

Discernment Paper #2

This document is an abridged version of one of the six thematic Discernment Papers from the communal discernment process leading to the Plenary Council. As such, it is only a “taste” of the original document, albeit a close reflection of its approach, spirit and content. To read the full text from the original Discernment Paper, go to the Plenary Council website:

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/continuing-the-journey-of-discernment/>

Key Question

How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is **Inclusive, Participatory and Synodal?**

Executive Summary

This report proposes a vision of Church that gives priority to the poor and vulnerable. It urges greater openness to the diversity of peoples and faith expressions. It calls for a Church culture that welcomes and recognises all persons.

I. Reflection on the Theme

“Inclusive”

Jesus prayed “that they may all be one” (Jn 17:21) and was compassionate and outreaching toward those in need.

Following Jesus, the Church is a forum of welcome to “the great multitude from every tribe, tongue and nation” (Rev 7:9). How can this biblical image invite reimagined ways for the Church in Australia which encompasses diverse ecclesial expressions, such as those from East and West?

A Christ-centred Church is inclusive of persons rather than ideologies. Inclusion recognises every person as a doorway into the mystery that is the Body of Christ. Inclusion of one group should not result in the exclusion of another.

“Participatory”

Imitating the ministry of Christ, love shown by believers cannot be mere words, it must be a love that forgives, transforms, and brings fullness of life; not merely ‘acceptance’ of others but the call to conversion and justice and authentic community.

Through Baptism, Christians have the “right and duty” (SC, 14) to participate in the sacred liturgy, and they are entrusted by God with an irreplaceable task “to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all” (CCC, 900, c.f. LG, 33).

Participation is more than the pragmatic administration of talents. It is responding fully to the particular graces given to each person, in the unique circumstances of our lives.

There is a risk that the Church will be reduced to divisions of separate works (parishes, schools, hospitals). Rather, the Church's sacramental heart, with the graces of the sacraments, must nourish the works of its agencies.

Participation in the life and mission of the Church involves outward and inward ways (e.g., apostolic work and contemplative life). There can also be layers of participation, with important collaborators, not limited to the baptised.

We need to explore new ways for people to find connections that deepen the communion of the Church.

“Synodal”

‘Synodal’ should not become a “buzzword”. From the Greek, it means to “walk together”. Like Jesus on the road to Jerusalem with his disciples, the Church is a “caravan of solidarity”. We are stepping through everyday life together with Christ. In the words of Pope Francis, we are called to be a “listening” Church, which “is more than simply hearing”. Together—the faithful, the Bishops, the Pope—we are “all listening to each other, and . . . to the Holy Spirit”. (Pope Francis, Address, 17.10.15)

In this light, to be “synodal” is not so much a structure as an attitude. It involves a dynamic form of togetherness. The whole community—with its hierarchical and charismatic gifts, with a humble leadership and an actively engaged community—is open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

II. Pastoral Reality

There are no simple ways to address the complex array of experiences, of both belonging and disconnection, described in the submissions. Christ asks us to accompany rather than judge, and to respectfully walk with one another as we grow in grace together. In this context, the following concerns were identified as significant concerns, although it is not an exhaustive list.

- The concerns of *Indigenous Catholics*. They have suffered so much, yet they desire to live and share the rich diversity of their culture, language stories and art.
- Catholics from *diverse cultural backgrounds*. Their contributions transmit the Gospel, both publicly and privately.
- The contribution and role of *women* seeks greater recognition and expression in decision-making aspects of the Church's life.
- *Young people* often feel alienated from the Church in its doctrines, yet they display a deep desire to work for justice and inequality.

- *Married couples, parents and families* experience many joys, and also struggles which, if left unattended, can lead to disengagement with each other and the Church.
- The Church is often perceived to be negative about *sexuality*. Yet, made in the image of our Creator God, sex and sexuality are core elements of a person's identity. Concerns expressed in submissions include the cultivation of the union of man and women in marriage, as well as the request that the Church be less judgmental and more caring of people who do not neatly "fit" ecclesial categories due to their marital situation or sense of sexual identity.
- The Church contributes to society through its *social ministries and services*, e.g., health, aged care, social services, education. Many people staffing these services do not personally identify with the Church, yet they share a passion for the specific ministry.
- In general, *men* in Australian society do not seem to be flourishing and are disengaged in the life of the Church. Masculinity and manhood have received relatively little attention in the Church's teaching until recently.
- *Mental illness* goes to the very depths of a person's psyche and inner life and can result in a profound isolation, loneliness, compounded by being stigmatised. To experience mental illness confronts the very mystery of human identity.
- *Full lay participation* in parish and diocesan governance is not a reality. This, along with the "*culture of clericalism*" is a significant concern.

III. Theological Vision

Through Baptism each member of Christ's faithful is equally part of the Body of Christ. An inclusive, participatory and synodal Church is centred on Christ, open to the Holy Spirit, and discerning of the gifts of the baptised. It is relational, personal and welcoming.

As the People of God on pilgrimage back to the Creator, the Church believes in a God who gathers into one family all who are scattered. Participating in the creative work of the Word, members of the Church patiently listen and joyfully receive the experiences of others, in all their joys and sorrows, hopes and aspirations. In this way, communion is deepened.

IV. Major Challenges

Along with the concerns and challenges already mentioned, there is also a concern for Catholics whose voices have not been heard, who are disengaged from the Church or who felt unable to participate in the Listening and Dialogue process.

In developing an attitude that is inclusive, participatory and synodal, key questions can be asked at every step along the way.

- Is this step following the way of Jesus?
- Are the unique personal gifts of the baptised being recognised and encouraged?

- Are the gifts of diverse cultures joyfully received?
- Is this step inclusive or exclusive? Does it welcome or judge? Does it encourage or discourage participation?

A culture of lifelong learning, deep personal reflection and mutual respect in formation in faith are also vital the proposals that follow.

V. Priorities and Proposals

1. Accompany Individuals who are Poor, Powerless, on the Margins

It is proposed that the whole body of the faithful find ways to include those in need at the edges—those in remote locations, homeless, without income, in prison, new arrivals, aged, of diverse sexual orientation.

2. Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics

Their contributions and concerns should be joyfully received and acted upon, particularly in Reconciliation Action Plans, recognition of language and culture, training of future deacons and catechists, cross-cultural training for non-Indigenous ministers, measures to improve faith formation, employment, wellbeing.

3. Welcome the Riches of Various Cultural Communities

It is proposed that the faithful welcome and celebrate the cultural and linguistic riches of various groups gathered according to country of origin, ethnicity, language or new ecclesial communities. This would include a spirit of mutuality, special care for refugees, and assisting foreign clergy to adapt to the diversity of Australian life.

4. Take Steps to Include Women

It is proposed that the Council do all within its power to ensure the inclusion of women in the Church, with attention given to respectful translations of Lectionaries, Missals and Sacramentaries, and participation in parish and diocesan leadership that is more than advisory. Where the universal Church is already investigating these matters, facilitate discussion among the faithful on allowing women to be lectors and acolytes, permanent deacons and priests. Take note of these local concerns while following the progress of Church investigations.

5. Endorse Dialogue with Young People

It is proposed that the Council

- recognises the gifts of young people and addresses their cultural and health concerns;
- creates opportunities for the young to be involved in the leadership of the Church (through initiation, formation, missioning and accompaniment);
- gives practical encouragement and affirms the use of new technologies;

- seeks stronger links between in-school and post-school formation;
- develops broader and more flexible ministries that welcome, accompany and celebrate the gift of young people, while addressing their pastoral needs.

6. Sexuality and Marriage

It is proposed that the faithful

- be encouraged to develop a theological understanding of God’s creation of human sexuality that informs a pastoral approach to issues such as contraception, IVF, surrogacy;
- renew efforts to prepare, accompany and support couples;
- provide greater pastoral care for couples when a marriage ends, including sensitivity in the practices of marriage tribunals;
- offer patient listening to people who feel excluded from the Church because of their sexuality or relationship status;
- communicate the dignity and wonder of human sexuality in accord with the Church’s rich theological teaching.

7. Catholic Health, Education and Social Service Ministries

It is proposed that better recognition be given to these ministries as integral to the Christ-centred Church; that priority be given to effective formation; that shared stewardship bring about better collaboration and accountability among church leaders, among services and personnel, including ministerial PJPs.

8. The “Missing Men”

It is proposed that priority be given to examine the needs of men who no longer participate in the Australian Church.

Final Comment

The above proposals are suggestive rather than prescriptive, in order to encourage broad discussion of issues at the local level, according to the principle of subsidiarity.

Abbreviations

Address. Pope Francis, Address at the Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops. 17 October 2015.

CCC. Vatican. Catechism of the Catholic Church. English translation. Homebush, NSW: St Pauls/ Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

LG. Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. *Lumen Gentium*. 21 November 1964.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

SC. Second Vatican Council. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 4 December 1963.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.