

The Participation of Women in the 2020 Plenary Council



A paper was prepared by the Council for Australian Catholic Women as a basis for a discussion with Archbishop Mark Coleridge June 2017.

The Social Justice Sunday Statement in 2000, the Bishops' response to the Woman and Man, included nine decisions of national significance and 31 proposals for implementation at local diocesan level. Decision number 8 recommended that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) establish a Commission for Australian Catholic Women to facilitate the implementation of the decisions and recommendations of the ACBC in response to Woman and Man. It was accountable to the Bishops' Committee for the Laity and would have role monitoring the development of strategic planning and evaluation of the ACBC recommendations. The Commission for Australian Catholic Women (CACW) would have an Office, known as the Office for the Participation of Women (OPW), to support its work.

In 2006, the Bishops determined that the Commission would be replaced with the Council for Australian Catholic Women. The Council would now provide advice to the Bishops Commission for Church Ministry about women and their participation in the Catholic Church in Australia. Questions have been raised as to whether this move has resulted in a downgrading of the voice of women in the Church. Reduction in staffing and the need for the Director to also support the Australian Catholic Council for Lay Pastoral Ministry raises the concern that the scope of responsibilities for the Director of the OPW has become much too wide.

A CASE FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE 2020 PLENARY COUNCIL

The intention of the bishops' decisions in 2001 was to give women a better platform for contributing their talents, gifts and wisdom to the service of the Church. This would enable their voices to be more readily heard, recognised, reported and brought to the attention of the hierarchical/institutional Church in a positive, respectful and consultative way.

The pioneering and spirit-led decision by the bishops of Australia taken in 2001 should be respected in the decisions about the agenda and participation of women in the 2020 Plenary Council.

Some progress has been made, but the Plenary Council provides renewed opportunity to hear and respond to the voices of women. The need to be open and responsible to diverse voices, including that of women, has been reinforced by the deliberations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The need for continuing engagement between the ACBC and women remains relevant and is in fact more compelling in 2017.

The Royal Commission, has strengthened the call of many voices, Catholic and non-Catholic, for greater involvement of women in leadership, decision making and ministry roles in the church.

1. Strong participation by women in the 2020 Plenary Council will support this outcome.
2. Women constitute in excess of 60% of Church attendees and form a higher rate of Church participation in ministry and practical support for parishes.
3. It is crucial therefore that the participation of women in the 2020 Plenary Council should be strong.
4. It is important that the 2020 Plenary Council caters for all women, regardless of their status: married, single, divorced, separated, consecrated, with or without children, older people without close/any family, and for women of all ages and orientations. It should also address the concerns our First Peoples, and women from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds.

The 2020 Plenary Council will need to provide for deep listening and respectful dialogue. It is essential that it canvas the voices of all women in the Church. Important elements to be considered include:

1. contemporary ecclesiology, and its theological, catechetical and pastoral implications for the participation of women in the church.
2. ministry in the church including the role of the lay faithful, especially women, in ecclesial ministries, from the scriptural, historical, theological, liturgical, sociological, anthropological and canonical perspectives.
3. the theology of the human person, sexuality, marriage and family life, especially as it refers to the contemporary life of Catholic women.
4. consideration of a broad range of practical issues including:
 - support for more inclusive language in liturgy and Church documents;
 - advocacy for those marginalised by economic conditions;
 - practical approaches regarding domestic violence;
 - support for people from indigenous backgrounds;
 - support for people from non-English speaking backgrounds;
 - support for people with disabilities
 - development of a training/education programme aimed at both women and clergy that supports the participation of women in decision-making, leadership and ministry;
 - input into seminary curriculum.
 - a better balance of men and women, clergy, religious and laity on existing commissions, councils, organisations and advisory bodies

- a better balance of men and women in leadership roles and in professional roles at the national level within the church.

The ability of the CACW and OPW to provide meaningful advice to the ACBC has come into question as a consequence of movement away from direct reporting to the ACBC and OPW staffing reductions. In the spirit shown by the ACBC in its establishment of both the CACW and the OPW, the Plenary Council should further consider how the voices of women into the future are to be facilitated. At the least:

1. CACW and OPW need to be suitably resourced to meet their mandates.
2. a review of the role of the CACW and the OPW should be undertaken to articulate with greater clarity the difference and relationship between the two, to determine the adequacy of their mandates, structures, practices and resources to carry out their work.
3. CACW should be consulted on many of the key issues which affect the Catholic Church in Australia, including the 2020 Plenary Council.

CONCLUSION

Both women's and men's views, and responses to life and the gospel vary widely. It is therefore important that Church teaching, both in context and style, be inclusive of all voices and the voices of those who differ from the norm.

To date the CACW and the OPW have attempted to hear, listen, judge and act on matters of concern to women from the diversity of their lived experiences and circumstances. Indeed, in preparation for the 2020 Plenary Council, a key strategic focus for the CACW is to ensure that the voices of Catholic women from around Australia are heard, regardless of background, social setting, etc. Based on CACW consultations to date the Council on behalf of women seeks:

- cultural transformation of the Church, clergy and laity, so that all experience a change in heart and minds faithful to Christ's life and to the call of the Gospels;
- the urgent redress of structures and practices that have resulted in the shameful abuse of children, and the abuse of power;
- a genuine role for women in decision-making, leadership and ministry, including liturgy;
- a place at the 2020 Plenary Council

Cultural transformation is a necessary task if changes are to be made, a task chillingly and shamefully identified by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.