

Towards the Plenary Council Working Document: Some Reflections

Editorial Committee¹, senseofthefaithful.org.au

The Plenary Council process has moved to the critical stage of preparing the documents and agenda for the first assembly, to be held in October 2021. As a result, four individuals² have the challenging, indeed daunting, task of preparing the *Working Document* (or *Instrumentum Laboris*) for the Council. This will provide the basis for discussions at the Council and for shaping the Agenda.

The Working Document will draw on the extensive Stages I and II submissions from the faithful and particularly on the six Writing Group reports. These reports, prepared after a process of discernment by six groups of 12 people representative of the diversity of opinion within the Australian Church, provide a central foundation for the new document. Our analysis of the recommendations in these documents is to be found on the website.

We are acutely aware of the challenges facing the writing team, in terms of the variety of issues and the diversity of views across the Church. The final Working Document will not only shape the outcomes of the Council. It must also provide the body of the faithful, sceptical as many are, with signs that a real process of change is at hand. They will certainly need the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps also the wisdom of Job!

Recognising the difficulty of their task, we here respectfully offer some comments on two issues. First, we note some broad features that we believe are essential for the Working Document. Secondly, a central challenge is how the writing team might identify the key issues and priorities, given the vast complexity of issues and the diversity of views that are before them, and hence chart a path forward for the Plenary Council. We offer one suggestion about how that might be done.

These reflections by the six members of the Editorial Committee reflect a process of discussion and discernment they have undertaken over many months, as well as their ongoing listening to the views from the parishes.

Some Key Features

Internal Change Driven by an Outward Looking Mission

With failing leadership in many countries and in the Church, Pope Francis stands out like a beacon. In the human dimension, he will undoubtedly be the inspirational force behind the Plenary Council. So it is strange that the documents to date do not reflect his central view of the reform process.

Francis has persistently called for conversion within the Church, from an inward-looking self-referential stance to one looking out to the needs of our communities. Reform starts not by looking at ourselves but at the needs of the marginalised and indeed of the whole of creation. This conversion in mentality is vital and must drive any reform program.

¹ The members of the Editorial Committee are: Anne Marmion (St Thomas the Apostle, Blackburn); Richard Curtain (St Carthage's, Parkville); John Davies (St Joseph's, Malvern); Rowan Ireland (St Francis Xavier's, Montmorency); and Fr Gerry McKernan and Peter Sheehan (St Kevin's, Lower Templestowe).

² The members of the writing team are Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, Mr Daniel Ang, Dr Trudy Dantis and Fr Kevin Lenehan. For further details see <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/staff/>.

Francis' view is that the task is to bring Christ's good news and His healing love to those at the margins, and in turn to learn from them. The changes in the Church should be those necessary to serve these groups, to see Christ in them and to learn from them. We suggest that this should be a central theme of the Working Document.

Address Australian Realities

The Writing Group papers touch on many of the stark realities facing the Australian Church, but do so with a very light touch. The Working Document, in our view, needs to document honestly the position of a church in crisis and lay out a framework for the Plenary Council to address this position. Some of these realities include:

- The continuing decline in the number of priests, with devastating effects on the operation of many parishes;
- The deep alienation of many of the faithful from the leaders of the Church, reflecting a widespread reaction against clericalism and the response to the sexual abuse crisis;
- The ongoing withdrawal from active involvement in the Church, especially by young people;
- Widespread dissatisfaction— among the laity, religious and clergy – with the role allowed to women in the Church, and the demand the real action be taken.

It is a time for direct speaking and for real action, in a synodal context. For example, the Bishops have never entered into a real dialogue with the faithful about options for responding to the collapse in the number of priests.

Issues Based

The task of the six Writing Groups was made more difficult by the fact that the six Themes that they were given were ill-defined and overlapping. This was clear from the vague descriptions provided for themes and from the extensive overlap in the wordles or word clouds that were partly used to define them. In our experience people working in parishes had difficulty in interpreting the themes. The six reports dealt with many issues in common, with, for example, all of them making recommendations on governance and the need for humble leadership and changes to the priesthood.

We suggest that it is important that the Working Document is organised on an issues basis, so that key issues can be directly addressed, rather than continuing with the ill-defined themes.

Firm Proposals and Statements of Principle

We understand that some of the changes that many see as critical are not within the authority of the Australian Bishops to implement. These include the ordination of women, either as priests or deacons, the allowance of optional celibacy for priests or even, some suggest, the reinstatement of the Third Rite of Reconciliation.

It is vital that the Working Document prepares the ground for firm and detailed proposals for change that can be quickly implemented by the Australian bishops. Pope Francis has been urging local bishops to take greater authority. Our bishops should be encouraged to expand their envelope of their authority to make real change possible, rather than hiding behind Rome as a defence against change.

For those issues which are clearly under the control of Rome but for which there is strong support for change among the faithful, the local position should be made clear. The Plenary Council will fail

in its role if these views of the People of God are not made explicit, while recognising that at this time the Bishops cannot act on them.

Identify Priorities and Linkages

In his comments on Writing Group Paper 5³ Rowan Ireland noted that there is much to celebrate in the paper, including the seven sets of challenges and proposals which it provides. But ‘the sheer welter of proposals... (makes it) hard to see how the two sessions of the Council could consider all the proposals arising from just this paper, let alone from all the papers’.

He also notes that there is no attempt to set priorities between or within the seven sets of challenges and proposals, to explore links or dependencies between proposals or to discuss sequencing of actions to give effect to priorities in this light. ‘In terms of rather depleted energies, shortage of clergy, and the ripple effects of the sexual abuse crisis at the local level, the PC will surely have to prioritise if it is to set realistic goals for the Church in coming decades.’

Given that the Working Document needs to address inputs from the six Writing Group reports and from many other sources, this issue of identifying key priority proposals, understanding the interdependencies between them and addressing the sequencing of actions will be a massive challenge. We make one suggestion below about how this might be addressed, while recognising that there are many possible ways forward.

Setting Priorities

Figure 1 outlines a possible approach to the Working Document in the light of these complex issues. This figure cannot address, of course, the complex interaction between the various elements, but this is discussed below.

As outlined above, we believe that the central theme of the report should be Francis’ theme of conversion within the Church by looking outwards, and that this could be pursued by a report in four parts. Francis drew great inspiration from the meeting of Latin American Bishops held at Aparecida in Brazil in 2007, sometimes called the ‘Latin American Pentecost’. Part One of the Aparecida document addresses in detail the situation in Latin America at that time, with eyes of faith and ‘in the midst of the lights and shadows of our age’.

Our Working Document could start by looking at the situation of Australia, and the world in which we live, with eyes of faith and ‘in the midst of the lights and shadows of our age’. This might cover, for example, the realities of the COVID and post-COVID world, the position of the poor and disadvantaged, our need to meet with and learn from Australia’s aboriginal people and the cry of the earth, both here and globally.

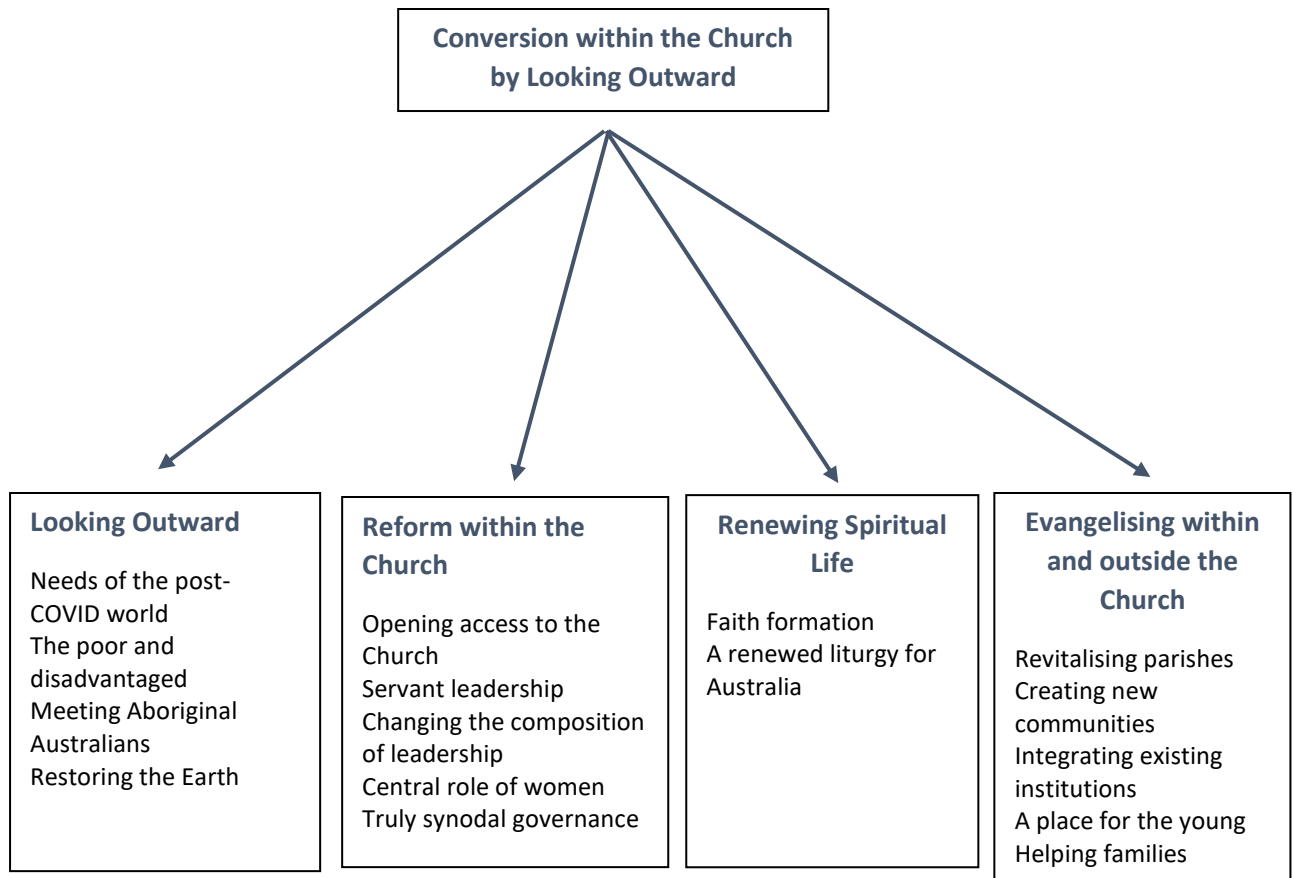
The issues of priority, dependencies and sequencing really come to the fore in the second part, reform within the Church. Many of the 161 recommendations across the six Writing Group reports involve initiatives that parishes or dioceses should take to address particular issues. But a wide range of initiatives cannot in reality be taken by parishes and dioceses in decline, with the few priests stretched even more thinly across parishes, the laity ageing and increasingly isolated from the hierarchy.

What is required here is not a list of proposals in each area, however good they may be, but an integrated strategy to achieve major reform within the Church over say ten years. We are not

³ <https://www.senseofthefaithful.org.au/towards-the-final-documents>

suggesting that the writing team could produce such strategy by the end of October 2020, but they could insist that the strategic interaction of the reforms should be emphasised. The readers of the Plenary Council documents are not fools, but people with much experience in the life of the world and of the Church. They can distinguish between nice general statements that will go nowhere and serious plans that could bring real change. They need the hope that can be generated by the latter.

Figure 1. Addressing Priorities and Linkages: A Suggestion



Reform within the Church is not just a matter of change or reform in a political or social institution. As Francis has so often stressed, it is a conversion within the Church based on a deeper relationship with Christ and deeper concern for the needs of others. Thus the many proposals in the submissions and the Writing Group reports on renewing the spiritual life of the people of God are critical. Two we emphasise here. The first is the renewal of the liturgy to enable it to better meet the needs of Australians today. Secondly, as we move from a Church heavily shaped by philosophy and Jewish and Roman law to one based more directly on the Gospels, the faithful need much greater education in the scriptures.

Finally, we suggest that the Working Document needs to return to the specifics of evangelisation, both within and outside the Church, in the context of the broader process of conversion. As the Church wheels around to its new mission, how can parishes be revitalised, new communities be created where parishes are not applicable, how the work of the great institutions of the Church (in health, education and welfare) be integrated with the life of the faithful? A critical question in many documents and submissions is how to find a place for young people in the Church. Our firm view is

that this will only be achieved through a broader process of conversion within the Church to a much more outward looking perspective, and not by specific programs within existing structures to involve youth.