

Reforming the Church and Australia's Plenary Council

A longtime priest in Melbourne says next autumn's Plenary Council must address four key areas if it wants to renew and enliven the Church.



By [Terry Kean](#) | [Australia](#)

The Catholic Church in Australia had hoped to commence a [Plenary Council](#) last October. Unfortunately, it was postponed for at least another year because of COVID-19.

But the issues the Council will have as its focus have probably only become more urgent.

As to how we will regather as a Church, not only in Australia, but across the world, is a question that all of us will find very challenging.

I recently wrote to the committee that is preparing the *Instrumentum Laboris* -- or working paper -- for the Council. And the following is, more or less, what I shared with them.

I am a diocesan priest nearing retirement after 50 years of parish ministry in Melbourne Archdiocese. I have loved the journey and I am very grateful for the Catholic Church of Melbourne.

However, a deep sadness has grown within me as I see the diminishment of the Church and the increasing numbers of parishioners who do not come to Eucharist. Or if they come, it is more for special occasions.

I have lamented the terrible actions of priests and religious who have abused young people.

And I have also lamented what I see as a growing clericalism with our Church. So many of my priest colleagues lead with power and authority, rather than with empowering and authorizing.

Confident that the Spirit of God will lead the Church to a new story

In thinking about the Plenary Council, I have to say that I am not confident there will be the great change that I think is necessary for the Church of the future. I fear that our bishops will look to manage rather than *imagine* a Church of the future.

It seems to me that we will not change much and for that reason I think the Catholic Church -- not only here in Australia, but around the world -- will shatter and from the pieces a new story will begin.

Who knows what that will look like, but I am confident that the Spirit of God will lead the new story wherever it takes us. And I imagine it will be a very different story from what we have experienced in our lifetime.

It is more than likely that the Catholic Church will have a major schism. In some ways this is already happening as more and more people find other ways of expressing their spirituality.

If the institutional Church seeks to control, legislate and manage a difficult situation as it tries to negotiate the views of so-called conservative and liberal Catholics, then I believe the Plenary Council will not achieve much, if anything.

As it stands, the vote rests primarily in the hands of the bishops and there is a serious question as to a governance that so limits the voice of the faithful.

But if the institutional Church seeks to empower the voice of the faithful, and encourages small communities of people to come together, largely making their own way, then the needed reforms may arise. The necessary reforms to empower a priesthood of the people and a more creative and compassionate Church might then be born.

This would allow for a vision of seminary training focused on personal and pastoral development and within an apprentice-style context.

Somehow it seems to me, that the new story of Church will grow out of the ashes of the old Church and begin like it once began, with the coming together of small communities.

I do not advocate the end of the Church as institution, for we need an institution that leads, enables and authorizes the way to be Church today. And we have Pope Francis who is such an inspiration in leading our Church.

But, in my view, we are being called by the Spirit to step into an even more uncertain time and allow the creativity and energy of the faithful to lead us into the future, even if there is schism and shattering.

Having said this by way of preamble, let me put forward some of the issues that I think our Plenary Council must address if we can find a way to renew and enliven the Australian Church.

There are four areas I would particularly like to address: Outreach to the Poor and Marginalized, Clericalism and Governance, Climate Change and Eucharist.

Outreach to the poor and marginalized

First and foremost, if the Catholic Church is to be credible, we have to look outwards. We already have a resource to that. It is Catholic social teaching, often regarded as the Church's best kept secret.

The first principle of this teaching insists on the "dignity of every single person, created in the image and likeness of God".

Pope Francis in his recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti* has very clearly insisted on this principle, in a section titled "A Universal Love that Promotes Persons" (FT, 106-111).

With the Gospel as our mandate and Catholic Social Teaching as our guide, our reaching out to the poor and marginalized of our world must be at the heart of our purpose.

The more I pray the Gospel, the more I see Jesus as engaged with the poor, the sick and the broken -- the marginalized. If we as a Church proclaim to be the story of Jesus in our world today, this is where we must be.

Unfortunately, I see our institutional Church as far too uninvolved and silent in speaking up for the poorest in our world. Here in Australia, I think especially of asylum seekers.

I do acknowledge that there are wonderful Catholic organizations and communities who really make a difference to the poorest among us, but as a Church collective, we have so

much more to do.

There will be some critics who say that everyone must do this, whether they are a Church person or not. And they will point out that there are many other organizations and charities who do this as well, if not better than us.

True enough. But if we take our inspiration and energy from our belief in the Risen Jesus among us, I think we will have something to offer in partnership with these organizations and charities.

We are not separate people from our world; rather, we are called to engage with it.

Clericalism and Governance

My second point focuses on what I perceive as the growing clericalism in a Church, where the separation between priests and lay people seems only to widen.

There are far too many horror stories of priest "ruling the roost", so to speak, and of leading parishes without consulting with people.

In addition, it is very obvious that priesthood, as we know it in Australia, is dying. More and more parishes are partnering and or amalgamating because of the priest shortage and the ageing of priests.

Also, fewer and fewer people are coming to Eucharist. It seems to me it's because the Catholic Church has an abuse story that has scandalized its members. It's also because its leadership "male top heavy" and does not give women their rightful place in governance and in presiding over liturgy.

We must find ways to heal, to be more inclusive and relevant. Otherwise, we will become fewer and fewer, older and older. And we will find ourselves more and more irrelevant.

Climate change

My third point concerns climate change and the care of the earth. There are still so many people, including Catholics, who have their head in the sand and cannot see the diminishment of the earth's resources and how the human race contributes to this situation.

Pope Francis has given us a wonderful document in *Laudato si'* that calls us to reflection and engagement.

In the parish where I still work full time as priest, I remember a woman named Barbara once rang me. She was from from the Montmorency Asylum Seekers Support Group and asked, "Is the pope's document for Catholics only or is there any way where we can all come together as Montmorency communities?"

Without detailing what happened, let me just say that for two years we gathered as various communities and organizations around Montmorency to discuss *Laudato si'* and as a result some excellent initiatives have evolved.

If we don't take climate change to heart and do something that is substantial in response, we will continue to lose credibility, especially with young people. We will also be contributing to the destruction of our planet.

If, on the other hand, we partner with others, especially the young, no matter their religious affiliation, we may well find a new engagement with our faith communities.

Eucharist

My fourth point concerns the celebration of Eucharist.

The Second Vatican Council stated that Eucharist is the "source and summit (*fons et culmen*) of the whole Christian life" (*Lumen gentium*, 11).

I truly believe this. And for all my 50 years, the Eucharist has always been the center of my Catholic expression of prayer and action.

However, Eucharist is not the source and summit for many -- perhaps even most -- Catholics. There may well be occasions when these people come to Eucharist, but it is no longer an obligation for them and so many of them find it irrelevant and uninspiring.

I don't want to wish a return to insisting on obligation, but it seems to me that we have to think differently and offer a variety of prayer experiences that allow increased participation for those who come.

I cannot see the ordination of women and their presiding over Eucharist as a likely scenario for some time to come. But maybe a step in the right direction is to have women -- and non-ordained men -- preside over non-Eucharist gatherings.

Of course, this is already permissible. But our insistence as Catholics on the Eucharist and the presence of the priest, has meant we have not encouraged other expressions of liturgy as well as we could have encouraged them.

Such other liturgies can be more creative and less tied to rules and regulations as in our Eucharists. And thank goodness, we will be able to avoid the awful "new texts" that, in my opinion, have distanced the Eucharist from the lives of people

There are many other points I could write about, like our engagement as Church in social media, but I will leave that to others who are better informed.

Finally, let me just say that, in my view, the institution will not be the one to reform the Catholic Church. It will be up to the Spirit of God to lead Church members to a new story.

Terry Kean has been a Catholic priest in the Archdiocese of Melbourne for nearly 50 years. This article was originally published in The Swag, the magazine of the [National Council of Priests for Australia \(NCP\)](#).