

Issues for Consideration at the Plenary Council

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For some time my closest friend in priesthood Gerry McKernan has suggested that I write a few words on what I believe are the issues for consideration at the coming Plenary Council for Australian Catholics. The Plenary Council has of course been delayed because of COVID-19, but the issues have probably only become more urgent. As to how we will regather as a Church, not only in Australia but across the world, is a question that all of us will find very challenging.

I have already written a submission in response to the first stage of consultation on the issues for the Plenary Council. In many ways what I write here is a more concise response.

By way of context, I am a diocesan priest nearing retirement after 50 years of parish Ministry in Parishes of the Melbourne Archdiocese. I have loved the journey and I am very grateful for the Catholic Church of Melbourne. However a deep sadness has grown within me as I see the diminishment of the Church and the increasing numbers of parishioners who do not come to Eucharist, or if they come, it is more for special occasions. I have lamented the terrible actions of priests and religious who have abused young people. And I have also lamented what I see as a growing clericalism with our Church. So many of my priest colleagues lead with power and authority, rather than by empowering and authorising.

In thinking about the Plenary Council I have to say that I am not confident about seeing much of the change that I think is necessary for the Church of the future. I fear that our Bishops will look to manage rather than imagine a Church of the future. It seems to me that we will not change much and for that reason I think the Catholic Church, not only here in Australia but around the world, will shatter and from the pieces a new story will begin. Who knows what that will look like, but I am confident that the Spirit of God will lead the new story wherever it takes us. And I imagine it will be a very different story from what we have experienced in our life-time.

It is more than likely that the Catholic Church will have a major schism. If the Institutional Church seeks to control, legislate and manage a difficult situation as it tries to negotiate the views of conservative and so called liberal Catholics, then I believe the Plenary Council will not achieve much, if anything. As it stands, the vote rests primarily in the hands of the Bishops and there is a serious question as to a governance that so limits the voice of the faithful.

If the Institutional Church however, seeks more to empower the voice of the faithful and encourage small communities of people to come together and largely make their own way, then out of these communities may come the reforms necessary to empower priesthood of the people and a more creative and compassionate Church might then be born. Such a vision would allow for a vision of seminary training focussed on personal and pastoral development and within an apprentice style context. Somehow, it seems to me, the new

story of Church will grow out of the ashes of the old Church and begin like it once began, with the coming together of small communities.

I do not advocate the end of the Institution, for we need a Church that does set boundaries and responds to crises like the sexual abuse crisis. And we have Pope Francis who is such an inspiration in leading our Church. But we are being called by the Spirit, in my view to step into an even more uncertain time and allow the creativity and energy of the faithful to lead us into the future, even if there is schism and shattering.

Having said this by way of preamble, let me put forward some of the issues that I think our Plenary Council must address if we can find a way to renew and enliven the Australian Church. There are four areas I would particularly like to address: Outreach to the Poor and Marginalised, Clericalism and Governance, Climate Change and Eucharist.

OUTREACH TO THE POOR AND MARGINALISED

First and foremost for the Catholic Church to be credible, it seems to me that we have to look outwards and we have a resource that is often regarded as the best kept secret of the Church, its Catholic Social Teaching. The first principle of this Teaching insists on the 'dignity of every single person, created in the image and likeness of God'. With the Gospel as our mandate and with Catholic Social Teaching as our guide, in my view, our reaching out to the poor and marginalised of our world must be at the heart of our purpose. The more I pray the Gospel, the more I see Jesus as engaged with the poor, the sick, the broken, the marginalised. If we as a Church proclaim to be the story of Jesus in our world today, this is where we must be. Unfortunately I see our Institutional Church as far too uninvolved and silent in speaking up for the poorest in our world and I especially think of asylum seekers in this regard. I do acknowledge that there are wonderful Catholic organisations, and communities, who really make a difference to the poorest among us, but as a Church collective, we have so much more to do.

There will be some critics who say, yes but everyone must do this whether you are a Church person or not, and there are many other organisations and charities who do this as well, if not better than we can. True enough, but if we take our inspiration and energy from our belief in the Risen Jesus among us, I think we will have something to offer in partnership with these organisations and charities. We are not separate people from our world but called to engage with it.

CLERICALISM AND GOVERNANCE

My second point focuses on what I perceive as the growing clericalism in a Church where the separation between priests and lay people seems only to widen. There are far too many horror stories of priests 'ruling the roost' so to speak and of leading parishes without consulting with people.

In addition, it is very obvious that priesthood, as we know it in Australia, is dying. More and more Parishes are partnering and or amalgamating because of the shortage and ageing of priests, and less and less people are coming to Eucharist. Why are people not coming? Because it seems to me, the Catholic Church has an abuse story that has scandalised its

members and because it is so 'top heavy male' with a leadership that does not give women their rightful place in governance and in presiding over liturgy. We must find ways of healing, of inclusion and relevance or else we will become fewer and fewer and older and older. And we will find ourselves more and more irrelevant.

CLIMATE CHANGE

My third point concerns climate change and the care of the earth. There are still so many people, including Catholics, who have their head in the sand and cannot see the diminishment of the earth's resources and our part as a human race in contributing to this situation. Pope Francis has given us a wonderful document in 'Laudato Si' that is worthy of reflection and engagement. In the parish where I still work full time as priest, I remember a woman, Barbara from the Montmorency Asylum Seekers Support Group, ringing me and asking, 'is the Pope's document for Catholics only or is there any way where we can all come together as Montmorency communities'? Without detailing what happened, let me just say that for two years we gathered as various communities and organisations around Montmorency to discuss 'Laudato Si' and as a result some excellent initiatives have evolved.

If we don't take climate change to heart and do something that is substantial in response, we will continue to lose credibility, especially with young people, and we will be contributing to the destruction of our planet. If, on the other hand we partner with others, especially the young, no matter their religious affiliation, we may well find a new engagement with our faith communities.

EUCCHARIST

My fourth point concerns the celebration of Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council stated that Eucharist is the 'source and summit of our Liturgy'. And I believe this and for all my 50 years, I have never tired of celebrating Eucharist. Of course at times I have been tired, but Eucharist has always been the centre of my Catholic expression of prayer and action.

However Eucharist is not the source and summit for many, even most Catholics. There may well be occasions when these people come to Eucharist but it is no longer is an obligation for them and so many of them find it irrelevant and uninspiring. I don't want to wish a return to insisting on obligation, but seems to me, we have to think differently and offer a variety of prayer experiences that allow increased participation for those who come. I certainly support the ordination of women and their presiding over Eucharist. This however is not a likely scenario for some time to come.

Maybe a step is for the presence of women to preside over non-Eucharist gatherings, as indeed for men other than priests to preside over such gatherings. This of course is permissible now, but our insistence as Catholic Church on Eucharist and the presence of the priest, has meant we have not encouraged other expressions of Liturgy as well as we could have encouraged them. Such other liturgies can be more creative and less tied to rules and regulations as in our Eucharists, and thank goodness we will be able to avoid the awful 'new texts' that in my opinion have distanced the Eucharist from the lives of people.

There are many other points I could write about, like our engagement as Church in social media but I will leave it to others better informed than myself to write about this engagement. Let me let me leave it at this, with my concluding remarks to say that, in my view, it will not be the Institution that reforms the Catholic Church but the Spirit of God leading all Church members to a new story.