

FIRST PLENARY COUNCIL ASSEMBLY MIXES IN-PERSON, ONLINE FORMAT

The first assembly of the Plenary Council will take place with a combination of online and face-to-face participation as uncertainty remains over restrictions on travel and gatherings.

The decision to hold the October 2021 assembly in a “multi-modal” format was reached last week based on feedback from a number of groups, including the steering committee for the Council assemblies, the Plenary Council’s facilitation team and risk assessors.

Plenary Council president Archbishop Costelloe SDB said while COVID-19 travel restrictions might be lifted by the time of the first assembly, ongoing social distancing requirements and questions around flight schedules and costs were concerns.

“In announcing earlier this year the postponement of the first assembly for 12 months, we were confident that by October 2021 restrictions in relation to travel and public gatherings would have largely disappeared,” he said.

“This now appears much less certain. Among other concerns, the Adelaide venue we had selected was unlikely to be able to host the gathering of more than 300 people due to social distancing requirements.”

Archbishop Costelloe said the bishops, during their biannual meeting last week, wrestled with the decision before conceding that the move to a multi-modal gathering was the only realistic option.

Under that format, delegates will gather in local groups - diocesan, inter-diocesan or provincial - and participate in some Council sessions within those groups. Other sessions will take place with those groups engaging in conversation, prayer and discernment with other groups around Australia.

“We recognised that in order for this to be a true plenary council, it couldn’t solely take place within geographical regions,” Archbishop Costelloe said.

“It’s clear this isn’t the preferred way forward, but there was a sense that we couldn’t just postpone the Council for another 12 months and hope for the best.”

Peter Gates, from the Plenary Council’s facilitation team, said while contingency planning for an online assembly began as the pandemic’s second wave in Victoria unfolded, the decision to move to a “multi-modal” gathering means the planning can now proceed with urgency.

“We had essentially been preparing for an in-person gathering, while at the same time trying to devise a backup plan if COVID-related restrictions remained in place,” he said.

“Now we can focus solely on ensuring that the first assembly can honour and carry forward the listening, dialogue and discernment that has already taken place, albeit in ways we couldn’t have imagined a year ago.”

Archbishop Costelloe said it is important to remember that the Plenary Council is a years-long journey and that there will be a second assembly in Sydney in July 2022.

“The first assembly will inevitably take on a somewhat different flavour because of the multi-modal format, but the key principles of prayer, of discernment and of renewal in Christ remain central,” he said.

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