



TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN AUSTRALIA

REFLECTING ON THE FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

26 November 2023 | Solemnity of Christ the King

On the Solemnity of Christ the King, celebrating the sovereignty of the Kingdom of God, we give thanks for the many different ways by which the Spirit of God leads the Church forward both in fidelity to its Tradition and in creativity of Mission. In particular, we are mindful of the significant event of the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, recently completed in Rome, with its theme: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” Though it will be some time before the conclusion of the Synod in October 2024, and the Holy Father’s response thereafter, the invitation to the Church to consider how it might develop synodality at all levels of its life is now unmistakably before us. Synodality means “walking together”. It means renewing structures and processes by which all the Baptised might participate in a shared mission to bring the Good News of the Lord to a society hungry for the Word of Life. This Mission is not just for some, but for all Christ’s Faithful.

In Australia, the nature of synodality was at the very heart of the processes and conduct of the Fifth Plenary Council which concluded in July 2022. This was represented by the broad preliminary consultation at the service of the Plenary Council, by its representation of members, and by its methodology of ‘Conversation-in-the-Spirit’ which guided the conduct of the Second General Assembly of the Council, especially. The Australian experience has been of assistance to the recent Synod of Bishops, which has adopted a similar framework for its discernment.

The five volumes of Acts and Decrees of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia were presented to the Dicastery for Bishops of the Apostolic See in January 2023, following their approval at the Australian Bishops Conference Plenary in November 2022, in accord with the Statutes of the Plenary Council. We await the *recognitio* of the Apostolic See. The Decrees of the Council may be promulgated only after the grant of the *recognitio*, in accord with Canon 446 of Universal Law. Subsequently, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference will establish measures to assure the effectiveness and accountability of the implementation phase of the Plenary Council.

Notwithstanding, in line with the intention of the Ninth Decree of the Plenary Council, the Bishops consider it helpful to provide an interim report on the Plenary Council’s implementation as 2023 comes to its conclusion. Much work has been done in anticipation of the receipt of *recognitio* by the Apostolic See. Some of this work has been formal; much has been informal, organically assumed in diverse local contexts which have taken up the impulse of the Plenary Council and sought to apply it in myriad situations. Throughout, it is evident that there has been a revitalisation of the way in which we engage with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, with a deeper commitment to listening and accompanying one another, providing a greater understanding that we are co-responsible for our shared mission to proclaim the Gospel.

On a national level, the General Introduction and the Introductions to the first eight Decrees of the Plenary Council were translated into a pastoral study guide that was published for Pentecost 2023, [*Carrying Forward the Plenary Council: As we continue the journey together*](#). The resource invited Catholic parishes, schools and other communities to pray about, reflect upon and review what they are already doing, or could be doing, in relation to acting on the commitments made in the Decrees of the Plenary Council. This has been a very helpful means to invite further the People of God in Australia into the synodal pathway.

In addition, [each article of the 10 Decrees of the Plenary Council](#) has been entrusted for consideration to one of the Bishops Commissions. These Commissions have been for Relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples; for Liturgy; for Professional Standards and Safeguarding; for Catholic Education; for Social Justice, Mission and Service; and for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry. In addition to these, the Bishops' Permanent Committee, the Episcopal Panel for Canon Law and the National Centre for Pastoral Research have also been involved, as have the numerous Councils of lay advisors that support that work of the Commissions. Each of these groups has acted as a study circle for the Decrees and their articles, considering effective pastoral strategies by which the Decrees may be implemented. Reports from the Commissions were received at the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Plenary in November 2023. This work will be of special assistance for attaining the objectives of the Plenary Council. It shall achieve greater form between the time of the promulgation of the Decrees and when they take effect six months later.

It has been a particular grace of the Plenary Council to stimulate and to encourage many initiatives throughout Australia. For example, Diocesan Synods or Assemblies have been conducted in the Dioceses of Adelaide and Parramatta. Others are also in the planning stage for such forums. The Archdiocese of Brisbane is currently preparing for a Synod in August/September 2024. The Archdiocese of Perth is preparing to re-establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council and is undertaking a journey of discernment that has included a Diocesan Assembly Formation Day in 2023 and now looks towards the hosting of a Diocesan Assembly in 2024. The Diocese of Broken Bay has initiated regional pastoral discernments, while the Archbishop of Sydney has held small gatherings over a meal where Christ's faithful can discuss openly matters of interest and concern. The Diocese of Sandhurst formed a Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Council in April 2023 after a synodal preparation process including a diocesan assembly. The Diocese of Sale has appointed a Facilitator for Synodality and Mission to engage people in a discernment process of how to become a more synodal, missionary Church and is preparing for a Diocesan Assembly in 2024.

Many parishes throughout Australia are also considering innovative processes and structures to nurture the practice of synodality. Indeed, throughout the country, people have been drawn into reflection on the themes emerging from the Plenary Council. We think, for example, of the 2023 national conference of Catholic Mission, "One Heart Many Voices". Others have continued to network through online gatherings such as those provided by Garratt Publishing and Yarra Theological Union, and in so doing are contributing to a shared Mission. Individual Religious Institutes and Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (who conduct many of our education, health and social services) have welcomed speakers and established groups to engage with issues addressed in the Plenary Council and related to its various Decrees. It is clear that there are many participants on a shared journey which continues to unfold.

In providing this report, the Bishops of Australia share their commitment to honour and implement the remarkable work of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia. It remains fresh and alive in our planning for the future. We look back in gratitude for the breadth of engagement on every level of the life of the Church and for the experience of encounter, listening and discernment (which lies at the very centre of a synodal framework) afforded by the experience of the General Assemblies of the Plenary Council. We look forward with anticipation and hope that, with the promulgation of the Decrees of the Plenary Council, the Church in Australia will be graced with both a deepened experience of Communion and Participation, and at the same time a revitalised impetus to Mission.

This report was prepared by a group of Plenary Council members and others nominated by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial PJPs, which gathered on November 10 to review the implementation of the Plenary Council: Sr Monica Cavanagh, Hon. Jacinta Collins, Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, Miss Monica Doumit, Archbishop Anthony Fisher, Dr Ricki Jeffery, Ms Cathy Jenkins, Ms Kathy McEvoy, Bishop Shane Mackinlay, Ms Catherine Nguyen, Archbishop Patrick O'Regan, Bishop Anthony Randazzo and Fr David Ranson.