



25 January 2018

Most Rev Denis J Hart DD
Archbishop of Melbourne
PO Box 146
East Melbourne Vic 8002

Dear Archbishop Hart,

I write as the new president of Catholics for Renewal in regard to the Melbourne Archdiocese's preparations for the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia, scheduled to open in 2020. You may recall that in 2012 we wrote to you as President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) about the convening of such a council.

The Catholics for Renewal committee and many of the thousands of Australian Catholics who actively support our objectives reside in the Melbourne Archdiocese. Together, we are hopeful that the Plenary Council will be a major catalyst for the renewal of the Church in this nation.

We are pleased that the ACBC has already taken some early and decisive steps to launch the Council's preparatory stage, including the establishment of a dedicated Bishops Commission, a Facilitation Team, and a Council Executive Committee. These are excellent initiatives. We also applaud the decision to appoint many lay members of the faithful, male and female, to the advisory bodies.

At the most recent (November/December 2017) plenary meeting of the ACBC, we note that the bishops decided to hold the Plenary Council over two sessions, in late 2020 and May 2021, and recommended the establishment of 'diocesan working groups' by the end of March 2018 to support bishops in their engagement with the Plenary Council and the Facilitation Team. Again, both decisions are excellent initiatives.

In the published summary (*ACBC*, 20 December 2017) of that meeting, Archbishop Coleridge outlined a variety of approaches which might be taken by dioceses in the 'journey of preparation': e.g. a diocesan synod, a diocesan assembly or a diocesan gathering. He also noted the importance of coordination within each diocese, and the need for the approaches taken to be tailored to the circumstances of each diocese, its needs and the available opportunities. Catholics for Renewal considers those statements as most important and would like to offer some comment and suggestions.

By way of comment, we cannot emphasize sufficiently the importance of good

governance which, in practical terms, means that every diocese must ensure that its institutional practices and culture are of the highest order. This will entail full accountability, full transparency, and the inclusion of all the faithful in the decision-making processes of the diocese. Particularly important is that more women are included in top diocesan leadership positions and decision-making processes.

We note that the ACBC's *Social Justice Statement 2000: Promoting the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia* included 31 proposals that diocesan "bishops might wish to consider for possible action in their dioceses". Among them:

- A better balance of men and women, clergy, religious and laity be included on existing councils, organisations and advisory bodies (n.1);
- A better balance of men and women be appointed to leadership roles (n.2);
- In dioceses where pastoral councils are not established, and where the bishop judges their formation to be appropriate, they be formed, and include a balance of men and women, clergy, religious and laity so that women's participation in decision-making and leadership may be increased (n.3);
- A data-base of Catholic women and their qualifications and skills be developed to help promote the participation of women in the Church, especially their involvement in decision-making processes and leadership roles (n.4); and
- Greater attention be given to the education of clergy, religious and laity towards attitudinal change in recognizing equal value, equal rights of women and men with the lay faithful of the Church (n. 28).

We are unaware of how many, or to what extent, you have actioned these proposals during your stewardship of the archdiocese.

We are aware, however, that you have not judged it appropriate to establish a diocesan pastoral council in the archdiocese or to convene a single diocesan synod. This has been a great shame and a serious lacuna in your pastoral ministry during the past 17 years. A diocesan pastoral council and diocesan synod(s) could have better assisted you to understand and address the many matters that have adversely affected the archdiocese in recent years. Also, as a consequence, Melbourne Catholics have had very limited experience of synodality and participatory processes in the archdiocese.

Pope Francis highlighted the need to put in place means of communication and pastoral dialogue in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG, n. 31), and urged every bishop to listen to everyone, with 'mission' as the principal aim.

As you now proceed with the setting up a 'diocesan working group' to prepare for the Plenary Council, Catholics for Renewal would like to make the following suggestions:

1. That in appointing members to the diocesan working group, you seek to make it truly representative of the archdiocese, and perhaps consider using the formula recommended for selecting members of a diocesan pastoral council, namely, including clerics, religious and lay persons representing the various regions of the archdiocese, but also the different social conditions, professions and apostolates;
2. That the objective of the consultations be primarily pastoral, with a missionary aspiration;

3. That the working group develop a consultation program designed to “listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell the bishop what he would like to hear” (EG, n. 31);
4. That the consultations begin at the grassroots, with assemblies or gatherings in the local parishes, where Catholics are most at ease and feel the greatest sense of belonging and community. It is here that a bishop should engage with his people, and there should be no delay in getting them underway;
5. To facilitate the parish assemblies and ensure they are effective, we urge you to be fully open with the Catholics of Melbourne, informing them of the true state of the diocese. We would recommend that, as soon as possible, you prepare and publish a concise and accurate report on the archdiocese’s current and projected pastoral, sacramental, educational, and financial, etc. position;
6. We would also strongly encourage you to share with the Catholics of the Melbourne Archdiocese your own personal evaluation of its needs and challenges, for unless the faithful know what they are dealing with, they will not be able to discuss the issues co-responsibly. Poor governance has been at the centre of the present crisis; accountability and transparency must now be at the core of the solution;
7. 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;
8. There needs to be a continuous and open feedback loop throughout the consultations, with participants kept informed of what others across the archdiocese are thinking and saying. Secrecy will be toxic. We would suggest that a section of the archdiocesan website be dedicated to the progress of the consultations and their content;
9. The process of engagement with the faithful should be simple and informal, so as to encourage diverse contributions, hopefully including those who have walked away from the Church, and particularly the young;
10. The diocesan working group should invite submissions from the faithful, suggesting issues that might be included on the Council agenda, as well as critical diocesan research to be undertaken prior to 2020;
11. In the initial parish consultations, Catholics might be asked three questions: i) what do they see as the ‘signs of the times’; ii) what do these signs mean for their personal faith life and for the life of the Church; and iii) in light of these signs, how should the Church respond to give an authentic and credible witness to Christ and his Gospel. Out of these responses flowing from the faithful’s personal and communal sense of the faith (*sensus fidei fidelium*), should emerge the draft agenda and the pointers for reform;
12. As the archdiocese has over 200 parishes, the working group might also consider organizing deanery and/or regional assemblies, building on the insights from the parishes.

13. The culmination of the archdiocesan consultation should be a diocesan assembly or gathering, where lay, religious and clerical representatives of all the parishes can distil the parish input and prioritize the issues they consider necessary for the Plenary Council's agenda;
14. We would recommend it be a diocesan 'assembly' or 'gathering' rather than a diocesan 'synod', as the whole process is primarily aimed at consultation, not legislation. Moreover, there will also be fewer canonical restraints;
15. Should the working groups in the other dioceses of the Melbourne Province consider it useful and appropriate to have a provincial assembly, we would support such an initiative.

Through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, the Holy Spirit has gifted all the faithful with wisdom, knowledge and understanding. As the preparatory stage for the 5th Plenary Council gets underway, Catholics for Renewal sees its principal task as tapping into those gifts of the Spirit and engaging effectively and productively with the *sensus fidei fidelium* of all in the archdiocese.

We offer these suggestions in the hope that they may assist with the archdiocesan preparations for the Plenary Council. We would certainly welcome the opportunity to discuss them with you and look forward to your response.

We are convinced that the consultative arrangements that you adopt for the Council can become a substantial contribution to the future vibrant life of the Church in Melbourne.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

(Dr) Peter J Wilkinson
President,
Catholics for Renewal

Cc. Mgr Greg Bennett, Vicar General and Moderator of the Curia