

Statements developed and revised by the Plenary Council Stage 2 group at St Carthages, Parkville 3052

Submitted 24 February 2020

Stage 2 of the Plenary Council consultative process asked parishes to discuss and formulate short statements (limited to 1,000 characters or about 150 words) focused on six themes. These themes, the focus of the Writing and Discernment Groups, are: 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. For more detail, see <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/themes/>

A group of 18 parishioners at St Carthages met three times face to face and exchanged comments via email to finalise the statements. We were asked to prepare and submit on behalf of the parish two statements for each a theme, one with a national focus and one with a local focus. The group's convenors addressed the two Sunday Masses and 230 copies of the statements were collected by parishioners at the Masses over the weekend of 22-23 February.

Statement 1: Theme - open to conversion, renewal and reform (national focus)

The perfidious paedophilia committed by some clerics and religious caused inestimable victim harm. The Church also suffered huge damage from the glaring lack of leadership and governance exercised by our bishops before, during and since exposure of the child abuse scandal. The Church from the Vatican down is overwhelmingly controlled by all-male clergy with no significant role for women. We demand a national program of change which embraces a servant model of leadership to create greater transparency and collaborative decision-making at all levels, based on a greatly expanded role for the laity and women in particular. Major reforms should include priest formation to meet the demands of contemporary pastoral care. Evidence of these changes, especially on the role of women in the Church at all levels, needs to be made public with an annual report card in every diocese. We and the wider community need to know that the Church is changing and is the better for it.

Statement 2: Theme - open to conversion, renewal and reform (local focus)

At the parish level, we need to apply a synodal model of Church. This requires parish members making decisions collaboratively with Church leadership on issues that affect the parish at its core, such as appointment of a new parish priest. Each parish facing a change of parish priest should assess its strengths and weaknesses, formulate an agreed statement of pastoral objectives, develop selection criteria for a new pastor and jointly decide who is selected. At the diocesan level, a Diocesan Pastoral Council is needed as a consultative body with regular meetings and reporting. Laity should hold a majority of positions, with women and men represented equally as far as reasonably possible. All parish councils should be invited regularly to submit matters for discussion and action. The Council should also take part in the selection process for a new bishop. A diocesan council secretariat and website should be set up to report on the discussions, recommendations and actions taken by diocesan Church leaders.

Statement 3: Theme - humble, healing and merciful (national focus)

The Church has recently done much to redress Christianity's historical shortcomings regarding environmental theory and practice. But much more earnest and realistic effort is needed to implement Pope Francis's exhortations in *Laudato Si'*, especially on environmental justice. We need to emphasise the importance of good example at all church levels, such as environmental friendliness in choice of investments, land use, building practices; personal living choices of the laity, clergy and religious; and in church-related events and in Catholic schools. Regarding basic theory, three different, though related, concerns should be recognised: (1) the environment, considered as an entity, concerns meeting human needs sustainably; (2) animal justice and welfare, which should be treated separately from environmentalism; and (3) ecology, which embodies the integrity of creation. These distinctions are implicit in *Laudato Si'* and should underpin its practical application.

Statement 4 - humble, healing and merciful (local focus)

There is a long Catholic tradition of respect for animals as sentient beings and of opposition to animal cruelty (D Jones *The School of Compassion: A Roman Catholic theology of Animals*. 2009), inadequately proclaimed in the new catechism (1997: nn. 2415-8) and *Laudato Si'* (para 130). Generally the Church needs to show much greater concern for animal justice apart from species endangerment or ecological involvement in liturgy, preaching, and teaching. Much pro-animal discourse inappropriately invokes 'divine command' and/or 'divine ownership' theory to differentiate the basis of animal justice from that of human justice. Urgently, the Church in Australia should condemn the worst cruelties to animals, such as inhumane circumstances in which live animals are exported, and join the current campaign to persuade the Pope to condemn bullfighting.

Statement 5 - Inclusive, participatory and synodal?

Many young people feel betrayed by leaders of our Church. Children and adolescents have been abused without those responsible being made accountable to Church or State. This has unsurprisingly given rise to loss of trust, and sometimes, loss of faith. Even young believers often express a reluctance to affiliate with the institutional church and its practices. As a Parish we are much aware that the Church must rebuild trust and nurture the faith and spirituality of the young. Over many years St Carthage's has offered families with teenagers and younger children the experience of a Children's Liturgy. Children and young people are now being empowered to regularly lead Liturgy at Sunday Mass. Sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation are also embraced by many. Our Parish is co-located with the University of Melbourne; other tertiary institutions are nearby. We are keen to support more students spiritually and socially. This is a focus of attention for our Parish Council.

Statement 6: Theme - a joyful, hope-filled and servant community (national focus)

To become a joyful, hope-filled and servant community, the Church needs to engage more with its people in their daily living. This requires, as Pope Francis has urged us, to invert the hierarchical pyramid where the top is below the base. Those who exercise authority should work out ways to engage with those they are serving. Francis proposes that those in authority should remove themselves ‘from the temptation to remain in protected and comfortable positions’ by going to the peripheries to find ourselves and listen better to the Lord’ (Letter to the German people). This type of engagement requires continuing and deepening the process of listening, reflecting, discerning and recommending changes that the 2020 Plenary Council has initiated. This requires a bottom-up process that begins in the parish and progresses to diocesan pastoral councils and a national synod. As Francis urges, the Church should get involved in ways that are ‘more faithful, available, agile and transparent’.

Statement 7: Theme - a joyful, hope-filled and servant community (local focus)

What practical steps can be taken to support a joyful, hope-filled and servant community through episcopal engagement? The responsible bishop should visit each parish regularly within a specified time period. The visit should be to inform and engage with parishioners in a meeting separate from the liturgy to address issues of concern to parishioners and to identify their needs. The bishop should also offer in advance to speak with those who request a private meeting. This will give an opportunity for those deeply wounded by past actions of church representatives to explain what had happened and to set up a process to have the matter investigated and responded to. This should include a further private meeting to explain the Church’s response, including where needed, an apology from the bishop and for him to ask forgiveness on behalf of the Church. Information on the general nature of the issues and the responses should be made public with the consent of the complainants.

Statement 8: Theme - missionary and evangelising (national)

Historically, religion has failed to support peace and concord, leading to wars and other civil dysfunction. The exclusivity, tribalism, heated contention, and frequent misunderstanding of each religion’s essence and meaning have had those effects. For the sake of world peace and to honour the essential message of the various religions, we need to pursue ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue and action, realising how much is common to different faiths, and what is similar or reconcilable. Avoiding misunderstandings based on prejudice and linguistic obfuscation can realise the potential of religions for peace (see JD May *Pluralism and Peace: The Religions in Global Civil Society*. 2019). The Catholic Church needs to do much more to support practical inter-faith dialogue, such as promoting it in school teaching, preaching and in the liturgy, consistent with the Church’s own official pronouncements, leading to real social, intellectual and political co-operation.

Statement 9: Theme - prayerful and eucharistic (national)

We strongly recommend that the Church allow and support secular priests and deacons to get married – whether before or after ordination. Celibacy should be optional. Until and beyond the first millennium, marriage for secular priests was allowed, and often even expected as the norm. It is the practice of Protestant and Orthodox clergy to marry, and indeed in Eastern Catholic churches, as well as former Anglican married priests who have become Catholic priests. Our recommended reform would have several advantages: (1) it would recognise that marriage is the normal state of life for most people; (2) it would encourage greater numbers to the priestly vocation; and (3) it would give priests relevant insights into married life to underpin pastoral counselling. There is an Orthodox tradition of selecting Bishops from monks (necessarily celibate). But we would recommend selection of bishops from a field that includes both secular priests (married or celibate) and celibate religious.