

## **Catholic Principals Victoria**

### **Marcellin College, Bulleen**

**Friday 17 June 2022**

#### *Plenary Council Second Assembly Process and Outcomes*

### **John Warhurst AO**

---

The Plenary Council was called to address the crisis in the Church in Australia and to discern the future of our Australian Church. My group, Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, was formed in 2017 for much the same reasons just as the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was about to report. We quickly joined the national network of church reform groups and have been active ever since.

My place as a Plenary Council Member, one of two lay members chosen in 2020 for the Archdiocese of Canberra Goulburn, just evolved. I am really an accidental member and never thought I would find myself in this position. I continue to learn hard lessons about how our church works. At times I have been very pessimistic about real reform; at other times more optimistic.

I have written about my experiences in two books and regular articles. The whole Plenary Council process is a case study in the modus operandi of the church. We have a lot of improvement to make across broad categories such as inclusiveness, accountability and transparency. Moving towards co-responsibility with the hierarchy for lay Catholics, as promoted in the official church report, [\*The Light from the Southern Cross\*](#) (2020), has many cultural obstacles to overcome inside the church.

We are now just days away from the culmination of the process, the Second Assembly meeting face to face in Sydney in the first week of July. About 280 members will be joined by official advisers and observers to consider an amended version of the Framework of Motions, a public document divided into eight main parts, which was released at the end of May. This document includes 30 motions, some of which have a number of clauses. The members have just finished a two-week period in which we have offered amendments. These will now be considered by the Drafting Committee and a final version of the motions and amendments will be released at the end of this month.

Each section contains a general introduction for “adoption” followed by specific motions. Briefly, the eight parts are as follows: reconciliation; responding to those abused in the church; our missionary call; the equal dignity of women and men; liturgical, spiritual and sacramental life; formation; governance and decision-making; and ecology. We are happy to discuss these motions in detail as best we can today.

These motions will be voted on each afternoon at the rate of two parts per day. Consultative votes will take place at the end of each day and deliberative votes by bishops the following morning. Only motions which achieve a two-thirds majority will proceed to a deliberative vote. Final amendments will be allowed on the day, but only by small ‘table’ groups and not by individuals.

Each morning will be devoted to a Plenary Session and then to Spiritual Conversation in small groups. This context is extremely important as this the assembly is no ordinary conference or meeting even for the church. It is deeply immersed in a spirituality which seeks the will of the Holy Spirit for our church. For me getting the balance right between prayer, discernment and concrete outcomes is highly problematic and challenging.

Implementation of whatever is decided will be very important and the final business on the last day includes voting on an Implementation Phase review with interim reports in 2023 and 2025 and a final report in 2027. It is proposed at this stage that this review will be coordinated by a proposed new national synodal roundtable body.

Next month's Second Assembly is the culmination of a long process, even if there are years of implementation to come. The journey has been severely disrupted for all of us by the Covid pandemic and for some by floods and fires. The first assembly last October was delayed by 12 months and then only went ahead online. The elongated process has not helped engagement with the broader Catholic community, although this was not the only troubling factor as I will discuss below.

The whole exercise has been a massive exercise and would have tested any Australian organisation, public or private, secular or religious. I would emphasise that point and thank all involved in its production.

Its conduct should be considered, in my view, against some deep background factors.

First, the crisis is extremely serious in terms of falling church allegiance, reduced resources and identity conflicts. The church is at odds with wider social trends and beliefs in inclusion and sexuality. Solutions are not obvious and are often contested because diagnoses may vary between so-called conservatives and progressives.

Secondly, our Church is deeply divided and on some matters of belief and practice deeply polarised. Less than 10% of younger Catholics are church attenders. Many older Catholics are hanging on by their fingernails.

Thirdly, our Church in Australia is just one part of a universal Church and Canon Law restricts some matters of belief and practice, such as ordination of women to the priesthood and diaconate, and proposed mechanisms for lay participation in decision-making, like compulsory diocesan pastoral councils. One issue in dispute within the PC is how firm the PC should be in expressing our desires and aspirations to Rome.

Fourthly, our Church is hierarchical and the bishops consider that hierarchy is of divine origin and immutable. Our leaders are used to primacy in decision-making and deference from the laity. It is embedded in church culture. Our culture is also one of compliance and dissenters are penalised. There are regular examples of this culture in action. The bishops have controlled the Plenary Council process. Synodality, the guiding spirit for Pope Francis, challenges hierarchy, but just what it means in practice can be disputed.

Finally, the organisation of our Church around territorial dioceses, led by local bishops, constrains reform of the church. The Plenary Council is a national event but the powers of the 'national' church, so far as it exists in the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and, to a lesser extent Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons, are limited.

The process has had many over stages four years, all coordinated by the ACBC, the Bishops Commission, the Executive Committee, the PC Steering Committee, the PC Drafting Committee and the PC Facilitation Team. At one level the various stages have been clear, but many things happen behind the scenes and 'who is actually responsible for what' is often unclear.

What have been the ingredients?

First, there was a community consultation which led to 17,500 submissions by an estimated 220,000 people. This led to a national report and diocesan reports by the National Centre for Pastoral Research on what Catholics value most highly. Critics like me say these submissions have been diluted over time.

Secondly, there have been various sorting and writing exercises. This began with short public reports from six writing groups on selected themes. Then a Working Document (*instrumentum laboris*) was produced by a small group, followed by sixteen public Agenda Questions for the First Assembly. After the Assembly a so-called Fruits of the First Assembly was released to PC Members and the public. This was followed by a privately issued document, *Towards the Second Assembly: A Working Document for Members*, which was leaked to the public. Finally there is the current Framework for Motions.

Thirdly, there are the two Assemblies of the 280 members, which are not parliaments but synodal meetings. They are difficult to briefly summarise, but are quite remarkable events. Business is conducted in a mixture of plenary sessions and facilitated small groups. The Members are diverse and women and lay people are in a minority. Some parts of the plenary sessions were publicly broadcast last time, and this will happen again. Time is at a premium and the pressure is quite intense. Reasonable questions can be asked about whether this is an effective way to do business. The first Assembly was too rushed and the quality of the outputs suffered accordingly.

I would offer three final points to help understand the Plenary Council.

The relationship between the broader community and Plenary Council Members individually and collectively has remained uncertain. The community has been deliberately kept at arm's length by authorities when it tries to communicate its views to PC Members. The authorities would explain this as keeping a balance between a so-called bubble and a bridge. The renewal movement hasn't been deterred but has found the going tough.

The hardest issues on which to achieve consensus will probably be the internal issues of equality, belief, organisation, and practice. There is likely to be greater consensus on external and/or mixed internal/external matters like Indigenous spirituality, integral ecology and aspects of safeguarding and taking responsibility for child sexual abuse within the church.

Finally, differences of opinion remain as to what would constitute 'success' for the Plenary Council. Both Members and the general community have been asked to suggest 'concrete proposals' and I think that the passing of concrete motions that address the crisis of the church in a modern way should be the measure. But others believe that just holding the PC itself and involving such a diversity of views, including lay women and men, in a synodal process is a success in itself.

**John Warhurst**

**15 June 2022**