

The Plenary Council: Listening and Discernment

Preparations continue for the Plenary Council, which will have its first session in exactly one year (4 - 11 October 2020). Last year we took part in the 'Listening and Dialogue' phase, and submitted our reflections on what we think God is asking of the Church in Australia at this time.

Altogether there were 17,457 submissions. All these were read by the Facilitation Team, who drew from them 'Six National Themes' for this next phase of *discernment*. That doesn't mean the individual submissions have now been discarded by the organisers, but it enables the rest of us to focus our further discernment with these main themes (which would be impossible using seventeen thousand submissions).

So what we're now called to discern, with the Holy Spirit's guidance, is this: 'How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church that is: (1) Missionary and evangelising; (2) Inclusive, participatory and synodal; (3) Prayerful and Eucharistic; (4) Humble, healing and merciful; (5) A joyful, hope-filled and servant community; (6) Open to conversion, renewal and reform.'

So, six wonderful themes. The organisers have said: 'We invite the groups who participated in Listening and Dialogue to now reconvene in communal Discernment on any one of the six themes. Each Discernment session is expected to result in a response that can be summarised in 1000 characters and that can be submitted through a form on the Discernment page [on the website]... This period for Listening and Discernment will be open until the first few months of 2020.' So that might be something we take on in these months – as the Legion and also in our own parishes. Today I'll just make a few comments to forestall some misunderstandings.

First, the overriding question: 'How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church?' This is exactly right. God – his will, his call – is the beginning and the end. And if we're not Christ-centred, we've lost the plot. Apart from Christ, the Church has no meaning; and if we were completely Christ-centred we'd be exactly where we should be.

Only one caution: we can't go wrong if we're centred on the *genuine* Christ. But people sometimes have a Christ of their own fashioning, cut down to their own size. For example, if someone sees Christ *just* as someone who challenged authorities, who broke rules – leaving out all the other aspects in the Gospels: for them, being Christ-centred would mean, 'Forget the rules and regulations, just get back to Jesus, who didn't judge, who freed us from all that.'

Well, from a fuller picture of Christ, we understand his challenging of the authorities, and of when following human regulations does more harm than good; but we also fit that in with how he set up his *own* authorities in the Church he was founding, and how he affirmed the laws of *God* as showing the path to true human fulfilment. So: to discern what it is to be Christ-centred, we need to be open to the *fullness* of who Christ is.

Then the individual themes: a Church that is *Missionary and evangelising*. Something coming out in the 'listening and dialogue' phase was the challenge of passing on the faith to the next generation. That might not seem to be there in the six themes. But I think it does fall under this theme of evangelising, which isn't *just* about sharing our faith with non-Catholic adults, but also includes the whole work of faithfully transmitting the Gospel.

Second, a Church that is *inclusive, participatory and synodal*. I spoke about synodality a while back, so I won't repeat that. And yes, we must be inclusive – yet remembering that doesn't mean affirming every opinion as equal. Christ's teaching is the standard for what genuinely gathers everyone into the unity of God's People.

Then, a Church that is *prayerful and Eucharistic*: We can't go wrong there. Some people say, 'We shouldn't be too devotional, we have to just get out and be active in the world.' But that's the Pelagian heresy Pope Francis warns about – imagining we can do everything by our own strength. If we take away the heart – which is love of God, relationship with him, being empowered by him in the sacraments and prayer – all the action in the wider world will be nothing in the end. Prayer and action aren't a zero-sum game, as though the more we do of one, the less we do of the other. Prayer is the wellspring that overflows into action.

Next, a Church that is *humble, healing and merciful*. Just a thought on how that's sometimes misconstrued. For some people, a humble Church might be one that said, 'The Catholic Church isn't so great, it's no better than any other Church, we're not really sure if Catholic teachings are true.' Well: we're meant to be humble about *ourselves* – recognising our own sinfulness, the failure of the members to live out what the Church is meant to be.

But we're not meant to be humble about the things of God, and the gifts he's entrusted us with. The Church isn't our doing – it's God's gift. So if we put down the *divine* aspects of the Church, we're not 'humbly' putting *ourselves* down – we're putting down what God has established for human salvation. Or with liturgy: we're not meant to say, 'Our God – he's not so great really. We don't want to glorify him *too* much. Let's not go over the top, but just have humble simple casual liturgies.' No: a truly humble liturgy is one where we don't glorify *ourselves*, but where we *do* focus on *God*, and glorify *him* as much as possible.

Or, a merciful Church. Absolutely: it's central to the Church's identity to bring God's mercy to all. But, for some people a 'merciful' Church might mean one that tells people they don't really need to follow God's laws – as though God's truth and law are burdens we need to mercifully liberate people from.

Then, a Church that is *a joyful, hope-filled and servant community*. You can't really go wrong with that – remembering that a key way we serve is by bringing to all people the truth and grace of Christ, which is what gives people real joy and real hope.

And finally, a Church *open to conversion, renewal and reform*. The Church does need to be constantly open to allowing God to renew her. Again, for some people, 'reform' would mean being ready to 'change everything', even things that (actually) were established as essential by Christ: 'Let's have women priests, let's get rid of the authority of the hierarchy.' So against that: true reform is always within the limits of faithfulness to the will of Christ, as we receive it in the Spirit-guided Tradition of the Church.

In one way my focus has been a bit 'negative'. But being aware of the dead ends frees us to focus on the *positive* richness of the themes, which if we discern the genuine path within them, will truly allow God to work amazing renewal in his Church.