

Walking a synodal path of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia: A Reflection

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Plenary Council -
community of
communities united
in faith, guided by
the Holy Spirit to
discern what God is
asking



Plenary Council
Listen to what the Spirit is saying...

Outline

1. What is synodality?
2. What is a Synod and how does it differ from a Plenary Council?
3. Plenary Council – the journey
 - Preparation
 - Phase I: Listening and Dialogue
 - Phase II: Listening and Discernment
 - Celebration
 - First Assembly
 - Second Assembly
 - Implementation
4. Reflections on the process
5. Implementation
6. Was the Plenary Council a Success – pluses, challenges and learning
7. Final words

Synodality

- mutual listening
- everyone has something to learn, the lay faithful, the bishops, the pope
- all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'spirit of truth' (John 14:17)
- in order to know what God is saying to the Church
 - *is a constitutive element of the Church, to be found at all levels of church life*
 - *the Church is either synodal or it is not Church (Pope Francis)*
- Put simply, synodality is about journeying together by listening to the Holy Spirit and to each other to discern what God is asking of us.

Synod

- a gathering or assembly – traditionally of bishops
- from the Greek **synodos** meaning assembly whose purpose is to discern a path, way, direction
- not new
 - Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)
 - Council of Trent prescribed annual synods
 - 1917 Code of Canon Law legislated for bishops to hold a synod every ten years
 - Vatican II desired
 - “the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with fresh vigour.” (Christus Dominus, 36)
 - more dialogic and participatory processes
 - by virtue of their baptism all have a sense for the faith (sensus fidei)
 - all the church together has “the faithful’s sense of the faith” (sensus fidelium)
 - Synod of Bishops was instituted in 1965 to foster collegiality, Pope with bishops
 - now held every two to three years
- The Church and Synod are synonymous (St John Chrysostom)

Plenary Council

A Plenary Council is a gathering of the bishops of a particular territory, along with a number of priests and others, to consider matters of importance for the Church in that territory and to pass legislation on them. Any such legislation must first be approved by the Holy See (cf. Can. 446).

Synod vs Plenary Council

- Both can be influential
- BUT
- A Plenary Council is the highest form of gathering of local church and has legislative and governance authority. Its decisions are binding for a particular territory, in our case the Catholic Church in Australia.
- A Synod does not have this legislative and governance authority, but can provide direction.

Pope Francis' Address at
Commemorative
Ceremony for the 50th
Anniversary of the Synod
of Bishops, October 17,
2015

- The defining aspect of this change of epoch is that things are no longer in their place. Our previous ways of explaining the world and relationships, good and bad, no longer appears to work. The way in which we locate ourselves in history has changed. Things we thought would never happen, or that we never thought we would see, we are experiencing now, and we dare not even imagine the future. That which appeared normal to us – family, the Church, society and the world – will probably no longer seem that way. **We cannot simply wait for what we are experiencing to pass, under the illusion that things will return to being how they were before.**

Australian response

- Convocation of the Fifth Plenary Council
- “the Church is not the presence in our society it once was. We need to take a measure of that and make decisions accordingly. The culture in which we have to proclaim the Gospel is very different to what it was even 20 or 30 years ago (Archbishop Mark Coleridge).”

A long gestation

- 2012 Year of Grace to discern the need for a national gathering
- Decision May 2016
 - response to invitation from Pope Francis for local Church to dialogue
 - address the significant changes in contemporary society
 - listen to and respond to the Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual and
 - dialogue about the future of the Catholic Church in Australia
- Ratified by Francis 9th March 2018
- Launched on the feast of Pentecost 2020
- Officially convoked on the feast of Pentecost 2021

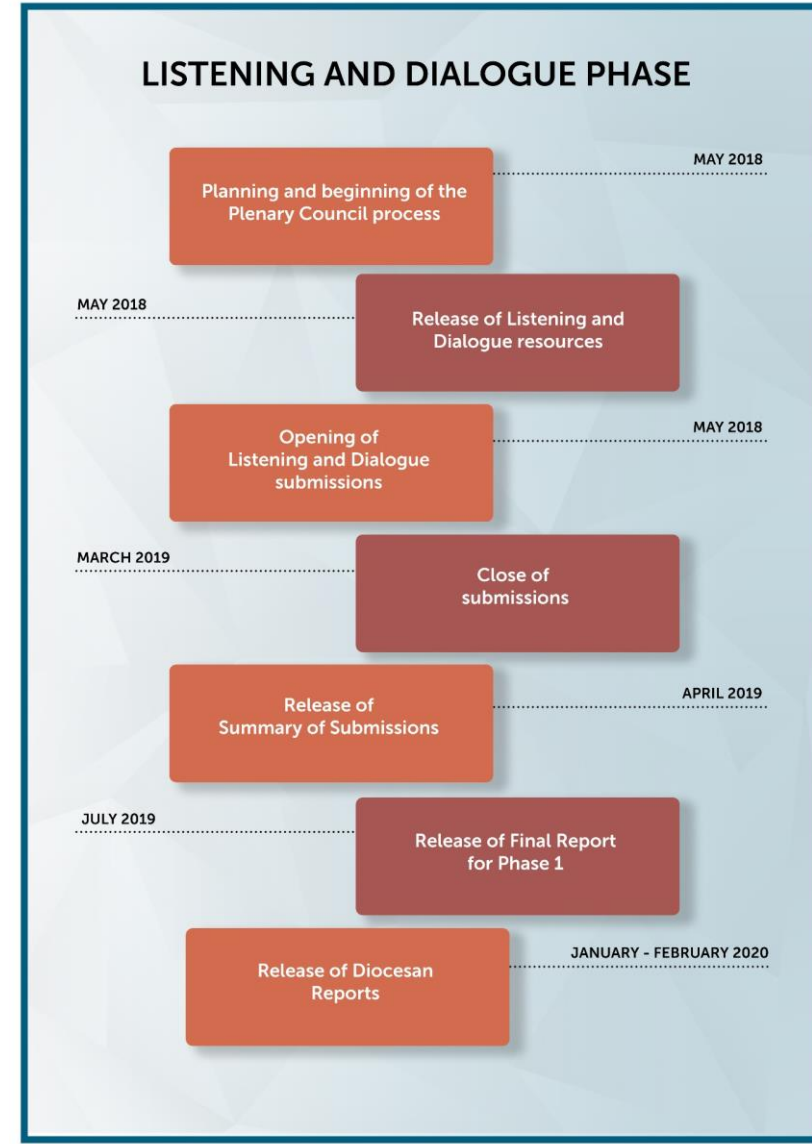
**Three stages – a
journey spanning
several years**

Preparation –
prayer, listening,
dialogue,
discernment

Celebration –
assemblies

Implementation –
promulgation of
the decrees

Preparation Phase I: Listening and Dialogue



PREPARATION

Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue

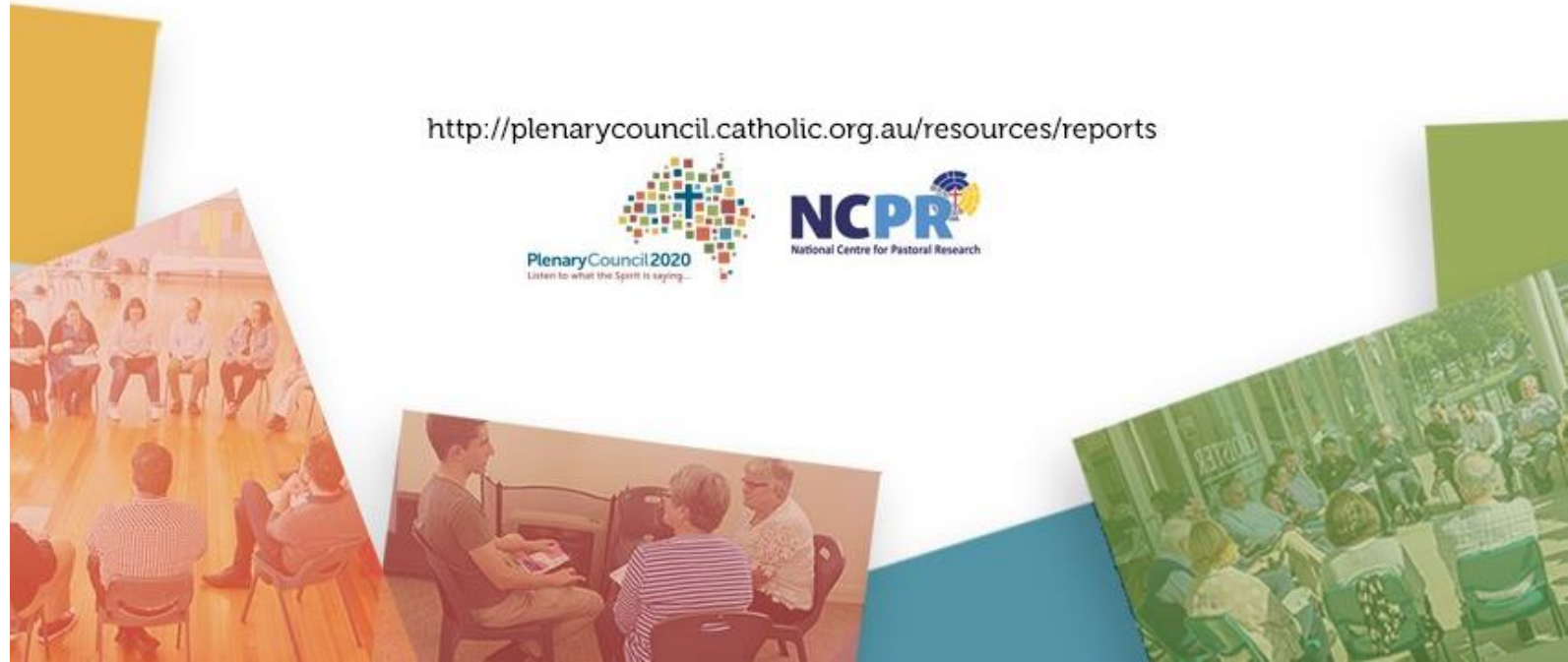
- group and individual reflections
 1. What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?
 2. What questions do you have about the future of the Church in Australia that you would like the Plenary Council to consider?
 3. You are invited to share a story about your experience of faith or an experience of the Church in Australia that has shaped you.
- Spiritual conversations to discern
 - lived and historical experience
 - current reality of the Catholic Church in Australia
 - hopes, questions, and yearnings that challenge us as church

Final Report Phase I

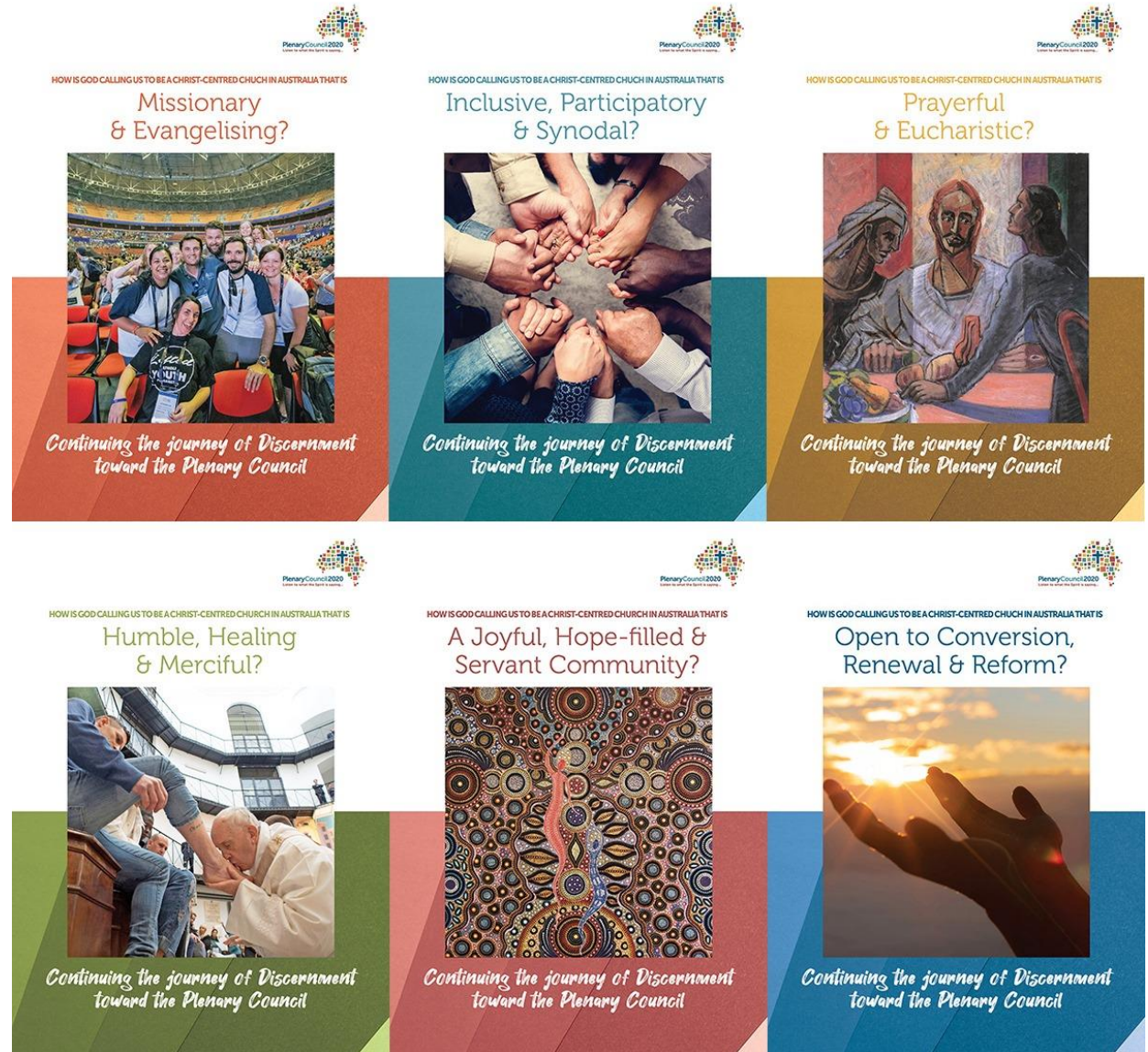
*Listen to what
the Spirit is saying*

FINAL REPORT FOR THE PLENARY COUNCIL
PHASE I: LISTENING AND DIALOGUE

<http://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/resources/reports>

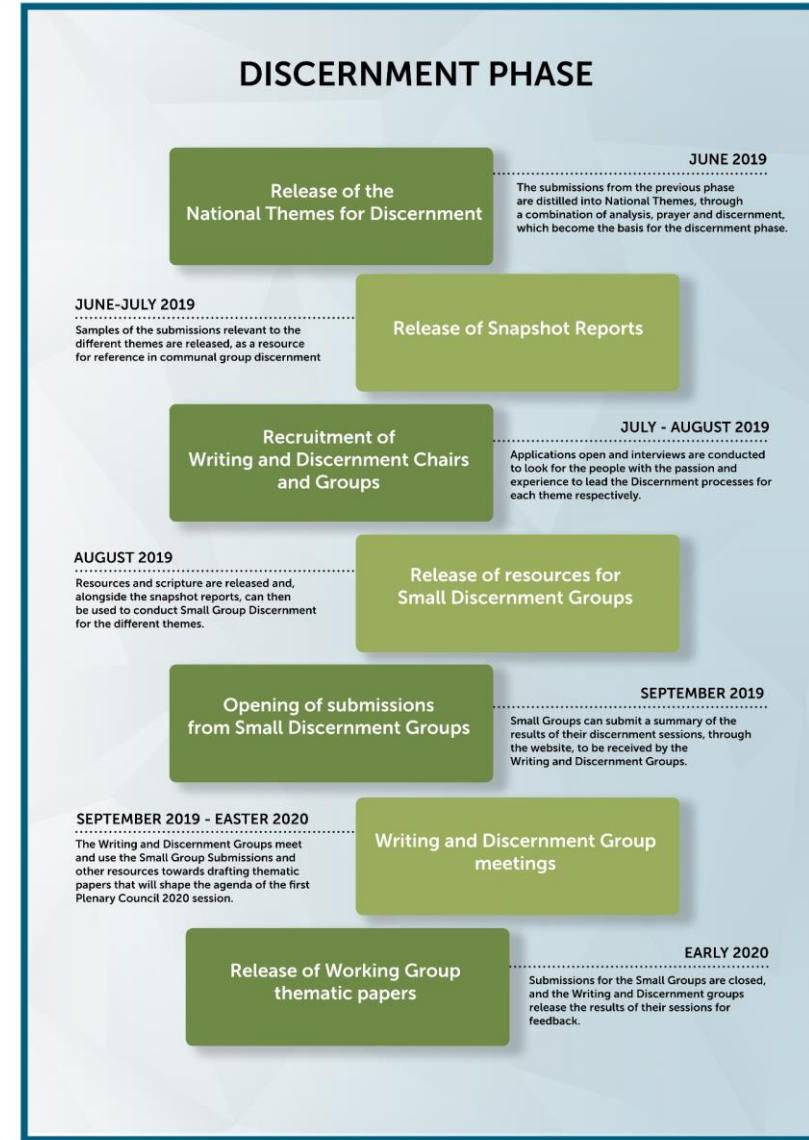


6 National Themes emerging from Phase I



Preparation

Phase II: Listening and Discernment



Fruits: National Discernment Themes

Listening to what the Spirit is saying continued
BUT communal discernment around the 6
national themes, rather than individual

Spiritual Conversations

The Listening & Discernment experience



Time/Duration:

2 – 2.5 hours.

Number of participants:

Maximum 10-12 per group.

Suggested location:

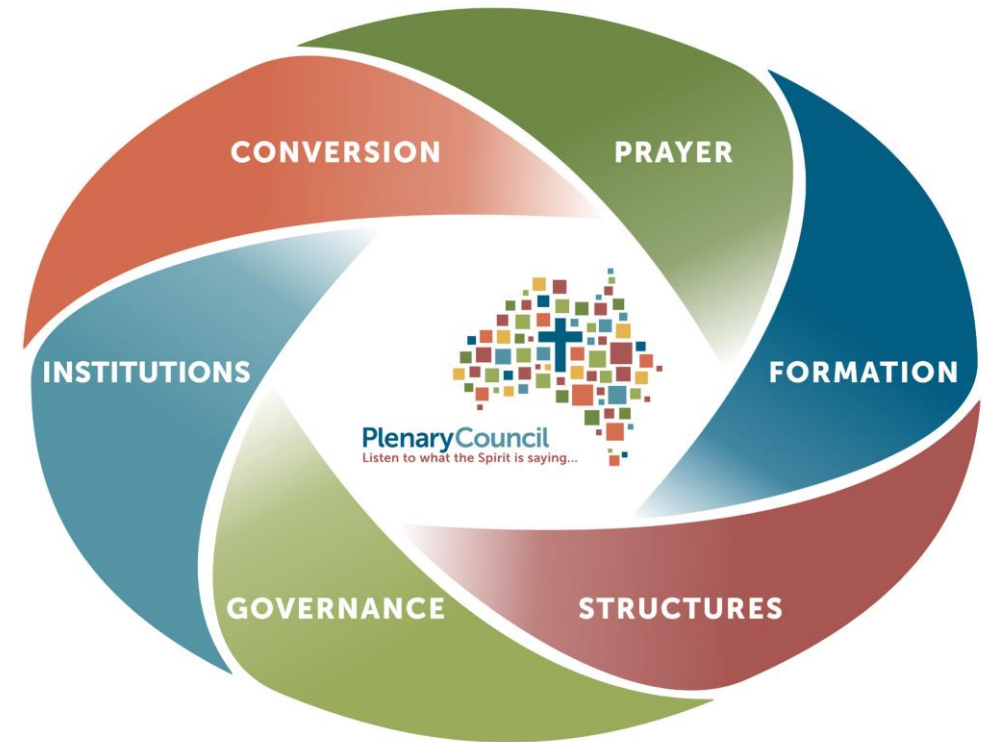
Anywhere quiet.

Fruits: Preparation

Instrumentum Laboris



Agenda First Assembly



Celebration

First Assembly

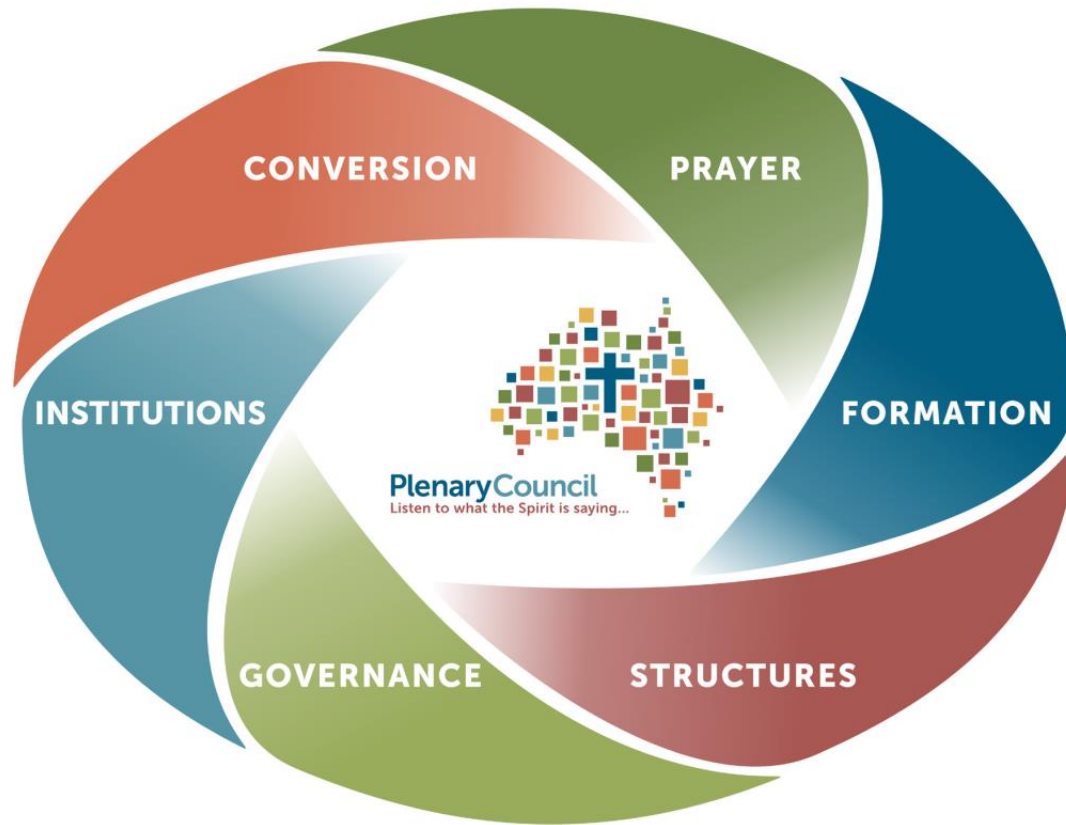


Plenary Council
Listen to what the Spirit is saying...

The First General Assembly
OF THE FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
October 3-10, 2021

#ListenToTheSpirit #PlenaryCouncil #PlenaryCouncilAU
FOLLOW THE LIVESTREAMS AND PRAY WITH US AT
www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au

First Assembly: A virtual experience



- Agenda
 - 16 questions, 6 themes
 - Conversion – 5 questions
 - Prayer – 2 questions
 - Formation – 3 questions
 - Structures – 2 questions
 - Governance – 2 questions
 - Institutions – 2 questions
- 280 members gathered virtually
- 10 groups - one question and some two
- 2 questions - **the wounds of abuse and the needs of the most vulnerable** – addressed by Assembly as a whole in Special Plenary Session
- Spiritual conversations
- Acknowledgment of Country
- Liturgy and daily Masses
- Interventions

Fruits:

First Assembly Proposals from Small Groups and Individual Members



FIRST ASSEMBLY PROPOSALS FROM SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

DECEMBER 2021



Between Assemblies

- *Towards the Second Assembly: Working Document for Members* released 28 February 2022
- four thematic foci
 - A. Deeper Communion Enriched by Diversity (Participation)
 - B. Ecclesial Leadership and Governance Growing as Disciples and Servants of the Gospel
 - C. To Witness to Faith, Hope and Love as Missionary Disciples in the World
 - D. To Proclaim God's new creation as people of prayer, healing and hope (Reconciliation, compassion for the wounded, care for our common home)
- Members' response by 4 April – 535 responses
- *Framework for Motions* published
- recommendations for amendments to *Framework*
- *Final Motions and Amendment* – the agenda released end of May
- Coffee conversations during June

Celebration

Second Assembly

The Second General Assembly
OF THE FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

JULY 3-9, 2022



Motions and Amendments

29 JUNE 2022



Agenda: Second Assembly

- Eight parts
 - Part 1: Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts
 - Part 2: Choosing Repentance – Seeking Healing
 - Part 3: Called by Christ – Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples
 - Part 4: Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men
 - Part 5: Communion in Grace: Sacrament to the World
 - Part 6: Formation and Leadership for Mission and Ministry
 - Part 7: At the Service of Communion, Participation, and Mission: Governance
 - Part 8: Integral Ecology and Conversion for the Sake of our Common Home
- Three further parts rounded out the agenda
 - Part 9: The Implementation Phase Fifth Plenary Council
 - Part 10: Decrees Fifth Plenary Council of Australia
 - Part 11: Closing the Plenary Council

Second Assembly

- 277 Members
 - Thirty+ tables of approximately 8 people.
 - a diversity of people from across Australia
- Each day opened with Acknowledgement of Country and liturgy
- Discernment on motions based on spiritual conversations.
- Input from Periti
- Voting – online, straw, pen and paper
- Weather was awful but sun did finally appear
- COVID

Motions and voting

- more than 35 motions put to a consultative and a deliberative vote
- 3 failed – 4.5 and 4.6 (re-drafted and passed) and 5.4 lay ministry of preaching in Eucharist assemblies
- votes taken after spiritual conversations
- motions with qualified majority – two-thirds of deliberative voters eligible and present – passed by the Plenary Council
- confirmed as the decrees of the Plenary Council
- November 2022 meeting of ACBC to send decrees to the Apostolic See
- in accordance with canon 446 decrees not to be promulgated until reviewed by Rome
- promulgated in the *Australasian Catholic Record* and the ACBC website
- decrees oblige six months after promulgation

Specific motions

1. Apology to First Nations Peoples, acceptance of NATSICC recommendations to the Plenary Council, and endorsement of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*
2. Apology to the victims of sexual abuse, their families and communities, a new name for 'Safeguarding Sunday', and the development of appropriate rituals and resources for the day
3. Commitments in relation to education, health and social justice organisations, and ecumenical relationships
4. Support for women to participate in the most important aspects of diocesan and parish life, fuller implementation of recommendations contained in *Woman and Man: the Bishops Respond*, examination of how best to implement female diaconate should universal law change
5. Review of the guidelines for lay people to participate in preaching, institution of a program of catechesis to promote understanding of Sacrament of Penance, and a request for wider use of the Third Rite of Reconciliation and a new translation of the Roman missal
6. Support for ministry and leadership, cross sectional engagement and development of resources and formation programs, development of a national Formation for Leadership strategies that addresses the possibilities of synodal practice, and a national framework for formation in Catholic Social Teaching
7. establishment of pastoral councils and finance committees, and a national synodal roundtable, study the implementation of the recommendations from *The Light from the Southern Cross*.
8. A commitment that every diocese, parish and agency will take action on the environment through a new developing or participating in a *Laudato' si'* action plans by 2030

Reflections: Preparation

- More than 222,000 people and 17,457 submissions from across Australia Phase I
- Submissions wide ranging - diverse and conflicting views
- Concerns about
 - the roles of laity, women, young people
 - marriage, family
 - divorced and remarried
 - LGBTQI+ people
 - spiritual and faith formation,
 - Marginalised, people of the periphery and social justice
 - language
 - viability of parishes, engagement with the clergy, lay governance
 - Impact of COVID
- Revealed
 - Ongoing trauma and pain flowing from the abuse scandal, loss of trust and need for healing
 - Cultural diversity
 - Depth of people's commitment to the Church
 - Good works being done
- Exposed people to spiritual conversations
- Mammoth exercise and amazingly rich

Reflections: First Assembly

- **General comments**
 - genuine concern for the Church
 - commitment to listening and hearing - respectful conversations
 - recognised
 - need to unlearn, to learn and relearn the wisdom of God at the heart of our tradition, not to limit to God but for expansion
 - Holy Spirit is life, movement, colour, radiance and restorative stillness in the chaos
 - need to learn from First Nations Peoples – Uluru Statement from the Heart
 - passion of strong young women
 - passion for ecological conversion
- **Process**
 - questions appeared unfocussed but ultimately wide-ranging discussion
 - spiritual conversations a way to listen and hear
 - day of lamentation was confronting and powerful
 - exhausting
- **Some improvements**
 - getting the balance between small group and individual proposals right
 - at times needed clearer direction – the group needs to own and lead
 - Identifying the purpose and nature of interventions
 - virtual process worked but lost the incidental meetings
 - time

Reflections: Between Assemblies


- opportunity to provide feedback on
 - proposed themes to emerge from the listening, dialogue, discernment and the First Assembly
 - amendments on the initial framework document and
 - the final document
 - Coffee conversations real value
- But
- time was an impediment
 - inability to discuss documents with wider audience

Day 3: Video clip

<https://youtu.be/tJiWFSY1ays>

Reflection: Part 4: The turning point

- the protest
- turning point - acknowledged in concluding statement
- a spontaneous response to the hurt felt by many women and men about the failure of Part 4 to pass
- bishops under attack for the failure of the deliberative vote but also problems with consultative vote
- bogged down in conservative vs non-conservative mindset especially as it related to the female diaconate – sent a message
- ordination a lightning point but not the main issue – important but how are women present in decision making and ministry? Where is their voice and perspective?
- stopping the agenda, hearing people's views and re-drafting Part 4 a graced moment
- produced a better Part 4, better process and improved tone and atmosphere that carried through to the rest of the Assembly



Other benefits – Second Assembly

- people – in and outside the Plenary
- prayers for and support offered to members
- First Nations Peoples
- apology to victims of abuse, their families and communities
- response to the vulnerable
- concern for the environment
- gathering of bishops, clergy, religious, lay men and women
- liturgies
- input from the Periti
- flexibility of organisers
- meals and friendship that built relationships

Implementation:
A symphony in
the making

- Promulgation of the Decrees after review by Rome - yet to happen
- Signal to local churches as well as national – they have a role to play
- Expectation of interim reports 2023 and 2025 and a final report in 2027

Was the Plenary Council a success?

- A plenary council is about legislation, about shared practices across a territory, about change in practice across a territory
- not many of the motions are legislative in nature, rather they are aspirational, opportunities
- So limited

BUT

- As a synod it did work
 - started with listening, dialogue and discernment
 - identified key themes
 - gathered to address these issues and suggested ways forward, gave direction

Pluses and challenges

- **Pluses**

- to be celebrated - we went on a journey
- we were open to hearing diverse voices
- the people – members and non-members
- that lay people were present, particularly lay women
- the process – discernment, coffee conversations, spiritual conversations, the use of technology
- the organisation – amazing and fruitful

- **Challenges**

- Some things were not addressed – how will these issues be managed?
- Different opinions remain – how do we respectfully address?
- How do we achieve unity in diversity?
- How do we embrace change?
- Will we achieve consistency of practice across the nation?
- How will we support dioceses who are not well resourced?
- How do we embed spiritual conversations as common practice?

Learnings from the PC

- The value and the pitfalls around spiritual conversations
- The value of reporting back following discernment
- The need for interventions to be aligned with discussion
- The importance of good liturgy
- The value of embracing First Nations spirituality
- The importance of naming and acknowledging past sins
- The importance of a formation phase – prayer, spiritual conversations, discernment, coffee conversations
- The value of good planning
- The need for time

Final words

Did the Plenary Council address all the issues raised in the Listening and Dialogue phase?

No – it did go some of the way.

Motions are not perfect, still many issues to discuss, however with minimal time, it was a good outcome.

The journey and the process set a good example for how we as the people of God can engage with everyone together and move forward.

It did embrace the call for walking a synodal path. We began the journey of listening, dialoguing, discerning together.

We did embrace synodality.

For these reasons I believe it was a pivotal moment in the life of the Church in Australia.

