

Looking to the Plenary Council

As the leader of a Religious Institute, I have the opportunity to participate in the forthcoming Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia. The first session, which will occur online, is scheduled for October this year and the second session for July 2022.

Being a cleric as well as a religious, it was with some hesitation that I accepted the opportunity to participate in this Plenary Council. I think there will be more than enough clerics participating in the Council by right and, in my view, the laity will be underrepresented. I think one of the crucial tasks of the Council is to address issues of governance and participation in decision making in the Church so that the voices and the talents of all the baptized are given due recognition. I know this viewpoint will be strongly advanced by religious participating in the Council. It is a viewpoint that I will be strongly aligned with. I am hopeful, too, that many of the participating clerics will also strongly hold to it and that the Council will be effective in promoting changes in structures and procedures which will see a greater involvement of all the baptized in Church governance and decision making.

Following the lead of Pope Francis and in the spirit of Vatican II, those preparing the Council are very aware that it needs to be a “synodal” experience. This is to say that everyone has a voice that needs to be heard in responding to the fundamental question: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* A very widespread consultation was held to get initial responses to this question and, as to be expected, there was a wide variety of opinions, at times contradictory, expressed in the 220,000 responses which were received. From these responses, it has been suggested that there are six main themes which the Council needs to keep in mind as it tries to discern, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a way forward for the Church in Australia. These themes suggest that, in facing the future, the Church needs to be:

- i. Missionary and Evangelising;
- ii. Inclusive, Participatory and Synodal;
- iii. Prayerful and Eucharistic;
- iv. Humble, Healing and Merciful;
- v. A Joyful, Hope-Filled and Servant Community;
- vi. Open to Conversion, Renewal and Reform.

The process of finding a way forward will be necessarily messy. This is the way of “synodality” where the voices of all are heard and respected in an attempt to discover what the Spirit is saying through it all. In many ways, I think that the process or the journey of the Council is its most important aspect. As we heard in the early days of facing the coronavirus pandemic in Australia ... *We’re all in this together*. It will be hard to come to firm decisions or recommendations. If, however, decisions are just “handed down from on high”, the Council will have been a disastrous waste of time, energy and money. I do not believe, however, that this will happen. We may not come to many firm decisions or recommendations by the end of the formal Council. If, however, we can face the many challenges to the Church in Australia today by listening respectfully to the voices of all, then, whilst decisions or recommendations will come slowly, we will learn to live in the “mess” as we discern the authentic voice of the Spirit emerging, albeit slowly. It is essential, I believe,

that all of us – clerics, religious and laity - can be patient with ourselves and each other as we grapple with the reality of our lives and our situation, whilst retaining hope that the voice of the Spirit will eventually prevail and that the kingdom of God will be advanced.

In attempting to listen to the voices of all, the Council must be very mindful of those whose voices have hitherto been muted or marginalized. There are many of these and our Australian society is helping us to be aware of some of them ... women, LGBTQI people, migrants and refugees, asylum seekers, first nations peoples, divorced and remarried people, young people, the diverse range of families, the poor and vulnerable, the disabled and frail elderly, victims of domestic violence, etc. The voice of creation itself also needs to be heard. It will be a significant challenge for the Council and for the Church looking to the future to hear the voices that haven't been heard very much, if at all, in the Council's preparatory consultation process. This includes the voices of those who have drifted away from the Church for whatever reason. Finding a way for the Church to be more inclusive, more open, more sensitive, more missionary, more true to Jesus and the Gospel is perhaps the greatest challenge of the Council if it is to help the Church be relevant, accessible and helpful to the people of Australia in the future.

A couple of months ago, I read an article by Teresa Pirola in *Catholic Outlook* (6 April 2021) entitled: *The hour of the domestic Church is NOW*. I was struck by her reflection, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, that "we are living through a moment in history when, in every parish and diocese around the world, the domestic space is the only place where most Catholics can be fully present to one another in celebrating their Catholic traditions. In fact, the terrible necessity of enforced home isolation has opened up an extraordinary opportunity: to call the faithful – family units of every kind and configuration – to rediscover their power to 'be' Church, each within their unique domestic context."

Whilst Pirola was specifically making a case for people to be more focused on celebrating God's presence in the context of their real lived circumstances rather than viewing "live streamed" Church services, I believe she makes a broader point that the Plenary Council needs to take into account in discerning a path forward for the Australian Church. She says: **THIS IS THE HOUR OF THE DOMESTIC CHURCH! FAMILIES, LAY FAITHFUL, LEAD THE WAY! SHOW US HOW TO DO THIS. LEAVE YOUR MARK ON OUR PARISHES AND DIOCESES. SHIFT OUR GROUND TO A MORE FAMILIAL BASE; FREE US FROM CLINGING TO THE CLERICALIST WAYS OF THE PAST.**

The Church is in a crisis. Whilst uncomfortable, this is not a bad thing for us. A crisis is an opportunity for new growth. The challenge is to accept and respond to this opportunity. Taking up our priestly and prophetic role and being a Eucharistic people in the lived circumstances of our lives is called for. The Plenary Council is a vehicle for facilitating this. I pray that we don't squander it. Boldness is called for in hearing and responding to the voice of the Spirit, discerned in the voices of the people. May we advance in hope and trust in the Spirit.

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