

## **The Plenary Council: Where to after Coronavirus?**

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The pandemic is forcing communities everywhere to adopt new approaches, unthinkable only a few months ago. This must apply to the Catholic Church too, and provides an opportunity to revive its Plenary Council process.

The world will never be the same after the coronavirus pandemic. The failure to contain COVID-19 global tragedy, born of a massive failure of leadership and solidarity, both internationally and in major countries. With a likely death toll over 500,000 and the deepest recession since the 1930s, communities everywhere will demand new ways of doing things, greater transparency and action not evasion.

The power of nature unleashed shows the urgency of working together to protect those most at risk and dramatises the risk from global climate change. The future of the young is most at risk, and they will drive the push for real change.

There are close parallels with the situation of the Catholic Church in Australia. Over several decades, there has been a failure of leadership, a weakening of community and an unwillingness to protect those most in need, especially children. The number of priests has fallen sharply and is now at crisis levels. The young have left Church in droves, while often still active in serving the community elsewhere. Except for Pope Francis, the faithful have tuned out from our leaders.

The vehicle that the Australian Church has set up to address this challenge is the Plenary Council 2020 (PC). The pandemic has delayed the first assembly (PC) until 2021, but will have a more profound effect on it than that. The demand for new ways of doing things, greater transparency, and action not evasion will also apply to the Council. The Council must respond not only to the crisis in the Church but also to the desperate situation facing the world now.

We argue that the delay in the PC provides the Church with a chance to reshape a process that is failing in many respects to respond to the changing needs of the times.

The fact is that, after initial enthusiasm, many priests and lay people have become deeply sceptical about the Council. One indicator of this is the much reduced responses from parishes to the Stage 2 consultation process. They see few signs of genuine synodality, or indeed of what the Council plans to discuss. Few signs, in other words, that those holding power are willing to embark on a genuine process of discernment about desperately needed change.

For example, the bishops will determine the agenda for the PC, in their own time. On the list of delegates to the Council over 70% have some official position in the Church. The local bishops selected the 76 lay delegates, in a closed process over the summer.

Communication within the PC process has been vertical. Submissions from the parish level go up to the Secretariat, with little intelligible feedback to parishes. There have been few opportunities for serious discussion across parishes.

The six PC Writing Groups provide a case in point. Their draft reports have been completed and sent to Rome for review. There has been no opportunity for the faithful to debate and discuss these documents. These reports are strictly confidential in Australia, but are available for vetting in Rome.

With failing leadership in many countries and in the Church, Pope Francis stands out like a beacon. However, our PC processes to date do not reflect his teachings, and this is where we should start a rebuilding process.

Above all, Francis has persistently called for conversion within the Church, from an inward-looking self-referential stance to one looking out to the needs of our communities. Reform starts not by looking at ourselves but at the needs of the marginalised and indeed of the whole of creation. This conversion in mentality is vital and must drive any reform program

His view is that the task is to bring Christ's good news and His healing love to those at the margins, and in turn to learn from them. The changes in the Church should be those necessary to serve these groups, to see Christ in them and to enable the process of learning from them.

Francis was a key leader in, and drew great inspiration from, the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, held at Aparecida in Brazil in 2007. This meeting is sometimes called the 'Latin American Pentecost'. Part One of the Aparecida document (<https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf>) addresses in detail the situation in Latin America at that time, with eyes of faith and 'in the midst of the lights and shadows of our age' (para 20).

One could not say that Australia's PC process to date reflects this vision. It has been inward looking, debating the changes needed to the life, structures and personnel of the Church. We have not taken seriously the challenge from Francis to start with the reality of our world and convert to an outward looking mentality.

What would a revised approach to the PC look like? Following Aparecida, it might start with a close look at the reality of the Australian community, in the midst of the lights and shadows of our age, which is now the age of coronavirus and recession.

That reality is that Australia is a prosperous country with a high level of exclusion, loneliness and disaffection, as evident in poor mental health and high levels of homelessness, drug use and suicide. This will worsen as the recession hits again at many of the most disadvantaged in our community. These issues spread across the whole of society, although especially affecting the least privileged.

If we want to follow the example of Francis, we need to have a hard look at the reality of our world and how the Church might change to minister to it. Francis seeks an evangelical church, not as one that proselytises but as one that takes Christ's message to those at the margins and learns from them.

If we start from such an outward perspective, many of the resulting changes in the Church are likely to be those already discussed. These include ending clericalism, transforming the role of women, welcoming the excluded -- from the LGBTQI and divorcees to the poor and disabled -- and learning from our indigenous sisters and brothers how to see and protect the unity of creation. However, they will emerge from a quite different sense of mission.

The first step should lie with the immediate public release of the six Working Group reports, for open discussion and debate. These could provide the spark that lights a new fire under the PC, as Australia emerges from coronavirus.

The catch phrase on launching the PC was that 'it cannot be business as usual'. Post-coronavirus that is more true than ever, but we have no consensus about the new direction. An urgent, open debate is needed now, before the opportunity for real change at the PC slips away. This debate must be

horizontal, between parishes and individuals, and not just vertical, to and from the authorities, in the traditional way of the Church.

A number of parishes in Melbourne have set up a website ([www.senseofthefaithful.org.au](http://www.senseofthefaithful.org.au)) to assist that discussion. We invite contributions to it.

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