

The Plenary Council: A Church that is Missionary and Evangelising (1)

The Church in Australia has been praying and discerning in preparation for the Plenary Council. Because of COVID-19, the first of its two Assemblies has now been postponed from October this year until 3-10 October 2021, to be held in Adelaide. The second Assembly will gather in Sydney from 4-9 July 2022.

Last October we reflected on the six themes for discernment drawn from the initial phase of 'Listening and Dialogue': '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.' 'Discernment Papers' (available on the Plenary Council website) have now been presented on each of these themes. In the coming months (while not leaving behind our recent topic of the principal beliefs we hold as Catholics) we'll reflect on each of these six Papers.

Each Paper has an initial reflection on its particular theme in view of the 'Listening and Dialogue' phase; a description of current pastoral reality; the theological vision that enlightens that reality; major challenges we face; and prioritised questions and proposals for change. Together, the six papers run towards 100 pages, so it's not possible to cover them with any completeness. We'll concentrate on the 'prioritised questions and proposals for change' since these are what may eventually flow most directly into the practical proposals discussed at the Council.

We should note that the individual members of the teams of authors working on each theme weren't themselves fully in agreement, since all the Papers are prefaced with the explanation: 'The discernment papers are the fruits of communal discernment, which does not necessarily reflect the individual perspectives of each of the group members.'

So we'll start to consider the first theme: 'How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is missionary and evangelising?' The Discernment Paper organises its proposals under 11 questions:

- (1) How can the Church be missionary and evangelising by showing responsibility for the environment and our common home?
- (2) How can the Church be missionary and evangelising through the service of all humankind?
- (3) How can the Catholic Church best educate and form Australian Catholics to grow in respect, understanding, and collaboration with other religions?
- (4) How can the Church work more closely with other Christian Churches in order to be more missionary and evangelising?
- (5) Where does evangelisation sit as a focus for the Church in Australia?
- (6) Given the importance of the family for the missionary and evangelising activity of the Church, how can we best promote a Catholic vision of marriage and family?
- (7) How can the Church actively promote the missionary and evangelising role of women in the Church, ensuring a better balance of men and women in leadership?
- (8) How can the Catholic Church in Australia authentically embrace and nurture the culture and spirituality of First Nations peoples?
- (9) How do we best support the growth in faith and in relationship with Jesus among our young people?
- (10) How can our educational institutions best serve the missionary and evangelising activity of the Church?
- (11) How can we as a Church most effectively reach out to people from all walks of life, particularly those who might feel distant from the life of the Church?

The authors have undertaken a great labour in integrating the diversity of proposals from the ‘Listening and Dialogue’ phase. As all are now invited to do, I’ll make some reflections, intended constructively – keeping in mind, there’s not space for me to repeat individually all the excellent *positive* points that have been made, so I necessarily limit myself to points where my view differs somewhat, or where I feel I have something useful to add that may help guide your own reflections.

The authors would have had the difficulty of numerous ideas coming up from ‘Listening and Dialogue’ that didn’t fit easily under the six themes, yet that they felt had to be mentioned somewhere. So we see some points above that might seem a bit peripheral to mission and evangelisation (unless these terms are interpreted so broadly as to include everything). One danger is that the most crucial issues get swamped in a sea of other concerns; and in the short time span of the actual Assemblies of the Council, one wonders if all the proposed topics can possibly be adequately discussed.

Many worthy proposals are put forward under the headings of the 11 questions above. Some points may be more debatable, such as whether parish volunteers really need to ‘undergo cultural competency training’, or whether our aim should really be to have ‘qualified lay women and men...preaching in the liturgical context’ (the absence of female ‘public liturgical leadership’ being described as an ‘evident limitation’). The ‘action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world’ could profitably have included, alongside ‘peace, justice, non-violence, poverty, homelessness and solidarity’, explicit mention of the protection of unborn human life – the outstanding justice issue facing Australia today, if only by reason of the sheer numbers of human persons being killed.

Much of our legionary motivation for evangelising, as for Catholics through history, has been concern for the eternal salvation of souls. The Discernment Paper may have benefited by expressing this, as its focus seems more ‘this-worldly’. True, the Church’s mission is the *integral* salvation of humanity – body and soul, the individual and society, with seeds planted in this world that blossom in eternity. And on the other hand, the Discernment Paper does make a few mentions of the ‘eschatological fullness’ that is still awaited. (In view of the call for the Church to speak to people in comprehensible language, ‘heaven’, though less nuanced, might be a better term here.)

But there seems nothing in the Paper clearly reflecting Christ’s emphatic teaching that heaven *hangs in the balance* for every person, and that ‘eschatological completion’ is not guaranteed for any one, Catholic or not. We all know that it’s *possible* for those who don’t explicitly know Christ to be saved; but it’s also surely true that actually following Christ is much more conducive to reaching heaven than not doing so. ‘If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation...’ (*Dominus Iesus* 22) The omission of this motivation of eternal salvation greatly dilutes the urgency of mission.

Mention is made in the Discernment Paper of collaborating with non-Catholic Christians in ‘proclaiming Jesus Christ as the saviour of humankind’. Here we might learn from evangelical Protestants, who would laugh at how contemporary Catholics often beat around the bush in these matters. Pope Benedict XVI once told the Bishops of Brazil: ‘This, and nothing else, is the purpose of the Church: the salvation of souls, one by one.’ (*Address*, 11 May 2007) This one sentence, while needing to be filled out in various ways (as Benedict would doubtless agree), nevertheless focuses attention on what is most central. We pray that the supreme focus on eternal salvation through Christ will also be clear in the final documents of the Plenary Council.