

Draft of Potential Joint Plenary Council Statement

(For consideration at Zoom meeting on 5 May 2022)

The Basis for this Statement

This statement reports the results of a discernment process involving Plenary Council (PC) members and *periti*, together with many other members of the faithful in the Catholic Church in Australia. It is undertaken under Article 3 of the Statutes and Regulatory Norms of the Council, which states that

‘Between the two general assemblies, further consultation, research, and discernment may be undertaken as may be beneficial.’

Consistent with the Regulations, the statement will be submitted to the Drafting Committee of the Plenary Council.

The Plenary Council Process to Date

The current Plenary Council is an event of great importance for the Catholic Church in Australia, and is being closely watched by many Catholics around the world. The farsighted decision by the Bishops in 2016 to set up a Council was partly driven by a recognition of deep problems in the Church, such as those evident in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis. But it was also a joyful response to Pope Francis’ inspiring message of synodality, for example in his closing address to the Synod on the Family in 2015. The establishment of the Council was a cause for optimism in Catholic communities, although some parishioners remained skeptical that any real change would be permitted.

Reflecting this early enthusiasm, over 222,000 people participated in 17,457 submissions to the first stage of the Council. These submissions were drawn upon by six working groups to produce, in June 2020, six Thematic Reports. These reports brought out both the substantive, but also the diverse, nature of the changes sought by the People of God in Australia. They were impressive documents, given the wide diversity of the inputs into them.

Many who participated in the First Assembly in October 2021 found it inspirational, with clear evidence that many members, despite very different views, were willing to participate in a genuine discernment process. But the Assembly was handicapped by flaws in its processes and by the impact of COVID. The agenda prepared for the meeting was vague, with individual items overlapping.

During the first general assembly there was little focus on specific proposals. The main focus was on small working group reports and on member interventions, some of which were presented in the morning plenary sessions. However, few of the members’ interventions were noted or acknowledged in the ‘Fruits’ report of the First General Assembly. A change to the PC Statutes during the Assembly allowed members to submit individual proposals ‘for further consideration’, and all these individual proposals were accepted as outcomes of the

First General Assembly and were published in the Fruits report. None of the individual member proposals were the subject of any communal discernment process during the Assembly.

Since the First Assembly concern about the processes, priorities and lack of transparency of the PC has grown sharply. The key follow-up document to the First Assembly – *Towards the Second Assembly* – has been rightly criticized on several grounds, even as its strengths are acknowledged. It contains no analysis of trends in the wider world which the Church exists to serve, nor of the centrality of the Church’s mission to serve that world. It develops few specific proposals for consideration at the next assembly, nor any clear set of priorities. While important matters are discussed, many key priorities are given short shrift. This is particularly true of the critical issue of moving to a truly equal position for women in all aspects of the life of the Church.

We are also concerned that, since the First Assembly, the processes guiding the Council have become much less synodal. Decisions are increasingly taken by a small group, with limited effective involvement of the members of the Council or of the *periti*. The broader people of God – priests, religious and other laity – are entirely excluded. This was made clear by the decision not to release the *Towards the Second Assembly* document to the wider Church. Nor have the requested PC member responses to this document been made available to other PC members.

On 31 March 2022 the Secretary to the Plenary Council, Fr David Ranson, gave a frank and honest assessment of the position of the Council in an address to an Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform. While still hoping to be surprised, he stressed that the changes possible at the Second Assembly will be modest, and that we ‘must tailor our expectations in anticipation of the inevitable ‘disappointment and disillusionment’ that will follow the Second Assembly in July.

Such an outcome is not one we can, or should, accept. Rather, responding to the needs of our world and of the Church, and to the urgings of Pope Francis, we should continue to have high and broad expectations for the PC’s outcomes. Here we make some suggestions about how to achieve more positive and substantial outcomes for the Plenary Council, in line with the high expectations raised by the extensive and thorough consultation process.

Some Suggestions for Stronger Outcomes

(i) Much Improved Processes for Assembly Two

While the July 2022 meeting is approaching rapidly, there is a need to put in place better processes for that meeting. We suggest the following:

- Council members and *periti* should be given immediate access to documents being prepared by the Drafting Committee concerning the agenda for the July 2022 meeting;
- A process should be set up to enable council members and *periti* to discuss these documents, both with one another and with members of the Drafting Committee;

- The *Towards the Second Assembly* document and successive drafts of the July 2022 agenda should be released publicly, to inform the faithful about ongoing developments;
- The agenda for the July 2022 meeting should be confined to a limited number of important items, with adequate time for discernment about these matters; and
- Some Council members and *periti* should be actively involved in planning for the July 2022 meeting.

(ii) Priorities for the Second Assembly meeting in July 2022

To date the Plenary Council has failed to establish a clear set of priorities or specific resolutions to be discussed in respect of any particular priority. This is a critical issue that should be addressed prior to the July 2022 meeting. We believe that this meeting will only be successful if it is able to focus on a small number of well-defined issues. Decisions of the Council do not need to be confined only to matters which the Australian bishops have the power to implement. The Plenary Council can include recommendations or requests to the Pope to consider changes deemed vital by the Council members.

Of the official Council documents to date, the six Thematic Reports provide the most developed recommendations (159 in total) in key areas, based on extensive discernment of the First Phase submissions by the faithful. An analysis of mentions of key issues in these recommendations (Table 1 below) provides a measure of the importance of issues as seen by the authors of these papers.

Table 1. Analysis of mentions in 159 recommendations in the six Thematic Reports, 2020

Issues	Number of mentions in recommendations (per cent of total)
1. Implement new governance changes	20
2. Humble leadership, changes to the priesthood	17
3. Promote mission and evangelisation	8
4. Encourage an open and inclusive Church	7
5. Personal faith formation	7
6. Promote role of women in the Church	7
7. Focus on the poor and marginalised	6
8. Build stronger parishes	6
9. Make the liturgy more relevant	6
10. Recognise and support indigenous peoples	4
11. Promote the family	4
12. Address the sexual abuse crisis	4
13. Celebrate and support the service organisations	2
14. Protect and restore the earth	1

Source: [Sense of the Faithful analysis](#)

However, many of the issues highlighted in Table 1 get scant recognition in the report for PC members 'Towards the Second Assembly'. The issues that receive limited attention include unequal position of women, the promotion of humble leadership, building stronger parishes, making the liturgy more relevant and making the Church more open to those

currently excluded, such as victims of abuse, those divorced and remarried and members of the LGBTQIA community. These issues should be addressed if the Council is to be credible with the faithful. Even with a broader range of issues, there is still a need to assign priority to the issues that can be addressed in the next assembly and the issues need a longer discernment process to arrive at an agreed way forward.

It is important in identifying the importance of issues to understand their significance for the Church by distinguishing between 'ad intra' issues and 'ad extra' issues. Many of the issues listed in Table 1 are about how to reform the Church and not about the mission of the Church. The structure should serve the mission. Vision comes first.

While we have been critical of the *Towards the Second Assembly* document, it does highlight a number of key issues on which progress has been made and which could be taken forward in the July 2022 meeting. We particularly highlight the response to our indigenous peoples, based on the NATSICC recommendations; a range of governance changes, based on *The Light from the Southern Cross*; and ecological conversion, based in part on the *Laudato Si'* action plans. The report also contains a proposal to establish a Ministry of Preaching, open to both men and women empowered to preach at the Eucharist (subject to amendment of canon 767), and to reinstate the Third Rite of Reconciliation.

While it is up to others to determine the agenda for the July 2022 assembly, we suggest that these items would be more than sufficient for serious consideration in that meeting. But this would need to be in a clear context that a further, well-prepared meeting would be held in 2023, to address other important matters.

(iii) Extend the Plenary Council

If the Australian Church is to address the urgent challenges that it faces, and to avoid widespread 'disappointment and disillusionment', the life of the Plenary Council should be extended. In principle this could be done by adding further sitting days to the current July 2022 schedule for the Second Assembly, but insufficient preparatory work has been done for an extended sitting at that time. The Statutes and Regulatory Norms provide for the Second Assembly to be adjourned under certain circumstances. In our view the July meeting should be so adjourned, with the intention to set a date in 2023 for a further meeting, with better preparation. Another option would be to put in train the processes necessary for a Third Assembly in 2023.

There is little doubt that a third meeting in 2023 is both necessary and achievable, given that, because of COVID, the full Assembly has yet to meet face-to-face. The COVID pandemic has starved members of the time together to undertake true discernment. Whichever course is adopted, it will be important both to achieve real outcomes from the July 2022 meeting and also to signal clearly that further major issues will be addressed in 2023.

(iv) Priorities for a further meeting in 2023

The issues noted above as getting scant recognition in *Towards the Second Assembly* should be at the heart of a further meeting in 2023. These include the full equality of women in the Church, the related issue of the promotion of humble leadership, building stronger parishes,

making the liturgy more relevant and making the Church more open to those currently excluded from it.

Critical as they are, these could be seen as largely internal issues. The Council's proceedings to date are not adequately focused on the Church's mission to serve the broader world, in Australia and beyond – the external issues. In our view, discussions in the Council should be grounded in a thorough analysis of changes taking place in society, both in Australia and internationally, and how these 'change of era' trends might shape the Church's responses. This will lead to many important matters, such as the critical one of outreach to other religious faiths, in an increasingly multi-faith society, and our focus on serving the poor and excluded.

(v) More synodal processes for a further meeting

We are concerned that the processes that have been put in place for the Council to date have not brought forward specific proposals on high priority issues of concern to the People of God in Australia. These processes have been too top-down and tightly managed to enable a genuinely synodal process to take place. This may in part have been a response by the Bishops to the diversity of views in the Australian Church. More open, consultative and transparent processes need to be put in place for a further meeting in 2023.

In our view, the Council should follow Pope Francis' advice to face the differences in the Church directly and let the intense discussions go on, all the while searching for a new way forward. It should also search for new ways of re-engaging all of the People of God in bringing the work of the Council to a positive conclusion.

2 May 2022