

PLENARY COUNCIL SUMMARY

Last week was a big one for the Catholic Church in Australia. The Archdiocese of Sydney hosted our country's Fifth Plenary Council, an opportunity to collectively discern where the Holy Spirit is leading the Church and how we might respond to the challenges currently facing us.

A Plenary Council is a meeting of the Catholic Church in a particular region (in this case, Australia) in which members of the Council come from different parts of the Church, including lay women and men, clergy, religious sisters and brothers, most of whom make up the 'consultative vote' to make proposals and discuss them, and the 'deliberative vote' made by the bishops, which determines an outcome. After a Plenary Council, the Pope is asked for his confirmation of the motions, and whatever he approves will become part of the 'law' of the Church in that land. At all times, every member is asked to submit their hopes and aspirations to God, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide the Church in all places and times.

There were many highlights of the week, but here are four takeaways.

Keeping Christ at the centre

The President of the Plenary Council, Archbishop of Perth Timothy Costelloe SBD, opened and closed the Council with words aimed at focussing our hearts and minds on what is most important.

His opening address prepared the Members for what lay ahead, reminding them that by the end of the Council, their own projects and priorities might not have come to fruition.

'Cherished hopes, dreams and projects may not have been realised, or not in the way we had hoped and presumed would be the case,' he said. 'Who knows what will have to die for something new to spring to life?'

"None of us is perfect and none of us I suspect is free from the tendency to presume that the way we see things must be right and must be God's way and that therefore those who see things differently must be mistaken or not as wise and full of insight as we are".

In closing the Council, Archbishop Timothy also reminded Members that if we are to see renewal in the Church, we must always put Christ at the centre. He took up the words of St John the Baptist, 'He must grow greater, I must grow smaller' (John 3:30), saying:

"There will be no renewal of the Church if we put ourselves above Christ or in some perverse way push him to the margins".

Australian Catholics have spent four years discerning together, in which many local groups met for dialogue and prayerful consideration of the future. In many ways, the collective discernment that was at the heart of the Council was a new experience for

the Church. The Archbishop said that the Council had only achieved it in a 'tentative and incomplete' way, but even so they had 'opened up some possibilities'.

The nature of discernment

The discernment revolved around 'spiritual conversations' that were structured in a prayerful way, drawing upon the depths of Catholic tradition.

The best way to think about this is to say that it was a lectio divina–styled process, adapted to suit the dynamic of conversation.

After a period of prayer, Members would begin three rounds of sharing. The first round would focus on sharing the fruits of their prayer; the second was an opportunity to share their responses to what others in the group had already said; the third round was more of a free-flowing discussion, seeking points clarification and discerning agreement or disagreement.

Catholicism has a rich tradition of discernment practices, but discernment-in-conversation is not something many of us are used to. The approach mainly used in the Plenary Council process included features of the Ignatian tradition. It is sometimes observed these days that the art of conversation is on the decline. Using the structure of spiritual conversations, however, the Council modelled how to put diverse groups of people in the same room for a week of intense dialogue.

Motions, amendments, decisions

Because the Members came from different traditions and perspectives, the events of the week became opportunities to grow and learn in the face of disagreement, often heartfelt and personal. Halfway through, on the Wednesday, some disruption saw a temporary halt to proceedings, to which the bishops responded quickly and pastorally.

Recognising that there were some flaws in how the Council had been conducted to that point, Members shifted gears, organising the remainder of the week in a way that felt smoother and more engaging.

The end product was a document to which all Members felt able to give their signature. There were more than 35 motions for the Members to consider, most of which passed when brought to a vote. One motion that did not pass was a request for Canon Law to be amended to permit lay homilies during Mass.

Things to look out for

The motions that received a qualified majority in the deliberative round of voting (voting by Bishop-Members) have been confirmed as Decrees of the Plenary Council. While much of the media coverage has highlighted the more controversial ones, there are many that have received little attention. One aspect that the media has not covered, but which illustrates the deeply Christian nature of this meeting, is the way that Members made their own journeys of change and a growth in mutual understanding. There were emotional moments of reconciliation between individuals,

much laughter every day as strangers became friends, and even moments of apology after strong words or actions had been on display. These actions were part of the fabric of the whole week and they tell a story of joy, forgiveness and healing. Here are just a few things to look forward to:

[Decree One](#) outlines an openness for worshipping communities to offer an appropriate integration of Catholic liturgy and First Nations rituals and symbols.

[Decree Three](#) outlines the establishment of a national forum that would seek to make Catholic education a more effective instrument of evangelisation and to provide greater formation for teachers in Catholic schools.

[Decree Five](#) outlines a commitment to build a foundation upon which catechists are a normative ministry in Australian dioceses. [Pope Francis recently instituted](#) the catechist as a formal ministry in the Church, and despite having an ancient pedigree, they are not common today. Officially committing to the role is something that will hopefully bear good fruit for the Church. This decree also outlines a national program of catechesis on the sacrament of Penance, widely recognised to be a declining practice in the Church.

[Decree Six](#) outlines the development of a 'national framework for formation in Catholic Social Teaching' to be used in ministries across the board. Catholic Social Teaching is a rich and important source of formation for Christians, especially in navigating an increasingly complex and secularised world.

Where to from here?

After the November 2022 meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the decrees will be sent to Rome for review and approval by Pope Francis. Following direction from the Holy Father, the decrees will be promulgated in [the Australasian Catholic Record](#) and the website of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Six months after promulgation, the decrees will become binding on the Church in Australia. [You can review the Plenary Council Decrees here.](#)