

REPORT
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CATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP OF CANBERRA AND GOULBURN
SECOND ASSEMBLY OF THE FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
3RD JULY – 10TH JULY 2022
SYDNEY

Dear Friends in Christ,

I have returned very recently from the Fifth Plenary Council in Sydney (2nd Assembly). I would like to offer some observations regarding the Plenary Council.

1. Some of the highlights of the Plenary Council.

There was a real sense that the Holy Spirit was present. The members, which totalled over 277, were very much aware that people around Australia and even beyond, were praying that the Holy Spirit would guide us. Be careful when you pray to the Holy Spirit! Make sure you have your seat belts on! When the Holy Spirit answers, we are in for quite an unexpected ride! There were plenty of surprises from the Holy Spirit during this week.

Firstly, it became very clear that the newer Catholics, coming to Australia as migrants and refugees over recent decades from Eastern countries of the Catholic world, are making an increasingly mature contribution to Australia in the present moment. We think of Catholics coming from the Eastern Eparchies, for example from Maronite, Syro-Malabar, Ukrainian Melkite and Chaldean Catholics. These and so many others represent the “Eastern lung” of the Catholic Church. Joining the Western or “Latin Lung”, we form the Body of Christ in Australia in such a wonderful fresh way. Breathing with two lungs, the Holy Spirit is able to give us a glimpse of present and future Catholicism in our ancient but new land.

Second, another great surprise of the Holy Spirit was the increasing contribution the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics of Australia are making in our Church. So many First Australians were present at the Assembly. They participated in many of the table discussion groups. They were also very much present in leading us in morning prayers, acknowledgment of country, and sharing with us their stories in a way that was quite refreshing and at times essential if we want to be truly Australian Catholics.

Third, there were some moving liturgical moments in our continuing lament for the victims of Sex Abuse in our country, especially those victims abused by members of the Catholic Church over the decades.

Finally, there was a surprise to witness the deepening ecological dimensions of our Catholic faith expressed in the Council. The impulse that Pope Francis has given us in his document *Laudato Si'* was clearly evident. It is quite clear that understanding

what Integral ecology means not only for the environment but also for our relationships with each other, is certainly becoming a more vital component of our mission.

All of these wonderful surprises indicate a real “Australian face” of the Catholic Church becoming apparent in our time.

2. Some of the challenges that we faced.

A major challenge or flash point, which created tension earlier in the week, pertained to our discussion regarding “Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men.” At one stage, the voting pattern seemed to indicate that the Bishops were indifferent to the role of women in our Catholic Church. On deeper reflection, however, it was revealed that a rather unforeseen archaic voting procedure at the final stage when the Bishops gave their votes was less than satisfactory.

This created a real rupture in our proceedings and caused great tension. However, given the deep tone of respect and determination to allow the Holy Spirit's action to guide us, we were able to reset procedures and re-write paragraphs. Indeed, at the end, we concluded with a better statement. We must remember how the Holy Spirit can really stir us up and bring us to a precipice to help us to trust the Holy Spirit even more. It was so good to see how we all worked together in the midst of all these difficulties. There was determination in us to rely on the Grace of God.

Regrettably, however, this took quite some time. Other important topics were considered, but perhaps not considered enough. I think particularly of topics regarding the role of Men in the Church, Marriage and Family life, Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious life. All of these areas are also very significant for us to move forward with evangelisation as our way of becoming Missionary disciples of the Resurrection.

3. Synodal listening.

Listening attentively over a whole week is not as easy as one would think. Pope Francis is always keen to note the difference between hearing and listening. We can hear sounds but when we truly listen, we are trying to communicate.

Most of the discussions did not happen in the general sessions but in small groups around many tables spread throughout the auditorium. The first part of any consideration was the proclamation of the Word of God, the introduction to the topic, and then significant periods of listening in silence and then listening to each other as we responded to what we believe the Holy Spirit was communicating to us. Throughout all this, there was a great sense of joy and hopefulness. Nonetheless, it was very tiring. It is something that requires continual conversion that moves away from our own priorities and agenda to that which seemed to be emerging in the groups.

However, by the end of the week, this new Spiritual Conversation method was something that became a normal part of our discussions and we became far more at ease. There was a great sense that the fruit of Synodality was a real determination for the Catholic Church to advance in the future with a renewed impulse in evangelisation in our culture and world of today.

4. What will be the next steps now that the Plenary Council has concluded?

In one sense, the Plenary Council has concluded, but in another, it has just begun. The final stage of the Plenary Council is the implementation of the Decrees that we have approved.

The next period will be for the refining of these motions, the cataloguing of them and the presentation of them to the Holy See seeking Papal approval. Once this is given, there is a six-month hiatus whereby we can wait for a maturing of the understanding of what these Decrees mean for the Dioceses of Australia. After which they will be implemented in all the Dioceses of Australia.

Over this waiting time, we do need to respond appropriately as the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn. We need to learn to walk together in a Synodal way and really engage all in the Archdiocese in this great movement of the Holy Spirit. I will write a follow up letter to you all in the next few weeks explaining what the next year might mean.

Therefore, on the conclusion of the 2nd Assembly of the 5th Plenary of the Australian Church, we thank the Lord for His many blessings and the undeniable presence of the Holy Spirit leading us on in the midst of our own selfishness and woundedness.

Whatever the future may look like for the Church's pastoral life in the years ahead, it will be clearly centred on Jesus Christ. Anything that is enacted must help us to become more and more the evangelising people of God that we are called to be.

Thank you so much for your prayers over the last few weeks. Let us now thank the Lord for His many blessings.

Archbishop Christopher Prowse
Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn
14th July 2022