

WORKING DOCUMENT NEXT STEP ON PLENARY COUNCIL JOURNEY

The working document - or instrumentum laboris - for the Plenary Council will provide a constant reminder of the need for deep and ongoing discernment of God's will for the Church, the Council's president has said.

Work recently began on the development of the instrumentum laboris, with the document drawing heavily on the first two preparatory phases of the Council journey: Listening and Dialogue and Listening and Discernment.

The voices of more than 220,000 people across the country, as well as discernment and writing papers on each of the six National Themes for Discernment, are being considered alongside Church teaching, Scripture, papal documents and a range of other sources - within and beyond the Church - in preparing the instrumentum laboris.

Plenary Council president Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB pointed to a national review of parish and diocesan governance, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the COVID-19 pandemic as some of those sources.

"It is the task of the instrumentum laboris to give voice to all these elements of our individual and communal experience, and deepen the process of bringing them into dialogue with the Gospel and the Church's living tradition," said Archbishop Costelloe.

Archbishop Costelloe is joined on the instrumentum laboris writing team by Daniel Ang, who has served on the Plenary Council's executive committee since 2016; Trudy Dantis, the director of the National Centre for Pastoral Research; and Fr Kevin Lenehan, the master of the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne.

Dr Dantis, whose centre was responsible for the collation and summation of more than 17,000 submissions during the opening stage of the Council, said the instrumentum laboris carries forward the voices heard in that period.

"The joys and hopes, questions and challenges that have been shared during this phase and through the writing of thematic papers form the basis for the continued process of reflection and discernment," she said.

"They continue to be a crucial element of the path of synodality as we work towards the ongoing mission of the Church in Australia and for the proclamation of Christ to the world."

She said the document the writing group produces will discuss "the pastoral realities and issues essential to the faith and life of the Church in Australia and synthesise them with inspirations from the Gospels and the teachings of the Church".

Mr Ang, who has worked in evangelisation for several years and held leadership roles across multiple dioceses, said the preparation of the instrumentum laboris is "one part of a Plenary Council journey that will stretch well beyond our group's work together, to engage other voices".

"I hope that our work will provide a faith-filled platform from which conversation among the delegates at the Council can spring," he said.

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“I see this entire pilgrimage of faith as none other than the reception of Jesus through time under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and so I hope our work will ultimately nourish that encounter with Christ which is the very foundation and mission of the Church’s future in faith.”

Fr Lenehan said the group is trying to model the behaviour and broader vision of the entire Plenary Council.

“The instrumentum laboris team, like all those ‘walking together’ (*synodus*) on the Plenary Council journey, works by listening, gathering information, praying and proposing some next steps in the mission of the Church in Australia,” he said.

“It aims to offer a useful instrument or resource that can be a stimulus and guide to the communal discernment event of the Plenary Council assemblies in 2021 and 2022.

“It will assist the Council delegates to remain open to the working of the Holy Spirit by shining a light on the urgent questions of Catholics in Australia today, and by challenging the delegates to reflect carefully on the Scriptures and Tradition in order to propose realistic and authentically Catholic ways for the Church at all levels to respond to those urgent questions.”

The instrumentum laboris had initially been scheduled to be completed in time for the plenary meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference two months ago. The postponement of the first Council assembly from October 2020 until October 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, also saw a delay in the preparation of the instrumentum laboris.

It will now be finalised in October this year and be considered at the bishops’ November plenary meeting. It will then be sent to the Holy See, while local work continues on the development of the agenda for the first assembly in October 2021.

“The instrumentum laboris is not in any sense the ‘final word’ on any issue,” Archbishop Costelloe said.

“The ‘final word’ will be spoken in the months and years which follow the Plenary Council, as each diocese and local Church community begins to discern how best to incorporate the insights and practical proposals which emerge from the Plenary Council into its own local context.”

Archbishop Costelloe said the process of listening and discernment remains central to the Council journey - for the instrumentum laboris team, for the delegates and for the wider Catholic community.

“The six papers that were published at Pentecost provide valuable insights that can be prayed with and reflected upon in a local, diocesan and national context,” he said.

“I encourage people to remain engaged in the Council process and, most importantly, to pray for those of us engaged in this writing task, for the delegates and for our Church in Australia.”