

Plenary Council 2020: Joint Parish Statement

This statement is made by a group of twenty-six Melbourne parishes. We are deeply concerned about past trends while also hopeful that real change can be achieved before and at Plenary Council 2020.

The extent of the sexual abuse tragedy is overwhelming. We believe that the leadership in the Church has failed ordinary Catholics. We experience a profound feeling of shame and demand change. The Church must reform itself, and protect the rights of people, especially children, rather than of those who have caused this damage. The Church needs the full involvement of women at all levels, and recognition of the role of laity and priests as equal members, with the Bishops, in the People of God. Young people must be well represented at the Council and in the life of the Church.

We want to see the following changes made.

- 1. Address the Sexual Abuse Crisis.** All Catholic institutions with possible historical sex abuse complaints should immediately join the national redress system. A trauma-informed treatment approach that is both competent and adequate is needed to assist the survivors. The Church must provide an ongoing ministry of support to victims/survivors of clerical child sexual abuse and their families, and also to the many fine priests who have faithfully served the People of God.
- 2. Change the Nature of the Plenary Council.** If the Council is not seen as genuinely representative of the Church it will fail. A majority of the delegates to the Council should be laypeople and priests working in parishes, with at least half of these women. Voting must be open and transparent, with the ‘sense of the faithful’ revealed by decision-making processes involving all those attending.
- 3. Encourage an Open and Inclusive Church.** Many are currently excluded from full participation in the life of the Church. These groups include women, the LGBTQI communities and those divorced and re-married. The Council must commit to full inclusion of these groups. It must also reach out and support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who hold a unique position in Australian society.
- 4. Promote Servant Leadership for a Humble Church.** A new leadership model is needed. This requires dismantling the dominant male celibate club, banishing the trappings of power and reshaping the training of priests. All new priests need regular mentoring and support to help them develop servant leadership.
- 5. Change the Composition of the Priesthood.** Rather than relying on overseas priests and the clustering of parishes under one priest, immediate action is needed on widening access to the priesthood. We support optional celibacy for priests, re-admitting former priests now married, beginning the ordination of women as deacons and endorsing the principle of women priests.
- 6. Implement New Governance Changes.** The Council must instigate a move to a new governance structure, suitable for the People of God. Lay men and women should be involved at all levels, with transparent and accountable structures throughout the Church. All leaders should be subject to regular review.
- 7. Make the Liturgy More Relevant.** The Council should move to make the liturgy more relevant for a truly synodal church, for example by reforming the language used, reinstating the Third Rite of Reconciliation and removing the restrictions on attending the sacraments. As Pope Francis has said, the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect but nourishment for the weak.
- 8. Renew our Focus on the Poor and Marginalised.** The Council should set out to revitalise and extend the important work for the poor and marginalised that the Australian Church has done over the past 150 years. We need to build on past achievements to increase our outward-facing focus, reaching out to asylum seekers, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged.
- 9. Protect and Restore the Earth.** The Australian Church has failed to respond adequately to climate change and the destruction of the earth more generally. We urge the Council to express a new approach to caring for the Earth, the environment and our common home. We call on the Council to lead strongly and proudly on issues raised in *Laudato si'*, and to call for specific actions within the Church and Australian society to answer this powerful plea from Pope Francis.