

A Joyful, Hope-filled Servant Community, Open to Conversion, Renewal and Reform

Today we conclude our reflections on the six ‘Discernment Papers’ preparing for the Plenary Council. The fifth theme is: **‘How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is a Joyful, Hope-filled and Servant Community?’**

The Fifth Paper in its final section speaks of ‘Major challenges, questions and proposals for the Plenary Council’ and sets challenges in seven areas of the Church’s life: 1. Parish Communities; 2. Engagement with the broader Australian Community; 3. Celebrating and supporting the service organisations of the Church; 4. Promoting an integrated Christian mission; 5. Formation; 6. Rebuilding Trust within the Church; and 7. Finance.

A central theme it raises for parish renewal is the co-responsibility of the lay faithful for parish mission, and how the parish can welcome all its members’ gifts in fulfilling that mission. Many committed laity have long lived out their roles in parishes in this way, and legionaries in particular have been at the forefront of parish mission and spiritual outreach. The Legion, when it energetically carries out its apostolic activities, is a great example to both priests and parishioners of this co-responsibility of the lay faithful.

The Paper highlights that ‘particular attention should be given to the reasons why so many young people and their families are absent from our parishes, and how schools and parishes might address this concern.’ Hopefully in addressing this question, the Council will look more deeply at the adequacy of religious education in schools, which was somewhat glossed over in the first Discernment Paper on the theme of Mission and Evangelisation.

Challenge Four, ‘Promoting an Integrated Christian Mission’, helpfully emphasises that the life of prayer and worship, and our call to service of others, are not in tension with each other. Rather, prayer and worship must overflow into service; and service to others dies without the grace of God animating it. Again, this union between prayer and apostolic activity is something legionaries know well.

The theme of the final Discernment Paper is, **‘How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is Open to Conversion, Renewal and Reform?’** As the Second Vatican Council taught, the Church does need to be constantly open to allowing God to renew her. (*Lumen Gentium* 8)

For some people indeed, ‘reform’ would mean being ready to ‘change everything’, even things that (actually) were established as essential by Christ: ‘Let’s get rid of the authority of the hierarchy, let’s have women priests, let’s relax the Church’s moral teachings.’ 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.

The question necessarily arises: Where does the boundary lie between what can and what can’t be changed? The Paper raises the fear that there may be an ‘unbalanced concern for non-essential traditions’. This is where God’s gift of the Magisterium, guided by the Holy Spirit, is an indispensable factor in discerning which traditions are essential and which are not. Sometimes voices in the Church express the wish to abandon teachings and traditions that the Magisterium has in fact indicated as essential.

Also, just because something *can* be changed, doesn't necessarily mean it *should* be changed. For example, there are many 'non-essential' devotional expressions nonetheless experienced as precious by many of the faithful, and which also help attract others to the faith, even if not every expression suits every individual. So even with non-essential traditions, we shouldn't change things just for the sake of it, but seek to preserve and enhance what remains fruitful for many.

The sixth Discernment Paper raises the issue of 'clericalism'. This, we recall, might be defined as the error of thinking the clergy are there not *to serve*, but *to be served*. The priesthood becomes an elite club, and the dignity and welfare of the laity are downplayed. Thus defined, it's clearly opposed to the Gospel.

A danger, however, is if under the term 'clericalism' things are grouped that are actually part of a *healthy* expression of priestly identity, and a fruitful use of the authority that Christ has given to bishops and priests for the service of the God's People. We should be alert to where the risk of clericalism is being used to push other agendas and to try to associate it with anything in the Church the person dislikes. The special spiritual identity of the priest – coming from God, not his own merit – is a reality. And the hierarchy does have authority from Christ to serve the people by teaching, sanctifying and governing. None of this is clericalism, unless it gets twisted into an attitude that the priest is there to lord it over people for his own benefit, or to replace the teachings and laws of Christ and his Church with his own opinions and preferences.

Here again, the Magisterium must remain our guide. Pope St John XXIII, in his 1959 Encyclical *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia* on St John Vianney, patron of parish priests, gave this statement on the priest's true identity: 'A cleric should be considered as a man chosen and set apart from the midst of the people, and blessed in a very special way with heavenly gifts – a sharer in divine power, and, to put it briefly, another Christ...He is no longer supposed to live for himself; nor can he devote himself to the interests of just his own relatives, or friends or native land...He must be aflame with charity toward everyone. Not even his thoughts, his will, his feelings belong to him, for they are rather those of Jesus Christ who is his life.' (6)

So yes, a priest is a man *set apart*. Some would say that's very clericalist – but then, John XXIII goes on, 'set apart *from the midst of the people*'. Or, the concept that he uses of the priest as 'another Christ' (*alter Christus*) might also be viewed as 'clericalist' – if Christ's identity as *servant* is not understood. In truth, every Christian identity is founded in Christ; and the Pope states what should be obvious, that being 'another Christ' calls the priest all the more to complete service, 'aflame with charity toward everyone.' The priest does not *replace* or *obscure* Christ, but is *transparent* to him.

More recent popes have taken up the same teaching: 'A man offers his humanity to Christ, so that Christ may use him as an instrument of salvation, making him as it were into another Christ.' (John Paul II *Address to the Clergy of Rome*, 14 February 2002) 'As an *alter Christus*, the priest is profoundly united to the Word of the Father who, in becoming incarnate took the form of a servant, he became a servant (*Phil 2: 5-11*). The priest is a servant of Christ, in the sense that his existence, configured to Christ ontologically, acquires an essentially relational character: he is *in* Christ, *for* Christ and *with* Christ, at the service of humankind.' (Benedict XVI *General Audience*, 24 June 2009)

So to emphasise the priest's identity as 'another Christ' is not to *separate* priests from others. For Christians, *identity* is bound up with *relationship* (as we see above all in the Trinity). When priestly identity is strongly affirmed and lived in this way, clericalism is defeated.