

Response to the Agenda for the first meeting of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia from the Partnered Parishes Plenary Council Facilitators Group of Sacred Heart Diamond Creek, St Thomas the Apostle Greensborough North and St Mary's Greensborough.

We acknowledge the work and commitment of the many people who have been part of the planning and execution of the process for hearing the voices of Australian Catholics when asked: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* And then: *How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred church*, in a variety of ways? The results of the listening, dialogue and discernment were distilled further into the *Instrumentum Laboris* and finally into the agenda for the Plenary Council. The choice of words in the introduction of the agenda for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia which quotes Pope Francis, *"I dream of a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything"* is already the Holy Spirit speaking to us through the Australian Plenary Council and the head of our Catholic Church in Rome, Pope Francis in a loud way. Guided by these words, the six headings, sixteen dot points and nineteen questions in the Agenda, and the voice of the Holy Spirit in our own gatherings of the Partnered Parishes Plenary Council Facilitators Group of Sacred Heart Diamond Creek, St. Thomas the Apostle Greensborough North, and St Mary's Greensborough, we are stirred to offer the following to the members of the Plenary Council of Australia in response to the release of the Agenda for the first meeting of the Plenary Council in October 2021.

Positive Initiatives

We welcome the inclusion in the Agenda of indigenous ways of being Christian and respect to the ecology of our planet. We believe this can be done prayerfully through significant liturgy reform. Whilst maintaining the compulsory liturgical traditions passed on to us by Jesus himself namely, the offertory and consecration, the Lord's prayer, Holy Communion, and gospel readings, the rest of the liturgy could serve as a guide and the agenda question could address, *'How do we provide room in liturgy for parish missions to express worship in their own prayerful way?'* In this way and in collaboration with First Nations peoples, indigenous culture and practices may be incorporated into our liturgies and we become enriched through their spirituality. As Pope John Paul II said in 1986 when he visited Australia: *"You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others."* We also commend a focus on ecology, a respect for and commitment to our precious and fragile environment which is considered integral to our Catholic faith. *"But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind."* Job 12:7-10

Concerns

1. There were items points on the agenda that we do not recall being mentioned in the earlier phases, namely, the reference to PJPs under Structures and also the reference to the "new communities" and wondered if most Catholic lay people would understand these references/terms in terms of the structure of the Church.

2. Inadequacy of the depth of Agenda items

We are also concerned that the wording of many of the questions to be discussed, and the selection of the agenda items stops short of the true intentions of the voices of Australian Catholics inspired by the Holy Spirit. We contend that it is hard to see:

- an honest and repentant acceptance that there have been moral, spiritual and structural failures of the past and a commitment to meaningful change
- leadership in taking responsibility for preventing future wounds of abuse as well as *“the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful ...”* (Pope Francis, quoted in the *Instrumentum Laboris*)
- the formation of a vision for our Church that responds to the pain of its people and their loss of trust, recognises the need for institutional change in culture, formation, authority and governance, and courageously seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit to examine how we return to the teachings of Christ, who placed the poor, the humble and those in need at the centre of His mission.

We also fear the agenda and discussions of the Plenary Council may be stifled because of the comment in section 110 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* which states, *“there may be matters touching on the universal doctrine and discipline of the church to go beyond the competencies of the Plenary Council”*. This is disturbing because we believe this goes against the very introduction to the Agenda mentioned above. We believe the Mission for the Australian Plenary Council, at the very least, is to discuss and to consider making recommendations for what so ever the Holy Spirit is telling Australians, without bounds. The Plenary Council should not shy away from the voice of the Holy Spirit, however difficult it may be. Members of the Plenary Council must have the courage to deal with and not avoid matters of universal doctrine and discipline of the Church. Its role is to listen to the voices of the laity who are being guided by the Spirit and to courageously present these recommendations to Rome. Ephesians 4. 13-14 tells us, *“And we shall all come together to that oneness in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine...”*. To restrict the outcomes of the Council to tinkering around the edges, restructuring parishes, increasing enthusiasm in the already converted few, will render this Plenary Council the seed that fell onto the rocks.

To become the mustard seed that grows into a huge living tree, the language of the Agenda must be more explicit and specific in how it frames the issues, the breadth of the concerns, and addressing wrongs that have gone on in governance and structures. For example, dot point four under Conversion could read: *How might the Church in Australia be missionary in places that it has overlooked in contemporary Australia, including but not limited to women aspiring to preach and to be priests, the victims of divorce, those born into minority groups whose sexual identity is not heterosexual, or whose gender identity is non binary, the married males hearing a vocational call to be priests, those that have stopped attending or practicing in the Catholic Church?* This is not to diminish those overlooked by Government, for example asylum seekers, students on temporary visas, or those where there is support but more is needed such as low income earners, disabled whether physically or mentally. It is important to highlight the spiritually vulnerable because of being overlooked by the Church, as opposed to those materially in need; for it is the spiritually vulnerable that suffer without a path to closure. The Holy Spirit is calling us in Australia to speak to the world stage because the world is awaiting the outcomes of the Australian Plenary.

3. Inadequate Importance Given to the Following Matters

- Sexual Abuse Crisis and Governance

When looking through the agenda, we see little open reflection on the past, little acknowledgement of what has gone wrong and no item that addresses the breadth of the concerns of many of the laity. Item 2 under Conversion and Items 1 and 2 under Governance do not in any way meet the expectations and confidence of Church members that the failures of the past are understood and that fundamental change will occur.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse clearly found that the governance of the Catholic Church in Australia, hierarchical and unaccountable, significantly contributed to allowing sexual abuse of children in its parishes, schools and institutions to occur, to the systemic protection of and lack of accountability of the abusers and to the lack of a caring and pastoral response to the victims. There was little moral leadership or adherence to the legal framework of this country from many in charge and the focus was on the protection of the Church, not the wellbeing of those abused.

The catastrophic failure of the Church regarding sexual abuse of children has been the culmination for many Catholics of their questioning about where our Church was heading. For others it confirmed their withdrawal from active participation in Church liturgies and activities and loss of belief. What was exposed through the Royal Commission was acute failure across all aspects of governance. If the Church cannot follow its own teachings about right and wrong and hold itself accountable when abuse occurs, how can its members be confident that the Church understands its true mission and acts with integrity in all its teachings and works? This question relates to a fundamental understanding about who we are, the culture of this church established by Jesus. How has the Church come to this pivotal point in time where there is questioning of its role in the everyday life of the faithful and in our society in general? What needs to change so that we may stay true to the teachings of Christ and assist the Church to carry out its mission? By relegating the sexual abuse crisis in the Church to one item on the agenda and no explicit reference to culture and governance, it appears that the institutional Church is still more about self-preservation.

- Building Trust

The Plenary Council Agenda in Australia could allow itself to properly sow the seed of the deafening global call to reform a misguided institution. In saying this we note actions of our Pope's endorsement of the US Jesuit priest Fr James Martin for ministry to LGBTQ community. We note Pope Francis refusal to accept the resignation of Cardinal Marx in Rome. We note the loss of trust in Catholics in Cologne over Cardinal Woelki's refusal to publish the initial independent report on sexual abuse in the archdiocese, and the Croatian Archbishop Uzinic's Facebook apology to homosexuals who feel rejected by the Church" as a few examples of the global movement whose primary role is to not destroy the Church but to heal the wounds of abuse and rejection, and division in community. It is a voice for the Church to make itself vulnerable to the wrongs, to seek forgiveness and reconciliation from people, and they will get it and trust will come. These global actions echo the listening and dialogue in Australia and are reflected in the diminishing numbers of Australians participating in their faith. According to the *Instrumentum Laboris* Section 47, "*the onslaught of secularism, individualism, relativism, materialism, the rise of new technologies, the sexual abuse crisis and the influence of mass media have fashioned a popular culture that is often alien or inimical to Catholic beliefs, doctrines and practices.*" We see this as scapegoating and we

suggest that the laity and others have lost trust in the leadership of the Church and see its hypocrisy. A conspicuous question absent therefore from the Agenda is ‘*How do we build trust in Australia and globally?*’

- Church Culture

The *Instrumentum Laboris* did devote some time to the culture of the Church (including governance and authority) as an issue of central concern. It also recognised that there was a need to develop “*a culture of listening and dialogue*”, in response to the many on the margin of society who feel ignored, left out, left behind, undervalued. The *Instrumentum Laboris* called for “*a reform and renewal of culture*” and a “*culture of appraisal and review*”. Where is this reflected in the Agenda? As we have learned from the past, we are often unable to move forward unless the past is rigorously addressed, repentance and apologies are made and commitment to reparation and restoration are clearly stated and enacted. This agenda does not inspire confidence, belief and hope that the leadership of the Church has understood the distress of the laity and members of the clergy, can heal the wounds and has the ability and commitment to envision the future and to walk together to fulfil Christ’s mission.

- Clericalism

Under Formation, points two and three are vague questions. The *Instrumentum Laboris* identifies “*some lay Catholics feel unseen and unheard by church leaders*”. The agenda fails to address the issue of clericalism that has been raised by the Pope and many others. This relates directly to the current culture within the hierarchical institutional church. What is the true role of the clergy? How are they trained? How is the training developed and is the training reviewed? What support is provided for the clergy in their priestly duties? How does this system of support and review extend throughout the working life of members of the clergy, including for those who move into more senior leadership positions? How do we avoid the problems seen to date with clericalism? We would hope that the points under Formation would address these specific questions.

- Synodality and Co-Responsibility

Synodality and co-responsibility are fundamentally important concepts, explored in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and in other publications but while the words are used (Governance Item 1) their true meaning is not fully explored. Pope Francis is quoted as seeing synodality as “*a way forward for the Church*”. According to the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the Governance Review, *Light from the Southern Cross*, identifies synodality as “*an essential component in promoting inclusion and co-responsibility in the Church’s exercise of governance*”. Where is the role of the laity in this agenda? What is their relationship with the clergy? We believe that lay people, as baptised people, are called to be missionaries for God, to work in partnership with the clergy, co-responsible in planning and decision making and holding positions of leadership. To accept these concepts is to make a fundamental change to the culture of the Church, taking in all aspects of its functioning. Like culture and governance, they should be a keystone to the Plenary Council agenda.

- The Role of Women

The *Instrumentum Laboris* in Section 55 speaks about a *perceived* need for a greater awareness and promotion of the accomplishments of women in senior management roles in dioceses and Catholic Agencies. This fails to recognise that it is not promotion of women that is the issue. Australians are calling for ending of exclusion of women from ordained ministry and in formal leadership. The

role of women in the Church was also a significant issue raised throughout the first two phases of the Plenary Council. For too long women have been the backbone of the Church, the majority of those who regularly attend Mass and other liturgies, who quietly support their parishes and priests and serve in many roles throughout Church ministries and yet are not seen as true leaders, of having the right to take on significant leadership roles, and to share responsibility for decision making. This agenda has not addressed this important aspect of Church structure and culture, one that the Pope has recognised and spoken about. We believe that the Church should reflect the broad nature of society, that women and men co-exist in the world as equals. The talents and gifts of women should be more formally recognised and welcomed, empowering them to offer the Church new and different perspectives and ways of working, leading to a greater richness in the expression of God's mission in the world.

- The Future of our Church

The role of the laity, the role of women, the nature of the ordained ministry, the rules that govern ordained ministry – these issues have drawn forward many responses during the listening and dialogue and discernment sessions. Another significant issue worrying many Catholics has been the withdrawal of young people and young adults from engagement with the Church. Without young people/young adults and the meaningful engagement of the laity in the everyday life of parishes, we believe that the future of our Church is perilous. There is no focus on them in this agenda.

To address these concerns, we would like to see Culture appear as a heading in the Agenda, with the focus on rebuilding trust, and with the following dot points, in the context of ensuring the mistakes of the past are not repeated:

- governance
- synodality
- co-responsibility
- the role of the clergy, lay women and men
- reconnection with our young people

The Agenda is seeking ways to partner with other Christian faiths. Let the Spirit open members' eyes to how the Uniting, Baptist, Anglican, Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches have demonstrated that can spread the living word of God in spite of having females ordained, or married priests or ministering to LGBTQ for example. They are proof the word of the Lord transcends structure and rules. In fact the life of Jesus and his word being alive today is in itself proof that the word of Jesus transcends man's laws, and is living proof that the only true law is the divine law from Jesus to love our neighbour and our God with all our might. Jesus' style as Pope Francis said "*has three elements: closeness, compassion and tenderness. This is how he comes closer to each one of us*" (in letter to Father James Martin in the US). This style is undermined by rules which unwittingly end up excluding. So an Agenda question under the heading Conversion could become, *How do we reduce exclusion?* It does not have to include throwing away the baby with the bath water, the Spirit will guide, and the *sensus fidei* will show the way.

4. Framing of the Agenda

All these points raise a fundamental issue with how the agenda items are framed – as questions. We contend that there is a lack of courage in explicitly naming those concerns and proposals for action that most lay people articulated through the listening and dialogue and discernment stages. By having mainly broad and general agenda items, there is little focus for consideration, discussion, reflection and decision/recommendation. An enormous amount of time and effort have been

expended by thousands of Catholics across Australia to specifically, bravely and honestly, speak of the pain, disappointment, anger, confusion, despair, disillusionment, hope, faith, commitment, and love of their Church; but the agenda does not reflect this. The agenda feels large and nebulous, and with this comes a sense that nothing may change in the foreseeable future. An open consultation with Catholics across Australia was going to bring forward a range of responses across all aspects of the functioning of the Church, many of them requesting fundamental change. Two gatherings (of several days) of the Plenary Council members could never hope to respectfully and adequately respond to this and the agenda lacks a commitment to rigorous review and rebirth. This does not engender trust, hope or goodwill.

Concluding Remarks

We the faithful were asked to enter into a broad ranging consultation, based on Pope Francis' vision for a *"listening Church"*, to help shape the future course of our Church in this country. The bishops identified the need to *"review, analyse and discern the sign of the times, to listen to the Spirit ..."* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference). In good faith this occurred; the faithful spoke but have we been heard?

We believe that we need both reform and renewal of our Church, so that the true mission and teachings of Jesus Christ are central to our existence, that all we do is anchored to them and that our culture, our governance, our structures and processes truly reflect and are grounded by them – that we live what we preach. As it stands, we believe this agenda does not offer the vision and inspiration to take the Australian Church into the future. The desire of the Pope for *"a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything"* seems unachievable.

In the spirit of synodality and collaboration, the members of this group would welcome members of the Plenary Council to meet with us and to discuss our concerns prior to the first meeting of the Plenary Council.

From members of the Partnered Parishes Plenary Council Facilitators Group of

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