

Catholic Church 2020 Plenary Council: bishops must tap into the grassroots without delay

By Peter Wilkinson.

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The Catholic Church in Australia is in the midst of a massive and existential crisis, the greatest in its history. The Catholic bishops have responded by proposing a Plenary Council in 2020. They say it will no longer be “business as usual” and have promised to consult the whole Church. But no changes to business as usual and no consultation plans have been announced, and no guarantees given that every bishop will buy in. The consultation must begin without delay and start at the grassroots.

If Pope Francis approves, around 260-300 Catholic men and women, but mainly bishops and other clerics, will gather in a cathedral some day in 2020 to begin the 5th Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia.

This Council is coming after years of vacillating by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. They chose a plenary (national) council because this is the traditional forum for Church leaders to wrestle with contemporary issues in the light of the Gospel and respond in terms of faith, morals, governance, discipline and worship.

Australia’s bishops have largely eschewed synods and councils, especially since the 2nd Vatican Council, which insisted on laypersons being included as members. Although they can convene a plenary council whenever they believe one is necessary or useful (so long as the Pope approves), the last one was 80 years ago in 1937. Moreover, since 1965 only 5 bishops have held a diocesan synod. The Australian bishops’ record for synodality and sharing responsibility with Christ’s faithful is certainly not a proud one.

This decision to hold a plenary council in 2020 is undoubtedly a result of the 2013 *Betrayal of Trust* report of the Victorian Parliamentary Committee and the findings of the current Royal Commission into the Catholic Church’s response to child sexual abuse. Archbishop Mark Coleridge, who chairs the Bishops Commission responsible for organizing the 2020 Plenary Council, has admitted that “the Royal Commission has made it abundantly clear that ... the [Church’s] culture has to change, and that bishops and others will have to make bold decisions about the future. There has been a recognition that we [bishops] can no longer put up a sign saying ‘Business as usual’”. But if the “new business” means anything, it has to include synodality, co-responsibility and subsidiarity, and a complete reform of church governance. And the “new business” cannot wait until 2020. It has to be in action in the preparations for the 2020 Plenary Council.

Plenary Council members

The 260-300 members of the 2020 Council will consist of two groups: a larger one (two thirds of members) composed of those who “must be called”; and a smaller one (one third) composed of those who “can be called”. The “must be called”, predominantly clerics, will

include all active bishops (currently 43), all vicars general (34), all Episcopal vicars (33), some major superiors of religious institutes and some rectors of major seminaries (numbers to be decided), all rectors of Catholic universities (4), and all deans of faculties of theology and canon law (14). The “can be called” will include titular and retired bishops living in Australia (currently 28), other priests, and other female and male religious and lay persons (numbers to be decided). Since numbers in the second group cannot exceed half the total number in the first group – a strategy designed to prevent pressure groups from taking over the council – lay members will likely make up around 20 per cent of total membership. Of all council members, only the bishops, active and retired, (possibly 70) will have a deliberative vote; all others will have a consultative vote only. Together they will enact laws which, subject to approval by the Holy See, will bind Catholics throughout Australia.

However, when the members meet for the first time, they will have an agenda before them decided on by the Bishops Commission overseeing the Council’s preparations. How that agenda is drawn up, and what is on it, will be key to the Council’s relevance and success.

Listening to all the voices

Since becoming Pope in 2013, Francis has constantly called for synodality, more participatory processes, and better forms of pastoral dialogue to listen to everyone. In response, Australia’s bishops have determined that for the 2020 Council “the scope of the consultation and discernment processes will be inclusive of the whole Catholic community in its breadth and diversity” and its agenda “generated by genuine consultation with the whole Church”.

However, as yet, no consultation plans have been announced, no guarantees given that every diocesan bishop will consult, and no assurances offered that all bishops will buy into the consultative processes proposed by the Bishops Commission.

Catholics in Australia currently number around 5.5 million and reside in 1,385 parishes belonging to 35 separate dioceses or equivalent. Each diocesan bishop is supreme in his own jurisdiction and cannot be forced to consult, or to follow the agreed consultative processes. Each bishop can choose not to consult, or to consult as he wishes, although refusing to consult would be irresponsible and contrary to the Conference’s promise. Even to consult in a manner other than that agreed would demonstrate a lack of collegiality and solidarity, and above all a weakness in the communion between the various dioceses of the nation, of which a plenary council is the highest expression.

A grassroots approach

There is no question that consultation must begin at the grassroots, at assemblies in the local parishes where Catholics are most at ease and feel the greatest sense of belonging and community. It is here that every diocesan bishop must commit to engage with his people, and there should be no delay in getting it underway, preferably close to Easter 2018.

To facilitate these assemblies, to which all parishioners should be invited, a simple uncomplicated questionnaire or SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis document, prepared by the Bishops Commission, will be helpful. More importantly, for these assemblies to be effective, each diocesan bishop must be open with his people, informing them of the true state of the diocese with a concise and accurate report of its

current and projected pastoral, sacramental, educational, financial, etc. position, and sharing with them his own personal evaluation of the situation. Unless the faithful of each diocese know exactly what they are dealing with, they cannot discuss the issues co-responsibly. Poor governance was at the centre of this crisis; now accountability and transparency must be at the core of the solution.

Throughout the consultation process, free speech must be encouraged and safeguarded, along with mutual respect and the value of diversity. There can be no intimidation, and no restraints on the free, but respectful, expression of ideas. And bishops must, above all, listen.

The consultation will only be effective if there is a continuous and open feedback loop. All consultation participants must be kept informed of what others across the nation are thinking and saying. Secrecy will be toxic. The Bishops Commission will do well to set up a dedicated Plenary Council website to make all feedback and suggestions publicly and freely accessible. The Commission should also call for submissions, and commission research on issues most likely to be on the Council agenda.

For the initial parish engagement Australia's Catholics might be asked three questions: 1) what are the 'signs of the times'; 2) what do these signs mean for your personal faith life and for the life of the Church; and 3) in light of these signs, how should the Church respond to give an authentic and credible witness to Christ and his Gospel. Out of their responses to these questions, and out of their personal and communal sense of the faith (*sensus fidei fidelium*), should emerge the draft agenda and the pointers for reform.

In larger dioceses, the initial parish consultations might be followed by deanery or regional assemblies, building on the insights from the parishes.

The next level of engagement should be at diocesan assemblies (preferable to restrictive canonical synods) where lay, religious and clerical representatives of each parish of the diocese can distil the parish input and prioritize the issues for the Plenary Council agenda. Many dioceses will prioritize common issues, but if the grassroots consultations have been effective, there will be diversity, which must be respected and embraced.

Another level might be provincial (or State) assemblies (preferable to canonical councils) to address issues shared by several dioceses. Again, lay, religious and clerical representatives of each diocese must be present to vote or seek consensus on those items they want on the Plenary Council agenda.

An informed agenda

After the consultations, but well before the opening of the 2020 Plenary Council, the Plenary Council Bishops Commission must state the aim(s) of the Council, announce its agenda, and determine which questions are to be treated.

If all bishops commit to accountability and transparency, and the Bishops Commission actively seeks to mine the wisdom, knowledge and understanding gifted to all the baptized and confirmed by the Holy Spirit, and fully engages with the *sensus fidei fidelium*, then there can be real hope that the 5th Plenary Council will be well-informed and ready to renew the Church in Australia.

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