



## Introduction

1. The Catholic Church proclaims Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). We seek to follow his way, commit to and live by his truth, and to allow the Spirit to work within us so that, with Saint Paul, we can say: “I no longer live, for it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). We want to offer everyone the promise and the hope of the Good News of Jesus Christ.
2. Over the years of preparation and consultation for the Fifth Plenary Council, two questions – both theological and pastoral – have guided the prayer, reflection, conversation and discernment at each stage of the process:
  - what is the Spirit saying to the Church?
  - how do we become a more Christ-centred Church?
3. These questions help us to reflect on the themes and priorities that emerged during the national consultation and First Assembly and that now form the basis of the proposals of this framework for motions.

### **Listen to what the Spirit is saying**

4. By deciding in May 2016 to call the Catholic Church in Australia to undertake the journey of the Fifth Plenary Council, the Australian Catholic Bishops were building on several years of prayerful reflection on how the Church in this country could effectively respond to the challenges and opportunities facing the Catholic community in the 21st century.
5. At the turn of the millennium, Pope Saint John Paul II urged the universal Church to a renewed grounding in the person of Jesus Christ and to a new vigour and creativity in missionary witness to the way of Christ. In his 2001 Apostolic Letter, *Novo millennio ineunte* (Entering the New Millennium), the Pope called all the baptised to “contemplate the face of Christ” in all the peoples and circumstances of our time, and to “start afresh from Christ” in living out the Gospel message in each concrete context.
6. In 2012, the Catholic Church in Australia celebrated a Year of Grace. It was a time of renewal and growth in prayer for individuals and communities, and a means of discerning the timeliness of a national gathering of the Church in this country. The warm response to the Year of Grace in dioceses and parishes, schools and agencies around the country indicated the readiness of the Catholic community to face the challenges of renewing the Church’s pastoral presence and evangelical mission in Australia.

7. The bishops' decision to call the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia, and to undertake a period of extensive national consultation, expresses the understanding of the Church and its mission articulated in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and in subsequent papal teaching. Pope Francis uses the theological term “synodality” to describe this way of being Church. Synodality calls all the baptised to a shared journey of “listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (cf. Revelation 2:7 et al.). It requires the ongoing practice of discernment by the community of the baptised, animated and guided by the Holy Spirit, as we walk together on the way (*syn-hodos*) of discipleship of Jesus in the circumstances of our time.
8. The consultation phase of the Plenary Council asked Catholics and others to consider the question: “what do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?” This question emerges from an awareness that the Catholic community in this country is facing a time of both *crisis* and *hope*.
9. The current crisis has several dimensions. A decline in those identifying as believers and the practice of Christian life in Australian society, is calling for a creative and committed response. There is an urgent need to address the continuing effects of the criminal and sinful abuse of minors by Church personnel and the negligent failures of due care by Church authorities. An effective response to the loss of public trust in Catholic governance and procedures evidenced by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is required. Action is needed concerning the viability and sustainability of dioceses, parishes, religious institutes and ministries due to changing demographics, personnel and resourcing. We need to find ways to develop the charisms of the ordained and of all the baptised in the Church, in existing and new ministries that foster the mission of the Church today.
10. Yet this is also a time of hope in the Church in Australia. We are conscious of a stronger awareness of the presence of the Lord Jesus and his life-giving Spirit in the hearts of believers, in the communal life of the Church, in all human cultures and peoples, and throughout creation. This hope encourages us to work together with other Christians, religions and people of goodwill who share our Gospel-based values, to strengthen the service, advocacy and prophetic presence of the Church in Australian society. It urges us to build on the good that has been achieved through the commitment of so many clergy, religious and lay people, both employed and volunteers, in parish ministry and mission, youth ministry, education, health and aged care, social services and community development. It motivates us to undertake the necessary work to rebuild confidence in the probity and trustworthiness of the Catholic community in this country. At each of its stages the journey of the Plenary Council has been a way of spiritual conversation and communal discernment. This approach flows from the nature and mission of the Church itself. Grounded in practices of prayer and spiritual attentiveness, Catholic people have shared their experiences of living the faith in an increasingly interconnected yet fragile world. This process of listening, reflecting, speaking and listening again contributes to a rich consideration of pastoral needs and complex circumstances. It informs decisions about practical action that furthers the mission of the local Church. Such practices of communal discernment are an authentic expression of a synodal Church which can be embedded in the canonical and pastoral structures of parishes, dioceses, eparchies, ministerial public juridic persons and Catholic agencies.
11. Listening to what the Spirit is saying requires a faith-inspired awareness of the voices, circumstances and contexts that call for a response in Christian discipleship and witness.

Vatican II called this “scrutinising the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel”.<sup>1</sup>

12. The Plenary Council has recognised the call of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and the need for the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics in the life of the Church as crucial signs of the times for the Church in Australia. Our times are also marked by the transition of Australian society from a predominantly Christian population to a multi-religious, multi-cultural and non-affiliated society, together with the public acceptance of diverse forms of marriage and family life, sexual orientation and gender identification. Legislation has been adopted that undermines the protection of human life from conception to natural death. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and wellbeing, social inequity, workplace practices and international development pose serious questions about the future we wish to build for our country and our world. The Plenary Council embraced the urgent need for the development of an integral ecology of life as a sign of the times that requires what recent popes have called an “ecological conversion.”

### **How do we become a more Christ-centred Church?**

13. The call and desire to become more Christ-centred as individual Catholics, families, and as communities of faith has been like a touchstone for the Plenary Council journey. We recognise that this time of crisis and hope in the Church in Australia is a call to a spiritual deepening and reorientation. Answering this call will enable us, as baptised people and as Church communities, to reflect more clearly the image of Jesus Christ in the worship, ministries and common life of the community, and in the witness and service that Catholics offer Australian society and the world. The Gospel calls us to profound “conversion, which ... leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change”,<sup>2</sup> so that we might follow Christ more closely in all areas of life.
14. Many Catholics have noted Pope Francis’ observation that we live in not only an era of change, but a change of era.<sup>3</sup> The underlying principles and values, and the shared understandings and commitments, that previously united Australian society are no longer predominant. Social and technological innovations, greater cultural and religious diversity, global communications and travel are all factors contributing to a more complex and pluralist context. The challenge for people of faith is to be aware of both the distinctiveness of their own faith tradition, and of their connectedness to people of other faiths or of non-religious worldviews. The identity and practice of Catholic people and communities is grounded in a personal encounter with God’s love made visible in Jesus Christ and poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Far from separating believers in Christ from other faiths and peoples,

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), n. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter on Care for our Common Home, *Laudato Si’* (24 May 2015), n. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Francis, “Meeting with the participants in the fifth convention of the Italian Church” (10 November 2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151110\\_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html)

Christ's love impels us towards relationships of solidarity and service wherever possible in our society.

15. The wide-ranging responses to the Listening and Discernment phase identified several ways in which a Christ-centred Church expresses its identity and mission. A Christ-centred Church is missionary and evangelising, witnessing to the Gospel message of God's reign on earth in every aspect of life. It is inclusive, participatory and synodal, modelled on the Trinitarian communion of life. It is prayerful and eucharistic, giving voice to all creation's praise of God. Such a Church is humble, merciful and healing, following the Lord who is among us as one who serves. It is joyful, hope-filled and serving, confident in the Light who shines in the darkness. A Christ-centred Church is open to conversion, renewal and reform, since Christ and his Spirit are continually present and at work in the Church and the world, drawing all creation into the transforming love poured out in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord.
16. These features of a Christ-centred Church were explored through the spiritual conversations and deliberations of the First Assembly, as well as through the ongoing reflection and feedback from Plenary Council Members and others. They are expressed in the themes described below which form the basis of proposals for consideration at the Second Assembly in July 2022. The Fifth Plenary Council seeks to foster a Christ-centred Church in Australia by focusing on the following themes through the Implementation phase of the Council:
  1. Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts
  2. Choosing Repentance - Seeking Healing
  3. Called by Christ - Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples
  4. Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men
  5. Communion in Grace: Sacrament to the World
  6. Formation and Leadership for Mission and Ministry
  7. At the Service of Communion, Participation and Mission: Governance
  8. Integral Ecology and Conversion for the Sake of Our Common Home