

SPEECH

Book Launch

Zoom

A Church for all: A guide to the Australian Plenary Council and Beyond

7:00pm Thursday 9 September 2021

Claire Victory, National President, St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia

Thank you Andrea and thank you for the invitation to help launch this enlightened publication.

I would like to acknowledge that I am meeting with you on Kurna country and I pay my respects to the elders of this land.

BACKGROUND

When I was a kid, our family was involved in the church in many ways. My parents were active at many levels, and over time, so were my sisters and I. I remember a great sense of community, tradition and ceremony; of friends and role models; of parish and Family Group social events.

I grew up in Adelaide. Although we didn't realise it then as kids, this Archdiocese shone a light on how the hard-won changes from the Second Vatican Council might come to life in grass roots church communities. Under the stewardship of Archbishop Leonard Faulkner and in consultation with his parishioners, the archdiocese engaged women in decision-making roles, consulted widely with the lay community, informally and through various councils – some required under canon law, others not.

The Royal Commission nominated Adelaide as an exemplar in this respect.

VINNIES

I am still part of a positive church community. I became a member of Vinnies when I was ten years old and have been actively engaged in the work of the Society ever since. I have come to see it as my vocation. I have been on the National Council since 2011 and am proud to be the youngest and first female National President. I am in the fortunate position of my age and gender having opened opportunities for me, rather than closing doors, including in my involvement with the Church. I acknowledge, however, that I also have privilege by virtue of being a white, tertiary educated, straight, cisgender person, and that not everyone has found the Church to be the place of welcome and belonging that I have. In many parts of the country, the inclusive circumstances which nurtured and inspired me as a child were clouded by the impact of misguided clericalism, the abuse of power and of the sanctity of the institution above all else as many sought to return the church to a bygone era. The Royal Commission laid bare the tragic results.

Over 50,000 members and staff are part of the St Vincent de Paul Society family in Australia. And for many who have left the institutional church, working at the coalface with very vulnerable people is an authentic expression of their faith – bringing Gospel values to life in the lives of people who need a hand up from time-to-time.

One of our founders, Frederic Ozanam, whose feast day it is today, wrote:

'the knowledge of social well-being is learned, not from books, nor from public debate, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man's garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind. When we know first-hand the conditions of the poor in school, at work, in hospital, in the city, in the country, everywhere that God has placed them, then and only then can we begin to grasp the elements of poverty, and hope we may resolve it.'

THE PLENARY COUNCIL AND OUR SUBMISSION

In its recent submission to the Plenary Council, the St Vincent de Paul Society acknowledged the need for greater inclusion and an urgent recasting of church leadership and governance at every level of the Church in Australia.

The Plenary Council process is one opportunity for urgently needed cultural and systemic change identified not just by the recent royal commission, but by faithful lay Catholics for decades.

As the largest lay-led Catholic organisation in Australia the St Vincent de Paul Society has a crucial role to play in the restoration of our church's credibility.

To transform itself, the Church must strive to be more representative of the entire community it seeks to serve.

We want our Church to be known for its commitment to the poor, not as passive recipients of our benevolence but as people central to the Church's life and mission.

The Society strongly advocates for a Church that condemns clericalism and promotes a more transparent and accountable model where hierarchical structures give way to shared leadership, where wisdom is sought through a process of genuine dialogue and inclusive vision.

As Vincentians, we hope that this Plenary Council, and the significant hard work that follows it, will lead to a Church that has a more deliberate, inclusive and intentional focus on its fundamental mission of following Christ by serving the poor.

THE BOOK

Reading this book – *A Church for All: A guide to the Australian Plenary Council and Beyond* - gives me hope for the church I love.

It's an inspiring record of two historic convocations hosted by the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform, attended by thousands, in the lead up to the 5th Plenary Council of the Church in Australia.

Sr Joan Chittister, Dr Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, Debra Zanella, Robert Fitzgerald and Professor Emeritus John Warhurst all articulate in different ways the yearning for a different way of being church in the 21st century.

Joan Chittister, through her guided tour of eight biblical mountains took us to Mt Olivet, the mountain of solidarity with the poor and oppressed. 'And today we still see it... We see the laity being church beyond ritual and rubric'. She said: 'We must be people who recognise that it is not that we are Church that is important. What is important is that we remember that we are what is left of the Gospel in this changing time.'

She called for lay Catholics to be treated "as equals, as seekers, as spiritual adults. Old styles of worship, old criteria of piety, old ways of relating to the world . . . good as all of them may once have

been . . . cannot build for us a new Jerusalem in this place in this time when the forces of history face us with new challenges ...". She was dismissive of the Church's unequal treatment of women, querying why there should not be women deacons, priests, and cardinals. She observed that in a world that suppresses its women, the Church "needs the presence of the other half of the human race". Catholicism "must grow up", she said, "beyond the parochial to the global, beyond one system and one tradition, to a broader way of looking at life and its moral, spiritual, ethical frameworks".

Dr Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann opened the second convocation sharing insight into her own culture, entreating us all to practice deep listening and to be courageous enough to find a way to adapt the learnings from the sessions to the future practices of the church. 'We wait for the seasons to come, and we sit in stillness,' she said. 'When you deeply listen to people of other cultures, you learn to find similarities and respect for the differences. You become inclusive. In our culture everyone belongs. We all have relationships with everyone through family and also skin relationships. Family, kinship, relationship. But we also have a connection, relationship and respect for the land, which if adopted, could bring about the peace that we all so dearly strive for.'

Debra Zanella called for a deconstruction of the underlying structures, beliefs and systems that feed the current injustice. She said: 'A church that is inclusive, diverse and welcoming requires the total reformation of the structures that has prevented it from being such a church... You cannot tinker around the edges with small reforms that provide the appearance of change but do nothing to change the underlying structures which have harmed, and continue to harm and exclude the faithful.'

Drawing on his experience as a Child Sex Abuse Royal Commissioner, **Robert Fitzgerald** highlighted the desperate need for governance reform, articulated in the Light from the Southern Cross, and the tragic consequences of poor governance. He said one of the greatest challenges to renewal of our church is fear. 'It is often exploited by those who resist change and return to the status quo,' he said. 'Hope can set us free to contemplate the possible. Renewal is born out of hope, not fear,' he said. And likewise, 'good church governance must be based in hope, not fear. It must arise out of humility, not arrogance. It must be based in truth, not denial'.

In summing up, **John Warhurst** provided insight into the Plenary Council to date, but he was not optimistic. He said the Plenary Council process has been firmly top-down and exclusive. The energy for reform in the 17 thousand 500 hundred submissions made early on in the process is largely absent from the final Plenary Council document.

As he notes, this Plenary Council is not the only, or even the main opportunity for reform, but it is an opportunity too good to overlook.

CONCLUSION

This little publication is dense with wisdom and insight, with brave and prophetic statements and observations.

I hope it will be read widely by people who are hanging on by their fingernails.

ENDS

1,500 words

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