

Preparing for the 2020 Australian Plenary Council

This second article in the series looking at particular councils, examines the initial preparations for the 2020 Australian Plenary Council. Further articles will examine in some detail the seven particular councils – provincial and plenary – which have been held in Australia since 1844, and a final one will attempt to imagine what the 2020 Plenary Council might hope to achieve.

A synodal church in Australia

Though the Second Vatican Council declared in 1965 that it “earnestly desires that the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with new vigour”, in Australia since then, synods and councils have not flourished.

During the past 52 years only five of Australia’s 28 territorial dioceses have had a diocesan synod: Canberra & Goulburn in 1989 and 2004, Maitland-Newcastle in 1992-93, Brisbane in 2003, Cairns in 2008-11, and Broken Bay in 2011-12. Sydney has not had a diocesan synod since 1951 and Melbourne since 1916. Several other dioceses, including Bathurst, Hobart, Parramatta, Toowoomba and Wollongong, have had non-canonical diocesan ‘gatherings’ or ‘assemblies’, but the Holy See’s 1997 *Instruction on Diocesan Synods* states that all such assemblies should be formally situated within the canonical discipline of the Church.

There have been seven particular councils – provincial and plenary - held in Australia since the Catholic hierarchy was established in 1842 (see Table 1), but no provincial council since 1907 (1st Melbourne Provincial Council) and no plenary council since 1937 (4th Australasian Plenary Council). Worldwide, only two plenary councils have been held since 1965: in the Philippines (1991) and Poland (1993).

Table 1: Particular Councils held in Australia: 1844 - 1937

Particular Synod/Council	Year	Place Held	Bishops attending	Clerics attending	Decrees enacted
1 st Australian Provincial Council, (Follow-up meeting) ¹	1844, (1862)	Sydney, (Melbourne)	3 (Australian only) (4)	33	48 (Supplement)
2 nd Australian Provincial Council	1869	Melbourne	8 (Australian only)	30	38
1 st Australasian Plenary Council	1885	Sydney	18 (Australian & NZ)	52	272
2 nd Australian Plenary Council	1895	Sydney	23 (Australian only)	49	344
3 rd Australian Plenary Council	1905	Sydney	21 (Australian only)	49	371
1 st Melbourne Provincial Synod	1907	Melbourne	4 (Victorian only)	18	112
4 th Australasian Plenary Council	1937	Sydney	33 (Australian & NZ)	59	685

Note: 1. A 2nd Provincial Council was planned for 1862, but in the absence of the bishops of Adelaide and Perth, the meeting of the bishops of Hobart, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney was not considered a canonical provincial synod. The decrees and regulations adopted at the meeting and approved by the Holy See were published only as a Supplement to the decrees of the 1st Provincial Council of 1844.

In general, since Vatican II Australia’s bishops have shied away from synods and councils, preferring to exercise their collegial pastoral and governance ministry via the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), a ‘kind of council’ usually meeting in plenary session twice a year. But an Episcopal conference was never intended to replace a plenary council,

where a more comprehensive discussion of issues takes place, not just among bishops, but among a much wider group of Christ's faithful, giving witness to the Church as a hierarchically ordered community of believers. A plenary council also has far greater legislative authority than an Episcopal conference and is the highest form of communion between the various local or particular churches of the nation.

A plenary or national council in 2020

Under canon law an Episcopal conference can celebrate a plenary council whenever it deems it necessary or useful, and the Apostolic See approves (C. 439).

The ACBC has been discussing the holding of a plenary council since 2007, following the urging of Pope John Paul II in his 2001 Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* to 'discern the Spirit'. In 2008 the ACBC set up a working party to prepare a proposal and discussion paper, and at that stage a plenary council in 2011 looked likely. However, as new challenges arose, the bishops felt more discernment was needed, and in 2010 they decided to have the 2012-2013 Year of Grace rather than a council. However, in 2015, after years of discussion, the ACBC voted unanimously to move towards a 'national ecclesial event', and in November 2016, by a large majority (30 votes to 5) determined to seek the approval of the Apostolic See to hold a plenary council in 2020, the first for 83 years. During that time, the Church, Australian society, and the world itself had changed significantly.

It was somewhat of a *volte face* for the ACBC, for in August 2012, its President had responded to a proposal by Catholics for Renewal for a plenary council in 2015 stating that "The ACBC Permanent Committee does not consider that a Plenary Council is opportune at this time" (*Letter*, August 2012). But circumstances had changed.

While the ACBC has given no specific reasons for its decision, four factors are most likely: i) Pope Francis's renewed call for a synodal church; ii) the current Royal Commission's investigation into the Catholic Church's response to child sexual abuse; iii) the ongoing decline in regular Mass attendance across Australia (12.2 percent in 2011) and the continuing downturn in use of the sacraments, particularly Penance and Marriage; and iv) the continuing paucity of local vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge, who has taken Pope Francis's call to heart, has been the driving force for the 2020 Plenary. He has said that the ACBC's decision was a "recognition that we can no longer put up a sign saying 'Business as usual', for the Royal Commission has made it abundantly clear that ... the culture has to change, and that bishops and others will have to make bold decisions about the future" (*The Catholic Leader*, 1 December 2016). He has also said that if bishops are to "listen to all the voices and try to bring them into harmony", synods are necessary, even if they might reveal differences and unresolved issues, be exhausting, and struggle to find the way ahead; because, for all their messiness, synods are a serious process of discernment, can be exhilarating and refreshing in deeper ways, and should produce real fruit (Knox Lecture, May 2016).

First preparatory steps

While Australia's 5th plenary council can only proceed with the consent of the Pope, the ACBC has already received advice from the Apostolic See on the process for obtaining that consent and has acted on it (Plenary Meeting 4-11 May 2017). It is expecting a favourable response at an early date.

There are three phases to a plenary council: preparation, celebration, and implementation. The preparatory stage began in 2015 and will run until a date in 2020 to be set by the ACBC.

The first steps were the 2015 decision to move towards 'an ecclesial event' and the 2016 decision to convene a plenary council and seek the approval of the Apostolic See.

The second step was taken in November 2016 with the ACBC establishing a special Plenary Council Bishops Commission, consisting of Archbishops Coleridge (Chair), Wilson and Costelloe, and Bishops Long, Kennedy and Tarabay. The Acting Executive Secretary is Fr Stephen Hackett MSC. It is expected that a Facilitator, leading a small team, will be appointed shortly to coordinate and guide the preparatory phase. The Bishops Commission will be advised by and work closely with the Plenary Council Executive Committee, a 14 member group sourced from across Australia and including 8 women and 6 men. Appointed on 28 June 2017 the group includes a priest, a religious brother, 2 religious sisters, and 10 lay men and women, with a variety of competencies and experiences.

Further steps yet to be taken by the ACBC, on the advice of the Plenary Council Bishops Commission, are:

1. Convoke the plenary council after receiving approval from the Apostolic See;
2. Select the place(s) within Australia where the plenary council is to be celebrated (if there is more than one session, multiple venues may be considered);
3. Select a council president from among its own members, who must be a diocesan bishop (ordinary) and must be approved by the Apostolic See; (and possibly a Bishop Secretary General);
4. Issue a call to participate in the council to those who must be called and to those who can be called;
5. Set the number of major superiors (male and female) of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life in Australia who are to be called (to be selected by their peers);
6. Set the number of rectors of major seminaries in Australia who are to be called (to be selected by their peers);
7. Determine the number of priests and other members of the Catholic faithful who are to be called and how they are to be appointed or selected;
8. Decide whether to invite other persons as guests (not participants) to the council, which ones and how many;
9. Determine the agenda of the council and the questions to be treated;
10. Set the opening and closing date for the council (with the possibility of more than one session); and, if necessary;
11. Transfer, extend or dissolve the council.

Among these steps the most important and immediate are determining who will participate in the council, and setting the agenda.

Participants in the plenary council

The 1983 Code of Canon Law is quite specific on who ‘must’ and who ‘can’ be called to participate in a plenary council. It also distinguishes between those participants with a ‘deliberative’ vote, those with a ‘consultative’ vote, and guests with no vote (see Table 2 below). Until Vatican II only clerics had been able to participate in a plenary council. At the 2020 plenary council participants will include bishops, priests, religious men and women, and lay men and women. No specific mention is made of permanent deacons.

At this stage it is not possible to determine the exact number of participants, as the ACBC has some latitude in determining the number of two groups: major superiors of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life, and rectors of major seminaries. Until their numbers are decided, the number of presbyters and other members of the Christian faithful who can be called’ will be up in the air, as it cannot exceed one half of the combined numbers of all the other participants who must and can be called - a limitation possibly designed to prevent pressure groups from attempting to take over the council.

Table 2: Participants in the 2020 Plenary Council (based on Canon 443)

Those who <u>must</u> be called	Voting Rights	Those who <u>can</u> be called	Voting Rights
Diocesan bishops	Deliberative	Titular bishops retired or living in Australia	Deliberative
Coadjutor & auxiliary bishops	Deliberative	Priests and other members of Christ’s faithful ⁴	Consultative
Titular bishops with special function	Deliberative		
Vicars general of all particular churches	Consultative		
Episcopal vicars of all particular churches	Consultative		
Major superiors of religious institutes ¹	Consultative		
Rectors of Catholic universities ²	Consultative		
Deans of theology & canon law faculties	Consultative		
Rectors of major seminaries ³	Consultative	Others (as guests, but not participants)	Nil

Notes: 1. Includes societies of apostolic life for both men and women. The number of those to be called will be determined by the ACBC and they are to be elected by all the major superiors with a presence in Australia. 2. Includes ecclesiastical universities in Australia. 3. The number will be determined by the ACBC and they will be elected by all the rectors. 4. These can include deacons, non-ordained male and female religious and other lay men and women. Their numbers will be determined using a special calculation (see text below).

However, if one was to speculate using July 2017 data, estimated numbers might be the following:

- A. **Participants who must be called:** diocesan bishops (35), coadjutor bishops (0), auxiliary bishops (8), titular bishops with a special function (0), vicars general (36), episcopal vicars (33), major superiors of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life (say 10–15 male and 10-15 female), rectors of Catholic and ecclesiastical universities (4), deans of faculties of theology and cannon law (14), rectors of major seminaries (say 10-15). The total number in this group of participants may be around 160-175, including 10 or more female participants.

B. Participants who may be called: retired titular bishops living in Australia (24) who may send a proxy (with a consultative vote), as well as priests and other members of the Christian faithful (80-99). The total number who can be invited may range from 104 to 123, including men and women.

To calculate the number of priests and other members of the faithful who can be called to participate, one adds the total of those who must be called (estimated 160-175) plus the number of retired bishops who can be called (estimated 24), and divides the sum (184-199) by 2 (= 92-99.5). Accordingly, any number of priests and other faithful less than 92-99 may be called to participate.

By this estimate, if the plenary council were held in mid-2017, the maximum number of participants might be around 276-298, including: 67 bishops (22% – 24%) with a deliberative vote, and 209-231 other participants (76%-78%) with a consultative vote. Lay non-religious participants (male and female), possibly numbering 55-60 persons, might constitute some 20 percent of all participants, though the number may increase if fewer religious are called.

An invitation to other churches

While the 2020 Plenary Council will be a significant event for the Catholic Church in Australia, it will also be important beyond Australia, particularly for neighbouring churches in the Asia-Pacific region and other churches which share similar cultural values and historical ties. Representatives from many of these churches will likely be invited as guests.

Since the bishops of New Zealand were full participants in the 1st and 4th Australasian Plenary Councils in 1885 and 1937, Archbishop Coleridge has already spoken informally to them about some form of presence. While the ACBC is one of 4 members (ACBC, CE PAC, NZCBC, PNG-SI) of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania, no decisions have yet been made as to how the other members might be part of the council.

It should also be expected that the ACBC will invite as guests to the council representatives from other Christian churches in Australia, and perhaps even representatives from other non-Christian faith communities.

Setting the agenda for the 2020 Plenary Council

The ACBC has stated that it “intends that the scope of consultation and discernment processes towards the Plenary Council will be inclusive of the whole Catholic community in its breadth and diversity” (Plenary Meeting 4-11 May 2017). Archbishop Coleridge has said that he hopes the agenda “will be generated by genuine consultation of the whole Church”, but has already pointed to some issues which he believes will need to be addressed if the Church in Australia is to stop the drift, revive hope and set a vision:

- better understanding the culture in which the Church must proclaim the Gospel;
- how to deal with the fact that mass civic Christianity is ‘over’;
- facing the fact that the Catholic Church is not the power in Australia that it once was;
- planning the future of the Church in Australia at a very complex time;
- developing and revitalizing parish life and mission;

- confronting the critical issues of our times, such as same-sex marriage;
- the Church's response to the findings of the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse;
- contemporary issues of justice, peace, development and the environment;
- becoming a more missionary church, not one retiring behind defensive walls;
- reviewing ordained ministry and the diminishment of apostolic orders;
- examining the relationship between newer and older Catholic communities/parishes (*The Catholic Leader*, 17 August 2016).

At its May 2017 plenary meeting the ACBC also indicated that some of the issues raised in the recent *Open Letter to the Bishops* (*The Swag*, Winter 2017, 15) such as greater transparency, accountability and inclusivity, and greater participation of the faithful in the selection of bishops, could be included in the council agenda.

To arrive at a suitable agenda the ACBC will be careful to avoid a politicized process. A synod is first and foremost a 'sacred' gathering where the participants open their hearts and minds to the guidance of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 15:28*). It is a moment to discern what the Spirit is saying to our Church at this time.

To prepare for the 2020 council, the *Open Letter*, prepared by Catholics for Renewal and signed by 3770 Australian Catholics, asked each diocesan bishop to "hold a diocesan synod or assembly in 2018, with deanery and parish listening sessions, to develop the agenda for the 2020 Plenary Council". Given that every diocese throughout the nation will have particular needs and issues besides those common to all, this strategy would bring to the agenda a healthy diversity of views and insights. It would also allow all the particular churches, in communion, to more fully participate in the process of discernment.

A further aid to developing the agenda might be the preparation and distribution of a user-friendly questionnaire or survey instrument, such as those requested by Pope Francis for the recent Synod on the Family and the planned Synod on Youth. A call for submissions from Christ's faithful could also be useful.

A time for prayer

Sadly, there has been a near fatal breakdown in the trust relationship between the wider Australian community and the Catholic Church in Australia, as well as a catastrophic loss of mutual respect and trust between the Catholic faithful and many of their bishops. For the good of the Catholic community and the community at large, a new relationship of trust and confidence has to be created within the Church and with the wider community, and this can only happen if the Church is prepared to think and act differently. This will require a cultural and spiritual transformation, a *metanoia* or radical conversion if you will, with repentance for past sins, a change of heart, and a change of life (*Mark 1:1-8; Ezekiel 18:30-31*). Without this *metanoia*, which also calls for a fundamental change of perspective and a new way at looking at reality, the Church in Australia will not be able to accomplish God's plan of salvation for the people of this nation.

The 2020 Plenary Council will be not only a time for discernment but also a time for prayer. It might be useful to recall the words of the Apostle James at the first council in Jerusalem (*Acts 15:13-18*):

*After that I shall return and rebuild the fallen House of David;
I shall rebuild it from its ruins and restore it.
Then the rest of mankind, all the pagans who are consecrated to my name,
will look to the Lord, says the Lord who made this known so long ago.*

Peter J Wilkinson
31 July 2017