

Thematic 5 Paper: The Church as a joyful, hope-filled and servant community.

Rowan Ireland St. Francis Xavier Montmorency, Vic.

Observations and critical appreciation

1. This writing paper sets out well to address Theme 5 which, like all the themes, seems rather remote from the task of formulating agenda items for the PC. In what I have called the Preamble, the writers have produced definitions of the three key ideal terms of the theme – joyful, hope-filled, and service-orientated. They set themselves two questions: What are the challenges facing the Australian Church as it attempts to manifest more truly the three ideals? What do we propose that the PC should do as it addresses these challenges? The writers have given us a clear structure for the paper, with seven sets of challenges and proposals. However, in several of the challenge-proposal sets, the connection to Theme 5 is not made clear (Sets 4, 6,7). That problem arises because the writers had to fit their ideas about challenges and remedial proposals under the set themes, and it need not concern us at this point. More important is that the writers of Paper 5 have given us much to celebrate: the challenges spelled out are full of insight, and all the well-thought out proposals deserve prayerful reflection by the Catholic community as agendas for the PC are being formulated..

2. There are, though, some problems with the proposals which need airing well before agendas are drafted:

2.1 **The problem of urgency.** Overall, the sheer welter of proposals masks the urgency of some of the challenges they are meant to address. It is hard to see how the two sessions of the Council could consider all the proposals arising from just this paper, let alone from all the papers. Overlap between the papers, though, should help in this respect.

2.2 **The problem of priorities.** There is no attempt to prioritise the seven sets of challenge-proposal listed below. Is Set 2 more important than Set 4? In terms of rather depleted energies, shortage of clergy, and the ripple effects of the sexual abuse crisis at the local level, the PC will surely have to prioritise if it is to set realistic goals for the Church in coming decades.

2.3 Likewise, there are often four or five proposals in a set, are they all equally important? Don't we need argued priorities here too?

2.4 Overall, there is no **sequencing of proposals** to indicate whether action on one may be a condition for successful address to another. For example, if renewal of the Australian Church is really to come from the local level up, and voices from the grassroots of the Church are not to be drowned out by pronouncements from on high, then surely the sets of 'challenge-proposal' relating to grassroots renewal deserve priority of consideration. Thus, in relation to Paper 5, the second and perhaps the fifth set of challenges-proposals (re parish level renewal) might be considered prerequisites for the third set (re the functioning of organized social welfare agencies).

Of course, attending to lower level renewal does not mean neglect of upper level challenges and proposals; and it is likely that attention to some of the seventh set re finances is a prerequisite for both grassroots and upper level renewal. **But again, the sheer volume of proposals suggests the need for prioritising in terms of attention to grassroots renewal as a pre-requisite for upper level renewal. Perhaps the first Assembly of the PC itself should be devoted to grassroots issues, not only with respect to Paper 5 but to the issues addressed in the other papers.**

Summaries

There follow detailed summaries of

- 1) the Preamble to the Report;
- 2) the theological vision informing the sketched challenges and proposals; and
- 3) the sets of discerned challenges facing the Church as it responds to the call to be a more joyful, hope-filled and servant community. Each set of seven challenges is accompanied by the proposals for addressing the challenges.

1.1 Preamble: The Australian Catholic community is in many ways “a light in the darkness” because of its contributions in education, care and healing, and aged facilities. But “for many” it is *not* seen as a joyful...community engaging “positively” with the world. This is because the Church fails to communicate well its contributions to the public good, and it fails to rejoice in the positive features of Australian society but focuses on its negative features.

Many parishes make contributions to local society. But many need to be renewed, are not experienced as welcoming, and are shrinking and aging. Often the school rather than the parish itself is the point of contact with the Church both for Catholics and the wider world.

Many parishes are declining under the impact of a variety of factors, e.g.: aging clergy; the sexual abuse crisis and inadequate response to it; the fact that many parishioners are content to confine expressions of their faith within the bubble of the parish; language and cultural barriers affecting the work of migrant clergy. These factors at parish level negatively affect capacity to be joyful etc.

Two further factors negatively affect the ability of parishes to be joyful, hope-filled and servant communities, and to project themselves as such. One is that many parishioners see the prayer/worship aspects of Catholic life as disconnected from the call to loving service within and beyond the local world. The other is finances which constrain many parishes and dioceses.

Sheer diversity of opinion about how to move forward on all the above has also constrained the Church.

1.2 Theological Vision

Joy is seen in a zest for life, a sparkle in the eye. These are themselves the fruits of the experience of forgiveness, and the experience of God who loves.

Hope is based in the conviction that God is with us as we work for justice and peace. In hope we avoid the Church becoming “a sort of NGO stripped of the luminous mysticism so evident in the lives of St Francis of Assisi and other saints.

When joy and hope are manifest in the Church’s action in the world it becomes clear that the servant nature of the Church is no added extra. The three dimensions of joy, hope and servanthood are ‘inseparable’.

1.3 Challenges to realising a Church of Joy, Hope and Service and proposals to address the challenges

1.3.1 First set of challenges – re parish communities:

1. How to strengthen parish communities so that they become centres of joy, hope, and service
2. How to respond to schools becoming the primary points of contact between faith communities and the general public (including non-attending Catholics)

Proposals:

P1.1 PC to work toward laity taking up co-responsibility with PPs to build up community life. This to be achieved by the PC initiating consultation on national guidelines for co-responsibility of laity and clergy at parish level.

P1.2 PC to require all dioceses to take action on the *Building Stronger Parishes Project*.

P1.3 PC to identify opportunities for developing lay ministry within parishes – especially through setting up parish pastoral teams. In turn, the PC to require that teams be recruited from a broad demographic, to engage all parishioners in ministry. Regarding participation of women, the Report *Women and Men ...* (1999) should be re-visited.

P1.4 PC to ensure that seminary formation includes a focus on building a culture of lay-clergy co-responsibility, on the just and consultative use of authority, and on processes for transparency and accountability.

P1.5 PC to require bishops to demonstrate broad commitment to shared leadership by “modelling” the process of fostering pastoral councils within their dioceses.

P1.6 PC to plan for the development of the ministry of permanent deacons

P1.7 PC to draw up guidelines for the development of Parish communities, to include the election of laity to share leadership with the parish priest. It is suggested that the leadership group should include representatives of parish teams to ensure that the parish is transparently a community of communities.

P1.8 PC to ensure the availability of on-going training and formation for all parties involved in co-responsibility.

1.3.2 Second set of challenges: Working towards closer engagement with the broader Australian society.

2.1 How to focus less on negative features of Australian society and culture and more on the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of ordinary people

2.2 How to achieve positive engagement with society through dialogue and the delivery of services

2.3 How to involve local faith communities to play their part in building a more just society

2.4 How to extend loving service to the social margins by inviting Australian Catholics to see social service as integral to their baptismal calling

2.5 How to persuade Australian Catholics to engage more positively with society as a whole

Proposals to set before the PC:

P2.1 Promote diocesan sponsored parish support programs to encourage all Catholics to extend a welcome to those at the social margins.

P2.2 Encourage cooperation across parishes and networks of parishes to work out how to encounter and serve the marginalised – whether marginalisation has arisen from mental health problems, economic position, sexuality issues, or other factors (race?). By way of example, respectful dialogue with LGBTI persons to be encouraged at the local level.

P2.3 Establish formation programs focusing on Catholic social teaching and work for social justice including the annual Bishops' social justice statements.

P2.4 Promote at diocesan and national levels a "conscious attitude" of sharing the hopes and joys of all Australians. This engagement and empathy to be then reflected in public statements from the Church.

P2.5 Develop a cooperative structure and strategy across the whole Church to communicate to the wider Australian public the social welfare work of all parts of the Church

P2.6 Establish a process to register all Catholic Church work for community welfare, and to publicise this as part of extending dialogue with other involved agencies.

P2.7 Maintain and strengthen national and diocesan structures for social justice research, always with an eye to opportunities for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

1.3.3 The third set of challenges: Celebrating and supporting the service organisations of the Church.

3.1 How to strengthen connections between specialised and professional organisations involved in Church service in education, aged care etc.

3.2 How to strengthen relations between these specialised organisations (which often rely on Government funding) and parishes, dioceses, and all parts of the Church.

3.4 How can the Church work with its specialised agencies and organisations to ensure that the whole Church is doing all it can to answer the call of Jesus to love our neighbour.

Proposals

P3.1 PC to task peak bodies for Catholic health, education, and welfare etc. to work with all parts of the Church to build a "community of shared endeavour and a sense of shared service"

P3.2 PC to recognize personnel engaged in these ministries as co-workers in the Gospel

P3.3 PC to encourage shared reflection and dialogue to ensure that where government funding is used for shared work the Catholic identity of these services is not lost or undermined.

1.3.4. The fourth set of challenges: toward the promotion of an integrated Christian mission.

4.1 The challenge here is to deepen our understanding of the interrelation between proclamation of the Word of God, celebration of the Sacraments, and exercising ministry. Deeper understanding will help counter tendencies towards a Church of different groups emphasising one aspect of mission to the exclusion of others.

Proposals

P4.1 The PC to initiate a “national forum for all sections of the Church.” The purposes of this forum are: First, to deepen understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist and of how this presence connects all elements of our Christian calling. Second, to develop awareness of how Mass and the Eucharist nourish hope and joy.

P4.2 The PC to develop formation programs for the above

P4.3 The PC to provide opportunities for parishes and communities to reflect on the intimate unity of sacraments, prayer, ritual, and service.

1.3.5 Challenge 5: Formation

To respond more fully respond to God’s call to personal conversion

5.2 To develop formation programs specific to areas of mission to enable more Catholics to use their God-given gifts in ministry and outreach

Proposals

P5.1 The PC to develop a “national faith formation hub” to enable the collection and distribution of quality and affordable resources for formation for Catholics across the country, and to address the delivery of this function.

P5.2 The PC to direct the Hub or other appropriate bodies to identify the requirements for formation at each local level; to provide professional development for those who deliver programs; to conduct a national survey of formation programs already in place, noting networking and resource-sharing; to develop a strategic plan to address the delivery of quality formation; to address the willingness and ability of various groups to participate in formation programs; to explore ‘servant leadership’.

1.3.6 Challenge 6: Re-building Trust within the Church

6.1 How can Church leaders and laity re-build trust in our Church so that it can be a joyful, hope-filled servant community for all?

Proposal

P6.1 The PC to ensure that the Church continues to learn and respond to the sexual abuse crisis

1.3.7 Challenge 7: Finance

Challenges and problems:

7.1 The unequal distribution of wealth and income in the Church – between dioceses, parishes, and ministries.

7.2 Lack of transparency and accountability re allocation of funds to various ministries

7.3 How to adopt a mission-focused approach to direct resources to the most appropriate area – with accountability

7.4 How to adopt a mission-focused approach to direct resources to the most appropriate areas – with accountability

7.5 How to respond to the financial limitations on the Church as a whole, while realising that recommendations made by the PC will require funding?

Proposals:

P7.1 The PC to initiate a review of financial cooperation and re-distribution between dioceses.

P7.2 PC to require annual public financial statements from each diocese.

P7.3 PC to require that diocesan and parish finance councils be transparent in their decision-making and record-keeping.

P7.4 PC to recommend a spirit of financial cooperation to enable fair and just reviews to identify efficiencies in diocesan structures of the Church, and in areas of administration like education where there is currently much duplication of effort.

P7.5 PC to initiate a national focus on the use of wealth in Church, always with a view to the Gospel call to serve those most in need – “lest the mission of the Church be seen as servant to its wealth.”