

Discernment Paper #5

This document is an abridged version of one of the six thematic Discernment Papers from the communal discernment process leading to the Plenary Council. As such, it is only a “taste” of the original document, albeit a close reflection of its approach, spirit and content. To read the full text from the original Discernment Paper, go to the Plenary Council website:

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/continuing-the-journey-of-discernment/>

Key Question

How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is **Joyful, Hope-filled and Servant Community?**

Executive Summary

In brief, we ask that the Plenary Council

- strengthen parish communities as centres of joy, hope and service;
- engage positively and proactively with the broader Australian community;
- strengthen connections between Church agencies, organisations, dioceses and local worshipping communities;
- promote an integrated Christian mission, emphasising Christ’s presence in the world, the Word, the sacraments and in our brothers and sisters;
- provide formation to assist everyone to encounter God and share God’s love;
- work to rebuild trust in our Church;
- adopt a mission-focused approach to financial accountability and transparency.

I. Pastoral Reality

Australia has been blessed with natural beauty, abundant resources, democracy, peace and prosperity. However, many Australians are afflicted by mental illness, sickness, loneliness, family or financial pressures. Many lack hope, joy and experience fear and distrust of institutional authority. Cycles of drought, fire and flood, threaten lives, homes and livelihoods.

In the midst of these challenges, the Australian Catholic community is a light in the darkness. For example, Catholic schools educate more than 750,000 students. Care and healing are offered to 1.5 million people visiting Catholic hospitals annually, and 75,000 are served by Catholic aged care facilities. The St Vincent de Paul Society and other Catholic social services work with more than a million Australians each year. Catholic Mission and Caritas, among others, promote outreach to communities internationally. Add to this the efforts of bishops, dioceses, parishes, religious orders, Catholic organisations of many kinds and individual Catholics.

However, for many, the Church is not seen as a joyful, hope-filled and servant community. While parishes exhibit great strengths, with (in normal times) more than 600,000 people gathering to worship each week, many parishes are also in need of renewal. In many locations, fewer people are attending Mass. Some do not experience parishes as welcoming. There is a decline in the number of young people who belong to parish communities. For many school-aged Catholics and their families, the school rather than the parish is their primary point of contact with the Catholic community, and the school and the rest of the parish sometimes seem to operate independently of each other. Most of our clergy are dedicated and valued servants of the people of God, however regard for the clergy is less positive than previously. The sexual abuse scandal has contributed to this. More generally, in our materialistic, consumer and secular age, there is a disinterest in organised religion and a distrust of institutional authority.

Also, in many parts of the Church there is unease about

- relations between clergy and laity;
- the exclusion of women from ordained ministry;
- the challenges of multiculturalism, alongside appreciation of the richness of diversity;
- the “more to be done” before Australia’s First Nations peoples find their rightful place in the Church;
- the need for better integration of prayer/worship and service at the margins of community life;
- issues relating to the distribution of wealth and resources, and the financial pressures on the Church as a whole.

Finally, also part of the pastoral reality is the great diversity of opinion on how to move forward to address the many challenges facing our Church in Australia in 2020.

II. Theological Vision

Through Baptism, we all take on the mission of Jesus to bring God’s love to the world. The Church is the Body of Christ, the People of God, the communion of saints. As one community in Christ, our unity is expressed in a blessed diversity of nations, cultures, rites.

The servant nature of the Church is grounded in the servant ministry of Jesus, and in the joyful and hope-filled servant nature of the earliest followers of Christ who “were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). Thus did the Church unfold under the guidance of the Spirit as a “community of faith, hope and charity” (LG, 8). Still today, many in our Church embrace a life of service: supporting fellow parishioners, caring for older Australians, responding to the needs of bushfire victims or visiting homes of people in need.

Joy is the fruit of being a disciple of Jesus. Joy is the zest for life, the sparkle in the eye, the fruit of being forgiven. Joy is fundamental to a servant community.

Pope Francis reminds us that joy is restored when we come back to God whenever we are lost, and that “the joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church” (AL, 1). Even amid the greatest distress, we can allow the joy of faith to slowly revive us as a quiet yet firm trust (see EG, 6).

Along with joy, Christian hope arises from an encounter with God, as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us (SS, 1). Hope is a fundamental Christian virtue, enabling us to look forward with desire and confidence, *choosing to trust an unknown future to a known God* (as Corrie ten Boom put it).

In Baptism we receive the threefold mission of Jesus: to proclaim the Word of God, celebrate the sacraments, and exercise charity. Pope Benedict XVI identifies these three inseparable dimensions of Christian mission as “the Church’s deepest nature” (DC, 25). He further notes that and “justice is not extraneous to charity” but is intrinsic to it (CV, 6). Justice and charity are “hope in action” (SS, 35).

With a similar integrated perspective, Pope Francis speaks of “the inseparable bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace” (LS, 10). The Church is not simply a welfare organisation, and its identity cannot be reduced to a NGO. The Word of God and the Eucharistic life of the faith community underpin the Church’s works of service, deepening our awareness of Christ within us and those we serve.

The servant nature of the Church cannot, therefore, be an “added extra” or the responsibility of only certain people or groups. Love of neighbour is first and foremost the responsibility for each member of the faithful, and for the entire Church. (DC, 20)

III. Major Challenges, Questions, Proposals

1. Parish Communities

How do we renew parishes? How can we respond to the role of schools (which are integral to parish) as primary points of contact with faith communities?

Proposals for the Plenary Council

- Initiate consultation on national guidelines for lay-clergy co-responsibility in the parish.
- Require each diocese in Australia to take action on *the Building Stronger Parishes Project* (buildingstrongerparishes.org.au).
 - Identify opportunities for lay ministry within the parish, perhaps as a variety of parish teams that utilise gifts and serve others.
 - Develop structures and processes that fully embrace the broad demographic of the parish. Activities might include hospitality, bereavement, sacramental preparation, social events, outreach in charity, justice and youth ministry.

- Promote strategies of information sharing within each diocese and parish.
- Initiate and resource a robust dialogue about the role of women in the Church, including consideration of the leadership of women and their exclusion from ordained ministry and any liturgical roles. Revisit the 1999 report *Woman and Man: One In Christ Jesus*.
- Ensure that seminary and clergy formation include a focus on a culture of co-responsibility, on the just and consultative use of authority, on accountability and transparency. Clergy trained abroad must be trained in the light of the Australian pastoral context.
- Adopt open and respectful dialogue between clergy and laity, that builds a culture of trust; e.g. hold diocesan forums and parish focus groups that explore the meaning of a 'servant Church'.
- Promote and develop the ministry of permanent deacons, as servants to the peripheries and enablers of others in ministry.
- Review, from an Australian perspective, the ordination to the priesthood for married men.
- Initiate a robust discussion on how to strengthen the intimate bond between schools and parish communities.
- Require Bishops to model the process of Parish Councils within their dioceses, along with suitable guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils.

2. Engagement with the Broader Australian Community

Too often the Church seems to focus on the negative aspects of society. The challenge is to engage positively, in dialogue and service, and for justice.

Proposals for the Plenary Council

- Promote parish support programs to assist in welcoming those on the margins.
- Encourage diocesan efforts to engage in respectful dialogue with Catholics who identify as part of the LGBTI community.
- Include in formation programs a focus on Catholic Social Teaching, based on the annual ACBC social justice statements.
- Promote a conscious, positive attitude of engagement with society.
- Develop a cooperative structure and strategy across the whole Church around communication with the general community.
- Strengthen national and diocesan structures that advocate for justice, including opportunity for ecumenical and interfaith collaboration.

3. Celebrating and Supporting the Service Organisations of the Church

Proposals for the Plenary Council

- Recognise the personnel of Catholic service organisations as co-workers in the service of the Gospel, and strengthen cooperation between Catholic agencies, parishes and other centres of service.
- Share reflection across the Church’s ministries to ensure that its social services remain linked in work and in spirit with the rest of the Church, and that acceptance of government funding does not undermine the Catholic identity of services.

4. Promoting an Integrated Christian Mission

Proposals for the Plenary Council

- Initiate a national forum—as well as formation programs and parish opportunities—that foster a shared understanding of how Word, Sacrament and the ministry of charity are integrated parts of the one Christian mission.

5. Formation

Adult faith formation requires conversion and nourishment of personal vocation, as well as specific formation processes to enable individual gifts to be identified and animated.

Proposals for the Plenary Council

- Develop a national faith formation hub to enable the collection and distribution of quality and affordable resources for Catholics across the country.
- Task this hub, or other bodies, to:
 - identify formation requirements,
 - provide professional development for formators,
 - conduct a national survey of existing formation programs,
 - develop a strategy for the delivery of quality formation,
 - examine issues of people’s accessibility to formation opportunities,
 - ensure formation programs for particular parish ministries, as well as for couples at all stages of their relationship journey.

6. Re-building Trust Within the Church

Today there is a breakdown of trust between clergy and laity. Could this humbling experience be a watershed moment for the Church to rise up as a servant community?

Proposals for the Plenary Council

- Ensure that the Church continues to learn and respond to the sexual abuse crisis, through repentance, prayer and practical support for victims and the safety of the vulnerable.

7. Finance

Wealth and income are unevenly spread across the Church in Australia. How can we respond to financial limitations and scarce resources, while recognising that the Plenary Council will require funding?

Proposals for the Plenary Council

- Initiate a review of financial cooperation and redistribution between dioceses so that all are appropriately resourced to undertake their shared missionary endeavour.
- Require each diocese to make public its annual financial statements.
- Ensure that diocesan and parish financial councils are responsible and transparent in their decision-making, record-keeping and reporting.
- Avoid unnecessary duplication of administrative effort by adopting a spirit of financial cooperation and identifying efficiencies in the diocesan structure of the Church.

Abbreviations

AL. Pope Francis. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family. *Amoris Laetitia*. 19 March 2016.

https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

CV. Pope Francis. Post-Synodal Exhortation to Young People and the People of God. *Christus Vivit*. 25 March 2019.

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

DC. Benedict XVI. Encyclical Letter. On Christian Love. *Deus Caritas Est*. 25 December 2005.

http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.

EG. Pope Francis. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World. *Evangelii Gaudium*. 24 November 2013.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

LG. Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. *Lumen Gentium*. 21 November 1964.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

LS. Pope Francis. Encyclical Letter on Care for our Common Home. *Laudato Si'*. 24 May 2015.

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

SS. Benedict XVI. Encyclical Letter. On Christian Hope. *Spe Salvi*. 30 November 2007.

http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.