

‘The Plenary Council and Synod of Bishops in Australia and Oceania’

ABRIDGED VERSION FOR TRANSLATION

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Wurzburg Conference

June 1-3 2023

Introduction

Australia is a middle-sized immigrant Western Church, (25.4 million people and 20% Catholic), operating on Indigenous land, whose church elites are influenced mostly by the English-speaking churches in the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, and USA. Within Oceania it is a Global North country surrounded by its Global South neighbours.

The Plenary Council (PC), 2018-2022, was one of the precursors of the international Synod, mentioned favourably as an exemplar of synodality by Pope Francis in Let Us Dream. I can speak personally about the PC as a participant seeking church reform.

The Australian church contains friends of Germany and of the German Synodal Way (DSW). Two Australians, Ms Susan Sullivan and Bishop Shane Mackinlay, were official observers at the DSW Final Assembly in March. Ms Sullivan reported most favourably about her experience. Few Australian Catholics would know very much about DSW, however, other than the reported clashes with Rome.

The Plenary Council and the Synod of Bishops, 2021-2024, overlapped. The announcement of the beginning of the Synod of Bishops in October 2021 took place just as the First Assembly of the PC process concluded. I took part in making group submissions for the Synod within Australia, but I played no direct part in Oceania discussions during the Continental phase of the discussions in Fiji.

The Plenary Council in Australia: Processes and Experience

The PC began in 2018 with a four-year process planned but was delayed for a year because of the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The church process proceeded through several stages of consultation, discernment, and assembly. The First PC Assembly in early October 2021 was not face to face, but a hybrid mixture of smaller meetings of members in dioceses and a national online meeting over six days. The PC concluded with the Second Assembly in Sydney in early July 2022.

The PC idea had been discussed within the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) for a decade before the decision was taken. Initially it was driven by the decline of the church in Australia, measured by the church’s own official records of falling Mass attendance and vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and other internal issues related to women and youth. International church developments also played a role, including the Papacy of Pope Francis.

These motivations were joined later by the impact of the federal government’s Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2013-2017, in which the Catholic Church was one focus. The church set up a Truth Justice and Healing Council, with a lay Catholic, Mr Francis Sullivan, as CEO, to lead its response. The Royal Commission (RC) report uncovered extensive child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions and cover up of these crimes by Church authorities, including bishops. It made recommendations about governance and cultural reform to the church.

The lay Catholic renewal movement, led by the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform network (ACCCCR), had been calling for church reform for several decades. Its concerns were a revitalisation of the church along Vatican II lines, including equality for women, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and lay leadership. Its issues are laid out in an important book, called Getting Back on Mission, written by Catholics for Renewal, a major reform group. It was based on their PC submission.

The RC report shook up an already dispirited Catholic community and distrust of episcopal authority grew even further. Decline in the church continued. Yet the community responded energetically to the call of the Council and made 17,500 submissions. Some wanted to reinforce the status quo orthodoxy, but the majority mood was for internal and external reform. Priority internal issues included governance reform, equality for women in ministry and decision-making, reform of seminary training and greater adult formation, recognition of the Indigenous Catholic tradition, and liturgical reform. External issues included promotion of integral ecology, public leadership, social service, and education, reaching out to minorities and those excluded by the church, such as divorced and remarried Catholics and the LGBTQI+ community.

The RC report specifically advised the Church to undertake cultural and structural reform to remedy its child sexual abuse failings and to improve church leadership and accountability. In turn the church pledged to respond seriously to the report. The ACBC and Catholic Religious Australia (the peak body for leaders of religious orders and congregations) responded by setting up a group of lay women and men, religious and bishops called the Implementation Advisory Group (IAG) to advise them on improved church safeguarding measures to protect vulnerable children and adults. It also created a Governance Review Project Team (GRPT) to advise on the RC's call for structural and cultural change.

The GRPT formed an international advisory group, drawn from the United States and Europe. After fifteen months it presented its report, The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia (LSC), in May 2020. This was a blueprint for widespread governance reform in dioceses and parishes, built on an examination of synodal theory and practice. In almost 100 detailed recommendations it accepted modern civic principles of good governance, including co-responsible leadership, consultation, inclusiveness, greater roles for stakeholders, financial transparency, and open government. It recommended the greater involvement of the People of God in leadership selection, including at the episcopal and parish level, seminary formation, and pastoral planning. It advised that Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils should be mandatory so that governance could be co-responsible.

This report was meant to be a resource for the PC but was not integrated directly into its processes. The PC process itself included the publication of the community submissions, followed by the creation of six lay-majority writing groups to produce theme papers. Then a small central writing team, chaired by the PC President produced a Working Document, followed eventually by an Agenda for the First Assembly.

This Agenda was a comprehensive but bland and ultimately unsatisfactory distillation of the fire and passion for reform found in the community submissions. The 16 agenda questions can be found in A Church for All, an ACCCR booklet, which reflected its attempts to influence the PC process.

The whole process accentuated tensions between an inner circle and the wider Catholic community over whether it should be open or closed. This is sometimes explained as a difference between a P C

'bubble' in which the members go about their discernment in a quasi-monastic conclave and a Council in which members are a 'bridge' between the Assembly and the wider community.

The process also highlighted the elevated role of the bishops. Widespread suspicion of the hierarchical church model and of the tradition of deference to church authority existed within the renewal movement. The bishops themselves kept control of the whole process within their own hands, though they were advised by an executive committee of lay women and men, religious and clerics, and delegated the practical operation of the PC to a Facilitation Team, led by a lay woman. The bishops controlled the composition and structure of the council and each step along the way has only gone forward after being signed off by the ACBC at one of its twice-yearly general meetings.

It is unwise to generalise about the Australian bishops who are divided along philosophical and cultural lines familiar to Catholics anywhere. Their internal discussions are private, but their positions can be determined by their public statements. Trying to hold the bishops conference and the PC together were the ACBC President, Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, who was a strong supporter of a synodal process and an open PC agenda, and Archbishop Tim Costelloe of Perth, PC President and now Coleridge's successor as ACBC President. At one end of a continuum there is a small but powerful group of conservative bishops; at the other end there are one or two progressive bishops. The other thirty to forty bishops hold a variety of positions between the two ends of the continuum.

In dioceses the level of fruitful engagement between laity and bishops varied. There were few synodal diocesan structures and only a small number of diocesan pastoral councils. Prior to the PC some bishops, including senior ones, rebuffed any attempts to engage with lay persons seeking to challenge orthodox authority and renew church ways of doing business. Others engaged in good faith. The same diversity holds at the lower level in the parishes in terms of relations between laity and priests and in terms of parish pastoral councils. The Church in Australia is a 'patchwork' church.

This variety can be better understood if the character of the Church in Australia is quickly sketched. It plays a large part in Australian life. More than a fifth of the community are educated in Catholic schools. Historically nuns and brothers have provided that schooling and other services to the Catholic community. For many Catholics, schools are their main connection with the church, more important even than parishes. These religious institutes are a major part of the Australian church and their often-contentious relations with bishops are a major part of the church story.

The church is multi-ethnic, but the Vatican II generation is predominantly Anglo-Celtic, with a strong Irish history. The decline in priestly vocations now means that about 50% of priests are foreign born, including many from Africa and India. Recently the church community has been invigorated by immigration, especially from the Indian sub-continent, the Philippines and Vietnam. The predominantly Latin Rite Church also operates alongside a growing number of Eastern Rite Churches, especially the Maronite church. This means the church is increasingly culturally diverse.

The whole PC experience was presented primarily in spiritual terms. The Council sought out the Holy Spirit in its deliberations by asking 'What does God want of us?'. The issues were always presented in a theological and biblical framework. The guiding methodology of the Assemblies was Ignatian spirituality. Small group work within the Council was structured around the three stages of spiritual discernment. The emphasis was on 'deep listening'. Sometimes the emphasis on 'deep listening' discouraged necessarily robust discussion of issues.

The Council itself operated under Vatican rules found in Canon Law. The 280 members were a mix of bishops, priests, religious, lay men, and lay women. The laity were in the minority, making the PC

unrepresentative in a democratic sense, but the bishops did achieve an increase in lay numbers after representations to the Vatican. Women were also in a minority. The proceedings were synodal, but according to Canon Law, only bishops had a deliberative vote. All other votes are consultative only. The impact of this rule was not tested at the First Assembly as the voting was procedural only. At the Second Assembly it became crucial when the bishops initially rejected a major part of the agenda on women's role in the church. This rejection was later overturned after members insisted on a new vote and the bishops complied. These rules led to some discussion at the highest level, including by the Secretary of the Plenary Council, about whether the Australian church would have been better served by the greater flexibility of a Synod rather than the regulations of a PC.

PC achievements included:

- Support for the Indigenous 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' and for Indigenous spirituality generally to be incorporated within the church;
- Support for Laudato Si action plans;
- Progress on welcoming women deacons should Rome allow it;
- Support for a more inclusive new translation of the liturgy;
- Support for extension of the Third Rite of Reconciliation;
- And general support for synodality, equality for women, and for regular diocesan synods and assemblies.

The disappointments included:

- Defeat in the consultative vote for lay preaching (but 20 out of 40 bishops supported it anyway);
- Lack of attention to radical inclusiveness (e.g. for LGBTQIA+; divorced and remarried);
- General lack of boldness of vision;
- And general timidity as far as Vatican oversight was concern

In general:

The PC was a national event, but there is no 'national church'. The ACBC is consciously passive vis-à-vis dioceses. This is a major limitation for PC implementation. We are a fragmented church in so many ways. There is the diocesan/religious divide and the geographical division into 34 dioceses. There are also the Eastern-Latin church tensions. This fragmentation provides opportunities for reform initiatives, but also condemns reform to being piecemeal.

We are also polarized like the universal church. Authority (executive, legislative and judicial) still lies with bishops and priests. This situation can be positive in favourable circumstances, but in the wrong hands can have awful outcomes. An ethos of synodality is still 'skin deep' and it's meaning much disputed. 'Walking Together' in a synodal church can be interpreted in many ways.

PC members have no ongoing church standing. Most, if not all, have not even been invited to play an ongoing role within their dioceses or within the Synod. Some former PC members, without encouragement and with limited success, have attempted a play such a continuing role. One example in late 2022 was a Statement of Solidarity with LGBTQIA+ Catholics signed by 46 former members of the PC and communicated to the bishops.

On the other hand, bishops are the constant factor. 'Walking together' cannot be episodic or temporary. To bear fruit it requires constant engagement and listening to each other by ordained, religious and lay people over many years. Permanent and episodic synodal structures are necessary

to do this, but they are often resisted or watered down by those in authority. This is the case, for instance, with diocesan and parish pastoral councils.

There is much more to say about the PC, and a longer version of this presentation is available for your interest, but I now turn to the Synod.

The Synod of Bishops on Synodality in Australia and Oceania

Despite the late Cardinal George Pell's recent dramatic and outrageous denunciations of Pope Francis and the Synod, the Synod has many attractive features for Australians, including the documentation and the international debates; but the local Australian consultation has been less successful. The Catholic community was clearly fatigued on the consultation journey (compared with the 17,500 PC submissions there were less than a hundred group submissions, representing fewer than 1,000 people, at the final Continental Stage).

Shortly after the PC First Assembly concluded the initial international consultation Synod consultation was launched. This conjunction put the Church in Australia in an unusual position. What was the connection between the two events? The ACBC took the unavoidable decision to integrate the second consultation with the PC outcomes. An independent Synod of Bishops community consultation was undertaken, but the level of engagement was much less than with the earlier Plenary Council engagement. Catholics were advised to respond to the issues raised in the PC through the international process. Not only was there evidence of lethargy and 'consultation fatigue' in the community and church leaders, but some Catholics made their submissions direct to the Synod Secretariat in Rome because they distrusted how much their voices would be heard and 'reflected' within the local process.

The Synod of Bishops consultation encouraged greater awareness of the international dimension of church renewal. Both the hierarchical institutional church and the lay renewal movement have always had many international connections, as have religious leaders. The Amazonian Synod, the DSW and other international assemblies are regularly reported in the Australian media, both secular and church. The same is true of lay initiatives such as the Root and Branch lay synod in Bristol.

The LSC team research also benefitted enormously from its international advisers. The renewal movement has regularly called on international Catholic speakers, including Dr Mary McAleese, Sister Joan Chittister, Prof Massimo Faggioli (LSC consultant), Prof Richard Lennan (official PC adviser), Raphael Luciani, and many others, for inspiration. Even the Australian Ambassador to the Vatican facilitated an international Zoom conference on Synodality and Women in the Church.

Australia has been well represented on the various international Synod committees, for instance by Ms Susan Pascoe, Chair of the Oceania Bishops Synod Taskforce who is a member of the Synod's global methodology commission, and Archbishop Costelloe, and this has encouraged us. But there have been relatively few community submissions, given fatigue, disinterest, and the usual problem of limited time to respond.

The Continental Phase Document (DCS) was well-received by the reform movement. This was reflected in the Australian submissions. For instance, the local Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn group's response was,

impressed by the refreshing honesty about the Church's problems. It names the difficulties when often this is avoided. This is inspiring despite the consultation not being advertised or encouraged within many of our parishes and dioceses...

The document positively emphasises inclusiveness and synodality. Our experiences within our continental Church are often the opposite of both. Much of our experience with the Church hierarchy has been the antithesis of synodality...

The section on “Rethinking Women’s Participation” (Paras 60-65) resonates particularly strongly with our lived experience of the Church in Australia. It applies to all aspects of Church structures, decision-making and ministry.

After the completion of the first international stage from October 2021, the second local/ national stage began in October 2022. Australian Catholics had until 9 December 2022 to create local groups and then to respond. The tight schedule may explain some of the limited community response. The central National Pastoral Research Centre (NPRC) team then had to complete its synthesis before the end of the month.

The official Oceania Phase response began with a Draft document produced in Melbourne on 8-13 January 2023 by a delegated writing group of about 20 members rather than a general assembly, which was considered but ultimately unable to be held. It was based on four national reports. Each of the five ‘national’ groups had three representatives on this group.

There was some overlap among Australian representation with PC non-member participants, e.g. church officials Dr Trudi Dantis, CEO of the NPRC, who was an ACBC representative, and Dr Sandie Cornish, Suva Assembly Taskforce Chair, but only one Australian PC member was included. The modus operandi was ‘retreat-like’, echoing the earlier creation of the DCS itself.

The composition of the Oceania continental writing group was an interesting mix of five elements of the Global North and the Global South (Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, the Pacific Islands, and the ‘largely Australian’ Eastern Churches)). The New Zealand hierarchy is regarded as more progressive than Australian bishops and the Eastern bishops more conservative.

It is fair to say, however, as some have noted, that as the largest and most resource-rich component Australia likely played a key role. Australians were appointed to key positions, including Oceania chair, Suva Assembly Task Force chair, spiritual conversations’ facilitator (Bro. Ian Cribb SJ, who played the same role for the PC), and lead coordinating writer.

The Suva assembly, which worked on a draft Continental document, was held within the triennial meeting of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania (FCBO). The final draft was completed by 31 March 2023.

Among the outcomes enthusiastic support for integral ecology and Laudato Si was most distinctive. This was a natural priority given extreme climate-related problems in the Pacific, shared by all Oceania nations and bishops’ conferences. The Synodal Assembly was asked to “consider this an urgent existential global crisis” and a “mission field in which the whole Church globally should be engaged in”.

The general tone, praising the DCS, is generally ‘reformist’ and attentive to calls for greater synodality, inclusion, equality for women, governance reform and ‘unity in diversity’ in church teaching on sexuality and relationships. The Global South and Eastern church views tended to moderate Aust/New Zealand views on inclusion and governance reform, however. The Australian emphasis on Indigenous spirituality was reflected in support for inculturation and localisation.

The FCBCO then added its own pastoral reflection on the continental response to the DCS, which expressed confidence that Christ was moving the Church forward and their trust in “the process and the people we appointed”. It hoped for broader participation as the Synodal process unfolds and noticed a “desire for practical applications of synodality in the present moment”, However it called for appreciation that synodality “would be a long journey” and that the continental response was more like a “postcard” along the way. It noted that “Not every bishop found every part of the document wholly convincing or complete, and some had doubts and concerns about where this might be leading us”.

There are many tensions and warning signs implicit and explicit within this reflection by the Oceania bishops. The possibility of the Synod meeting ‘unrealistic’ community expectations of practical synodal outcomes is an underlying theme.

Conclusion

There are lessons for the Synod of Bishops to be drawn from the PC in Australia. Translating synodality into practice at the diocesan and local level remains key. The Church moves very slowly.

Despite official statements to the contrary, most of the Australian Catholic community has disengaged. Maintaining attention for a total six years (four plus two) is a test of resilience, especially given PC implementation disappointments. Many reforming Catholics were exhausted by the PC process, but some are pressing on. There is no ‘national’ church alternative. Initial hopes for large-scale church reform in Australia have mostly been dashed. In a fragmented church any reform can only be piecemeal.

There are greater hopes for the Synod process in the much longer term. But this whole process, perhaps inevitably given the scale, is much further removed from the grass-roots Catholic community experience. It has become much more institutionalised, despite the presence of many excellent people. There is also a growing focus on embedding synodal processes rather than outcomes. Those who emphasise practical outcomes increasingly are being sidelined.

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