



Marriage is a Sacrament for Others.

A Submission to the Plenary Council 2020

Teams of Our Lady

Oceania Super-region

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Executive Summary

Teams of Our Lady or Equipes Notre-Dame is a lay movement within the Catholic Church which promotes marriage and supports a world-wide community of Christian married couples. It exists in 70 countries and has 130,000 members including 8,000 priests and religious. Teams of Our Lady is governed by canonical statutes which were approved on July 16, 2002 by the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

A 'Team' is a group of 4 – 6 married couples (and sometimes widows/widowers where one spouse has died) as well as a spiritual counsellor (priest or religious) which meets together regularly once per month over a simple meal where each member shares what has happened in their life over the previous month particularly in terms of their married/family life. A meeting may also have a discussion topic.

In response to the invitation to contribute to the Plenary Council 2020 agenda, the Teams Movement in Australia invited its members to follow the Plenary Council 4-step process and develop submissions as individuals, couples, a Team or a group of Teams. These submissions were then sent to a Coordinating Team in South Australia. However, each individual, couple or Team were also encouraged to submit their submissions to the Plenary Council website if they so wished.

These submissions were collated and analysed by the Coordinating Team and have been reported on in this document. They reflect the concern that Teams members have about the broad issues facing the Church in Australia as well as the specific issues concerning marriage, family and education.

As a large and significant marriage movement in the Church that has a wealth of lived experience in regard to marriage and family we would like to respectfully encourage the Plenary Council to address a number of issues on marriage and family. In this we have drawn heavily on our submission to the Extraordinary Synod on the Family in 2014 and the result of that Synod as outlined in *Amoris Laetitia: The Joy of Love*.

In summary we recommend that the Church:

- Re-evaluate Church structures and modus operandi to become a more humble Church, more responsive to the needs of our people in the spirit of the Gospel. Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*.
- Give more prominence to the Sacrament of Marriage as the 'domestic church' and the foundation of a truly Christian Society.
- Promote the importance of stable and enriching marriage relationships in accordance with the teachings of *Amoris Laetitia*.
- Review the methods of education and support for marriage and better pastoral outreach to those in difficult situations.
- Re-evaluate Catholic Education, giving more prominence to effective catechesis.

Introduction

Teams of Our Lady is a lay movement within the Catholic Church that offers couples a chance to discover the Lord's presence in their marriage and to live in Christian fellowship with other married couples. The goal of the movement is to help couples live their lives with more strength, light and hope.

The movement, known internationally as Equipes Notre-Dame, was formed in France in 1939 and now exists in seventy countries across five continents with more than 130,000 members, including 8,000 priests and religious.

Equipes Notre-Dame is recognised by the Pontifical Council of the Laity as an international private association of the faithful with juridical status.

Teams of Our Lady, hereafter referred to as Teams, is grateful for the opportunity to have input into the Plenary Council process.

What is a Team?

Typically a Team consists of 4 – 6 couples (and sometimes widows/ers where one spouse has died) as well as a spiritual counsellor (priest or religious). The Team meets over a meal once a month, each member shares about the last month and is listened to respectfully and in silence. The Team also shares in prayer and discussion on a relevant topic. Hospitality, respectful sharing and shared leadership are central to the Teams Movement. Teams members aspire to 7 formative endeavors: to pray daily and particularly in conjugal prayer; to read the word of God daily; to “sit down” in the presence of God and converse deeply with their spouse at least once a month; to address an aspect of their behavior (of their own discernment); to attend the Team meeting monthly and to address the study topic for that month and to attend an annual retreat.

Across Australia there are 105 active Teams with over 1000 members. Teams members are also active in the Australian Church. A census taken in 2006 showed that a Teams member on average participated in 4.8 ministries in their local church/parish.

Process of preparing this submission

The preparation of this submission was based on:

1. Responses received from Teams members across Australia, and
2. Documentation from the Teams Movement and elsewhere particularly in relation to marriage and family.

Responses received from Teams members

All members of Teams were invited via their Region to participate in the submission. A letter and a copy of the Plenary Council 2020 pamphlet were sent out to all 105 Teams by their respective Regional Leadership Couple. They were encouraged to follow the process outlined in the pamphlet and consider the three questions for the submission:

- What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?
- What questions do you have about the future of the Church for the Plenary Council to consider in 2020?
- Do you have a story of your experience of faith, or the Church you would like to share?

Teams members were requested to send their responses to the Submission Coordinating Team in South Australia but were also encouraged to submit their responses on-line to the Plenary Council team as a Team, as a couple or as an individual.

In several cases, some Teams met together to consider the questions and make a combined submission.

A list of all Teams who contributed to this submission is contained in Attachment 1. A collated copy of their contributions (i.e. the raw information) is available upon request (see contact details above).

The Response

A total of 37 submissions were received from Teams which represents a response rate of 35%. This involved 174 couples (38% of total couples), 16 widows/ers (28%) and 21 spiritual counsellors (36%).

A thematic analysis was conducted on the submissions by the Coordinating Team. This resulted in the identification of 19 broad themes which are described below.

This process identified 19 broad themes which are listed below ranging from most mentioned to least mentioned.

Results

The following themes must be understood as a response to the question posed by the Plenary Council process: What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?

1. A greater role for women in the church including ordaining female priests (Score 20; 61%)
2. Removing the requirement of celibacy for the priesthood and allowing married priests (Score 20; 61%)
3. Greater inclusivity of divorced couples, gay people, marginalized people within the church (Score 19; 58%)
4. Empowerment of the laity (Score 16; 48%)
5. Encouraging a more communal church including the support and expansion of various movements within the church such as Teams (Score 12; 36%)
6. To atone for sexual abuse by clergy and prevent abuse from occurring again (Score 11; 33%)
7. To address the church's loss of credibility and lack of relevance to the modern world (Score 10; 30%)
8. To reform the structure of the church (Score 10; 30%)
9. To review decision-making and work towards a synodal church (Score 9; 27%)
10. Address persistent clericalism and abuse of power (Score 9; 27%)
11. To address a church in decline that is losing members and is in crisis on a number of fronts (Score 8; 24%)
12. Re-energise and improve liturgy (Score 8; 24%)
13. Responses that describe personal faith action (Score 8; 24%)
14. Better training of clergy (Score 8; 24%)
15. To increase transparency and accountability in the governance of the church (Score 7; 21%)
16. Foster and better support marriage and married couples. Support Teams as a way to achieve this (Score 6; 18%)
17. Address the faith formation of children (Score 5; 15%)
18. Better use of social media to promote the faith (Score 4; 12%)
19. Review the need for a Catholic education sector (Score 1; 3%)

Documentation from the Teams Movement and elsewhere

The Coordinating Team also considered important and relevant documentation from within the Teams Movement as well as from other sources which make important observations on Christian marriage and family life. These include:

- The Teams submission to the Extraordinary Synod on the Family 2014
- Pope Francis' speech at an audience given to Teams of Our Lady, 10 September 2015.
- Amoris Laetitia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family, 2016.
- "Marriage and the Plenary Council" by Byron and Francine Pirola, www.smartloving.org

Discussion

It is clear from the submissions received from Teams around Australia that there is deep concern at the current state of the Church, not only because of the damage caused by clergy sexual abuse and a perceived lack of atonement but also because there is concern that the Church has simply not kept pace with the changes and the knowledge that has enriched our world. The world has changed but the church has not kept up with the change and the portrayal of the teachings by Jesus is not being done justice by the language and cultural presentations that are used.

The Church as a whole, has not grappled or embraced this new knowledge and skills, particularly in governance, transparency, administration, community development, sociology, the audit process of improvement through systematic Plan-do-study-act iterations of change (PDSA), small group theory or in law, where Canon Law particularly has been found wanting.

The submissions by Teams showed that the main areas of concern included:

- The structure of the Church
- Need to review decision making and working towards a Synodal Church
- The impact of clergy sexual abuse
- The problem of persistent clericalism and abuse of power
- The lack of transparency and accountability
- Greater inclusivity of divorced people, gay people etc.
- The training of clergy and role of Seminaries
- The Church's loss of credibility
- The role of women
- The issue of celibacy and married clergy

We believe that it is important to address church structures and processes to create an environment where the faithful can flourish. However, in this submission we wish to focus on areas impacting on marriage and family life; and particularly the questions of Catholic education and faith formation of our youth, marriage education and support services. We also want to address how Teams can become more involved in these issues especially in light of Pope Francis' insistence that the Teams Movement has a missionary role to other couples and families. He said:

"And, in fact, I would like to insist on this missionary role of the Équipes Notre Dame..."

"Christian couples and families are often in better conditions to proclaim Jesus Christ to other families, to support, fortify and encourage them".

“However, I invite you also to commit yourselves, if it is possible, in an ever more concrete way and with ever renewed creativity, in the activities that can be organized to receive, form and support in the faith particularly young couples, before and after their marriage”.¹

The Sacrament of Marriage is under-estimated

There is a strong sense that marriage as a sacrament is still under-estimated within the Church.

And yet, marriage is the cornerstone of society.

“Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. The sacrament of marriage is an important opportunity for each to encounter Christ in the other. This is the extraordinary mystery of married life. Parents have the privilege to lead their children to the knowledge, love and awareness of Christ in their own lives, as part of the vocation of marriage and family”.²

From Pope Francis’ comments on mission to other couples and families, married couples have the opportunity and the responsibility to lead others outside their marriage and family to a love and awareness of Christ. That love and awareness, as well as the strong model of a loving marriage will hopefully strengthen and support other married couples and their families in the face of the many pressures in modern society that tear at the fabric of society. Hence the title of our submission: Marriage is a sacrament for others.

It can be said that sacramental couples (and probably most couples who marry or co-habit in a long term relationship of family with children), simply do not realise or understand the missionary role of the couple in love, committed to their children and contributing to society (wittingly or unwittingly) to make “thy kingdom come”. At the human level this is clearly so; at the sacramental level we see an immediate concern as to “What is a sacramental couple?” and all those couples aspiring to live to the highest calling that love and the generosity of the human spirit (God’s love) that drives great couples to be missionaries to their children and to our society. Indeed, we see our institutional church withdraw rather than embrace such couples who are “not sacramental”. It is an area of Australian and Church life that requires strong leadership and support.

A very significant contribution to the recognition of the importance of marriage as a sacrament that is absolutely essential for the wellbeing of society and for a flourishing Church was the establishment of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2014 and the publication of *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)*.

We all need to be reminded about the wealth of knowledge and understanding which is contained within this small volume. It addresses the theological and spiritual basis of love and marriage, provides an understanding of the realities of couple relationships and families in contemporary society and the challenges faced, examines love in marriage and provides a vision of what can be achieved in terms of pastoral care, the promotion of love and marriage and the education of children. It is clearly written, not only for “sacramental couples” but for all people especially couples in our world.

It would be a large and unnecessary task for us to repeat all of the issues within the book that needs to be on the agenda for the Church in Australia within this submission. We would like to comment on a few issues and suggest ways in which the important findings of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family

¹ Pope Francis’ speech at an audience given to Teams of Our Lady, 10 September 2015.

² The Teams submission to the Extraordinary Synod on the Family 2014, pg. 15.

can be implemented. *Amoris Laetitia* is the best and most accessible guidebook we have for the Church to take action on marriage, family and children.

How do we implement the findings of the Synod on the Family?

Amoris Laetitia has been studied by many members of Teams, both individually and as a study topic for Teams meetings. In response to Pope Francis' exhortation to Teams to be missionary, there has been much discussion and planning about what Teams can contribute to marriage and family at the local level beyond the boundaries of the Movement.

Whilst this is absolutely important, *Amoris Laetitia* also points to the important role that the Church has in ensuring the implementation of the findings. In fact, it is disappointing that little or nothing has occurred in this regard. It is our belief that all dioceses and parishes ought to have a body which seeks to enhance marriage and family life. Whilst there are some central structures and programs, this is not so in every diocese and certainly not so in every parish.

This harks back to the important principle that the Bishops in Australia have a responsibility to ensure that an environment is established with appropriate structures and processes to ensure that effective action on marriage and family can take place. At a minimum, an action plan for taking this forward needs to be developed.

In considering what effective action is, we make the observation that organisations including the Church and the government often engage in action which can be best described as "fluff and bubble". Actions such as the development of advertising campaigns, glossy pamphlets, special functions, etc. frequently achieve nothing. Using marriage as a model, important outcomes require perseverance and consistent, sustained support.

The Catechesis of Children and Catholic Education

Great effort needs to be focused on the faith formation of our children and young people. A number of our groups expressed their greatest concern for the catechesis of children and grandchildren. There were many stories and examples describing the view by their children that "being a good person and by living a good life, thus strongly contributing personally in the community, is more important than teaching children about Christ, the Father and the Spirit". The emphasis on the education in secular subjects with scant attention apparently paid to the spiritual formation of adolescents was almost universal and spoken about with great regret and resignation. Enormous variability in the quality of these experiences by children at different schools was apparent. Many students at Catholic schools do not comprehend their faith. It was the general view that Catholic schools are not succeeding in the catechesis of their students; certainly at high school level.

The frequent lack of cooperation between parish and school could almost be described as scandalous in some parishes. Sacramental programs are a wonderful opportunity for outreach. These programs require review because at present many are simply tokenistic. They speak of loving, supportive Christian communities when that is simply not the experience for many families. Often there is no follow up support and parents are left to "fend for themselves" following baptism, reconciliation, confirmation or first Eucharist.

We feel that the power of a hospitable school and integrated parish community should not be underestimated for the support that can be provided to families in their mission for the catechesis of their children and indeed for missionary outreach for so many un-churched parents of the children in Catholic schools.

Ministry and education for marriage and family life

Marriage, premarital co-habitation, the high incidence of domestic violence and marriage breakdown and divorced people being excluded from communion are subjects that need further examination.

Couples need appropriate marriage preparation and ongoing support. In the Catholic Church in Australia a lay bureaucracy is mostly responsible for marriage preparation and their focus is mainly psychological rather than spiritual. This bureaucracy is competent but is not always available to young couples outside of metropolitan and large urban areas. Easier access to marriage preparation needs further investigation. Further, the current system has no capacity to provide support and guidance after marriage. Such services need to be available for every marriage conducted in the Church at the parish level, jointly with whatever Marriage preparation is provided by presiding pastors.

Teams are in an excellent position to offer such support to marriage courses and to couples in the early years of marriage. The church in Brazil has achieved high participation rates of young married people into Teams. In New Zealand bishops are now promoting Teams and their involvement in marriage preparation.

Teams need to have greater involvement in:

- Marriage education classes
- Introducing Teams to all parishes
- Encouraging newly-wed couples to join the Teams Movement.

Also pre-marriage formation and the support of couples during the marriage should be no longer a choice; it is a must. The present pre-marriage courses are too short and superficial. To gain an accreditation in any profession requires months or years of studies, and yet we expect couples to understand a lifetime commitment through 4 - 6 sessions.

Further, Pope Francis exhorted Teams in his 2014 address to

“... continue to be close to wounded families, which today are so numerous, because of the lack of work, of poverty, of a health problem, of mourning, of worry caused by a child, of the lack of balance caused by an estrangement or absence, of a climate of violence. We must have the courage to come into contact with these families, in a discreet but generous way, materially, humanly or spiritually, in those circumstances where they find themselves vulnerable”.³

Teams also need to have greater involvement in areas such as:

- Accompanying couples in difficulty or challenging circumstances.
- Advising families on relationships.
- Supporting “wounded” families.

Teams understands that the involvement of its members in the above areas requires the Movement to select the most appropriate couples/people to undertake these roles, that they are properly trained and that they can demonstrate the necessary competency to undertake this work.

Finally, Teams would welcome the opportunity to work in a collaborative and coordinated way with other organisations in the Church that have a focus on marriage including the professional staff in Centacare who provide marriage preparation.

Divorce and Re-marriage

There is widespread feeling that the Church needs to change the rules about divorce and re-marriage.

³ Ibid

In that section of 'Amoris Laetitia' dealing with couples in 'irregular situations' Pope Francis is insistent on the need for sensitive pastoral care and to avoid judgemental attitudes. The current rules and the way they are applied do not serve people well and they have forced people to leave the church. The church needs to reach out and help people who have relationship problems.

Again, Pope Francis has stated in his address to Teams:

“Finally, I cannot but encourage the couples of the Équipes Notre Dame to be instruments of the mercy of Christ and of the Church towards persons whose marriage has failed. Never forget that your conjugal fidelity is a gift of God, and that mercy has been given to each one of us. A united and happy couple can understand better than anyone else, as from inside, the wound and the suffering caused by an abandonment, a betrayal, a failure of love”.⁴

The church needs to show love and compassion and not rules. Many divorced and re-married people experience the church as lacking compassion. When couples split up, the response from the Church is canonical and legalistic. There is no understanding and acceptance.

We need to consider the related issue of marriage annulments.

Many couples who break up refuse to go through the annulment process as they say that an annulment implies that they did not experience that part of their lives. If a couple wish to marry in the Catholic Church they should be allowed to do so, even though they have not gone through an annulment process.

There is a truth about the power of small group hospitality.

Our formation in Teams has inspired us to live with a strong faith and is continuing to live like that for each of us. We see many other small groups, with various names resulting in faith formation for many. Examples are the YCW movement, groups such as Teams of Our Lady (Teams), Marriage Encounter, Antioch, Focolare, amongst many Family Movements in marriage and family life; St Vincent de Paul in Welfare and charitable works, religious congregations in teaching and mission. They have all a similar social dynamic of small groups gathered around a purpose.

Little has been done to actively support, endorse, encourage or facilitate the mission of these groups either at Parish or diocesan levels as being a primary means of evangelising and central to Parish life and endeavour. The Teams Movement in Brazil is one situation where there is direct and strong support from the church; a similar initiative in New Zealand recently is encouraging, and both see more couples involved in Teams and in the Church.

⁴ Ibid

Recommendations

In summary we recommend that the Church:

- Re-evaluate Church structures and modus operandi to become a more humble Church, more responsive to the needs of our people in the spirit of the Gospel. Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*.
- Give more prominence to the Sacrament of Marriage as the 'domestic church' and the foundation of a truly Christian Society.
- Promote the importance of stable and enriching marriage relationships in accordance with the teachings of *Amoris Laetitia*.
- Review the methods of education and support for marriage and better pastoral outreach to those in difficult situations.
- Re-evaluate Catholic Education, giving more prominence to effective catechesis.

We trust the Plenary Council will give due consideration to the matters raised in our submission, and we pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance in the Council proceedings.

Attachment 1: Teams Contributions to the Plenary Council Submission by Region

Region	Team	Couples	Widow/ers	Spiritual Counsellors
ACT/NSW	16 Teams in Region	77	3	6
	4-5	5	1	1
	Cana (Syd)	4	0	1
	Good Shepherd (Syd)	6	0	1
	Total Response 3	15	1	3
Vic East	36 Teams in Region	148	33	21
	1 (Geelong)	3	1	0
	7	1	4	0
	22	3	3	1
	25	4	0	1
	29	5	0	1
	30	6	0	1
	33	5	1	0
	56	4	0	0
	63	5	1	1
	76	5	1	0
	Total Response 10	41	11	5
Vic West	27 Teams in Region	127	14	14
	Wangaratta 1	4	2	1
	Wangaratta 2	5	0	1
	Wangaratta 3	6	0	0
	Wangaratta 4	6	0	0
	Wodonga 1	5	0	0
	Bendigo 1	5	0	1
	Total Response 6	31	2	3
Queensland	9 Teams in Region	32	1	9
	2	5	0	1
	3	4	0	1
	7	4	0	1
	9	4	0	1
	13	4	0	1
	Total Response 5	25	0	5
SA/NT/WA	17 Teams in Region	74	6	9
	5	3	0	1
	6	6	0	0
	7	5	1	1
	12	5	0	0
	27	5	0	0
	28	6	0	1
	35	5	0	0
	42	4	1	1
	45	4	0	0
	WA 1	5	0	1
	3 Crossroads Meetings (members from different Teams met)	14	0	0
	Total Response 13	62	2	5

Summary of Responses	No of Teams	Couples	Widow/ers	Spiritual Counsellors
Total in Australia	105	458	57	59
No. of Responses	37 (35%)	174 (38%)	16 (28%)	21 (36%)