

# What are the priority issues for the Second PC Assembly?

## [Sense of the Faithful](#)

9 April 2022

### Introduction

The preparation for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia has involved a long, extensive and in-depth consultation process. The purpose of this paper is to draw on the results of that process to offer another lens to view the most recent reports based on the deliberations of its First Assembly. The purpose of this analysis is to help identify the key priority issues for the Second Assembly.

### Background

Our analysis seeking to identify the priority issues for the Plenary Council began with a discernment process in Melbourne in March 2019. A small group of parishioners from five parishes, formed at the initiative of parishioners at St Kevin's Templestowe, sought to identify the common themes from 15 parish group submissions that were publicly available.<sup>1</sup> 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.

To explore this commonality, representatives of the five parishes convened a meeting at the Catholic Theological College in Victoria Parade East Melbourne on 13 April 2019 which 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 15 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.

This draft statement was circulated to the representatives of the 32 parishes who took part in the discernment process. Parishes were asked to convene a group of interested parishioners to discuss the common themes identified from the parish group submissions and the ranking of priorities by the 62 parish representatives. They were then asked to decide whether to endorse the statement or not. In response, interested parishioners from 24 parishes endorsed the draft statement and the final statement was circulated to the participating parishes at the end of May 2019.

The *Plenary Council 2020: Joint Parish Statement* identified nine key issues. These were: 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 reproduced below because it explains in more detail the intended meaning of each issue.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Joint Parish Statement May 2019

This statement is made by a group of parishes in Melbourne. We are deeply concerned about past trends while also hopeful that real change can be achieved before and at Plenary Council 2020. The extent of the sexual abuse tragedy is overwhelming. We believe that the leadership in the Church has failed ordinary Catholics. We experience a profound feeling of shame and demand change. The Church must reform itself, and protect the rights of people, especially children, rather than of those who have caused this damage. The Church needs the full involvement of women at all levels, and recognition of the role of laity and priests as equal members, with the bishops, in the People of God.

We want to see the following changes made.

1. ***Address the Sexual Abuse Crisis.*** All Catholic institutions with possible historical sex abuse complaints should immediately join the redress system. A trauma-informed, treatment approach with support that is both competent and adequate is needed to assist the survivors. The Church must provide an on-going ministry of support to victims/survivors of clerical child sexual abuse.
2. ***Change the Nature of the Plenary Council.*** If the Council is not seen as genuinely representative of the Church it will fail. A majority of the delegates to the Council should be lay people and priests working in parishes, with at least half of these women. Voting must be open and transparent, with the 'sense of the faithful' revealed by processes involving all those attending.
3. ***Encourage an Opening and Inclusive Church.*** Many are currently excluded from full participation in the life of the Church. These groups include women, the LGBTIQ communities and those divorced and re-married. The Council must make a strong commitment to full inclusion of these and other groups.
4. ***Promote Servant Leadership for a Humble Church.*** A new leadership model is needed. This requires dismantling the dominant male celibate club, banishing the trappings of power and reshaping the training of priests. All new priests need regular mentoring and support to help them develop servant leadership.
5. ***Change the Composition of the Priesthood.*** Rather than relying on overseas priests and the clustering of parishes under one priest, immediate action is needed on widening access to the priesthood. We support optional celibacy for priests, re-admitting former priests now married, beginning the ordination of women as deacons and endorsing the principle of women priests.
6. ***Implement New Governance Changes.*** The Council must instigate a move to a new governance structure, suitable for the People of God. Lay men and women should be involved at all levels, with transparent and accountable structures throughout the Church. All leaders should be subject to regular review.
7. ***Make the Liturgy More Relevant.*** The Council should move to make the liturgy more relevant for a truly synodal church, for example by reforming the language used, reinstating the Third Rite of Reconciliation and removing the moral restrictions on attending the sacraments. As Pope Francis has said, the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect but nourishment for the weak.
8. ***Renew our Focus on the Poor and Marginalised.*** The Council should set out to revitalise and extend the important work for the poor and marginalised that the Australian Church has done over the past 150 years. We need to build on past achievements to increase our outward-facing focus, reaching out to our first nation people, asylum seekers, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged.
9. ***Protect and Restore the Earth.*** The Australian Church has failed to respond adequately to climate change and the destruction of the earth more generally. We endorse a major new mandate in this area, consistent with the powerful call from Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*.

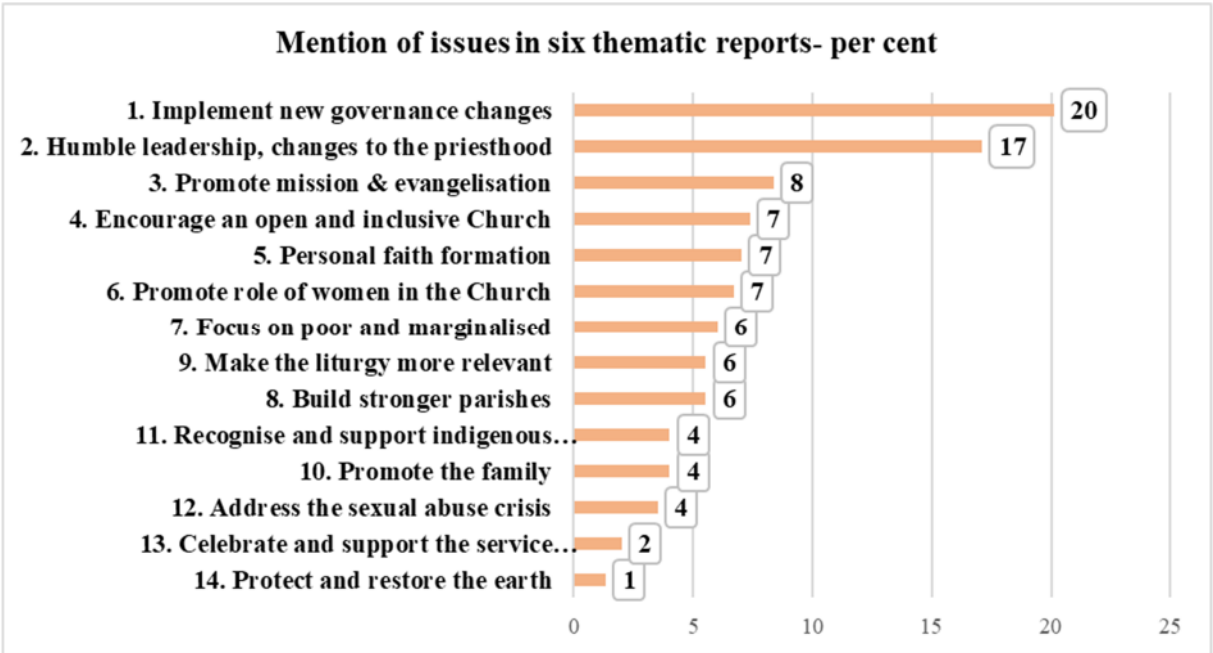
**The recommendations of the six thematic writing groups**

A separate discernment process took place through the deliberations of six publicly identified writing groups focused on six broad themes, distilled from the early consultations. The six thematic reports listed 159 recommendations made by the writing groups. The recommendations in each paper did not follow a common format, as the recommendations were sometimes numbered clearly but often are embedded within a text and were signified by words such as ‘it is proposed that’.

The significance of the issue as important increased with its appearance in more than one thematic paper. The themes that the writing groups were given were more general than specific, so each writing group was largely free to raise any issues they thought were important, arising from their process of collective discernment.

Figure 1 below shows the relative importance of the specific issues identified in the recommendations of the thematic reports. This rating is based on 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 percentage of the ratings for each issue shows its relative importance.

*Figure 1: Importance of issues in six thematic reports*



This analysis shows that the two issues stand out with the most mentions in the recommendations of all six thematic reports. These are: the need to implement new governance changes and the need for humble leadership and changes to the priesthood, with the most references in each of the six reports. The next two most important issues identified in the recommendations are the need to promote mission and evangelisation and to encourage an open and inclusive Church, with mentions in five and four thematic reports respectively.

## **The challenge of ensuring a fair and transparent process to identify the priority issues**

Having a fair and transparent process is a crucial element in any consultation to work out what reforms are needed. These principles are essential for a process involving participants with widely differing viewpoints, knowledge of and understanding of the issues and willingness to change.

As Pope Francis notes in his discussion of the tensions with the synodal process:

*Synods produce intense discussion, which is good: they involve different reactions and responses to those who think differently or have particular positions. We do not all react in the same way. We have also seen in many cases how, faced with disagreement, different groupings attempting to interfere in the synodal process try to impose their ideas, either by applying pressure inside the synod, or outside of it, by distorting and discrediting the views of those who do not think as they do.<sup>2</sup>*

Pope Francis offers three principles to guide the synodal process:

*In walking together, reading the signs of the times, open to the new things of the spirit, we might take some lessons from this ancient church perspective of synodality which I have sought to revive.*

*First, we need a respectful, mutual listening, free of ideology and predetermined agendas. The aim is not to reach agreement by means of a contest between opposing positions, but to journey together to seek God's will allowing differences to harmonise. Most important of all is the synodal spirit: to meet each other with respect and trust to believe in our shared unity and to receive the new thing that the Spirit wishes to reveal to us.*

*Second, sometimes this new thing means resolving the disputed questions through overflow. Breakthroughs happen often at the last minute, leading to a meeting of the minds that allows us to move forward. But the overflow might equally mean an invitation to change our way of thinking and our lenses, to shed our rigidity and our agendas, and look in places we never notice before....*

*Third, this is a patient process, which does not come easily to our impatient age. But perhaps in lock down we've learned better to approach it.<sup>3</sup>*

## **Analysis of the report of First PC Assembly**

The First General Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia involved over three hundred participants. However, due to COVID restrictions, the meeting took place online, which greatly limited participant discussion and interaction. The introduction to the report of First Assembly of the PC noted that 'the process of discernment continues' and that more needs

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, 2020, *Let us Dream: The path to a better future*. Simon and Schuster London, p 84.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, 2020, p 93.

to be done to work out what the key issues need to be addressed. The Concluding Statement of the First Assembly noted:

*Our process of discernment requires time and space for mature reflections to emerge, and further spiritual conversations will be necessary in our considerations of what God is asking of us in Australia at this time (p3).*

The Concluding Statement also noted that while many elements of the Council's Agenda were carefully considered, 'discussion of other issues, including some not formally on the Agenda, was initiated, and will require more time' (p3).

The report of the First Assembly provides details of the results of the three very different processes followed. First there were the small group discussions and reports based 14 pre-set questions which the report notes 'many described as the heartbeat of the First Assembly'. Second, there were the whole group discussions which addressed two questions (Nos 2 & 4) related to the Church's response to the wounds of abuse and how might the Church in Australia meet the needs of the most vulnerable ...in contemporary Australia. The third input was separate from the group or collective discernment process as it was based on online submissions by individual members called formal proposals which had to be seconded by one other PC member. This process produced 78 proposals related to each of the 14 questions and are listed in the report under each question with a proposal number.

The key question is: do these processes reflect the discernment that has been highlighted by the PC organisers as the real benefit the PC is to deliver? The short answer is that the results of the First Assembly, as reported, show that there is little evidence of a group discernment process. The 78 individual proposals, by definition, are not the product of any PC discernment process. They vary greatly in their focus and tone. The Concluding Statement referred to these individual proposals in these terms:

*As the many personal interventions demonstrated, there is no shortage of passion and charisms among the community of believers. These interventions covered a wide range of the complex realities of the Church and Australian society in this particular moment of our history. They expressed personal wisdom and aspirations that have been a gift to this Assembly's deliberations (p3).*

A closer look at the proposals, by coding them in terms of whether they reflected either a pro Pope Francis or a pro emeritus Pope Benedict sentiment, shows that just on a majority of the individual proposals (52 per cent) can be said to reflect a pro Benedict view of the Church and only three in ten (29 per cent) reflected a pro Francis view of the Church. The remaining two in five (19 per cent) were seen as reflecting neither sentiment. Feedback on the report of the First Assembly noted that these individual proposals were given far too much prominence in the report, distorting what many expected the First Assembly to produce.

The results of the small group discussions too were variable in their value as the products of a discernment process. Some group discussions included well-prepared recommendations that have come from a prior discernment process such as the response to Qu 3 on the Church and indigenous ways of being Christian and Qu 7 on embracing the diverse liturgical traditions of the Churches within the Catholic Church. Other small group recommendations appear more genuinely the product of group discussions and agreement during the First Assembly. The

recommendations of the two questions considered by the whole assembly are not reported, other than as a single paragraph in response to Qu 2 on areas for further consideration nominated by small groups.

### **Towards the Second Assembly: A Working Document for PC Members (28 February 2022)**

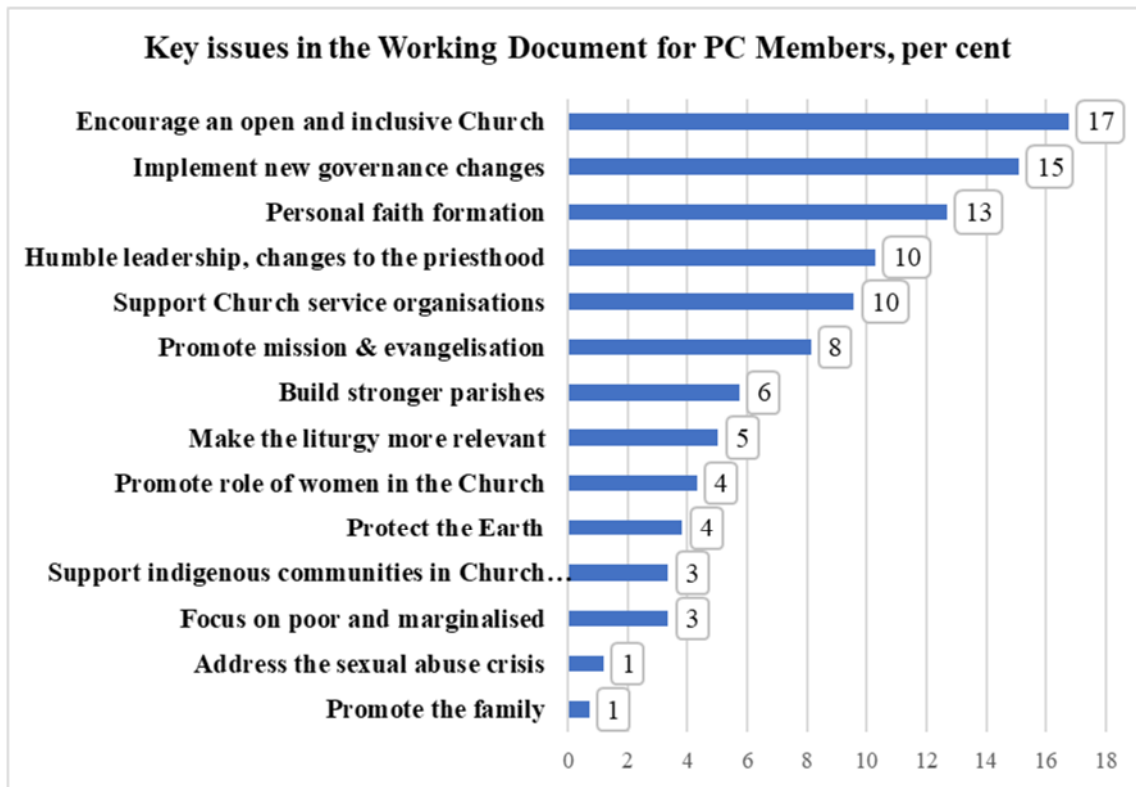
In response to the shortcomings of the First Assembly and its report, the PC's Drafting Committee set up four writing groups comprising theological advisors (periti) to the Council and some PC Members to 'progress further the work of discernment.' The final product is released on 28 February 2022 and was sent only to PC Members and periti 'for discernment and response'. The next step in the process is for the Plenary Council Steering Committee, to prepare resolutions for the Second Assembly. The Preface to the Working Document for PC Members by Bishop Shane McKinley, Vice President of the PC noted that the Plenary Council Steering Committee is 'very aware that significant work remains to be done before we arrive at possible resolutions for the Second Assembly' (p 2).

Peter Sheehan in his First Thoughts assessment has noted that in each of nine sections of the document entitled *The Context and Theological Background* are strong and inspiring. However, he also notes that in comparison to these sections, the recommendations that follow look weak.

What priority issues emerge from the discernment of the four writing groups? How does the product of this discernment process compare with that of the six thematic writing groups and the earlier parish group consultations? Figure 2 below reports the results of the coding by two experienced researchers using a coding frame based on a list of issues identified from 26 parish consultations, as noted above. A total 113 separate proposals under the following four broad themes were coded. These proposals include both the recommendations of the small groups and the formal proposals of individual PC Members. The four broad themes are:

- a. A Deeper Communion Enriched by Diversity (Participation)
- b. Ecclesial Leadership and Governance Growing as Disciples and Servants of the Gospel
- c. To witness to Faith, Hope and Love as Missionary Disciples in the World
- d. To proclaim God's new creation as people of prayer, healing and hope (Reconciliation, compassion for the wounded, care for our common home).

*Figure 2: Key Issues identified in the Working Document for PC Members*



The top two issues given the most mentions in the Working Document, accounting for one third of all references, are:

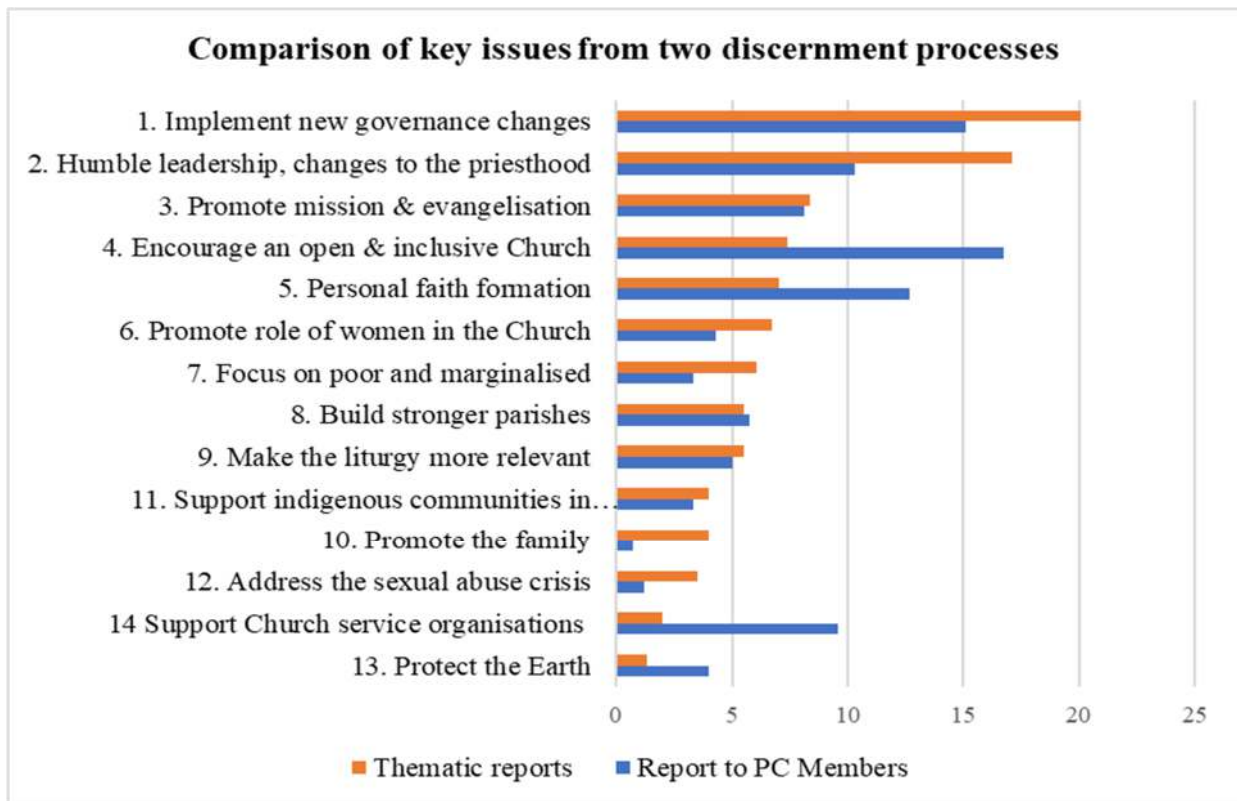
- encourage an open & inclusive Church, and
- implement new governance changes.

Next in prominence are issues related to personal faith formation and the need for humble leadership and changes to priesthood, accounting for nearly one quarter of all references. Also prominent are the issues of support for church service organisations, promoting mission & evangelisation, and building strong parishes, accounting for nearly a quarter of all references. However, make liturgy more relevant, promote the role of women and protect the earth only account for 13 per cent of all references. The least prominent issues mentioned are: support indigenous communities in the church, focus on poor & marginalised, address the sexual abuse crisis, and promote the family.

### **How do these priorities compare with the earlier, more considered discernment process?**

Figure 3 below shows that in both reports the key issue is the need to implement governance changes. Otherwise, there is little agreement between the reports to determine a ranking of issues. Notable differences between the reports are the lesser weight given in the Report to PC Members to the need for humble leadership and changes to the priesthood, promoting the role of women, a focus on the poor and marginalised, the promoting the family and addressing the sexual abuse crisis. On the other hand, the Report to PC Members has given much more weight to encouraging an open and inclusive Church, personal faith promotion and support for Church service organisations.

*Figure 3: Comparison of key issues identified in thematic reports compared with the Working Document for PC Members, per cent*



## Conclusion

This analysis supports the widely held view that the recent Report to PC Members downplays certain themes that many of the faithful and many Members have seen as critical, such as humble leadership, the role of women and renewed emphasis on the poor and marginalised.

One key issue in this analysis is that what is classified under any given heading may change over time. For example, the issue with the highest rating in the latest report is ‘encourage an open and exclusive Church’. In the Joint Parish Statement, the following statement is provided for this issue:

*Many are currently excluded from full participation in the life of the Church. These groups include women, the LGBTQI communities and those divorced and re-married. The Council must commit to full inclusion of these groups. It must also reach out and support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who hold a unique position in Australian society.*

Leaving aside issues about indigenous peoples, which are well covered elsewhere in the Report to PC members, a wide variety of issues, such as being open to the liturgies of non-Latin rite Churches, are included in the most recent report that have been classified under encourage an open and inclusive Church. However, we note that there has been very limited coverage in the most recent report of the three groups highlighted in the Joint Parish statement.

This raises the question of how we can best identify the key priorities and try to influence the



agenda for the Second Assembly. This will be a key issue for discussion at the meeting on 12 April 2022, at Newman College. It will also determine how we conduct the public meeting on 28 April 2022 and a possible ZOOM meeting with PC Members and other interest parties across country.