

# Towards a Synodal Church

## A Submission to Plenary Council 2020 from St Kevin's Parish, Lower Templestowe Draft, 22 February 2019

We, the people of St. Kevin's parish in Templestowe, Victoria, welcome the decision of the Australian Bishops to establish Plenary Council 2020. We also welcome the statement by Archbishop Mark Coleridge, Chair of the Australian Bishops Conference, that the Plenary Council is 'a gathering of the whole Church to make decisions, together and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, concerning the future of the Church in Australia' (1).

The Catholic Church remains, in our view, a powerful force for good in Australian society. But a Council is sorely needed now, in the wake of the evil of clerical sexual abuse and the scourge of clericalism, and at a time when the official Church has become alienated from both ordinary Catholics and from Australian society as a whole. It is important that the Council is truly inclusive, that it works cooperatively and that it takes decisions on key issues facing the Australian Church.

This brief submission starts with our view of the context in which the Council is taking place. It then makes some suggestions about how the Council can be truly inclusive and then highlights six key issues that we believe the Council must address. Six attachments provide further detail.

### 1. The Context of the Plenary Council

*Completing and extending Vatican II.* The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II; 1962-65) began a major process of *aggiornamento* in the Church, proposing changes in its practices, processes and theological positions to promote renewal in the light of emerging realities at that time. The completion of these processes, after several decades of roll-back, is a major task, to which the Plenary Council must contribute. Pope Francis and others have said that it takes 100 years to fully implement the results of a Council, and that we are now about half-way through that task.

However, in the 55 years since Vatican II, our world has continued to change rapidly, often in ways of profound moral significance but not anticipated by Vatican II. In most areas of society, the right of women to full and equal participation in human life has now been recognised. The fact that human beings have, by nature, diverse forms of sexual orientation has also been accepted, so that all should be treated equally. Since Vatican II globalisation has rapidly gathered pace, and we have seen the revelation of the extent of sexual abuse in the Church. None of these issues were seriously considered by Vatican II, but all must be addressed now.

Vatican II stressed the role of the laity in Christ's work and saw the Church as the whole People of God, but left the work of renewal to the bishops, emphasising *episcopal collegiality*. This has clearly failed, as has been recognised by Pope Francis. This has led him to emphasise synodality: "It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium" (2).

*Building a synodal Church.* To implement the reforms of Vatican II, and to extend them to meet new realities, Pope Francis has called for the building of a truly synodal Church. Synodality is the process whereby the whole People of God – laity, priests and bishops, and from all walks of life – move forward together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (3,4). As we understand it, synodality is not about challenging the authority of the bishops but about insisting that that authority be exercised in a quite different way, one in which decisions emerge from a mutual process of listening and discernment involving, in a genuinely inclusive way, representatives of the whole Church.

This theme of a building a truly inclusive, synodal Church is the guiding theme of our submission and should, we believe, be the guiding theme of the Council.

## **2. The Nature of the Plenary Council**

To be a real vehicle for healing and change, the Council must be open to the whole Church and not be 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. We suggest that the key principles of a synodal approach to the Council should be as follows:

- A majority of delegates should be a diverse group of lay men and women and priests, selected from local churches in a 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.
- The Bishops should retain the right to determine the official decisions of the Council, using their deliberative vote, but in open voting and in the light of the sense of the faithful.

The Council is being established under Can. 443 of Canon Law. We submit that an appropriate application of Clause 6 of Can. 443<sup>1</sup> would provide sufficient flexibility to allow these principles to be applied. 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 and managing the agenda.

Such actions are both within the authority of the Bishops and vital if the Council is to be a 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. We urge the Bishops to emulate Pope Francis' efforts to decentralise authority in the Church, encouraging the Council to take decisions for the Australian Church without continual reference to Rome.

## **3. Renewal towards a Synodal Church**

We propose four areas for consideration, to make a reality of all the People of God walking forward together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit:

### ***An open and inclusive Church***

Genuine openness and inclusiveness must be a key mark of a synodal Church. This will involve being open to new ideas from everyone irrespective of their sexual preferences, marital status, disability or mental health or current lack of trust and faith in the Church. But we must not only be open to these individuals and ideas, but also truly inclusive of them in the life of our communities.

Being an open church is about attitude, having an open mind to accept change, as not a betrayal of past learnings but as necessary to deal with current realities, accepting that Church teaching can develop in response to new contexts. In order to be an open church, we need to accept that we can

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<sup>1</sup> "§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)

learn from others. Our lack of openness, as a Church, can be interpreted as an attitude of self-righteousness. Such an attitude is inappropriate in the current era, Pope Francis makes clear:

*In her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some that have deep historical roots, are no longer properly understood and appreciated. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them. At the same time, the Church has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people's lives. Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God 'are very few'" (Evangelii Gaudium #43)*

This requires us to be generally open to, for example, our Indigenous brothers and sisters, and to people of other faiths or of no faith. From each of these we have much to learn, and must avoid being self-righteous about our knowledge of the truth.

We can, however, be genuinely open to people and ideas without being truly inclusive of different groups in the life of our communities. An inclusive Church lives by the words of St. Paul's letter to the Galatians:

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus, (Galatians 3:27, 28)*

This Church should make no distinctions nor discriminate on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. But this is far from the case today.

While there are many who can be affected by the lack of openness and inclusivity in the Church today, three groups bear special mention. Women are systematically excluded from full participation in the liturgy and governance of the Church, on the basis of past custom rather than any current good reason. The gay and gender dysphoric communities, the LGBTQI, are judged as 'objectively wrong' in official teaching and are made unwelcome by the Church hierarchy and by many lay Catholics. Those who are divorced and remarried are also excluded from full participation in the Church, and often feel a great weight of rejection.

In today's world many sincere Catholics take issue with particular customs, rules and precepts of the Church, some of which have little direct foundations in teaching of Jesus. Denying access to the life and sacraments of the Church should not be used as a way of enforcing these rules and precepts in a changing world. Rather the Church should be open and inclusive to all believers of good faith and the Plenary Council should take a lead in encouraging such an approach.

### ***Beyond Clericalism: Reshaping the Priesthood***

There is a widespread sense, both in Australia and internationally, that current patterns of priesthood are failing the People of God. This is so in spite of the remarkable commitment of many fine priests and lay people to building and maintaining vibrant Christian communities.

Two issues are critical here. The first is the way clerical priesthood is often practised within the Church, as an exclusive club – male, hierarchical and celibate – that is closed and secretive, part of a system of privilege, deference and power. Especially in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis around the world, the evils of clericalism have been denounced by many, led by Pope Francis (1). The nature of the priesthood need to be changed, away from the clerical club to more diverse and humble roles of service to local communities. This will also involve rediscovering the reality of the priesthood of

the baptised. As the fathers of Vatican II said in *Lumen Gentium* “the baptised, by regeneration and anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood” (3).

The second issue is composition of the modern ordained priesthood. In Australia as elsewhere, there has been a heavy loss of priests and few young men have come forward, yet women and, in many jurisdictions, married men are excluded from the ordained priesthood. In our view there are no good reasons, in current times, for excluding either women or married men, and we have no doubt that in due course both groups will be ordained within the Catholic Church. But it must be noted that just broadening the base of a still clerical priesthood will achieve little. This change will only be effective in the context of a fundamental reshaping of the ordained priesthood.

The Plenary Council should endorse the importance of the priesthood of the baptised, and the need to reinforce this role to overcome the problems of clericalism arising from a dominant focus on the priesthood of the ordained. Some suggestions for implementing this rebalancing follow:

- Set up a Commission, with a lay chair and majority lay membership, to make suggestions about how to strengthen the priesthood of the baptised;
- Direct parishes to give more recognition and authority to lay ministries;
- Strengthen the role of parish councils and them more synodal, with all members working cooperatively with the priest rather than as only consultative; and
- Transform the education of priests, for example by abolishing seminaries and developing formation programs better integrated into the life of the Church and of broader society.

On the question of the composition of the ordained priesthood, the Plenary Council should:

- Endorse the principle that all persons – male or female, single or married – should be eligible to become priests, and transmit this view to the Pope;
- Curtail the practice of bringing priests from overseas to offset the shortage of local priests;
- Immediately implement a *virī probati* program for the ordination of married men and for the re-admission of men who have left the priesthood to marry; and
- Begin a process for the ordination of women as deacons.

### ***Governance for a Synodal Church***

To become an open and inclusive Church, a Synodal Church, with a reshaped ministry of priesthood, we need a new model of Governance; for the current male, clerical, celibate, hierarchical governance model has clearly been found to be wanting.

We need a return to the way of ‘being Church’ present from the very beginnings of the Christian community, where the lay people played an active role in all of Church life, “including the election of bishops and the designation of ministers” (4). This ‘way of being Church’ is in line with the movement towards synodality or ‘walking together’ being explored by theologians and encouraged by Pope Francis.

A practical first step on the part of the ordained clergy and Church hierarchy in Australia in regard to the leadership of parishes and dioceses, would be the adoption and implementation of the principles of the Governance Institute of Australia (GIA). According to the GIA the four key components of Governance are transparency, accountability, stewardship and integrity. Other practical steps could

include the introduction of greater flexibility and variety for those men or women seeking to be ordained, including optional celibacy for priests and limited tenure for bishops.

And more than these practical measures we need real conversion of heart, renewed understanding of the shared sense of faith of all the baptised, a renewed will and ability on the part of the Bishops to listen to the faithful, especially those whose words are not comforting. We need a willingness on the part of all the lay members of the Church community to speak the truth in faith to those in authority and with respect for the dignity of all. We need a willingness on the part of all to enter into genuine dialogue (ref), and trust that the Holy Spirit is renewing our community for this time.

### ***Liturgy for a Synodal Church***

The liturgy is the central way in which the People of God meet together and experience the Lord. In spite of the major improvements flowing from Vatican II, many aspects of our liturgical practice still remain as 'customs ... that no longer serves as means of communicating the Gospel'. The Plenary Council should take further steps to modernise the liturgy to serve a synodal Church, making use of the new flexibility offered by Pope Francis to craft genuinely Australian solutions.

*Language.* The current literal translation of the Missal has failed badly, and our liturgical language is not inclusive. We believe that the Vatican II goal of 'full, active participation in the liturgy' until our language matches the lived experience of our people. The Council could, for example, introduce the 1998 translation of the Missal, vetoed by the Vatican in 2001, for Australian use. Better still, it could establish a Commission of Australian experts, of which there are many, to create translations appropriate for Australian use.

*The Sacraments.* The practices surrounding many of the sacraments needs to be updated. It is critical that the Third Rite of Reconciliation be reinstated – the people have voted with their feet and moved away from this sacrament as currently practised. It is also, in our view, inappropriate to have young children involved in the Sacrament of Penance. Many simple changes could also be made to enhance the value of Confirmation and Anointing of the Sick to those who receive them.

*Educating the Laity for a Greater Role.* There are many good pastoral reasons why the laity can play a beneficial role in the delivery of some sacraments. This should be facilitated and appropriate training

## **4. 'The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor'**

As Vatican II and Pope Francis have stressed, the Church must not only reform its internal processes but look outward to the needs of the world in a more vigorous fashion. Francis has especially highlighted 'the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor', stressing that they are interrelated. The destruction of the Earth impacts most heavily on the poor, both within and across countries. The poor live with poor housing on marginal land, in worse environmental conditions. Thus they bear the greatest impact of climate change, without the resources to protect themselves from its ravages.

The performance of the Australian Church has been very poor on environmental and climate change issues. Indeed, given the activities of some bishops and prominent lay Catholics, many see the Catholic Church on the side of the climate change deniers. This is in stark contrast to the position laid out in Pope Francis' magnificent encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which embodies an appeal to all humanity to urgently address the man-made crisis facing Sister Earth, tying this directly to the needs of the poor.

By contrast, the Australian Church has had a strongly commitment to the poor from the earliest days, from the establishment of the St Vincent de Paul Society in 1854 and of Caritas Australia in 1964 to the heavy investment, for over a century, in providing education, health and other services to meet the needs of the poor and marginalised. This commitment is evident in the release by the Bishops of a Social Justice Statement for every year since 1940.

We submit that Plenary Council 2020 should take major new initiatives on climate change and the environment, where we have been weak, but also reinvigorate the Church's activities on social justice to meet the growing challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### *The Cry of the Earth*

We share, with many around the world, deep concern about the degradation of the natural environment and the massive challenges to future generations posed by global warming. In many countries, including Australia, the land and the rivers are seriously polluted, water is in short supply, many species of plants and animals are becoming extinct, extreme events such as cyclones, floods and droughts are becoming more frequent and the both the atmosphere and the oceans are warming. These trends severely threaten the quality of life of future generations, and hence are rightly of special concern to young people.

Following Pope Francis' lead, Plenary Council 2020 should make protecting the environment and mitigating climate change a central duty of Australian Catholics. Actions to this end might include:

- (i) Speaking out consistently, from all levels of the Church community, emphasising
  - the need for a moral conversion, to attitudes much more respectful of the natural world and ways of living more in harmony with it,
  - link this conversion explicitly with the message of Australia's indigenous peoples, and
  - advocating strongly for real policy changes to address global warming;
- (ii) Establish new institutions to drive this central mandate of the Church's mission;
- (iii) Support local initiatives to preserve the natural environment and to reduce emissions; and
- (iv) Follow the example of other Churches, such as that in the Philippines, in giving high priority to activities to study and implement *Laudato Si'*.

### *The Cry of the Poor*

In a globalised world there are close links between the marginalised and dispossessed in Africa, Asia and the Middle East and the disadvantaged in Australia. As a free, open and peaceful society, Australia remains a magnet for those seeking to escape from poverty and oppression. At the same time our domestic challenges – for example of homelessness, children and families in poverty, mental health and domestic violence – remain serious, and can be exacerbated by the flow of new entrants. How to deal with these complex issues going forward is a major challenge for all Australian governments, especially given that some powerful voices advocate a harsh and vindictive response. With the mission given to it by Jesus and reinforced by Pope Francis, the Australian Church should be a powerful force, in both moral and practical terms, in shaping our national and local response.

In our view Plenary Council 2020 should both celebrate what the Church has achieved in working for the poor and marginalised for over 150 years, and seek to give new impetus to revitalise and expand that work. It is beyond our competence to suggest here how that might best be done. But it should at least involve stronger advocacy for the 'priority to the poor' in Australian life and policy and intensification of 'on the ground' activities in the areas mentioned above.