

## Most prominent issues for the Plenary Council agenda

**Peter Wilkinson**

*New research into the written submissions to the Plenary Council shows that among the issues raised, some are more prominent than others.*

### **Listening and Dialogue**

Preparations for the Plenary Council began in May 2018 with a 'Listening and Dialogue' phase aimed at "listening to the voice of God speaking through the voices of the people" and "gaining a sense of their faith" (*sensus fidei*). Australian Catholics, and others, were invited to reflect on and respond to the question: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* By 13 March 2019 over 220,000 persons, mostly Catholics, had responded in 12,758 individual and 4,699 group submissions.

The National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) subsequently published several reports on both their content and authors. It found individual respondents were: more female (49%) than male (29%); slightly more numerous in the older age groups (23% - 15-29 yrs; 22% - 30-59 yrs; 32% - 60-80+ yrs); predominantly Australian-born (65%) but with very few indigenous (143); more from non-English-speaking countries (11%) than from other English-speaking countries (6%); predominantly Catholic (72%); other Christians (3%) and non-Christians (1%); significantly regular Mass attenders (76%); and most numerous from Brisbane (1890), Melbourne (1649), Wollongong (1244), Sydney (1103), and Perth (1082).

Group respondents were: more female (50%) than male (41%); more numerous in the under 50 age group (78,000) than in the over 50 age group (73,000); in groups varying in size from 5 to 17,000 persons; and their submissions were most numerous from Melbourne (791), Perth (519), Sydney (447), Brisbane (379) and Broken Bay (343).

### **Listening and Discernment**

In its July 2019 *Final Report*, the NCPR identified 119 'themes' or issues raised in the 17,547 submissions. These became the foundation for the second phase - *Listening and Discernment*- of the Council preparations and from them Council organizers developed 6 National Themes for Discernment (NTDs):

- Open to Conversion, renewal and reform
- A joyful, hope-filled and servant community
- Humble, healing and merciful
- Prayerful and Eucharistic
- Inclusive, participatory and synodal
- Missionary and evangelising.

Six Writing and Discernment Groups are currently using the NTDs to prepare working documents to guide the formulation of the Council agenda:

## Diocesan Reports

In its *Final Report* the NCPR provided no weighting to the original 119 ‘issues’ (I will refer to them as ‘issues’ to distinguish them from the 6 NTDs). Nor did it rank them in terms of which were the ‘most prominent’ or ‘most widely discussed’ by the respondents. But the NCPR’s March 2020 *Diocesan Reports* providing new data on each of Australia’s 28 territorial dioceses, show which issues were the ‘most prominent’ and ‘most widely discussed’ by respondents both within and across dioceses. They also contain data on the respondents from each diocese, the texts (de-identified) of their responses, and the issues ‘most widely discussed’. They cover 77 of the ‘most prominent’ issues, and group them under 6 ‘topic areas’ (A-F below):

- A: Love God, Love Neighbour (11 issues)
- B: Leadership and Church Governance (14 issues)
- C: Sacraments (8 issues)
- D: Mass and Eucharist (9 issues)
- E: Social Justice and Environment (9 issues)
- F: Outreach and Other (26 issues)

Each report lists the topic areas discussed in each diocese, and the order discussed. Table 1 shows topic areas A, E and F were discussed in all 28 dioceses, B and C discussed in 27 dioceses and D in just 6 dioceses. The # 1 most discussed topic area within dioceses was A (in 24 dioceses) followed by E (3 dioceses) and B (2 dioceses).

**Table 1: Topic areas ‘most widely discussed’ by respondents in 28 territorial dioceses**

Topic areas discussed in dioceses	Most discussed within dioceses					Total dioceses where discussed
	# 1	#2	#3	#4	#5	
A. Love God, Love Neighbour	24	4				28
B. Leadership & Church Governance	2	10	5	8	2	27
C. Sacraments		6	17	3	1	27
D. Mass & Eucharist		1		4	1	6
E. Social Justice & Environment	3	7	5	9	4	28
F. Outreach & Other						28

Source: NCPR, *Diocesan Reports*, March-April 2020

### Most widely discussed issues within and across dioceses

As each *Diocesan Report* indicates which of the 77 issues were the ‘most prominent’ or ‘most widely discussed’ by respondents, it is possible to give each issue a ‘prominence’ ranking both within and across dioceses.

Table 2 indicates the degree (# 1-# 6+) to which an issue was ‘most widely discussed’ within a diocese. It also shows the total number of dioceses where it was ‘most widely discussed’. For example, ‘Greater inclusion for all’ was the #1 ‘most widely discussed’ issue within 27 dioceses and ‘most widely discussed’ issue across 28 dioceses. Table 2 also lists the top 20 ‘most prominent’ or ‘most widely discussed’ issues across all dioceses and ranks them (1-20) according to the total dioceses where they were discussed.

The degree to which the issues were ‘most widely discussed’ within the dioceses is also important. ‘Greater role for women’, for example, was the #1 ‘most widely discussed’ issue within 21 dioceses, ‘Fighting for human rights issues’ was #1 in 18 dioceses, and ‘Ending compulsory celibacy & allowing priests to marry’ was # 1 in 15 dioceses. ‘Care of Neighbour’, however, although ‘most widely discussed’ across 25 dioceses, was # 1 within just 4 dioceses.

**Table 2: Top 20 ‘most prominent’ or ‘most widely discussed’ issues in submissions: within and across Australia’s 28 territorial dioceses**

Ranking of ‘most prominent’ and ‘most widely discussed’ issues (Topic area)	Most widely discussed within dioceses						Total dioceses where discussed
	# 1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6+	
1. Greater inclusion of all (A)	27	1					28
2. Greater involvement of the Laity (B)	2	6	9	2	3	5	27
3. Remaining faithful to Church teaching (A)	3	2	2	5	8	6	26
4. Greater role for women (B)	21	3	1	1			26
5. Ending compulsory celibacy & allowing priests to marry (C)	15	9	2				26
6. Ordination of women (C)	2	14	9	1			26
7. Care for neighbour (A)	4	4	4	5	3	5	25
8. Greater trust, faith and hope in God (A)	6	7	5	3		3	24
9. Greater focus on Jesus Christ (A)	12	6	5	1			24
10. Better faith formation (A)	1	7	5	3	2	6	24
11. Fighting for human rights issues (E)	18	5					23
12. Greater outreach to youth (F)	11	6	3	2		1	23
13. Greater sharing of the faith with others (F)	7	7	5	2	1	1	23
14. Greater focus on the Word of God (A)			4	6	3	9	22
15. Greater leadership from bishops (B)		4	3	4	7	3	21
16. Greater emphasis on prayer & sacraments (C)	9	8	3	1			21
17. Care of the environment (E)	1	2	13	3	1		20
18. New leadership & governance model (B)		3	5	4	4	3	19
19. Ending clericalism (B)	3		4	6	2	3	18
20. Greater leadership from priests (B)			2	3	1	12	18

Source: NCP, *Diocesan Reports*, March-April 2020

Other ‘most prominent’ and ‘most widely discussed’ issues across dioceses (in order) were:

21. Need to modernize church teachings (in 18 dioceses)
22. Teaching authentic Catholic faith (17 dioceses)
23. Being a witness in society (15 dioceses)
24. New model of church, diocese and parish (15 dioceses)
25. Ending LGBTIQ discrimination (15 dioceses)
26. More transparency and accountability around child sexual abuse (15 dioceses)
27. Renewed call to holiness (13 dioceses)
28. Inclusion of divorced and remarried (13 dioceses)
29. Listening to each other more (12 dioceses)
30. Stronger parish communities (12 dioceses)
31. Better selection and formation for candidates for priesthood (10 dioceses)

The 'most prominent' and 'most widely discussed' issue within and across dioceses was 'Greater inclusion for all'. Significantly, 5 of the top 6 most prominent issues relate directly or indirectly to the role of women in church ministry and governance.

While most of the issues are self-explanatory, 'Greater inclusion for all' has a particular meaning for those responding to the Question "What God was asking of us [i.e. the Church] in Australia as this time?" They want their Church: to be more inclusive of persons of all sexual preferences and genders, marginalised persons, refugees and poor persons; to make these persons feel included, welcomed, and valued equally, regardless of their sexuality or marital status; to reach out to people and be 'Christ' to them; to welcome and embrace persons of different ethnicities, cultures, faiths and sexual orientations and promote unity among them; to be more caring and respectful to persons with disabilities, recognising their equality and gifts, and facilitating their access to the sacraments; and to be non-judgemental on relationships (e.g. same-sex) and moral issues (e.g. premarital sex, divorce, and contraception).

As the bishops move closer to setting the Council's agenda, it is hoped they will give careful consideration to those issues which Christ's faithful have prioritised.

Note: All reports cited can be accessed at [www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au](http://www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au)