

Were the good old days in the Catholic Church really that good?

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By Claire Victory

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(Image: Unsplash)

To heal from the child sex abuse tragedy, the Catholic Church must be more inclusive and go to the people on the margins.

Some positives emerged from the Plenary Council and those strengths should be acknowledged. But some displayed a nostalgia for a past time when the pews were full on Sunday and marriages didn't end. We now know that while those pews were full, children were being abused, unmarried women were being forced to give their babes up for adoption, and Indigenous kids were stolen from their families.

The Church's teachings on a number of matters would be more readily accepted if people could see that those teachings are anchored in love and respect for the dignity of the human person.

But the Church has become an inward-looking club that has closed its doors to many of the faithful.

I'm not sure what Jesus would make of recent decades, given his tendency to hang out with society's outcasts. He confronted oppressive structures born of religious law and custom and encouraged a loving relationship with God and each other.

The week-long first assembly of the Church's historic Plenary Council concluded just over a week ago.

In the lead up there was deep scepticism about the council's agenda and about what had become of the recommendations and concerns raised in the 17,500 submissions made by individuals and groups of people deeply concerned about the future of their church.

I was one of the 280 members who gathered virtually in this first assembly for a week of prayer, reflection and deep listening and I have to say I am quietly confident that the majority are optimistic about the mood for change that will lead to a church that can serve the world in the 21st century.

Each of us was allocated to a group of 30, and a smaller group of 10, which explored the 16 agenda questions. Most of the proceedings were held in-camera, but daily reports from each of the groups were livestreamed, along with a pre-recorded Mass.

Evidence of our broad church was on display during this week of generally respectful listening and dialogue.

Diverse opinions ensured rich discussion as many laid bare their concerns for the church they love.

Through various Plenary Council processes I called for greater inclusion in the church and for the church to go to the people on the margins, to begin the deep healing which is so desperately needed.

I was not alone.

There seemed to be a consensus among those who spoke with conviction about the exclusion of various groups of people from the Church, including people who are gay, trans or gender diverse; people who are divorced and remarried; and those living with a partner but not yet married.

I participated in a series of nightly webinars produced by the church's national reform movement. I spoke in particular about my experience of the Plenary Council processes and joined a lively discussion about the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ people.

There was a great strength in the "interventions" by Plenary Council members, both written and spoken, which will form part of the First Assembly's official record.

Many of those interventions have been welcomed by faithful people who are hanging on by their fingernails — from among the Plenary Council members and from the broader community.

People responded with optimism to many of the reports aired in the open sessions of the Council, and to the quality of the discussion in the mainstream media.

And many were heartened by the frank and open discussion on issues close to their heart in the Plenary Tracker – the nightly webinar discussion hosted by the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform and Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn.

Fellow Council members Professor Emeritus John Warhurst and Francis Sullivan each penned a daily blog, also well-received.

But not all submissions looked to the future.

Some displayed a nostalgia for a past time when the pews were full on Sunday and marriages didn't end.

As I pointed out during one of the plenary sessions: we now know that while those pews were full, children were being abused, unmarried women were being forced to give their babes up for adoption, and Indigenous kids were stolen from their families.

By bemoaning the fact that marriages today don't last like they did in the "good old days", we ignore the lived experience of so many women for whom a life-long commitment was akin to a life sentence; women who were abused but who were legally, socially, financially unable to leave.

As Vincentians we travel with people who are struggling — materially, psychologically and spiritually. Many people see their work with Vinnies as an authentic expression of their faith, even though they may no longer feel welcome in the pews.

People do experience love and respect in the church, through welcoming and supportive practices, but so often it's through schools, social services agencies and specific communities or individuals (including some priests and bishops, and many religious women and men).

But when the official structure or leadership of the church is seen to treat those welcoming, supportive groups or individuals as outsiders, outliers and trouble-makers — then we should question what the institutional church is telling the Australian community about who it is.

The Gospel is clear that human life — all human life — is sacred and should be protected. It's hard not to feel that this simple truth has been all but lost in a church where the leadership is seen to perpetuate the legalistic, hierarchical structures that deliver power to a few in an outdated monarchical model that has been protected by Canon law and dogma in recent centuries.

I am optimistic that a strong, pastoral, Christ-centred church will rise from the ashes of the child sex abuse tragedy. This Plenary Council is an important part of that process, as is an ongoing commitment to listening to a diverse range of voices from within the Church and from the margins.

Forty proposals came out of last week's discussions, and they include the Church publicly backing Indigenous Australians seeking constitutional recognition; adoption of innovative models of governance with lay and clergy working closely together; expansion of programs for contemporary lay and religious formation; professional supervision for clergy and church workers; expansion of the influential participation of women; and the establishment of forums for open dialogue and discernment, especially with groups who feel excluded in the church.

The proposals will be considered by a team of experts in the lead up to the second assembly in July next year.

We have a lot of work to do before then. But we've made a start.

The National Council is in discussions with other social services organisations and people committed to social justice. We will work together in the lead up to the next assembly to further engage and animate our people. We will continue to reflect on and deepen our understanding of Catholic Social Teaching and how our Catholic faith and identity form and inspire us. And we will lead by example, as we reach out to people who are marginalised and welcome all, the way Jesus did.

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