

# Plenary Council 2020 and the Diocese of Broken Bay

What does it mean as a Catholic community to live the life and mission of Jesus in contemporary Australian society? It is this question that has moved the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) to announce a Plenary Council of the Church in Australia to be held in the year 2020.

BY DANIEL ANG

The ACBC has sought the approval from Pope Francis for this Council, official endorsement which is expected in due course.

Put simply, a Plenary Council is the highest form of communion between the various local or particular Churches of a nation. It is, then, not simply a meeting of bishops but a process that calls for the participation of the entire Catholic community. It invites the whole Church into dialogue, to discern how its communities can live the Gospel with renewed vitality amidst new questions and challenges. The Plenary Council itself will feature representation from among the laity, religious and ordained ministers, together with the bishops of Australia, as the culmination of a sustained pilgrimage in faith.

As such a Plenary Council is an expression of the 'synodality' of the Church, the nature of the Church as a communion of persons 'walking together' in faith as disciples of the Lord. The Plenary Council recognises that all the baptised have received a common vocation to be a 'sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity' (*Lumen Gentium* 1) and upholds with faith that it is by our mutual listening to the Holy Spirit – who guides the Church 'into all truth' (John 16:13) – that we can realise our mission most deeply as a community of faith.

As set out in Canon Law, a Plenary Council has legislative power with the final decisions reserved to the bishops by nature of their episcopal ordination as successors of the Apostles. The bishops are obliged to make decisions on the basis of their careful discernment of the work of the Holy Spirit in the minds and hearts of all the People of God, recognising that the sense of the faith of the faithful – what is known as the *sensus fidelium* – is a source of the Church's life and learning as it seeks to fulfil its Gospel mission.

This means that the Plenary Council is more than a single event to be held in the year 2020 but an extended process that invites the entire Catholic community, even now, to 'walk the path of dialogue' and interpret what God is doing today and how God is calling the Church to live the Gospel into the future. It calls the Church to undertake a pilgrimage of listening and learning, to be a synodal and receptive Church that engages in honest speaking and mutual listening to the Holy Spirit, to share insights and also hear insights shared.

Throughout this process of listening, dialogue and prayer, experiences of diverse lives will be welcomed and invited to share their sense of faith, questions and hopes for the Catholic Church – from those who are attempting to live a committed and sacramental life in the Church, those baptised Catholics with lesser involvement in ecclesial life, to those who are vulnerable in Australian society, who may be more distant from the Church, or who have been hurt and may or may not still regard themselves as Catholic in some way.

We are invited by the announcement of a Plenary Council to develop together a culture of dialogue and discernment to determine how best to ensure the pastoral needs of the people of God are provided for and, with regard for the universal law of the Church, 'to decide what seems opportune for the increase of faith, the organisation of common pastoral action, and the regulation of morals and of the common ecclesiastical discipline which is to be observed, promoted and protected' (Code of Canon Law, c.445). Following their listening to and discernment with the whole Church, the members of the Plenary Council will convene in 2020. This will include all active bishops, vicars general, episcopal vicars, some major superiors of religious institutes, rectors of major seminaries and Catholic universities, and deans of faculties of theology and canon law. Others that can also be called to the Plenary Council include lay persons, retired bishops, other priests, and religious. The bishops will have a deliberative vote (that is, cast a ballot to determine outcomes) while other council delegates will have a consultative vote (the right to speak about the issues under discussion). The Plenary Council will then enact laws which, subject to approval of the Holy See, will bind the Catholic Church in Australia.

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In calling a Plenary Council the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has recognised that the patterns of change confronting the Church and the wider community impel the Australian Catholic Church to review, analyse and discern the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel (*Gaudium et Spes* 4). It has opened a pathway for dialogue, for the exchange of faith and ideas, and to encounter the Holy Spirit and the Church in one another.

Pope Francis himself has encouraged the need to prayerfully discern together what the Spirit is saying to our Catholic community at this time, remarking “A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realises that listening ‘is more than simply hearing’.

It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the call of Pope Francis for a synodal and discerning Church, the Royal Commission into



Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has also raised the critical need for reform within the Church and its manner of governance, themes with which the Plenary Council will also wrestle. As a way of being the Church 'synodality' promotes a form of governance that involves all the People of God, with governance referring to those processes for making and implementing decisions so that each of the baptised can fulfil their personal calling as well as our shared mission as a communion of faith.

Plenary Council 2020 will be the fifth plenary council in Australia's history with the last plenary council held in 1937, some 80 years ago. Two sessions for the Plenary Council have been proposed to the Holy See, the first session in the latter half of 2020 and the second session in May 2021.

The ACBC has established a Bishops Commission to oversee, plan and prepare for the Plenary Council which will have three phases: preparation, celebration and implementation. The Chair of the Bishops Commission is Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane. Other members of the Commission include Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB (Archdiocese of Perth), Archbishop Philip Wilson (Archdiocese of Adelaide), Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFMConv (Diocese of Parramatta), Bishop Michael Kennedy (Diocese of Armidale), and Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay OLM (Maronite Diocese of St Maroun).

A Facilitation Team has also been appointed including Ms Lana Turvey-Collins, Fr Noel Connolly SSC, and Mr Peter Gates (Catholic Mission) together with an Executive Committee for the Plenary Council which includes people with particular expertise related to the holding of a Plenary Council. The Executive Committee members have a range of backgrounds, are diverse in their experience and will offer advice and guidance to the Facilitation Team and the Bishops Commission throughout the Plenary Council journey.

As a local Church, the Diocese of Broken Bay will enter into this national process of dialogue and discernment beginning with a year of listening in 2018, followed by discernment throughout 2019 and the sharing of proposals to the Plenary Council in 2020. This local dialogue will not only inform the national Plenary Council but also the discernment of our Bishop, parishes and local communities, our schools and agencies in Broken Bay on how best to express the life and mission of Jesus at this critical juncture of our life as Church.

It will be an opportunity for us to name those issues that are important to our faith in charting a course for the future of the Catholic Church in Australia, and to share perspectives and practices that God can use to touch ordinary lives. Dialogue on the faith and mission of the Church will be encouraged

across our Broken Bay parishes, school communities, migrant communities, and social outreach services, these constituting "the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters" (Evangelii Gaudium 26). All people are welcome and invited to engage in this process locally. Support, guidance and resources for this process of dialogue will be provided by our Office for Evangelisation, our Catholic Schools Office and CatholicCare in collaboration with the national Facilitation Team for the Plenary Council.

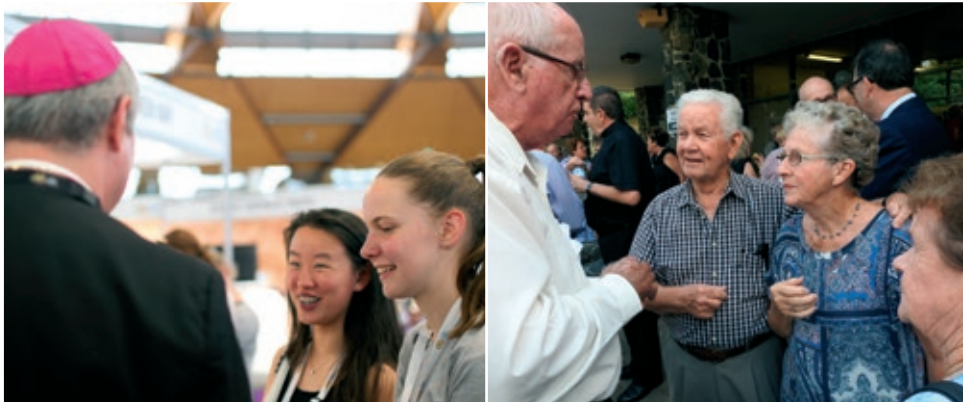
As a member of the Executive Committee I look forward to sharing more information with you as it comes to hand. There is still much yet to be clarified and I look forward to discovering the way forward together. I hope this initial outline is a helpful introduction and an encouragement for our journey ahead. I believe with faith that in these most challenging of times for the Church, the

Plenary Council is a gift of the Holy Spirit and that it has the potential to open up new horizons within ourselves and our communities, to discern ways to live our Catholic faith anew in contemporary Australian society.

As we await Papal consent and begin our preparations, let us pray for the life and mission of our Church. I look forward to sharing more details about the national process and local opportunities for participation in the April edition of the Broken Bay News and at Pentecost (Sunday 20 May) when the ACBC formally opens the process of dialogue with all of God's people.

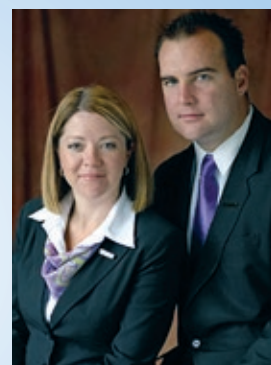
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<sup>1</sup> Address of His Holiness Pope Francis Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October, 2015. The full text is available online at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html)



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