit.ly/30qtGxc> or <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/continuing-the-journey-of-discernment/>