

Synthesis

Synod 2021 – 2023

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission

Diocese of Ballarat

The Australian Catholic Church is in the process of a Plenary Council and the Diocese has combined this with the journey towards the Synod of Bishops. Preparation began when leaders were selected and educated to assist at regional parish gatherings. At these gatherings, after prayerful discernment, participants' contributions were collected throughout the diocese. The leadership team led ten regional meetings over a three month period at Horsham, Mildura, Ballarat, Warrnambool and Swan Hill.

Parishioners also were encouraged to send personal reflections to the diocese and/or make submissions to the online portal on the Synod of Bishop's website.

<i>Age groups of participants</i>	
13-15 years	3
16-19 years	10
20-24 years	2
25-29 years	1
30-34 years	8
35-39 years	4
40-44 years	12
45-49 years	15
50-54 years	23
55-59 years	14
60-64 years	15
65-69 years	40
70-74 years	29
75-79 years	28
80 years and over	21
Not stated	34
Total	259

Gender of participants

A little over half the number of all individuals from the diocese were female (58%), while a further 27 per cent were male and the remainder did not indicate.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

There were three individuals who identified themselves as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Communion, Participation and Mission

Within each of these three areas, the most widely discussed themes were as follows:

Communion

- Greater focus on Jesus Christ
- Greater trust, faith and hope in God
- Remaining faithful to Church teaching
- Better faith formation
- Being a witness in society
- Greater focus on the Word of God
- Renewed call to holiness

Participation

- Greater role for women
- New leadership and governance models
- New models of Church, diocese, parish
- Greater involvement of the laity
- Dialogue in Church and society
- Ecumenism
- Greater leadership from bishops and priests
- Holy Orders - ending celibacy/allowing priests to marry
- Holy Orders - ordination of women
- Emphasis on Church teachings on marriage
- Greater understanding for those that are divorced
- Restoring the Third Rite of Reconciliation
- Greater inclusion of all
- Fighting for human rights
- Care for the environment
- Ending discrimination of LGBTIQ+

Mission

- Greater emphasis on prayer and sacraments
- Sharing the faith with others
- Listening to one another more
- Outreach to youth

- Modernise Church teachings
- Teaching authentic Catholic faith
- Listening to the laity

Among the three main themes, the area of ‘Participation’ was most frequently chosen by respondents, with the most frequently selected subthemes being:

- authority and participation
- discerning and deciding
- sharing responsibility for our common mission

The major themes of Communion, Participation and Mission were brought to the surface through prayer, reflection, discernment and discussion with participants responding to the following:

- ***These are the ways we are working together well***
- ***These are the areas we need to strengthen***

“Evaluating our successes and failures has been variable and often doesn’t take place. It is important that it does, but it should not be onerous. Some evaluation may be physically obvious, but appraisal forms often give you information you may not have received otherwise and so are very worthwhile. An important consideration is the fact that this is God’s Church, we are the people of God but not God. Whilst listening to the Holy Spirit through the voices around us we also need to discern if all of those voices are of God or are in accordance with the will of God.”

A Summary of the Responses:

These are the ways we are working together well:

As a Church Community we recognise our efforts to:

- Give affirmation to the clergy. We have many good priests working in our parishes who have suffered considerably because of the child sexual abuse scandal
- Give primacy to the place to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian Church particularly by the heeding of indigenous voices: supporting the Uluru Statement from the Heart; responding to NATSICC’s recommendations; receiving and acting upon the five recommendations outlined in the NATSICC submission

- Place an emphasis on the processes of listening, dialogue and synodality, and on the need to embed such processes in ecclesial decision-making in our Church
- Emphasize building unity within the church (*passim*)
- Have a strong focus on the need for on-going formation for all the baptised
- Recognise the need for serious ecumenical and interfaith dialogue
- Have a ‘missionary discipleship’ focus informed by Pope Francis
- Recognise the need to heal the wounds of abuse
- Proclaim and enact Catholic social teaching
- Promote the use of the Sacrament of Penance and encourage the proposal to reinstate the third rite of reconciliation
- Promote financial and institutional support for prayer and catechetical centres
- Give particular emphasis to Pope Francis’ call to conversion in relation to care for our common home and to affirm the missionary impulse in the prayers of Pope Francis at the end of *Laudato Si’*
- Promote integral ecology and ecological conversion
- The consultation prior to the Australian Plenary Council and the experience of the Plenary Council itself have been experiences of synodality in practice.
- Promote synodality. The practice of or journeying together has been developing gradually in our diocese for several decades:
 - Our diocesan pastoral planning document, entitled “Looking Forward”, has been shaped and re-shaped through various levels of consultation among laity and clergy at many parish and regional gatherings over the years.
 - Parishioners from neighbouring parishes have met to discuss ways of cooperating to improve services in local communities. This has led, for example, to several parishes having common programs to prepare children for the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist.
 - The board of the recently established Diocese of Ballarat Catholic Education Limited is made up mainly of laity. The Diocesan Personnel Board now includes laity as well as clergy. These are examples of our diocese transitioning to a greater involvement of laity in governance.
 - The promotion of the “*Light from the Southern Cross*” report, which contains proposals for a more collaborative, synodal model of Church governance and pastoral leadership in parishes and dioceses.

“I believe the clerical/hierarchal structure of the Church is greatly hindering its ability to relate to our society and culture. Clerical structures need to be reformed by restructuring the training of priests and revisiting the roles assigned to the Council of Priests and the College of Consultors. The document 'The Light from the Southern Cross' needs to be implemented in the Australian Catholic Church. The present standing and situation of the Church in Australia and the world certainly indicates the present regime of authority is a failure in today's world. Less clerics and more laity need to be the decision makers in our Church. Bishops are the "chief shepherds" not the CEOs. Change the formation structure for our leaders. It is doing damage to them and the Church.”

These are the areas we need to strengthen:

- The Church is facing two issues:
 - ❖ how can we be a better church
 - ❖ can we gain (or regain) the trust that we had in the past
- Synodality seems the best way for us to become a better church. The Church needs to be reformed in order that people regain their trust in it. The image of the Church seen by outsiders is an organisation dominated by conservative male clerics who have shown their frailty. (This was on display for all to see in the Royal Commission)
- *The Signs of the Times* and the concept of Synodality: In Australia, women have been Prime Minister, Governor-General and Chief Justice of the High Court. Leadership to recognise the gifts of women and welcome them into all aspects of Church life.
- The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has attested to the problem of clericalism and the need for changes in the seminary curricula and ongoing professional development for clergy. This needs follow up.
- An understanding that Sacraments are a permanent stimulus to reform, renewal and the self-giving that reveal the Church as ‘the seed and the beginning’ (*Lumen Gentium* #5) of God’s reign”.
- Many question the need for compulsory celibacy for priests in the Latin Rite.
- Seminary formation; a thorough review of seminary formation, in particular the continuing of a semi-enclosed system. Many of the recently ordained are markedly more clerical and restorationist than their predecessors.
- While the Australian Church is making a substantial and helpful financial contribution to overseas church communities every aspect of the justice of engaging priests from Asia and Africa needs to be re-examined.

- The Church is said to “receive the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom”(LG 5). This is not self-evident in western society today.
- The rules governing the structures of Plenary Councils be reviewed. Laity should be the most numerous group in Plenary Council representation.
- In the diocese and parishes we often identify needs rather than goals. The problem with this is that we are only dealing with survival rather than advancing, being reactive rather than proactive and forming true disciples or developing ministries.
- There is a need for a better understanding of the four-fold presence of Christ in the Eucharistic celebration. This has the potential to expand horizons, to refocus attention on the centrality of Eucharist and revivify participation of all the baptised in the Eucharistic celebration. (*Sacrocsanctum Concilium #7*)
- To permit, where appropriate and under the oversight of the Local Ordinary, the possibility of suitably qualified non-ordained (both men and women) being entrusted with this Ministry of Preaching in the Eucharistic Assembly.
- The issue of gender language in the Church is an irritant which should be dealt with, as it has been in the secular world.
- When dealing with ecology and the environment there is a tendency to reduce ecological justice to environmental justice and to equate social justice and environmental justice. Pope Francis draws these notions together using the term “integral ecology”. Pope Francis, in speaking of the intrinsic value of the material world, introduces a profoundly transformative and new church teaching (*LS 115, 118, 140*) that eschews the dualism of Platonism, a philosophy that has been in our ecclesial DNA for centuries. God’s all-encompassing embrace of creation deserves greater attention.
- Bishops have lost the trust of many of the laity, religious and clergy. There is need for transparent processes and procedures for the appointment of bishops.
- Canon law gives every indication of being written by clerics. A review could illuminate the signs of clericalism and promote synodality. A significant group of lay people could be involved in such a review.
- Diocesan Synods and Pastoral Councils: If these bodies became the norm a revision of the function and need for some of the existing governance bodies in the Church could occur. (diocesan curia, college of consultors, council of priests, social justice committee, women’s council, diocesan finance council).

- Attentiveness to what the Spirit is saying to the Church at this time allows for entirely new insights. Often people want decisions and are not prepared to follow a discernment process that requires patience and time.
- The need to acknowledge the current context of our young people and what reaches them. We could show far greater sensitivity in the areas of culture, music, leadership, finance, language and technology.
- Understanding the full extent of our Baptism is vital and this can only happen with solid preparation and follow-up support. Such preparation often occurs with adults through the RCIA program, but to have more than one session with new parents is rare. As parishes we need to accompany these families in their faith and this means regular contact.
- Teamwork and governance in parishes needs to be positive, active and well-advertised with frequent, open and honest discussion, initially between the parish priest and the leadership team and then the leadership team taking it to the wider community.
- Discernment can be problematic. One of the difficulties we have encountered is that often people see a gathering as an environment where something concrete has to be achieved, they want to see results and are loathe to take part or commit to the discernment process if it is going to take a) more time or b) more than one meeting – which is a time factor again. Fostering prayer that is not just tokenistic before a meeting is a good lead into creating a spiritual presence to our gatherings. Growing in spiritual discernment can be challenging since important decisions are usually accompanied by strongly held opinions. Finding the fine line between discipleship and ownership of the church can be difficult. Detachment is key for discernment and requires humility before we can be open to those voices from outside. To grow in communal spiritual discernment requires practice and good direction as well as the desire.
- Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils should be mandatory.
- Pastoral planning is essential when parishes merge.
- Parishes need a pastoral vision.
- An essential need for the development of emotional intelligence and spiritual discernment skills for all levels of leadership of the Church.
- Consider a model of having a pastoral leadership group of 4 to 6 including the Priest. This pastoral leadership group have the authority to make decisions, reflecting a servant leadership style, for the Parish community. The pastoral leadership group are responsible for facilitating the development of a Mission for the Parish. Give the Parish community responsibility for their own spiritual development.

- Consider the role of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) in the formation of trainee Priests to build emotional intelligence, access their pastoral heart and develop an awareness of collaboration.
- Provide clergy professional development to assist in keeping with the *signs of the times*.
- Consider the role of ongoing Supervision for all levels of leadership.
- Embrace diversity in Ministry. Women welcomed into all levels of Ministry, e.g. preaching, anointing, baptising. People who are celebrants within a local community to be called on when needed.
- Consider inviting parishes to develop a Position Description to attract Priests who fit the culture of the Parish. Consider implementing Performance Reviews of people in pastoral leadership.
- Allow and support diverse models of Catholic community to emerge as possible ways in which the Gospel might light the spark of faith within people.
- Ecumenism is important, again relationships are at the heart of this. We can learn much from our Christian brothers and sisters in terms of love and knowledge of the Bible, personal relationship with Jesus and witness and evangelisation.
- Produce an easy-to-understand version of the lectionary and missal with inclusive language.
- Foster an inclusive and welcoming community to all including divorced, remarried, LGBTIQ+, those on the edge and those discriminated against. Recognise diversity among people. Advocate a community that inspires people and encourages involvement and opportunities.

Concluding Observations:

A strong theme in people's reflections was disappointment regarding the extent of the child abuse in the diocese and the perceived lack of response to victims during the early days of the crisis.

Many of the participants were over 60 years of age and expressed sorrow and lack of understanding related to the rapid decline in Sunday Mass attendance within their lifetime in the Australian Catholic Church.

Many were concerned that their church communities were in severe decline. Bewilderment was a common theme among the older group. A good number of those who could remember the post Vatican II enthusiasm in the Church were dismayed at the lack of change. People confided that they started to limit their participation in Church life and governance (parish councils, finance and liturgy) when they encountered 'difficult' priests.

Leadership, accountability and inclusiveness are of major concern. There is a strong sense that the ordained need to move away from the role of CEO and concentrate on being shepherds.

A good number of the participants found the lack of inclusion and the hierarchical structure of the Church frustrating. On the other hand, those with a more conservative bent were uncomfortable with what they described as a move away from tradition, culture and doctrine.

The hope for the diocese is that the power of the Synod and the Plenary Council will support it in taking steps to make concrete changes towards synodality which may include but not be restricted to: a new governance structure such as a working diocesan pastoral council that can make decisions, women in leadership on the different governing bodies; diversity in ministry; parishes that are proactive rather than reactive in their decision making; priests whose formation reflects the signs of the times; a focus on ecology and environment; more ways to respond to young people's involvement and so many more important points that have been recognised as the call of the Holy Spirit in the Diocese of Ballarat.

Key points that have emerged:

- Recognise and acknowledge the *present-day Sign of the Times* – Women in leadership and in all ministries, professional development for laity, clergy and Bishops, leadership within dioceses and parishes, lay people in all areas of ministry.
- Respect and recognise diversity among people; welcome divorced and remarried people to Communion; welcome homosexual people, officiate at their marriage; those discriminated against and those on the edge.
- Give particular emphasis to and promote integral ecology and ecological conversion, place importance on care of the earth.
- Clergy formation at different levels for all including new and international.
- Focus on mission – welfare, education, those on the edge.
- The need to acknowledge the current context of our young people and what reaches them.
- Allow and support diverse models of Catholic community to emerge as possible ways in which the Gospel might light the spark of faith within people.
- Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue are important.
- There is a need for a better understanding of the four-fold presence of Christ.
- Advocate a community that inspires people and encourages involvement and opportunities.