

# A skeleton for the Plenary Council agenda

- [John Warhurst](#)
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[Continuing the Journey](#), the working document (or instrumentum laboris), is another stepping stone towards the Plenary Council (PC). How you view this document, provided explicitly both to those few hundred called to be PC participants and to the whole Catholic community, depends very much on your expectations. Few Catholics had any prior idea because the document was mysterious and written behind closed doors. As well as the writing team, presumably the Australian bishops and perhaps the Vatican shaped the final product.



The document describes itself as an initial reference point and as a skeleton for a future PC agenda. The job of putting flesh on the bones will be crucial and must be done as openly as possible. This one was written by a four-person team, including Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, Fr Kevin Lenehan and two other church employees, Daniel Ang and Dr Trudy Dantis, the lone woman. There was no public discussion.

The document is meant to be widely read. It contains a preface and five chapters, of which the agenda will come largely from the third and the fourth, a distillation of 'what the People of God

have expressed, especially — though not exclusively — in the Listening and Dialogue and Listening and Discernment phases of the Plenary Council journey'. In other words, they are a distillation of the six Listening and Discernment papers. The first chapter is an informative historical introduction, 'the story so far'. The second chapter is a theological reflection, and the fifth chapter proposes St Mary Mackillop as a model of Australian discipleship and issues an invitation to follow in the footsteps of her 'practical spirituality'.

The whole document is not just about possible agenda items but, perhaps more significantly, about the style, approach and process by which topics will be discussed. Ignatian discernment is at the heart of this approach. It is through such discernment by all participants that the Holy Spirit will be revealed.

The difficult task of producing such a document must be acknowledged. We should appreciate its strengths and recognise its purpose. It discusses most possible agenda items and in doing so offers some bold statements and striking summaries of the situation the church finds itself in.

But it does contain critical failures in both style and content. Some of these flow from the fact that, as someone described it to me, it is a distillation of a distillation of a distillation of the original 17, 457 submissions received in the Listening and Dialogue phase. They were first distilled into the final report by the National Centre for Pastoral Research then distilled again into the six theme papers before this latest distillation. Much has been lost in the process. Let us hope it is restored in the final agenda.

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This is a bland document, not enlivened by the passionate stories or urgent voices found in many of the submissions. It is also excessively cautious. We are a broad church, but on too many issues its approach is to report that *some Catholics say this, and other Catholics say that* rather than to reflect the majority opinion about what matters most to the People of God. It is afraid to say that *most Catholics, based on the submissions, say this*.

Despite its claim that the PC was planned to be a council with a 'uniquely Australian flavour' this document fails to take that opportunity. Despite many references to the desirable contribution of First Nations people and despite the attempt to make Mary Mackillop a model for action it lacks an Australian face. It is so afraid of the secular character of Australian society that it fails to appreciate the best features of Australian identity, such as participation and egalitarianism. To do so would be to threaten the official church commitment to hierarchy and to admit that the church can learn much from broader society and from alienated Catholics about where it has gone wrong. Instead, like defeated political leaders, the document blames church decline on a failure of communication and/or messaging.

Despite bowing in the direction of the contribution of women to the church in Australia it is inadequate in its treatment of gender and inclusiveness. Most Catholics want greater equality for women in the church. This document is afraid to move outside the restrictions imposed by the universal church on the ordination of women.

There is also a lack of self-reflection, especially about church leadership. The sexual abuse discussion is forthright, but still inclined to focus on the evils of the abuse itself rather than the equally criminal cover up by church leaders.

The danger of such attitudes if they are translated into the PC agenda is that, despite the words of warning, a somewhat rosy view of the church's dilemmas prevails. The necessary sense of crisis and the failure of business as usual are lost.

If this critique seems harsh then some of the best parts of the document about turning challenges into opportunities should be quoted (found in paragraph 196). Jesus is always with us.

It is this assurance that should encourage us and empower us to speak and act with that *parrhesia*, that boldness and courage, which are a gift of the Holy Spirit. We need the Spirit's prompting, lest we be held back by fear and excessive caution; lest we grow used to keeping within safe bounds. Let us remember that closed spaces grow musty and unhealthy. Yet the culture of the church thrives on closed spaces and safe bounds. To fulfil its potential the Plenary Council must be open rather than closed and bold rather than safe.



John Warhurst is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University, the Chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn and a delegate to the Plenary Council.

Main image: The Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Mother of God in Sydney (Getty Images/kldlife)