

RELIGION

The forgotten Australian Plenary Council

- [John Warhurst](#) 23 April 2026

The synodal process in the Church in Australia has a longer history than just about anywhere else in the world. The second and final assembly of the 5th Plenary Council of Australia ended almost four years ago, in July 2022. This followed an extensive consultation period involving 17,500 submissions and the participation of 220,000 individual Catholics. It was ground-breaking. Now it has been almost forgotten.

In November 2022, at their next six-monthly plenary meeting, the Australian Bishops formally approved its acts and decrees and announced that they would now be sent to the Apostolic See for review. That review, including approval, is known by the Latin word 'recognitio'. Six months after recognitio, those acts and decrees would then become the law of the Catholic Church in Australia.

The Plenary Council (PC), despite local scepticism, was widely applauded as a ground-breaking precursor to the Synod on Synodality. Pope Francis spoke glowingly about it in his book, *Let Us Dream*. International church media figures agreed. The new President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), Archbishop Tim Costelloe, reflected after his 2022 trip to Rome on "how closely the Church around the world was watching the Plenary Council and how aspects of it are being lived out through the Global Synod for a Synodal Church". This larger synod had been announced on the final day of the Plenary Council's second assembly.

Australian church members waited anxiously for the recognitio, under the understanding that it was important. But it has never come. Despite serious efforts in quiet church diplomacy by senior Australian bishops on visits to Rome, it has never materialised. One would be forgiven for thinking that it has been forgotten. Soon, four years will have elapsed. We know that the Church moves slowly, but as the PC members left Sydney in July 2022, even the most pessimistic would have expected Vatican action by now.

Some senior bishops are embarrassed and frustrated that nothing has happened. If they are aware of any specific reason for the inordinate delay, they have not shared it with the Catholic community. That is not how things are done within the Church. To complain publicly would imply criticism of the Roman Curia. Still, a public statement of the state of play would be a welcome demonstration of the new transparency supposedly central to synodality.

It may not be entirely fair to say that the Plenary Council has been forgotten. Understandably, it has been somewhat submerged by its global big brother, the Synod on Synodality, but no announcement has been made by anyone that this is the reason for the lack of formal Vatican approval of the Council.

The PC decrees cannot be promulgated until they have been reviewed by the Apostolic See (Canon 446 of Canon Law). That means the formal third and final implementation stage of the Council cannot begin. It matters because, at the very least, it means that formal implementation has not proceeded as envisaged. That implementation included a much-vaunted new National Catholic Synodal Life Roundtable, elaborated in Decree Seven.

This new roundtable was to be established jointly by the ACBC, Catholic Religious Australia, and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons "to foster, assess, and report periodically on the

development of synodal leadership across the Church in Australia". It was to bring together representatives of Diocesan Pastoral Councils (once established) and other national bodies, including social and community services, health, and education. It was going to be a big deal.

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There was some initial national episcopal action. In November 2023, a first interim report called "A Letter to the People of God in Australia" was issued, preceded by a pastoral guide called "Carrying Forward the Plenary Council". But those steps didn't get the Church in Australia very far. The second interim report, scheduled for 2025, was quietly shelved because the Vatican recognitio had still not been received. No one noticed because the Council had already been forgotten.

There are two schools of thought among those few who have given it a second thought.

For optimists, it is a mere irritant. One senior bishop, while frustrated, explained that 'we are just getting on with it'.

This optimism assumes that the essence of the decrees had always been in the hands of Australian diocesan bishops. Only changes to Canon Law and universal church matters, such as women deacons, were out of their hands. The essence included the bulk of the content of the decrees.

After the Council, these matters to be implemented were allocated to the various ACBC commissions for implementation. Business as usual.

Optimists also have a rosy view of the acceptance of the spirit of the Council by Australia's diocesan bishops. There was some patchy early energy in 2023 in some dioceses. Those optimists without such a rosy view of other bishops trust in the obedience of their fellow bishops to the pro-synodal proclamations and intentions of Popes Francis and Leo.

For pessimists, the failure of the recognitio to materialise is a major impediment to the full implementation of the Council decrees and a breach of faith with the Catholic community, which reflects badly on all concerned.

The breach of faith and trust involves dashing the legitimate expectations of the Catholic community that their generous time and energy, encapsulating their strongly expressed wishes about the future of the Church, would be respected by the official Church. After all, the Holy Spirit was at work in the Council. Surely that larger Spirit would not be trifled with by the Vatican and/or local bishops.

The major failure in implementation is the absence of the promised major new synodal structure which the Council members, by a clear majority, wished to have carry forward a truly synodal Church.

The realistic view is that implementation of synodality in Australia is balanced on a knife-edge. It needs all the human help it can get. The Vatican recognitio is crucial. In the words of the 2023 ACBC interim report, it should provide "revitalised impetus to Mission" and also a further, much-needed injection of authority on the side of synodality. It would be wind in the sails behind both those church leaders who are getting on with it and those who are lagging. Its continued absence is a shocking revelation that the old Church ways continue to prevail.

The final report on the implementation of the Plenary Council outcomes has been promised for 2027. Without Vatican recognition, followed by official promulgation of the decrees in Australia six months later, it will be a hollow document, if indeed it ever appears.

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