

Recently I was asked by a relative to contribute to answering some of the Questions given in the [Agenda for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia 2021](#).

While I'm still very concerned that the Plenary Council process has been a waste of time, talent and resources, I did agree to attempt some answers. Here they are:

1.CONVERSION

How might we better accompany one another on the journey of personal and communal conversion which mission in Australia requires?

To accompany one another on any journey means that we have to get to know one another and spend time with each other.

The current culture of arriving just in time for Mass, and leaving as soon as it is finished (or even beforehand), does not lend itself to learning to accompany one another. What needs to be done is part of the shift that has to happen from church goers being consumers to church goers being participants in mission.

We know from the end of Acts 2 that it was the Holy Spirit who bonded the members of the early church together in unity, community and mission. Without the Pentecost experience of the Holy Spirit there is no impetus/motivation to accompany each other and to care for each other.

But the wine of the Holy Spirit needs to go into fresh skins, so some kind of structural shift is needed that celebrates, rewards and makes accompanying each other possible. From experience we know that morning teas after the last Sunday morning Mass are not sufficient. Even though we sit beside many of the same people in the pews each weekend, 'breaking the ice' with each other isn't easy; and the cringe factor when we are invited to say hello to each other at the beginning of Mass or during the homily is palpable.

But unless that ice is broken somehow, and at more than a superficial level, then the courage to join any kind of discussion group won't materialize. Yet it is only in small to medium groups (3-20 people) which meet monthly, or more frequently, that true accompaniment takes place.

God must have a plan for such a structural shift, but we are only going to find His answer through assiduous communal prayer.

How might we heal the wounds of abuse, coming to see through the eyes of those who have been abused.

First we have to recognise just how prevalent abuse is; the statistics are something like 1 in every 4 women, and 1 in every 10 men have suffered some kind of sexual abuse; and that doesn't count any other kind of abuse.

It is a widespread problem that so many people in society and in our pews live with the wounds from that kind of trauma and in ever present fear of that kind of abuse happening again.

On the other hand that means there are also a significant number of people committing abuse, some because they can, others due to various kinds of compulsion stemming from abuse that they themselves suffered. They are in our pews too.

Both groups need the salvation and healing that Jesus Christ freely offers.

But when was the last time you heard a homily about the power of Jesus to heal these wounds? When was the last time you heard a homily about the power of Jesus to help you forgive those who have hurt you – and to forgive yourself – as well? When was the last time you heard anyone talk about how to bring the most shameful things to Jesus in the sacrament of Penance?

These things don't go away with an apology.

They don't go away with any kind of retribution or revenge either.

And people with the specific God-given natural gifts and training necessary to do the kind of deep listening that is therapeutic, they are rather rare. While they are effective; that effectiveness can only deal with the tip of the iceberg of this societal problem.

Obviously God must have a solution. It is a God-sized problem.

But has anyone or any group even begun seriously interceding for the revelation of His solution?

NB. Some people have suggested that something akin to a Truth and Justice Commission would be a way to deal with this situation. But the Truth and Justice Commission in South Africa was not as effective as people hoped it would be. Not everyone wanted to publicly recount the trauma they had been through; not everyone wanted to be identified as a victim, and many perpetrators managed to obtain amnesty when they should have been charged with crimes.

How might the Church in Australia open in new ways to indigenous ways of being Christian in spirituality, theology, liturgy and missionary discipleship? How might we learn from the First Nations peoples.

We can learn from their knowledge of relationship with the Great Spirit gathered over millennia;
from the methods they developed to keep families and tribes together
from their concept of stewardship, and temporary custody of the land
from their methods of dealing with due punishment for crime
from their lived experience of all things being held in common (both the good aspects, and the not so good aspects where advantage is taken of the vulnerable)
from their balance between the need for times of community and for times of solitude (walkabout).

While there is greater openness to including First Nation cultural rituals into our community lives and liturgy, such things should only be done after very careful and thorough discernment of each religious ceremony; since not all of them arose from relationship to the Good Spirit.

How might the church in Australia meet the needs of the most vulnerable, go to the peripheries, the missionary in places that may be overlooked or left behind in contemporary Australia? How might we partner with others (Christians, people about the faith, neighbourhood community groups, government) to do this?

This isn't something that pertains to diocesan and national leadership, except in terms of giving permission/encouragement and confirming/commissioning what is happening at grass roots (parish level)

These ministries spring up at grassroots level in response to local conditions and to local needs.

Two examples

Mary Mac's Place, Woy Woy

It began as a parish outreach to the homeless, with companionship, lunches, and a place of safety to go to. Over time Catholic Care and the St Vincent de Paul Society added input and degrees of oversight and funding. These days many of the volunteers aren't parishioners and are from other Christian communities.

Food Bank, Dartmouth, Canada

Part of that parish has the lowest socio-economic levels in the region, and an opportunity opened up when a local Christian community lost their place of worship to provide not only hospitality for somewhere to gather for worship, but also to join together the two parish's food banks into one, and become more effective together in meeting local needs.

You can't 'legislate' for these things, but you can give pastors and their parishes permission and encouragement to take ecumenical options for works of mercy when opportunities arise.

Likewise you can give pastors and their parishes permission to explore how to best serve the neediest in their locality, but it will always be a matter for local research into local needs/conditions and of local response to how God is calling them to answer those needs in His way.

Thought could be given to the provision of seed-funding for new ministries and support funding for ongoing ministries from a diocesan level.

It is important to determine at a local level who the most vulnerable people are and then set up programs where we may be able to assist. But we must learn from the mistakes of the past and not impose solutions from without. To truly help means to listen with open hearts to what they need – not what we think they need. Any solutions must have significant input and ongoing guidance from those in vulnerable situations. For example: we've often patted ourselves on the back for putting in access ramps – but what good are access ramps if there are no accessible toilets for people to use once they've got inside the building?

How might the church in Australia respond to the call to ecological conversion? How can we express and promote a commitment to an integral ecology of life in all its dimensions with particular attention to the more vulnerable people and environments in our country and region?

This has to be handled very carefully, and from a distinctly Christian and Catholic perspective. For many people, anything with a tinge of Green lobby about it has become an instant turn off.

How do you answer people who say, 'well I'm much better than I used to be, I am reducing, re-using, and recycling, - do you mean that's not enough?'

2.PRAYER

How might we become a more contemplative people, committing more deeply to prayer as a way of life, and celebrating the liturgy of the Church as an encounter with Christ who sends us out to "make disciples of all the nations"?

This topic tends to be where pleas for the return to the 3rd Rite of Reconciliation are given. Please consider:

Grace might be free, but it certainly isn't cheap. And we should never treat it as cheap.

Everybody loves the easy option that doesn't really cost them any more than an hour of time. It is akin to the difference of saying with others 'we believe in one God' compared to saying alone before others 'I believe in one God'.

There's no risk with the former; commitment with the latter.

Isn't that the difference between 'we have sinned' vs 'I have sinned'?

3rd Rite also encourages the consumer behaviour that we want to replace with missionary disciple behaviour.

A shepherd watches over his flock, but he treats each sheep individually when medicinal care is needed (worming, sheep dip, shearing, hoof scraping, inspecting for ticks etc). Our Good Shepherd is the same, individual care for medicinal needs (healing of sin) is His way.

All of the perceived benefits of the 3rd Rite are present in the 2nd Rite (communal preparation followed by individual confession), and the 2nd Rite, produces better fruit than the 3rd Rite. Each of us needs to hear the 'I absolve you (singular)' for certainty of forgiveness.

.....

How many of us are actually praying every day?

Yes there are some who pray their daily rosary and chosen devotions, and there are some who pray parts of the Divine Office daily, and there are some who incorporate daily reading of the bible into their prayers times, and others who do a bit of everything

but,

the vast majority of people in the pews have no regular prayer life at all.

Once someone has begun to pray, then you have a hope of deepening it, but the commitment to pray daily is a pre-requisite.

Even 10 minutes a day can make a vast difference in our spiritual lives. Without prayer we can do nothing.

Sustained encouragement for everyone to pray 10 minutes a day would be a very good start.

How might we better embrace the diverse liturgical traditions of the churches which make up the Catholic Church and the cultural gifts of immigrant communities to enrich the spirituality of worship of the church in Australia?

Providing devotional space for our immigrant communities would be a good step.

An exterior shrine, or an interior chapel, for localities with a significant migrant population should be encouraged, as places where they can honour the saint/s that are so important in their country of origin.

The parish at Marsfield has a chapel for a statue of Our Lady of Graces donated by the local Italian/Maltese community. It is a way of sharing our cultural/spiritual patrimony with each other.

When WYD pilgrims visited Sydney, many of them brought images and icons of the patron saints of their localities and nations as gifts to the parishes that hosted them, enriching all of us, and visually reminding us that we are the Church universal whenever we gather to pray.

3.FORMATION

How might we better form leaders for mission - adults, children and families, couples and single people?

Should you happen to have active children, families, couples and non-retired adults in your faith communities count yourselves especially fortunate.

The vast majority of parishes no longer have age diversity in their congregations. In a recent May headcount at a vigil Mass, only 2.5% of those present were aged under 70.

The focus should be on how to form teams, and leaders of teams for mission, from among our 70+ year olds, for there to be any kind of missionary success.

How might we better equip ordained ministers to be enablers of missionary discipleship the church becoming more a 'priestly people' served by the ordained ministry?

How might formation, both pre- and post-ordination, better foster the development of bishops, priests and deacons as enablers of the universal Christian vocation to holiness lived in missionary discipleship?

Guided practical experience in discerning whether something emerging in the parish is of God (or not) would be the most useful. Because if something hasn't been initiated by God, then pouring resources into it is ultimately futile.

Learning how to support laity whom God has commissioned in the catechising, evangelizing and charitable works of the Church would be the next most useful thing. Moral support and financial support: 'How can I and the parish help you to be more effective in your calling from God?'

Because otherwise two things happen; the priest becomes a bottleneck rather than a coach/cheerleader/enabler who with God's authority gives permission and commissions for mission; and people forget that lay ministry is crucial for the mission of the church and begin/continue to think that 'Father and the nuns do all of that'.

Understanding the charisms the Holy Spirit bestows upon His people; and learning how to help His people grow safely and effectively in the use of those charisms, is one of the greatest services to the Church (and to the mission of the Church) that can be done.

By and large ordained leadership has been guilty of 'one size fits all' when it comes to recruitment for ministry (eg catechists, altar servers) – if you are breathing, and seem reasonable, you'll do – instead of taking the time and effort to find those who have charisms of teaching to be catechists and to find those who have charisms of service (helps) to be altar servers.

It isn't overly difficult to work out who the naturally out-going people are in a congregation; the ones who have a genuine interest in new people, and to give them some extra training as welcomers and evangelists – because that extra training in techniques and listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit will make them far more effective than they already are.

We have to comprehend that when we see parishioners we can no longer see pawns (ie. interchangeable worker bees), but we see that no one is a pawn, that they are all kings, queens, bishops, rooks and castles with very different God given callings and abilities. Likewise, we have to comprehend the double disaster of putting a rook in a castle ministry; the rook will burn out and be ineffective AND the castle that should have been there has had his/her talents unused.

But this goes for the ordained as well. A priest with a more than ordinary effectiveness in ministering to the sick should be placed in a position where he can use those gifts – and not moved to any position where that isn't a major part of his regular ministry. Permanent deacons without people skills should not be put in situations where people skills are essential, but where the talents they do have can shine (eg livestreaming technology, events organisation, archivist)

This impacts preaching too: It is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that everyone else has the same calling that you do. That's why we see priests gifted as evangelists in their preaching calling everyone to evangelise like them when maybe 7% of the congregation has the charism for that ministry, and the rest have charisms for works of mercy, for intercessory prayer, for teaching, for administration and other charisms. Yes, we all have the small 'e' calling to evangelise, (the church exists to evangelise) but some have the big 'E' calling. Preaching 'let's all be big E' puts off and confuses everyone who doesn't have a big E calling.

4.STRUCTURES

How might parishes better become local centres for the formation and animation of missionary disciples?

Just like each baptized person has a call to a particular mission of the church, and just like we find that there are calls within calls among our priests and religious (some priests are more gifted at visitation of the sick than others; some religious are more gifted at being memory keepers/archivists than others; some religious are more gifted at spiritual direction than others) – so too does each parish have a particular call from God within the general call of being a parish.

For example, St Patrick's Church Hill, understands that it is everyone's 'second parish', either for Mass or Confession, or both, and that a degree of anonymity for those who walk through the doors is needed to preserve that special calling.

Only when a parish begins to know and come into agreement with its special call within a call from God, will it truly thrive and become a local centre for the formation and animation of a specific missionary calling (eg inner healing, evangelization of workers, promotion of the rosary etc).

NB these are long term callings, well beyond the lifespan of any pastor, and often linked in some way to the spiritual patronage of the parish.

For example the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes at Earlwood has long been known for its healing Masses; and is it a complete surprise that a parish under the patronage of St John the Baptist has retained 4 regular weekly opportunities for confession (when most other parishes only have one?)

How might the Church in Australia be better structured for mission, considering the parish, the diocese, religious orders, the PJPs and new communities?

Most parish and other budgets only look at costs for maintenance of buildings and salaries, and existing ministries (eg sacramental programme/s).

Even 5% of budget set aside only for funding the start-up of new missionary initiatives would be a worthwhile beginning. (Remembering that new initiatives often take until the 2nd year to bear fruit)

5. GOVERNANCE

How might the people of God, lay and ordained, women and men, approach governance in this spirit of synodality and co-responsibility for more effective proclamation of the Gospel?

How might we recast governance at every level of the Church in Australia in a more missionary key?

It would help a lot if what we reward and celebrate wasn't so 'parish building' focused.

The real mission field is outside the church walls where the believers interact with the non-believers in various ways.

The visible ministries of choir, lector, altar server, sacristan, musician get far more regular kudos than the invisible ministries of mothering young children, caring for the elderly, taking Holy Communion to the sick, serving with the St Vincent de Paul society, facilitating small groups of bible study, and listening to the young. That has to change.

90% of the miracles Jesus worked happened outside the synagogue and Temple walls. Outside the parish building is where the laity should be focused on the mission to which God has called them.

Remember, we should be encouraging our nurses to become holy nurses; our carpenters to become holy carpenters, our shop assistants to become holy shop assistants so that they can have maximum impact in the places and careers, ie the specific mission fields that God has placed them in.

You'd much prefer a holy nurse who prayed for you and with you as she changed your wound dressings than a secular nurse, wouldn't you!?

We have a duty to mutually encourage each other to both holiness and mission.

We have a duty to help each other see the missionary possibilities that are present in our existing careers and vocational callings, and to encourage and train them to act on the opportunities that arise.

Possibilities like taking the opportunity to pray with customers and work colleagues who are distressed, like asking the extra question (you've sorted out your legal/financial situation, but have you done anything towards sorting out your eternal situation?), like noticing patterns where

vulnerable people are falling through the cracks of bureaucratic systems and working with others- together with prayer- to find an effective solution.

6.INSTITUTIONS

How might we better see the future of Catholic education (primary, secondary and tertiary) through a missionary lens?

I honestly don't know if the existing structures have a future.

Can we in all good conscience say that our schools at any level (primary, secondary, tertiary) are producing believers, missionary disciples? We see less than 5% of them inside our church walls in any given 12 month time period.

Shouldn't we be putting our resources where there is good fruit, and pruning away that which is producing no fruit or bad fruit?

What we do have are secular schools with a Catholic veneer that are very good at inoculating young people from having any commitment to Catholic faith at all.

During this time of pandemic we have seen families cope with homeschooling their children with the 'remote' support of teachers and online resources.

We could let our already secular schools become fully secular, and instead invest in setting up hubs of teachers to support the homeschooling efforts of Catholic families. But those hubs of teachers need to be fully practicing Catholics with full adherence to the teachings of the Church. It is true that we learn as much from the character and beliefs of a teacher as we do their subject matter.

How might we better see the future of Catholic social services, agencies and health and aged care ministries as key missionary and evangelising agencies

We could look at them as current and future bastions against the evils of euthanasia, abortion, and care proportionate to the benefits of treatment vs the burdens of treatment.

In dire circumstances often hearts open up to the need for God. We are called by 1 Peter 3:15 to always have our answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.

We would be derelict in our duty if we didn't train our staff in these services, ministries and agencies to be able to do give their answers when asked.