

Key Plenary Council topics emerge from final report of the Listening and Dialogue phase

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By [Mark Bowling](#)



First Nations: Uncle David Miller, Ravina Waldren, Toni Janke, Eric Robinson (kneeling) Archbishop Mark Coleridge, Aunty Joan Hendricks, Cynthia Rowan, Aunty Evelyn Parkin, Marlon Riley (kneeling) Bernice Fisher, Troy Tornabene, Fr Gerry Hefferan, Kevin Eastment at a listening and discernment session at the Catholic Precinct.

CELIBACY for priests, the role of women, and the inclusion of divorced and remarried Catholics were among “strongly discussed” topics contained in the Plenary Council 2020’s latest report.

The final report of the council’s Listening and Dialogue phase captures the voice of more than 222,000 Australians and provides insights into 17,457 individual and group submissions.

Plenary council president Perth Archbishop Timothy Costelloe said the 314-page document was the result of the listening process that had produced “an extraordinary treasure of ideas and proposals which represents the heartfelt response of many people”.

“The great challenge ahead of us now is to ‘catch’ the voice of the Holy Spirit within the passionate, hopeful but sometimes contradictory voices of God’s people.”

Among the wide-ranging list of submissions were those calling for ways to improve the sacraments to increase Church attendance and “allow the fullness of a Catholic life to flourish”, and addressing the clerical child sex abuse scandal.

The structure of Church life “drew a great deal of attention” around leadership and governance, the need for greater listening between leadership and the laity, and the need to “modernise Church teachings to bring them in line with Australian society in the 21st century”.

Brisbane leads Plenary submissions

Brisbane archdiocese produced the highest number of individual submissions (1890), and about 44 per cent of individual submissions (5663) were received from those aged more than 50.

Many respondents discussed the need for greater outreach and evangelisation, particularly to young people.

Identified as “critical” was a significant desire for the Church to humble itself in the light of the sexual abuse crisis, and for more to be done to offer healing and restoration to those affected.

This included a call to repentance for clergy sexual abuse and greater concern for victims and survivors.

“Participants had many suggestions for the Church to conduct public acts of reparation for the victims and survivors of clergy sexual abuse,” the report said.

“This included a ‘national day of reconciliation’ for the victims and a ‘national public apology circulated in newspapers’ around Australia.”

There were also suggestions that the Church should hold public liturgies for the victims along with organised public acts of reparation through Masses and Prayers of the Faithful.

Participants called for greater transparency and accountability from the Church concerning the crisis, and some participants voiced concerns that the reporting of the crisis needed to be more balanced.

There were also calls for healing and moving beyond the scandal.

Concerns were raised by participants about “labelling the whole Catholic Church as paedophiles”.

Finally, some participants believed it was important to support and care for convicted abusive priests.

This included allowing for the context of each case and ensuring that each convicted priest could maintain a connection to God.

Many voices of a synodal Church

Human rights also figured amongst participants’ submissions including support for refugees and asylum seekers, the homeless and people suffering from famine.

Many participants felt that the Church needed to advocate for communities in Australia and overseas to live in peace and harmony.

A critical way to improve social justice outcomes for some participants was to reduce the margins between the rich and the poor, and one way to achieve this was through the Church community becoming more generous which could help create a more inclusive and equitable Australian society.

According to the report “several participants also urged all members of the Church community to have greater care for the environment”.

“There was a belief that the Church should show leadership in the community on climate change,” the report said.

“Moreover, every Catholic should embrace Pope Francis’s thinking that environmental care is fundamental to the Gospel, placing the responsibility of climate change on all parish members.”

Breaking down the demographics

Among people who wrote submissions, about 72 per cent of individual participants were Catholic, with three per cent identifying as other Christian.

Of the Catholics, 76 per cent of those participants indicated that they regularly attended Mass and other church activities.

Thirteen per cent said they went to Mass and church activities sometimes, while the remaining 12 per cent indicated less involvement or did not provide a response.

Plenary Council 2020 is being held in three stages – preparation, celebration and implementation.

As part of the plenary preparation, Listening and Dialogue, people connected with the Catholic Church were invited to reflect on the question: “What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?”

After the close of submissions in March, the responses were analysed by the National Centre for Pastoral Research.

N CPR director Trudy Dantis described the plenary council as “one of the most ambitious research projects the Church has ever undertaken”.

“For the bishops to invite the people of God in Australia to respond to such a broad question was a courageous move and the response was overwhelming,” Dr Dantis said.

“We could not have predicted the number of voices from which we would hear, but we were able to use high-level research and analysis tools to understand the threads and topics on which people spoke.

“This report is faithful to the stories told, the questions asked and the opinions shared.”

Plenary council facilitator Lana Turvey-Collins said the second phase of preparation – Listening and Discernment – would begin in earnest this month.

This time of discernment will run for several months and will shape the agenda for the council.

Archbishop Costelloe said the plenary council had been an exercise in being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with the council’s theme coming from the Book of Revelation: “Listen to what the Spirit is saying”.

Celebration of the plenary council will be held over two sessions in October 2020 in Adelaide and in May 2021 in Sydney.

Brisbane Assembly, an archdiocesan Plenary Council 2020 event, is expected to unite more than 600 Catholics across two days of communal discernment on October 4 and 5 at St Laurence’s College, South Brisbane.

The final report of the Listening and Dialogue phase can be found on the plenary council website: <http://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/resources/reports/>