

The Journey to 2020: Opening the Conversation to the Plenary Council

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Bishops, leaders of religious congregations and Catholic lay leaders from across Australia have come together in Sydney for the first of a series of consultation seminars in the lead up to the historic Plenary Council in 2020.

The last Plenary Council for the Catholic Church in Australia took place 80 years ago and the upcoming synod is being widely seen as an opportunity to engage the wider community in important discussions around the future of the Church.

The consultation seminars, *The Journey to 2020: Opening the Conversation to the Plenary Council* are being led by the Chair of the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council, The Archbishop of Brisbane, Most Reverend Mark Coleridge.

The first consultation seminar took place at Mary MacKillop Place in North Sydney on 8 September and was attended by 150 participants. The seminar was facilitated by the Congregational Leader of the Presentation Sisters, Sr Anne Lane PBVM.

Specific information from the discussions that come out of the seminars will be passed on directly to a 14 member committee which will work closely with the Bishops Commission to ensure the successful preparation, celebration and implementation of the Plenary Council 2020.

Archbishop Coleridge thanked BBI- The Australian Institute of Theological Education for hosting the consultation seminars and in his keynote address he emphasised the importance of ensuring the Plenary Council was a meaningful consultation process.



“This must certainly not be just another talk-fest that risks becoming tokenistic, but one that allows all voices to be heard, that is attuned to the Holy Spirit and which actively seeks out the views of the disaffected as well as those more actively engaged with the Church”, Archbishop Coleridge said.

“The consultation process will drive the agenda of the Plenary Council

and social media will play a key role in ensuring that it is as inclusive as possible so that those who are unable to attend the consultations in person can still be actively involved”, he added.

The Bishop of the Maronite Diocese of Australia, Most Reverend Antoine Charbel Tarabay shared some valuable insights at the seminar on the synodal processes in the Maronite Church and he called for the Plenary Council to be as ecumenical as possible.

“It is a wonderful opportunity to promote dialogue well beyond the Catholic Church and to reach out to all Christians so that we can give a better witness to Jesus in our modern society”, Bishop Tarabay explained.

Participants at the Journey to 2020 seminar also benefited from some valuable international insights from Monsignor John Renken, the Dean of the Faculty of Canon Law at Saint Paul University in Canada.

He called on those involved in the Plenary Council to draw inspiration from Pope Francis’ call to make the Church a true sanctuary for all.

“There is great spiritual beauty in a synodal Church where everyone is invited to have their say, where no-one is excluded and through that consultation process, the Church can grow and be enriched since it recognises that we are all missionary disciples, whether we are clergy or laypeople”, Monsignor Renken said.

The Congregational Leader of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, Sr Clare Condon SGS told the seminar, she saw the Plenary Council as a unique opportunity to promote a more inclusive Church.

“We need to actively reach out to the marginalised, including those in irregular marriages, same sex relationships, the homeless and the long term unemployed”, Sr Clare said.

“Our world has also changed irreversibly for women since the last Plenary Council was held eighty years ago and this should be reflected in Church governance today”, she added.

The seminar concluded with a memorable panel discussion in which six lay participants from across Catholic welfare, health and education led a discussion around the challenges facing the Church in Australia based around group discussions held throughout the day.

Archbishop Coleridge urged the participants to reflect upon the longer term significance of the Plenary Council.

“The world is watching this process and we can’t therefore afford to see the Plenary Council as merely significant for the Australian Church”, he said.

“This will indeed help shape the direction of the universal Church as well”.