

Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR)

Contribution to the Synod on Synodality

(Numbers and letters in brackets refer to items in the Synod Synthesis Report)

ACCCR seeks to inspire Catholics directed by their consciences to pursue renewal in the Australasian Church as Jesus inspires his disciples to proclaim and live the Good News of love, justice, equality, self-giving and hope. The Spirit is calling us to be a synodal church in which we live and model Christ's concern for the common good, human dignity, local decision-making and solidarity.

ACCCR has organised numerous events to promote engagement with the Synod, led and participated in many discussions and listened to the voices of the faithful in every continent but especially throughout Australasia.

The following quotes encapsulate the hopes and vision evoked by the announcement of the Synod on Synodality.

“The purpose of the Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but ‘to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.’” (Cardinal Mario Grech to Presidents, Episcopal Conferences. 7 September 2021)

A Church “with a gentle yoke” (cf. Mt 11:30), which does not impose burdens and which repeats to everyone: “Come, you who are weary and oppressed, come, you who have lost your way or feel far away, come, you who have closed the doors to hope: the church is here for you! *Tutti, tutti, tutti!* (Everyone, everyone, everyone!)” (Pope Francis’ reflection at the opening of the Synod on Synodality, 4 October 2021)

Introduction

Catholicism is at a crossroads. Most baptised Catholics have given up on the church organisation. They find the spirituality and theology on offer, often characterised as devotional and exclusionary, to be inadequate. The appalling behaviour towards the abused, sexually and spiritually, the lack of understanding of the damage done to them, their families and the wider church, and the total lack of openness to justice in these

issues are unacceptable for many. Clericalism, the injustice of not welcoming LGBTQI+ and those in irregular relationships together with other rules, practices and exclusions are anomalies. The credibility of bishops and clergy is at an all-time low.

Australia's Catholic population, just over five million (2021 census), is an aging community with 19.9% aged over 65 in 2021. The percentage of weekly Mass attendance, 12% in 2016, is now significantly lower. The church's multicultural and linguistic profile is being transformed with Italian still the most popular non-English language (2021) but now closely followed by Filipino languages, Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese languages, Croatian, Malayalam, Portuguese and Assyrian/Chaldean. The situation in New Zealand is similar.

The Synod process (led by the inspiring papacy of Pope Francis) is introducing new life into how the church proceeds, from worldwide consultations to the conversation methods of the first Assembly in October 2023. The *Synthesis Report* lists multiple opportunities for further progress. For this we are appreciative and grateful. Significant and sustainable reform, indeed renewal, depends on a process built on respectful consensus and the Holy Spirit.

ACCCR here responds to the *Towards October 2024* request for contributions guided by the question: "HOW can we be a synodal Church in mission?" on the two levels suggested.

1. The local (diocesan) level.

Sense of the faith of the faithful

In his *Motu Proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam* on 1 November 2023, Pope Francis reiterated the centrality of the sense of faith of the faithful for theology and Catholic living.

ACCCR affirms that this sense is clear and manifest regarding the equality of women, their ordination, same sex relationships and repartnered Catholics. (18e) Other areas in which the sense of faith of the faithful must be given practical recognition include:

Requiring the establishment of Pastoral Councils with decision-taking authority in all dioceses and parishes (7b);

Decreeing regular local, open discussions/consultations on matters that concern the faithful (18e, 10c);

Proclaiming the equality of all Catholics, the ordination of women, inclusion of LGBTQI+ and repartnered Catholics within a theological perspective (8b);

Ensuring that lay women and men, those in consecrated life, and ordained ministers have equal access to all church positions. The exercise of co-responsibility is essential for synodality and is necessary at all levels of the Church (1a).

Recognising that recently arrived migrants, deeply embedded in a variety of cultures, often require additional attention and support to become active in the mainstream.

Current structures and practices imply that the hierarchy do not take the sense of faith of the faithful seriously and do not trust non-ordained Catholics in any roles with real power. (1g) This is undoubtedly a factor in the declining numbers of engaged Catholics.

Authority and leadership

The abysmally low level of engagement by Catholics in the Synod process reflects:

- The lack of effective engagement of most bishops and clergy with the synodal process and the mediocre quality of leadership from many of those who have;
- The perception that the contributions and submissions provided for the Synod and, in Australia, the Plenary Council have disappeared into the ether;
- The widespread perception among those who know anything about it that the Synod is irrelevant. In fact, most Catholics know nothing about the Synod;
- A clericalist attitude among bishops and clergy (8j, 8l).

To counter these realities and become a properly functioning church, ACCCR proposes:

- Total differentiation and separation of pastoral and liturgical functions from governance and administration functions. The latter must be cognisant of and serving the former. The Australian report, *Light from the Southern Cross*, is an excellent guide;
- Introduction of procedures and practices that implement contemporary standards of governance, transparency and accountability (20e);
- Mandatory pastoral councils, democratically elected, based on synodality and nurtured by a practice of contemplation and action;
- Affirm practices that legitimately democratise decision making, especially with the inclusion of women in governance roles, not just executive management positions, in all parishes, and diocesan activities. A significant step would be for dioceses to have women as participants in the Councils of Consultors to bishops. (20f);
- An overhaul in the selection and training of priests to ensure that emerging pastors are genuinely committed to the “Francis” model of Church, prioritising their pastoral role, living servant leadership lives and rejecting all forms of clericalism;
- The acceptance and implementation of synodality everywhere in the Church.

Effective communication

The failure of the first Assembly of the Synod in October 2023 to engage the imagination and inspire Catholics reveals a need to:

- Promote the church’s mission in language and actions that are meaningful and relevant in 21st century Australasia;
- Express clear positions on the social, economic and political structures that exclude and marginalise poor and vulnerable people;

Deliberately shun any attempts at Catholic identity politics that alienates and divides the community;

More vigorously promote our common humanity, universal wellbeing and planetary survival as hallmarks of the Church's mission;

Stay resolute to finding creative solutions to indigenous disinheritance and disadvantage;

Make the resolution of the refugee scandal a performance indicator of the effectiveness of the Christian voice;

Develop more effective channels of communication between culturally diverse groups, including 'Anglo-Celtic' sections.

2. Between churches level: finding “a dynamic balance between the dimension of the church as a whole and its local roots”

Free and open discussion on theological positions

There is nothing more important for the Church at this time than finding and living new ways of being in the world. The way of synodality is an enormous challenge for humanity. It is different from many accepted practices of the world in which we live, a world which is a daily witness to communication and decision-making failures. Yet, there is much to be learned from progressive trends in the socio-cultural environments.

Every Catholic lives by a personal theology and spirituality, whether overt or implicit but many find that the theological positions they have inherited are antiquated. An adult approach is required with free and open discussion on core Catholic doctrines and moral positions. Theological exploration is a prerogative of all the baptised.

The Synod's encouragement of respectful dialogue that is open to all Catholics and all issues is a wonderful start. It allows traditionally taboo issues to be discussed. Free and frank discussion of Catholic doctrines and moral positions will lead to a more mature and responsible laity.

Pastoral leaders able to lead these discussions are urgently needed. Otherwise the present enormous disparity between what the Church teaches and what Catholics believe and live by will continue to widen. For example, the vast majority of Catholics including many high ranking officials have concluded:

There is no theological basis for excluding women from ordination;

There is no theological basis for the church's position on LGBTIQ+ people. (3c).

Yet the organisation insists on maintaining these unsustainable positions.

This is a call for unity in diversity, not for uniformity. The reality is that Catholics do not all understand everything the same way, nor should such conformity be expected. Both those who hold to traditional and progressive positions are to be respected. Insisting on

uniformity (e.g. The Catechism of the Catholic Church and Canon Law) is repressive and undermines the credibility of the Church.

Instrumentum Laboris

The *Instrumentum Laboris* will effectively set the Agenda for the October 2024 Synod Assembly. In line with the quotes at the head of this submission, ACCCR recommends that the Agenda:

- Calls explicitly for an immediate review of Canon Law to remove or update canons to enable the Church to effectively conduct its mission, specifically to allow participation of the laity particularly women and LGBTIQUA+ in Church leadership and ministry, e.g. Canon 1024 (only males can be ordained) and Canon 129 (only the ordained can exercise governance). Pope Francis has already set a precedent by making changes to Canon Law;
- Addresses the concerns expressed worldwide and reflected in the Synthesis Report;
- Calls explicitly for an immediate review of Canon Law to remove or update canons to enable the church organisation to effectively conduct its mission, modelling the vision, message and behaviour of Jesus, e.g. Canon 1024 (only males can be ordained) and Canon 129 (only the ordained can exercise governance);
- Calls for a review of liturgy, especially the language of the liturgy;
- Requires implementation of the Pope's *Motu Proprio* by theologians, preachers and all Catholics.

Synodal Councils

All bishops in Australasia need to be directed in the strongest terms to instigate genuine Synodal Councils where clergy, religious and lay people sit together to address issues in the life of the Church and adopt the Synodal way.

Conclusion

The future of Catholicism will be deeply affected by the degree to which the organisation and the movement of faith (or governance and spirituality) are differentiated but evolve synodally, hand in hand.

Effective renewal and reform of the church organisation will involve all Catholics and create opportunities for personal and community growth. The Synod and other church agencies at the service of the people and people claiming agency in their spirituality will transform the church.

The current change of era holds potential for Catholics to collaborate, internally and externally, in ways not possible in earlier times. Jesus' message offers a powerful, credible and positive future for all in the 21st century. This is the ongoing evolution of humanity, leaving no one behind. It requires commitment and willingness to change. It will not be easy. However, it is vitally necessary

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