



Carrying Forward the Plenary Council

As we continue the journey together

This process of listening, reflecting, speaking and listening again contributes to a rich consideration of pastoral needs and complex circumstances.

[Plenary Council: Introduction to Motions and Amendments](#) (2022, para.10)

Thank you to all those who have been part of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, and/or the Synod on Synodality. If you are new to the journey, we are delighted you have joined us now.

This resource serves as a way of reviewing what your community is already doing, or could be doing, in relation to the commitments made by the Fifth Plenary Council. It is a resource that will assist you in continuing the synodal journey, of walking with your fellow Catholics and encountering the "face of Christ" in each and every person.



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Carrying Forward the Plenary Council was prepared by the National Centre for Evangelisation on behalf of the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry – a commission of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. It is offered as a guide for the ongoing journey of synodality in Australia.

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1. The journey so far

Over the past few years many Catholics have participated in significant processes at both national and international levels.

In Australia, the bishops invited all Catholics to contribute to the Fifth Plenary Council by considering:

1. What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?
2. How do we become a more Christ-centred Church?

Over 222,000 individuals participated in the Plenary Council process – through prayer, reflection, conversation, consultation and discernment. A total of 17,457 submissions were received and distilled into eight themes, which became the focus areas for two national gatherings of the Council members in 2021 and 2022.

Almost simultaneously, Pope Francis invited the Universal Church to participate in what is commonly referred to as the “[Synod on synodality](#)”. From 2021-2024, Catholics from across the world have been asked to discern together how the Church can proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to her, and what steps the Holy Spirit is inviting us to take to grow as a synodal Church.

This idea of synodality is common to both the Australian and the international processes. Synodality calls all the baptised to journey together, discerning what the Holy Spirit asks of us. It calls all to “contemplate the face of Christ” in all the peoples and circumstances of our time.¹

Both the Fifth Plenary Council and the Synod on Synodality invite us to listen deeply to the “[joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties](#)”² of our fellow travellers. Each initiative invites an ongoing synodal journey as the Catholic Church continues to face a time of both *crisis* and *hope*.

Crisis, because we know there is a decline, in our country, of people who identify as believers or who practise their Catholic faith. Crisis, because of the continuing effects of criminal and sinful abuse of minors by Church personnel which has led to a loss of public trust in Catholic governance and procedures and declining Church affiliation.

Yet, at the same time there are signs of hope! Hope, as Catholics work with other Christians to strengthen the service, advocacy and prophetic presence of the Church in Australian society. Hope, in the experiences of renewal where there is an awareness of the presence of the Lord Jesus and his life-giving Spirit moving in the hearts of believers, in the communal life of the Church, in all human cultures and peoples, and throughout creation.

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, [Novo millennio ineunte](#) (6 January 2001), n. 42.

² Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, [Gaudium et spes](#) (7 December 1965), n.1.

The Plenary Council sought to foster a Christ-centred Church in Australia by focusing on several themes. This resource looks at each of the themes, indicating the commitments that were made by the Council, and offers a variety of areas for exploration by members of Catholic communities.

Note: The above is a summary of the Plenary Council's *General Introduction* to the Motions and Amendments document. It can be read in [full here](#).

Key Plenary Council Terms, Documents, and Actions Terminology

The Plenary Council process employed several key terms and phrases. To assist you with the use of this resource here are some brief definitions you might find helpful.

- **Decrees:** During the Plenary Council more than 35 motions were voted on. Those motions that received a two-thirds majority vote were passed by the Plenary Council and became “decrees”. They can be read [here](#).
- **Discernment:** Discernment is a process, a way of coming to know what it is that draws us closer to God, and what draws us away from God. See page #5.
- **Plenary Council:** A Plenary Council is the highest formal gathering of all local churches in a country. The fifth Plenary Council to be held in Australia provided a significant opportunity to dialogue about the current situation and the future directions of the Catholic Church in our country.
- **Sensus fidei:** Latin for “sense of faith”. This refers to the personal capacity of believers, within the communion of the Church, to discern the truth of faith³.
- **Synodality:** This is the process by which the entire Church – all the baptised – seeks to discern together what the Holy Spirit is asking of them in more faithfully living out the Church’s mission. Synod comes from two Greek words, meaning “walking together”.
- **Themes:** As a result of the consultation phase prior to the two General Assemblies of the Plenary Council, the large number of submissions contributed by Australian Catholics were distilled into eight main “themes” or topic areas.

EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES

The Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia will interpret the decrees of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia in accordance with the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches and the traditions of each church *sui iuris*.

³ For a deeper understanding of *sensus fidei*, please read, [Sensus fidei in the life of the Church](#), International Theological Commission, 2014.

REVIEW OF THE DECREES BY THE APOSTOLIC SEE

In accordance with canon 446 of the *Code of Canon Law*, the decrees are not to be promulgated until they have been reviewed by the Apostolic See. They will then be promulgated in the *Australasian Catholic Record* and the website of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in accordance with its usual practice. The decrees will take effect six months after promulgation.

Note: This resource has been produced prior to the *recognitio* – that is, the review by the Apostolic See – so that faith communities may continue to build on the momentum of the synodal journey.

2. How to use this resource

“Carrying Forward the Plenary Council” is a resource and process outlined by the Implementation Plan of the Fifth Plenary Council, Terms of Reference, point 5.A. It is a pastoral study guide of the commitments that conclude the introduction to each Decree, with exploratory questions for specific and local circumstances. This resource and local reflection are not contingent on the *recognitio* by the Apostolic See and encourages an ongoing synodal pathway.

The invitation to continue the synodal journey is offered to all Catholic faith communities, which includes but is not limited to parishes, schools, dioceses, agencies, groups and movements. Community leaders are encouraged to invite members to gather and to consider one or more of the Council’s decrees.

Your synodal pathway should include:

- community involvement: involving a variety of methods, including going out beyond the normal places and spaces of your community so as to seek thoughts, ideas and actions;
- process of discernment: drawing on the lived experience, wisdom, knowledge and contribution of all members of the community, in the context of prayer and reflection;
- prayer: time reflecting on Scripture and in prayer listening to the Holy Spirit.

Further outlines and suggestions are detailed below.

Leaders should ensure time is provided either prior to or during a session for attendees to read the relevant “Introduction” and the “Plenary Council Commitment”, before moving to the “Areas for exploration”.

If attendees have had limited exposure to the Plenary Council process, leaders should be prepared to fill in any gaps, possibly by providing some introductory words at the start of the session.

2.1 Community involvement

Every effort should be made to involve as many community members as possible in this continuing journey of the Plenary Council, as all the baptised have the right and responsibility to contribute to the life of the Catholic communities they belong to.

The question many people ask is how to attract interest beyond the “usual” group of people who contribute to the decision-making processes in each community. If a culture of synodality in your community has been limited, then building momentum in a synodal way of operating will be challenging at first. Leaders will have to express a genuine desire and commitment to be prepared to listen, and to act, as appropriate, on the *sensus fidei*. When the community members see this in action, they are more likely to offer their contributions.

Here are some ideas community leaders might like to consider so as to include more community members in this ongoing process of the Plenary Council journey.

- *Identify the community members who aren't currently represented.* For example, in parishes, it could be families in the parish schools, young adults, those who have English as a second language, those living with a disability or those who have been hurt by historical events in the parish/Church. Determine how an invitation could be extended to these groups.
- *Consider where to gather, or if you need to.* In seeking new voices, you may need to move beyond the expectation that people will come to you to share in this process. Consider individual consultation or group discussions in locations beyond parish buildings. Visit youth groups, aged care centres, schools, mothers' groups, cultural communities and other locations in your community.
- *Communicate the invitation in multiple ways* – personal, in writing, in social media, or in newsletters (parish, school, social services, hospitals, aged care, youth organisations). Your communication strategy needs to be broader than those who regularly attend weekend Mass.
- *Communicate the invitation well in advance* and consider offering the gatherings at different times.
- *Offer in-person and online options.* Online may be especially attractive for parents who find it difficult to get baby-sitting in the evenings, for people who are less outgoing, for those who have mobility issues and for those living in regional, rural or remote areas.
- *Offer generous hospitality* – the best discussions often happen over food and drink.
- *Keep the gatherings short.* It is probably better to only tackle one or two themes in each meeting.
- *Discern the best person/team to lead the gatherings.* Leaders should be passionate, articulate, have a pastoral heart and be willing to listen more than talk. Check that the leader or team has an understanding or relates to the diversity of the community: male/female, laity/clergy, ethnicity, young/old etc.

2.2 The process of discernment

“Discernment” was a prominent word used during the Plenary Council, and it should continue to be so in the life of our Church. Discernment is a process, a way of coming to know what it is that draws us closer to God, and what draws us away from God. It is a process of listening to the Holy Spirit, listening to yourself and listening to others. In making decisions, discernment helps us weigh up what God wants me, or us, to do in any given situation.

If the idea of discernment is new to you, then please take the time to look at these explanatory [videos and articles from the Fifth Plenary Council website](#).

When you gather in your small groups to discuss the material in this resource, we encourage you to use a simple process of discernment to guide your time together.

As an example:

1. Pray – we have provided an opening prayer in the next section, but you may choose another.
2. Read the relevant “Introduction”, “Plenary Council Commitment” and the “Areas for exploration” and reflect on them in silence.
3. Share and listen – it is helpful to let everyone have their say without interruption, and then have a time of sharing. Conclude with another time of silence.
4. Pray and respond – what are the actions that need to be taken.

Here is another example of a [discernment process](#) used at the Plenary Council which you can adapt.

2.3 Prayer

Scripture is referenced in many of the Fifth Plenary Council documents and decrees. Take time to read the Scripture behind statements and actions from the Plenary Council. If you are focusing on a particular decree, you may like to pray on the related Scripture at the start of your session.

The Plenary Council has many prayer resources which can be found on the [Plenary Council website](#). The Plenary Council Prayer remains central to our ongoing reflection and you are invited to continue to use this prayer as we continue to walk together.

The Plenary Council Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit of Pentecost.
Come, Holy Spirit of the great South Land.

O God, bless and unite all your people in Australia
and guide us on the pilgrim way of the Plenary Council.

Give us the grace to see your face in one another
and to recognise Jesus, our companion on the road.

Give us the courage to tell our stories
and to speak boldly of your truth.

Give us ears to listen humbly to each other
and a discerning heart to hear what you are saying.

Lead your Church into a hope-filled future,
that we may live the joy of the Gospel.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
bread for the journey from age to age. Amen.

Our Lady Help of Christians, pray for us.
St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, pray for us.

The Decrees of the Fifth Plenary Council



DECREE ONE

Reconciliation – Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts

“You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.” Pope John Paul II.⁴

Introduction

The first decree of the Fifth Plenary Council is an invitation to all Australians to learn from the cultures, spirituality and knowledge of country of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The decree acknowledges that the Catholic Church has been caught up in the history of dispossession, Stolen Generations, racism and the undermining of language and culture. For the harms this has caused to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in and beyond the Church, the Plenary Council says sorry.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) prepared a series of recommendations to assist parishes, dioceses and Catholic organisations implement a best-practice model when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The recommendations, received and accepted by the Plenary Council, address areas of ministry, formation and training, enrichment of liturgies, appropriate acknowledgement and recognition of the genius and gifts that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can offer.

Plenary Council Commitment

In its commitment, the Plenary Council:

- a. says sorry to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in and beyond the Church, for the part played by the Church in the harms they have suffered;
- b. commits to walking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in continuing to work towards recognition, reconciliation and justice;

⁴ John Paul II, [*Address of John Paul II to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Blatherskite Park*](#) (Alice Springs), (29 November 1986).

- c. joyfully receives and accepts the recommendations contained in the NATSICC position paper “[Embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Life of the Catholic Church](#)”⁵;
- d. endorses the Uluru Statement from the Heart and encourages engagement with processes for implementing the statement, including local, regional, and national truth-telling efforts.

We encourage you to read the [full text of this decree](#) to deepen your understanding of the theme: Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts.

Areas for exploration

1. Who are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in your parish/community? Consider ways in which you could invite these members of your community to share their stories, especially in relation to culture and spirituality, and to discuss what “country” means to them.
2. Consider asking members of your parish or community to read and discuss the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (see Annexure A). You might find it helpful to invite one or two Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples to engage with you in this discussion.
 - What questions arise?
 - What action might be possible in your local parish/community as a response to the Statement?
3. As a group, read the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council’s position paper, [Embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Life of the Catholic Church](#).
 - Consider undertaking the [Cultural Competency in a Catholic Context eLearning Course](#)

In the above areas for exploration, you might add the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this task?
- Identify any barriers to progressing this task and then brainstorm solutions.
- What resources will be required?
- What is the timeline for each task?
- How will you assess if any improvement has been made?

⁵ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, [Embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the life of the Catholic Church](#), undated.

DECREE TWO

Choosing Repentance – Seeking Healing

“Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs’” (Matthew 19:13-15 NRSVCE).

Introduction

The second decree of the Fifth Plenary Council acknowledges with profound sorrow that children, young people and vulnerable adults have been abused by clergy, religious and lay workers of the Catholic Church, and that religious leaders have failed to act sufficiently to prevent or respond to abuse. To the victims and survivors of abuse, their families and communities, the Plenary Council offered an unreserved apology.

The Plenary Council reviewed the significant steps taken by the Church in recent decades to respond to those who have suffered the trauma of abuse. These steps include the Towards Healing protocol, the Melbourne Response, the introduction of policies and procedures by individual dioceses and other Church organisations and more recently the establishment of Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd, which has an ongoing role in promoting the protection of children and adults at risk.

The Plenary Council endorsed the expectation that the processes set by the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards and the requirements set down by canon and civil law will be adhered to by dioceses, eparchies and all Catholic entities. These initiatives, and others, address the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The Plenary Council noted that some Church communities have established memorials in various forms, as a tangible recognition of the harm done through abuse and the need for special care of children.

The Plenary Council affirmed the practice of an annual Day of Prayer on which Church communities throughout Australia pray for God’s healing for those who have suffered abuse and dedicate themselves to care for children and all those who are vulnerable, following the example of Christ.

Plenary Council Commitment

In its commitment, the Plenary Council strongly reiterated an apology to victims and survivors of abuse, their families and communities. It recommitted the Church to continue to respond with justice and compassion to all victims and to ensure the ongoing work of implementing and improving safeguarding standards and practices.

The Plenary Council called on all Catholics to ensure Church environments are safe and respectful.

We encourage you to read the [full text of this decree](#) to deepen your understanding of the theme: Choosing Repentance – Seeking Healing.

Areas for exploration

1. Discuss ways in which victims of abuse can be acknowledged in your parish/community. For example, a visible memorial, prayer service, inclusion in the Prayers of the Faithful.
2. What are the policies and procedures that relate to the safeguarding of children and vulnerable people in your community? How do you continue awareness of safeguarding and promote an open and safe reporting environment?
3. What auditing processes do you have to ensure safeguarding maintains best and current practices? How are community members updated on safeguarding policies, procedures and reporting on an ongoing basis?

In the above areas for exploration, you might add the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this task?
- Identify any barriers to progressing this task and then brainstorm solutions.
- What resources will be required?
- What is the timeline for each task?
- How will you assess if any improvement has been made?

DECREE THREE

Called by Christ – Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples

“All the baptised, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelisation, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelisation to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients” (Pope Francis).⁶

Introduction

The third decree of the Fifth Plenary Council is a challenging but joyful reminder to all Catholics of the mission that has been entrusted to them through their Baptism. As disciples of Christ, the baptised are called to give loving attention to our world – marked by both sin and grace – to prayerfully read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, to seek to grasp the meaning of human strivings and to discern God’s will under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (cf. [Gaudium et Spes](#) nn. 3-4, 11).

Pope Saint Paul VI reminded us that “the Gospel is not out-of-date” but remains an inspiration for offering people of our own time and place renewed hope while also “advancing the life of society”.⁷ The Plenary Council commended the contributions made by the Church to Australian society in living out the Gospel through its ministries and services, particularly those in health, aged care, disability, community services and education.

In reference to parish communities the Plenary Council affirmed the need to move from a maintenance model of parish life, to one that is more missionary. Parishes are encouraged to create pathways for parish forums, small groups (for example for young people, families, children, married couples, single adults, etc.) and ecclesial communities that may foster the lay apostolate. These pathways can provide supportive spaces for prayer, formation, fellowship and mission animation.

In forming these pathways, parishes should aim to build up a culture of synodality, of purposefully walking together to understand the needs of all who wish to know and love Jesus. In doing so, parishes should ensure that all find welcome and inclusion, with particular attention to those who experience disadvantage or exclusion, and those who have been hurt in an encounter with the Church through abuse, exclusion, intolerance or a lack of compassion and understanding. There are deep wounds to be healed – and this will require dialogue and non-judgemental listening so that we might hear the voice of Christ in their stories.

⁶ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, [Evangelii Gaudium](#) (24 November 2013), n. 120.

⁷ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter, [Octogesima Adveniens](#) (14 May 1971), n. 4.

This missionary work of making Christ known and loved requires the clergy and laity to adopt collaborative approaches to ministry, where healthy, respectful and fruitful relationships will bear fruit. In building these relationships, formation may be required so as to discern and recognise the charisms/gifts that each community member brings, and to be open to reassessing current structures and ways of operating with the aim of revitalising parish life.

In our aim to be Christ-centred communities, the Plenary Council also called for Catholics to be open to dialoguing with other Christians, those of other religious traditions and those with no religion. The building up of such relationships can promote dialogues of life, action, theological exchange and religious experience – all of which can build up and enrich our society as a whole.⁸

Plenary Council Commitment

The Plenary Council committed the Church in Australia to being centred on Christ, with a baptismal identity and on a path of missionary discipleship. This includes:

- a. Formation for, and promotion of evangelisation through hospitality, encounter, dialogue, and merciful responses drawing on Catholic Social Teaching;
- b. Developing a culture of inclusion and a commitment to collaboration and co-responsibility;
- c. Opportunities for Church leaders in all aspects of Church life to dialogue with those who experience disadvantage or exclusion;
- d. Development of a long-term plan to evangelise the community and catechise the faithful in a broad range of faith matters, including the sanctity of life, support for healthy marital and sexual lives and promotion of the Gospel through engagement in the public arena.

We encourage you to read the [full text of this decree](#) to deepen your understanding of the theme: Called by Christ – Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples.

Areas for exploration

1. Review the initiatives/topics which are currently on the agenda of your community leadership team. Do these initiatives/topics relate to maintenance or missionary endeavours? What changes might be required to encourage an increased focus on mission?
2. Identify what formation might be required for parishioners to learn more about co-responsibility and possible ways to re-focus the parish so as to become a more missionary community.
3. Identify the opportunities which exist in your community to proactively engage with those who feel marginalised. Choose one of these opportunities for your community to pursue.

⁸ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, [Dialogue and Proclamation](#) (19 May 1991), n. 42.

- When planning your engagement, give thought to hospitality, times for encounter and dialogue and merciful responses.
4. Identify an activity which would allow your community to dialogue with people from other faith traditions.

In the above areas for exploration, you might add the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this task?
- Identify any barriers to progressing this task and then brainstorm solutions.
- What resources will be required?
- What is the timeline for each task?
- How will you assess if any improvement has been made?

DECREE FOUR

Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Introduction

The fourth decree of the Fifth Plenary Council is an invitation to all baptised Catholics to witness to the equal dignity of women and men.

Scripture calls us to recognise this equal dignity of women and men and to esteem their contributions: “there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Throughout history, the Church has looked to Mary the Mother of God as a model for every human person and *the* model for Christian discipleship.

The Plenary Council observed that “disregard for the equal dignity of women and men persists in society and the Church.” In 1995, this was acknowledged by Pope Saint John Paul II in his *Letter to Women*⁹. He wrote:

Women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. Certainly, it is no easy task to assign the blame for this, considering the many kinds of cultural conditioning which down the centuries have shaped ways of thinking and acting. And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry.

The Plenary Council heard from women of varied experiences in the Church today. Sometimes women were joyful, happy and thriving in their service to Christ and the Church. Other times women experienced barriers and a lack of support in seeking to offer their gifts in service of the Gospel, causing frustration and disappointment.

Authentic witness to the equal dignity of women and men requires addressing issues of power, authority and the freedom of persons to decide and act on their decisions with informed consciences. We need to deepen our understanding of the human person, to appreciate more fully the gifts that women and men together bring to the life of the Church. This will require scriptural and theological formation and catechesis at the parish, diocesan, eparchial and national levels. The Council noted that there is much work to be done in this area.

⁹ John Paul II, [Letter to Women](#) (29 June 1995), n. 3.

Plenary Council Commitment

In light of the above, the Plenary Council committed the Church in Australia to acting in ways that witness clearly to the equal dignity of women and men, with their diverse gifts and experiences.

It committed the Church to enhancing the role of women in the Church, and to overcoming assumptions, culture, practices and language that lead to inequality.

It committed the Church in Australia to ensuring that the experiences and perspectives of women are heard, considered and valued at all levels of the Church, and that women are appropriately represented in decision-making structures of the Church. It also committed the Church to recognising and valuing publicly the women who lead and serve in the Church in various ways.

We encourage you to read the full [text of this decree](#) to deepen your understanding of the theme: Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men.

Areas for exploration

1. Name the opportunities, or processes, which exist for the women and men in your community to identify and contribute their diverse experiences, perspectives and charisms/gifts.
 - Are these opportunities or processes sufficient?
 - What could be done to enhance these opportunities?
2. Review the representation of women and men in leadership or significant roles in your community.
 - If there is an imbalance, what can be done to address this? For example, is formation required, and could the community facilitate this by financial or other types of support?
3. Reflect on the culture of your community. Are there practices, such as language, that contribute to inequality?
 - In keeping with Church teaching, identify what action could be undertaken to counter these aspects of your community's culture.
 - Identify steps that can be taken at the local level to enable this to happen.

In the above areas for exploration, you might add the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this task?
- Identify any barriers to progressing this task and then brainstorm solutions.
- What resources will be required?
- What is the timeline for each task?
- How will you assess if any improvement has been made?

DECREE FIVE

Communion in Grace – Sacrament to the World

“The Church is ‘like a sacrament’, a sign and instrument of union with God and the unity of the whole human race” (Lumen Gentium).¹⁰

Introduction

The fifth decree of the Fifth Plenary Council affirmed that the Church was founded by Christ and that our vocation is to be the sacrament of communion with God and of unity among all people¹¹. We are committed to unity in Christ, while acknowledging the rich diversity which makes up the universal Church.

The Plenary Council reminded us that the Catholic Church breathes with two lungs¹² – the Western (or Latin) Catholic Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches. The latter are flourishing in Australia, and by their preservation of ancient liturgical, disciplinary and spiritual traditions offer a great richness to the Church as a whole.

Similarly, the charisms/gifts of religious orders and ecclesial movements provide opportunities for Catholics to be enriched by the spiritual and mystical traditions which have nourished the Church through the centuries.

The Plenary Council also emphasised the pre-eminent role of liturgical worship and the sacramental life of the Church. In our communal, liturgical worship, our hearts are opened to ongoing conversion to Christ¹³. In the sacraments we experience and celebrate the healing, forgiving, nourishing, strengthening presence of God that enables us to love others in turn; this is possible because God’s grace works in the Church’s celebration of the sacraments.¹⁴

Catholics come to receive the sacraments at key moments in their lives, and the Plenary Council affirmed that these are opportunities for accompaniment and dialogue as we celebrate God’s role in our individual and communal life. The Council also acknowledged challenges the Church in Australia is experiencing in relation to engagement in liturgical worship and its sacramental life.

¹⁰ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, [Lumen Gentium](#) (21 November 1964), n.1.

¹¹ Ibid, nn. 1,8.

¹² John Paul II, Encyclical letter on Commitment to Ecumenism, [Ut Unum Sint](#) (25 May 1995), n. 54.

¹³ Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#) (4 December 1963), n. 7.

¹⁴ *YOUCAT* (Australia and New Zealand). Melbourne: Freedom Publishing, 2019, p. 105.

- a. The Church rejoices when people come forward to receive the sacraments, for example, parents requesting Baptism for their children, but recognises that there is often little ongoing involvement in the life of the parish. The Council affirmed that the first response to these approaches must always be to welcome and encourage what is positive in a family's request, warmly inviting them to move further on the journey towards a personal relationship with Christ, lived out in the Christian community.
- b. The Council noted that the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults continues to be a source of renewed vitality for parish communities and for the Church as a whole. It also recognised that parish resources are often stretched to offer this process and to maintain contact with the neophytes after the celebration of the sacraments of initiation.
- c. The Council reaffirmed the centrality of the Eucharist as the source and summit of all sacramental life, and acknowledged the need for renewal in catechesis, formation and devotion to the Eucharist.
- d. The Liturgy of the Word is central to the Eucharist, and the Council therefore emphasised the need to promote a warm and living love for Scripture, including promoting faithful and excellent preaching.
- e. Because of the important role played by language in our experience of the liturgy, the Council affirmed that language used in the liturgy needs to be both faithful to the original text, and also able to communicate clearly and include all in the assembly.
- f. The Council recognised the desire expressed by Catholics in Australia to be formed in the sacrament of reconciliation and to review the opportunities for celebrating the various forms of the Rite of Penance.
- g. The Council highlighted the need for a renewed catechesis of marriage, pastoral care for all married couples and, related to this, the promotion and understanding of the sanctity of human life.

Plenary Council Commitment

The Plenary Council affirmed the fundamental importance of a sacramental, joyful and spiritually rich prayer life that is transformed, transforming and inclusive. To this end, the Plenary Council encouraged the provision of resources and formation which will enhance the dignified and reverent celebration of the liturgy and participation in the sacraments.

The Plenary Council committed the Catholic Church in Australia to breathing “with her two lungs”¹⁵ – East and West – respecting, fostering and promoting the rich heritage of each tradition.

We encourage you to read the [full text of this decree](#) to deepen your understanding of the theme: Communion in Grace – Sacrament to the World.

¹⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical letter on Commitment to Ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* (25 May 1995), n. 54.

Areas for exploration

1. Identify ways your parish can renew its welcome and encouragement for those who have celebrated the sacraments of initiation but may not be closely connected with the community. For example, parents who have presented their child for Baptism or adults who were initiated into the Church at the Easter Vigil.
2. Identify ways in which your parish can encourage a greater love for the Eucharist. This might include an increase in catechesis on this sacrament.
3. What initiative could your parish implement to promote the vocation of marriage? This might include, honouring couples who have achieved marriage milestones and encouraging couples to attend programs which strengthen the bond of marriage, especially in difficult times.

In the above areas for exploration, you might add the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this task?
- Identify any barriers to progressing this task and then brainstorm solutions.
- What resources will be required?
- What is the timeline for each task?
- How will you assess if any improvement has been made?

DECREE SIX

Formation and Leadership for Mission and Ministry

“What we are experiencing is not simply an epoch of changes, but an epochal change . . . It entails decisions that rapidly transform our ways of living, of relating to one another, of communicating and thinking, of how different generations relate to one another and how we understand and experience faith and science” (Pope Francis).¹⁶

Introduction

The sixth decree of the Fifth Plenary Council is an invitation to all baptised Catholics to re-assess current models of formation and leadership at all levels of Church life. Such an assessment should lead to developing, and committing to, a culture of lifelong formation.

FORMATION

Throughout the dialogue and discernment of the Plenary Council it was recognised that the need exists for different types of formation in the many dimensions of Church life. Formation is required for all the baptised, and for those discerning about becoming a Catholic. Of particular note, formation is required for, but not limited to:

- leaders of Catholic entities;
- marriage and family life, especially for parents, guardians and caregivers who are “the primary and principal” teachers of the faith¹⁷;
- those preparing for the sacraments;
- laypeople as they live their faith in the world;
- seminarians and clergy;
- those involved in formal ministry and mission.

Formation is also required to assist the faithful in discerning their gifts wisely.

The Plenary Council also noted that the contexts, resources and challenges of parish and community life and ministry vary markedly across Australia. Therefore, formation needs to:

- be adapted to local circumstances;
- attend to the needs of regional and rural communities;

¹⁶ Francis, [Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia](#) (21 December 2019).

¹⁷ [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), n. 2223.

- correspond to the rhythms of family life and
- use creative multi-dimensional, integrated and experiential models and methods which acknowledge the diversity of the Church.

LEADERSHIP

Pastoral leadership within, and for, our Catholic communities was recognised as an important matter by the Plenary Council. As such, leadership is a topic also addressed in other Decrees, for example, Decree Four: Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men.

In the sixth decree, there is a focus on what leadership looks like within the contexts of our Catholic communities and the type of formation required to nurture pastoral leadership that is attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit within the Church and beyond. The call to pastoral leadership relies on:

- fidelity to the Gospel and continual growth and renewal of closeness to Jesus Christ;
- lived witness to the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, proclamation of the Word, and encouragement of the ecclesial community in the way of ongoing conversion which, in turn, supports and furthers missionary discipleship;
- formation that is grounded in Scripture and tradition, and incorporates liturgy, proclamation of the *kerygma* of the Risen Christ, and the teaching of the Church about the God-given dignity of life and Catholic Social Teaching;
- formation in practices of synodality, interculturality, ecumenical dialogue, and interfaith relations;
- formation that will enable leaders to address the needs of the People of God, promote the mission of evangelisation and strengthen the witness of all the baptised through personal and communal conversion.

Plenary Council Commitment

To meet the formation needs of the present and future, the Plenary Council committed the Church in Australia to developing a culture of lifelong faith formation that will ensure:

- a. the diversity of the Catholic community is explicitly recognised;
- b. intercultural competency is encouraged, especially in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and spiritualities;
- c. the equal dignity of women and men is affirmed and demonstrated;
- d. the renewal of faith formation within and for families in the context of the critical role that marriage, parenting and care-giving play as a school of formation is prioritised and strengthened;
- e. the apostolate of the laity, along with new ecclesial realities, acting as “leaven in the world,” ([Lumen Gentium](#) n. 31) is promoted, encouraged and supported;
- f. the hopes, spirituality, giftedness, energy and modes of communication and connection of young people are identified, incorporated, encouraged and celebrated;
- g. ongoing support and strategies for those who minister to young people;

- h. the rich variety of spiritual and devotional traditions of the Church are appreciated and celebrated; and
- i. synodal practices such as encounter, accompaniment, listening, dialogue, discernment and collaboration are fostered and deepened.

We encourage you to read the [full text of this decree](#) to deepen your understanding of the theme: Formation and Leadership for Mission and Ministry.

Areas for exploration

1. Review the formation opportunities which are currently available for members of your community.
 - When undertaking this review, investigate offerings from your diocesan office, Catholic tertiary institutions and ecclesial groups, movements, third orders etc, as these groups often offer short courses, retreats, online programs and other formation that foster human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral growth.
2. Considering the results of this review, are the needs of all community members being catered for?
 - Identify the gaps, especially if your community is in the process of re-assessing its missionary endeavours and/or responding to the commitments made under other themes of the Plenary Council.
 - What can you do to encourage community members to engage more with formation opportunities?
3. Review the leadership roles within your community. For example, in a parish community, consider the roles of leader of the parish pastoral council, finance council or liturgy committee.
 - Discuss whether the leadership positions and associated structures meet the needs of your community, both now and in the near future.
 - Identify changes that might need to take place and what formation requirements for leaders might be required.

In the above areas for exploration, you might add the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this task?
- Identify any barriers to progressing this task and then brainstorm solutions.
- What resources will be required?
- What is the timeline for each task?
- How will you assess if any improvement has been made?

DECREE SEVEN

At the Service of Communion, Participation, and Mission: Governance

*“The faithful have an instinct for the truth of the Gospel, which enables them to recognise and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false. That supernatural instinct, intrinsically linked to the gift of faith received in the communion of the Church, is called the *sensus fidei*, and it enables Christians to fulfil their prophetic calling” (International Theological Commission).¹⁸*

Introduction

The seventh decree of the Fifth Plenary Council is an invitation to recognise the Holy Spirit’s gift of the *sensus fidei* in each baptised person, thus calling for the participation of the entire faithful in the mission of the Church and for dialogue within the Church and beyond.

Pope Francis has called all the baptised to participate in co-responsibility for the Church’s mission by embracing the practice of synodality. This practice involves greater transparency in decision-making and the overcoming of “a ‘culture of clericalism’ that promotes privilege and enables abuse of power.” Pope Francis has stressed that “it can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general”¹⁹.

Attending carefully to this practice of synodality and to the principle of subsidiarity, those whose roles involve responsibility for decision-taking should ensure that decision-making is not confined to those who exercise sacramental ministry. Those who will be affected by a decision should have the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes and express their view before the decision is taken, to the extent that this is possible and appropriate.

As decision-making authority in the Church is most often exercised by the ordained, there should be careful attention to ensuring that the voices of lay women and men, as well as religious, are heard and considered in all matters, especially those that impact distinctively on them.²⁰

¹⁸ International Theological Commission, [Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church](#), (2014), n.2.

¹⁹ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, [Evangelii Gaudium](#) (24 November 2013), n. 104.

²⁰ Cf. International Theological Commission, [Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church \(2018\)](#), nn. 105,104; Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, [Evangelii Gaudium](#) (24 November 2013), n. 102.

Plenary Council Commitment

In its commitment, the Plenary Council:

- a. affirmed that governance in the Catholic Church should be exercised in a synodal manner, with the appropriate participation of all the baptised;
- b. recognised and affirmed the commitment of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference that “within five years following the closing session of the Plenary Council . . . each Diocese conduct a Diocesan Synod and every ten years thereafter” and encouraged dioceses and eparchies to begin planning for this after the conclusion of the Plenary Council;
- c. called for all dioceses and eparchies to establish a diocesan pastoral council and affirmed the continuing work of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the National Centre for Pastoral Research to develop guidelines and provide resources for the establishing and flourishing of diocesan pastoral councils, parish pastoral councils, and other appropriate synodal structures;
- d. recognised and affirmed the many initiatives already undertaken at parish, diocesan, eparchial, and national levels to implement recommendations agreed to in the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference response to *The Light from the Southern Cross*²¹; and
- e. committed the Church in Australia to fostering the discernment and synodal leadership envisaged at Vatican II, called for by Pope Francis and experienced in the Plenary Council’s journey.

We encourage you to read the [full text of this decree](#) to deepen your understanding of the theme: At the Service of Communion, Participation and Mission: Governance.

Areas for exploration

1. Identify the processes in your community where the process of synodality is practised. As noted earlier, synodality is the process by which the entire Church – all the baptised – seeks to discern together what the Holy Spirit is asking of them in more faithfully living out the Church’s mission. Synod comes from two Greek words, meaning “walking together”. What improvements, if any, could be made to strengthen this practice, especially in relation to decision-making?
2. In your community, identify what structures or mechanisms exist which allow members to contribute to decisions about the life of the community, especially on matters which involve them.
3. In your community, identify the various decision-making roles and groups which operate. Reviewing this list, are there ways of broadening the participation of male/female, lay/religious/clergy, ethnic/cultural diversity, etc?

²¹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, [Response to ‘The Light from the Southern Cross’](#) (17 December 2020); Implementation Advisory Group and the Governance Review Project Team, [The Light from the Southern Cross](#) (15 August 2020).

In the above areas for exploration, you might add the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this task?
- Identify any barriers to progressing this task and then brainstorm solutions.
- What resources will be required?
- What is the timeline for each task?
- How will you assess if any improvement has been made?

DECREE EIGHT

Integral Ecology and Conversion for the Sake of Our Common Home

“An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us” (Pope Francis).²²

Introduction

The eighth decree of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia reminded us that as drought, bushfires, floods and extreme weather have become more common in Australia, we realise the urgency of responding to our baptismal calling of taking up God’s mission of love for the whole of creation.

All life, including human life, and all that sustains it comes from God the Creator, as gift. In his encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis powerfully points out that we do not stand outside creation but are “joined in a splendid universal communion” with other creatures and are called to care for the common home which we share with them.²³ Thus, when we speak of an integral ecology, we understand that it is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics.²⁴

Pope Francis calls for an “ecological conversion”, whereby the effects of our personal and communal encounters with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.²⁵

This call to care for our common home and to cherish and promote the dignity of human life from conception to natural death is both a personal and communal task. Our actions will be informed by Scripture, our theological tradition, Catholic Social Teaching, human knowledge and scientific insight.

²² Francis, Encyclical letter on Care for our Common Home *Laudato Si’* (24 May 2015), n. 225.

²³ *Ibid.* n. 220.

²⁴ *Ibid.* n. 156.

²⁵ *Ibid.* n. 217.

Plenary Council Commitment

In its commitment, the Plenary Council:

- a. recognised the sacred duty to care for and protect the Earth as a common home for all God's creatures, including the generations to come;
- b. encouraged Catholics to accept Pope Francis' invitation to join the Laudato Si' Action Platform and either develop Laudato Si' Action Plans, or participate in existing Laudato Si' Action Plans, as a vehicle for their ecological conversion; and
- c. promoted initiatives in Church and society which promote and defend human life from conception to natural death, especially those who are most vulnerable.

We encourage you to read the [full text of this decree](#) to deepen your understanding of the theme: Integral Ecology and Conversion for the Sake of Our Common Home.

Areas for exploration

1. As a community explore the [Laudato Si' Action Platform](#) website. Discuss how an Action Plan could be brought to life in your community and whether there are existing Action Plans that you could participate in (e.g., the Action Plan developed by your diocese).
2. What are the ways your parish encourages a culture of life? What resources can your community members easily access to gain information about life issues, such as access to pregnancy care and palliative care?
3. Determine how your community can celebrate God's gift of creation. For example, in the liturgy, offering special prayers, highlighting the feast day of St Francis of Assisi, etc.
4. As an individual, and/or within your family, identify one way you can put the idea of an integrated ecology into practice. For example, taking time to acknowledge the beauty of God's creation and how this can promote wellbeing, or being mindful of wasting resources that are plentiful for us, but not for everyone, for example food, clothing, electricity.

In the above areas for exploration, you might add the following questions:

- Who is responsible for this task?
- Identify any barriers to progressing this task and then brainstorm solutions.
- What resources will be required?
- What is the timeline for each task?
- How will you assess if any improvement has been made?

ANNEXURE

Uluru Statement from the Heart²⁶

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from ‘time immemorial’, and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is *the torment of our powerlessness*.

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

²⁶ [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#)

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle*. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.