

A Church that is Inclusive, Participatory & Synodal – Prayerful & Eucharistic

We continue looking at the six ‘Discernment Papers’ preparing for the Plenary Council, today reflecting on the second and third themes. The theme of the second Paper is, ‘**How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is Inclusive, Participatory and Synodal?**’ As with the first Paper, we’ll focus on the final section, ‘Priorities and Proposals’, organised around ten proposal headings.

Seven of these concern greater inclusion – of those who are ‘poor, powerless, on the margins or without a voice’; of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics; of different cultural communities within the Church; of women; of young people; of those with special needs and their families; and of the ‘missing men’ who no longer participate in the Church. One proposal heading concerns sexuality and marriage – communicating the Church’s teaching, and supporting those in difficult situations. Enhanced formation and collaboration is proposed for Catholic health, education and social service ministries. And increased lay involvement in Church governance is proposed, such as through ongoing Councils and regular Assemblies at diocesan and parish levels. Under these different headings, amidst some exceptions numerous worthwhile suggestions are made.

Doubtless one of the contentious topics will be how the inclusion of women is promoted. Here the Discernment Paper proposes ‘that the Council takes whatever steps are within its power to ensure’ that liturgical translations ‘include and respect both women and men’; ‘that women be given more than advisory participation in parish and diocesan leadership’; and that ‘where the Plenary Council has limited powers, including discussion among the faithful on allowing women to be lectors and acolytes and the inclusion of women to the permanent diaconate and priesthood’ that ‘the Council notes these local concerns and an eager interest of the progress of the Church’s investigations’.

As we’re aware, and as mentioned in February’s *Allocutio*, it’s already infallible Catholic teaching that the Church has no authority to ordain women as priests, and a Catholic denying this departs from full communion with the Church. (*Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the Profession of Faith* 6, 11) The Discernment Paper unfortunately speaks in a way that suggests that this is one of the issues still under ‘investigation’ by the universal Church. There is minimal chance that the Australian Bishops would agree to a non-committal statement on the matter, and no chance that the Holy See would endorse such. But we can hope that if the topic is to be dealt with, it will not be in apologetic tones, as though we wish the doctrine were otherwise – this would implicitly insult Christ, from whose choice the male priesthood derives. Some will never be convinced, but Pope Francis, in his repeated reaffirmations of the Church’s doctrine, has given us some examples of how this teaching can be explained in a positive way.

Regarding governance, the Holy See’s Congregation for the Clergy issued a document a few months ago, approved by Pope Francis, entitled ‘The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church’. In dealing with various aspects of parish governance, it reaffirms the decisive authority of the parish priest, at the same time as exploring how all members of the parish can contribute to and collaborate in its mission. But in any case, it indicates that the Holy See will not be endorsing any radical restructuring of parish governance, so the Plenary Council will be restricted in its options on these matters.

The third Discernment Paper is on the theme, ‘**How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is Prayerful and Eucharistic?**’ The ‘Prioritised Questions and Proposals for Change’ are organised under four headings: **Community, Participation, Formation and Mission**. Here we have space to cover the first two.

Community: ‘How can we develop as a prayerful and Eucharistic community that is united in Christ while valuing and celebrating diverse spiritualities, customs and authentic liturgical practice?’ One suggestion, already in operation in some places, is to encourage the creation of ‘small communities of faith and life’ within larger communities like parishes. Also recommended is prioritising the engagement of those who participate in sacramental programs.

The Discernment Paper proposes making the Third Rite of Reconciliation more widely available. My October 2018 *Allocutio* explained at length the divine law of individual confession, and why the Church cannot make general absolution an ordinary mode of the Sacrament. This is why in 2002 Pope John Paul specified the restrictions on the Third Rite in more detail. Pope Francis has likewise consistently encouraged individual confession. So again, this is a topic where proposed changes would seem unlikely to gain approval from Rome.

Participation: ‘How can we best encourage full, conscious and active participation in the liturgical and prayerful life of the Church community?’ Here it is proposed to ‘expedite and implement a review of the current translation of the Missal to promote an expression of prayer that is inclusive and understood by all people’ and to ‘implement a revision of the Lectionary that is accessible and considers inclusive language alongside accuracy’. These matters were thrashed out at length and with some contention in the time leading up to the introduction of the new translation of the Missal in 2011. Some liked the new translation, others didn’t. Most churchgoers have now acclimatised well enough to it. Probably most non-churchgoers (whom of course we’re hoping to attract) wouldn’t greatly care, some would like it, others wouldn’t. But one would think the last thing the Church needs pastorally is to have any repeat of the whole difficult process so soon simply because some were not pleased the first time.

Matters of language can be contentious, and the six Discernment Papers make certain choices that could be disagreed with, such as their avoidance of masculine pronouns for God (the word ‘God’ simply being repeated wherever one would in standard English usage normally expect ‘He’). Another example is the repeated use across the Papers of the acronym ‘LGBTI’ (at least in the main text – concerns about this are put in a footnote at one point). (In view of such disputes, a simple proposal from the ‘Missionary and Evangelising’ Paper ‘that all Church communications only use language that upholds and promotes people’s inherent dignity as human persons’ might make us consider what interpretations some could place on this.)

The third Paper’s other main suggestion in this section is that lay people be commissioned to do such things as administer Baptism, bless marriages and officiate at funerals (obviously without Mass). Church Law allows for this when there is an absence of ordained ministers, though the Paper doesn’t seem to have that limitation in mind. (The pastoral reality is, the Catholic faithful, even if not regular churchgoers, would typically prefer an ordained minister if possible for major life events.)

As previously, due to space limitations I’ve concentrated on points where my views differ from the Discernment Papers, rather than just repeating the many positives. Various of the proposals above will no doubt be concerning for legionaries, but it’s good for us to be aware of what is being discussed, to encourage us to pray all the more that the Council will make its decisions with wisdom, and for the true good of the Church in Australia.