



## FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

### COMMUNION IN GRACE: SACRAMENT TO THE WORLD

1. The Church is “like a sacrament”, a sign and instrument of union with God and the unity of the whole human race. (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, n. 1) We know that the Church was founded by Christ and that our vocation is to be the sacrament of communion with God and of unity among all people (*Lumen Gentium*, nn. 1, 8). The Church’s receptivity to sacramental grace deepens our spiritual connections with each other, making visible our sacramental nature. The multicultural nature of our Church community has generated a variety of liturgical and spiritual experiences for Catholics in Australia. New ecclesial movements and communities have also helped many faithful to rediscover the beauty of the Christian vocation. The Council hopes that, drawing on the charisms of religious orders and of ecclesial movements, a rich national network might flourish, providing opportunities for Catholics to be enriched by the spiritual and mystical traditions which have nourished the Church through the centuries.

2. “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12). Members of the Church are diverse, and their vocations are complementary. Some are laypeople, some are in consecrated life, and some are ordained as deacon, priest, or bishop. Lay Catholics may be single or married; they may participate in ecclesial movements; they may be connected with religious communities. The Church desires to foster vocations in every aspect of Church life, knowing that disciples can serve Christ’s mission according to their unique gifts. In recent times, the universal Church has broadened criteria for admission to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte. With the recognition of the Ministry of Catechist, we are witnessing a wider range of formal ministry opportunities in the Church. Throughout its phases, the Plenary Council has also heard a call for the renewal of preaching, which is another acknowledgment of the importance of faith formation, rooted in Scripture, for the mission of the Church.

3. Through ordination, priests, who are already baptised disciples, enter into a new relationship with the ecclesial community. Called and consecrated by the Church, through the ministry of the bishop, they are to gather the community, proclaim the Gospel and preside at the liturgy, in order to sanctify the entire community of faith for its mission in the world. As disciples, ordained priests are themselves to be formed by the Word and sacraments they celebrate, so that their discipleship is manifest in their way of life and in their relationships, which are to reflect the Spirit of Jesus, the one who serves.

4. The diversity and unity of the Church are mirrored in the diverse practices of prayer and the ecclesial/liturgical families of the Catholic communion (the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Church). These can all help to build up strong communities of faith, to enable the active and effective participation of all the baptised, to create opportunities for ongoing formation in faith and to draw all believers deeper into the mission of the Gospel. In Australia, the Eastern Catholic Churches provide a vibrancy to complement the Western Catholic Church in proclaiming the Christian message. The Eastern Churches are flourishing and have an important ongoing contribution to make to the Catholic Church in Australia and to the wider Australian community. By preserving their ancient liturgical, disciplinary and spiritual traditions, the Eastern Churches offer witness to the diversity in unity which adds to the beauty of Christ's Church. The Eastern Churches, who have a diverse expression of liturgy and spirituality even amongst themselves, have an important and unique contribution to make to mission, formation, liturgy, issues relating to children, young people, women and men, ecumenical and interfaith relations, ecology and conversion.

5. All members of the Church are called to help Christ's Church breathe with both lungs (John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, n. 54) – East and West – especially in the formation of its teachers; in the religious education curricula of Catholic schools and catechetical materials, including diocesan, independent, religious institute and ministerial public juridic persons' schools; in Catholic universities, and in other institutions of Catholic higher education. Eastern Catholics must always have a place as active participants and leaders in whole Church gatherings. Special care must be taken to include those without an ordinary or diocese of their own rite in Australia.

6. The Plenary Council reaffirms the pre-eminent role of liturgical worship in the life of the Church. As Vatican II teaches, "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows." (Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963, n. 10) Renewal of its celebration is needed to ensure the faithful are properly nourished at the table of the Lord's Word and Sacrament. This will be reflected in the formation of Christian faith and life, and the consequent need for a renewal of how the faith is communicated, both in the celebration of the Eucharist and in other occasions of common prayer. The way that we worship informs how we believe (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). Our communal worship witnesses to unity and hope in a fractured world increasingly hostile to public acknowledgement of God. Through sacramental grace and our experience of worship, the celebration of the sacraments and other rites, powerfully forms us. Worship opens the human heart to ongoing conversion to Christ, for the celebration of the liturgy is "an action of Christ and his body the Church" (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, n. 7) The yearning for such conversion and healing has been evident at each moment of discernment for the Plenary Council.

7. We rejoice when Catholics come to receive the sacraments at key moments in their lives. The Church welcomes these opportunities for accompaniment and dialogue as we celebrate God's role in our individual and communal life. Nonetheless, the discernment process of the Council has highlighted that, in Australia today, sacramental celebrations are sometimes approached more as a cultural milestone than a moment in ongoing faith formation that unites us with Christ and with each other. It can be more a process of certification than incorporation. Parents and caregivers who desire for their children to be baptised often have little ongoing involvement in the life of the parish. The Church needs to attend to this challenge and seek to understand better the reasons behind this lack of engagement. A parish's first response to these approaches must always be to welcome and encourage what is positive in a family's request, warmly inviting them to move further on their journey towards a personal relationship with Christ, lived out in the Christian community. This situation calls for the continued formation of all in a renewed understanding of the centrality of sacramental and parish life. The Church recognises that the ideal model for the formation, preparation and celebration for the sacraments of initiation for children is family-centred and parish-based, drawing on the assistance of Catholic schools and catechists.

8. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults continues to be a source of renewed vitality and new membership for parish communities and the Church as a whole. This journey of initiation, conversion, welcome and acceptance requires considerable community and practical resourcing to celebrate well the various stages of growth and maturing into faith. This can often stretch the capacity of communities, particularly small and isolated ones, to offer a deep and fruitful period of preparation. In addition, and as with children's initiation, parish communities sometimes struggle to maintain contact with neophytes after the celebration of the sacraments of initiation. The experience of welcoming new members into the Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults offers communities opportunities to collaborate and share resources with other communities, and to foster commitment to discipleship in those who seek to be initiated into the life of the Church.

9. The Church professes the Eucharist to be the source and summit of all sacramental life (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 11). Thus, celebration of the Eucharist, and formation for participation in the celebration according to the call for liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council, offers opportunities for spiritual growth. The Plenary Council acknowledges the need for renewal in catechesis, formation, and devotion to this Sacrament. To support this, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has requested that the 2028 International Eucharistic Congress take place in Australia. This would provide a time of prayerful preparation for the People of God. The Plenary Council hopes that dioceses will commit to planning and promoting communal public events that focus on the Eucharist, in service of forming Catholic belief, culture and identity. These might include feast day celebrations, Eucharistic processions and adoration, and the development and performance of music well-suited to worship.

10. The Liturgy of the Word is crucial to the celebration of the Eucharist. According to the Second Vatican Council, “to achieve the restoration, progress and adaptation of the sacred liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for Scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites give testimony” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 24). Opening up the Word together in prayer, we invite God into our lives. In our listening and discernment, concern has been voiced about the state of preaching in the Church in Australia. Supporting and promoting excellent faithful preaching reflects the importance of the homily in the celebration of the Eucharist: “By means of the homily the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text, during the course of the liturgical year” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 52).

11. The Plenary Council recognises the importance of the language used in the liturgy. Translations of prayers and Scripture passages for use in the liturgy need to be both faithful to the original text and sensitive to the call for language that communicates clearly and includes all in the assembly.

12. The People of God in Australia have voiced a desire to be formed in the sacrament of reconciliation. Some have advocated for use of the third form of the Rite of Penance, and a wish for more formation in the first and second forms has also been voiced.

13. In a society that sees the Catholic understanding of marriage as “outdated and irrelevant”, there is an urgent and clear need for a renewed catechesis on marriage. At the same time, there is a great pastoral need to care for all married couples, including those who struggle to accept the Church’s teachings about the sacrament of matrimony. This sacrament is at the heart of the Church’s understanding of the sanctity of human life, from conception until natural death. The Plenary Council affirms the need for an ongoing catechumenate of life, as part of the catechumenate for marriage, supported by local diocesan Offices for Life and Family and the Bishops Commission for Life, Family and Public Engagement (Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, Chapter 6; Francis, Address to the Roman Rota, 21 January 2017; John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 22 November 1981, n.66; “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World: The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops, 2015”, nn. 57-58). Such catechumenates support those who are most vulnerable in our society. At the same time, they affirm the unique contributions of mothers and fathers to a healthy society. In these ways the Council affirms the union between Christ and the Church, and a call for unity between men and women in a world marked both by sin and by Christ’s redemptive grace.

14. **THEREFORE**, this Plenary Council affirms the fundamental importance of a sacramental, joyful and spiritually rich prayer life that is transformed, transforming and inclusive:

a. To promote people’s fully conscious and active participation in the Church’s liturgy and sacraments, as well as spiritual nourishment through other forms of prayer, the Plenary Council urges renewal in liturgical catechesis and formation. The Council encourages the provision of liturgical and other prayer resources that enhance the dignified and reverent celebration of the liturgy and other opportunities for formation at the national and diocesan levels.

- b. It commits the Catholic Church in Australia to breathing “with her two lungs,” (John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 54) - East and West - respecting, fostering, and promoting the rich heritage of each tradition.
- c. It requests the Bishops Commission for Liturgy to prepare a new English translation of the Roman Missal that is both faithful to the original text and sensitive to the call for language that communicates clearly and includes all in the assembly.

**FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA**  
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**DECREE**

**The Fifth Plenary Council decrees:**

**Article 1**

That dioceses promote exercise of and formation for the ministries of Lector, Acolyte and Catechist.

**Article 2**

That in the light of the change in circumstances over the past twenty years, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference review the provisions and guidelines it issued in May 2003 for lay people to participate in a formal ministry of Preaching in the Latin Church, as provided for in canon 766 of the Code of Canon Law.

**Article 3**

That the Bishops' Commission for Liturgy institute a sustained program of catechesis of the Sacrament of Penance to promote an understanding of the conditions for, and appropriate practice of, each of the three forms of the Rite of Penance.

**Article 4**

That the Plenary Council request that the Holy Father consider whether the Third Form of the Rite of Penance might have wider use on occasions when it is particularly appropriate, granted an understanding among the Faithful of its distinctive nature and requirements.

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: