

Plenary Council concludes with united vote



THE CHURCH in Australia has agreed a series of landmark reforms on the role of women, a new translation of the Roman Missal and on the wider use of the “third rite” of confession. These were voted through on a final day of voting on Friday last week at the week-long plenary assembly in Sydney and come at the end of a four-year discernment process that included 222,000 participating Catholics from across the country. Bishops and members of the Plenary Council agreed that the Church in Australia would “implement” female deacons, should the universal law of the Church allow it, and that women concludes with united vote will be part of “decision making structures” of governance. Each diocese would commit to finding “new opportunities for women to participate in ministries.” A plenary council is the highest form of gathering for a local Church. Final decisions need to be signed off by the Pope.

The agreement on the role of women marked a dramatic turnaround in the council process. Some members had threatened to abandon the assembly gathering earlier in the week, when motions on women failed to reach a two-thirds majority. Following this vote, on 6 July, some members held a silent protest inside the hall. After crisis talks were held by the bishops, the council drew up new motions on the topic of “witnessing to the equal dignity of women and men”, which obtained a two-thirds majority on 8 July. For any motion to be successful at the plenary council, it must receive both a two-thirds majority both among the members and the bishops.

During the last day of voting, the council also passed a motion calling for a new English translation of the Roman Missal in Australia, to ensure it is “sensitive to the call for language that communicates clearly and includes all in the assembly”. The current translation of the English Mass texts, which came into force in 2011, has been criticised for a lack of inclusive language. Pope Francis, however, has reformed the process for liturgical translations, giving greater freedom to local bishops, which opens the path for the Australian Church to progress a revision.

Another significant vote came in the request for a wider use of the “Third Form of the Rite of Penance”, known as “general absolution”. This is a way to offer reconciliation to groups rather than individuals. In the years after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) the “third rite” grew popular in Australia, particularly in rural dioceses with severe shortages of priests. However, the Holy See cracked down on the practice during the pontificate of John Paul II in the late 1990s, stressing the need for individual confession. The Plenary Council has agreed to petition the Pope to “consider whether the Third Form of the Rite of Penance might have wider use on occasions when it is particularly appropriate, granted an understanding among the faithful of its distinctive nature and requirements”. The council has agreed motions on a range of topics, including a “national framework for formation in Catholic Social Teaching” and a commitment for every parish and church body to take action on the environment through Laudato’ si’s action plans. The council has also pledged to tackle a “culture of clericalism” by including lay people in major decisions and to ensure governance is carried out in a “synodal manner” through structures such as pastoral councils. The plenary process is a response to the devastating revelations of clerical sexual abuse in the Church which have led to calls for deep reform. A liturgy of lament for abuse and the passing of safeguarding motions were held on the assembly’s first day.