

A Final Word from the Second Assembly

From the Members of the Plenary Council, 9 July 2022



The nine-month celebration phase of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia ended on Saturday, with the formal declaration of the closing of the Council.

In addition to celebrating the final Mass on Saturday morning, Members also approved a concluding statement signed by all Members of the assembly, reflecting on the discernment that took place over those days.

This statement can be read below:

Concluding Statement – A Final Word from the Second Assembly

Gathered by God, and called together by the Church in the name of Christ Jesus, the members of the Plenary Council have sought to be faithful to their commission to listen to and hear “what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev 3:22).

The agenda and motions of the second assembly drew together the four years of the fruits of prayer, listening, dialogue and discernment which have been the marks of this long Plenary journey.

Since the Council was convoked, the fortunes of the world, the patterns of Church life, and the rhythms of daily life have been disrupted by pandemic, natural disasters and war. In turn, these unforeseen events have affected the course of this Council. Despite these obstacles, the Council has met, engaged in prayerful

communal discernment, spirited and creative discussion, and adopted concrete outcomes which are sure signs of the Holy Spirit's work.

This process has been an expression of the synodality that Pope Francis has identified as a key dimension of the Church's life in the third millennium. Synodality is the way of being a pilgrim Church, a Church that journeys together and listens together, so that we might more faithfully act together in responding to our God-given vocation and mission.

As Pope Francis has noted, and as we have experienced, synodality is "an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice". Embedding these practices of listening and discernment will continue to be essential dimensions of the implementation of this Plenary Council. They will re-shape our engagement with the world, our evangelising mission and our works of service in a rapidly changing environment. The work has only begun.

Some moments of this second assembly have been calm and harmonious, others tense and difficult. But every moment has been blessed; the entire week has been grace-filled, though never a cheap grace. The Holy Spirit has been both comforter and disrupter. Throughout the assembly, diverse views and approaches were named, occasionally appearing to be irreconcilable. At a pivotal juncture in the assembly, some of these differences helped move the Council from *having a* process to *being-in* process; from following an agenda to following the Holy Spirit into the unknown. Not only did this moment overturn the timetable and the order of proceedings; it also meant that we had to address strongly-felt emotions. The days that followed established new patterns of listening and dialogue, which are nascent but real. We trust that the God who overturned our smooth predictabilities and led us into new territory will continue to open up the pathway before us.

Framed by silent prayer and the rituals of the liturgy, the assembly traversed many topics, both formally and informally, gathered around the tomb of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, in the hall, in the Cathedral, and in other gathering spaces. We sprinkled ash to express our deep lament and our commitment to justice and healing, as we acknowledged the trauma of those abused in the Church. We sought forgiveness for the wounds inflicted by European settlement and said "sorry to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in and beyond the Church" for the trauma they still suffer. Calling upon Christ the healer, and drawing on the words of Pope St. John Paul II, the assembly recognised that we will not be "fully the Church that Jesus wants' us to be until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have made their contribution to the life of the Church" and until their contribution is joyfully received. We affirmed overwhelmingly the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the calls for bipartisan constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians.

We reflected upon our baptismal call to missionary discipleship and the ways in which we might strengthen our personal and communal response. We focused upon the diverse gifts and common dignity of women and men, and reaffirmed the Church's commitment to recognising and fostering the participation of women in all the avenues of ministry and leadership open to the lay faithful. We considered our baptismal invitation to receive and to live the gift of the Trinitarian life of grace, and how we might enrich and deepen our sacramental life, which both draws us from the world and leads us back. We sought to discover new and creative ways to form our communities and their leaders in ministry and for mission. We committed the

Church in Australia to greater participation of all the laity, women and men, in our governance processes and leadership structures. We acknowledged the urgent need to make commitments to care for our common home and to be open to the integral and ecological conversion required to work with God who makes all things new (Rev 21:5).

Lingering smoke from an Indigenous tarnuk (wooden dish) and constantly falling rain, ancient signs of cleansing and new life, greeted members of this second assembly. We now go forth no longer considering statutes or regulations but our common life of grace. We remain committed not by decree or declaration, but by the power of the Spirit who gives inspiration and creativity to our Christian vocation. We go forth acutely aware of the challenges ahead but renewed and encouraged by the promise of God's word, the wisdom of our tradition and the faithful companionship of all our sisters and brothers.

We carry forth into the world the seeds of fresh possibilities, sown in a hidden yet abundant way by the great Sower of everything, who makes these seeds flourish in unexpected places for the sake of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8:4-15). We bear a rich heritage: the many ways in which the Catholic community has enhanced life in Australia through its care for the sick and marginalised, its commitment to education, and its advocacy for social justice, especially the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. We commit ourselves to seek and serve the human flourishing of all Australians, and to care for Earth, our common home, by cherishing, preserving, and healing the land.

We have seen God at work in these days, comforting and disrupting in order to lead his people into a future of God's making. This has been a time of grace, and for that we give humble thanks. May God who has begun the good work in us bring it to fulfilment (cf. Phil 1:6).

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With thanks to the ACBC and the Plenary Council.