

Getting ready for the Plenary Council: A quick refresher

PUBLISHED 27 September 2021

WRITTEN BY Melbourne Catholic

What is a "Plenary Council" and why are we having it?

A Plenary Council is the highest form of gathering a local Church can have. It has governing and legislative authority, so whatever resolutions are passed at the end of this Plenary (which won't be until after the second Assembly in 2022) will be binding for the Catholic Church in Australia. This is what makes it different from a Synod. Nonetheless, what has taken place up to this point has been an exercise in deep listening and prayer, or what Pope Francis has called a move to a more synodal church 'which listens' and which realises 'that listening is more than simply hearing'. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §171)

It should be noted that a Plenary Council has no power to change or pronounce doctrine. It is, we might say, a more practically-minded Council, looking at how the Church can be more effective in Australia today. This is Australia's fifth Plenary Council, the last one having happened in 1937 (and prior to that in 1885, 1895 and 1905).

The fifth Plenary Council might be commencing this Sunday, but this event has been years in the making. After almost 20 years of discernment and discussions about a national event for the Catholic Church in Australia, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference confirmed in 2016 that they planned to host a Plenary Council in 2020. This was later postponed to 2021 due to the pandemic.

The Council's significance

We shouldn't underestimate the importance of this Council for the life of the Church in Australia. It is an opportunity for the Church in Australia to discern together how we might respond to any number of complex crises facing us and then actively develop resolutions that work towards implementing those responses.

It's been more than 80 years since the last Plenary Council was held and much has changed since then. The circumstances of the Church in Australia in our time, including the patterns of change that are evident within the community of the Church, the issues confronting the Church in modern multicultural and secular Australia, the increase in entrusting responsibility for and leadership of the Church's mission to laity, and even the changing face of the Episcopate, prompt the Church to review, analyse, and discern the signs of the times, to listen anew to the Spirit, and to chart its course into the future.

At the heart of the Council, however, lies the question of how to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia.

What is the theme of the Plenary Council?

The theme and purpose of this Council is to "Listen to what the Spirit is saying", which draws upon Revelations 2:7. The Council is a large-scale act of communal discernment, whereby the Members (both clergy and laity) come together in order to discuss and pray about a number of complex problems that face the Church in Australia today.

What is the agenda for the fifth Plenary Council?

There are six key areas of focus on the Agenda, each with accompanying questions for reflection that the Members will discuss during the Plenary Council. These six key areas were distilled from the National Themes for Discernment, which was drawn from the initial Listening and Dialogue phase of the Plenary, and prepared by Discernment and Writing Groups.

Arguably, the two biggest challenges being responded to are these: the failures of the Church as highlighted by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; and the Church's ability to form missionary disciples for the effective proclamation of the Gospel. Helping survivors of sexual abuse, and working to evangelise more effectively in a society that is very different from 20 or 30 years ago, are two of the topics that will be of primary importance.



The agenda of the fifth Plenary Council of Australia

What has taken place to get us to this point of the First Assembly?

We began with the Preparatory Stage.

1. It began with the Listening and Dialogue Phase. This took place over the course of about ten months (across 2018 and 2019), and sessions were held in parishes across Australia. These sessions were an opportunity to talk with each other about the issues facing the Church today and how the Holy Spirit might be guiding us to respond to them. Written responses were then submitted to be reviewed in the second phase of the process. Over 222,000 people participated in those sessions and there were over 17,500 written submissions accounted for. Of these submissions, 2,440 responses were submitted from Melbourne with more than 1,500 respondents saying they participated in a Listening and Dialogue session. Of those submissions, 791 were from groups and 1,649 were from individuals.
2. The second phase of the Plenary process was a period of Listening and Discernment. During this phase, Discernment and Writing Groups were formed in order to review the submissions and develop the National Themes for Discernment mentioned above. From these themes, an Agenda was developed with 16 questions that will be discussed at the First Assembly.
3. Members (or delegates) were commissioned from dioceses around Australia. There are 278 members participating in the Plenary Council, plus a number of advisers and committees. These members are drawn from dioceses, eparchies, ordinariates, personal prelature, leaders of religious congregations and representatives of church ministries.

4. An *Instrumentum Laboris* (“working document”) was published in 2020. This document sets the tone and purpose for the event as well as summarises the responses given through the First Phase, interpreting them in the light of Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterial Teaching of the Church.

Here’s what is going to happen now the Preparatory Stage is over:

1. There will be two major assemblies held. This is the real guts of the Council. The First Assembly is being held from 3-10 October 2021. The plan was to have all members gather in Adelaide, but this is no longer possible with the COVID situation as it is. It will now be held both online and in-person.
2. For six of the eight days that constitute the First Assembly, the attending Members will be breaking into small groups twice a day in order to discuss the questions on the Agenda. There will be opening Masses and a closing Daily Examen in order to frame each day, keeping them prayerful and discerning. There are not only Members involved; there are also 20 theological experts (*periti*) who will be called upon as advisors – these include some well-known names in Australia: Dr Tracey Rowland, Dr Paul Morrissey of Campion College, Rev Prof Frank Brennan SJ, Dr Sandie Cornish, Rev Prof Francis Moloney SDB and Rev Brendan Byrne SJ.
3. At the end of the First Assembly, there should be a sense of where the Council is heading in terms of its leading ideas and proposals. Between November 2021 and June 2022, there will be continual discernment and a preparation of proposals for the Second Assembly’s discussion.
4. From 4-9 July 2022, the Second Assembly will be held in Sydney. Decisions will be voted on that will be binding for the Church in Australia. However, before these decisions can be enacted, they must be sent to Rome to be reviewed and approved by Pope Francis.

The First Assembly of the Plenary Council will take place online

What’s the schedule of the First Assembly of the Plenary Council and how do we take part?

Here are some highlights from the upcoming livestreaming schedule you might want to look out for:

- **3 October:** Opening Mass of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, 2pm AEDT from St Mary’s Cathedral in Perth.
- **4-9 October:** Daily Mass broadcast at 9.30am AEDT and on demand afterwards.
- **4-6 October and 8-9 October:** Plenary session livestream starts at 11am AEDT and runs until approximately 12.15pm AEDT.
- **7 October:** Plenary session livestream starts at 12 noon AEDT and runs until approximately 12.45pm AEDT.
- **10 October:** Closing Mass of the First General Assembly, 11am AEDT from St Stephen’s Cathedral, Brisbane.

To watch these key moments of the First Assembly of the Plenary Council, visit the [Plenary Council’s homepage](https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/).

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/>