

Comments on the *Framework for Motions* Document

Sense of the Faithful Editorial Committeeⁱ, 12 June 2012

1. Introduction

This document, released by the Plenary Council secretariat in late May 2022, is a truly critical one in the story of the Australian Plenary Council. It is the final document to shape discussion in what is to be the last meeting of that Council, in July 2022. In many of its general, interpretative statements the *Framework for Motions* document is an impressive one.

For example, paragraphs 8-11 start by noting that the Australian Church is facing ‘a time of both crisis and hope’ (para 8). The crisis arises not only from the sins of sexual abuse of minors but also from issues concerning the ‘sustainability of diocese, parishes, religious institutes and ministries’ (para 9). The hope arises from ‘a stronger awareness of the presence of the Lord Jesus and his life-giving Spirit’ (para 10), as evident in the journey of the Plenary Council as ‘a way of spiritual conversation and discernment’ (para 10). ‘This process of listening, reflecting, speaking and listening again informs decisions about practical action that furthers the mission of the local Church’ (para 10). The authors also note that it is necessary to follow Vatican II in ‘scrutinising the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel’ (para 11).

Even so, when it comes to the motions themselves, that is to the ‘decisions about practical action that furthers the mission of the local Church’, the document is disappointing, with the exception of the recognition with our first peoples and of the reality of climate change. In particular we note that

- It is an inward looking document, with little sense of the wider world or of the Church’s responsibility to serve it;
- In discussing the ‘signs of the times’ there is no sense of the intellectual or moral challenge, and hence the learning opportunity, which the new era provides to the Church. Rather, the prime response is to educate the people better in the Church’s traditional teachings.
- While the crisis is mentioned in para 8, this sense of the real, existential crisis facing the Australian Church does not pervade the document, and indeed there is little discussion of the issues about the ‘sustainability of dioceses, parishes, religious institutes and ministries’ cited in para 8;
- There is very limited coverage in the document, or in the motions, of some key issues – such as clericalism, the role of women, the inclusion of currently excluded groups, the future of parishes and the service of the poor.
- Apart from the discussion of *Laudato Si’* Action Plans (para 103), there are no programs to systematically plan, implement, report on and review plans for change.

There is little doubt that, if the program outlined in this *Framework for Motions* document is implemented at the Second Assembly and this is the conclusion of the Plenary Council, this will be viewed by many of the faithful as a disappointing outcome. Even as parishes are trying to rebuild their communities after the COVID19 pandemic, it will reinforce the exodus of priests and laity from the Church.

Given the very tight constraints on considering this *Motions* document, with members permitted to submit amendments only to existing motions by 15 June 2022 for consideration by the Drafting Committee, we suggest that a Third Assembly in 2023 is clearly necessary to address the many items of unfinished business and to do so in a more transparent and synodal manner. We also respectfully

urge members to submit amendments to strengthen the existing motions, and provide below some suggestions about possible amendments.

2. The Motions: Some Suggested Changes

2.1 Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts

The recognition of, and apology to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is one of the most important parts of the document, but should be strengthened to become a more powerful statement, giving effect to the underlying intent. The following amendments to the motions are suggested (suggested amendments in red):

23. Motion: That the Plenary Council adopt the above introductory statement of Part 1, **and in doing so express support for a National Referendum and other appropriate action to give effect to the Uluru Statement.**

24. Motion: That each Catholic school, parish, diocese, eparchy or organisation respond to the recommendations contained in the NATSICC position paper “Embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Life of the Catholic Church” in at least the following ways:

- a. acknowledging in an appropriate manner the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which their buildings stand;
- b. including the online Cultural Competency in a Catholic Context course developed by NATSICC and approved by the Bishops Commission for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the orientation and/or ongoing formation of staff and volunteers to enable more effective and appropriate ministry;
- c. ensuring that any retreats and other formation activities offered are culturally appropriate;
- d. seeking to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on its committees, boards and decision-making bodies; and
- e. **put in place appropriate processes for Catholics to come to understand, and to learn from, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander spirituality.**

2.2 Choosing Repentance – Seeking Healing

The expression of sorrow to the victims of abuse is also vital. We suggest that this motion could be strengthened as follows:

32. Motion: That the Plenary Council adopt the above introductory statement of Part 2; whereby the Plenary Council

- a. says sorry to the survivors of abuse and their families, **and commits the Church to make this sorrow evident in many events covering all regions of Australia;**
- b. commits the Church to continue to respond with justice and compassion to survivors of abuse and their families, **and to ensure that all payments required by law for crimes of sexual abuse against children are met promptly and generously.**
- c. reaffirms the commitment of the Church in Australia to the work of implementing and improving safeguarding standards and practices; and
- d. invites all Catholics to commit to ensuring that Church environments are safe and respectful.

2.3 Called by Christ – Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples

This is a critical section of the *Framework for Motions* document, addressing as it does key issues for the Church's role as being missionary to the world, to serve the poor and disadvantaged and to be a full inclusive community. However, the motions are very limited, being the establishment of an education forum to enhance the vision and vocation of Catholic education as an instrument of evangelization and also setting up a triennial national forum of service, disadvantage and justice and peace organizations. There is also a welcome motion to strengthen inter-faith dialogue.

We have no suggestions about amendments to these motions that could make them a more effective response, because they fail to address the central issues.

2.4 Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men

While the heading to this part refers to the 'equal dignity of women and men' in the Church, the discussion and the motions are very limited. We suggest the following as an amendment to the only substantive motion in this section:

56. Motion: **That the Plenary Council requests Pope Francis to endorse the ordination of women as deacons. As steps towards full equality for women,** each Australian diocese and eparchy should foster new opportunities for women to participate in ministries that are stable, publicly recognised, appropriately resourced with theological education and commissioned by the bishop. These ministries should engage with the most important aspects of diocesan and parish life and have a real impact on those communities. **Each Australian diocese and eparchy should set up a process for monitoring on progress on these issues, and report the results publicly on an annual basis.**

2.5 Communion in Grace: Sacrament to the World

This section is a natural place for discussion of the inclusion of those groups excluded from some of the sacraments, such as divorced and remarried people and the LGBTQIA community. But these issues are not touched upon here, or elsewhere in the document. This a serious and disappointing omission.

The main recommendations here are to establish guidelines for a ministry of preaching, to request that those involved be permitted to preach in the Eucharistic assembly and to request the Pope to allow wider use of the Third Form of the Rite of Penance.

We have no amendments to suggest.

2.6 Formation and Leadership for Mission and Ministry

With the continuing decline in the number of ordained male priests and the rising role of the laity, it is necessary to give serious attention to both the criteria for ordination as a priest and to the formation of lay and ordained leaders. Unfortunately, the *Framework for Motions* document does not address married male priests or the ordination of women, but it does address leadership issues. We suggest the following amendments to the motion at para 82:

82. Motion: That each diocese establish or strengthen strategic policies that identify and support ministry and leadership formation. These will:
 - a. acknowledge the generational, cultural and ethnic diversity of the contemporary Church in Australia;

- b. recognise the changing community profile of many parish and faith communities;
- c. **commit to a major strengthening of biblical studies throughout the dioceses, to provide a deeper shared understanding of the Word of God and of the mission of the Church;**
- d. establish broader consultation, dialogue and representation within local Churches' structures and decision-making processes;
- e. include strategies for ongoing formation and appropriate forms of mentoring and accompaniment (human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral);
- f. consider avenues for financial support through scholarships, sponsorships and grants; and
- g. **set up a process for monitoring progress on these issues, and report the results publicly on an annual basis.**

2.7 At the Service of Communion, Participation, and Mission: Governance

The issues of synodality, clericalism and governance are crucial to the Australian Church and to the Plenary Council, and this section contains the main coverage of these issues. In this area we have the powerful and widely acknowledged *The Light from the Southern Cross* report (LSC) to provide a powerful basis for motions, but the motions actually offered are limited. Dioceses are required to conduct a Diocesan Synod within five years, and are asked to assist the flourishing of Parish Pastoral Councils. A new body (the National Catholic Synodal Roundtable) is to be set up, to 'foster and assess the development of synodal leadership' and the NPRC is directed to review the recommendation of LSC 'to enable further implementation of those reforms judged helpful and practicable'.

These are very limited outcomes on matters of central interest to the faithful, and on which we have a major report. They should be strengthened considerably before going to the Second Assembly. One example concerns Diocesan Pastoral Councils (DPCs). A central recommendation of is that every Diocese has a DPC (Rec 50), and this is at the heart of their recommendations about synodality. The Motions document presumes the operation of such Councils, but does not mandate them.

A recent report to NCPRⁱⁱ found that, as at September 2021, no archdiocese in Australia had a DPC and fewer than half of other dioceses had DPCs. That is, a small proportion of Australian Catholics are covered by DPCs. If the motions in this Part are to make sense the motion at para 92 should be amended as follows, to ensure that every diocese establishes a Pastoral Council or equivalent:

92. Motion: **That every diocese in Australia establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council (or closely similar body) within the next two years**, and that dioceses and eparchies support parishes to establish and strengthen appropriate synodal structures by developing guidelines and providing resources for the flourishing of Parish Pastoral Councils.

We also note that the motion at paragraph 93 to establish a national synodal roundtable on synodality does not propose a working group that is itself synodal. The working groups consists of representatives from the three large groups (ACBC, CRA and MPJP) but no members of the faithful outside these three groups. We suggest the following amendment:

93. Motion: That representatives from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia, the Association of Ministerial PJPs, **from lay organisations and from existing local Pastoral Councils** form a working group to develop and establish a roundtable structure, with the proposed name of the National Catholic Synodal Life Roundtable, to foster and assess the development of synodal leadership across the Church in Australia. The roundtable will bring together representative members of those groups with Diocesan Pastoral Councils and other key national bodies of the Church.

2.8 Integral Ecology and Conversion for the Sake of our Common Home

While the motion on requiring every parish to have a *Laudato Si'* Action Plan is welcome, we suggest that the requirement should be brought forward to 2025 and that the reporting be public. That is:

103. Motion: That, witnessing to their communal ecological conversion, by 2025 each Catholic parish, diocese, eparchy or organisation either develops its own or participates in an established *Laudato Si'* Action Plan which includes the following elements:

- a. a public commitment;
- b. a governance model, processes and procedures;
- c. a mechanism for listening to the ecological wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples;
- d. regular public reporting on progress towards and accountability for defined goals and objectives; and
- e. co-construction of those goals and objectives with the people they are meant to support and serve.

3. Unfinished Business: A Third Assembly

The *Framework for Motions* document rightly note the hope engendered within the faithful that the Holy Spirit is inspiring real renewal within the Australian Church. It is important that this hope is sustained by real outcomes from the Council. This does not seem possible if the Council concludes with the Second Assembly, and so there is a powerful case for a Third Assembly in 2023.

We suggest that key items on the agenda for a Third Assembly would include:

- i. Unfinished business from motions considered at the Second Assembly;
- ii. A serious discussion of the 'signs of the times' and of trends in society and in other countries, with their bearing on the Australian Church;
- iii. Detailed consideration of the challenges facing the Australian Church, and of the 'sustainability of dioceses, parishes, religious institutes and ministries' cited in para 8; and
- iv. Most sustained discernment about some of the key issues largely excluded from the *Framework for Motions* document, such as such as clericalism, the role of women, the inclusion of currently excluded groups.

One way to bring the question of a Third Assembly forward is by an amendment to the motion in paragraph 104 as follows:

104. Motion: That the Plenary Council agree to holding a Third Assembly of the Council at a date to be determined in 2023, and following the conclusion of the Council adopt the following steps for ensuring the effectiveness and accountability of the Implementation phase, to take place after a period of five years:

- e. the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council will be responsible for establishing terms of review for the Plenary Council's implementation;
- f. a roundtable body such as that proposed in the motion at paragraph 93 will be responsible for co-ordinating the review;
- g. interim reports will be published in 2024 and 2026; and
- h. the final review report will be published five years after the Second Assembly, in 2028.

ⁱ For details of the Editorial Committee see senseofthefaithful.org.au.