

Structure of the Plenary Council: Discussion Notes

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Key issues

The Plenary Council 2020 has been called at the time of real crisis in the Australian Church, in the wake of growing disillusionment over several decades, culminating in the sexual abuse crisis. This alienation is particularly marked on the part of young men and women, and is driven by distaste of clericalism and of the remoteness of the Church hierarchy.

Many Catholics welcome Plenary Council 2020 as an opportunity for real change, in the spirit of Vatican II and under the leadership of Pope Francis. But it must be said that the prevailing mood is one of cynicism: 'for all the words nothing will really change', especially given that the Bishops will provide two thirds of the attendees and only they will have a deliberative vote. It will be a tragedy for the Australian Church if the cynical view proves correct, for the alienation of people from the Church will deepen further.

In his letter to the church in Chile in January 2018, Pope Francis said:

"The People of God does not have first, second or third-class Christians. Their participation is not a question of goodwill, concessions, rather it is constitutive of the nature of the Church."(1)

This is not the reality of the Church in Australia in 2018. Women make a massive contribution to the life of the Church – in parishes, schools, social welfare and so on – but remain third-class citizens. Not only are they excluded from all formal roles within the ministry, but they are rarely consulted on issues that relate directly to them and their families. Nor are men much better placed. For example, major decisions are made, such as how to respond to the continuing decline in vocations to the priesthood, without any involvement with the laity or indeed with the current priests within the parishes.

Plenary Council 2020 offers an opportunity for the whole People of God to walk together in unity, with a profound sense of shared listening and give-and-take, jointly addressing the many problems now facing the Australian Church. A key challenge is to devise and implement arrangements for the Council which will support a shared process of listening, discernment and decision making, broadly consistent with the current provisions of Canon Law. We entirely endorse the view recently expressed by Fr Frank Brennan:

"In twenty-first century Australia, there is no point convening a time consuming and expensive assembly of the Church which includes so few lay women and people from the pews. In the wake of the royal commission, the Catholic faithful are as adamant as the general public that there be transparency and inclusiveness in our church governance arrangements." (2)

Background and importance of the issues

In our view, the key concept here is that of synodality, the process whereby the whole People of God – laity, priests and bishops, at all levels – walk forward together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we understand it, synodality is not about challenging the authority of the bishops but about insisting that it be exercised in a quite different way; in which decisions emerge from a mutual process of listening and discernment involving representatives of the whole Church. As a major quasi-official document on synodality, endorsed by Pope Francis, put it: decisions are made by the whole Church,

meeting together, but taken on that basis by the bishops, under the authority that they derive from the body of the baptised (3). As Francis has also said (4):

“It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”

The proposed arrangements for Plenary Council 2020 follow the provisions of Canon Law (Can. 443; 5), in a literal and unimaginative way. These provide that the attendees at a Plenary Council include bishops (§1 and §2), holders of other official religious positions, such as vicars general or heads of religious orders (§3), priests and lay people (§4), and others invited ‘if it is expedient in the judgement’ of the Bishops (§6). Priests and lay people are restricted to no more than half the number of Bishops and other religious officials, and only the Bishops have a deliberative vote to make the decisions of the Council.

These arrangements reflect a much older model and are totally inappropriate now. They rightly give rise to the cynicism which is widespread. The Plenary Council needs to be a forerunner of much fuller participation of all of the baptised faithful in the life of the Church. We suggest that better arrangements can be put in place for 2020, still broadly consistent the Canon Law 443.

Proposals

To be a real vehicle for healing and change, the Council must be open to the whole Church and not tightly controlled by the Bishops. It must reflect the emergence of a new culture in the Church, free of the clericalism which has created so much damage. There are several proposals about how this might be achieved (e.g. 6). We suggest that the key principles of a synodal approach to the Council should be as follows:

- A majority of delegates should be lay people and priests, particularly women, selected from local churches in an open and transparent manner.
- All delegates should have a role in setting the agenda, and on all matters there should be equal voting across all delegates, to determine the sense of the faithful about the issues at hand.
- The Bishops should retain the right to determine which decisions go forward as official decisions of the Council, using their deliberative vote, but they should do so in open voting and in the light of the sense of the Council.

Some have suggested that a dispensation from or an amendment to Can. 443 would be necessary to implement such arrangements (2). We submit that an appropriate application of §6 in the current circumstances should be sufficient. That clause is as follows:

“§6. Others can also be invited as guests to particular councils, if it is expedient in the judgment of the conference of bishops for a plenary council.” (5)

In the present situation in which the Church finds itself in Australia, it would surely be consistent with this clause for the Bishop’s Conference to invite a substantial number of women, both lay and religious, to participate in the Council, and also an increased number of lay men and of priests working for the Church at the coal-face. It is also within the gift of the Bishops to set up a transparent selection process and a genuinely synodal process for setting the agenda and managing the Council.

In our view such actions are not only within the authority of the Bishops but are vital if the Council is to be a new beacon of hope for the Church in Australia. Failing such actions the Council will be seen as a meeting of the episcopal club, reinforcing the current cynicism widespread among laity and priests.

References

- (1) Pope Francis, Letter to the Church in Chile, 31 May 2017, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-pope-francis-letter-to-the-church-in-chile-35580>
- (2) Brennan, Frank (2018), 'Seeking a plenary council fit for purpose', Eureka St, 20 November 2018
- (3) International Theological Commission, 2018, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church", http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html
- (4) Pope Francis, 17 October 2015, Address on the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html
- (5) Code of Canon Law, 443, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_INDEX.HTM
- (6) Catholics for Renewal Editorial, November 2018, <https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/editorial-november-2018>