

LISTENING AND DIALOGUE ‘LANDMARK MOMENT’ FOR CHURCH

While people were still sharing their stories of faith and of God with the Plenary Council last night and the final numbers won't be known for a couple of weeks, the Council's Listening and Dialogue stage is considered a "landmark moment" for the Catholic Church in Australia.

Plenary Council 2020 president Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB expressed his gratitude for the faith, energy and generosity of people everywhere who have shared so honestly.

"The bishops and the Plenary Council team are deeply grateful to all people who have participated," he said.

"It is important to stop and acknowledge the significant moment that this is for the entire Catholic community. I have been very moved by the stories of faith, hope and resilience I have heard."

The first stage of preparation for the Plenary Council came to a close at midnight last night.

Reflecting on the almost 10 months since that Listening and Dialogue process opened at Pentecost, Archbishop Costelloe said it had been impossible to predict how things would unfold.

"With no precedent for a national invitation to prayer, dialogue and sharing of stories, there was a sense of stepping into the unknown and being unsure of what the experience might become," he explained.

"What we found, though, was an Australian community that was enthusiastic to consider the question: 'What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?'"

The last official count of people who had participated in the opening Listening and Dialogue stage was more than 68,700. That was at the end of January.

"We have heard from our colleagues at the National Centre for Pastoral Research that there was an influx of submissions during February and a deluge in the final days leading up to Ash Wednesday," Archbishop Costelloe said.

"This is a landmark moment for the Church - not only in terms of the stories that have been shared, but also in the new relationships that have formed after encountering one another in dialogue. The change that this brings is already evident among people from all parts of the Church."

Plenary Council facilitator Lana Turvey-Collins, who has travelled to every state and territory - most on several occasions - said people have been very willing to share their stories.

"One of the common themes we have heard is people feel that the Listening and Dialogue encounter was invaluable," she explained.

"Many people have mentioned that they haven't really been asked to participate in anything like this before and that experiencing it together has been empowering because it has provided a platform for all voices to be heard."

Ms Turvey-Collins said most have understood the need for prayerful engagement in considering what God might want.

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“It’s a challenging question to be asking ourselves. The Scripture shaping this Plenary Council, ‘Listen to what the Spirit is saying’, is something that guides us very practically. In every conversation, every decision, we ask ourselves, ‘how is this helping all of us to listen to what God’s Spirit is saying?’” she said.

“The habit of encountering one another through listening and dialogue has been critical in the first stage of the process and will become more and more important over the two-plus years we still have to go before the second Council session.

“I am delighted that so many people from diverse parts of the Australian community have been a part of this process. It is a great sign of God with us on this journey.”

The second stage of the preparation phase of Plenary Council, which begins on June 9, will be “Listening and Discernment”.

“Discernment is a term that we hear quite often these days, and practising discernment in our communities and in our preparation towards the Plenary Council will help to ensure we are listening to God, listening to each other and considering our path forward as the People of God in Australia,” Archbishop Costelloe said.

With the Listening and Dialogue phase now complete, the National Centre for Pastoral Research will continue the deep listening process, conducting a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the submissions received and, using best-practice research methods, will identify key themes that have emerged.

Then, in May, the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council, the Plenary Council Executive Committee and the Facilitation Team will work together with the National Centre for Pastoral Research to finalise the National Themes for Discernment.

Those themes will become the focus for the Listening and Discernment phase and will be the foundations for the Plenary Council agenda.

The final statistical data from the Listening and Dialogue phase will be released later this month.

Visit the Plenary Council website for more information at www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au