

The Key Issues for the Plenary Council: Beyond the Working Document

For any meeting, big or small, the specification of the issues to be addressed and their expression in an agenda are crucial steps. The process of identifying the key issues and setting the agenda for the Australia Plenary Council has, to date, been far from clear.

While the Plenary Council Secretariat rightly highlights the extensive input from the faithful – such as 17,457 submissions to Phase 1 – the process has been almost entirely one of information flows to the centre. There has been little effective, interactive consultation about emerging issues, and as yet none about the agenda for the first Assembly in October 2021. In Plenary Post 33¹ we are informed that the agenda will be determined by the Bishops, at a forthcoming meeting of the Bishops Conference, drawing on their consideration of the Working Document and other material.

At para 14, the Working Document notes ten major topics to be discussed:

- renewing a Christ-centred Church that heals wounds and warms hearts;
- strengthening practices of discernment and synodality;
- the call to co-responsibility in mission and governance;
- embedding a response to the Royal Commission; renewing and supporting the ordained ministry;
- promoting discipleship in parishes, families and young people;
- forming prayerful and eucharistic communities;
- engaging in society for the service of all;
- proclaiming the Gospel in a change of era;
- renewing the Church's solidarity with First Australians and those on the margins of society; and
- promoting an integral ecology of life for all persons, societies and our common home, the earth.

These very general issues are not put forward as an agenda. The document proposes further discernment of these topics to give an understanding of the key issues so that a formal agenda can be specified, as follows:

In identifying and considering these various topics the skeleton of an agenda for the first formal assembly of the Plenary Council begins to emerge. Ongoing discernment of these topics, and others which have arisen in the course of the Plenary Council journey so far, will sharpen our awareness of the complexity of the current situation of the Church in Australia. This will enable us to recognise more clearly, and specify in a formal agenda, the particular areas which need to be explored in the first Assembly in October 2021 (para 14).

At the end of Chapters 3 and 4 the Working Document lists 20 questions for 'Journeying Together in Discernment'; these questions are reproduced in the appendix to this note. While many of these are really good questions, and may be thought of as hints to an agenda, they remain highly general and with little specificity

¹ <https://mailchi.mp/5c02f76cd949/plenary-post-edition-15-march-8-8471989>

to particular issues. They leave wide scope to the Bishops Conference in determining the agenda.

An Alternative Approach – the German Synodal Path

It is worth noting an alternative approach to collaboration with the faithful and to agenda setting, that of the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany. This process is an equal collaboration, at all stages, with the Central Committee of German Catholics, the peak lay organisation. Collaboration takes place at all stages, including equal voting at the Synodal Assembly, and is governed by Statutes approved by the German Bishops Conference².

The collaborative process of the Synodal Path has led to six issues being identified³. Their process started with four Synodal Forums to develop proposals for the Synodal Assembly. These forums themselves were focused on specific issues described initially as ‘Power, Participation and Separation of Powers’, ‘Sexual morality’, ‘Priestly form of Life’ and ‘Women in ministries and offices in the Church’. The resulting six issues are:

- Power and Separation of Powers in the Church
- Joint participation and involvement in the Mission
- Life in succeeding relationships
- Living love in sexuality and partnership
- Priestly existence today and
- Women in ministries and offices in the Church.

More details are available in the references provided. This process has generated a reasonably well-defined set of issues, through the involvement of the lay, religious and priestly faithful in collaboration with the bishops.

Identifying key issues relevant to the Australian Church

As background to a broader discussion of key issues and an agenda, we here note to exercises in which members of the Editorial Committee have been involved.

An initial discernment process to identify key issues for the Australian PC began in March 2019. A group from five parishes in Melbourne formed at the initiative of parishioners at St Kevin’s Templestowe to identify the common themes from 15 published parish group submissions.⁴ In discussions across parishes in Melbourne it became clear that there were strong views, held in common in many parishes, about the nature and urgency of the changes required.

² https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente_Reden_Beitraege/2019_Satzung-des-Synodalen-Weges-englisch.pdf

³ https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente_Reden_Beitraege/2020_FAQ-Synodal-Path-englisch.pdf

⁴ A joint initiative between St Kevin’s Parish, Templestowe; Nazareth Catholic Parish, Grovedale, Torquay & Anglesea; St Patrick’s Parish, Kilmore; St Carthage’s University Parish, Parkville; Our Lady of the Assumption, Cheltenham.

To explore this commonality, five parishes came together to convene a broader discussion, including a meeting on 13 April 2019 attended by 62 representatives of 32 parishes. At that meeting attendees were asked to rank the top priorities for the Plenary Council based on a list of issues identified from the parish group submissions. The meeting established a drafting group of three women and three men to prepare a joint statement, based on those identified priorities.

The resulting document - *The Plenary Council 2020: Joint Parish Statement* - identified nine key issues. These are: address the sexual abuse crisis; change the nature of the plenary council; encourage an open and inclusive church; promote servant leadership for a humble church; change the composition of the priesthood; implement new governance changes; make the liturgy more relevant; renew our focus on the poor and marginalised and protect and restore the earth. The full statement is available [here](#) on the Sense of the Faithful website.

Key issues identified from an analysis of the recommendations of the working groups

After the publication by the Plenary Council Secretariat of the six Working Group Reports, the Sense of the Faithful committee undertook another effort to identify key issues for the PC by analysing 159 recommendations of the six writing group reports, produced after an extended discernment process. The table below lists the top eight key themes of these recommendations. The rank order is the product of the number of discrete references in the overall listing of recommendations and the number of thematic papers with a recommendation referring to that issue. The full report is available here on this website.

Rank order of key issue
1. Implement new governance changes
2. Humble leadership, changes to the priesthood
3. Encourage an open and inclusive Church
4. Personal faith formation
5. Promote role of women in the Church
6. Focus on poor and marginalised
6. Promote mission & evangelisation
8. Build stronger parishes

A call for comment on the key issues and the agenda

We seek contributions from persons involved in the Church and concerned about its future on either the set of key issues or on particular issues. We welcome comments on key issues and on priority setting across issues, and individually on the four issues that we have decided to focus on initially (see relevant web pages): revitalising parishes, promoting the status and power of women in the Church, recognising and supporting indigenous communities in national life and in the Church, and protecting and restoring the earth, based on Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*. We believe that many beneficial changes could be made at the PC can take now, without approval required from the Vatican.

Appendix 1. JOURNEYING TOGETHER IN DISCERNMENT

Questions posed in the Working Document (p48 and p64)

III. Looking Within: Renewal for a Christ-Centred Church

The Church as ‘Wounded Healer’

- How might the Church in Australia better support and form the clergy for leadership and service in the twenty-first century?
- How can we strengthen the culture of listening, learning and pastoral care in Catholic communities and agencies?

A Discerning Church

- How might the preparations, experience and journey of this Plenary Council shape the way in which the Church in Australia discerns its priorities and practices into the future?
- How can we become less ‘self-referential’ and more responsive to the call of the Gospel in the signs of the times of the Australian context?
- In what way does the Church in Australia recommit to the mission of Catholic education, including Catholic schools and universities in the decades to come?
- How can we support young people and others whose faith is challenged by cultural norms?
- Do diocesan and parish structures match the pastoral needs of contemporary Australia and how might they be renewed to serve the mission of evangelisation?

Prayer and the Eucharist are fundamental to renewal

- How can the dioceses of Australia work together more effectively in service of evangelisation, social outreach and pastoral life?
- How can the Church better support marriage and family life, presenting these vocations as a gift and supporting them practically in the generations to come?
- How can we strengthen the collaboration among Catholic communities, agencies and welfare organisations in outreach to vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians?

IV Going Forth: The Church at the Service of the World

Renewing our commitment to service in Australian society

- How can the Church become a sign and instrument of the ‘ecological conversion’ called for by the teaching of recent Popes and by the *sensus fidei* of Catholics around the world?
- How can the Church express and promote a commitment to an ‘integral ecology of life’ in all its dimensions, with particular attention the more vulnerable people and environments in our country and region?
- What can we do to express respectful and cooperative attitudes with others in Australian society, focusing on opportunities to witness to God’s grace at work in the world?

Renewing our commitment to proclaiming the gospel

- How can the Church deepen the identity of all the baptised as missionary disciples, sharing in the mission of Jesus to prepare the way of God's kingdom?
- What can the Church do to address the question of sustainability of current Church structures and strategies in the light of the call to a greater 'shared missionary endeavour'?
- How can the Church be faithful to its evangelising mission in contemporary Australian culture, especially where teachings conflict with cultural values and practices?
- How can we proclaim the Gospel as taught by the Catholic Church in today's Australian society?

Renewing our solidarity with First Australians and all those at the margins

- How can we contribute to the greater legal and moral recognition and participation of Indigenous Australians in the life of the nation and the Church?
- How can the Church embrace an Aboriginal way of being Christian in spirituality, theology, liturgy and discipleship?
- How can the Church promote an 'integral ecology of life' in the face of risks to life, to human dignity, and to the environment?