



Diocese of Sandhurst

Plenary Council 2020

REPORT ON THE FIRST STAGE OF COUNCIL



Plenary Council 2020
Listen to what the Spirit is saying...

1. Resources provided to parishes in the Diocese

The Plenary Council process calls for listening, prayerful reflection, respectful dialogue and openness to the Spirit in implementing the aims and goals of this first phase.

Essentially, the Diocese provided three written materials, specifically designed for the Parishes of the Diocese, for distribution to Parishes and groups.

The first of these was a colour A4 four-page leaflet describing the essential information about the Plenary Council and its processes. Several thousand copies were printed and widely distributed to Parishes within the Diocese.

The second written material was a 44-page colour brochure. This brochure was a local adaptation of the same brochure prepared by the Diocese of Parramatta (with permission and gratefully acknowledged). The Parramatta Brochure was adapted and changed to the needs and circumstances of the Sandhurst Diocese. About 500 copies were then made available to Parishes and groups within the Diocese. Essentially the booklet provided a *how to guide* in 5 sessions for the prayerful listening and discernment of the first phase of the Council.

The third written item was a postcard with basic information about the Council on one side, and the opportunity to write in a few words some thoughts about the question posed by the Council on the obverse side. Again several hundred of these were widely distributed.

2. Diocesan Committee

A Plenary Council Committee for the Diocese of Sandhurst was established by the Bishop.

The Committee consisted of 12 members, drawn from various Parishes and interest groups of a rural Diocese. To date there have been four meetings of this Committee and the expectation

is that the next meeting will consider the synthetic report published by the Plenary Council Central Committee in May-June. The Committee also has an Executive Officer.

In distributing the written materials to Parishes and groups within the Diocese, the request was explicitly made that when individuals/groups/Parishes make submissions to the central Plenary Council Website, they also copy in the material of the same submission to the Executive Officer through her dedicated email address, for the purposes of creating a synthetic Diocese report to submit. This report would be a public document.

3. Process in parishes

There appear to have been varied responses to the implementation of stage one of the Plenary Council in our Diocese.

Some Parishes and groups indicated they found the Plenary Council Booklet provided too complex. From reports provided to the Diocesan Organizing Committee, the main implementation of the Plenary Council process was through small discussion and dialogue groups within Parishes; the distribution of the postcards as a way of eliciting responses; Parish public forums for discussion; and more widely, the distribution of an A4 size sheet with the primary Plenary Council question subdivided into two or three other questions. In the case of the sheet, people were invited to fill it in and leave it in boxes provided in Churches. This was seen as a more simplified experience than the booklet.

Consultation/discussion was used as a regular strategy in Parish meetings, in Church group meetings, in informal situations and with Primary and Secondary School teachers. Other forms of consultation included the use of Parish bulletins, announcements during Mass, and in some instances advertisements in local newspapers. Other parishes used the Plenary Council videos during Mass. One Parish used public forums rather than Parish groups and

another Parish used its regular, already existing groups for the discussions. One Deanery used the SIP (Spirituality in the Pub) gathering as a way of introducing the Plenary Council. An external Facilitator was invited and the evening was well attended.

Participation in this first stage of the Plenary Council appears to have been a generally positive experience for many people, drawing people together in an atmosphere of welcome and inclusiveness. What participants appear to have enjoyed was the opportunity to dialogue, to express their own opinions and to hear the opinions of others. It is clear that a significant number of participants saw the exercise as worthwhile and positive.

At the same time, several issues of concern have emerged about the implementation of this first phase of the Council in our Diocese. It may be that these concerns emerged in other rural Dioceses as well. Some of these concerns include the following:

- The dialogue dynamic in which persons and groups came together to prayerfully discern and discuss issues, rather than make an individual submission, does not appear to have been as widespread as we hoped.
- Issues of passivity and disillusionment about the state of Catholicism and the value of such a Plenary meeting may well have effected willingness to be involved.
- As a rural Diocese, with the furthest some 5 hours from Bendigo, distance and isolation of communities may well have impacted on the willingness and ability of people to be involved.
- There is concern about how accurately the results submitted for this Diocese may represent such groups as the youth, the non-churched, ethnic groups, and persons in special circumstances (eg. Prisons).

Our general impression is that the invitation via the Plenary Council to prayerful discernment and listening has been well received in the Diocese and those interested are eager to be heard and to make submissions.

4. Key Issues and Responses to the Primary Question

What follows is an attempt to synthesise the hundreds of submissions by people in the Sandhurst Diocese to the Plenary Council to some fifteen themes. These themes are not necessarily presented here in order of importance nor does this report attempt to identify every theme or suggestion received. What follows is an attempted summary of the principal areas raised.

Clericalism

- People at the top are too far away to hear the concerns of ordinary people.
- People want to see a situation of power with the laity, not power over the laity.
- Clergy may need, or benefit from, proper professional development in leadership.
- Priests and people relating with each other on equal ground and where life is happening for the people.
- Priest to see his role of presider of the Eucharist as integrally connected to the congregation and not above the congregation.
- Sense of the superiority of the Priest is not acceptable in today's world.
- Inservice training and formation for Clergy to be held together with laity and not as separate groups.
- Full consultation and profile of a Parish developed and used in the appointment of Clergy.

Hierarchy

- A call to uphold the faith and strengthen the faith and so promote Church life.
- Plenary Council to hear, understand and act on what is being asked.
- Call out leaders for their behavior, especially their focus on rules instead of faith.
- Better communication between leaders and the faithful, specifically in relation to secrecy and decision-making, consultation, and acceptance of responsibility.
- Church too busy protecting its assets instead of listening to grass roots people.
- Need for all to be involved and informed in relation to the administration and decision making in the Parish and in particular the Diocese.
- A Pastoral plan for the Diocese be formed by all members of the Diocese and not just the Clergy.
- Reconstitution of such bodies as the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Diocesan Liturgical Committee.
- Introduction of a Diocesan Youth Commission.
- Lay people involved in Clergy Life Ministry aspects of the Church.
- Those who have leadership positions within the Church seem not to be capable of being present to people and appear to be out of touch.
- There appears to be little sense of the urgency among the Church's leaders in relation to the various crisis facing the Catholic Church.
- The structure and hierarchy of the Church has too much focus on maintaining status, ego, power and wealth.
- Some of our Church leaders have been great at addressing the shortcomings of the Church, while others have been appalling and have left people angry and despondent.
- We, the flock, are clear that more of the same is not an option in Australia

Seminary and Training

- Attention needs to be given to the particular needs of overseas priests ministering in the Diocese and specifically efforts in inculturation; the experience of isolation and loneliness; professional assistance with accent through language classes; appreciation of their own particular understanding of priesthood; and, dedicated attempts to welcome and appreciate these priests.
- The Church needs to be more relevant for those living in rural, regional and remote Australia as the Church in the bush operates quite differently to the Church in major cities.
- Seminary Formation in terms of style and method needs a radical overhaul.
- Seminary Formation needs to place greater emphasis on the stages of development of the whole person and not just intellectual and spiritual formation.
- Seminarians would benefit from ongoing mentoring and assessment.
- More training in practical Parish skills.
- Lay formatters and Parishioners be involved in Seminary training as staff.
- Increased study of psychology, sociology and the human sciences in Seminary Formation.
- Seminarians need to understand that communication and the ability to relate to others is the key to undertaking ministry.
- Seminarians be encouraged to see that formation means becoming more fully human rather than becoming perfect.

Accountability and Transparency

- Review Diocesan/Parish financial arrangements to ensure equitable distribution of funds and greater autonomy for local Parishes.
- An audit to ensure sufficient funds are used for charitable purposes and spiritual programs in the Diocese.
- Financial support from the Diocese for struggling Parishes.
- Use of suitably qualified consultants/advisers in making senior appointments in the Diocese.
- Incorporation of the Child Safety Standards at every level of structure and culture of the Church as the current situation has led to tremendous evil.

Management, Finances and Property

- Models of consultation and co-responsibility of management of finances and properties both Parish and Diocesan levels be adopted.
- Transparency in financial dealing at Diocesan and Parish levels, end of secrecy, and inclusion of laity in these areas of the Church's life.
- Free flow of communication and accountability with people and the Diocesan and Parish structures.
- Money not be the primary factor in deciding the outcome of decisions made for the Parishes and the Diocese.

Involvement of Young People

- Young people are waiting to be invited into our Church communities.
- Social Justice programs are a key link to involve young people with the local Church.

- That young people be helped to create structures, movements and organisations of Social Justice based on their lived experience of the world.
- Young people need to feel that their input is valued and they are made welcome.
- Issues of the environment, stewardship of creation and sustainability are key concerns of the young and the Church.
- Let young people have their say and respect what they say.
- Music in liturgy needs to speak to the young and their culture.
- Young people need to feel part of the Church.
- That the vision and life of the Gospel as understood by young people in their own language and culture today be incorporated into the life of the Church.
- Instead of inviting young people into our way of being Church, young people invite us into the Church they already are and they wish to create.
- Young People don't know where to go if they have questions.

Celibacy and Married Clergy

- Celibacy for the Clergy should be optional.
- Ordination of women is a major issue facing the Church.
- Parishioners want stability in clerical appointments as the way of building up trust in relationship with their priest.
- Priests to benefit from supervision and Pastoral Support.
- Retired Priests appear to be neglected.
- Priests who have left the priesthood to marry should be invited to return to active ministry.
- That dialogue, research and exploration of different forms of leadership commence now rather than wait for future developments.

- The assumption that once a man is ordained he can be a competent manager of Parish, School and Community is not always correct.

Lay Involvement and Lay Leadership

- Lay leadership and participation in the life of the Church needs to increase.
- The involvement of lay leaders in decision-making process leads to empowerment and better outcomes.
- The skills of lay people need to be utilised and enhanced more.
- By virtue of baptismal dignity lay people need to advocate for cultural change and reform in the church to replace a culture that appears to be entrenched and outdated.
- Lay people to be invited to leadership in the church in a collaborative fashion that involves real responsibility.

Outreach to “The Other”

- Church to be more open and inclusive, welcoming all persons.
- Community does not stop at the Church doors.
- All LGBTQ persons are made welcome as full members of the Church.
- Outreach to the divorced and remarried, outreach to refugees, and respectful dialogue with others are seen as ways of reaching out to “the other”.
- That the Church assists all people to understand the diversity of being human, and not psychologically disordered or evil.
- That the Church creates an environment in which LGBTQ+ persons do not have to hide or become absent in their quest to be followers of Christ and bearers of his Gospel.

Clerical Sexual Abuse

- Recognition of the widespread hurt and disillusionment in the Church.
- Emphasis on healing, counselling and compensation.
- Open, effective and victim-oriented programs.
- Thorough investigation into abuse and appropriate apology.
- Transparency to Parishes of Diocesan practices of dealing with abuse.
- Compensation for abuse needs to be swift and compassionate.
- Difficulty of resolving the integrity of the confessional with compliance to State Laws.
- The Church has lost much respect because of the crisis and its failure to deal with it promptly and appropriately thus appearing to be compromised and hypocritical.
- There has been more focus on the Church “saving face” and protecting itself against legal and financial culpability than attending to the needs of victims.
- The long term impact of sexual abuse on the victim and the wider family needs to be deeply understood.

Community and Welcome

- A welcoming and inclusive Church in which there is no judgement of an individual and in which a person receives understanding, tolerance, dignity, and compassion.
- No discrimination: sacraments open to everyone, dignity and respect for all, especially the divorced and those who feel on the margins.

Women in the Church

- The meaningful participation of women in all areas of the Catholic Church to be acknowledged and celebrated.

- Possibility of Woman Deacons.
- Women not to be excluded from genuine and equal decision-making processes.
- Gender equality within the Church and priesthood as women are needed in all areas of governance and the varying expressions of the Church's ministry.
- Lead by example and not by directives and laws.

Catholic Education

- Attention needs to be given to the efficacy of RE instruction modes.
- Sacramental Initiation of the young is seen as the entry point into the Catholic School with little ongoing practice.
- Call to teach clearly the Ten Commandments, to reinforce doctrine, and to teach liturgical reverence.
- School Principals and all staff need to lead by good example and by showing awareness of the Catholic Ethos and Identity in which they work.
- That the Church more actively promote its own Social Teachings and build these insights into its own structures.
- Children are taught the basics of our faith and its Tradition before exploring other faiths.
- Bridges between the Parish and the School be strengthened so that the School is not seen a parallel alternate Church.
- The Church to distance itself from Government Education Policy.
- A stronger focus on RE studies in Primary School with attention to the basics of
- Catholicism, the "what" and "why" of being a Catholic.

Marriage and the Family

- The changes as set out by Pope Francis in 2015 to the process and conditions of annulment need to be put into practice.
- There is an urgent and ongoing need to consider the issue of divorce in the Catholic Church.
- Need to give serious consideration to marriage in the context of the modern world.
- Persons in aged care need support, inclusion and reassurance.

Liturgy

- It is time to revisit our liturgies and worship places.
- Young people find the Mass and Catholic liturgy boring and uninteresting.
- Liturgical language needs updating and modernising.
- A modern understanding of values and sin in relation to lifestyle choices is needed.
- The Third Rite of Reconciliation needs greater use and acceptance.
- More singing in Mass with joy and passion.
- Particular attention to the styles and forms of music that will speak to and attract young people.
- Some young people are looking for more awe and reverence in liturgy
- Wider use could be made of the RCIA forum for knowledge of the faith.
- Charisms in the Church to be encouraged.
- A call to live the faith meaningfully, to remain true and strong to our faith.
- A clearer explanation of Catholic belief.
- The Gospels are the centre of all that we do and say.

Spirituality, Prayer and Devotions

- That more spirituality centres be made available in regional areas of Australia.
- An examination of spiritual practices of the past eg. Solidarities, recitation of the rosary, weekly confession, novenas, fasting before mass, be reexamined and reintroduced in Catholic Life
- The Church to promote the messages and apparitions of Mary and other visionaries.
- Prayer and Adoration of the Blessed Sacraments be encouraged in Parishes and Schools, both Primary and Secondary.
- Attention to the Sacrament of Reconciliation as we all need to take responsibility for personal sin to reach holiness.

Conclusion

Generally the participation of people in our Diocese in the First Phase of the Plenary Council has been good and encouraging. However, more people ideally could have been involved.

While there is some degree of scepticism, there is also substantive hope. We look forward to receiving the synthetic report of all the Australian Dioceses and to the Second Phase of the Council preparation. The mood of cautious optimism that this first Phase has engendered in the Diocese could well be summed up in this comment from one of the participants:

“This is the “last hurrah”. If the people of God are not listened to in earnest and responded to in honesty, integrity and transparency, many more will walk away.”

Fr Brian Boyle

Ruth Lawlor

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