

Plenary Council 2020

Our Lady of the Assumption parish, Cheltenham (Vic), reflection session held on Sunday October 7, at 4 pm.

Preface. About 40 parishioners gathered to reflect on what the Spirit was saying to them about the Church in Australia. After the gathering prayer and a period of silence some eight groups of about 5 gathered in different corners of the church. There was no detailed briefing but a remarkable similarity of views emerged across all groups. A number of pastoral, cultural, structural and governance issues were raised. Even though some are more universal matters for the church they have relevance to the local Australian Church because universal matters affect the local spirit. While all present loved the church or aspects of the church there was an awareness that they knew many people who are just hanging onto their faith by the skin of their teeth.

Issues raised:

Pastoral Cultural issues:

1. We need a less judgmental church, a bottom-up church, where women and children are as equally important as the male leaders. We need less emphasis on rules and regulations, and more on outreach and connection.
2. We need a welcoming church, communities that welcome all regardless of culture, colour, gender orientations, and marital status (divorced, de facto, etc.). Structures have been so important in recent times in the church, but should attitudes be more important?
3. We need simplicity, a return to the community that Jesus inspired first. A return to living the gospel. The gaudiness of dress and over the top ritual is out of place. Let's return to the message of Jesus and get rid of the trappings of the centuries. Could some Aboriginal rituals, etc., find a place in Australian Catholic liturgy?
4. Our congregations are generally made up of the elderly. Where are the young families today? How can we engage and encourage our young to stay part of the church after they celebrate their sacraments of Eucharist and Confirmation? YCS, YCW and Antioch are no longer relevant. But what can emerge? Our Catholic schools might be good in many areas but don't appear to be very successful in passing on the faith.
5. There is a schism in the Australian Catholic Church now between post and pre Vatican II liturgies and spiritualities and theologies. Can the gap between conservative and liberal forces in the church ever be healed? It is almost as if the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World has never been accepted by many. We need a return to the practice and celebration of 3rd Rite Reconciliations.

Structural issues:

1. There is a need to look at structures of what the church communities may look like in the future, for example, many parishes do not have a resident priest at the moment,

and more will experience this in the near future. So parish leaders may have to be called forth from the people rather than the ordained. To lessen clericalism could each faith community elect their own leader?

2. Small faith communities exist, but could they become Eucharistic communities as well with leaders (male or female, married or otherwise) “ordained” to celebrate the Eucharist. There could be more pastoral input from former priests and nuns who have left their ministries to marry. Celibacy needs to be optional.
3. To impose a priest on a parish community who comes from another country and culture and language sometimes works but more often leads to the demise of the faith community, as people go off in search of more meaningful liturgies. Parishioners have no say in who is appointed to their parish.

Governance issues:

1. Constantine’s edict of toleration in 313 basically has meant that the “Chair of the Emperor” has become the “Chair of Peter.” The church took on the trappings of the Empire. A top-heavy male clerical governance has persisted since. We need a Vatican II church, charismatic, and less clerical.
2. The hierarchy should share the burden of “running” the church. They need above all a mindset of being servants rather than masters. Women have been the backbone of local Catholic communities, but have no part of the governance. Can the hierarchy start smelling like the sheep (to use Pope Francis’ term)? Can all of us smell like the sheep?
3. There is pessimism about the Plenary process especially since only the bishops have voting rights. A Woman should be a co-chair. Also we have been told that everything is on the table. What about married and women priests, gay marriage, etc.? Are they on the table?
4. Is it time for married and/or part-time priests, both male and female, with kind and compassionate hearts. Permanent male deacons have become part of the clerical structure of the church, but where are the permanent female deacons?
5. Union with other Christian churches needs to be pursued. The post Vatican II ecumenical movement seems to have died.
6. An apology from Rome would be welcome for those who have been silenced for thinking/writing/speaking outside the square. They are our prophets.

Formation issues:

1. Seminary training needs revisiting. What sort of church do candidates for the priesthood wish to serve? Is it a pre or post Vatican II church? What are the criteria of eligibility for candidates?
2. Seminary formation needs revisiting following the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Child Abuse especially in regard to the psychosexual maturity of those who seek the celibate life of priesthood.