

Woftam alert for Plenary Council Framework for Motions document

Just in case you haven't been using the woftam catchphrase, it means waste of time and money – although some people like to include an expletive starting with f. The Framework for Motions document, the working document for the second assembly of the 5th Australian Plenary Council, was released on 1 Jun 2022. The actual assembly starts 4 Jul 2022, so it doesn't give any of us much time to assess what each motion means, and what the implications are should it pass.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EiQBQV8U8-T5DemhN1TY-WSIT4uSzy-v/view>

It isn't an easy document to read, even though it is only 44 pages long. That's because it is couched in a language that's part lawyer and part education bureaucrat.

To even begin to read it, you have to get past the title, and when I think Framework for Motions a toilet cistern is what comes to mind, and for that reason 'motions' is an unfortunate choice too.

Because I was curious, I wanted to know if the Holy Spirit was mentioned in any of the motions that were of a non-introductory nature. After all, if we have been truly listening to the third person of the Most Blessed Trinity, shouldn't He be mentioned a la Acts 15:28? (It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves). The answer was no. In fact, references to the Holy Spirit could be counted on the fingers of one hand. However there were references to the Spirit, spiritual and spirituality, and some of those references would make just as much sense with Zeitgeist being substituted for Spirit, and sadly maybe even more sense, than substituting Holy Spirit for Spirit.

This curiosity extended to seeing what kind of splash this new document was making in the Twitterverse. I had to really dig to find any response at all, and it's been over 48 hours since release. Indeed this kind of 'non-event' status has been observed on Twitter throughout the whole Plenary Council saga. Thinking back the communication policy seems to have been drop a document, provide press statements for dioceses to use, and then have radio silence until the next document drop. As I said back then, that's not the way to engage minds and hearts in the process, and without grassroots engagement the Plenary Council process cannot rise above woftam status.

Where there has been engagement is with levels of church bureaucracy (diocesan curia et al) and with catholic education bureaucrats, and maybe with the odd bishop or two (yes I know that's a tautology). The Plenary Council process has been bureaucrats taking to bureaucrats about things that matter to bureaucrats.

Every so often during the whole Plenary Council Process I've tried to find blogs with Plenary Council commentary. After you wade through page after page of diocesan blogs with word for word copies of the official press statements, you give up looking. So all you have left is

commentary from semi-regular journalists in the Catholic Press. Of them, Dr Philippa Martyr has been the most prolific and reliable commentator. The upshot of this is that non-bureaucrats haven't been able to find other non-bureaucrats to compare notes with on Plenary Council matters, unless they are long-suffering family members and similarly long-suffering friends -and those long-suffering ones tend to be people in the stratum between bureaucrat and disinterested laity.

Unless the whole church in Australia is engaged in the Plenary Council process then adoption of any approved motions (amended or otherwise) isn't going to happen. If the outcomes of the Plenary Council process are not 'received', then it has been a colossal woftam. For a Council or a Synod process to be received something more than just engagement is required, people have to be both convinced about the necessity of change AND inspired to work towards it.

Compared with the fruit of the Detroit Archdiocese synod <https://www.unleashthegospel.org/the-letter/> and its high levels of inspiration, the Framework for Motions document is lacking in inspiration at all.

Several of the Plenary Council motions have more to do with virtue signaling and public opinion than anything else.

The ongoing problem is that the Church is a movement not a bureaucracy, even though it needs levels of bureaucracy to fulfill its God given charter to draw people to holiness and to send them out to co-operate in establishing God's rule on earth. The Church is a theocracy, it is not, and can never be a democracy, because the only person's opinion that matters is God's.

We are here to please and serve Him, not public opinion, not ourselves and not our own preferences for ways of doing things.

So the only proper lens to view each motion through is, '**Is this what God wants?**' and can we back up any yes with evidence that this is what God wants from scripture, tradition and magisterial teaching? How does each motion assist the universal call to holiness and the universal call to mission?

How do these motions measure up against what I consider are the Big Three of what God wants?

Scripture -His message to us, to help us know, love and serve Him better.

Family -His plan for human life, which has been under extreme attack in our lifetimes.

Holy Spirit – how to open up pathways for the charismatic dimension of the Holy Spirit's activity to flow through the Church and bear superabundant fruit.

Scripture is rarely mentioned, except for a push for inclusive language, which is itself based in an ideology and not found in scripture or tradition.

Family and families get mentioned in the introductory parts of motions and are given an oblique and not primary focus.

The Holy Spirit's charisms are mentioned sometimes in a general way, and usually with the connotation of some people being better at doing certain tasks than others, not in the charismatic way of openness to the 'dynamis' power of Acts 1:8.

There are a minimum of 104 motions for the second assembly to consider in the space of 4 days. Each one deserves far more time for consideration, modification and the development of referendum-like pros and cons than the brief weeks between now and July 4. Does this speed imply an expectation that each motion will get rubber stamped? Many of the introductory motions will need several amendments, and each amendment will need to be voted upon.

Some of the motions will produce 'jobs for the boys', opportunities for expensive studies, investigations and reports by bureaucrats which will keep said bureaucrats in employment and which may – or may not – produce information conducive to helping people respond to the call to holiness and the call to mission.

Some of the motions are so vague that whole sections of the Church in Australia could get on with business as usual, keeping the status quo, and concoct creative reports that speak glowingly about how well they have adopted those motions. The work necessary to concoct such creative reports will help keep the bureaucrats employed too. Ditto for the paperwork necessary to produce the careful investigations required for some motions.

I continue to mourn the lack of realism about Catholic education. According to the motion all we need is a new national forum to talk about all manner of things to do with education – which by implication means the education bureaucrats think everything is as rosy as pie. While the rest of us wonder if the huge amounts of money poured into the Catholic education system are doing anything worthwhile at all - since so incredibly few graduates of Catholic education live recognisably Catholic lives.

Have you been to a school Mass recently? They are a combination of a school concert and a school assembly with a Eucharistic prayer thrown in there somewhere. Youngsters who have seen such diminishment in importance given to the non-school parts of the Mass are unlikely to take those holy parts seriously.

Those who do care about the religious education of their children are voting with their feet and either home-schooling or sending their children to Christian schools where at least they will learn lots of scripture by heart. Imagine the number of full-time youth ministers and parish sacramental co-ordinators who could be employed if the budgeted funds were directed to that purpose instead of the national forum.

I note the motion for laypeople, especially women, to preach homilies within Mass. Anyone with a microphone kit and a computer these days can preach whatever they want and upload it to YouTube or similar platforms. If you are any good at it, you will get invitations to speak at retreats and similar non-Mass opportunities for preaching. But at Mass we do want the person in persona Christi, who has been the person in persona Christi throughout the rest of the Mass

to speak to us in the homily; to break open God's Word for us. So the push for laypeople preaching homilies at Mass has more to do with wanting the authority that comes from being regularly in public view than most other reasons.

One way to fix this is to provide regular opportunities for preaching outside the context of Mass.

The other major push for this motion is the abysmally poor quality of preaching in homilies. I get it, I really do. The majority of homilies come in the following flavours; word salads; retelling the Gospel narrative almost word for word, something obviously put together a few moments before Mass started, something poorly regurgitated from an online source, or something using examples from a non-Australian culture that do not resonate meaning with an Australian audience.

Another way to fix this is to replace this motion for lay preaching with a more useful motion containing constructive proposals to improve the quality of clerical preaching in homilies.

I am also concerned about the proposed motions which put those who vote nay to the motion in difficult positions. Consider this scenario. You agree that recognition of the custodial role of first nations people is a matter of justice, but you have reservations about whether all the subparts of the motion will bear good fruit; or you have concerns that some parts of the motion will have unforeseen and detrimental consequences. In conscience you cannot vote yay for the motion as it is, and no amendments have been proffered. In essence you disagree with specifics but not the general direction. On motions like these it will be so easy for people to unfairly conclude that the nay voters were first nations haters, rather than people who wanted a better motion to vote yay to. Under conditions like these having true freedom to vote according to conscience will be hampered.

A similar concern is the peer pressure to vote a certain way which is going to be much higher under in-person conditions than under zoom-like conditions. It is the nature of these things that factional blocks will form, and the better organized factional blocks will be a force to be reckoned with. Certainly we need to pray for the second assembly delegates because when how you know God wants you to vote is different to how the largest faction wants you to vote - voting true to God's way is going to require extra courage.

I still think the best use of the days of the second assembly is to throw all the motions away, and spend those days imploring the visitation of the Holy Spirit upon Australia like a nation-wide Pentecost.

Whenever I overcome my repugnance, I'll read the Framework for Motions at a much deeper level and attempt to come up with lists of pros and cons, even though such a task feels like a complete woftam.