

## The Plenary Council: A Church that is Missionary and Evangelising (2)

In July's Allocutio we started looking at the six 'Discernment Papers' preparing for the Plenary Council, beginning with the first theme, 'How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is Missionary and Evangelising'. In the section, 'Prioritised Questions and Proposals for Change', proposals were organised under 11 'Questions'. We'll now look at a few more of these in detail, to help guide your own reflection and reading.

Question 5 addresses the theme most broadly: 'Where does evangelisation sit as a focus for the Church in Australia?' Proposals include prioritising 'formation for mission utilising the resources of existing institutes to advance the mission of evangelisation in our nation...', and developing mission statements that 'assist development of mission strategies appropriate for each local context'.

When we imagine things like this in practice, we need to recall that in the Discernment Paper's vision, mission and evangelisation include aspects like work for the environment, or for justice, or interreligious dialogue. (Questions 1-3) Various programs won't necessarily be about *directly* leading and inviting non-Christians towards faith in Christ – so the centrality of that leading and invitation will need to be properly emphasised by the Plenary Council (amidst all these other necessary activities of planting the Gospel in our world, which do also draw people to Christ). As St Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: 'Even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run, if it is not explained, justified – what Peter called "giving a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15) – and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus.' (22)

Under question 9, on supporting young people's growth in faith and in relationship with Jesus, good proposals are made for learning from the experiences of youth ministry in recent decades. But Pope Francis is quoted from his Apostolic Exhortation to Young People, *Christus vivit*, that the focus should be on building up relationships of trust and consolidating them, before 'being too concerned with communicating a great deal of doctrine'; and it must be said that there is some distortion here, by taking his words out of context.

The Pope actually wrote: 'In some places, it happens that young people are helped to have a powerful experience of God, an encounter with Jesus that touched their hearts. But the only follow-up to this is a series of "formation" meetings featuring talks about doctrinal and moral issues...As a result, many young people get bored, they lose the fire of their encounter with Christ and the joy of following him; many give up and others become downcast or negative.

'Rather than *being too concerned with communicating a great deal of doctrine*, let us *first* try to awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain the Christian life. In the words of Romano Guardini, "when we experience a great love... everything else becomes part of it". *Any educational project or path of growth for young people must certainly include formation in Christian doctrine and morality*. It is likewise important that it have two main goals. One is the development of the kerygma, the foundational experience of encounter with God through Christ's death and resurrection. The other is growth in fraternal love, community life and service.' (*Christus vivit* 212-213, emphases added)

In other words, love for Christ and faith in him always remain *central*, and formation in his teachings and the way of life he proposes are then part of what *flows from that*. We never 'leave

behind' the kerygma. But the Discernment Paper, by taking a few words out of context, gives a negative impression about communicating doctrine at all (as though there is a serious concern that Australian Catholic youth are presently being bombarded with mere 'head knowledge' about Christian teachings). Pope Francis, on the contrary, says that there 'must certainly' be 'formation in Christian doctrine and morality'.

Question 10 on our educational institutions calls for great expansion, considering the crisis in recent decades in passing on the Faith to the next generation. It does say that it is 'crucial that our Catholic educational institutions have mission and evangelisation at the heart of all their activities.' The proposals relevant to Catholic schools are that our educational organisations 'consider further opportunities for enhancing the preferential option for the poor'; that the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) facilitate national collaboration 'to ensure mission and evangelisation remain a constant focus in Catholic schools'; and that the NCEC's committee on faith formation be empowered to provide leadership formation for senior school and system leaders, and to 'develop strategies for the faith formation of students and families'.

But hopefully the Plenary Council will give our school systems much deeper guidance than this on where things may have gone astray. Pope Francis also says in *Christus vivit* that 'schools are in urgent need of self-criticism, if we consider the results of their pastoral outreach, which in many cases focuses on a kind of religious instruction that proves often incapable of nurturing lasting experiences of faith...The way [young people] were instructed in religious and moral values did not prepare them to uphold those values in a world that holds them up to ridicule...' (221)

How might the Pope's call to urgent self-criticism apply to us? For decades our schools have been producing comparatively few graduates firmly committed to Catholic faith and practice. The reasons include factors in society and in families; and true, faith is a gift – but is God offering this gift less than previously? Too often, these things are used to deflect criticism from the manner and content of religious education, and for not considering the radical measures required. Teachers do their best, sometimes heroically. But on the broad scale, formation and training are not given to them anywhere near the extent needed, if they're to powerfully communicate faith in ways that will withstand the many doubts and criticisms of contemporary culture. (Or, they are formed in a 'liberal' theology critical of Church teaching, which is part of the problem, not part of the solution.)

Especially, they must be resourced and motivated to systematically offer students a synthesis of faith and reason, drawing mind and heart. (cf. John Paul II *Fides et Ratio*; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 132; 242) When religion is not taught with intellectual rigour equal to other subjects, or students are given the impression they can make it up themselves, an impression of weakness is created. Rather, in the present crisis, apologetics (the rational defence of faith) must make up a much greater proportion of learning – even from upper primary level, when students are already asking questions and discovering multiple competing worldviews. Certainly, doctrine must be explained, but this easily collapses if students are not taught, in depth, the reasons supporting Catholic teaching. (True, faith is based not on reason but trust in God's word – yet current temptations to abandon faith become too great if reason's help is neglected.)

It is a huge task, but if we truly care about young people, and about mission and evangelising, we will give it everything we have. No evangelising of adults in the wider community at parish level will ever compensate for the massive losses at school level. This will be one of the Plenary Council's principal challenges.