



Towards the Plenary Council – people of God on a pilgrim journey

Image: 123rf.com, Pop Nukoonrat.



Women and the Plenary Council was the topic for a gathering on Zoom last month when over 100 people registered for the first conversation in a new series, WATAC PRESENTS.

WATAC (Women and the Australia Church) was established 34 years ago to explore women's experience and place within the Catholic Church. For many of the women, these years have been a long but rewarding journey of faith and appreciation of their own significant contribution to women's spirituality. Simultaneously, it has been a frustrating journey for some, who feel the Catholic Church still fails to honour women's experience of the divine in its liturgical, parish and missionary life.

The Australian Catholic Church will hold a [Plenary Council](#) during 2021 and 2022 as a vehicle for renewal within the church; a church battered by many failings over many years; battered by sexual abuse by clergy and cover up by bishops and other leaders, battered by failures to engage with changes in the role of women within society; and battered by an irrelevance witnessed by a rising disaffection of believers with their experiences of church. Only [12% of Catholics now attend Mass on a Sunday](#).

At the inaugural WATAC PRESENTS on June 9 the President of WATAC, Andrea Dean, interviewed Debra Zanella from Perth and Good Samaritan Sister Clare Condon from Canberra about their hopes, expectations and disappointments about the forthcoming Plenary Council.

Debra and Clare expressed both their yearnings and despair as they contemplate church renewal, especially for women. As Debra said: "If we truly take Genesis seriously that all are made in the image of God, there is no alternative to a true democracy in the church where authority must be translated into service rather than the command and control that we experience. We need a Christian view of service where governance is about the empowerment of those most marginalised, those who actually do not have a voice, of whom women are many."

Clare identified three possible outcomes from this national process.

There could be simple window dressing, that is women being identified in more managerial roles at parish and diocesan level.

Secondly, there could be some incremental change through the mandating of parish and diocesan pastoral councils with equality of women and men representation.

Finally, there could be radical change in some of the outmoded philosophical and theological positions that underpin current clerical dominance within the church.

Clare suggested that we not hold our collective breath on this third option for a more inclusive church. There are clear divisions across the church and, therefore, the need for authentic deep discernment by all participants.

She also identified the gender imbalance already noted in the list of [delegates](#) so far appointed to the Plenary Council – more than 57% are male clerics, lay men represent about 14% and women just 29%. She encouraged women to seek out the delegates in their own Diocese and to have discussions with them, particularly with the local bishop about his attitudes to the key issues of concern to women.

In the last analysis, Andrea asked both Debra and Clare for their hopes for the church of the future. Debra used an image from [JK Rowling's Harry Potter](#) series. "Think about the scene when the Phoenix dies but then magically is reborn. You know, the church constantly renews itself and comes back from periods of decline. While currently on the Plenary Council journey, I am not hopeful it will produce the change that I desire. But I do have hope that small movements create further movements and it is the collective movements, faithful to the Word of God, that will ultimately bring about the change in the church that is desperately needed."

Clare concluded by stating that her hope rests around the capacity of the members of the church to discern. "I hope for a greater ability to discern at an individual, communal and cultural level. Recently, I read a very apt definition of discernment; *discernment arrives at what is crucial and necessary. It lets go of what is extraneous and secondary.* My hope is that we might become the church of the Gospel, a people of God on a pilgrim journey. We are the church."

Andrea thanked all those who participated in this new venture, especially those behind the scenes who organised the technology and the breakout groups, where participants were able to share with one another. A special thanks was extended to the executive members of WATAC, including Tracey McEwan and Lee-Ann Wein.

For more information about WATAC PRESENTS, click [here](#).

The Good Oil

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