

Thematic Paper 6: Open to Conversion, Renewal and Reform

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The thematic paper Number 6: Open to Conversion, Renewal and Reform gathers the themes from the Listening and Discernment groups' reports.

The paper reflects on elements of pastoral reality, articulating a theological vision, outlines challenges to be overcome, suggests some questions to be prioritised and develops some proposals for change. While the paper calls for change, it does not articulate well what that change is, nor how it can best be achieved. In the Plenary Council there must be a desire for authentic reform, including a change of heart that increases the Church's own calling. But there are major challenges to be aware of and to overcome, if we are to move forward. Clearly, there is an urgent need for change in the Church and how it exists in the modern, secular world.

The Open to conversion, renewal and reform writing team found that a number of key findings fell under three headings:

- Governance and Leadership -renewing governance structures and procedure,
- Ministry for mission-strengthening faith communities for the mission of the Gospel through a wide range of vocations for ministry,
- Becoming the Catholic Church with an Australian face -how to embed the Gospel mission in the 'soul' of the people and the conditions of Australia today.

They also found that among other things, Covid-19 had revealed gaps in connections between members of parishes. They note there are widely diverse views that the Plenary Council will need to address, while still seeking unity. Australians often agree on the issues that are important, but regularly disagree on their nature, causes and how the Church should respond.

Key Responses:

The thematic paper I have reviewed here has been faithful to the earlier writing and discernment groups but there is much that is not tackled. In the end, the devil is in the detail and these papers cannot get into detail as they aim to cover such a large amount of information. What new paths are they recommending we forge when we have many paths that we have not yet crossed? What are the obstacles to people hearing the Gospel message? What is this new system of governance and how will it look on the ground? What systems need to change within the Church to enable this?

When will we acknowledge the inequality of the participation of women in the Church and give them roles of equal status in the Church? When will divorced people and the LGBTQI find acceptance in our Church? When will young men be offered the option of celibacy when accepting their priestly vocation? Jesus calls us to embrace the sinner, the poor and the vulnerable, those for whom society does not offer equity. The paper does not address the way we, in society, treat our vulnerable, asylum seekers and refugees and how the Church could be a tipping point in this darkness.

The paper is internal looking with little emphasis on outreach and how we need to provide support beyond our parishioners to the people that Jesus would have us embrace and welcome. As parishes we need to become more outward focused. In many parishes, this is left to the St Vincent de Paul group, but as people living in our communities, often with great gifts and talents we could share, we are reluctant to go beyond our own boundaries. We need to do more in this area and to be encouraged and supported in this.

The paper finds there is a need for organisational structures and procedures to "better reflect Jesus ministry and teaching and to better manifest the Church's living tradition." The importance of new Church governance within the full range of consultative bodies and assemblies should be recognised in Canon Law. Consideration should be given to local needs and resources; with the maximum participation

of lay women and men, religious women and men, and clergy; and, to the greatest extent possible, equitable participation of women.

There is a risk that the great diversity of responses may be used as the reason or as an excuse for not discussing and processing a clear desire from the Catholic community. We need to be sure that a balanced view is provided, and the Plenary Council outcomes are not hijacked by any particular group or left or right leaning influencers with their own agendas. We must trust that the process will be driven by our gospel values, influenced by Jesus' death and resurrection and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Clericalism and Child sexual abuse

The paper recognises that there have been both personal and communal failings in the Church. The Church community has felt a loss of trust and is looking for far greater governance with open communication, transparency and accountability at all levels. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found a need to recognise the issue of clericalism as a contributor to the failings of the Church.

The long-term, sexual abuse of children demands change so that this can never happen again. Open acknowledgement of the Church's personal and communal failings calls for conversion. The Royal Commission recommended 26 changes for the Church to implement. This is a pivotal time in our Church. It has resulted in a profound loss of credibility and reputation, as noted in the paper.

Rite of Reconciliation

The paper states that the Reports repeatedly referred to the rites of Reconciliation. There was a desire expressed for the re-instatement of the Third Rite. It further found there was a need for greater formation in and access to sacramental reconciliation and the sacraments, in general.

The Role of Women

Few women are in senior leadership roles in dioceses, parishes or liturgies and for the forthcoming Plenary Council. This needs to be confronted as the lack of women in key roles in the higher levels of the Church is a significant issue of inequality. Many well-educated women are overlooked for positions they could fill as well, if not better than the men. Some are educators of our student priests and offer continuing formation for the priesthood, yet they are not allowed to preach or provide homilies. This is to exclude half of the Church's population. Women need to be given their rightful place in the Church and have representation at all levels.

Synodality

The importance of synodality is highlighted in the paper, through the involvement of the whole People of God in the mission and life of the Church. Many devoted and deeply religious persons have a great sense of loss and are grieving for the ideal of the Church that they held, which they fear was never true and has been trampled on in so many ways. Many older Catholics were brought up pre-Vatican II and feel they no longer understand the Church. In their young days, the rules and regulations were clear and they knew what to do as good Catholic people. But they feel the Church they felt they knew never existed and those practices and ideals they believed in no longer have relevance for the Church of today. They feel a sense of loss and abandonment by the Church. At the same time, many post-Vatican II parishioners feel that the great hope and vehicle for change they endorsed was never realised.

Covid-19

The paper notes that Covid-19 has done little to dispel this as parishioners are no longer able to attend mass on Sunday. For those returning to mass with social distancing, limited numbers, and not being able to interact with the community they are part of, many have felt that the mass had lost something. Many have opted not to attend again until the Church is able to take more people and will continue to view mass on-line. The writer has been informed that where the reduction of restricted numbers attending church services in some states, the numbers of people returning to Sunday mass have been considerably less than it was before Covid-19.

However, Covid-19 could also be seen as an opportunity to do things differently, to breathe new life into our parishes. To provide more outward facing ministries that support those who are hurting. We could reach out in pastoral support, prayer and faith development to others, especially to the poor. We could also see this as an opportunity to include more people into the parish ministries to provide support for our parish priests and for those parishes without a priest.

Vocations and Priestly Education

There was little mention in the paper of our lack of priestly vocations in Australia and how this could be overcome. Nor was there discussion of the importance of greater formation and education for our student priests and novices. We need to provide on-going spiritual formation for all our priests and determine how our priests can be supported in their work. It should become compulsory for all priests to receive regular spiritual direction. New priests should be given a mentor who will walk with them, supporting and guiding them for their first 5 years, as well as monthly spiritual direction. Our ageing priests are being expected to take on much more with many having responsibility for more than one parish and deferring their retirement. We need to find new ways of ministry that would include team ministry with the model of Servant Leadership.

Lay Formation

The paper finds that on-going formation is crucial to deepening the awareness of the laity and how they can become “disciples to the contemporary world.” However, lay Catholics are not encouraged to continue further education in their faith. Faith development should become just the next steps once leaving school to continue with our faith education. There is little opportunity offered to lay Catholics for this, particularly in the fields of biblical studies and spiritual formation. This needs to change if we are to become more missionary in our approach, become a more evangelising community and continue to engage our young people.

Our Common Home

We are called to care for our environment and to use the knowledge and understanding of this land garnered by our First Nation People and learn from them how to walk gently on this land and to reduce the harm that we do. We also need to increase our cultural understanding of our First Nation People and to learn from their deep sense of spirituality for this land and their safeguarding and protection of it. We need to promote an “integral ecology” where all life is respected, received and cared for as God’s gift while being the responsibility of humans for future generations. We support a renewed commitment to reconciliation and recognition with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, it is not clear as to how we do this.

Parishes need to change

The paper does, however, state that a challenge for the Church is the decline in parish life, while schools remain strong. Based on current trends parishes are experiencing demographical changes such as ageing parishioners, lack of priests, financial sustainability etc. In many parishes, parishioners have devoted 30-50 years of dedication to their Church, are still often heavily involved in their parish activities, but they do so because there are not young people following behind them to take over their roles. They are often tired and wanting to pass the baton, but do not feel that there is someone who will continue the work they do. There are others who have found their niche in their parish and do not want to let this go. Both exist in our parishes and this will require gentle and diplomatic ways of changing. We need to find ways for the retention, engagement and inclusion of our young people. We need to ensure that our faith is passed on to our young.

Engagement of Young Parents and Young People

It needs to be emphasised that this reform should not be a paternalistic pat of the head for the laity, but a genuine desire for change coming from within the highest levels of the Church. It requires participation at all levels of the Australian Church. In particular, our young parents and how they can be re-engaged with the Church. The lack of young people in the Church should be one of the highest priorities for those

wanting renewal, conversion and reform in the Church, for they are the future of the Church. Pope Francis says of young people that they will forge new paths and lead the Church into the future. There will be no Australian Church if we do not find better ways of engaging them in it. As for now, we are an ageing community, just as our priests are.

This paper contains selected issues from the Thematic Paper 6: Open to conversion, renewal and reform. Some actions and areas of concentration are presented here that we think should be addressed by PC2021. We seek your comments on the points that you think should be addressed by PC2021 and are worthy of further discussion. We look forward to receiving your comments and responses.