

Plenary Council Members: An Analysis

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At 22 September 2021 total ‘members’ of the 2021/2022 5th Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia numbered 278. Together they have authority to make laws which provide for the pastoral needs of the people of God in Australia (c. 445). Their authority to legislate comes not from any delegation by their local bishop, but from a ‘summons’ or ‘call’ from the President of the Plenary Council (c. 443). They are ‘members’ of the Council, not ‘delegates’.

Members called from particular churches in Australia

Who is to be called to a plenary council is set out in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*.

Canon 439 specifies that members are to be called from all the ‘particular churches’ of the same conference of bishops. In Australia this is the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), which includes 35 particular churches: 28 territorial dioceses, 5 Eastern Catholic Churches (Chaldean, Maronite, Melkite, Syro-Malabar, and Ukrainian), and 2 Ordinariates (Military and Our Lady of the Southern Cross). The Personal Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei, though canonically not a particular church and is without a resident ordinary, has been added.¹

Canon 443 distinguishes two groups of members: those who ‘must’ be called, and those who ‘can’ be called. The former (those who must be called) includes bishops, vicars general, episcopal vicars, some major superiors of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life, rectors of Catholic and ecclesiastical universities, deans of faculties of theology and canon law, and some rectors of major seminaries. The latter (those who can be called) may include retired titular bishops living in Australia, some priests, and some other members of Christ’s faithful.

Until the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* took effect, lay persons, whether male or female, could not be called to participate in a plenary council. Female religious superiors were also excluded. Now, c. 443 includes ‘both men and women’ among religious superiors, and though it does not mention ‘lay’ members, it is assumed that religious and non-religious lay women are included in ‘other members of Christ’s faithful’ (443 §4).

However, C. 443 § 4 puts a cap on how many presbyters and other members of Christ’s faithful can be called. It prescribes that their number “cannot exceed one half of the

¹ The Personal Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei is not a ‘particular church’. Personal prelatues are regulated by canons 294-297 dealing with Christ’s faithful, not the canons dealing with particular churches (cc.368-572). Personal prelatues are groups of secular clerics (presbyters and deacons) with a ‘special ministry’, making Opus Dei more akin to a clerical religious institute or society of apostolic life rather than a particular church. Though lay persons can dedicate themselves to the apostolic work of a personal prelature, they cannot become members. They remain members of their own particular church (diocese).

combined number of all the other participants who are mentioned in §§ 1-3". This formula, which limits the number of priests, lay religious who are not superiors, and non-religious laypersons, to just one-third of total members, was probably designed to prevent pressure groups from taking over a council.

Before the Council was launched, Catholics for Renewal urged the ACBC to seek a dispensation from C. 443 § 4, to ensure that at least one third of all those called to the Council could be women (religious and non-religious). The ACBC requested the dispensation, which [was granted by the Holy See](#) (Article 4) on 27 March 2020, allowing up to 44 additional presbyters and other members of Christ's faithful to be called.

Lists of Members

When the first list of 257 persons called to attend the Council – referred to as 'delegates' – was published on 23 March 2020, Catholics for Renewal objected to the term 'delegate' and requested that they be called 'members'. The change occurred with the approval of the Council's [Statutes and Regulatory Norms](#) in November 2020.

Since the first list was published there have been many changes, with new persons called and others deleted. At 22 September 2021 the [current list of members](#) published on the Plenary Council website identifies a total of 278 members, including clerics (bishops, priests, deacon), lay religious (men and women), and lay non-religious persons (men and women).

The analysis below, with table and figures, analyses the composition of the total membership of the Council under 4 categories: by particular church, by voting rights (deliberative and consultative), by status (clerical and lay), and by sex (male and female).

Members by particular church, status and sex

Table 1: Members by particular church, status and sex

(Total number = 278)

Diocese	Bishops	Priests	Deacons	Lay Religious		Lay non-religious		TOTAL
				Men	Women	Men	Women	
Adelaide	2	1				2	3	8
Armidale	1	1				1	1	4
Ballarat	1	1					2	4
Bathurst	1	2				2	1	6
Brisbane	2	3			1	1	3	10
Broken Bay	1	1				2	1	5
Broome		1				1	3	5
Bunbury	1	1				1	2	5
Cairns	1	3					3	7
Canberra & Goulburn	1	2				1	1	5
Darwin	2	2				1	2	7
Geraldton	1	1					2	4
Hobart	1	1				1	1	4
Lismore	1	2					2	5
Maitland-Newcastle	1	1					2	4
Melbourne	5	7			1	1	3	17
Parramatta	1	6					2	9

Perth	2	5				3	3	13
Port Pirie	1	1				1	1	4
Rockhampton	1	1				1	2	5
Sale	1	2					2	5
Sandhurst	1	2					2	5
Sydney	4	8			1	7	3	23
Toowoomba	1	2				1	1	5
Townsville	1	1					3	5
Wagga Wagga	1	2				1	1	5
Wilcannia-Forbes	1	1				1	1	4
Wollongong	1	3				1	2	7
Chaldean	1	1				1	1	4
Maronite	1	5					2	8
Melkite	1	2	1				1	5
Syro-Malabar	1	2				2		5
Ukrainian	1	1				1	1	4
Military		3				1		4
OLSC		3				1		4
Holy Cross & Opus Dei		1						1
Catholic Ministries						2	6	8
Religious Superiors		18		4	23			45
TOTAL	43	100	1	4	26	38	66	278

Note: Members who have been called as 'Religious Superiors' and as representatives of 'Catholic Ministries' reside in the territorial dioceses, but are listed separately from those dioceses.

Members with Deliberative and Consultative Votes

The Statutes and Regulatory Norms of the 5th Plenary Council of Australia (Article 4) specify the following members of the Plenary Council will have a **deliberative vote**:

- All diocesan bishops in Australia²;
- All coadjutor and auxiliary bishops in Australia;
- The Ordinary of the Military Ordinariate³;
- The Ordinary of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of the Southern Cross⁴;
- The Ordinary of the Personal Prelature of Opus Dei⁵;
- The four emeritus bishops of Australian dioceses, elected by the Bishops Conference⁶.

² The Diocese of Broome is currently 'vacant' (without a diocesan bishop). Bishop Morrissey (Geraldton) has been appointed Apostolic Administrator until a new bishop is appointed. He will not have an extra deliberative vote. On 16 September 2021 Bishop Bill Wright of Maitland-Newcastle Diocese announced that he had submitted his resignation to Pope Francis and would remain on sick leave until he received a response. At 22 September 2021 he was still included as a member of the Plenary Council.

³ The Military Ordinariate is currently 'vacant' (without an Ordinary). Archbishop Prowse (Canberra & Goulburn) has been appointed Apostolic Administrator until a new bishop is appointed. He will not have an extra deliberative vote.

⁴ The Ordinary of the Personal Ordinariate of OLSC is not an ordained bishop.

⁵ The Regional Vicar in Australia (equivalent to a Vicar General) is not an 'ordinary'. The *Decree of Establishment of the Personal Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei* and its *Statutes* state that the Prelate of this Personal Prelature – who resides in Rome - is an 'ordinary', but neither the *Decree* nor the *Statutes* give that role and status of 'ordinary' to any others in its governance structure, such as its Regional Vicar in Australia. Prof. Ian Waters DCL is of the firm opinion that the Regional Vicar of the Personal Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei in Australia "is definitively not an ordinary of any sort".

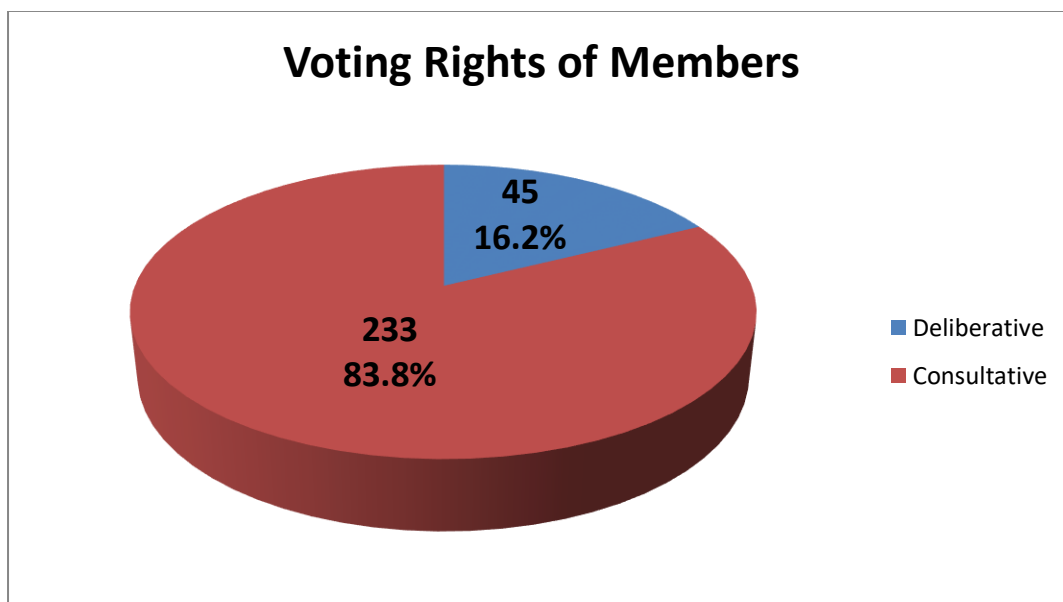
⁶ The bishops emeriti derive their right to a deliberative vote from c. 443 §2. The 4 bishops elected by the ACBC are Hurley (Darwin), Tomlinson (Melbourne), O'Kelly SJ (Adelaide) and Walker (Sydney) with their current residence indicated in brackets.

The *Statutes* specify the following members of the Plenary Council will have a **consultative vote**:

- All vicars general in Australia;
- All episcopal vicars in Australia;
- Not more than 45 (forty-five) major superiors of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life, elected respectively by all the major superiors of the institutes and societies which have a seat⁷ in Australia;
- Not more than 10 (ten) rectors of ecclesiastical and Catholic universities and deans of faculties of theology and of canon law, being all such rectors and deans in Australia;
- Not more than 9 (nine) rectors of major seminaries, being all the rectors in Australia; and
- Not more than 88 (eighty-eight) presbyters and other members of Christ's faithful, among whom shall be included all bishops-elect, apostolic administrators and diocesan administrators at the time of the Plenary Council.
- Not more than 44 (forty-four) additional presbyters and other members of Christ's faithful.⁸

Invited Guests have **no right to a vote**⁹ and include: observers from other episcopal conferences, observers from other ecclesial communities, observers from Catholic organisations, and theological advisors and consultants (*periti*).¹⁰

Figure 1: Members with Deliberative and Consultative Votes (Total = 278)



Note:

Members with a deliberative vote are: diocesan bishops (27), auxiliary bishops (7), bishops emeriti (4), bishops ordinary of Eastern Churches (5), non-bishop ordinary (1), regional vicar of personal prelature (1). Total = 45

⁷ This is usually a province or the equivalent of a province.

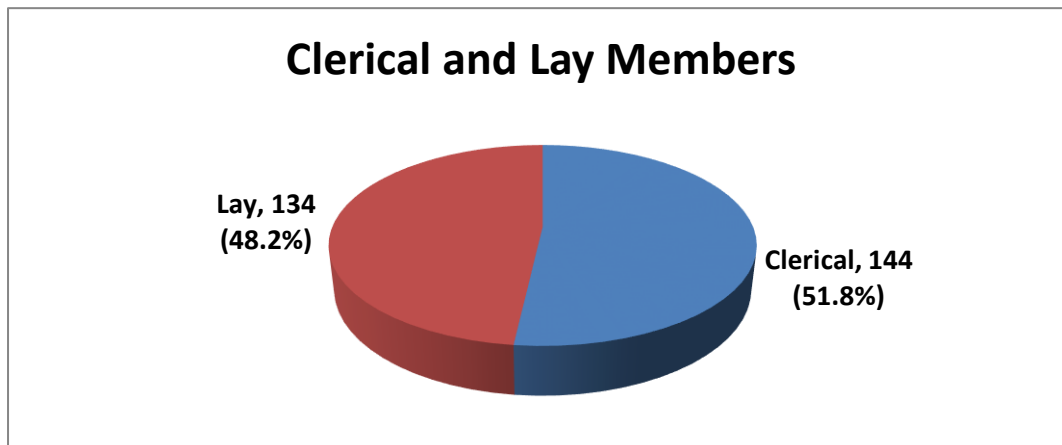
⁸ These extra numbers are derived from a dispensation from Can. 443 §4 granted by the Holy Father, Congregation for Bishops, 27 March 2020, Prot. No. 849/2017.

⁹ Can. 443 §6

¹⁰ Twenty expert advisors (*periti*) have recently been appointed according to c. 443 §6 to support Council members.

Figure 2: Clerical and Lay Members

(Total = 278)



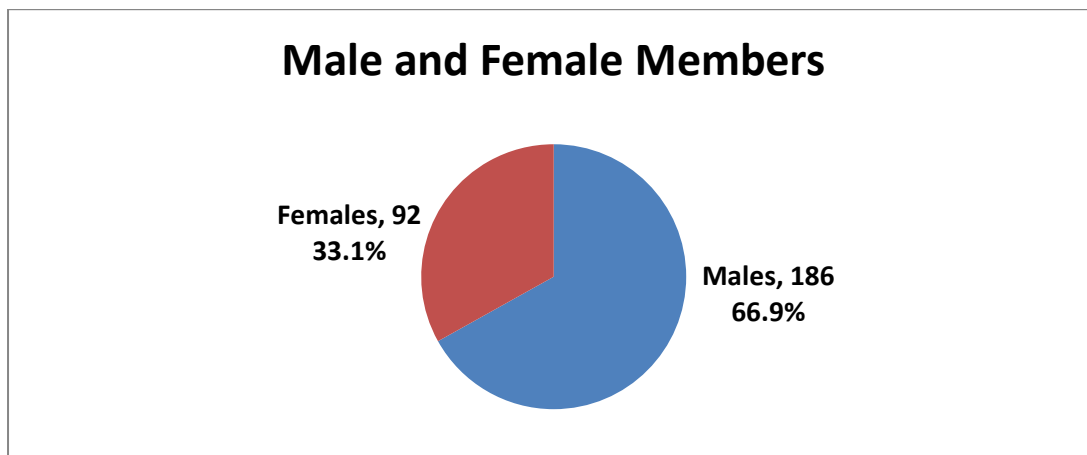
Note:

Clerical Members include: bishops/ordinaries (45), diocesan priests (76), religious priests (22), permanent deacon (1). Total = 144

Lay Members include: lay religious men (4), lay religious women (26), non-religious lay men (38), non-religious lay women (66). Total = 134

Figure 3: Male and Female Members

(Total = 278)



Note: Male Members include: bishops/ordinaries (45), diocesan priests (76), religious priests (22), permanent deacon (1), lay religious brothers (4), lay men (38). Total = 186

Female Members include: lay religious women (26), lay women (66). Total = 92

It should be noted that further changes are possible after 22 September 2021 when this document was finalised.

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