



FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

CALLED BY CHRIST – SENT FORTH AS MISSIONARY DISCIPLES

1. God’s covenant with creation, made new in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, is fashioned, sustained and nourished by the gift of the Holy Spirit, who calls together the community of disciples, the Church, privileged to share in Jesus’ mission. The Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ continuously overflows into the work and beauty of creation. In the Incarnation, the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15). Jesus embodies the depths of God’s love “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). This proclamation of the kingdom or reign of God is at the heart of Jesus’ mission. The Church exists in and for the world. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, it incarnates Christ’s love for the world, just as Christ incarnates God’s love for the world. To be Christ-centred missionary disciples requires loving attention to our world, which is marked by both sin and grace, prayerfully reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, seeking to grasp the meaning of things and to discern God’s will under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* n. 11).

Shaping Communities Centred on Christ and Sent by the Spirit

2. This call to discipleship is integral to the Gospel. Each of us is called by our Baptism to be a missionary disciple, hearing and responding to God’s invitation to follow Jesus Christ with joy (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* n. 120). As a people anointed with the oil of gladness, all the baptised share in Christ’s three-fold office that is priestly, prophetic, and royal (*Lumen Gentium* n. 31). In this way, the Church proclaims that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 10:17) and embodies the in-breaking reign of God that transforms human history. In the words of Pope Saint Paul VI, “the Gospel is not out-of-date” but remains an inspiration for offering people of our own time and place renewed hope while also “advancing the life of society” (Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 4). In this way the Church is called to attend with integrity and compassion to the great issues impacting respect for life and its protection at all stages, including the issues of “contraception, abortion, reproductive technologies and euthanasia.” The Church is also called to facilitate the inclusion and address the needs of people with disability, the needs of the “frail elderly, refugees, the trafficked and newcomers, those with mental illness,” and to work to protect Australians’ right to religious belief and practice.

3. In a spirit of transformation and hope the Plenary Council affirms that we need “to move ‘from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry’” (Latin American Bishops, quoted in *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 15). An evangelising community knows that God has taken the initiative; God has loved us first (cf. 1 John 4:19). Therefore, we can move forward, speak and act boldly, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast.

4. The *First Assembly Proposals* document encourages “taking the decision to become missionary communities” and suggests pathways for growing as missionary disciples: parish forums; small groups (for example for young people, families, children, married couples, single adults, etc.) and ecclesial communities that may foster the lay apostolate. These pathways provide supportive spaces for prayer, formation, fellowship, and mission animation. The document also proposes research to identify where missionary activity is thriving. Consistent support has been shown for the pursuit of new models of engagement with young people and families, encouraging initiatives in youth ministry, peer support and evangelisation, as well as support for the domestic Church. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (n. 28) Pope Francis describes four key characteristics of an evangelising parish:

- it is “in contact with the homes and the lives of its people”
- it is “an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration”
- it “encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers”
- it is “a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach.”

5. The Plenary Council affirms a culture of synodality for parishes, dioceses and eparchies, where healthy and fruitful relationships between clergy and laity “recognise different but complementary charisms and opportunities for co-responsibility”, and desire “consultative and collaborative approaches to governance at all levels in the Church.” The emphasis on listening and discernment for a synodal Church reveals how the People of God may be more centred on Christ, build healthy and respectful relationships amongst ourselves, and be effective missionary disciples in the Spirit:

... a Church which listens ... realizes 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” (John 14:17) in order to know what he “says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7) (Francis, “Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops”).

6. The Plenary Council commends the contributions of Church ministries and services to society as examples of evangelisation through missionary discipleship. Amidst many challenges, the Church makes a unique contribution to Australian society through its ministries and services, particularly those in health, aged care, disability, community services and education. The long-standing commitment and service of Catholic religious women and men within these sectors is well-recognised and has been extraordinary. In these domains they continue to provide lay people with opportunities for professional formation and participation in leadership. The unique role of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons demonstrates how both ecclesial governance and service to Australian society may operate in a mature,

innovative, and effective way. Catholic ministries often already embody synodal elements that form and support missionary disciples. These include commitment to hospitality, encounter, and dialogue; strong practices of discernment; Christian service and compassion; and the provision of a variety of opportunities for Catholics to deepen their baptismal calling.

Building Relationships of Respect and Compassion

7. The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. Missionary discipleship is participation in Jesus’ own mission; it is characterised by openness to encounter, hospitality and dialogue with each other, other Christians, people of faith and no faith, and with the human family for the care of our common home. Just as we were enlivened by “deep listening” during the Plenary Council Assemblies, we propose formation for all Catholics in the practice of listening, so that we might discover in other people a brother or sister to be supported and loved. (*Fratelli Tutti*, n. 8). Mission directs us to the peripheries of society. It calls us to be in active solidarity with all those who experience disadvantage or exclusion; including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities, people on low incomes, refugees and asylum-seekers, people experiencing mental ill-health and with the exploited earth. Especially important are those who hold a grievance against us (cf. Matthew 5:23), those who experience marginalisation by the Church, and those who are victims of abuse, exclusion, intolerance, and lack of compassion and understanding. There are deep wounds in our brothers and sisters who are excluded in the Church through a lack of mercy by some... The challenge to meet those in pain is to be a Church that is able to dialogue and listen without judgement, to hear the voice of Christ in their stories.

8. Listening has the power to open us to the Spirit’s work of transformation, enabling genuine encounter and giving rise to missionary action. During the First Assembly, as Members of the Plenary Council, we devoted time to thinking of and praying for people who have experienced marginalisation within the Church, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, those who are divorced, those who identify as LGBTIQ+, and those who have suffered abuse of any form. We express our profound sorrow to those who have been hurt through an encounter with the Church. We call on all members of the Church to make our community one in which all the baptised find welcome and inclusion.

9. The First Assembly Proposals remind us that a synodal journey needs to be inclusive and focus upon ecclesial participation, communion, and mission. As Jesus demonstrates, our language should never be “judgemental, demeaning, and hurtful.” Instead:

Jesus clears a way to seeing two faces, that of the Father and that of our brother. He does not give us two more formulas or two more commands. He gives us two faces, or better yet, one alone: the face of God reflected in so many other faces. For in every one of our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the most vulnerable, the defenceless and those in need, God’s very image is found. Indeed, with the scraps of this frail humanity, the Lord will shape his final work of art. For “what endures, what has value in life, what riches do not disappear? Surely these two: the Lord and our neighbour. These two riches do not disappear!” (*Gaudete et Exsultate* n. 61.)

Seeking Communion

10. In his address to the members of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1987, Pope Saint John Paul II declared: “Just as interreligious dialogue is one element in the mission of the Church, the proclamation of God’s saving work in our Lord Jesus Christ is another... There can be no question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other.” In this spirit of mission, dioceses, eparchies, and parishes are to commit to building friendly and co-operative relationships with other Christians, communities of other religious traditions and people with no religion, and to promote and engage in the four forms of interreligious dialogue: dialogues of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience (Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 42).

11. **THEREFORE**, this Plenary Council commits the Church in Australia to being centred on Christ, with a baptismal identity and on a path of missionary discipleship. This commitment involves:

- a. development of resources, formation and education programs in the promotion of hospitality, encounter, dialogue and merciful responses to the needs of our society;
- b. Church communities and entities promoting evangelisation through hospitality, encounter, dialogue, and merciful responses. Informed by encounter with people and communities who are disadvantaged or marginalised, and drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, they seek to foster a more just and compassionate society. This endeavour includes meaningful analysis and challenging of systems that perpetuate disadvantage and inequality;
- c. all Church communities, entities and collaborative bodies developing a culture of inclusion in their structures and policies that demonstrate commitment to collaboration and co-responsibility, in ways that are discerned as being appropriate and achievable;
- d. taking care to provide opportunities for those formed for leadership in the Church, including seminarians, to engage in dialogue with people who experience disadvantage or exclusion, both in the Church and in society.
- e. dioceses and eparchies supporting Parish Pastoral Councils to establish opportunities to listen to people on the peripheries – within and beyond parishes – and to develop plans to overcome experiences of exclusion, lack of acceptance and other boundaries. Diocesan Pastoral Councils will explore how to provide Parish leaders with formation and resources for training in these works of evangelisation; and
- f. development of a long-term plan to evangelise the community and catechise the faithful through dialogue within the Church and the wider community on areas including: the sanctity of all life, the nature of the human person, sexuality, marriage and family; better support for healthy marital and sexual lives; proclamation of the Gospel through engagement in the public arena and

contribution to public debate on issues relating to marriage, sexuality, and social and ecological justice.

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DECREE

The Plenary Council decrees:

Article 1

That those responsible for Catholic schooling and early childhood education, in consultation with representatives of Catholic parents' groups and parish-based organisation, led by the National Catholic Education Commission and drawing upon the document, *A Framework for Formation for Mission in Catholic Education* (2017), establish a national forum, which will seek to:

- a. identify and respond to the needs of the diverse and distinct circumstances of Catholic schools in Australia;
- b. build partnerships which enhance the vision of Catholic education as an instrument of evangelisation and an essential dimension of the contemporary mission of the Church;
- c. offer a process for critical reflection and discernment of the vocation of Catholic education today;
- d. support formation opportunities for catechesis, faith formation, leadership development and religious education pedagogy; and
- e. to assist parish engagement with schools and young people.

Article 2

That the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service establish a triennial National Forum of Catholic social service, health and aged care, disability, prison ministry, refugee and asylum-seeker, and justice, ecology and peace organisations and representatives of those served by these organisations; and that the purpose of this forum include:

- a. providing opportunities for dialogue that will contribute to the ability of the Church in Australia to attend to "examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel";
- b. identifying and exploring priorities for evangelisation through outreach, service provision, advocacy and formation;
- c. addressing gaps;
- d. seeking opportunities for collaboration; and
- e. informing the development of local social teachings to be issued by the Australian Bishops.

Article 3

- a. That each diocese and eparchy identify ways of promoting ecumenical and interfaith relationships (e.g., an Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer) that are practical and appropriate for the diocese or eparchy.
- b. That the Bishops Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-religious Dialogue – in collaboration with Catholic tertiary institutions and theological associations – provide guidance, advice and resources to dioceses and eparchies for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and relationships, and formation for those responsible for ecumenical and interreligious relations.

The Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia will interpret the decrees of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia in accordance with the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches and the traditions of each church *sui iuris*.

In accordance with canon 446 of the Code of Canon Law, this decree is not to be promulgated until it has been reviewed by the Apostolic See. It will be promulgated in *Australasian Catholic Record* and the website of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in accordance with its usual practice. The decrees will oblige six months after promulgation.

Signed:

Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB
President

Bishop Shane Mackinlay
Vice-President

Date: