

PLENARY COUNCIL TO CONTEMPLATE WOUNDEDNESS, SEEK NEW PERIPHERIES

Day four of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia will take on a different feel, as members spend extra time offline, praying with and reflecting on questions about seeing through the eyes of those who have been abused and reaching those on the peripheries.

The agenda for the Plenary Council poses 16 questions across six themes, with members called to “develop concrete proposals to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia at this time”.

Fourteen of the 16 questions are being discerned concurrently during the week by 10 small working groups. Two particular questions are the focus of a special plenary session, being held on Thursday, October 7.

The questions are:

- How might we heal the wounds of abuse, coming to see through the eyes of those who have been abused?
- How might the Church in Australia meet the needs of the most vulnerable, go to the peripheries, be missionary in places that may be overlooked or left behind in contemporary Australia? How might we partner with others (Christians, people of other faiths, neighbourhood community groups, government) to do this?

Br Peter Carroll FMS, the provincial leader of the Marist Brothers in Australia and a Plenary Council member, said while the Council “is about mapping out a path for the future, we can’t ignore the tragedies of the past”.

“We must come to terms with our sinfulness and reconcile our future with our past,” he said.

“We must seek forgiveness and facilitate healing. We need to recognise the pain that’s been suffered and the hurt perpetrated. We need to accept responsibility for what has happened. We need to listen to and accompany those who have suffered. We need to commit to ensuring such wrongs are never perpetrated again.”

Br Peter, who is also president of Catholic Religious Australia, said Pope Francis has offered the challenge for the Church to heal wounds and warm hearts.

“How much more important for us to try to heal the wounds that the Church has caused,” he said.

Br Peter said he has urged the Plenary Council membership to consider how a public response will be made to victims and survivors during the Council journey, which runs until July 2022.

Council member Claire Victory, national president of the St Vincent de Paul Society, said when considering how the Church might support the vulnerable, Jesus’ example of offering people opportunities and keeping company with the marginalised is the guide.

“The Church should be the first place a person excluded from or shunned by society - the single mum or pregnant teen, the person struggling with questions about their sexuality or gender identity - should find welcome and support,” she said.

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“Why is it that, in some places, the Church is a place of welcome, yet in other places people find it intimidating and judgmental?”

Ms Victory said Bible stories learned as children are another signpost for action.

“Those Gospel stories that we hear as kids - the Good Samaritan, Jesus and Zaccheus, Jesus washing the feet of his disciples - it’s always been about being with people,” she said.

“We have to be truly present where the people are and not expect them to come to us. Vinnies members are present in local communities right across Australia.

“It can be as simple as a cup of tea and a chat, or dropping off an emergency voucher for food or a new doona. It’s not ground-breaking stuff.”

Plenary Council president Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB said the decision to focus on those two particular questions as a full body of members will allow space for extra prayer and reflection.

“Nothing can justify or cancel out the dreadful mistakes of the past. What the Church can do today and into the future is to commit itself to treating those who have been abused, and those who are vulnerable, with dignity, with respect and with integrity,” he said.

“We will spend this time as a plenary - all members together - considering these critical matters. We have additional time for individual prayer and reflection, spending some time away from our online environment, to contemplate what God is asking of us at this time in response to these two powerful questions on the Plenary Council agenda.”

Find out more about the Plenary Council at www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au