



FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

WITNESSING TO THE EQUAL DIGNITY OF WOMEN AND MEN

1. God's word speaks clearly of the equal dignity of women and men: "So God created humankind in his image . . . male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). For Christians specifically, "there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). In the Church, all people receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit that are mediated through our baptism: "There is one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all" (Ephesians 4: 4-6).
2. Scripture calls the Church to recognize the equal dignity of women and men and to esteem their contributions. Throughout history, the Church has looked to Mary the Mother of God as a model for every human person and *the* model for Christian discipleship. At the close of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Saint Paul VI spoke of the "hour of woman," (Paul VI, Address to Women, 8 December 1965) recognizing the unique contribution that women make in the life of society and the Church. This has been true in the history of the Catholic Church in Australia. Mary of the Cross MacKillop, Eileen O'Connor, Mary Glowrey, and Caroline Chisholm are examples of faith-filled women who have made outstanding contributions to society and to Catholic life, often against significant odds.
3. In his *Letter to Women*, Pope Saint John Paul II apologised for harm caused to women, and he called us to ensure the personal dignity and rights of women are protected and upheld as well as recognising the unique gifts they contribute to building up a healthy Church and society. In particular, he called us to work to overcome the cultural assumptions of inequality:

Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. Certainly, it is no easy task to assign the blame for this, considering the many kinds of cultural conditioning which down the centuries have shaped ways of thinking and acting. And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. John Paul (John Paul II, Letter to Women, 29 June 1995, n. 3)
4. From the beginning of the twentieth century, a growing awareness of the equal dignity of women and men has reshaped Australian social and political life. Nonetheless, disregard

for the equal dignity of women and men persists in society and the Church. There is still much to be done.

5. The Plenary Council has heard from women of varied experiences in the Church today. Sometimes women are joyful, happy, and thriving in their service to Christ and the Church. Other times women experience barriers and a lack of support in seeking to offer their gifts in service of the Gospel, which has caused frustration and disappointment. Authentic witness to the equal dignity of women and men requires addressing issues of power, authority, and the freedom of persons to decide and act on their decisions with informed consciences. We need to deepen our understanding of the human person, to appreciate more fully the gifts that women and men together bring to the life of the Church. This will require scriptural and theological formation and catechesis at the parish, diocesan, eparchial, and national levels. Here too, there is much work to be done.

6. In light of the above and aware of the extent of the ongoing challenges, this Plenary Council commits the Church in Australia to acting in ways that witness clearly to the equal dignity of women and men, with their diverse gifts and experiences. It commits the Church to enhancing the role of women in the Church, and to overcoming assumptions, culture, practices and language that lead to inequality.

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DECREE

The Plenary Council decrees:

Article 1

That the Plenary Council commits the Church in Australia to ensuring:

- a. through formal policies and intentional practice, the experiences and perspectives of women, including women who exercise ministry, are heard, considered and valued at local, diocesan and national levels. This is particularly important for matters which affect them distinctively;
- b. that women are appropriately represented in decision-making structures of Church governance at the parish, diocese or eparchy, and national level, and in Church agencies, entities, and organisations;
- c. that dioceses and eparchies recognise and value publicly, and properly remunerate, women who lead and serve in the Church in various ways.

Article 2

That each Australian diocese and eparchy commits to supporting, with appropriate formation and recognition, new opportunities for women to participate in ministries that engage with the most important aspects of diocesan and parish life.

Article 3

That the Plenary Council commits the Church in Australia to implementing more fully the undertakings made by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in their Social Justice Statement, *Woman and Man: The Bishops Respond* (2000), in response to the research report *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* (1999).

Article 4

That, should the universal law of the Church be modified to authorize the diaconate for women, the Plenary Council recommends that the Australian Bishops examine how best to implement it in the context of the Church in Australia.

The Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia will interpret the decrees of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia in accordance with the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches and the traditions of each church *sui iuris*.

In accordance with canon 446 of the Code of Canon Law, this decree is not to be promulgated until it has been reviewed by the Apostolic See. It will be promulgated in *Australasian Catholic Record* and the website of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in accordance with its usual practice. The decrees will oblige six months after promulgation.

Signed:

Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB
President

Bishop Shane Mackinlay
Vice-President

Date: