

A pew-sitter's view of the Plenary Council Agenda

I've come to the conclusion that the Church the Plenary Council Agenda is talking about bears little resemblance to my pew-sitter's view. Admittedly I'm an unusual pew-sitter, since I've read all the major reports issued on the Plenary Council website.

Like other pew-sitters, I'd determined that giving any more time to the Plenary Council process would be unproductive. But then someone asked me to read the official Agenda.

So I read it. One page of reading isn't onerous.

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Plenary-Council-Agenda.pdf>

Of the 16 Agenda questions, only 4 stood out as worthy of detailed deliberation, viz:

- How might we better form leaders for mission – adults, children and families, couples and single people?
- How might we better equip ordained ministers to be enablers of missionary discipleship: the Church becoming more a “priestly people” served by the ordained ministry?
- How might parishes better become local centres for the formation and animation of missionary disciples?
- How might the Church in Australia be better structured for mission, considering the parish, the diocese, religious orders, the PJPs and new communities?

(I had no idea what PJPs are: apparently they are ‘Public Juridic Persons’, entities set up in the Church for specific purposes eg Catholic Healthcare, Edmund Rice Education Australia. Hint: Church jargon of that magnitude means it wasn't written for pew-sitters like me, but for people used to collaborating with diocesan curia – and above.)

But most of these kinds of questions mean very little until they are applied to a case study of some kind, to enable people to wrestle with possible answers to these questions in realistic situations.

What does an average parish look like in Australia?

Something like this:

It has one priest; by and large, if he is a senior citizen he was born in Australia, if he is younger he was born in another country where English was not the native language.

He has the equivalent of one paid administrative person on staff.

The parish contains a Catholic primary school with about 300-400 students.

Of those students, in any 12 month time frame, he might see 5% of the children from that primary school at weekend Mass.

The parish contains people from a variety of ethnicities.

The parish is located at least 50 kms from the diocesan cathedral, (an hour's drive or more).

Daily Mass attendance average is 20 persons.

Weekend Mass attendance is of 550 persons spread over 3 Masses.

The parish is struggling to make even 50% of the expected annual contributions to the

diocesan charitable works fund.

The parish has no resident religious orders, but perhaps has one or two retired consecrated persons of 80+.

95% of those attending weekend Mass are aged 70+, or even 75+.

The parish has at least one St Vincent de Paul Conference, and a few dedicated and overworked catechists who serve in local state-run primary schools.

From the perspective of that case study, even the most pertinent question (How might we better form leaders for mission?) is framed incorrectly.

Because the question really is “How do we form our 70, 80 and 90 year olds for mission, as leaders, teams, and team members?”

And the follow-up question is “How do we keep our few sub 70 year olds from imploding under the weight of the regular tasks needed to keep a parish functioning and the isolation of how few people are on the same part of their life journey to share faith with?”.

In an average parish there are no able bodies with spare time to give to questions and to ministry in the areas of First Nations, ecology, wounds from abuse, ecumenism, education, health care and social services.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the current Plenary Council Agenda is like determining the precise positioning of deckchairs on the Titanic.

There are 3 very large items missing from the Plenary Council Agenda:

- No mention of the Holy Spirit. Without Him, neither holiness nor mission is possible.
- No mention of sacred scripture. Frequent personal reading of the Bible is the number 1 input that guarantees all discipleship outputs. (Read: ‘No Silver Bullets: Five Small Shifts that will Transform Your Ministry’ by Daniel Im)
- No mention of ministry to families. As goes the family, so goes the Church. Family is the plan of God that pre-dates scripture by millennia. All vocations (of all types!) grow in families.

Until the Plenary Council Agenda items have any hope of becoming reality in an average parish, and until these 3 very large items assume due prominence, this pew-sitter will remain disengaged from the process.

If you are a pew-sitter who agrees with me, please share these thoughts with other pew-sitters and with any contacts you may have in the rarefied worlds of curia and episcopacy.