



We proclaim a crucified Christ

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15 July 2022

To all of Christ's Faithful in the Archdiocese of Melbourne

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Last week, the second and final Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia took place. A week-long gathering of nearly three hundred faithful – laity, religious, clergy and bishops, it was the culmination of a nation-wide process of listening, discernment and dialogue that began over twenty years ago when the Australian Bishops first considered how to take up the call of St John Paul II to “put out into the deep” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*). Closer to our own time, our Holy Father Pope Francis has also urged us to live more radically the Christian life of closeness with the Lord, the poor and each other, drawing on his call for a more synodal Church.

The Assembly was the fruit of these many years of prayer, reflection, conversation and consideration which took place in small groups and large, among the diverse members of the Church in Australia. At the Second Assembly, members of the Plenary Council were presented with a summary of this discernment – in the form of eight themes and 37 motions to consider. The process of the Assembly followed a very specific format, involving two forms of voting on motions: a vote taken by consultative members and a deliberative vote by the Bishop-members. Motions were passed after achieving at least a two-thirds majority.

I write these words only a short time after the conclusion of the Assembly. My experiences are still very fresh, and they are still very much centred on the week itself. Nevertheless, I wish to share with you some initial and personal thoughts on the Plenary Council.

The first thing I want to share is that the Assembly was not like a sitting week of the Australian Parliament. Rather, it was a week where the Catholic Church in Australia sought to put aside agendas, to strive for unity of purpose, where a representative group of the Body of Christ grappled to find a shared vision, and where a determined effort was made to speak to the Church in Australia.

A recurring word of Scripture was spoken throughout much of the week: “*Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together.*” (Ephesians 4:3) And a single question was repeatedly posed to the members: *How does this help the Church in Australia to be more missionary and Christ-centred?* While each member will remember certain things heard during the week, these common words, perhaps more than any others, were the collective words we all grappled with, and by which we were shaped. May they shape us all!

Perhaps you have heard of news from within the Assembly of what occurred on the third day. This was when the motions around the theme on witnessing to the equal dignity of women and men did not initially reach a two-third’s majority. The reasons for this were manifold, but it is fair to say that it was a moment of serious and confronting contention, and for many, a moment of great pain and distress. But it was never a moment bereft of hope. The Holy Spirit accompanied us, and grace abounded. As a result, reform – our ecclesial word for conversion – was able to emerge as a revised and improved text was commonly discerned and approved.

It should be remembered that what happens within the confines of a gathering of this kind is not necessarily what is spoken of outside of the gathering. Some of the various commentaries and media opinions that have been circulating are not of the Plenary Council itself. The process of discernment is best seen as a whole, and not reduced to selective interpretations.

So, what did happen? Might I encourage you to read and reflect on two documents. Firstly, there are the Decrees that set out all the motions that were passed with a two-third’s majority. You can find them here as a combined document: www.bit.ly/PlenaryCouncilDecrees. This is the work that we now take forward in the life of our local Church, the fruits of these past several years and a pathway for the years to come.

Secondly, please see the final summary statement from the Assembly of what occurred during the week. This is a document that those present agreed to as a final summation of the Assembly and can be found at: www.bit.ly/PlenaryCouncilSummary. These two documents, as distinct from anything else you may have heard about, contain the fruits of the second and final Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia.

You may ask, where to from here? May I encourage you to read the documents, not just on your own, but together as Christ’s faithful in your local settings: parish forums, faith communities, clergy gatherings, religious houses, lay organisations, leadership groups, family settings, and anywhere where our local Church in Melbourne gathers. They are not the ‘be all and end all’ of all that is to be said and done in Melbourne, but they set a direction for us all. These are some of the fruits of the Assembly.

Did the Assembly say all that is needed? No. Is it a perfect outcome? No. Is there more to say and do? Certainly. But the second Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia has given to us all a grace upon which we can step forward in confidence in Christ

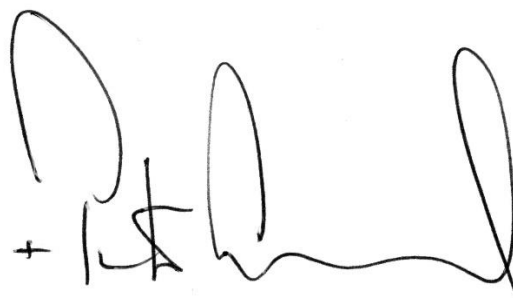
Jesus. This will unfold over an extended period of time, commencing with the regathering of the Bishops of Australia in November this year to confirm what is to be presented to Pope Francis for his recognition and approval. Then begins the work of ‘embodying’ the fruits of the Council into the life of our local Church. I think especially of how the work of the Council is placed into our own changing COVID realities, and how it might best inform our missionary initiatives in Take the Way of the Gospel.

These are my initial, personal thoughts. Much is still to be absorbed, considered and acted upon. And I was but one member among 17 other members from Melbourne, and 277 members in total – bishops, priests, religious and laity. Gradually, may its fruits be something for all of us. As St. Paul said to the Church in Rome, so may we hear for our local Church in Melbourne: *“Just as we have many members in one body, and the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, form one body in Christ, each individually members one of another, having different gifts according to the grace given to us.”* (Romans 12:4-6)

Please be assured of my prayers for you all, Christ’s faithful in Melbourne.

And may I humbly ask for your prayers for each other, and for the ongoing flourishing of our communities of faith.

With every grace and blessing, I remain,
Yours in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter A. Comensoli'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small cross symbol to the left of the first name.

Most Rev Peter A Comensoli
Archbishop of Melbourne