Preparing for the Plenary Council 2020

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The Australian Bishops at their November meeting decided that the Plenary Council will be held in two sessions, one in October 2020 around the tenth anniversary of Mary Mackillop’s canonisation and the second in May 2021. One of these sessions will be held in Central Australia and the other in one of the major cities on the East Coast.

In the next few months, the Facilitation Team and the Executive Council will prepare a website, social media access, a Plenary Council logo and prayer, a survey [online and on paper] and other instruments to ensure that all Catholics can be consulted in as full, free and productive way as possible. Meanwhile, the Bishops are to appoint working groups to ensure that the people in their dioceses, parishes, schools, health care and social welfare facilities can be involved.

The official launch will be on Pentecost Sunday 2018. That will begin a year of consultation through diocesan and parish meetings, family conversations, facilitated community discussions, meetings with schools, health care, social welfare agencies, with aboriginal groups, the poor, listening sessions with the bishops and so forth. There will also be consultation and reporting back through the website, discussion through social media, and other ways. The hope is that many Catholics, active and disaffected, will take the opportunity to help plan the future of our Australian Church.

After Easter 2019 we will try to review and consolidate what has been said in the hope of beginning a second phase of consultation and prayerful discernment after Pentecost 2019.

Early in 2020 the main issues and directions should be clearer and we can prepare documents, merciful and inspiring ones along the lines of the Vatican II documents. These can then be shared and attract feedback and discernment before the October 2020 first Session. They may also be accompanied by legislation to ensure they are implemented.

All the bishops must attend the Plenary Council, but it is also hoped to have many lay people, priests and religious present. It is difficult to say at right now, but if there is voting at this session, it will be largely consultative and involve all delegates. Then as with Pope Francis’ recent two Synods on the Family the results of the first session will be published and open for consultation in the seven months of prayerful deepening before the final session where the bishops, having listened to the Australian church, will finalise the documents and any necessary legislation to be submitted to the Pope for approval.

Because this is meant to be an open consultation where “everything is on the table” it is difficult to say at this stage what the major themes will be and what legislation will be required. But one thing is clear, whatever legislation is required our bigger need is to talk to and appreciate one another. There is a certain amount of fatigue in the church these days that no law will resolve. We need to discover the Spirit in the church and among ourselves.

Pope Francis is convinced that it is by listening to one another that we listen to God and that “open and fraternal debate makes theological and pastoral thought grow”. He is also convinced in the power of face-to-face encounter. Hopefully, there will be plenty of opportunities for personal encounters in the process.

We need one another. All being well, if we can learn to speak boldly, listen humbly and always with an open prayerful heart we may not only learn what the Spirit wants for us but also come to respect and even enjoy one another.

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