

COMMENT

A catechesis Australia needs

Findings from Plenary listening sessions indicate a Church in need of clarity on nature and mission



Phillipa Martyr

The Plenary Council has recently started to release some of its preliminary findings from the listening sessions that have taken place across the country.

The findings are fascinating. This process has brought to light a wonderful opportunity for re-evangelisation on a broad scale.

It's shown exactly where there needs to be targeted adult Catholic education to help the 10 per cent of Catholics who still attend Mass on a regular basis, but who are clearly confused and distressed by the changes they are facing inside and outside the Church.

If its own reported data is anything to go by, the Plenary Council has accurately captured the state of Catholic belief in the pews at the parochial level. It certainly looks a lot like the session I attended in person.

My listening session was held jointly for two local parishes with about 20 older adults, none of whom had the same idea of what the Catholic Church was, what it taught,

that our ideas about how to go forward were also completely different from each other - and mutually exclusive. For example, if you think that the Church's worship should be lay-led, it's hard to see that co-existing with the ministerial priesthood. If you believe that the ministerial priesthood is reserved to men only, then calls for the ordination of women seem to come from an alternate reality.

So there we were, like sheep without a shepherd. Our facilitator made notes which I assume were forwarded to the Council for processing as our collective views. I can only guess about this, because I never saw what was forwarded.

The Anglican communion has shown us what happens when you try to accommodate multiple different interpretations of the Christian deposit of faith. You end up with an increasingly irrelevant and top-heavy organisation with a substantial property portfolio and almost empty churches.

By contrast, the smaller non-Latin Catholic rite groups in the Australian Church - the Maronites, the Melkites, the Syro-Malabar community - have strong and coherent doctrinal identities and quadruple the rates of Mass attendance.

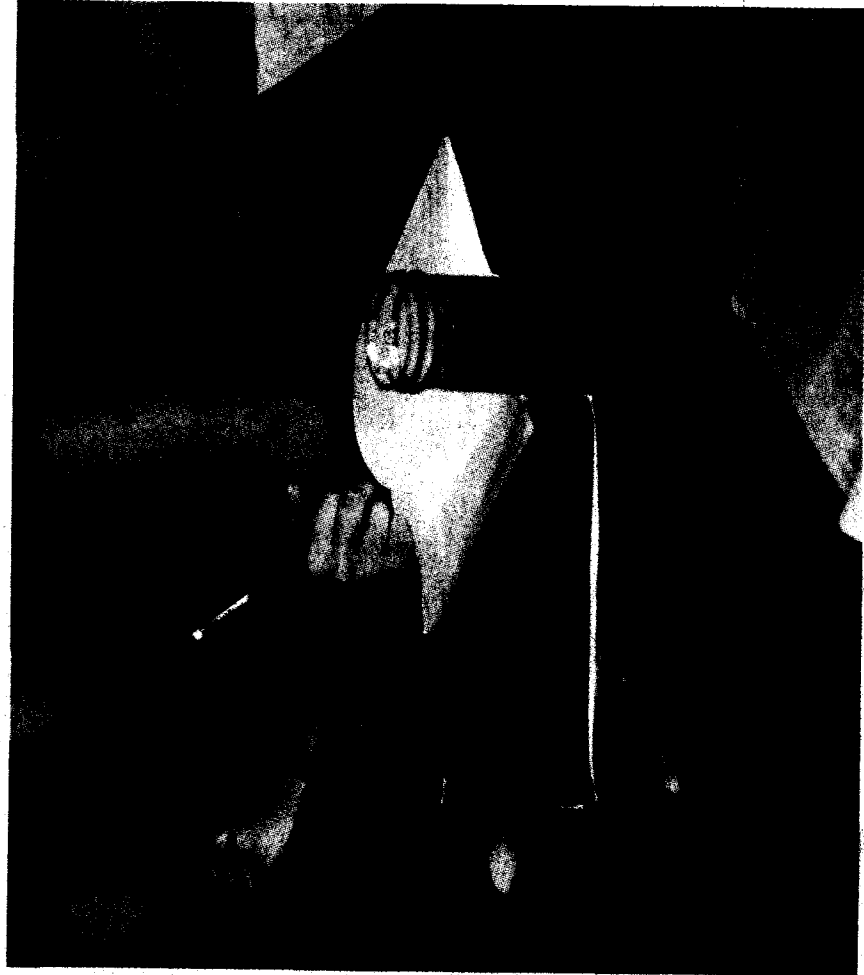
Some of this may be dependent partly on cultural identity, but their clear sense of who they are and what they believe is a useful lesson to us.

The tiny local communities in mainstream parishes are still practising, but they aren't quite sure why. They struggle with the reality of the Eucharist, the validity of the ministerial priesthood, and the value of celibacy. They don't know why their children and grandchildren no longer attend Mass or the sacraments, even after 12 years of expensive Catholic schooling.

They see their children and grandchildren living lives that were unthinkable to an older generation of Catholics: divorce, children born out of wedlock, cohabitation, same sex marriages and partnerships.

So what to do? At the very least, it's clear we have to help this puzzled generation with sound catechesis on the authentic deposit of faith. Perhaps if we can get that right, we will be in a better position to help the even smaller number of middle-aged and younger Catholics in the pews as well.

Dr Phillipa Martyr is a Perth-based historian, university lecturer and academic researcher.



Harnessing diametrically opposed views on the Church's faith will be a significant challenge.

or why it taught it. I was the youngest person there apart from J, the young man assisting the facilitator - and I was old enough to be J's mother. Some were scandalised to tears by the sexual abuse crisis, not having realised its full extent before now. But mostly we listened to each other with expressions of growing dismay, as it dawned on us that we all believed quite different things.

We had different views about marriage; about contra-

ception, about the priesthood, and about the sacraments. In most cases those views were diametrically opposed and could never co-exist in any normal universe, let alone in the one Church.

And naturally this meant