

THE PLENARY COUNCIL: WHERE TO AFTER CORONAVIRUS?

The coronavirus pandemic is changing the world, and the Church, in fundamental ways. One small effect is that, by delaying the first assembly of Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia until 2021, it provides an opportunity to identify more questions and issues that are rising. It is too early to be sure how the pandemic might affect our world. We suggest four trends that seem to be emerging, and to be notable and important.

First, in many ways the forced isolation is driving a hunger for community. Nations whose leaders emphasise individualism have failed with COVID-19. By contrast, those with stronger communal linkages are faring better. Australians have even surprised themselves with our ability to work together, even across political party lines, to defeat this enemy.

Students everywhere are learning that the virtual classroom is no substitute for the real one. Many Parishioners with their churches closed or severely limited in the numbers permitted to gather are yearning for revival of face-to-face Parish communities. We might emerge from COVID-19 with a new sense of the key role of community in human life.

Secondly, even as the poor and disadvantaged are out of sight, there is a growing awareness of their plight. We are more aware of their situation: the homeless being told to stay at home, the rising incidence of domestic violence, the increased demand at foodbanks, the neglect of temporary visa holders and the plight of many already lonely before the crisis.

Thirdly, the pandemic gives us a new awareness of the extent to which Christ is found outside the Church. Heroism in serving others beyond the call of duty is evident on all sides, independent of religious belief.

Fourthly, the pandemic explodes the falsehood of human dominion over nature. If a single virus can bring the world so low, how much more damaging might serious global warming prove to be? Perhaps it is indeed time to live anew in harmony with nature.

The extent to which the teachings of Pope Francis relate to these four issues is truly remarkable. Above all, Francis has persistently called for conversion within the Church, from an inward-looking self-referential stance to one looking out to the needs of our communities. Reform starts not by looking after ourselves but at the needs of the marginalised and indeed of the whole of creation. This conversion is vital and must drive any reform program.

The task is to bring Christ's good news and His healing love to those at the margins, and in turn to learn from them. The changes for the Church are those necessary to serve these groups, to see Christ in them and to learn from them.

The present authors do not claim to know what this conversion really means, or how to achieve it. But, especially in the wake of coronavirus, it is the journey on which we all must embark, walking forward together with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

A group of Parishes in Melbourne has established a website — senseofthefaithful.org.au — to facilitate discussions between Parishes and individuals about the future direction of the Plenary Council. We welcome contributions about the questions discussed here, or other relevant matters.

The catch phrase when the Plenary Council was launched is that 'it cannot be business as usual'!

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