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Fifth Plenary Council of Australia - Report

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Fifth Plenary Council of Australia - Report

A similar report was published in the Australian Journal of Liturgy, 18,2.

The Journey

The Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church of Australia was celebrated in Sydney in the first week of July 2022. This is the highest level of decision-making at a national level in the Catholic Church, and the resultant decrees, once given *recognitio* by the Holy See in Rome, become binding on the Catholic Church in Australia.

The journey took over four years, and over 222,000 people joined in the consultation and over 17,457 submissions were made.¹ The first stage was the Listening and Dialogue consultation with parishes and groups all over Australia. The process included prayer, deep listening to scripture, and listening to each other in small groups. From the materials submitted, qualitative research discerned six themes relating to the question 'What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?' These were:

- Missionary and evangelising
- Inclusive, participatory and synodal
- Prayerful and eucharistic
- Humble, healing and merciful
- A joyful, hope-filled and servant community
- Open to conversion, renewal and reform.

Writing and discernment groups for each theme were established and then a second round of gatherings around Australia used these themes for further Listening and Discernment sessions. Once again, the focus was on prayer, scripture and deep listening to each other, and submissions from groups were once again submitted online. The fruits of this discernment process shaped the agenda of the first session of the Plenary Council, which was held online in October 2021. The agenda was unusual in shape in that it was built around six themes that had emerged from further work and writing:

- Conversion
- Prayer
- Formation
- Structures
- Governance
- Institutions

These themes had a total of sixteen questions attached to them, and these were the focus for the first assembly. The first assembly engaged with these questions through prayer, scripture and deep listening as a full assembly, then in groups of thirty, then groups of ten. Although the online environment was exhausting and not ideal, the first assembly produced much valuable material that was published as the raw fruits of discernment showing the diversity of points of view among the members.

¹ Accessed 13/09/2022 <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/themes/about-the-themes/>

From this material, the Drafting Committee and writing groups produced draft propositions for further discernment which were sent to the 277 members of the Council in February 2022. Further reflections on the results were returned by Council members, and by June the final propositions for the second assembly were sent to all members. The Framework of Motions was distributed to all members prior to the commencement of the second General Assembly of the Plenary Council from 4 to 9 July in Sydney. The finalisation of the Acts of the second General Assembly was completed in August 2022 and the decrees published on the website: plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au

In November the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference [ACBC] will meet and the ten decrees will be sent to Rome for *recognitio*. Once returned, they will be promulgated in *Australasian Catholic Record* and the website of the ACBC will oblige six months later.

Decree on Liturgy

The document dealing with liturgical matters is called *Communion in Grace: Sacrament to the World*.² Each decree begins with an introduction which enunciates the background and wealth of discernment that emerged through the journey. There are thirteen paragraphs in the liturgy decree, and they focus on areas such as the sacramental nature of the Church,³ with the hope that the charisms of religious orders and ecclesial movements might flourish as a national network to enrich and nourish the Church.

The decree acknowledged the diversity of vocations within the Church and the need for all of them to be fostered. There has been a broadening of criteria for the ministries of lector, acolyte and catechist, which are to be encouraged for lay men and women. There was also a call for the renewal of preaching. This is underpinned by the need for formation, and one decree is devoted to formation in leadership and ministry which is crucial to our growth as a Church. The decree affirms the role of priests as those who gather the community, proclaim the gospel and preside at liturgy. As the number of priests diminishes formation and support will need further development.

The document also acknowledges the diversity of the Church through the presence of the Eastern Churches in Australia that are in communion with Rome. Using St John Paul II's image of breathing with both lungs, the differences between the Eastern Churches and Western Catholic Church are to be valued and included. The Plenary Council affirmed the Second Vatican Council's declaration of the preeminent role of liturgy as it is the 'summit toward which the activity of the Church

² Accessed 3 October 2022, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-5-Communion-in-Grace-Sacrament-to-the-World.pdf.

³ The Plenary Council documents use the capitalised word Church whenever it refers to the People of God. This makes a good distinction from the word used to describe a building used for sacred purposes. While this is different from LTP guidelines it is in line with Vatican II and the emphasis on the Church as the People of God.

is directed; as the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows'.⁴ This affirmation is important as the role of the Plenary Council repeatedly affirmed its union with Vatican II and the importance of focusing once again on the development called for by that ecumenical council. The Plenary Council acknowledged the need for renewal in catechesis, formation and devotion to the eucharist. To support this, the ACBC has requested an International Eucharistic Congress to take place in 2028.

Communion in Grace emphasised reception of the sacraments key moments in the lives of Catholics. The document also acknowledged the challenge of families seeing the experience of the sacraments as cultural milestones rather than moments of ongoing faith formation. These celebrations are not just a kind of certification but moments of continuing growth through the sacraments. The Church needs to better engage with families so that the sacraments lead those who celebrate them into deeper personal relationship with Christ. The document again encourages formation for family-centred parish-based experiences in faith as a pathway toward this goal. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was also highlighted as a way in which parish communities can grow and strengthen themselves, but with the understanding that the fostering of discipleship is crucial and difficulties may call for sharing of resources between parishes.

Recognising the importance of the Liturgy of the Word in the eucharistic celebration, and the promotion of a living love for scripture, there must be support for promoting excellent faithful preaching. Throughout the process there was concern voiced about the state of preaching in the Church in Australia. The Council also emphasised the importance of language in liturgical celebration, with the need for translations to be faithful to the original text but also accessible and able to communicate clearly to all assemblies of the faithful.

There was a call throughout the process for formation in the sacrament of reconciliation, including a call for the third form of the Rite of Penance to be used, in which 'general' (rather than individual) absolution is given to all present. Use of this form addresses in some way the decreasing numbers of priests and addresses difficulties expressed by those who have been hurt by the Church and so choose not to celebrate reconciliation individually. The final paragraph of the introduction deals with the sacrament of marriage and the urgent and clear need for a renewed catechesis on marriage and support for an ongoing 'catechumenate for life' to support married persons and their families.

Following this introductory material there is a section that begins with 'THEREFORE'. This section affirms the principal points: firstly, to promote full, conscious and active participation as required by Vatican II; secondly, to commit the Catholic Church in Australia to breathe with both lungs and to respect, foster and promote the rich heritage of both Eastern and Western traditions; and thirdly to request the Bishops Commission for the Liturgy prepare a new English translation of the Roman Missal.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, "Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963), 10.

The decree that concludes the document contains four articles:

Article 1: That dioceses promote exercise of and formation for the ministries of lector, acolyte and catechist.

Article 2: That in the light of the change in circumstances over the past twenty years, the ACBC review the provisions and guidelines it issued in May 2003 for lay people to participate in a formal ministry of preaching in the Latin Church, as provided for in canon 766 of the Code of Canon Law.

Article 3: That the Bishops' Commission for Liturgy institute a sustained program of catechesis of the Sacrament of Penance to promote an understanding of the conditions for, and appropriate practice of, each of the three forms of the Rite of Penance.

Article 4: That the Plenary Council request that the Holy Father consider whether the third form of the Rite of Penance might have a wider use on occasions when it is particularly appropriate, granted an understanding among the faithful of its distinctive nature and requirements.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church in Australia is not seeking radical change to the liturgy but really an affirmation of the teachings of Vatican II and the increase of formation and development as an ongoing practice. Some things can only be changed with the full agreement of the universal Church, and they might be included in the Churchwide Synod of Bishops in 2023. The life of the Church, however, needs the life of the Spirit, and to promote a more Christ-centred and missionary focussed community will no doubt enhance the life and faith of the Church. Many other aspects of life in the Church were developed in the other decrees but this report has only centred on the decree on liturgy.

Being a member of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia was a profound experience of synodality and the pinnacle of my life in the Catholic Church. It was a privilege and an outstanding faith experience to work towards the culmination of over four years of listening and discernment and to walk together with so many faith-filled people, all embracing the challenge together in a non-hierarchical manner. The Holy Spirit was tangibly evident in many of our challenges and in the conclusion when the Council was closed as well as in the excellent prayer and liturgical environment.

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