

Plenary Council 2020 – An initial submission, 21 December 2018

Engaging with the whole Church, and those at the margins

The membership of Catholic Social Services Victoria comprises 46 organisations, employing more than 8,000 staff and 17,000 volunteers. Collectively we stand with and serve more than 200,000 people a year.

Catholic social services are at the heart of that Church, and, in serving those in need on behalf of the Church, we involve thousands of workers and volunteers for whom our organisations are the only part of the Church with which they are in contact.

The Plenary Council seeks to reach out to the whole Church. Those who are vulnerable, and those at the margins of society, must be a core part of this endeavour, challenging as that might be.

Our submission reflects our consultation with member organisations, in their diversity and their wide embrace of people of good will. It also reflects our daily contact with those at the margins of our society.

The Spirit surely works through this broad repository of good will, and leads us to recognise the face of Christ in those that we see every day in our services. We pray that the Council will actively engage with this aspect of the Church in Australia.

A vision for the Church in Australia

Our consultations reflected wide interest in engaging with the Council process to help build the Church in Australia so that at every level we reflect the expectation that we love one another as Jesus loved us, and that we love our neighbour as ourselves.

We will not be able to enact this vision unless all parts of the Church respond fully and with conviction to the cry for protection of children and vulnerable people generally, and to the needs of those who have suffered from abuse by Church personnel and from the way that abuse was responded to.

Such a Church will more fully

- show compassion, openness, humility and justice in its dealing with the community, and with all people in the church;
- listen carefully to the cry of the poor, and the cry of the earth;
- speak up on issues of justice;
- deploy resources to address priority issues, including the work of social services;
- reach out to margins in all that it does – take responsibility for addressing those complex issues that deeply affect the lives of individuals and families: loneliness, drugs, family pressures, violence in the home, consumerism, etc;

Our Church will

- be an open, welcoming society, and resist any temptation to act as a club;
- truly be the People of God in Australia, a society where all identify with their Church, where lay people feel equally at home
- ensure the equal participation of women in all aspects of Church;



- respect the role of Aboriginal people in all aspects of society, be open to them, learn from them, and joyfully receives their contribution to all aspects of the Church.

It will be compassionate, inclusive and democratic.

Initiatives to be fostered

For our Church to achieve this vision we need to

- embrace young people, and speak to their needs and interests;
- support our priests and religious as colleagues in the Body of Christ; invite them to be co-ministers with us as servant leaders in the work of the Church; and foster a culture where clergy are pastors, not administrators
- embrace and make a place for all people of good will, especially the many thousands who work in our various agencies, which will so richly allow the Spirit to work in them and in us and in the people we serve.
- be open, merciful and loving
- be informed of our rich tradition
- be boldly Catholic – to speak the truth; to be always ready to give an account for the hope that we hold.

Our consultations have identified some scepticism about the Plenary Council process. We see our role, in such an environment, as to engage with our sector and to draw them into the Council process as effectively as is feasible. This will include forums at which members' issues can be raised, and communicating with a range of internal stakeholders – Dioceses, Plenary Council committees, etc.

As Archbishop Mark Coleridge has written: 'There has never been room for complacency in a church that seeks to be at the service of humanity.' Overcoming scepticism, rebuilding trust and growing hope will require cultural change on a large scale. Our consultations have identified that this would be assisted by

- appointment of bishops to have greater process and lay consultation;
- formation in seminaries to include placement in social services;
- welcoming, challenging and providing opportunities for lay people, in all areas of service;
- consultation and dialogue across the Church as a core element in the exercise of authority.

At the Plenary Council itself

- There needs to be the voices of all who are marginalised, and those working in service and work for justice. Many of our member organisations would make a very positive contribution at that level.
 - Nor should representation be denied or curtailed because of pre-determined numbers – there can always be more scope for participation, even if voting rights are limited.
 - The role of loving service is so central to the Church that, if effective representation at the Council itself is not feasible, then a parallel gathering might be needed – a model here is the meeting of community representatives (the C20) and business representatives (the B20) that work in parallel with the periodic G20 heads of Government meetings.
 - Unless there is a special reason not to make them public, all submissions to the Council should be readily available to the interested public
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