

Catholic world has eyes on Australia's Plenary Council, US theologian says

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By [Mark Bowling](#)



Wrestling with tradition: Richard Gaillardetz believes the work of the Plenary Council 2020 offers hope to the Church across the world. Photo: Mark Bowling

THE entire Catholic world is watching as the Church in Australia moves towards the Plenary Council 2020, according to one of America's leading theologians.

"I think this is one of the most important things that is going to happen in the Church – universal – in the next four or five years," Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology, Boston College, Richard Gaillardetz, said.

Prof Gaillardetz, author of 18 books, is visiting Australia, and is one of the keenest international observers of the plenary process.

"If the plenary council is done well it could have a marvellous revitalising effect, both in the Church in Australia and give some hope to other churches in other parts of the world," he said.

"I also fear that it could go in the other direction. There will be a great temptation for the bishops to sanitise the whole process – to say 'well, we've made these mistakes in the past, we have to put that behind us and move forward'.

"I think that would be the worst thing they could do.

"If the plenary council can muster the courage to take a genuine act of ecclesial repentance it has a chance of restoring the credibility of the Church.

"I fear that they'll not have the courage to do that though."

Attending the Holy Spirit Seminary in Brisbane on August 4, Prof Gaillardetz delivered a day-long lecture and workshop session entitled "Reflections on power and authority in today's Church".

He described the vision of Pope Francis in re-imagining the power balance within the Church, recovering one of the most radical teachings of the Second Vatican Council, namely, the Church as pilgrim people of God, always journeying.

"Vatican II called us to become an adult Church and that means it called us to a kind of spiritual and ecclesial maturity – which is a stretch for most of us," Prof Gaillardetz said.

"I think that Pope Francis is all about this.

"His starting point is you've got to be mature in order to embrace what discipleship is demanded of us." In considering Church doctrine in today's world, Prof Gaillardetz questioned, "What does it mean to wrestle with our faith?"

"Do we as Catholics have obligation to wrestle even with the teachings that are problematic to us?" he said. "And I would argue, we do.

"As long as we present doctrine either as something to be imposed in some sort of dominating and hegemonic way on the one hand or something to be dismissed as soon as it troubles you, doctrine will not have any purchase on the religious imagination of the people.

"What we have to do is encourage a mode of engagement that is more 'encouraging active', questioning, being troubled.

"(It's) Pope Francis' claim, right? That engaging doctrine doesn't preclude doubt.

"To belong to a tradition is to consent to conversion – the possibility of conversion."

Prof Gaillardetz related questions of doctrine and active questioning to the work facing Australia's plenary council.

"I am advocating the notion of a Church that presumes the fundamental equality of all Christians and their right and obligation to speak out and participate in the Church's discernment," he said.

"You want to hope the plenary council is going to do that.

"I think Pope Francis is waiting for local churches (for instance the Church in Australia) to ask for it."

Prof Gaillardetz said this included considering married priests.

"Francis is not opposed to the idea of ordaining viri probati – mature married men," he said.

"(Pope) Francis is committed to what I call the principle of subsidiarity – he doesn't think every decision should be made at the top.

"He would rather see local churches discerning a real need and asking for permission. And then I think he would grant that.

"I think if the plenary council were to make a formal request to the Pope that they be allowed to ordain mature married men I actually think Francis would respond positively."

Prof Gaillardetz said the Church in the Amazon region could pre-empt Australia in calling for married ordained priests.

Married ordained priests is already an agenda item on the 2019 Amazon synod, prompted by the shortage of clergy to serve isolated communities in the region.

"This isn't a question of Church doctrine, this is a question of Church discipline – we have married Catholic priests right now, either by indult or because they belong to an Eastern Catholic tradition," he said.

Prof Gaillardetz warned against the "temptation" for some Catholics to stoo much time thinking that the success of the plenary council should be judged by addressing "a laundry list of hot-button issues" – ordination of married men, ordination of women, or "what we say about LGBTI persons".

"I think it's a mistake to just focus on those hot-button issues," he said.

"First of all because I think that the Church in Australia has a more important issue to deal with.

"The elephant in the room has got to be the grievous harm that's been done to the credibility of the Church because of clerical sexual abuse and the episcopal malfeasance that allowed it to continue.

"To me that's got to be the most important issue. And I think its (the plenary council) success will be measured on that point – not whether it addresses questions like the ordination of women."

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