



A Pope who is not afraid of open discussion and even dissent in the Church

by Sr Mary Fermio RSJ and Sr Audrey Thomson RSJ

In her address to a recent gathering of Josephite Sisters of the Victoria/Tasmania region, congregational leader Sr Monica Cavanagh spoke of the upcoming Plenary Council and urged them to accept the invitation to become participants in the proposed process.

As Religious women, we have had a lifetime of dedication to the people of God and the work of the Church. This has put us in a privileged position of being close to the people and to families who have shown great confidence and trust in sharing with us the “the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4) they experience in their daily lives and in relation to the Church.

The same Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*, states that “the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the Spirit”.

How is the church to do this? “To carry out this task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. We must, therefore, recognise and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings and its often dramatic characteristics.” (*GS*, 4)

The Church cannot carry out this mandate unless it offers its members an opportunity to articulate what is in their hearts and minds and the reality of their lives.

The invitation to take part in the Plenary Council offers all in the Church a wonderful opportunity to be in dialogue with all Catholics – lay, Religious and clerics – across Australia. It can enable all to have a voice in determining how we can restore relevance to the Church in our society – a relevance which has been tarnished and greatly diminished by scandals, cover-ups and other factors which have caused many to feel alienated and without hope.

The Plenary Council Website states:

“Together we are on a journey of listening to God by listening to one another. We invite all Australians to engage in an open and inclusive process of listening, dialogue and discernment about the future of the Catholic Church in Australia. Your voice is needed – join in.”

The important question we are asked to ponder and respond to is: “What do you think God is asking of the Church in Australia today?” First and foremost, this question is a reminder that no matter who or where we are, whether we are active in ministry or the workforce, or in retirement, each of us is the Church and each of us has a responsibility for the life of the Church.

The Council seems to be a marvellous opportunity for Religious to accept the invitation to participate in a process which has the potential to help heal the wounds in today’s Church, to help create a vision for the future, to give hope to those who are dispirited, disenchanted, frustrated and disillusioned, as well as the devout and fervent.

As Religious we are close to the people; we hear their stories and many of us ourselves feel frustrated and disillusioned so the input from Religious women is vital, particularly if the Church is to have any credibility regarding equality in its membership.



Through the infrastructure of our General Chapters, Religious Congregations have endeavoured always to read the signs of the times in order to respond appropriately to the call of the Gospel. Because of our closeness to the people at local levels, we are in a position to gather people in groups to encourage them to discuss what they think are the needs of the Church in today's world and to forward their concerns to the Council. We can gather in our communities and share the wisdom of "our grey hair" and our countless years of experience in mission. We are called to "be on mission to our last breath" as was St Mary MacKillop – and here is a wonderful opportunity for us all.

In an article in *The Swag*, retired Bishop Pat Power states: "The unique gifts of women should not prevent the issue (the question of the role of women in the Church) being further examined. The unique gifts of women need to be brought to the fore in every aspect of the life and mission of the Church." (*The Swag*; Vol 26, No 2, Page 29).

Archbishop Tim Costelloe of Perth calls us to listen to each other. ***Listening*** seems to be the main focus of this Council and unless Bishops listen to the voice of the people, the Church will continue to lose ground, to have people turn away dissatisfied with the leadership and the spirituality offered to them. Many are now leaving their parishes to find expressions of their spirituality elsewhere and abandoning the local Church that had previously welcomed and nourished them.

The Plenary Council is a positive step and it is essential that we participate and use our wisdom, talents and experience to contribute to this significant event in the history of the Australian Church. So let us pray each day for all the people of Australia that they we will "listen to the whisperings of God in our own hearts" (*Mary MacKillop*) and take the leap in faith and send in ideas, suggestions and thoughts so that the Plenary Council 2020 will bring about the desired and necessary renewal of our Church in Australia.