

PLENARY COUNCIL 2020 LISTENING TO WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

Some forty people from Ballarat and district gathered in the Mackillop Room on Wednesday, May 2 to learn about the Plenary Council 2020. Another session was held in the evening. Fr Justin Driscoll welcomed the group and led the opening prayer.

During the gathering a suggestion was made that we should record our discussions and report on them so here are a few recollections.

Fr John Hill CSsR provided a brief explanation of the process involved, the powers of the Council to legislate for the



Church in Australia, the composition of the Council, its governing authority and the relative voting rights of the participants. The Bishops will have a deliberative vote while other participants including vicar–generals, heads of religious and laity will have a consultative vote.

Fr Hill prefaced his comments with the statement “something is broken in our church” and he invited us to listen to the Spirit by listening to one another in this process of renewing the Church in our Country. He also drew our attention to the information available on the Plenary Council Website (plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au).

The last Plenary Council in Australia was 1937 so we have no clear blue print for the processes although the Council has considerable power to enact change. Fr Hill also spoke about Vatican II and how both the French and German Churches drove the changes then. It was not until the early nineties that the attendance in the Catholic Church started to drop here in Australia. Many of us still in the pews now have fond memories of Vatican II and the hope and enthusiasm that followed, and now we are a broken Church. I am reminded here of some years ago when in Israel, one morning going out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. It was a beautiful morning, clear blue sky, the water like a mirror and out of that clear blue sky arose an enormous storm. We were all thrown around the boat, drenched and freezing cold, but we hung on and made it to shore. Some of us had a few bruises but we had hung on. We had survived. It was a very spiritual experience. For me that rather describes us in our church now, we the children of Vatican II have been thrown about and bruised by what has happened in our “broken” Church, but we are still here, and we have now grown up, we have grown into being a People of God and must use our ability to listen, discern and use our voices and strength in healing our Church. The Hebrew term which I rather like, *Tikkun Olam* refers in modern Jewish Practice to actions that contribute to the healing and transforming of the world. May our Church be blessed with *Tikkun Olam* and be healed and transformed.

The ensuing group discussion process generated a sense of urgency and a yearning for dramatic change so that we might become a more inclusive, less authoritarian Church that prioritises compassion and justice.

There were pleas in the small groups and in the feedback:

- to dismantle the present authoritarian structures of the church;
- Clericalism must be eliminated;

- to engage the leadership of the laity;
- to recognise the disjunction between the gospel message and the exclusion of women from leadership and decision making;
- to find ways of listening to the disaffected;
- to take seriously “the cry of the earth”;
- to replace “Voting” at the Council with a discerning and consensus building process and articulation of a vision to be implemented;
- to recognise and affirm the potential of Catholic schools to be church;
- to broaden the eligibility for priestly ordination or as one person in our group asked “Why Priests” with reference to the book by that title by Garry Wills;
- people need to be encouraged to enter a mystery experience, especially as a dimension of Sunday Liturgy.
- to document all such gatherings so that nothing might be lost as we have been told nothing is off the table.

Lay Leadership of future gatherings might be a way of beginning the process of moving towards a more inclusive expression of the Church as the People of God.



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