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“Please Change”

What Sandhurst Catholics said about *Plenary Council Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue*

By Ruth Lawlor and Fr Brian Boyle.

Introduction

Anticipation of, and preparation for, the Plenary Council 2020-2021 continues. Groups in the Diocese have met and individuals have made submissions for Phase 2 of the Plenary Council which is entitled *Let's Listen and Discern*. The key question for Phase 2 of the Plenary preparation is:

How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is:

- *Missionary and Evangelisation*
- *Inclusive, participatory and synodal*
- *Prayerful and Eucharistic*
- *Humble, healing and merciful*
- *A joyful, hope-filled servant community*
- *Open to conversation, renewal and reform?*

Phase 2 of the Plenary Council is about communal discernment through prayer and scripture, leading to action.

There have been two significant developments for the Plenary Council in the last several weeks. Because of the personal and social changes in our lives brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Bishops have announced the postponement of the first meeting of the Plenary until 2021. The initial meeting of the Plenary Council was scheduled for October of this year in Adelaide. The date and venue for that first Plenary meeting are yet to be determined.

The second significant development is the announcement of the Sandhurst delegation to the Plenary Council. Our delegates are:

Bishop Shane Mackinlay, Bishop of Sandhurst
Fr Joe Taylor PP, Vicar General
Fr Brian Boyle EV, Episcopal Vicar for Education
Ms Cathy Jenkins, Catholic Education Sandhurst
Ms Ruth Lawlor, Sandhurst Youth Ministry.

We thus have three clerics and two lay women. The three clerics attend by virtue of Office; the two lay women were selected. The process of selection of the two lay delegates was as follows: persons were invited to self-nominate as a delegate; the Diocesan Plenary Council Committee voted on the delegates who presented; the voting was presented and recommended to the Bishop who forwarded the results to the Central Committee of the Plenary Council.

A previous article on the Plenary Council appeared in the *SandPiper* (April 2019, Page 12-13) and offered a frank overview of issues and concerns expressed by Sandhurst people on Phase 1. In July of 2019 the Plenary Council Central Committee published its final report on Phase 1 of the Council for the whole of Australia. This was a comprehensive document that ran for some 300 pages! Subsequently, late last year, the specific Report on the Diocese of Sandhurst for Phase 1 was made available. This document runs for some 83 pages.

A meeting of our Sandhurst Plenary Council committee was held on 2nd March 2020 to consider the contents of this Report and how to make the Report best available to the people of our Diocese. Our Committee agreed on a number of measures: the commissioning of our Plenary Council delegates by people of the Diocese; make available the papers on the six themes (See above); the writing of a general article of interest for *SandPiper*; access to live streaming of all Plenary sessions; and, alerting our people to the Report as a public document.

This article is a breaking open of that Sandhurst Phase 1 Plenary Council Report. The Report is a summary of submissions received from Sandhurst people for Phase 1 *Listen and Discuss*. The Report is publicly available on the Plenary Council website and we as authors of this article encourage you to download the Report and read it. The address is <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Diocesan-Final-Report-Phase-1-Sandhurst.pdf> The passion, insight, commitment, faith and determination with which so many submissions from our Sandhurst people were presented, make for most impressive and indeed moving reading. What follows in the article is a breakdown of the Report and its structure.

Sandhurst Speaks

The findings in the Report are a summary of submissions received from people in Sandhurst Diocese in response to the *Listening and Dialogue* phase of the Plenary Council preparation.

What is contained in the Report has been printed with the consent of those who submitted. These submissions have been de-identified. These submissions are published in full. There were 305 submissions received from Sandhurst Diocese during the period May 2018-March 2019. Of those submissions 203 were presented by individuals and 102 were presented by groups. The total number of persons involved in the groups was 4,082. These figures indicate an impressive input from our Diocese. The total number of participants in the *Listen and Dialogue* process in Australia was 222,000.

As might be expected (comparing Mass-attending age groups), the majority of individual respondents came from the 55-80 age group; however, as we shall see, this was not the pattern for the group respondents who represented a much younger age group. There were nearly twice the number of female respondents as male respondents. The majority of respondents identified as Catholic, as regular Mass-attenders, and as those involved in other Church activities.

As we have seen, there were 102 group submissions representing 4,082 individuals. This was a very encouraging outcome. The largest number of individuals in a group submission came from *Galen Catholic College*, Wangaratta, with 1,280 participants, followed by *St Mary's of the Angels*, Nathalia, with 680 participants. These schools were followed with strong representation from the Kerang, Cohuna and Pyramid Hill parishes; St Liborius Parish, Eaglehawk; and, St Mary's Parish Echuca. It is clear then, that the under-20 age group was the largest group represented in our Sandhurst submissions with nearly 2,000 persons.

What Sandhurst Said

The Report on the Sandhurst Diocese is centred around the key three questions inviting submissions. Responses to Question 1, *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* constitute the major part of the Report, some 47 pages. It is very clear to us that what is submitted here has been stated with passion, with conviction, and with determination. The vast majority of persons who made submissions have a deep love of the Church, but not an uncritical one, and want to see the Church undertake fundamental change in order to survive and in order to be relevant in Australian society. In justice to those who contributed, the comments need to be read in full and in context and so we again urge you to download the Report as a public document from the Plenary Council website and read it yourself.

The five top topics discussed and raised by Sandhurst participants were:

- *Love of God and love of neighbour*
- *Leadership and Church Governance*
- *Sacraments*
- *Social Justice and the Environment*
- *The Mass and Catholic Liturgy.*

Under the theme or topic of *Love of God and love of neighbour* the main issues raised included greater focus on the person of Jesus Christ; being faithful to Church teaching; being a witness in Australian society; greater attention to Scripture; promotion of adult catechesis; and, an insistence on the Church as an alternative to the prevailing culture, rather than being overtly influenced by that culture.

Under the theme or topic of *Leadership and Church Governance* (which drew much comment) the issues raised included a need for a different model of Church; the untrustworthiness of Church leadership; clericalism; priestly celibacy; women priests; accountability and transparency on the part of the Church in the specific area of sexual abuse as revealed in the recent Royal Commission; clarity and simplicity in church life; a greater role for women in the Church; a voice for women in Church governance which is respected and heard; greater involvement of the laity; greater leadership from bishops and priests; and, the reimagining of relationships between clergy and laity in the Church.

Under the theme or topic of *Sacraments* some of the key issues raised included: the restoration of the Third Rite of Reconciliation; optional celibacy for priests; the ordination of women; and, concerns with the enculturation of overseas priests.

Under the topic of *Social Justice and the Environment* submissions included the obvious one of care of, and responsibility for, the environment in which we live. Social Justice issues included promotion of human rights; hearing the cry of the poor; attention to the marginalised, particularly Aboriginal Australians, LGBTQI persons, the poor, the elderly, refugees, the vulnerable and disabled, and those with mental health issues. Other submissions associated with this theme of Social Justice included being welcoming, inclusive and non-judgemental to all persons, as well as living as Jesus did and responding accordingly.

Finally, on the theme of *Mass and Catholic Liturgy* the main issues raised included: more options/translations of celebrating Mass (inclusive language); the positive place and role of the Latin Mass; inclusion of the divorced and remarried; the positive role of devotion and the Rosary in Catholic Liturgy; greater attention to music in liturgy; training people in prayer forms; and, the Mass to be more accessible to youth and children.

Other topics and themes that emerged from the Report which could not necessarily be conveniently grouped under one of these five headings included: outreach to youth where the disconnect is now seen as intergenerational; more transparency and accountability regarding clergy sexual abuse; greater concern for victims and survivors of sexual abuse; teaching authentic Catholic faith; stronger parish communities; the need to modernise Church teachings; and, greater connection with, and inclusion of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Australians.

As can be clearly seen, there is a wide range of concerns and issues presented by our Sandhurst people to the Plenary Council. From whatever ideological and faith stance persons may have made submissions, and allowing for the wide spectrum of opinions, it is very clear

to us that these views expressed are done so with passion and conviction. **People love the Church but also see that it must change and adapt.**

Some Sample Submissions

In order to give you as readers a sample of the opinions and views expressed in the submissions and printed in the Sandhurst Report, we would like to present to you now seven different contributions to illustrate the range of views in the Report and the passion with which they are expressed. Hopefully these samples will encourage you to read the Report itself.

The sample submissions are:

“God is simply asking us to rediscover what it means to live as Jesus did and respond accordingly. This requires change.”

“It is like standing beside the embers of our home and being asked how the fire could have been avoided! Particularly relevant is the fact that our opinions in the past have been so carefully ignored.”

“It is becoming harder and harder to keep our faith and remain committed to the Catholic Church. Urgent, radical and decisive changes are needed.”

“God is asking us to: 1) ensure the Catholic Church understands the significance of its current dilemma! 2) Ensure the Catholic Church immediately stops covering up and defending itself at the expense of its victims! 3) Ensure that the Catholic Church takes immediate and decisive action to address child sexual abuse and do anything in its power to prevent it every happening again. 4) Ensure the Catholic Church immediately adopts all of the recommendations coming out of the Royal Commission.”

“Giving young people the opportunity to feel connected to the Church and to be able to make it their own. Helping young people understand the importance of their roles in the future of the Church and how their voice can make a difference. Connecting young people, forming communities and fellowship.”

“Instead of offering an alternative, the Church has instead been influenced by the predominant culture ... we need to stand out from the culture rather than blend in.”

“This is a time for the Catholic Church to have its eyes wide open, be listening in faith, and have healing in its heart, as we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in answering God’s question to us, at this time in Australia ... let the endorsements of the Plenary Council be pleasing in all aspects, defining our Church’s way forward and delivering the message of God to all.”

Our Questions to the Plenary Council

The second question presented by the Council to all respondents was: *What questions about the future of the Church in Australia would you like the Plenary Council to consider?* There were some 56 questions put to the Council in the Sandhurst submissions. As with responses to Question 1, all these responses have been de-identified and are printed with the consent of those who submitted them. A sample and an indicative list of the 56 questions includes the following:

When are the People of God going to be meaningfully empowered?

When are Parish Pastoral Councils going to have a say in the appointment of local priests?

How can we help heal the marginalised?

How can the church address/show leadership in community issues, eg family breakdown, mental health (depression and suicide), domestic violence?

When will the Church recognise and allow women to hold positions of responsibility in the Church?

When will the Church allow married priests in the Australian Church?

How can the Church expect to remain relevant to educated young people in Australia when they consider it to be so out of touch on issues such as contraception and homosexuality?

What happened to the Third Rite of Reconciliation?

How can an organisation so broken restore faith in itself?

When will women be rightfully recognised as equals in the Church?

Where is the compassion to those whose marriages have split?

Why can't we have a church with equality in decision making among women and men, lay people and clergy?

How are we going to strengthen the Catholic element in schools and "protect the brand"?

How can theology be made more accessible for young people in response to the modern need for rationality and science?

How do we deal with the disillusionment of many older members due to the lack of youth participation?

How do we grow into the future given everything around the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse?

What is the immediate action the hierarchy are going to take to salvage some of the Church's dignity and credibility?

As you can see, there is plenty of interest in the life and future of the Australian Catholic Church and plenty of commitment to see that its future is viable and relevant. Again, these sample questions may encourage you as the reader to explore more of what is written in the Report.

Our Story

Question 3 put to the Sandhurst participants by the Plenary Council was: *Would you like to share a story about your experience of faith or of the Church in Australia that has shaped you?*

This question invited people to identify a key story or event that has shaped and influenced their faith.

In the Report the stories shared run for some 15 pages. Many of these stories are deeply personal, presented with intense conviction, and reveal a love of the Church, even if that love has been betrayed. Stories speak about relations between parents and children and between generations. Stories speak about the value and force of spirituality and a life of prayer, even outside the church. A range of hurtful experiences are recounted where the Church was not seen as inclusive, as merciful and as welcoming as people expected. At the same time a number of stories recount a positive experience of being a member of the Australian Catholic Church, particularly through such prayer forms and movements as Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Stronger Youth, participation in the Latin Mass, bible study groups, Divine Mercy, RCIA, and group recitation of the Rosary. Many stories reveal the hurt, disillusionment, betrayal, anger, despair, and trauma that the revelations of the Royal Commission about the Australian Catholic Church have laid bare.

Conclusion

This article on the Plenary Council has been entitled *Please Change*. The title is taken from one of the submissions in the Sandhurst Report. The title we believe picks up well the emotion many respondents indicated in their submission, namely a love for the Church on the one hand and a sincere desire, indeed the necessity, for the Church to change on the other hand. Many of the submissions in the Report reflect wisdom, passion, commitment and hope for change while at the same time acknowledging this may well be the last opportunity for that change in the Australian Catholic Church.

Our intention in writing this article as a summary was to be faithful to what has been presented in the Report. The views expressed in the Report by Sandhurst participants are not necessarily our own. It is clear that the Australian Catholic Church is indeed a broad church or tent in which many people find a home and many diverse views and opinions can be expressed. The Plenary Council will need to find the necessary compromises. This is clearly a God-given opportunity for our local Church and the many responses are basically positive (albeit critical) about the Church's future. To give one example from the recommendations of the Royal Commission, a new governance model for our Catholic schools in the Sandhurst Diocese is currently being investigated whereby, among other things, the Parish Priest will no longer be the Canonical Administrator of the schools in his parish. This development allows for a new focus on collaborative leadership between parish and school, between clergy and laity. The voices of Sandhurst Diocese in the Report clearly reveal to us the humble admission of the need for, and indeed the capacity for, change.

Pope Francis constantly reminds us by his own word and example, the important people in the Church are those who humbly serve others.

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Materials and quotations used in this article are taken from *Final Report for Phase I: Listening and Dialogue. A Report to the Diocese of Sandhurst.*
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Canberra, 2019.