

## PLENARY COUNCIL GATHERING

On Sunday afternoon, July 29, approximately ninety people from a number of parishes in the Diocese met in Ballarat for a Plenary Council Gathering. Three visiting speakers, Peter Wilkinson, Maria George and Peter Johnstone, lay people from a Melbourne based group “Catholics for Renewal”, gave input and led discussion.

### **Some of the main points from the discussion included:**

#### The meaning of Plenary and the structure

Peter Wilkinson spoke on the technicalities related to the term “Plenary” which means we are one Catholic

Church in Australia in union with Rome. He said there are five Provinces made up of Dioceses. After approval by the Pope, this Plenary Council binds all the dioceses in Australia. The last Council in Australia was eighty years ago in 1937. This council (2020) is called to solve a crisis in the church. Our present crisis is that the culture in which we have to proclaim the Gospel is very different from what it was even twenty or thirty years ago.

The current Council will have a membership of 260 -300 members and will consist of two major groups: a larger one (two thirds of members) composed of those who “must be called”; and a smaller one (one third) composed of those who “can be called”. Lay people will most likely make up around 20 per cent of total membership.

Of all council members, the major group will consist only of the bishops, active and retired (possibly seventy). They will have a deliberative vote; all others will have a consultative vote only. Together they will enact laws which, subject to approval by the Holy See, will bind Catholics throughout Australia. However, the Bishops could chose to send such items to the Holy See, and add their opinions on the recommendations.

The 20 per cent lay people does not take into consideration the percentage of lay people in the Church. However, it is not possible to change this voting system to include more lay people having votes. Any change of this rule is beyond the competence of the Plenary Council. Change to the rules governing the Council is within the role of the Holy See but the Australian Bishops could add their opinions.

#### The place of Women in Ministry and Gender balance in the Church

Maria George spoke about her role as a Pastoral Associate working in a number of Melbourne Parishes including Elwood and St Kilda West. She is extremely well qualified to speak on the position of Pastoral Associates in the Church, having fulfilled various roles at parish level including teaching catechesis and leading music and liturgy teams. She has a degree in Theology and a Masters in Faith leadership.

She said that thirty years ago the Church in Melbourne was flourishing. Now it is embattled. She emphasised the role of women and the need for gender balance in the Church ministry. The place of the Pastoral Associates in the Church is crucial if the Church is to combat the crises that it is currently facing.



She indicated that there has been a change in Pastoral Associates' place in leadership and collaboration with priests in parish development and within parish clusters. Now many Pastoral Associates have lost their positions and there is more focus on priests. Women can and should share leadership, and they need to claim their place in the Church.

She pointed out that Pastoral Associates have paid their own formation costs, had regular supervision and professional development and yet they have no security of employment even though much is expected of Lay Parish Leaders. The question should be asked whether a Diocese pay for their training and for their services?

### A sense of faith of the faithful

Peter Johnstone spoke of the need for the Church leadership to take account of church governance that needs to be more inclusive and transparent.

He emphasised that we all need to have a sense of the faith of the faithful. It is OUR faith therefore we should accept that responsibility and support each other. We are not sufficiently reminded by our leadership of our responsibility to build up the Body of Christ.

Peter said the Plenary Council must not be an excuse for delay. People have been silenced for so long they have lost the skills of gathering, listening and building up the community together. He asked how do we reach out to the disengaged? Do we need to get people back to the Church, or do we need to bring Church to the people?

There is a need for every Diocese to form a Diocesan Pastoral Council so there can be real input from lay people on the governance of the church.

All people need to be asked their views; even to the point of a process for the appointment of the Bishop of a Diocese, questions like what are the needs in leadership in our diocese? What strategies and systems need to be put in place? Companies put out annual reports. Church leaders also need to be accountable, inclusive and transparent. Without an effective Diocesan Pastoral Council there is danger that a leader might see no need to listen to the people.

*Sr Kathleen Moran rsm and Frank Sheehan*

