

Fifth Plenary Council of Australia

A Call for Agenda Development

from

The Sense of the Faithful Team <https://www.senseofthefaithful.org.au/>

Preamble: Towards substantive additions to the agenda for two sessions of the Council

We propose in this paper substantive additions of the kind we consider should accompany the six sets of excellent questions that constitute the published agenda for the Plenary Council (PC). In doing so, we address the call in the present draft “to develop concrete proposals to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia” (emphasis added).

Our concrete proposals for insertion into the PC Agenda arise from our reflections and discernments on:

- (a) the published agenda questions,
- (b) the published results of the consultations which have been at the heart of preparations for the Council, and
- (c) the issues distilled by the [Sense of the Faithful](https://www.senseofthefaithful.org.au/) team¹ from consultations with and between 26 parishes in Victoria which it organized. These issues are:
 - greater recognition and inclusion of women in a persistently patriarchal Church,
 - greater recognition and inclusion of indigenous Australians in an Australian Church still reflecting its colonialist origins,
 - the need to respond, at all levels of the Church, to Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Laudato Si*, and
 - the need to reform structures and processes in the Church to become more truly synodal and less clericalist.

In the lead up to the Plenary Council, extensive initial consultations were undertaken with the People of God in each diocese in Australia in Phase I of the consultation process. This was followed in Phase II of the consultation process by a more focused, small-group, often parish-based, listening and discernment process. The Phase I consultations produced over 17,000 individual and group submissions. Next came the six thematic discussion group reports followed by the Phase II consultations in response to these reports. The form of the Phase II consultations involved a communal discernment process, often from parish groups, which produced 114 group responses, involving in total over 1,700 individuals. The combined

¹ See <https://www.senseofthefaithful.org.au/> for details of who are the team members.

reports from this most recent Phase II consultation process came to 186 pages and 108,000 words. The references in this paper to the results of the Communal Discernment process refer to the outcomes of the Phase II consultations.

These consultations over the last two years have given rise not only to many concrete proposals for the PC to consider, but also raised the important issue of how the proposals should be addressed in the PC.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight concrete proposals for change which reflect the spirit of these consultations. Many of these proposals outlined below will not gain ready consensus among all or most PC members. This will require the members of the Assemblies to acknowledge and address deep conflicts in the Australian Church and elsewhere. As Pope Francis has urged, such conflicts call neither for blank compromise nor mere assertion of authority, but for the exercise of discernment and dialogue about God's Spirit at work in the world.

Pope Francis explains in some detail on how the synodal process should work to find common ground and agreed outcomes on p83-94 of his 2020 book 'Let us Dream: the Path to a Better Future' (Simon & Schuster, London). Here is one quote from his discussion:

Synods produce intense discussion, which is good: they involve different reactions and responses to those who think differently or have particular positions. We do not all react in the same way. We have also seen in many cases how, faced with disagreement, different groups attempting to interfere in the synodal process try to impose their ideas, either by applying pressure inside the Synod, or outside it, by distorting and discrediting the views of those who do not think as they do...(p85).

One such issue, about which there are strong differences, is the position of women in the Australian Church. The Phase II communal listening and discernment process referred to 'women' or 'female' 419 times, compared with 478 references to 'priest or priests'. The failure of the published PC Agenda to address this issue stands out, as the word 'women' occurs only once. By contrast, the importance of this issue was highlighted in several of the Thematic Discernment papers produced for the PC and in all of our consultations with concerned Catholics. It will be a major failure of the PC if the position of women in the Australian Church is not addressed directly in the Agenda and specific recommendations for change are not made.

Inclusion of concrete proposals in the working agendas of the Assemblies will be required if the Plenary Council is to deliver the tangible, meaningful and actionable outcomes clearly hoped for and expected by all, laity and clergy, who have responded to the calls to participate in the PC process.

We therefore urge Assembly members to formulate and discuss their own discernment of connections between the Agenda's questions and the most important substantive issues they and their communities see confronting the Australian Church as it develops its evangelising mission.

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1. CONVERSION

PC Agenda questions²

- *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?*
- *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 in our country and region?*

Reflections

The detailed reports from the Phase I consultations in the dioceses of each of the major cities shows that indigenous Australians or related terms were mentioned a total of 278 times as an issue for the Plenary Council to address. Climate or climate change was raised 133 times as an issue for the Plenary council to address.

Both questions call for conversion in the simple sense of a turning away from old ways of seeing and doing toward new ways. In the case of Australia's indigenous population this means definitively turning from colonialist ways of seeing our First Nations People in terms of what they were supposed to lack – Western civilisation, and the Good News which we were assumed to possess in full.

In the case of the ecology, the turning away is from white settler ways of seeing the land as having no value unless developed with European know-how, assessing it exclusively for its exchange value, and exploiting it for food and trade products.

In both cases the conversion/turning is towards seeing value, worth, and dignity where little or none was seen before. In both cases conversion is well underway in the Australian Church. The creation of *Catholic Earthcare Australia* by the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service was a landmark in the Church's conversion to 'an integral ecology of life'.

² We have only selected two key questions for each topic from the Agenda to illustrate how we think the Agenda needs to be expanded and to avoid producing a lengthy document.

Likewise, the establishment of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council* (NATSICC) in 1992 as a peak advisory body to the Australian bishops has been a landmark in practical conversion of the Church towards the engagement of First Peoples in the development of its wider mission. The online Cross-cultural Competency Course and the development of the Brisbane Archdiocese Reconciliation Action Plan are signs that the conversion continues.

The PC Assemblies, by acknowledging, endorsing and supporting these instances of conversion may contribute to 'an integral ecology of life in all its dimensions'. They might also consider ways of ensuring that the conversions noted here continue at all levels in all Australian dioceses.

Substantive Proposals

1. That the PC endorse NATSICC's 'new indigenous ways of being Christian' as expressed in the [NATSICC submission to the PC](#).
2. That the PC consider how other sections of the Australian Catholic Church might join with NATSICC and connected entities in realising their own missions.
3. That the PC endorse the recent call by the Australian Bishops for the Australian Government to move quickly to hold a referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament once a model for the Voice has been chosen.
4. That the PC consider how the call to 'ecological conversion' in *Laudato Si'*, and previously in Pope John Paul II's 'Eco-spiritual Audit of Planet Earth', might be better heard and implemented in all Australian Catholic communities.
5. That the PC urge the Australian Government to commit to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 in response to Pope Francis' plea on Earth Day 2021 for urgent action.

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2. PRAYER

PC Agenda questions

- *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'?*
- *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?*

Reflections

In the Phase II communal discernment process based on 114 small group responses involving 1,700 individuals, prayer was mentioned 360 times, compared with 462 references to the Mass. 'Liturgy' or 'liturgies' were mentioned 231 times. 'Translate' or 'translation' was mentioned 28 times. The 'gospel or gospels' and the 'bible' or 'biblical' were mentioned 93 and 44 times respectively.

The PC Agenda questions call the Church to examine connections between Catholic prayer-life, the everyday lives of the faithful, and the vocation of all Christians to bring the living Christ into their worlds. They ask us to consider: (a) how meaningful our available [liturgical](#) prayer might be to our culturally diverse Catholic population, and (b) how well our available [liturgical](#) prayer is geared to preparing the practising faithful to become evangelisers in their everyday lives.

The *Sense of the Faithful* team consider that there are serious deficiencies in liturgical prayer on both these counts. We urge that the following proposals, designed to address them, be inserted into the Agenda.

Substantive Proposals

1. That the PC consider an immediate return to the English translation of the Missal (1998), setting aside the presently over-Latinised authorised translation. The current translation carries with it the ethos, spirituality, and theology of the pre-Vatican II Church, hinders the integration of our Catholic prayer life with our everyday work and family lives, and is very difficult to understand for those with English as a second language.
2. That the PC set in motion steps towards the development of new forms of public prayer, including hymns composed by and for young people.
3. That the PC set in motion steps (including widespread consultation with the practising and non-practising faithful) for reform and diversification of liturgical prayer to better reflect the theology, ecclesiology, spirituality and lexicon(s) of the post-Vatican II Church.
4. That the PC encourage all Australian dioceses and parishes to assist the faithful to develop a range of modes of prayer with the goal of enriching the spiritual lives of all the faithful, and therefore their liturgical experiences.

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3. FORMATION

PC Agenda questions

- *How might we better form leaders for mission – adults, children and families, couples, and single people?*
- *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?*
- *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?*

Reflections

In the communal discernment process, the issue of ‘training’ was mentioned 89 times but the ‘formation or training of priests’ was only mentioned ten times in total. The word ‘laity’ was mentioned 237 times. Of the three questions under this heading in the PC agenda, two of the three refer to the formation of the ordained. None of the questions refer to the roles of women and their specific needs in formation. This provides evidence of the kind of thinking that must be challenged. It is vital that those dealing with formation in the PC recognize that focus needs to be on the ninety-nine per cent of parishioners, while not neglecting the less than one per cent who are ordained.

Among the reasons for this is that most of the mission work of the Church in the world is carried out, potentially at least, by lay people, and especially laywomen, in their families, workplaces, and networks. Their formation is paramount firstly to understand and deeply appreciate their missionary vocation, and secondly to envision how it might be carried out. The challenge for the PC will be to move beyond lip service about the role of the laity in the Church to making concrete changes.

The mission of Jesus has given birth to the Church and must frame all its theological and formational endeavours. The formation of ordained ministers and other Church leaders needs to have a stronger mission content both in the formal studies dimension and in the area of spiritual formation.

In the past half-century a corpus of official Catholic teaching on evangelising mission has emerged out of mission praxis and theology, and has been made available to the faithful via the magisterium. The formational challenge is to unpack this missionary impulse at every level of Church life. As Pope Francis describes it, it is an endeavour with the potential to transform everything.

Substantive Proposals

1. That the PC take on board the challenge to bring the Biblical renewal and the mission renewal of Church life together in the formation of Church members. The Gospels are at the heart of formation. A way forward would be for the PC to call on dioceses and parishes to encourage reconnection with the Gospels in an intelligent and deeply spiritual way.
2. That the PC strongly recommend the practical proposal on the Biblical formation of the faithful made by the world-renowned Australian Biblical scholar Fr Frank Moloney SDB. His submission to the PC is called [The Plenary Council and the Word of God](#), available on the *Sense of the Faithful* website.
3. That the PC encourage the Australian Church communities to prioritise work with families where the primary formation of children and young people takes place. It is here where they learn to grow in their sense of 'ownership' of the mission of Jesus in the world. We need to disown the belief that mission belongs to someone else, and is to be enacted some place elsewhere – an approach that is deeply embedded in Catholic culture.
4. That the PC commission each theologate and each faith community – parish, small faith community etc, - to consider how to put into effect in some way the contemporary Church's connection to the wider world, and so begin a more concerted process of change.
5. That the PC recognise that the formation of lay leaders for parishes is a pressing challenge. These formation processes must be well planned, and dioceses encouraged to exchange ideas and processes at a national level, as well as to learn from work done in other countries such as New Zealand and elsewhere.
6. That the PC recognise that many members of the Australian Church, as represented by members of the PC, believe that the ordination of women as deacons and priests would help to renew the Church in Australia. The communal discernment process in Phase II produced ten direct references to 'women deacons' 14 references to 'women priests' and 11 other references to ordaining women to the diaconate and priesthood.

Many also believe that there are no good reasons – whether biblical, theological or historical – for not doing so. While acknowledging that this is a matter for the Pope and is not within the discretion of the Australian bishops or the PC, we urge the PC to raise the issue so it can be conveyed to Pope Francis for his urgent consideration.

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4. STRUCTURES

PC Agenda questions

- *How might parishes better become local centres for the formation and animation of missionary disciples?*
- *How might the Church in Australia be better structured for mission, considering the diocese, religious orders, PJPs [independent ministries under canon law] and new communities?*

Reflections

The word parish was mentioned 1,058 times in the communal discernment process. This clearly shows how important these communities are in the life of the Church. In comparison, the words 'diocese' or 'diocesan' in whole or in part were only mentioned 261 times.

Both these questions draw attention to the interdependence of the Church's hierarchical and geographical structures on the one hand and its evangelising mission on the other. They remind us that the structures are always to be seen and evaluated as a means to realise the Church's evangelising mission.

The questions also invite us to focus on the basic local structural unit of the Catholic Church in Australia – the parish. This has been for most Catholics the main place for worship of God, for maintenance and development of their Catholic Faith, and for evangelization in and service to the wider community.

However, it is hard to retain this focus on *the* parish and its supposed and mandated functions because actual parishes are so varied demographically (e.g., in age and ethnic profiles) and vitality. Further, the shrinking and ageing of congregations in most parishes, and the shortage of priests to serve parishes have threatened their social and material viability. Amalgamations alone, especially if designed and executed without consultation with the local faithful, may not offer a solution. Though vital parishes are to be found, it is not too strong a claim to say that the basic unit through which the Church has realised its mission in Australia is withering away in many dioceses, as shown by the increasing number of parish mergers and amalgamations.

Substantive proposals

The following proposals for consideration by the PC are advanced in the belief and hope that they will contribute to the restoration and revitalisation of the Church's basic local structure. It is worth noting here that the communal discernment process mentioned the term 'pastoral council' 51 times and 'lay leader or leadership' 22 times.

1. That Pastoral Councils, composed predominantly of lay women and men, be established at all levels – and especially the diocesan level - in the Australian Church. This requirement has been more honoured in the breach than the observance. Councils at the various levels should be required to remain in frequent conversation with one

another. Pastoral Councils should be required to do all they can to encourage membership of the under-forties and to set up sub-committees strongly including the under-thirties. All Pastoral Councils should be required to plan and provide for community service projects as an essential part of their remit.

2. That lay-led parishes be encouraged, following (flexibly and creatively) the model developed in the Archdiocese of Wellington NZ and, as there, designed to enhance the Eucharistic role of ordained priests.
3. That basic training for lay leaders be developed at diocesan and inter-diocesan levels, with better resourced dioceses lending support to partner dioceses in need.
4. That formal recognition be given to a range of ministries to be exercised by qualified lay women and lay men. These ministries should include preaching, liturgical planning, various forms of counselling, and community service provision, and should be coordinated by Diocesan Pastoral Councils.

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5. GOVERNANCE

PC Agenda questions

- *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?*
- *How might we recast governance at every level of the Church in Australia in a more missionary key?*

Reflections

The proposals from communal discernment process mentioned 'open' and 'change' as a noun or verb 151 and 171 times respectively. 'Renewal' and 'reform' were mentioned 80 and 83 times respectively. 'Consult' was mentioned 34 times, 'transparent' 32 times, and 'accountability' 19 times. 'Synod' or 'synodal' were mentioned 72 times.

The principles and tools of good governance are widely known and discussed within society. At a minimum, the leaders of Catholic institutions and organizations need to provide evidence that these principles are operating in the institutions they are responsible for. These include being inclusive, equitable, accountable, participatory, and transparent.

Within the Church charged with the mission of Jesus, however, we would want to go further, to include a spirit of synodality and co-responsibility. There must be serious discussion at the PC and beyond as to what is implied by these principles, and about how we demonstrate

belief that the Holy Spirit works in and through each person of goodwill. Such discussion must also be addressed to how we dialogue and come to consensus in governance matters.

In the submissions to the PC, the lack of equal inclusion of women at every level of Church life was named as an area that must be addressed, as it is one of the Church's great areas of weakness, and a cause of scandal within and beyond the Church. A key question is: What should a truly synodal Church, one which drew equally on the gifts of women and men, look like?

Substantive Proposals

1. That the members of the PC undertake a major visioning exercise aimed at specifying requirements for an inclusive synodal Church. This should involve close reference to Pope Francis' agenda in this regard.
2. That the PC call upon the bishops of each diocese to ensure that all governance bodies in their dioceses are balanced and inclusive regarding membership.
3. That those who establish governance arrangements for education, parishes, social service and other ministries, be held accountable to ensure that these arrangements meet the requirements of both Church and state. That the practical work to assist this should be commissioned by ACBC as an outcome of the PC.
4. That the PC ask the bishops to come to agreement about the essentials of governance arrangements for parishes seeking to adopt new leadership models.

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6. INSTITUTIONS

PC Agenda questions

- *How might we better see the future of Catholic education (primary, secondary and tertiary) through a missionary lens?*
- *How might we better see the future of Catholic social services, agencies and health and aged care ministries as key missionary and evangelising agencies?*

Reflections

The mission of Jesus takes in every aspect of human life. If this mission is to be the lens through which service – education, health, or welfare etc – is viewed, then the issue is: What difference would/should it make to the way leaders are selected, the formation programs they experience, the way the institutions they lead ‘market’ themselves, the kinds of choices they make about services and service delivery, and to whom?

A major issue here is the understanding held by leaders and personnel of the term ‘missionary’. There is considerable confusion regarding this. Some see it solely as ‘purpose’, whereas in a Catholic institution, mission denotes religious purpose viz the mission of Jesus extended into our world. It is necessary for leaders and staff to become imbued with the understanding of mission as it has developed over the past half-century in the Church. There is a formidable agenda facing the Church in this regard.

If educational, health and welfare institutions are to carry out the mission of Jesus, they have to resist the temptation to become immersed in institutional survival and maintenance. Whilst operating within the broader service delivery sector, their ultimate goal is fundamentally different.

Substantive Proposals

6.1 Education

1. Because the Catholic worldview impacts all areas of knowledge, the PC is asked to consider how educational institutions can be held accountable for how this is manifest in projects undertaken, staff selection and the mandate given to them, the design and delivery of curriculum, the pastoral care of students etc.
2. That the PC consider:
 - (a) how institutions may avoid the potentially secularising tendencies that can accompany necessary practices associated with risk management and legal liability,
 - (b) how Catholic institutions need to work to achieve the correct balance and integration for their core vision and mission, whilst also attending to necessary institutional safeguards and generally accepted good practice.
3. That the PC encourage dioceses, educational systems and tertiary institutions to regularly share reflections and insights in the areas of formation, leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, and specific programs, with a view to ensuring that the mission of Jesus frames and drives all their educational endeavors.

6.2 Social services, health, aged care

1. That the PC ask the Catholic bishops to establish and make public the criteria that they expect to be used in the recruitment and selection of leaders in these ministries.
2. The issue of suitable staff to be employed is a pressing one and must be the focus of deliberations across the specific sector. The PC needs to consider the practicalities, and provide advice to the bishops and faithful.
3. That the PC consider how leaders of these sectors, and indeed across the whole of Church life, be held accountable as to whether or not the service provided is experienced as Jesus' healing ministry.