



St Vincent de Paul Society

NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.

good works

**SUBMISSION TO THE PLENARY
COUNCIL**

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SUMMARY

This 5th Plenary Council in Australia comes at a crucial time in the Church's history. The sexual abuse crisis means the church as we have known it will never be the same again. The Plenary Council process is one opportunity for cultural and systemic change.

As the largest Catholic lay organisation in Australia the Society has a crucial role to play in the restoration of the church's credibility.

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council consulted members as it prepared the original submission to the Plenary Council in July 2018. Key areas of concern were aligned under the following themes: renewed commitment to Christ-centred mission; inclusion; urgent review of leadership and governance structures. These themes are similar to those identified in the recently released agenda for the Plenary Council, particularly creating a more missionary, Christ-centred Church; synodality and co-responsibility; and re-casting governance at every level of the Church in Australia.

This submission follows the Plenary Council themes.

Creating a more missionary, Christ-centred Church

As Vincentians, we draw our inspiration from Jesus, who went out to encounter people with compassion and deep reverence. With trust in God's help, we see our work as a continuation of Christ's own work. We live the Gospel values with our actions in our daily lives, bringing Christ to where the people are, reminding them that they are intrinsically loved by God, irrespective of the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Our mission as church is not to fill buildings, but to reach people. We must empower all people to be present to keep the presence of God alive where the people are, not where we want them to be. This calls for a paradigm shift – from an authoritarian, hierarchical, patriarchal model to a communion of communities engaged in dialogue, discernment and decision making around both ecclesial and social concerns.

Synodality and co-responsibility

True co-responsibility moves beyond tokenism and provides a variety of people with a voice, and decision-making authority. We need to go to where the people are, proclaiming the message of Christ which is that of inclusion and welcome of all people, not just those we are comfortable with. How do we consider the voice of people marginalised by the church? It is not enough to do good. We have to live the Gospel. To transform itself, the Church must strive to be more representative of the entire community it seeks to serve.

Re-casting governance at every level of the church in Australia

The Church in Australia needs strong leadership and transparent and accountable governance structures which must serve the mission of Christ, rather than man-made structures. The Society strongly advocates for a Church that addresses clericalism and instead promotes a more transparent and accountable model where hierarchical structures give way to shared leadership and where wisdom is sought through a process of genuine dialogue and inclusive vision.

Conclusion

We do not know how well the Plenary Council process will enable the voice of lay people to be heard or what will come out of this historic opportunity. But we choose to remain optimistic

about the potential for engagement of lay Catholics. Do we want the smooth path to completion or are willing to engage in the radical and confronting work of transformation – to make room for the new?

We pray the result of this Plenary Council will make us a Church that is of and with the poor. We desire a Church that is intent on following Christ by serving the poor and by standing in solidarity with them.

Faith in Action: Role of the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Australian Church

The St Vincent de Paul Society

The St Vincent de Paul Society was founded in Paris, France on 23 April 1833, by Blessed Antoine-Frederic Ozanam and his companions. They began by responding to the emerging needs of the poor at the time, with the support of Blessed Rosalie Rendu and the inspiration of Sts Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Since 1833 the Society has spread and is now active in 155 countries consisting of 50,000 Conferences and 800,000 Members.

In Australia, we have over 60,000 members, volunteers and staff working in each diocese across the country in 1,520 conferences and 652 Vinnies shops as well as numerous other outreaches including crisis centres, disability care services, low-income housing provision and support for migrants and refugees. Collectively we have served over 1.8million people in the past twelve months. That equates to one in every 14 Australians.

A Crucial Moment for the Australian Church

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia is the largest Catholic lay organisation in the country. This 5th Plenary Council of Australia comes at a crucial time in the Church's history.

As we move towards the first session of the Plenary Council, we must face the reality that Australia is one of the epicentres of the sexual abuse crisis in the global Church. We need to question if we, as the Church in Australia, will allow ourselves to emerge from this time where our authenticity has been justifiably challenged to its very core, and see this moment as an invitation to embrace even more deeply the life and mission for which we exist.

We have the choice to be downcast and despondent as we reflect on the shameful track record of a small and yet significant percentage of people who have abused their power in terrible ways, or we can walk courageously through our moment of exile. Whatever we choose to do, the truth remains – that what we have known as the Church in Australia will never be the same again.

We can say that time heals. That time changes things. However, time can also serve as a scapegoat for capacity to hide behind fear. Time changes nothing if people do not change. If our attitudes and the subsequent practices that we can hide behind do not look radically different because of where we have failed, then we have missed a precious opportunity.

The Plenary Council provides us an opportunity to take a long, loving look at the real. For the bend in the road will be the end of the road for the Australian Church if we are unwilling to accept the reality of our circumstances and respond courageously.

The Society has a significant role to play in the restoration of the Church's credibility through the quality of our presence much more than words, documents and strategic plans. We show who God is through our good works. We desire to see the Church develop a more deliberate, inclusive and intentional focus on its fundamental mission of following Christ by serving the poor. As Vincentians, the poor are front and centre in our lives and work. Our voices and actions can act as a thread that weaves together the People of God, people living with poverty,

the community and wider society.

Not only is the Society focused on living our faith in action, but one third of the membership are under 40 years of age. As such, the Society has a significant presence, providing an experience of Church and mission for many Australian Catholics.

The Society believes that the engagement of lay people, with their wisdom, gifts and diversity, hold the key to the much-needed renewal of our Australian Church. The Plenary Council agenda provides us with a precious opportunity to develop concrete proposals and contextualise these at local levels through a lens of a Church that truly wants to revitalise our mission in our actions, not just with our words.

SVDPS Engagement with the Plenary Council Process

With the support and endorsement of our National Council, the Society consulted members. This process of active engagement and questioning the relevance and hope for the future of the Church has reaped many benefits.

Key areas of concern identified by members were aligned under the following themes:

- Renewed commitment to Christ-centred mission
- Inclusion
- Urgent review of leadership and governance structures.

These themes highlighted in reflective conversations by our members are very similar to those identified in the recently released agenda for the 5th Plenary Council of Australia. This further highlights the synergy between the lay people serving at the grassroots as part of the Society and the voice of the faithful who have spoken in the nation-wide listening and discernment phases as part of the Plenary Council process.

SVDPS Response to Key Themes of the Plenary Council Agenda

As a lay Catholic organisation, we highlight our views related to three specific areas of concern. Whilst being the fruit of the discernment of members, these headings are taken directly from elements of the Plenary Council Agenda.

1. Creating a more missionary, Christ-centred Church

The focus on renewal of mission is justifiably at the forefront of all levels of the Church at this time.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis dreams of a “missionary impulse capable of transforming everything so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG #27).

If we move to our Australian context, the focus of the agenda for the forthcoming Plenary Council presents very clearly the task for members, “As children of God, disciples of Jesus Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Members of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia are called to develop concrete proposals to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia at this time.”

We again find mission at the core of the message proclaimed in 2020 document, *The Light from the Southern Cross* where we are reminded: “The Church needs ‘real social and cultural transformation’ with tangible repercussions for the life of the faith if there is to be a restoration of trust and credibility in the human face that guides its mission.” (LSC, pg 3)

The Church in Australia is being provided an opportunity to learn from its mistakes, as it seeks to re-establish not only its credibility with the Australian public but, more importantly, a renewal of its mission at the service of the people of Australia. The focus on restoration of trust and credibility is paramount to our capacity to live mission, emphasising the need for no longer being satisfied with change. Instead, we take the good and the bad, the broken and the life-giving, and courageously walk on a journey of transformation.

Our mission as Church is not to fill buildings. Our mission is to reach people. And because our mission is to proclaim the Gospel in imitation of Jesus, then we need to drastically re-think the way we go about this. In order to be faithful to this mission, we need to empower all people to be capable of standing in the marketplace and keeping the presence of God alive where the people are, not where we want them to be. The Society serves as a model of practical engagement in standing with those in greatest need. The time has come for us as Catholics where we need to do more than go to Church. We need the courage of the first disciples, women and men who had an encounter with Christ, and who sought to live the fruits of that encounter in radical and meaningful ways. Women and men who were not caught up in the comforts of ritual but rather courageously went out to proclaim the Gospel through the way they lived their lives, trusting the promise and providence of God and daring to do things differently.

As the Society, we draw our inspiration from Jesus, who went out to encounter people with compassion and deep reverence. With trust in God’s help, we see our work as a continuation of Christ’s own work. We live the Gospel values with our actions in our daily lives, bringing Christ to where the people are, reminding them that they are intrinsically loved by God, irrespective of the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Living faith in action is key to our spirituality. What we aspire to, we also wish for our Church. We want our Church to be known for its commitment to the poor, not as passive recipients of our benevolence but as people central to the Church’s life and mission. This calls for a paradigm shift - from an authoritarian, hierarchical, patriarchal model to a communion of communities engaged in dialogue, discernment and decision making around both ecclesial and social concerns. It means a faith community focused on mission not maintenance.

2. Synodality and co-responsibility

The Light from the Southern Cross report reminds the Church in Australia that “The involvement of all of the People of God in mission enhances the notion of true co-responsibility. To take full advantage of the opportunities this provides there must be a proper appreciation of the concept of inclusivity... Women and men, religious, lay and clerical, working together will ensure the wisdom, talent and professional expertise and commitment to the Gospel needed to animate the mission of the Church in the 21st century.” (LSC, pg 72-73)

This call to synodality and co-responsibility is not just about collaborating in a tokenistic fashion. It is more than just accepting diversity or fair treatment for all people. A truly synodal, co-responsible and inclusive Church is one that provides a variety of people with a voice, and decision-making authority. An inclusive Church bears witness to the intrinsic value of all people, not just to be welcomed, but to be affirmed in the light of the greatest commandment of Jesus, love God, and love our neighbour, whoever they are.

No longer can we expect people to come flocking to the pews of a Church for their spiritual nourishment. We need to go to where the people are, proclaiming the message of Christ which is that of inclusion and welcome of all people, not just those we are comfortable with. We must be people passionately involved not just generous. We must be prophetic not passive. We must be inclusive people that welcome all, not one at the expense of the other. It's not about them and us, or clerics vs lay people. We must remember that we are what is left of the Gospel in this moment.

The Society invites the members of the Plenary Council to consider, how do we ensure we capture not only the voice of all the faithful in our discernment, but also consider the voice of those who are either on the margins of society or marginalised by the Church? Vincentian spirituality reaches out to those amongst us who are in any way suffering with a profound sense of respect for the dignity of each person always encouraging new possibilities for individuals to grow. There is no room for judgement or condemnation of people with diverse views to ours. As Pope Francis reminds us, "let the Church be a place of mercy and hope, where everyone is welcomed, loved and forgiven." If we look honestly at our Australian Church, it is evident that we need to move more in this direction if we are truly able to say that we are living in imitation of Jesus, who did not just condone the poor, but chose to dine with them.

It is not enough to do good. We have to do the Gospel. And just as Jesus sat with prostitutes and tax collectors, we need to ask the question, "who are the prostitutes and tax collectors of 21st century Australia?" and how do we make sure that in a meaningful way they feel valued, welcomed and affirmed for who they are, as they are, not as we want them to be.

We need not be afraid nor conditioned by who we are or where we come from, similar to the experience of Elijah in the First Book of Kings where we learn that God often appears not in the fire, nor the earthquake, but in the still small voice. We need to question, who or what is the still small voice needed to lead our Church in this moment, and how can we at the same time empower them to have the courage to speak and give ourselves the courage to listen. In addition, how can we go a step further and actually advocate for those who are on the margins of society, conscious that this is exactly where Jesus, our servant-leader, found himself.

For it is only when our Church becomes spiritually more evangelical, theologically more consistent, and pastorally more open to diversity that we will be able to respond to the challenges of working for justice, peace, and the care of our common home, from a stance of genuine attention to the most vulnerable and the excluded of our age.

If we sincerely listen to what the Spirit is saying, then it is the hope of the Society that we will see a genuine shift from a sense of them and us, where those with roles in the Church

collaborate with lay people, to a paradigm where all are co-responsible for bringing about the mission of Jesus at every level of decision-making and mission, not just when it is convenient.

To transform itself, the Church must strive to be more representative of the entire community it seeks to serve.

3. Re-casting governance at every level of the Church in Australia

The Church in Australia needs strong leadership and transparent and accountable governance structures now more than ever. We believe that this is particularly crucial at this time as we try to heal the wounds of the scandals of the past and the distance that has grown between the Church and the broader community.

Jesus serves as the perfect role model for strong leadership that the Church must aspire to in today's context. Jesus' way of living shows us the importance of acting humbly, seeking justice, speaking truth, offering healing and leading by service.

We must have structures of governance in place that provide opportunities for all people to have a voice and all wisdom to be heard. These governance structures must serve the mission of Christ, rather than the mission serving man-made governance structures. We must never forget that the goal of the Church is and always will be to live and proclaim the Gospel. Let us not forget, the Church is neither a building nor a set of guidelines. We are the Church, the body of Christ.

As a lay-led Catholic organisation, the Society cherishes its place within the Church and its relationship with Church leaders. The Society has traditionally drawn its members from parishes, with support from clergy and religious as spiritual advisors. As the Church adapts to a future with fewer priests and religious in Australia and where the laity will have a more prominent role, there is much to be drawn from the experience of the Society in Australia and how it has evolved. As an indisputably a lay organisation since our inception, the Society has relied on the lay women and men for direction, wisdom and leadership.

The Society strongly advocates for a Church that addresses the serious concerns that exist around clericalism and instead promotes a more transparent and accountable model where hierarchical structures give way to shared leadership and where wisdom is sought through a process of genuine dialogue and inclusive vision.

Conclusion

The concern of many Catholics across Australia, including members of the Society, is that the Plenary Council processes will not enable the voice of the lay people to be heard and that little will come out of this historic opportunity.

However, despite this concern, we choose to remain optimistic about the opportunities the Plenary Council provides for an even more active engagement of lay Catholics in giving voice to the direction of the Catholic Church in Australia, not just in the future, but also in this present moment. We believe that this is an opportunity for positive and significant change in the Catholic Church in Australia.

We emphasise the need for a change in mentality and attitude, as opposed to changing religious traditions. For we believe that if the Australian Church, guided by those serving in positions of clerical responsibility, is open to new possibilities of a Church that is courageous enough to own our need for improvement, then we can walk forward in hope. The question remains, are we ready as a Church in Australia to take the kind of bold actions necessary to bring about true and lasting transformation? We need to decide whether we want the smooth path to completion or whether we are willing to engage in the radical and confronting work of transformation, that is, to make room for the new.

As we move towards the celebration of the first session of the Plenary Council we are invited over and over again to listen to what the Spirit is saying. Whilst we need to be attentive to what the Spirit is saying, this is not enough. Grounded in our deep listening to the Spirit, we also need to learn how to speak.

We envision that the result of this Plenary Council, and the significant hard work that follows it, is a Church that has a more deliberate, inclusive and intentional focus on its fundamental mission of following Christ by serving the poor. We believe that this will be achieved through a renewed focus on Christ-centred mission, the call to inclusion and a drastically revised vision for governance at all levels of the Church. The Plenary Council is an opportunity to lift up our eyes, conscious that we never ever want to go back where we have come from, but to focus our gaze on the opportunities for new wine in new wineskins.

As the Church discerns the way forward with the Plenary Council, we take to heart what Cardinal Claudio Hummes said to the newly elected Pope Francis: "Don't forget about the poor". We hope that the Plenary Council does not forget about the St Vincent de Paul Society and how through collaboration with Church leaders and lay people who serve the poor at the grassroots, we can truly build a more missionary and Christ-centred Australian Church.

We continue to pray that the Plenary Council might be a transformative experience for the Australian Church, whereby the teaching Church will hear what the believing Church believes and through dialogue and discernment the body of Christ will breathe together as one.