

AUSTRALASIAN CATHOLIC COALITION FOR CHURCH REFORM

THE AUSTRALIAN PLENARY COUNCIL: An Agenda for Reform?

Response to the Agenda with Concrete Proposals for the
Plenary Council, 3-10 October 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our Church is at a crisis point, no longer adequately inspiring our people. We Catholics desire a 'grown-up' Church and recognise that the necessary reform requires major cultural change. All of us have a right and a responsibility to be engaged in this renewal. Relevant, constructive, and concrete proposals and actions are needed now more than ever to shape our Church for the task of proclaiming the vision and mission of Jesus in the 21st century.

We are concerned that the agenda questions for the Plenary Council do not encourage serious examination of the deep-seated issues underlying the numerous challenges facing thinking Catholics. We do not endorse the Agenda as it is and request that it be replaced. We urge those Members of the Plenary Council who have a similar view on the inadequacy of the current PC Agenda, to express that view prior to, or at the outset of the first session, in the strongest possible terms.

However, with a desire to work synodally, we offer our observations and proposals on the Agenda without being constrained by its restricted perspective. Key themes in our response include:

- *Inclusion - the elimination of all forms of discrimination in our Church in relation to sharing Eucharist, providing pastoral care, or sacramental ministry, LGBTIQ+ people and others suffering exclusion;*
- *Implementation of the recommendations of The Light from the Southern Cross report, particularly sections on:

 - *Identification of the Principles and Culture of Good Governance, and*
 - *Good Governance Practices and Culture' using auditable timelines;**
- *The concerns and spiritual perceptions of First Nations people;*
- *Sensitive and just support for the survivors of sexual abuse, refugees and asylum seekers, and marginalised people while advocating for fundamental change in public policies that cause or enable vulnerability and disadvantage;*
- *The eradication of clericalism in all its forms, while working towards new pathways to ministry for all, including women and married men;*
- *Diocesan Pastoral Councils and Parish Pastoral Councils in every Australian diocese and parish;*
- *The need for a major paradigm shift involving deep change, new modes of leadership both clerical and lay, and structures which ensure accountability, transparency and inclusion, especially of women in all leadership and decision-making;*
- *Examination of the traditional concept of 'parish' to consider smaller, more intimate groups of Catholics as the basic structure of the local Church;*
- *Synodality, recognising that all Catholics have gifts, talents and expertise for leadership; together we form a priestly people, requiring quality formation opportunities;*
- *Adopt Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si' and the principles of integral ecology as blueprints for Church action, leadership and advocacy in caring for our environment;*
- *The imperative that those matters that are beyond the competence of Australian bishops be referred to the Holy See.*

The Plenary Council has the potential to be a catalyst, a fulcrum on which an emerging Church can pivot towards the future. It could be a significant step towards a recovered vision of God's revelation in Jesus and the Spirit within faith communities and in transforming our world and creation.

We call on Plenary Council members to respond to Pope Francis' hopes for a new era of synodality and accountability where we all walk humbly together. It will require uncommon courage and a commitment to changes in how we do and are church. For this to happen, we must be open to radical conversion, reform, and renewal. Let us journey in the Spirit!

INTRODUCTION

Our Church is at a crisis point, no longer adequately inspiring our people. In an interview with the BBC, Archbishop Coleridge, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, admitted, *“the credibility of the church is shot to pieces”* Asked to explain this comment, he said, *“It’s true but up to a point because our agencies retain great credibility but it is the bishops overwhelmingly who have lost credibility”*.¹ The Archbishop of Melbourne, with the largest Catholic population in Australia, recently stated that his diocese is on a ‘threshold’ and either we do something or ‘sink into the sunset’.²

The institutional Church has alienated many people who for years lived a sacramental life, including many who attended Catholic schools. It has now become irrelevant to the lives of too many of our people.

After almost 60 years, our Church is not yet a Vatican II institution, a truly collegial Church in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances. Rather, its activities are often based on legalism and control, with inadequate listening and dialogue, and often more focussed on its institutional image.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has not only condemned the horror of child sexual abuse by clerics but has censured bishops for covering up that abuse and exposing children to harm, a demonstration of the autocratic and unaccountable clericalist decision-making that pervades our Church’s leadership. In a *Letter to all Catholics*, Pope Francis wrote, *“To say ‘no’ to abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism.”* *“Clericalism”, he said, “involves trying to replace or silence or ignore or reduce the people of God to small elites.”* (Aug. 20, 2018).

The Plenary Council must respond to Pope Francis’ hopes for a new era of synodality, create a Church that listens to a range of voices, a model of the church that Jesus expects from us in this millennium and one that will require changes on how we do and are church. This requires radical conversion, reform and renewal.

The Introduction to the Plenary Council Agenda sets out the task for the Plenary Council members: *‘to develop concrete proposals to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia at this time.’* It goes on to spell out the ‘missionary option’, quoting Pope Francis: *‘a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything ... for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.* (Evangelii Gaudium n.2)

This is not a time to be faint-hearted about the task ahead. Deep discernment is needed by all the members of the Plenary Council. The process and deliberations of the Plenary Council must focus on Jesus’ vision and mission, our inspiration, and positive outcomes for the people of God. A major paradigm shift is required as we aspire to being a holy people rather than just a church-going people.

Since the outcomes of the Plenary Council will affect all of us who care about our Church, every Catholic also needs to be attentive to the voice of the Spirit in our reflections and deliberations on this important task. It is for us to understand and apply the vision and message of Jesus to the here and now. Our decisions are to be assessed against the criterion of bringing the good news of Jesus to our own lives, our

¹ America Magazine, 26February 2019

² Archbishop Peter Comensoli, *The Way of the Gospel: Families of Communities*, Address to Archdiocesan Clergy, Bulleen, 28 April 2021.

communities and society; the news that is most clearly exemplified in Jesus' own life. The responsible course of action then is to make our views known to Plenary Council members.

However, it is extremely disappointing that the *Agenda* which the bishops have decided upon does not show that it has arisen from the discernment process that they established. It appears to ignore the priorities that thousands of Catholics distilled from their many deliberations and expressed so clearly in their submissions. It does not even reflect the prospects for change implied in the *Instrumentum Laboris* that we were told would shape the *Agenda* and offers limited scope for necessary and wide-ranging reform and renewal. It seems designed towards moderating existing policies and structures at best, in ways that provide for an appearance of renewal rather than substantial reform.

The *Agenda* as presented suggests an unrealistic picture of our Church with little recognition of its current perilous state. The agenda items and questions do not encourage consideration of the real issues. Further, it seems to try to discourage consideration of matters outside the narrow legislative competence of Australian bishops. We do not endorse the *Agenda* as it is and request that it be replaced. We urge those Members of the Plenary Council who have a similar view on the inadequacy of the current PC Agenda, to express that view prior to, or at the outset of the first session, in the strongest possible terms.

However, with a desire to make the Plenary Council as productive an exercise in synodality as is possible, we have not been constrained by its restricted perspective, as expressed in our observations. As the Introduction to the *Agenda* states, the task for the Plenary Council members is '*to develop concrete proposals to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia at this time.*' The members also must not be constrained in this task by accepting the limitations of these narrow *Agenda Questions*.

We, the members of the nineteen Catholic organisations which make up the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR), reach out to the members of the Plenary Council, recognising their most important role in ensuring the Council's success and building the Australian Church of the future. We have carefully considered the questions that make up the Plenary Council Agenda and we share our thoughts on some critical aspects. (We have numbered the sixteen Agenda Questions within the six themes as Agenda Questions 1-16 for ease of reference).

In responding to the questions as presented, we first provide observations on the experience of Catholics and the Church community that we seek to be and to personify in our living, noting the extended context within which the issues arise. A community's missionary impulse is '*the fruit of its own experience*' (EG n.24).

Relevant, constructive, concrete proposals are identified in seeking to renew our Church as Christ-centred and missionary. These insights and concerns represent the sense of faith of the Australian faithful and a desire for a 'grown-up' Church. Real reform is going to involve major cultural change. We seek to be part of the movement that leads to and through the change.

Inclusion, equality of women and men, clericalism and the opening of all ministries, including ordination, for women and married men are major concerns for everyone we have consulted in preparing this response. These were also dominant themes in the submissions to the Plenary Council.

Some proposals apply to more than one agenda item and are repeated as appropriate. In particular, the recommendations of *The Light from the Southern Cross* report, commissioned by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in response to the Royal Commission's criticism of the Church's governance, are applicable to all questions. Renewal of our Church cannot be achieved without reforming the Church's leadership methods, governance, and culture, all addressed with considerable wisdom in *The Light from*

the Southern Cross. Getting Back on Mission: Reforming Our Church Together, by Catholics for Renewal is also valuable in this regard.

The people of the Church and indeed the Pope, in his commitment to synodality, expect that the concerns of Australian Catholics should be identified and made known to the competent authorities, especially in matters beyond the jurisdiction of local bishops.

The Plenary Council should advise the Holy See of those issues of the Australian Church that are beyond the competence of the Australian bishops.

These observations and proposals are presented to the members of the Plenary Council as an expression of hope and trust arising from the experience of Australian Catholics. Let the voices of the people be heard!

PLENARY COUNCIL AGENDA QUESTIONS

CONVERSION

Agenda Question 1. How might we better accompany one another on the journey of personal and communal conversion which mission in Australia requires?

Our Observations

Conversion is foundational. Integrity, authenticity, a good conscience, and love for all people and God's creation are the hallmarks of true Christian conversion. Maturity means internalising and taking responsibility for one's own development, values and actions, not just following the beckoning of 'authorities'. This is a sure and firm basis for reaching out to others.

All Catholics share in the full membership of the Church. Ordination to any particular ministry does not make a person more Christian or more Catholic and does not take away from or diminish the freedom of any other to act according to their consciences, to express their personal beliefs and to live as they discern best for themselves. It is not for another to judge whether or not individuals should receive communion, how they settle their living arrangements or how frequently they attend Mass.

Many Catholics are now very well educated, well read, people of the world with experience of diverse peoples and cultures, leaders in health, education, the law, politics and the sciences among many other fields. They think critically and are prepared to question and discuss a broad range of topics including issues of faith. Many are better educated than the ordained. In short, they have a broad and deep life experience which sits at the core of understanding and living the word and example of Jesus. Many of us have the Catholic education system to thank for that. As the majority of Catholics now assert, life is primarily about living, caring for your family, getting your life organised. It is about appreciating the wonders of the natural and human world, creativity in art and culture, caring relationships, doing well at your occupation, trade or profession, fostering critical enquiry and personal integrity.

Christian communities ought to be characterised by a welcoming supportive attitude, personal relationships, care and concern for one another, and inclusive of all the people of God, i.e., all people without discrimination of lifestyle, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Discrimination against women,

LGBTIQA+ people, and re-partnered people are the most blatant examples of discrimination in our Church, but not the only ones. Pope Francis says in *Let Us Dream*:

Our main task is not to disengage from differences but to engage in conflict and disagreement in ways that prevent us from descending into polarisation.

Civil society has already held our Church to account over the clerical sexual abuse of children and its cover-up. Still, there is inadequate attention to the voices of victims and survivors. And the Church has failed to address the dysfunctional governance and culture that facilitated the cover-up by Church leaders. The perceived gap between many of the positions and practices of the Church and the gospel of Jesus is a scandal to many, presenting the Church as hypocritical and a negative force in society. We cannot persist in believing so many are wrong in following their consciences and best instincts in this. Reform is required to ensure a truly Christian Church in all its leadership, teachings and practices.

Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI wrote in 1968:

Over the Pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary, even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority. Conscience confronts [the individual] with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which in the last resort is beyond the claim of external social groups, even of the official church.

Pope Francis stated in *Amoris Laetitia* that the Church is “called to form consciences, not replace them”. Now is the time for the hierarchy to listen to the judgement of the people, to the sense of faith of the faithful. As a Church all of us, not just our leaders, should model the values we teach and recognise the work of the Spirit in every person.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Affirm the critical role of personal conscience as the basis and authentication for an inner voice and authority in relation to conversion and how we conduct our living, how we grow and shape a responsible self and the relationships in which we engage;*
2. *Recognise the work of the Spirit in all of God's people;*
3. *Acknowledge the full dignity of women and LGBTIQA+ peoples;*
4. *Recognise and seek to understand the position of the vast majority of Catholics on matters such as family planning and contraception, relationship breakdown and cohabiting, sexual ethics, justice for sexual and gender diverse people and all LGBTIQA+ people in reviewing Catholic teaching;*
5. *Commit to the elimination of all forms of discrimination and exclusion from our Church, whether in relation to sharing Eucharist, providing pastoral care, or sacramental ministry;*
6. *Promote and establish the core elements of Christianity - love and care as the way to a worthwhile life and a better world, and life as larger than biological death - as the criteria for all Church activities;*
7. *Ensure that personal and community formation opportunities are available and accessible in every diocese and parish;*
8. *Establish guidelines and inform clergy on how they should advise those who, in good conscience, need to use contraception in their family planning, need to be in relationships after marriage breakdown, or are in stable same-sex relationships;*
9. *Promote small groups (basic communities) as essential key places of mutual support, learning and evangelisation.*

Agenda Question 2. How might we heal the wounds of abuse, coming to see through the eyes of those who have been abused?

Our Observations

Conversion of love for the person abused, hurt and damaged comes before and underpins the motivation for action. With the eyes and insights of love, the interests of the victims are paramount. The calling of the Plenary Council was in large part a response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse. This reality needs to be recognised.

Complaints abound about the slow rate of response to victims. We will know that we are doing something right when we hear them telling us so publicly.

And let us never forget all those other Catholics who have suffered other forms of abuse by clergy and hierarchy when no respect was shown to them and they were denied the dignity of God's people.

We note that women suffer continuous abuse in our Church, excluded from positions of responsibility and influence by their God-given gender.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Invite victims and survivors to have a voice at the Plenary Council;*
2. *Promote development of liturgical expressions of lament;*
3. *Ensure speedy, effective and transparent compliance with the National Redress Scheme;*
4. *Ensure the independence of any future complaints handling scheme by entrusting all its juridical functions - investigative, adjudicative, and redress - to institutions which are structurally separate from, but funded by, the church.*
5. *Commit to accountability, transparency and inclusion in relation to all claims of abuse;*
6. *Adopt the relevant recommendations of the Royal Commission;*
7. *Develop ministries to work with abused people to help them overcome their deep sense of spiritual harm.*
8. *Initiate a direct conversation between the bishops, Catholic social service agencies and support and advocacy organisations to develop and implement a quality healing strategy and the construction of Gardens of Healing;*
9. *Propose the appointment of two full-time chaplains, female and male, for sexual abuse survivors within the chaplaincy and caring framework of Catholic social services in each diocese;*
10. *To develop a structured network of support groups and an individualized befriending support program for sexual abuse survivors.*

Agenda Question 3: How might the Church in Australia open in new ways to Indigenous ways of being Christian in spirituality, theology, liturgy, and missionary discipleship? How might we learn from the First Nations peoples?

Our Observations

Aboriginal spirituality and Dreaming have much to offer in their parallels with Catholic traditions and our scriptural inheritance. This spiritual culture grounded in and emerging from the experience of 60,000 years, is an authentic communication of God from which the Church has much to learn.

The initiative of Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas, Mexico, in ordaining hundreds of indigenous permanent deacons and other related initiatives in Latin America provide valuable lessons on what is possible and what is successful.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Listen to the concerns and spiritual understandings of Australian First Nations peoples;*
2. *Propose that First Nations peoples' artefacts and acknowledgement plaques be displayed in churches, schools and other relevant buildings and where appropriate, incorporate ATSI designs into vestments and church furnishings;*
3. *Encourage First Nations peoples to create liturgies, including Eucharistic celebrations, that incorporate or reflect elements of Indigenous spirituality and heritage, and seek their participation in parish education programs and decision-making;*
4. *Develop an Australian Rite which expresses our unique circumstances, our heritage of First Nations peoples' spirituality, acknowledges our history of dispossession and take-over and continuing racism and envisions a future of respect for everyone;*
5. *Endorse the 'Statement From The Heart' and have it on prominent public display in churches and school buildings;*
6. *Incorporate First Nations location names into all parishes, schools and relevant Church locations;*
7. *Teach local First Nations peoples' history and belief as part of all formation courses;*
8. *Promote and properly fund the creation of a Centre for Aboriginal Theology and Spirituality;*
9. *Encourage the ordination of First Nations people.*

Agenda Question 4A: How might the Church in Australia meet the needs of the most vulnerable, go to the peripheries, be missionary in places that may be overlooked or left behind in contemporary Australia?

Our Observations

Social services are at the heart of what it is to be Christian. Catholics are to be found in all places on the edge, much of their Christian service done informally. Catholic agencies, for the most part, have a positive profile in this area, as do chaplains and members of Religious Congregations of both men and women. However, Church leadership is still often perceived as self-serving and exclusivist rather than committed to the well-being of those on the peripheries.

To complement the hands-on work and provide for long-term, permanent solutions to the needs of the most vulnerable, our political system must promote policies and programs such as a just economy, a liveable level of social security, citizenship for asylum seekers and realistic action on climate change. Otherwise, agencies are engaged in repetitive band-aid struggles. The poor are always there waiting as the mirrors of our own brokenness and the face of a deeply involved and compassionate God. The Church must not only tend to the vulnerable but seek fundamental changes to those aspects of our society that cause vulnerability and disadvantage.

The institutional Church needs to be aware that it sometimes impedes the work of God's people in these endeavours because of avoidable negative perceptions and intolerant attitudes.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Adopt, as a core principle, engagement in social action on and with marginalised and vulnerable people as an authentic expression of faith complementary to Mass attendance;*
2. *Resolve that bishops, clergy and laity reject authority and status and walk humbly with one another to serve needs with our leaders seen to be engaged with those on the edge, avoiding token or liturgical gestures. All leaders should have regular (not short and token) work as frontline service providers under the direction and leadership of appropriately skilled professionals;*
3. *Resolve that the Church, particularly those in leadership positions, strive to model the best of Christian behaviour in seeking to influence the society we live in, including the principles of human dignity, common good, subsidiarity and solidarity and the promotion in practice of equality, inclusion and accountability;*
4. *Recognise and emphasise that lay Catholics have the same gifts, talents and expertise for leadership in the Church as the ordained; all share responsibility for promoting and acting for good of all God's people.*
5. *Resolve that the Church at all levels work for political change in relation to public policies and programs that are both timely and effective, including the social justice principles set forth in 3 above that affect the poor and marginalised, and, as often as possible in collaboration with broader community networks including all faith communities;*
6. *Resolve that the bishops fund social housing initiatives, especially in indigenous areas. This would require bishops to use Church resources, such as surplus land, towards actualising recommendations of Social Justice Statements.*

Agenda Question 4B: How might we partner with others (Christians, people of other faiths, neighbourhood community groups, government) to do this?

Our Observations

Christianity demands collaboration of its various communities and traditions in the promotion of the way of Jesus. Christians also have much in common with other religions in relation to perspectives, values and forms of action. There is already a significant level of cooperation in many areas, such as social justice, environmental and climate change issues, education and religious celebrations. This is a foundation to be built upon and developed for the more explicit promotion of the way of love, mutual care and a better world.

As Australia becomes more secular and more multi-faith with growing numbers of migrants bringing their own traditions, the experience of Catholics in countries where Christianity is a minority religion, particularly in Asia, could provide significant learning opportunities for our Church

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Stipulate that every diocese and parish adopt and make publicly available a plan for practical engagement and cooperation with other Christian churches and communities of other faiths;*
2. *Stress that our leaders be seen to respect and be engaged with other Christian churches and people of other faiths, beyond token or liturgical gestures;*
3. *Stress that the Eucharist is "food for the journey" for all;*
4. *Resolve that dioceses and parishes create partnerships and groups to actively pursue ecumenism and mutual respect amongst all religions as we seek to do the will of God;*

5. *Require all prayer forms and liturgies explicitly recognise the truth and value in other Christian churches and other faiths.*
6. *Encourage Australian bishops to liaise with their Asian counterparts, e.g. ACBC with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).*

Agenda Question 5: How might the Church in Australia respond to the call to 'ecological conversion'? How can we express and promote a commitment to an 'integral ecology of life' in all its dimensions, with particular attention to the more vulnerable people and environments in our country and region?

Our Observations

Climate is truly one of the major moral issues of our times and has to be addressed at personal, community, national and global levels.

Many individuals, family groups and school communities already participate in *Laudato Si'* events and other initiatives addressing climate change. But there is no universal response to all that Pope Francis proposes in his encyclical.

Integral ecology affirms the inter-relationship of all aspects of life and existence. Liturgies, especially Eucharistic liturgies, could be developed to reflect this. Likewise, promoting ecological sustainability is a central Christian responsibility.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Adopt Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* as a blueprint for Church leadership, advocacy and behaviour in caring for our environment; give it priority and facilitate it by resourcing activists and advocates;*
2. *Stipulate that every diocese and parish develop and publish a strategy for taking practical, auditable steps to reduce their carbon footprint, e.g. solar panels on all Church buildings, schools, and other facilities;*
3. *Stipulate that every diocese and parish develop relevant education programs, liturgies, homilies and parish mission statements;*
4. *Endorse advocacy and lobbying in the public square for renewable energy as we move away from reliance on carbon and polluting fuels.*

PRAYER

Agenda Question 6. How might we become a more contemplative people, committing more deeply to prayer as a way of life, and celebrating the liturgy of the Church as an encounter with Christ who sends us out to "make disciples of all the nations"?

Our Observations

Becoming contemplative means reflecting deeply on and appreciating the value of authentic living, being aware of the presence of God and living in relationships of love and mutual respect in all aspects of our lives.

An encounter with Jesus means getting to know Jesus in his time and place while appreciating the differences between now and Palestine in 30 AD. Updated liturgies that reflect developments in scripture, theology, anthropology, psychology and historical awareness would engage the imagination and energy of a broader range of Catholics. We need to use inclusive language and modernise the language and forms of liturgy, especially the Eucharist so as to connect directly to the lived experiences of those in the congregations.

We know that in Catholicism, prayer is living the life of Jesus, committing more authentically to life as a way of prayer.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Urge parishes and dioceses to provide available and accessible opportunities in every diocese and parish for spiritual growth and development in groups run by lay members of congregations;*
2. *Encourage the development of meditation, scripture reading groups, groups on being Catholic and other programs to meet local needs and the need for silent listening;*
3. *Strongly promote the use of inclusive language, and connections to experiences relevant to the congregation in all liturgies.*
4. *Ensure that every diocese includes in its public annual report a discussion of all these activities and their uptake in parishes;*

Agenda Question 7. How might we better embrace the diverse liturgical traditions of the Churches which make up the Catholic Church and the cultural gifts of immigrant communities to enrich the spirituality and worship of the Church in Australia?

Our Observations

Ours is a multicultural church in Australia and across the world, and our age is one of multiple forms of identity and expression.

Authentic liturgy emerges from the lived experiences of the participants. People are energised by celebrations that express their faith in forms that are meaningful and reflect value for them.

Different cultures require different expressions. Cultural diversity is not limited to language or ethnicity. Creating opportunities for larger gatherings featuring a coming together of traditions and liturgies will enhance our community experience.

As Pope Francis reminds us, the Eucharist *'is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak'*. (Evangelii Gaudium n.47)

There should be no sense of going back or trying to restore practices which are not of today's reality.

We know that many who disengage from the Church do so because they find liturgies dull and uninspiring.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Promote liturgical diversity, including varieties of forms of Eucharistic celebrations;*
2. *Promote and facilitate inter-community and inter-cultural sharing;*

3. *Promote a welcoming, inclusive culture of Eucharistic sharing for all who approach the table of the Lord;*
4. *Commit the Australian Church to advocating for and developing an Australian Rite which expresses our unique circumstances, our heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality, acknowledges our history of dispossession, take-over and continuing racism and envisions a future of respect by and for everyone.*

FORMATION

Agenda Question 8. How might we better form leaders for mission – adults, children and families, couples and single people?

Our Observations

Baptism is the primary Catholic sacrament. By living it, we become mature Christians. It is time to restore to all Catholics the dignity, authority and responsibilities that have over centuries been taken over by privileged groups in the Church. Catholics must claim their inheritance and take initiative in leading in their communities. It begins by enabling one another to be all that we can be. We need to have strong convictions about our own identities before we can lead others to share our perspectives and values.

The Plenary Council is an opportunity to recognise and implement a synodal process, essential for realising the program of Pope Francis. The synodal community is the primary context for the formation of leaders. Ordination is a commissioning to a particularly significant role within the broader context of baptism and community.

This time is an opportunity for further consideration and study of the different 'life-based' methods, and outcomes, of lay formation, including the 'action-reflection' and 'formation through action' models of the Cardijn movements ('*See, Judge, Act*'), Small Christian Communities, Couple and Family Formation (*Teams, Marriage Encounter*) and Christian Life Communities. Such small group experiences should start within families and continue through pre-school, at the celebration of the Eucharist and during sacramental preparation, in schools with class retreats and missionary experiences as well as youth group experiences as part of adolescent formation such as in Antioch.

Leaders emerge and flourish in community contexts, in relation to pressures, demands and opportunities. Mature communities are best placed to recognise and select appropriate leaders. Fostering and developing local communities (parishes) and small groups (intentional communities) in terms of responsibility, freedom and responsiveness to conscience will provide fertile ground for the emergence of leaders in all relevant areas. Leadership requires inclusion, solidarity, synodality, subsidiarity and respect for the sense of faith of the faithful. Vatican II wanted the principle of subsidiarity to permeate all governance, both ecclesial and civil (*Declaration on Christian Education*, n. 3; *Gaudium et Spes Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1965, n. 8). Ongoing training and understanding of those principles are for everyone essential as circumstances, needs and opportunities evolve.

Catholics are often hindered in their understanding and appropriation of our faith by the language in which our theology is presented, especially in liturgies and prayers and the outdated teachings, structures and laws of our Church. Core doctrines would benefit greatly from being expressed in personalist rather than scholastic or classic philosophical terms. Relevant revisions in these areas would dramatically improve the potential for reaching out to those who have left and those who might wish to join us.

Pastoral Associates do not currently have the autonomy or authority that their roles and responsibilities deserve. Those running sacramental preparation programs are often crippled by outdated theology and overbearing priests. All ministers in the Church are entitled to the freedom of their charisms. Bringing the experiences of women and men, married and single, to the work of enabling our people to reach out to others with good news will yield positive results.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Acknowledge that there is a 'lay apostolate' where lay people are co-creators and co-redeemers in the world;*
2. *Recommend that the bishops establish offices for the laity and adopt a lay pastoral strategy based on the Church's commitment to 'see, judge, act';*
3. *Ensure that personal and community formation for leadership opportunities are available and accessible in every diocese and parish for all the baptised;*
4. *Require that all leaders, clerical and lay, embrace qualities of humility, self-awareness, ingenuity, love and heroism and act with accountability, inclusion, safety for all especially children and transparency and in accordance with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching;*
5. *Assert that leadership in the Church is based on principles of equality, inclusion, and synodal processes; and that community development and formation programs should reflect this;*
6. *Require the devolution in every diocese of an appropriate level of authority and autonomy for non-ordained pastoral personnel, especially Pastoral Associates, those managing Sacramental preparation programs (Catechists) and other lay leaders;*
7. *Strongly support a review of Church teachings that hinder participation by Catholics;*
8. *Ensure that clergy or lay catechists/pastoral associates reach out to all parents when they present their children for Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, and in all situations where effective adult education can take place;*
9. *Open new pathways to ministry across all ministerial formation for men, women and LGBTIQA+ people which include optional celibacy.*

Agenda Question 9. How might we better equip ordained ministers to be enablers of missionary discipleship: the Church becoming more a "priestly people" served by the ordained ministry?

Our Observations

The expression of this question is misleading. All Catholics, cleric and lay, form a priestly people. Optimal equipping and formation of the ordained will come through listening to and understanding our people. Leadership in the Church is about witnessing and confirming the faith of the people emerging from experience, scripture and tradition and expressed through the consensus of their voices. It is not about defining the faith. The clergy and the hierarchy are ordained to serve the people not to be served by them.

Let our clergy focus on Christian leadership, pastoral care and the spiritual development of a 'priestly people'. Ordained ministers are co-workers with the non-ordained. Working together as equals, women and men, will bring enormous benefits to priests as enablers of missionary discipleship and to the whole priestly people.

Both clerics and non-clerics can be involved in Church leadership and, with lay people having more responsible autonomy in administration, assist our priests to work with us on mission. Bring the experiences of women and men, married and single, into the work of enabling our people to reach out to others with good news – news that leads to experiences of the Reign of God.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Educate ordained ministers and laity to understand that each of us needs to be conscious of, and responsible for, our own spiritual development and means of engaging in the world to bring about the Reign of God;*
2. *Ensure priests work alongside lay women and men in their roles as pastors and animators, animating the laity to reflect on how to live their lives in the light of the Gospel;*
3. *Urge ordained ministers to adopt a co-responsible approach with lay Catholics towards the administration and management of parishes to ensure that the ordained ministers and lay Catholics have sufficient time and energy to facilitate missionary discipleship and work towards all Church members becoming more a “priestly people”;*
4. *Urge dioceses to have a formal formation program for priests coming from overseas that includes local theology, Australian culture, local management practice and style, history, and language and an extended stay with a local priest;*
5. *Advocate for women and men to lead Sunday reflections/homilies;*
6. *Urge dioceses to monitor these actions and include them in the public diocesan annual reports;*
7. *Pursue with the Holy See the ordination of married men to ordained priestly ministry acknowledging that this subject is outside the Canonical brief of the Plenary Council but accepting that this subject is of major concern to those who made Plenary Council submissions;*
8. *Pursue with the Holy See the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate and priesthood acknowledging that this subject is outside the Canonical brief of the Plenary Council but accepting that this subject is of major concern to those who made Plenary Council submissions.*

Agenda Question 10. How might formation, both pre- and post-ordination, better foster the development of bishops, priests and deacons as enablers of the universal Christian vocation to holiness lived in missionary discipleship?

Our Observations

The current training of the clergy occurs away from congregations, separated from the world they are being formed to serve, and often without lay teachers, especially women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Priestly formation needs to recognise that the triple grace of priest, prophet and king is bestowed on all the faithful at Baptism, and that the role of the ordained is as fellow travellers and servants of the laity on their journey. Better formation of the ordained will come through listening to and understanding the needs of the faithful they are called to serve.

Deacons, priests and bishops most often do not undertake post-ordination formation and this must be changed to be in line with all other professions. Such programs should cover a broad range of topics from moral theology, psychology, sociology, administration, leadership and community development to enable them to best understand and serve their congregations. Appropriate lay leaders should assist in developing and teaching these programs.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Redevelop formation assessment processes to ensure that candidates for the priesthood are spiritually and psychologically capable of engaging in pastoral care;*

2. *Redesign priestly training, with students housed in the community, and encouraged to engage in the workforce in the long breaks from study, so that they better understand the communities they are being called to serve;*
3. *Ensure that the teachers of priests in training include women and First Nations people;*
4. *Include a greater understanding of Christ's call to diversity, the identification and avoidance of polarisation as core topics in the curriculum;*
5. *Teach up-to-date management, administration, communication and community development skills as a substantial part of formation;*
6. *Develop mandatory and audited ongoing formation courses for all ordained ministers including management practice and styles;*
7. *Organise an annual 360-degree performance review for all priests and permanent deacons;*
8. *Work towards the ordination of women and married men.*

STRUCTURES

Agenda Question 11. How might parishes better become local centres for the formation and animation of missionary disciples?

Our Observations

Personal and community formation are prerequisites for reaching out to others with integrity. With the reduction in clergy numbers and parish amalgamations, existing communities must be recognised and encouraged as centres of faith and support - not as parish outreach, but as the basic communities. The parish is formed through the coming together of these groups. That was the pattern of the early church – from the ground up, not from the top down.

Promote small groups who explore all aspects of Christian living from contemplative prayer to social services to adult Catholic education. When these groups find their motivation in the desires of their members for participation rather than in following directions from 'above', they will flourish, become attractive and grow. They are the primary places of personal and community formation.

Convictions and commitments grow and flourish in a context of personal relationships among people who understand and appreciate one another. When we are valued, we become more open to listening to others. We need to be heard ourselves before we can reach out to others.

Parish Pastoral Councils have a key role in this and so need to have appropriate authority and autonomy. Let priests focus on Christian leadership, and pastoral and spiritual facilitation.

Within 'parishes' there are usually multiple other Christian churches with whom 'a critical mass of Christian mission' may be possible and fruitful. It may well be that the Church in Australia is being asked to explore ecumenical initiatives within their communities. PPCs should be supported in this.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Acknowledge that the traditional concept of 'Parish', needs to take into account that smaller more intimate groups of Catholics are the primary elements of the local parish.*
2. *Promote small groups/communities as the primary places of formation and animation for Catholics, recognising their crucial role for the future church, empowering them with key decision-making authority;*

3. *Favour an experiential-based approach to discerning ways forward, e.g., the ‘See, Judge, Act’ Cardijn or similar action-reflection methods, rather than a ‘top down’ approach.*
4. *Require all dioceses to facilitate the creation and development of small group/communities, providing opportunities for spiritual and personal formation, organised, implemented and managed by lay people;*
5. *Promote the position that parishes are formed primarily by the coming together of small groups or communities, that each parish is a community of communities and thereby a community for the world;*
6. *Explore extending the current interpretation of the ‘Catholic parish’ to one of an ‘ecumenical Christian parish’ where feasible.*

Agenda Question 12. How might the Church in Australia be better structured for mission, considering the parish, the diocese, religious orders, the PJPs and new communities?

Our Observations

Structures must ensure the practice of synodality and the principle of subsidiarity³ whereby decisions are taken by an appropriate entity as close as possible to the people affected by those decisions. In order to develop structures suitable for Australian circumstances, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and individual bishops need to introduce changes that respond to local conditions in close consultation with their people.

Baptism is the foundational sacrament, through which we become Christians. Ordination is a particular designation of role and function within the community of the baptised. There is no theological reason why pastoral care and governance should necessarily be bound together.

Diocesan pastoral councils, a canonically designated means of involving Christ’s faithful in diocesan decision-making⁴, are necessary in all dioceses with functions that include pastoral planning, processes for accountability and transparency in Church activities and human resource planning, including concerted formation/education plans.

The most effective measures for gaining commitment from people is to involve them in matters that concern them: their participating in decision-making and taking on responsibility for the outcomes of their choices: *“That which touches upon all must be agreed by all”*⁵ There is nothing more off-putting to the laity (and people generally) than to be consulted and then disregarded.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Accept as fundamental that all decision-making by Church leaders be exercised according to synodality and subsidiarity, ensuring accountability, transparency, and inclusion;*
2. *Ensure that present canonical provisions for structured synodality through diocesan pastoral councils and diocesan synods/assemblies are adopted by all Australian bishops;*

³ Vatican II wanted the principle of subsidiarity to permeate all governance, both ecclesial and civil - *Declaration on Christian Education*, n. 3; *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1965, n. 86

⁴ Canons 511-514

⁵ Cardinal Mario Grech, General Secretary for the Synod of Bishops, Vatican News 21 May 2021, accessed 18 July 2021 at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-05/cardinal-grech-interview-synod-secretariat-changes.html>

3. *All pastoral and administrative decisions that affect the faithful must be preceded by consultation with the faithful. "That which touches upon all must be agreed by all"*⁶;
4. *Require the establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council in every diocese and Parish Pastoral Council in every parish;*
5. *Require that a Parish Priest not act against the advice of his Parish Pastoral Council without what is, in his judgement, an overriding reason⁷, that reason to be noted in the minutes of the Pastoral Council.*
6. *Require that the functions of Diocesan Pastoral Councils include pastoral planning, concerted education and formation plans including processes for accountability, transparency and human resource management;*
7. *With reference to the shortage of priests, propose to the Holy See that Canon 517 n2 be implemented across Australia so that qualified deacons, (men and women) laity (men and women) and religious, (men and women) can exercise their 'baptismal priesthood' of providing true pastoral care of a parish. This includes the delegation to baptise, conduct marriages, celebrate funeral services and lead Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest. (cf. Roman document of that name issued 1983);*
8. *Offer opportunities for Christian formation to parents of the young people being catechised for sacraments, taking advantage of the fact that they are present with their children. Advocate for a lay director of pastoral planning in every diocese;*
9. *Membership of Parish Pastoral Councils and Finance Committees is to be decided by the discernment of all parishioners;*
10. *Members of Diocesan Pastoral Councils are to be elected through a diocesan synod or assembly;*
11. *Legislate that those matters considered by the ACBC to be outside its competence are to be referred to the competent authority;*
12. *Require every diocese in Australia hold a diocesan Assembly at least once every five years;*
13. *Benefiting from our experience during COVID, explore the possibilities that social media provide for formation and participation in the future Church.*

GOVERNANCE

Agenda Question 13. How might the People of God, lay and ordained, women and men, approach governance in the spirit of synodality and co-responsibility for more effective proclamation of the Gospel?

Our Observations

People will be drawn to the Church and then to active involvement in Church activities by attraction to what they perceive as an adult, intelligent and responsible attitude to living a worthwhile life. Good governance is an essential element in this message. At present, some Australians see the Church as a floundering, inept organisation led by out-of-touch, life-constricted males or even as corrupt and to be avoided as much as possible.

⁶ Cardinal Mario Grech, *ibid.*

⁷ Canon 127 §2, 2°

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Implement the recommendations of The Light from the Southern Cross report (cf.5. 'Identification of the Principles and Culture of Good Governance', and 6. 'Good Governance Practices and Culture' - pp.37 to 115) with a timeline to be audited;*
2. *Involve and share authority with lay Catholics, openly and in realistic numbers, in the selection of bishops and in the appointment of priests;*
3. *Adopt the principles of accountability, transparency and inclusion applying them to all leadership and decision-making in the Church;*
4. *Ensure full equality for all across all ministries and thus eradicate the culture of clericalism from the Church, in both clergy and laity;*
5. *Encourage the clergy and hierarchy at parish and diocesan levels, to better recognise the giftedness of the laity while facilitating the proper exercise of their gifts, e.g. through adopting Pastoral Councils in all dioceses at parish and diocesan levels;*
6. *Enshrine the principles of Catholic social teaching, such as subsidiarity and solidarity, as well as inclusion, equality, transparency and accountability in the mission statements of all parishes, dioceses, DPCs and PPCs.*

Agenda Question 14. How might we recast governance at every level of the Church in Australia in a more missionary key?

Our Observations

The Church's governance, in structures, culture and practices, must in all respects accord with synodality and the principle of subsidiarity⁸.

Cultural conversion (conversion of the heart) is a huge challenge for humanity as evidenced in many aspects of today's human experience. History tells us that those who currently hold power are less likely to be accepted as successful leaders for such demanding change.

The first challenge is in identifying the change leaders. The second challenge is for the current leadership to accept the need for change and, if possible, get behind the new movement.

The leaders of the new movement will need prayer, broad consultation, discernment and new processes to see the way. Given the Canon Law constraints of the Plenary Council process and its hierarchical leadership, it is likely that the Council will be able to take only initial steps on this path.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Commit to the synodal course directed by Pope Francis as the basis of church governance, processes, and reform.*
2. *Implement the recommendations of 'The Light from the Southern Cross' report (cf.3. Theological Foundation of the Church, pp 24 to 31) with a timeline that can be audited;*
3. *Recognise the need for deep change and diverse modes of leadership, both clerical and lay;*
4. *Develop structures which ensure the principles of accountability, transparency and inclusion will be applied to all leadership and decision-making in the Church.*

⁸ Vatican II wanted the principle of subsidiarity to permeate all governance, both ecclesial and civil - *Declaration on Christian Education*, n. 3; *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965, n. 86*

5. *Include women in every place where decisions are being made (cf. LSC 5. and 6. as for Question 13 Proposal 1);*
6. *Ensure that the movement for change is based on inclusivity, equality and accountability to eradicate the culture of clericalism from the Church.*

INSTITUTIONS

Agenda Question 15. How might we better see the future of Catholic education (primary, secondary and tertiary) through a missionary lens?

Our Observations

Catholic schools are often described as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the Catholic Church in Australia. They must offer faith development that takes account of their very diverse communities, closely connected to the real world and at the service of the immediate and future needs of students and their families. Every aspect of school life, not just the Religious Education curriculum, contributes to the students’ holistic formation. They are being prepared for a future that, ideally, they will see as a vocation to make visible the Reign of God, whether as Catholics or other well-formed persons, guided by a moral compass inspired and informed by the life and teachings of Jesus, who is the heart of the Catholic school.

All stake-holders in Catholic education need to develop a shared understanding of the theology of mission of the Catholic school so that there are realistic, shared expectations of the role of the Catholic school in the twenty-first century to lead students towards the ‘fullness of life’ Jesus promised for all who seek to follow his ‘Way’.

The teaching of religion needs to be carefully reviewed as part of the Plenary Council’s considerations. Twelve years plus of Catholic education currently produces too many young adults who want nothing further to do with the Church and many who simply drift away.

Small group experiences in schools with peer group mentoring continue to receive positive comment by recent graduates. These valuable and important formative experiences have been noted in the formation of adults (see Q 8. above) and manifested for a time with the YCW, Antioch and World Youth Day experiences as examples. These continue to apply as a valid formative pedagogy for young people. In addition, ecumenical approaches to mission amongst young people should also be explored.

It is necessary to examine how religion is taught in schools. This could be done by a detailed survey, interviewing teachers, curriculum developers, students (those at school and recently graduated) and parents about their understanding of faith teaching and what they expect from a Catholic education. Schools and teachers cannot be responsible for all the faith development of a young person; families are an integral part of this. Social environment influences are also a factor.

If the local church were reflective of the changes expressed above in this paper, youth would have a Church ‘home’ to transition to as young adults, which they often do not have at present. There is little if anything to attract and ‘hold’ them in parish or parish involvement.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Ensure funding to youth organisations that engage students with both the gospel and life, and produce formed leaders in the church and in society.*

2. *Review the theological content of religious education curricula to ensure it is a theology for the times, recognising developments in historical awareness, anthropology, sociology, psychology, medical science, etc.;*
3. *Strongly encourage teachers of religious education be formed in theology, spirituality, scriptures and liturgy;*
4. *Advocate for those in leadership (directors and principals) to view their roles as ministries and have relevant formation offered to them;*
5. *Urge Catholic schools to set a certain percentage of their enrolments to be offered totally free to families who could otherwise not afford them;*
6. *Ensure that the school community and families are included in the promotion of parish small groups/communities as the primary places of formation and animation for Catholics.*
7. *To move from doctrine and apologetics to evangelisation and missionary communities that are relevant to today's issues, dialogue that involves them actively in the real issues of lives and relationships.*

Agenda Question 16. How might we better see the future of Catholic social services, agencies and health and aged care ministries as key missionary and evangelising agencies?

Our Observations

These services are generally seen by Catholics and others as providers of good and necessary services to all members of the community. For many, they are the face of the Church and should be seen as such, not as appendices. Most of these services have lay leaders and are conducted using principles of accountability, transparency, and inclusion. In some cases, there are clerical leaders making autocratic decisions. The leadership of these organisations needs to be transformed to be in line with 21st century best practice.

Pastors could learn much from the experiences of the many disaffected Catholics who continue to work in Church agencies and affiliates. Many have learned to distinguish between being Catholic and engaging with Mass attendance and sacraments.

Proposals

That the Plenary Council:

1. *Recognise and support compassionate, sensitive and just engagement with the poor, refugees and asylum seekers, the frail aged, the silenced and those discriminated against in our parishes and beyond as true ministries in the Church;*
2. *Ensure these services are affordable to those experiencing poverty;*
3. *Ensure Church leadership continue to support and encourage all forms of Catholic social services, strongly advocating for justice in the public forum;*
4. *Encourage pastors to be attentive to the voices of disaffected Catholics working in Church agencies and affiliates from whom there is much to be learned.*

CONCLUSION

The Church is an organic entity, a community on the move, an evolving presence of God in the world (one among many). The opportunity provided by the Plenary Council is far broader than the discussions and resolutions possible in two sessions. The Council has the potential to be a catalyst, a fulcrum on which the emerging Church can pivot towards the future. It could be a significant step on the way towards a recovered vision of God's revelation in Jesus and the Spirit within faith communities and in transforming our world and creation.

The immediate challenge for the whole Australian Catholic faith community is to facilitate the work of the Spirit in the Plenary Council in breaking through structural barriers and anachronistic positions to lead us all to a renewed vision of hope and courage.

The extensive participation of the whole People of God in their submissions to the Council was inspirational, reflecting an earnest longing for a revitalised church by Catholics that did not end in 2018-19. Being a synodal Church means involving everyone in ongoing discussions on all aspects of Catholic life. It is about the life and mission of the whole Church community, not just the members and not just the bishops.

We call on Plenary Council members to respond to Pope Francis' hopes for a new era of synodality and accountability where we will all walk together, listening to a range of voices. This is the model of Church that Jesus expects from us in this millennium; it will require uncommon courage and a commitment to changes in how we do and are church. For this to happen, we must be open to radical conversion, reform and renewal.

Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform

Australian Reforming Catholics

Be the Change Aotearoa (NZ)

Cardijn Community Australia

Catholics For Renewal

Catholics Speak Out

Communities of the Way (WA)

Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn

Concerned Catholics Tasmania

Concerned Catholics Wagga Wagga

Concerned Catholics Wollongong

Cyber Christian Community (WA)

For the Innocents

Inclusive Catholics

Rainbow Catholics InterAgency for Mission

SA Catholics for an Evolving Church

Toowoomba Catholics for Church Reform

VOCAL (Voices of Catholic Australian Laity)

WATAC (Women and the Australian Church)

WWITCH (Women's Wisdom in the Church)

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