

[Response to the Plenary Council Working Document](#)

The Instrumentum Laboris (working document) for the first session of the Australian Plenary Council was released on 25 Feb 2021, and I eventually finished reading it sometime in mid-March.

You can read it yourself:

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/instrumentum-laboris/>

It wasn't an easy read, despite it being beautifully presented. Penitential, it was. Firstly it takes a very long time to set the scene and give a situational analysis of the Church in Australia. Many times I wondered if the document would ever get to the point. Secondly it uses lots of ambiguous language that feels like it was written by a combination of church bureaucrats and school teachers. It would be easy to decode for them, but not for me. I longed for some footnotes that gave situational examples to aid understanding.

In particular I longed for concrete and contextual explanation of this passage from 166:

“Not infrequently, Catholics and their family members find themselves in an uneasy situation regarding particular Church teachings or disciplines, not because they identify any less as Catholic, and not because their attachment to Christ has grown “lukewarm” (Rev 3:16), but because of shifts in cultural norms and expectations that they once relied on to support their Catholic faith. Very often, however, this tension between people’s lived experience and the teachings of the Church reaches the point where people withdraw from parishes or communities, and no longer identify as Catholic.”

Is this about going to Mass on Sundays, cohabitation, same sex attraction, blended families, or about some, all or even more than this? How do you even begin to discuss this passage without knowing what the original catalyst for the passage was? How do you begin to frame questions that ask, ‘prove to me how attachment to Christ hasn’t grown lukewarm despite being out of synch with Church teachings, disciplines and practices...by what other means can you show strong attachment to Jesus Christ (John 12:26, James 2:17-18)?’?

I admit I was struggling to reconcile the somewhat rosy view the Working Document paints compared to what I am seeing in the pews. Then Philippa Martyr’s article came up while I was trying unsuccessfully to find any online commentary on the Working Document which wasn’t a clone of the official press release. It is well worth a read:

<https://gaudiumetspes22.com/2021/03/05/stranded-under-the-southern-cross-news-from-a-shrinking-church/>

I found it a more accurate analysis of the Catholic Church in Australia 2021.

In particular I found her imagery of a carapace to be valuable, viz:

“I tend to see the Church in Australia as consisting of the ‘real Church’ and an unpleasant outer structure that I call The Carapace. The Carapace is like The Borg in *Star Trek*, if it helps. It attaches itself to the real Church and feeds off it. Its principal purpose is to employ people, and its mission is to protect the Church’s assets at all costs.”

What bothers me greatly is that the Instrumentum Laboris seems to be written by the carapace, and the vast majority of the delegates for the Plenary Council sessions will come from the carapace.

What else bothers me is that God seems to be a minor stakeholder among many instead of the One and Only opinion that matters.

Why else would there be so much virtue signaling about sexual abuse, indigenous issues, women in leadership issues, ecology, etc? I'm not saying that they aren't important, just that they pale into insignificance against the urgency of saving souls from eternities in hell. Dealing with these things of necessity will be part of that primary mission, for the salvation of the people in these minorities, but they should never overshadow that primary mission.

Which matters to God the most?

What matters to God the most?

I put it to you that growth in relationship to Him (holiness), family (His plan that predates Scripture), and bringing people into relationship with Him (mission) and co-operating in expressing His love to others (service: which is the natural overflow of increase in holiness and mission) are what matter most to God.

On everything but service we are not doing well at all, and even our service is usually human powered service rather than Holy Spirit empowered service.

My view from the pew looks like this:

Everything starts from Holy Spirit inspired preaching. But for Holy Spirit inspired preaching to happen lots of prayer, study of scripture and sacred tradition, openness to the charismatic workings of the Holy Spirit and surrender to the workings of the Holy Spirit are necessary; and the preacher has to be able to effectively use the language and language idioms of those he is preaching to.

It is 'hymns, hospitality and homilies' or 'music, ministry and message' that either engages a newcomer and keeps them returning or turns them off for good. Generally we are mediocre when it comes to hymns and hospitality with the occasional flash of brilliance, but where we consistently fall down is in homilies.

When was the last time a homily encouraged you to pray?

When was the last time a homily invited you to go to confession? (and made it available)

When was the last time a homily opened your eyes to how good and great God is?

When was the last time a homily made you want to know Jesus better?

When was the last time a homily kept you awake and hanging on every word?

When was the last time a homily contained anything memorable that wasn't a pre-prepared joke?

Every day I pray that God will use the words of the homilist that day to touch hearts. Often I wonder if God hears me because even I can only decode on average 3 words out of 5 from our overseas-born priests, and the most common question when Mass is over is 'What did he say?'

But a preacher doesn't have to be in a pulpit. We pew dwellers are just as bad because we talk far more about parish politics, weather and medical ailments than we ever do (if we ever do) about Jesus, about inspiration we have found in Gospel passages, answers to prayers, and about living out the vocations we have been called to.

There is such laser focus on encouraging priestly vocations that you could be forgiven for thinking that vocations to family life, religious vocations, career vocations and vocations to special non-ordained ministries aren't important at all. Yet apart from a very few exceptions to the rule, priestly vocations grow in strong families and in devotionally vibrant parishes.

When was the last time you saw any parish-based initiatives for encouraging and supporting marriages and families?

Did you know that Australia has no (nil, nada, ziltch, zero) Retrouvaille ministry/weekends for marriages in crisis?

Schools. Shudder. They are supposed to be places where the Catholic faith is taught and flourishes. Yet they are places where those who do teach the demanding parts of the Gospel are persecuted in various subtle and non-subtle ways. But these days no one in the parish knows anyone with children at the local Catholic primary school, and vice versa, and about the only person who visits both places is the parish priest and any assistant priest. What we actually have are non-government schools. At what point do we call a halt to the massive investment in schools that don't evangelise, barely catechize and consistently churn out students indistinguishable from atheists and agnostics?

Families with faith have been choosing not to send their children to Catholic schools, many have chosen to home-school, some have chosen Christian schools, and the rest are sending their children to state schools partly because the cost/benefit analysis has swung the other way. In times past parents were willing to pay the extra cost of the Catholic school because it helped support the development of faith in their children.

The view from the pew can look very different from the view of the carapace.

An example may be useful...

In recent years the St Vincent de Paul Society went through a centralization process, and created regional hubs for furniture and other items. The people managing the hubs were happy. Some of the people in the local outlets were happy 'it's great, we refer them to the hub'. But those who knew how things worked pre-hub, and the people in need were not happy. Locally there used to be a room where furniture could be stored on a temporary basis. For the hubs to work, they were told rooms like these had to be stopped. The thing is, those rooms enabled society members to respond quickly when needs became manifest. With a hub, you have to send requests up, wait for decisions, and for action to be sent down, and sometimes have to follow-up the requests, all of which means many days, if not weeks, before needs get met. As for the person in need who had enough trouble asking for help the first time, now they have to travel to the hub to get help; and ask for help a second time. How many of them don't take the extra step? For some the transport costs alone would be prohibitive. For others it was so hard to admit they needed help, it would be a long time before they attempted to admit it again. Or they would seek other alternatives with quicker responses to their urgent emergencies.

Even more seriously, the local outlet loses the opportunity to begin a relationship of accompaniment with that person in need, and the probability of needy people falling through the cracks increases. But the hub managers will only see the turnover of furniture and other items, and fluctuation in staffing levels, and never record or quantify these other losses, and will assume everything is going great guns.

Thankfully there have been moves towards decentralization again.

There are very good reasons why the Church values the principle of [subsidiarity](#), and why any moves towards adding bureaucratic layers for co-ordination of smaller entities has to carefully make sure that the principle of subsidiarity is not violated.

Pope Francis has encouraged leaders to take on the smell of the sheep, to take time to be with those on the fringes and on the front lines. It is the only way to find out what is really going on.

An example may be useful...

A person serving at the diocesan curia has responsibilities for parish support. Most of this person's

time is spent liaising with parish staff and with parish members who voluntarily take on co-ordination roles. The parish support team puts together a Lenten discussion group programme, sends it out to the parishes. Some groups will meet every year regardless. Other groups will only form if there is active encouragement from the pulpit, and some recruitment and engagement of group leaders. Some parishioners will use the contents of the programme privately.

The parish support team will know how many programmes got sent out, and have a rough idea how many groups formed and how many participated. But they don't usually get information on how many programmes were thrown out because they were still on the display table several weeks later, nor information about why parishioners left them there, nor information about why groups didn't form, nor why anyone gave up part way through (individually or group). The only way you get that information is by talking incognito (without them knowing what your role is) with people in the pews whom you have never met before and truly listening to what they have to say, even if it isn't what you want to hear. (eg. "I picked it up, but I put it back when I saw you needed to download stuff. I'm not that good with computers, and there's no one at home who is any better at it than me, no one who could help me if I got myself into computer trouble.")

Can you see how from a curial vantage point everything could look rosy, and better than last year? And yet from a pew dweller's view point it could look very different indeed?

That's why I am so worried that the Instrumentum Laboris seems to be written by the carapace, and the vast majority of the delegates for the Plenary Council sessions will come from the carapace who haven't taken on the smell of the sheep.

A few passages from the Instrumentum Laboris caught my eye:

Passage 74 page 27

Rather, Pope Francis, echoing the thoughts of his predecessors since the Second Vatican Council, insists that an authentically Gospel-inspired renewal of the Church flows from a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit and gives rise to a 'pastoral conversion' of the entire Church, a renewal that is expressed in a 'missionary option' or 'missionary impulse' for making the saving love of God known in every place.

Amen. Amen. What we all need more than anything is a deeper encounter with Jesus, and a deeper encounter with the Holy Spirit. Without that, nothing, but nothing changes for the better. We can't make it happen, that is up to God Himself. But we can make the conditions and environment more conducive for those encounters to happen. Things like encouraging private individual prayer, corporate prayer (prayer meetings, public devotions, liturgy), scripture study, reconciling strained relationships, forgiveness of wrongs done to us, getting to know each other better so as to grow in unity, self-discipline, generosity to others, encouraging more frequent visits to the sacrament of penance, and asking God (individually and corporately) to grant us these precious encounters.

Passage 123 page 41

Submissions to the Council also raised what Pope Francis, among others, has identified as the danger of an unhealthy culture of clericalism within the priesthood and in the wider Church. At its most extreme, this has been identified as a significant factor in the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. It can also undermine the mission that belongs to the entire Church and discourage the exercise of gifts within it. Some fundamental questions arise in light of this concern: What are the causes of such a culture of clericalism? What are the theological, structural, psychological or spiritual influences that can contribute to it and how might the Church better equip its clergy and laity for mission today and for increasing co-responsibility in the decades to come?

Clericalism encourages an 'us and them' mentality, with 'us' being far superior to 'them'. Sadly our seminaries are still full of it. We have seminarians visiting parishes on placement and making the assumption that no one in the parishes knows how to use incense properly except for them. That assumption most certainly gets up the noses of parishioners who have been serving at the altar and

using incense for decades. Then there's the practice of getting 2nd year seminarians and above to always wear soutanes at Mass, even if they are sitting in the congregation. That's visibly making an 'us' and 'them' distinction well before the vocational discernment process has scarcely begun. It is very difficult to get to 'we' and 'team', albeit with different gifts and vocational callings, if from the 'get go' seminarians are treated as heroic and special. For the mission of the Church to proceed, ie the making of disciples of Jesus, clerics can't do it without laity, and laity can't do it without clerics. We vitally need each other. It is one of those 'both/and' things. Mutual respect will get us much further in that mission than clericalism.

Passage 131 page 43

There is not a well-developed understanding and practice of the Church as a community of missionary disciples. The Plenary Council offers the Church in Australia an opportunity to consider carefully, and prayerfully, what steps must be taken to awaken this awareness of the missionary vocation of every Catholic, for all the baptised are called equally to live and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

This is true. Although there are sub-groups within parishes that have this awareness eg catechists. Vatican II speaks eloquently of the universal call to holiness and the universal call to mission and so have subsequent papal documents. Encouraging us pew dwellers to read these texts is one thing, helping us to understand how to respond in our own lives is quite another since most of us have no idea what that looks like, nor what it feels like. A possible way forward is gathering and sharing testimonies of how God has used pew dwellers to make disciples, with particular emphasis on how pew dwellers came to understand what God was calling them to do, and how that mission developed over time.

Not everyone is going to be called to be an evangelist (nor to the same evangelistic mission field eg family, co-workers, young people, PTSD sufferers etc); not everyone is going to have a calling to specific works of mercy; not everyone is going to have a calling to accompany people through the RCIA process. So there needs to be intentionality about gathering a wide range of stories, and in presenting them with an openness to the multiplicity of God's callings. It is really easy to unconsciously fall into the trap of 'God has called me to be a preacher, it is so wonderful and exciting, therefore God is calling everyone to be preachers', thereby putting unnecessary burdens/guilt on listeners who may be called to very different missions.

Passage 135 page 44

Underpinning such renewal of practices and methods within dioceses, parishes, migrant communities and movements must be the renewal of sacramental life and prayer among all Catholics for it is the encounter with Christ in the midst of the Church that rekindles hope and makes genuine renewal possible. This is seen in the Emmaus story in Luke's Gospel (24:13-35) where, in the midst of the disciples' difficulties and even disillusionment, the faith of the followers of Jesus is restored and a new future opened for them by this encounter.

Without prayer and the sacraments, there is no fuel for mission. We can't give what we don't have. What we most need to give are God's love and access to Jesus. Prayer and the sacraments give us access to the infilling of God's love, and to experiential encounters with Jesus. We haven't done a good job of proclaiming this truth about prayer and the sacraments, by and large it has been a well-kept secret, when it should have been 'shout it from the rooftops' stuff. Again one of the best ways to renew sacramental life and prayer is to gather testimonies from pew dwellers who are living as missionary disciples. We need to share with each other what a difference prayer (personal and communal) and the sacraments (baptism, penance, eucharist, confirmation, anointing of the sick, marriage, holy orders) make in our lives. It is good news, in fact it is great news. All of them make a big impact. But again, sensitivity is needed, because some people feel and experience lots and some people feel and experience little even when God's grace is just as active in both. It is all too easy for a focus on feelings and experiences to get us chasing them rather than God, and for this focus to

make those who barely feel or experience anything to rate themselves as second class citizens of the kingdom of God. For this reason it is always wise to focus more on the fruits eg growth in patience, generosity, peace, trust, improvement in relationships etc.

Passage 197 page 67

It is this assurance that should encourage us and empower us to speak and act with that parrhesia, that boldness and courage, which are a gift of the Holy Spirit: We need the Spirit's prompting, lest we be paralyzed by fear and excessive caution, lest we grow used to keeping within safe bounds. Let us remember that closed spaces grow musty and unhealthy. When the Apostles were tempted to let themselves be crippled by danger and threats, they joined in prayer to implore parrhesia: "And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to Your servants to speak Your Word with all boldness" (Acts 4:29). As a result, "when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

It is my dearest desire that when the delegates gather for both of the sessions of the Plenary Council that they dedicate somewhere between a half day and a full day as representatives of the faith communities of Australia to imploring this parrhesia for Australia – and that they do so before they start any discussion of the Working Document. What this needs to be is heartfelt spontaneous prayer ebbing and flowing as the Holy Spirit prompts. Apart from an introduction and a conclusion, it needs to be totally unscripted. It needs to be allowing God to dredge up from the depths of our soul's expressions of our personal, corporate and national desire for Him and for the dynamic action of the Holy Spirit in our midst, in words, songs, groans and anything else He inspires. It needs to include our leaders begging pardon of God for the ways we have failed Him personally and corporately, to include confessing our failures and our shortcomings, and asking God to step in, to take control, to take leadership and give us sure guidance and the courage to respond with an active Yes to everything He wants us to do.

Without this, nothing else will really matter.

***Come Holy Spirit, Come!,
and through this Plenary Council
make of this nation Australia
the promised great south land
in complete synch with You.
Amen.***

<http://www.societyofsaints.net/blog/response-to-the-plenary-council-working-document>

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