

## **What might we see as outcomes or potential motions arising from the Plenary Council?**

### Introduction

It has been a month since the conclusion of the first session of the Plenary Council, and as yet (11 Nov 2021) there has been no public release of the documentation of that session.

That documentation would include at minimum: all of the interventions, all of the minutes, all of the small group reports, and the proposals that had been submitted.

A few weeks ago a friend asked me what we might see actually change as a result of the Plenary Council process. It was a fair question. So I went back through the notes I had taken from the public parts of the first session with that kind of lens. I noticed that most of the public deliberations would never form a proposal or motion because a) they were about matters that you can't legislate on or b) they were about matters that had yet to morph from motherhood statements into something more tangible.

Even many of the possible outcomes listed below are more likely to take a final form as recommendations than as local canon law.

But it is always easier to start with something rather than a blank page, so please feel free to copy and share it to aid discussion while we await the release of official documentation.

### List of possible outcomes and possible potential motions

Encouragement for parishes to develop small groups, whether they be sharing/accompaniment groups, discussion/bible study groups, or what some people are calling 'connect groups' that have a mix of social and catechetical functions.

A commitment to inviting a First Nations elder to be on decision making bodies, eg parish pastoral councils and diocesan pastoral councils.

- This would both acknowledge the traditional custodianship of the locality, as well providing a pathway for that traditional custodianship of the locality to continue to be exercised.

The establishing of a national church agency to facilitate mutual enrichment between Eastern Rites and Western Rites.

Putting more formation opportunities (theological and leadership) online for access by people in outback, rural and regional areas.

A longer period of pre-seminary discernment, nation-wide.

- This emerged because so many potential seminarians (religious and clerical) are coming from dysfunctional families and out of periods of substance abuse and non-marital relationships. All existing wounds from trauma and broken relationships need to be healed and addressed before entering the seminary process. Such a healing process takes time, and it also takes time to build enough trust to even be able to talk about such wounds and to allow them come to the surface.

Changes to seminary formation that encourage a collaborative approach to parish life. eg. having some study units done with both lay (men & women) and seminarian participants, and some of the study units taught by women.

- These are measures designed to reduce clericalism. There is widespread dismay at recent crops of seminarians acting like lay people in parishes know nothing and have nothing worthwhile to offer/contribute; and anyone with such a mindset coming into a parish will act like an autocrat and not like a collaborator.

Changes to seminary formation which include being in-situ in parishes while online learning takes place, on a regular basis, throughout seminary studies.

- Another measure designed to reduce clericalism.

Putting the desire to preach the Gospel as a non-negotiable in the seminarian selection process.

- Without a heart for the mission to make disciples, how could you possibly lead the mission to make disciples?

Introduction of ongoing accreditation for clergy and annual professional oversight/reviews.

- This is a practical measure to identify potential problem behaviours and address them before they become abusive behaviours. It has the potential to provide support systems that are currently lacking in diocesan life. When it becomes normative for priests to access these systems, then when issues surrounding loneliness, substance abuse etc do arise, priests can seek the help they need without any social stigma. Regular accountability is needed for the main thing to remain the main thing, and to counteract the tendency to choose the urgent crisis over the important mission.

The establishment of a mission support team in all parishes; making disciples being the mission.

- To enable mission to continue and grow despite the inevitable changes of pastors that parishes experience.

Developing a nationally accepted process of discernment as to whether a priest has a calling from God to be a bishop or not.

- The length of time where dioceses are without bishops and where archdioceses are without sufficient episcopal vicars must be reduced both for the good of the people of God and for the effectiveness of the mission of the people of God. Starting from scratch with the bishop selection vetting process every time a new apostolic nuncio is appointed isn't working. The earlier a diocese can spot the rare combination of true leadership talent with true calling from God, the fewer resources will be wasted in training inappropriate candidates, and the fewer clergy will be embittered by hoping for something that's never going to happen.

The addition of leadership training as part of seminary and/or post-seminary formation; using collaborative leadership models.

- Training for leadership - in the sense of bringing out the best in people, helping them work together optimally, and commissioning them into areas of service where they can be most effective for mission due to recognition of gifts, charisms and talents – is currently non-existent. The prevailing model is: find a person who is breathing, available and willing to comply and get them to do what most needs to be done right now. That's crisis management not leadership: and it does untold damage to both the mission and to the person (mis-match of gifts, charisms and talents causes burnout at minimum and toxicity at worst).

There was a ground swell of support (read frustration with a capital F) that in so many areas (eg. parish councils) laity have only a consultative role and never a decision-making role. But how to formulate that into a motion that the bishops would say yes to? That's the question!

Perhaps a threshold of 75+% disagreement with a pastor's proposals automatically puts that proposal up for review by an independent diocesan panel (composed of canon lawyer, liturgist, theologian, financial advisor etc) – might work.

It would deal with cases where a) the parish council is right and the pastor is wrong; and b) where parish council is wrong and the pastor is right; - which are the two situations where so much of the frustration currently experienced arises.

It would also put an incentive in place for working towards collaborative solutions; an incentive which currently doesn't exist and which is sorely needed.

Such a review process could also be sought when both pastor and parish council recognise that none of their currently proposed solutions will work and they together decide to seek the wisdom of the review panel.

Such a review process may also serve as an early warning system to the local bishop as to which of his pastors are not suited to collaborative ministry.

If both pastor and parish council agree on the wrong solutions... May God set them straight.

The issue of women deacons isn't going away.

- In rural and outback areas, where there is Mass once a fortnight or less, many women are already doing a lot of what a deacon does but without a title. Baptisms, funerals and marriages could be conducted by women deacons in such rural and outback areas. Civil celebrants (male and female) are already doing funerals, weddings and naming ceremonies in secular settings and getting paid. If we want to give our people in rural and outback areas the opportunity for a Catholic rather than a secular celebration of such important life events, the issue of women deacons needs due consideration.

Agency leaders (education, hospital, social service etc) need to be chosen/selected because they are skilled, faith-filled, effective leaders who are committed to ongoing formation in mission (making disciples) and in Catholic social teaching.

- We seem to have an existing system that selects for skills and effective leadership first, and with faith, orientation to mission and commitment to Catholic social teaching as optional extras. There could also be a lack of courage in insisting on strong Catholic faith credentials due to a desire to appear tolerant and inclusive together with a desire to not make co-workers with weak Catholic faith credentials feel uncomfortable. But if we are truly committed to the mission of making disciples, then the existing selection system must change.

The establishment of a First Nations seminary in Port Pirie diocese (somewhere near Port Augusta to enable ease of remote community rail travel and for geographical closeness to multiple landscape types that are similar to 'own country') staffed by First Nations people, with the establishment of a First Nations Ordinariate, and with a mandate to develop a Rite for First Nations use. Studies would be in small blocks of residential learning, interspersed with large blocks of online learning while 'on country', with regular in-person visits to country from seminary support staff. (See the Appendix below for more detail).

## Appendix

As a result of the open sessions from the 1<sup>st</sup> Assembly of the Plenary Council, I have been reflecting on the lack of First Nations clergy, and on the obstacles that First Nations peoples face to both entering and persevering in seminary life.

So I have begun to dream of a First Nations seminary, based somewhere near Port Augusta, in the diocese of Port Pirie, and to dream of the development of a First Nations Ordinariate and of the organic development from both of these of a First Nations rite (like the Anglican use rite).

As it stands at the moment, potential First Nations seminarians face at least 2 big obstacles, having to leave country for extended periods of time, and being in a city environment far from the landscapes of home; as well as not having a curriculum structure which permits times of walkabout.

So I have begun to dream of a First Nations seminary, staffed as fully as possible with First Nations people in leadership, teaching and administration with guest lecturers on the major theological disciplines.

I have begun to dream that such a seminary would also be eventually open to members of First Peoples from across the world; tribal Africa, native American, tribal South America, Inuit, ethnic Chinese etc.

I have begun to dream of a First Nations seminary that has short blocks of residential learning, 3-4 weeks long, interspersed with 2-6 months long online learning while living 'on country', with moral, technical and learning support provided from the seminary. Many First Nations seminarians would be well familiar with School of the Air procedures. During the times of 'on country' learning, visitors from the seminary would arrive on a regular basis to learn first-hand about the cultural group the seminarian belongs to.

I have begun to dream of a First Nations seminary that permits seminarians to learn at their own pace, faster in some subjects, slower in others.

I have begun to dream that the location of such a First Nations seminary would be near Port Augusta in the diocese of Port Pirie for 2 reasons:

- A. Because in that locality you are never more than an hour's drive away from salt plains, wetlands, billabongs, grass plains, salt water, desert, and mountains (Flinders Range); and therefore, not far from something that resembles country of origin for First Nations students.
- B. Because Port Augusta is easily reached by rail by most outback and remote communities, via the Ghan, the Indian Pacific, and the various rail networks that connect to them, giving relatively cheap, safe and direct transport to quite a central national location.

To these reasons could also be added a 3<sup>rd</sup> reason, the rejuvenation of the local townships by the seminary and utilization of buildings erected in times past that are currently falling into disuse (eg the leftover building complexes from past mining eras).