

PLENARY COUNCIL Monday Part 1. Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts

Every morning we began with the Welcome to Country and the cleansing ceremony followed by our prayers and song. These events were deeply moving and meaningful. Our indigenous brothers and sisters were open for us to receive the Truth-Telling. The Story telling was confronting and challenging. Could we dream that we would truly listen and walk together in humility, understanding, hope and compassion? That our new song-lines would be sung together in rich harmony and love?

We listened to accounts of truth telling which spoke of intense suffering, humiliation and hurt of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people stretching over generations. Some of the truth telling referred to historical structures, conditions, and experiences while others refer to the ongoing and systemic problems in a number of areas of society, in which the data reveals the sheer extent of the entrenched and ongoing suffering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Amidst the Truth-Telling the Elders told fond stories of the Catholic Church and the many Sisters and Brothers who provided care and education in reading and writing language even when the governments legislated against these teaching initiatives. The Elders saw the church as a sacred place like country. A place where we share what we have to offer with love, compassion and meaning. Where we walk together and be sacred in our dreaming and creation. Where we thank God for the universe. We look to the heavens and listen to what the Milky Way tells our hearts. We marvel at the Emu dreaming and the song line of the Gospel. The need for us to sit down together with Christ in the centre of the circle.

Today the forces of secularisation continue to impact on public schools where the celebration of significant events in the Christian calendar and other expressions of religiosity such as prayer are not actively encouraged or supported.

As a society we are suffering deeply as we notice the rise and the rise of mental turmoil, scepticism and relational disconnect. We give thanks for our indigenous brothers and sisters as they welcome us into their belonging and hope and pray we can sing the new song together in harmony.

All the Part 1. Motions passed. Details of Decrees: plenary.council@catholic.org.au

PLENARY COUNCIL Part 2. Choosing Repentance, Seeking Healing

The members of the Plenary Council were deeply distressed by the extent of the abuse and hurt committed by some clergy or religious brothers or sisters within the Catholic Church and the Church's initial response to allegations of abuse or harm. It was truth telling that spoke to the harrowing experiences of those affected directly by abuse and that of their families.

We experienced a time of prayer and reflection. The Ritual of Lament and the placing of the Cross of Ashes on each other's forehead was powerful. I called to mind those from the Diocese of Rockhampton affected by abuse or harm and I thought of the extent of the safeguarding structures, practices and formation processes that are now being implemented. I thought of the words of Micah all those years ago: *"Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God."* (Micah 6:8). And I prayed that the voices of the victims would be present and be alive in the structures, practices and formation processes now being implemented.

In the introduction to Part 2. The Plenary Council:

- a) Says sorry to the victims and survivors of abuse, their families and communities;
- b) Recommits the Church to respond with justice and compassion to those who have suffered from the trauma of abuse, including where appropriate, ongoing pastoral and spiritual support and accompaniment;
- c) Encourages the practice, where appropriate, of local memorials in various forms, as a tangible recognition of the harm done through abuse and the need for special care for children;
- d) Reaffirms the commitment of the Church in Australia to the work of implementing and improving safeguarding standards and practices;
- e) Calls on all Catholics to commit to ensuring that the Church environments are safe and respectful; and
- f) Requests the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial Juridic Persons, with assistance from the appropriate experts, to study, acknowledge and address systemic factors which have facilitated abuse within the church.

All the Part 2. Motions passed. Details of Decrees: plenary.council@catholic.org.au

PLENARY COUNCIL Part 3. Called by Christ, Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples

There is an increasing struggle in our society for the sense of identity and purpose. In a world that has become consumer driven many are caught in being individualistic with demands for self-gratification and self-importance. Many are slaves to clicking on the devices what *I like* rather than responding to the invitation of surrendering to what is true, beautiful and good. Short-term happiness on our individualised screens is prioritised over the deep satisfaction, contentment and joy that comes from knowing and living in relationship with Christ and one another.

Christ calls each of us by name to go out and bring in God's Kingdom by *'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'*. We are called together as a community of disciples, as a Church, privileged to share in Jesus' mission. The Love of God, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ overflowing into the work and beauty of creation. Take the time to pray and reflect on our parish mission statement found in the weekly bulletin. As post-resurrection people we have the privilege and responsibility to live our part in the unfolding love story of creation.

The Plenary Council focused on the importance of ***Shaping Communities on Christ and Sent by the Spirit***. Our Baptismal call is to be missionary disciples to follow Christ with joy, anointed with the oil of gladness. We are 'Good News' people who reach out to all in humility, dignity, respect and compassion.

We reflected on the many groups of people who have been marginalised including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, those who are divorced, those who identify as LGBTIQ+, and those who have suffered abuse of any form. We reflected on the importance of language and formation. Our Catholic Social Teachings, resources and expertise have a significant and important place in the public square.

We need to commit ourselves to building friendly and cooperative relationships with other Christians, communities of other religious traditions and people of no religion.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* n. 28 Pope Francis describes four key characteristics of an evangelising parish:

- It is in "contact with the homes and the lives of its people."
- It is "an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration."
- It "encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers"
- It is "a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach."

All the Part 3. Motions passed. Details of Decrees: plenary.council@catholic.org.au

PLENARY COUNCIL Part 4. Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men

The Wednesday morning session was a serious disruption to the flow of the Plenary Council. A catalyst for change. A number of speakers, including Virginia Bourke, the chair of Mercy Health Australia talked about the disconnect between the leadership roles of women in society and those held in the Church. There was a sense of hope that, after four years of consultation, change was inevitable. While the members voted in favour of the motions in the consultative vote the bishops did not in the deliberative vote. The disbelief and disappointment of those present was palpable. There was clearly unfinished business when we left for morning tea.

The crisis showed itself when, on return, many of us could not take our seats to continue until there was a resolution. Those who remained standing included women and men, priests and bishops. It was a defining moment for the council. It was not a protest of blame and shame but one where the Spirit swept over the chaos and God spoke in our hearts *Let there be light*. Those standing were invited to return to their tables to pray for light; for revelation.

The crisis became a turning point. Many members gathered in the library to listen to the varied and different points of view and ways forward. The bishops also met during this time to dialogue. Would the vote as it was taken stand, or would an alternative be suggested that would ensure that the critical topic of Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men was included in decrees of the Plenary Council? The importance of the Plenary Council as a form of synodality was immediate.

The schedules were overturned and proceedings revised. There was a change of process that enabled the members to be able to truly listen and see with new eyes what the Spirit was revealing to our Church for the twenty-first century. Could we be united in heart and together speak with one voice despite our differences of experience and perspective? A number of motions were revisited and revised in their format. Part 4. Motions would be reconsidered and voted on at the end of the week. There was still apprehension but also a deep sense of hope in the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

There has been a clear commitment by the Plenary Council to commit the Church in ways that witness the equal dignity of women and men, with their diverse gifts and experiences. For me, personally, although the motions passed, all the boxes I hope to be ticked will continue to need consideration and development. Nevertheless, the groundswell is evident and rises up rather than climbing a ladder of boxes.

My prayer for the universal Church Synod in 2023 is the commitment to the enhancing role of women in church leadership and the overcoming of assumptions, cultural practices and language that leads to inequality. We have two legs to walk, two arms to open wide, two lungs to breathe, two eyes to see, two ears to hear and one heart to speak with one voice.

Results of Part 4. Motions. Details of Decrees: plenary.council@catholic.org.au

PLENARY COUNCIL Part 5. Communion of Grace: Sacrament to the World

The roles and responsibilities of all the baptised were recognised and celebrated. The Church is seen as being 'like a sacrament', a sign and instrument of union with God and the unity of the whole human race (*Lumen Gentium*, 21). In Australia the growing multicultural nature of our communities has generated a variety of liturgical and spiritual experiences. We are greatly enriched by the spiritual and mystical traditions which have nourished the universal Church over the centuries.

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1Corinthians 12:12). Members of the Church are diverse, and their vocations are complementary. Some are laypeople whether they are single or married, some are in consecrated life, and some are ordained as deacon, priest, or bishop. In recent time there has been a broadening of the criteria for admission to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte and now the recognition of the Ministry of Catechist. The Plenary Council highlighted the need for formation and understanding in each of the vocational areas and the fundamental importance of a sacramental and spiritually rich and joyful prayer life that is transformed, transforming and inclusive. Just some of the areas discussed were:

- The diversity and unity of the Church in the practices of prayer and ecclesial/liturgical families of the Catholic communion (The Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Church)
- The importance of Catholic Education formation and witness in our schools, colleges, universities, hospitals and outreach processes. The need to explore and respond to who are we not reaching and including.
- The role and importance of catechesis in our government schools
- The importance and richness of the Rite of Christian Initiation of adults.
- The sacramental life of the Church with an emphasis on all the Sacraments with attention to Eucharist, Marriage and Penance
- The understanding and appropriate practice of the three forms of the Rite of Penance
- The beauty and richness of our Liturgies.
- The preparation of a new English translation of the Roman Missal that is both faithful to the original text and sensitive to the call of language that communicates clearly and includes all in the assembly
- A review in the provisions and guidelines for lay people to participate in the formal ministry of Preaching in Lay Led Liturgies and in the Eucharistic Assembly.

As a Church we must be witnesses of Christ and proclaim the sacredness of all people and welcome them into the communion with God.

Results of Part 5. Motions. Details of Decrees: plenary.council@catholic.org.au

PLENARY COUNCIL Part 6. Formation and Leadership for Mission and Ministry

We live in a time of significant change. These changes include the rapid transformation in the ways we live, relate to each other, communicate and think, how different generations relate and how we understand our faith amidst the increasing secularism and scientism in the world in which we live. As a Church we must reassess our models of formation for leadership at all levels, including our priests, to meet the needs of all people, promote the mission of evangelisation as the responsibility of all the baptised and strengthen the witness of all the baptised through personal and communal conversion.

The formation of all in leadership is essential. The contexts, resources and challenges of parish life and ministry vary greatly across our country and so there needs to be adaption to the local circumstances that is creative, multi-dimensional, integrated and experiential. We must acknowledge the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Church and support the Catholic identity, vocation and mission of families, faith communities, schools, institutions and agencies.

The realignment of our Parish Stewardship Council is one attempt to be creative. One area of significance is developing ways in which we can encourage and accompany parents, guardians, and caregivers in their vocation as the “primary and principal” teachers of faith and recognising the crucial role of family.

All the baptised are called to be missionary disciples and all should be equipped and supported through regular opportunities and programs for ministerial and missionary formation. The apostolate of all needs to be grounded in scriptural reflection, reception of the ecclesial wisdom of our tradition and prayerful communal discernment. At all times Christ must be centre of formation and activities.

Particular attention needs to be given to the support and encouragement of the future generations. Recognition of the needs of regional and rural communities is essential in our diocese. Formation in faith and new forms of missionary discipleship are at the heart of the future planning to ensure:

- The diversity of the Catholic community is explicitly recognised;
- Intercultural competency is encouraged, especially in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and spiritualities;
- The equal dignity of women and men is affirmed and demonstrated;
- The renewal of formation within and for families in the context of the critical role that marriage, parenting, and care-giving plays as a school of formation, is prioritised and strengthened;
- The apostolate of the laity, along with new ecclesial realities, acting as “leaven in the world,” (Lumen Gentium n. 31) is promoted, encouraged and supported;
- The hopes, spirituality, giftedness, energy, and modes of communication and connection of young people are identified, incorporated, encouraged and celebrated;
- Ongoing support and strategies for those who minister to young people;
- The rich variety of spiritual and devotional traditions of the Church are appreciated and celebrated; and
- Synodal practices such as encounter, accompaniment, listening, dialogue, discernment, and collaboration are fostered and deepened.

All the Part 6. Motions passed. Details of Decrees: plenary.council@catholic.org.au

PLENARY COUNCIL Part 7. At the Service of Communion, Participation and Mission: Governance

In Baptism, the Holy Spirit gives believers, and therefore the whole Church, a special gift so that together they can faithfully interpret and live the Christian Gospel in the diverse circumstances of history and culture – the *sensus fidei* (Lumen Gentium n.12). All the baptised are called to participate in the three offices of Christ as a priestly, prophetic, and royal people (Lumen Gentium, nn. 31,35).

The Plenary Council affirmed the importance of governance to be exercised in a synodal manner, with the appropriate participation of all the baptised. This would mainly involve the participation of lay women and men in governance structures at a Diocesan level, including the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Council of Priests, the College of Consultors, the Diocesan Finance Council, the Diocesan Curia, various boards and other governance bodies, and, at times, a Diocesan Synod. At a parish level this would mean the participation of lay women and men in the Parish Stewardship Council and the Parish Finance Committee.

There is a need to recognise, affirm and support the many initiatives already undertaken at parish, diocesan, eparchial, and national levels to implement recommendations agreed to in the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference response to *The Light from the Southern Cross*. Our diocese is already a leader in a number of these initiatives so necessary due to the vastness, demographic and diversity of our region. It is the reason why everyone of us is called to offer our gifts for the mission of our Church.

The Plenary Council commits the Church in Australia to fostering the discernment and synodal leadership envisaged in Vatican II, called for by Pope Francis and experienced in the Plenary Council's journey.

All the Part 7. Motions passed. Details of Decrees: plenary.council@catholic.org.au

PLENARY COUNCIL Part 8. Integral Ecology and Conversion for the Sake of Our Common Home

Our country is subject to extreme weather conditions and circumstances. We realise the urgency of responding to our baptismal calling of taking up God's mission of love for the whole of creation. Throughout the Scriptures we learn of God's love for creation, from the affirmation of the goodness of creation in Genesis (Genesis 1:2-4) to the Book of Revelation's vision of creation made new (Revelation 21:5). We are called to care for our Common Home, and we are called to cherish and promote the dignity of human life from conception to natural death. Our Church has the excellent resource of local and universal Catholic Social Teaching which we need to explore and put into action.

Pope Francis' landmark Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (2015) powerfully points that we do not stand outside of creation but are "joined in a splendid universal communion" with other creatures and are called to care for the common home which we share with them (n. 220). In their Social Justice Statement 2021-22, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, the Australian Bishops also affirm "an integral approach to economic, social and ecological issues" – an integral ecology – if we are to address the interlocking crises of our times.

The Plenary Council:

- Recognises the sacred duty to care for and protect the Earth as a common home for all God's creatures, including the generations to come;
- Encourages all Catholic people, families, parishes, dioceses, eparchies, religious institutes, educational institutions, and other Catholic organisations to accept Pope Francis' invitation to join the *Laudato Si'* Action Plans, as a vehicle for their ecological conversion; and
- Promote initiatives in Church and society which promote and defend human life from conception to natural death, especially those who are most vulnerable.

All the Part 8. Motions passed. Details of the Decrees: plenary.council@catholic.org.au

The original flame that was lit by our First Nations people on the Monday certainly became a fire on the Wednesday. The cleansing smoke that had come from the gum leaves suddenly broke into flames of fire that touched our hearts and minds. The Holy Spirit was at his fiery best.

Jesus said, "*As the Father sent me so I send you*" and he breathed on them. (John 20:21)