



***Discerning the Way to the Plenary Council:
Reflecting with the Thematic Papers.***

The Next Steps on our Plenary Journey

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to our personal and social lives. We are living now with restrictions which limit our movements, our gatherings, our social interactions, and our daily lives. Whatever post-Covid life will look like, we will certainly come out of the pandemic different people than when we entered this challenge. For persons of faith, the pandemic has also brought significant restrictions on our faith gatherings and our liturgical celebrations. Belief and practice may also assume quite different forms after the pandemic than what we took for granted beforehand.

Preparations for the holding of the Plenary Council in Australia have also been strongly impacted by the pandemic. Originally, as you read this document, delegates would have been gathering in Adelaide for the first Session of the Plenary. The dates of the two Plenary Sessions have now been changed because of the impact of Covid-19. The new dates are:

3-10th October 2021, Adelaide

4-9th July 2022, Sydney

The significant challenge for Australian dioceses now is to keep the energy and focus of the Plenary Council within the range of interests of Australian Catholics. This document provides a structure for our Diocese to keep the Plenary Council spirit alive over the next twelve months.

In July and August of this year four of us (Fr Brian Boyle, Lyn Breen, Cathy Jenkins and Ruth Lawlor) met to map out a Diocesan strategy for this phase of preparation for the Plenary Council. Our plan was to offer the Diocese an overall structure for preparation between October 2020 and July 2021. The structure and process outlined here has the approval of the Bishop.

We envisage that this plan will encompass the Diocese as a whole, the three Deaneries of the Diocese, our parishes, and our schools, primary and secondary. As such it is a comprehensive and ambitious plan but one we believe is achievable, given the right resources.

The Plenary Council Central Committee has produced six thematic discernment Papers, arranged around the central concerns which emerged from the widespread consultation of Australian Catholics. These Thematic Papers, then, will form the substance of the resources being offered to our Diocese to continue prayerfully on our Plenary Council journey. The six Thematic Papers are entitled as follows:

How is God Calling Us to Be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is:

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

As the Thematic Papers make clear, and indeed as the whole Plenary process preparation has illustrated, the key to the Plenary Council is **discernment**. The Plan presented here and the resources to be offered are based on this prayerful movement of discernment which is primarily a prayerful process that includes both an art and science. Our plan then begins with deepening our practise of discernment.

Overall Structure and Plan

This phase of our Diocesan preparation for the Plenary Council will run essentially from October 2020 until May 2021, that is, after the conclusion of the current Diocesan celebration of our *Care for Creation* (October) through to the celebration of the Feast of Pentecost on 23rd May, 2021. We will commence on **Sunday, 18th October**, with several weeks given to the key process of discernment. A presentation on the nature of discernment with resources will be made available to all our Diocese.

Each “month” we will engage in prayerful discernment with one of the six thematic themes and issues presented in the titles of the Thematic Papers as above. One of the four persons who have worked on this plan over the last several months will present on that particular theme, as well as making resources available. We have decided to relate each of these six themes as best we can to the liturgical season, either Advent or Lent or Ordinary Time. The schema of the overall plan could be represented as follows:

Dates	Theme	Presenter
18 th October 2020	Discernment	Cathy Jenkins
1 st November 2020	Inclusive, participatory, and synodal	Ruth Lawlor
29 th November 2020	Joyful, hope-filled and servant community	Lyn Breen
31 st January 2021	Open to conversion, renewal and reform	Cathy Jenkins
28 th February 2021	Humble, healing and merciful	Lyn Breen
12 th April 2021	Prayerful and Eucharistic	Ruth Lawlor
9 th May 2021	Missionary and evangelising	Cathy Jenkins

The term “month” is used loosely, to indicate a period of time for the community or the individual to prayerfully consider the nominated theme. The process lends itself well to incorporation into the current liturgical season.

Resources

In designing this structure for our participation by discernment in the Plenary Council preparation, we had in mind four specific groups or entities who could participate in this process, namely:

- **Our Diocese**
- **Deaneries**
- **Parishes**

- **Schools, primary and secondary**

For our participation as a Diocese proper, the Bishop will send out a letter and a video presentation on the Plenary preparation. We also envisage, across the Diocese, a number of zoom groups being set up to which persons are invited or can self-nominate by interest to become a discussion member. For example, we have a number of persons in the Diocese who have worked on Plenary Council committees and/or who nominated to become a Sandhurst delegate. These persons could form a natural group of interest for a zoom gathering.

We have three Deaneries in the Diocese. The Deans could well organise gatherings of parishioners and interested persons in that Deanery to come together on a regular basis to consider all or some of the six Thematic Papers. These gatherings could be conducted by zoom or, as regulations permit at that time, gathering in person.

For our parishes we envisage making available for each of the six themes, as related to the timeline set out here, resources including: Steps on Building a Synodal Parish; Weekly Bulletin notices; Prayers of Intercession; Invitations to join the diocesan-wide zoom groups; and, Reflection Guides on the six themes. Each presenter will adapt the parish resources according to their own interest and approach to that theme. The current six Thematic Papers (each of which runs to some 20 pages of text) will also soon be available in an abbreviated form.

In the Diocese-wide consultation for the Council (*What Sandhurst Catholics said about Plenary Council Phase I: Listening and Dialogue*) a number of our schools, primary and secondary, made substantial contributions, indicating a significant interest in the Plenary Council on the part of our school students. At least two specific strategies for our schools are clear at this point: school-based discussion groups around the six themes; and, adaptation of the Reflection Guides for staff meetings and staff prayer.

Further Plenary Council Matters

The delegates of the Diocese of Sandhurst to the Plenary Council have already been announced: Bishop Shane Mackinlay, Fr Joe Taylor VG, Fr Brian Boyle EV, Cathy Jenkins and Ruth Lawlor. The three clergy attend by virtue of office; the other two delegates were elected. There will be a period of formation for these delegates and a commissioning ceremony whereby the Diocese as a whole commissions these delegates to go to the Council on their behalf. The commissioning ceremony could well take place at a significant liturgical celebration such as the Chrism Mass 2021 or the commencement of Lent mid-February 2021, or the Feast of Pentecost on 23rd May 2021.

It is also envisaged that there be a Diocesan liturgical celebration to bring together many of the main ideas and energies of the preparation period of the Plenary Council, taking up such themes as hope, inspiration, renewal, and joy. Such a celebration would be fitting at the conclusion of our Plenary preparations, in June or July 2021.

A dedicated group of writers from the Plenary Council Central Committee is producing a draft *Instrumentum Laboris* or basic working document for the first session of the Plenary Council as well

as the agenda. Both documents should be available after Easter 2021, once they have been approved by the Vatican and the Australian Bishops.

The principle focus of this preparation time is **discernment**. The process of discernment, of prayerfully listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, is both art and science. Archbishop Timothy Costello has written an excellent paper on discernment in relation to the Plenary Council and we will make this resource readily available. Because prayerful discernment is at the heart of the Plenary Council process, we will begin our diocesan participation in this stage of the Plenary Council journey by focussing initially on discernment.

Fr Brian Boyle EV
Chair, Sandhurst Plenary Council Committee

Lyn Breen
Adult Faith Education Coordinator

Cathy Jenkins
Sandhurst Delegate for Plenary Council

Ruth Lawlor
Executive Officer, Sandhurst Plenary Council Committee and Sandhurst Delegate for Plenary Council