



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE
OF MELBOURNE

Church's need for inward and outward-looking focus

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The first general assembly of the [Fifth Plenary Council](#) of Australia has now ended, however, the work of discernment, listening and discussion has not. Plenary members from across Australia, including 17 from the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, will continue to ponder the [agenda questions](#) and the discussions of the past week, as they work toward the second gathering in July 2022.

Fr Kevin Lenehan, Master of [Catholic Theological College](#) attended the assembly as a member representing the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne. He was also part of the team that drafted the [Instrumentum Laboris](#), the 'working document', which drew together the voices of more than 220,000 Australians who participated in the Listening and Dialogue and Listening and Discernment phrases of the plenary council.



During the assembly last week, Fr Kevin offered an "intervention", an official statement that is tabled during the gathering which provides members an opportunity to share what is on their hearts with the broader assembly. In that intervention, Fr Kevin wrote:

I resonate with those voices asking for more explicit attention to be given in the agenda topics and questions for the "ad extra" dimensions of the Church's mission in Australian society. As we've heard, the Church is called to live out in each context Jesus' ministry of the kingdom and reign of God.

The awareness of the urgent challenges of the Church's outreach to all aspects of Australian society, especially the marginalised and vulnerable, was strongly articulated in the first phase of consultation and its final report, in the individual diocesan reports, in the six discernment theme papers, in chapter four of the Instrumentum Laboris and in the reports from the second phase of consultation.

While some topics of outreach and care, for example, care for creation, participation of First Nations Peoples, work of social services agencies, are mentioned under the six agenda topics, there is need for greater emphasis

on the Church's role in the promotion of just, humane and responsible conditions in societies, as expressed in the social teaching of the Church. Would the generations of St Vincent de Paul conference members and workers, who have kept many an Australian from destitution and worse, recognise their work of care in the agenda questions?

The proposal as outlined in an open letter from the Chair of Catholic Social Services Victoria for an additional agenda topic on "Justice and Equity" is worthy of consideration, although perhaps too narrowly defined. It is not practical to redesign the whole program and method of the agenda, but I endorse the call to find ways in the agenda for more specific attention to the Church's mission of outreach, service and care for all people and for the Earth.

Speaking with Fr Kevin about his intervention and his experience of the Plenary Council assembly, he said, 'When we gather as the Church it's important that we look both inwards – at what's going on in the life of the Church itself; things like ministry, liturgy, formation and Christian life – but also, that we look outwards.'

'In all of our Plenary Council discussions, I think we need to be very conscious of that "outward-looking" focus and engagement. What contribution does the Church bring into the world around us, like work, the economy, the digital culture and information society, social support and social care, issues of food security and health? In Australia particularly, there is a strong awareness of the health and lifestyle opportunities that impact our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.'

He added, 'In a way that took me back to the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s where early on in the council a fairly major decision was made to look at both the Church's inner life or self-understanding and also the Church's relationship with the world and engagement with the world.'

The idea that the Church is both a sacrament of Christ's presence and leading us inward to relationship with Christ, but that the Church is also a pilgrim walking through history in each country, in each time and place, with the people of that place, and trying to align as much as possible the social, cultural conditions with our vision of God's kingdom.'

Fr Kevin said he was 'particularly struck' by the [open letter](#) put together by Catholic Social Services Victoria calling for an additional discussion to the agenda focusing on the themes of justice and equity, not just within the Church, but within the wider society as well. He agreed that the principles of justice and equity are foundational to Catholic Social Teaching, but added that 'any ongoing plenary discussions would need to also take into account the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, the common good and the dignity of the person'.

‘And more recently, we’ve become very aware of the need to commit to care for the environment, “care for our common home” as Pope Francis puts it, and the habitat and the Earth.’

‘Many Catholics in Australia would have been brought up and really learnt their faith in the Young Christian Workers and the “See Judge Act” methodology,’ he said, ‘in a way that Vatican II calls “reflecting on the signs of the time, with a light on the Gospel”. And in some way that has diminished in the life of the Church more generally.’

Where is that formation for participation in society as a Christian person, reflecting on the event, the needs of society, in the light of the Gospel? How do we go about forming ourselves and inviting other generations to bring that sort of reflective methodology into their lives? That is a really important question.’

‘So, my call early on in the assembly was to remember what we learned from the Second Vatican Council, to keep both the internal and the outward-facing in balance. Because ultimately, I think the Australian public will be asking us “What’s the Church for?” And certainly, we’re for encountering Christ, leading people into Christ’s life, but that’s with our particular relationship in the Australian culture, and in the way that we accompany and walk with – as pilgrims together – with the people of our country, the issues that affect the person, the common good of society and the creation around it.’

‘And that’s where those principles of Catholic Social Teaching and participation and subsidiarity, solidarity, the preferential option for the poor, have not yet perhaps been expressed clearly enough in the discussions of the council.’

Perhaps it will be in the ongoing work of the council and the intervening period, and into next year, that the broader gamut of issues including these more social issues, will come to fruition. And hopefully they’ll be brought into more focused proposals by the time the council meets again in July 2022.’

Towards the end of the assembly, Fr Kevin reflected that he was feeling the intensity of the gathering in more ways than one. ‘I think the video conferencing adds another dimension of physical intensity. In my other life I’ve been teaching online all year and it’s so much more physically exhausting than being in person. It just takes another level of concentration and they have been long days.’

‘There has been a great diversity of views and issues that people have brought voice to. On the one hand, it’s wonderful and on the other hand, there are questions: How do we move forward with this? What is the Holy Spirit leading us to? Where is our attention being drawn? How do we move deeper into belonging together as a Church through these issues, even when there seems to be arguments or disagreements about what the best thing to do is? Those are the questions that are floating around in me.’

But Fr Kevin is 'not too worried at this stage'. 'It's a 12-month process and it was always going to be over two conferences so I'm very happy to let that time pass and for things to firm up over this time.

'Good ideas take time to emerge. There's been a lot of good, deep work that has occurred which will generate good recommendations eventually.'

Videos from the First General Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council are available to view at www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au.

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