



General Congregation 12 - 18 October 2023

Testimony

The Fifth Plenary Council of Australia

EMBARGO UNTIL SPEECH DELIVERED

Mons. Shane Mackinlay

Bishop of Sandhurst, Australia

The Fifth Plenary Council of Australia was held over four years, from 2018 to 2022. In many respects, it was more like a synod than a council: it used a very synodal process, and only a few elements of the final decrees were strictly legislative.

Our process began with a very broad consultation involving 220,000 people, responding to the question: What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time? This led to thematic papers, further discussion and feedback across the country, an *Instrumentum Laboris*, and then two one-week assemblies, with consultation during the year between them on initial draft documents, leading eventually to a set of eight papers being presented to the second assembly. Each of these papers sought to identify ways in which the Church in Australia could become more Christ-centred and missionary. With various amendments made during the Assembly, they became the eight decrees of the Council, addressing: reconciliation with indigenous people, healing the wounds caused by sexual abuse, missionary discipleship, witnessing to the equal dignity of women and men, spirituality and liturgy, formation for ministry, synodal models of governance, and integral ecology.

At all stages of the process, we ensured that drafting, discussion and decision was guided by discernment and conversations in the spirit. At least half of each day during the two assemblies was devoted to conversations in the spirit, beginning with extended prayer on a scriptural text, in table groups of about 10 people, including a mix of bishops, priests, religious, and lay people. There were 280 members, with about 60% specified by canon law and the remaining members being proposed from parishes, dioceses and other groups in the Church.

During our second assembly, we had a moment of crisis, which has been widely reported. This was in voting on the initial version of the decree relating to the equal dignity of women and men, which failed to achieve the required two-thirds majority amongst the bishops on either of the resolutions that it included. This reflected a range of concerns and reservations across the assembly, rather than a simple division between any two camps for and against, whether that be bishops and lay people, or women and men, or whatever. In the assembly's consultative vote on the previous day, the first resolution had only just achieved a two-thirds majority, and the second resolution had failed to achieve it. In both the consultative and the deliberative

votes, the vast majority of those not supporting the resolutions had voted *placet juxta modum* (signalling that they had reservations or would like to see amendments), rather than *non placet*.

There was widespread distress when the vote was announced, as we faced the prospect of the Council saying nothing about the place of women in the Church. We decided to suspend the planned agenda, to give space for concerns from all perspectives and all members to be articulated, initially through conversation in the spirit in our table groups, but then also in the whole assembly. Eventually we established a special drafting group, and returned to the topic two days later, where a revised text was passed overwhelmingly. The positive resolution was only possible because of the shared appreciation by all members that it was critically important to address this issue, and because of their clear commitment to ensure that we worked together towards a document that was more finely articulated and carefully balanced. The members showed great generosity in persisting in dialogue despite the grief and hurt that many had felt after the failed vote. In the interim, the quality and depth of our conversation and reflection had changed, and I think the remaining documents that we considered were significantly improved because of it. This may also be one of the reasons for the broadly positive reception of the decrees by people across the Church in Australia, who have recognised them as being faithful to the long process of consultation, preparation and discernment.

I have reflected often since then about what happened in us on those days. Those present had already spoken freely and openly, and had been listened to respectfully. But, in retrospect, I think we had mostly spoken from our heads, setting out ideas that we had considered frequently and that were already well established in our minds. After the crisis, people spoke much more from the heart, with a vulnerability that exposed them personally, putting themselves on the line to describe their lived experience of how they were personally affected.

And this courageous speaking was received with a different quality of listening. Instead of recognising familiar arguments and rehearsing objections, we listened better to what was said as being deeply personal, and we had greater openness to appreciating it, learning from it and being changed by it. This asked of us a humility to recognise that we might not have the final answer ourselves.

Many have since described the disruption and new possibilities that it opened as an experience of the Holy Spirit. It certainly was an experience of *parrhesia* – both courageous speaking and humble listening; and there is no question that it was critical in enriching our communion.

The task for us now in Australia is to begin implementing the decrees, both nationally and locally, in parishes, dioceses and other Catholic entities. Beyond the content of the decrees, I think the most significant impact of the Plenary Council on the Church in Australia will be the positive and transformative experience of discernment and synodality, which is now clearly established as the normal way for approaching discussions and shared decision-making in all our activities.