



# Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst

## SYNTHESIS

### Synod of Bishops



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## **INTRODUCTION: REREADING OF THE SYNODAL EXPERIENCE**

The journey of the synodal process in Sandhurst began quietly in the wake of the conclusion of the First General Assembly of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Council of Australia. The team appointed to implement the synod process made the decision to begin with a gentle and slow approach and to then adopt a more upbeat engagement strategy in early 2022. This tactic was employed following the consideration of two significant and interwoven factors which, in the view of the implementation team, affected the social and cultural climate in the community at large and therefore the general receptivity to the synod journey in the diocese.

The first related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the second to the Plenary Council timeline and process. Many parishioners and clergy felt worn out and worn down by eighteen months of rolling restrictions, including seven lockdowns of various lengths, imposed by state authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Places of worship were under strict capacity limits and many parishioners and clergy held fears that even after the lifting of restrictions many parishes would see attendance at worship permanently reduced.

Second, having entered energetically into the 'Listening and Dialogue' phase of the Plenary Council in 2018-2019, there did not seem to be an appetite among the faithful to engage in 'yet another' round of consultation. The Plenary Council process itself was also extended by the pandemic and there was a perception held by some that the Plenary Council was now completely removed from the day-to-day life of people in parishes.

One final issue that the team considered was the 'summer holiday' or 'festive' factor. Late December and most of January are usually time of reduced activity in parishes, as parishioners take extended breaks to rest, relax and travel to be with family during Christmas, New Year and the long school vacation period. December 2021 and January 2022 also coincided with what became known as the 'Omicron Wave' of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected confidence and therefore the willingness of people to gather in shared spaces.

Information about the Synod and how to participate was promoted through the diocesan electronic newspaper *Sandpiper eNews* and updates were provided when the timeline was extended. In December

2021 our Bishop wrote to all parish priests and parish leadership teams informing them that February 2022 would be designated a 'Synod Consultation Month' in the diocese. A copy of the letter was also sent to the Executive Director of Catholic Education Sandhurst. Two Zoom meetings were scheduled for the end of January for clergy, parish leadership teams and Catholic Education staff. At these meetings the bishop and diocesan staff addressed the Synod, its purpose, timeline, relationship with the Plenary Council of Australia and explained the Synod 2021-2023 'Coffee Conversation' process, which was kindly developed and shared by the Archdiocese of Wellington (New Zealand) and adapted for use in Sandhurst. These meetings were not particularly well attended; however, the message was clearly communicated and several local 'Coffee Conversations' were hosted in person and online in parishes, schools, offices, homes and in other places across the diocese. A member of the implementation team also addressed the Council of Priests at their first meeting for 2022. From anecdotal evidence, it seems that most 'Coffee Conversations' were hosted by lay leaders and pastoral associates in parishes with very few, if any, clergy involved. Some of these were not submitted via the portal but were sent directly to the diocesan contact person.

The authors of this synthesis were struck by the similarity between the submissions from the diocese to the 'Listening and Dialogue' Phase of Plenary Council responses and the submissions received through this process. Whilst many fewer responses were recorded, many of the themes were consistent. Topic 10 which addressed 'Walking with Other Christians/Ecumenism' was addressed briefly in one group submission.<sup>1</sup> There was no mention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, it did feature as a theme in the Plenary Council 'Listening and Dialogue' Report to the diocese.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ecumenism did feature as a theme in the Plenary Council 'Listening and Dialogue' Report to the diocese *Final Report for Phase I: Listening and Dialogue: A Report to the Diocese of Sandhurst*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> *A Report to the Diocese of Sandhurst*, 13.

## DISCERNMENT OF THE COLLECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

One of the most striking themes emerging from the Church in Sandhurst is that the people of God are longing to truly 'journey together'. There is a universal belief expressed in different ways that our Church has a place for everyone to walk 'side-by-side' as Jesus wants (Topic 1). At the same time there is almost universal agreement that as a Church we don't do this well and haven't been doing this well for many years. The sense of the faithful is that "journeying together" is not happening as it should be in the Church and certainly not often beyond the confines of regular parish life. As one respondent observed: "there is no walking side-by-side...we're missing younger people, parents of young families". There is a deep yearning from the people of God for engagement with youth and younger people. Many perceive that the school and the parish are not "journeying together": families and children are present in Catholic schools but rarely experience the life of the parish, apart from preparation for and celebration of the sacraments of initiation. Moreover, there is a sense that, whilst the work and efforts of the clergy are appreciated, on the whole they remain a separate and superior 'class' to the laity and that women are not afforded their place as equal partners in leadership and decision making.<sup>3</sup>

There is frustration and disappointment that so many people self-exclude from the life of the Church and that there is apparently little commitment to or energy for a genuine missionary outreach at any level. And yet, underneath the frustration and disappointment at the *status quo*, of our Church's inability to transcend the confines of the present, there is a genuine stirring of hope, an expression of the *sensus fidelium*: that the Church can be and become more for the world.

The steps that the Spirit is inviting us to take in order to grow in our journeying together seem to constellate around four key areas: inclusion, the role of women, co-responsible leadership for mission and formation for mission. Whilst distinct and with their own integrity each of the areas are clearly interrelated and speak one to the other.

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<sup>3</sup> One third of the submissions received through the Synod consultation process spoke directly to the role of women in the Church. Most of these expressed deep dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition women are afforded and leadership opportunities women are given.

## 1. Inclusion

There is a strong sense that the people of God in this diocese are yearning for a more inclusive Church, one that truly welcomes all and listens deeply to “women, young people, lay people, those on the margins, the socially discarded and excluded”.<sup>4</sup> Learning the discipline of deep listening with an open heart and mind and the action of stepping out and away from Church buildings to meet and engage with those who do not come or who only come at Easter or Christmas or for the Sacraments of initiation would be critical and part of the practical curriculum of the “Formation for mission” area. In a special way, the Spirit is inviting us to genuine encounter with people with diverse sexual orientations, sexual identities and genders and to listen deeply and respectfully to their experience.

Internal divisions in the Church, perceived or real, between lay and ordained, women and men, parishes and schools put at risk the authentic outreach to those who are not presently active in the life of the Church. It seems that the Spirit is also inviting us to transcend these internal divisions, to a true “culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions” within the Church.<sup>5</sup> Our mission is to one another as Catholic Christians as it is to the whole world. Furthermore, the Spirit is always calling the Church to become more of an effective sign and sacrament of God’s love for the world. Internal division risks the Church becoming a counter-sign to the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

In terms of how this renewed sense of unity and inclusion might be accomplished, the sacrament of penance is identified as an under-appreciated and under-utilised healing and reconciling ministry of the Church. At the same time contrasting pastoral strategies are recommended. Some advocate for a renewed focus on individual sin and personal confession and others for widespread and regular use of the Third Rite of Reconciliation as way to invite the people of God to an encounter with God’s kindness and mercy. Whatever the approach, the Spirit is calling the Church to truly appreciate the gift of this sacrament. Perhaps the penitential rite of the Mass could be highlighted in some special way in all liturgies and especially those when Catholics who irregularly attend are present, for example at Christmas and on Easter Sunday.

Today, many of the ordained are born and are formed overseas. In this diocese they mostly serve an Australian-born faith community. This has the potential to be a mutually enriching experience with a meaningful exchange of faith informed by life experience and culture. The Spirit is calling us to treasure

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<sup>4</sup> Topic 1, Companions on the Journey.

<sup>5</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, n 215. Whilst Pope Francis addresses division within the Church in *Evangelii Gaudium* (nn 98-101), he makes more explicit a way of overcoming division in *Fratelli Tutti*.

the genius and insight of all cultures and human experience and at the same time to critically scrutinize, appraise, transform, and purify culture and human experience in the light of the Gospel. Among other things, this requires an intentional and ongoing commitment to inclusion through intercultural learning, self-critical reflection and growth for laity and clergy alike.

## **2. Women**

The Spirit is inviting us to truly honour and receive the gifts, expertise, and life experience of women. We are diminished when they are not present or active in the governance, decision-making and leadership of the Church. There is a call to move beyond the prevailing anthropology of the complementarity of women and men and into a more nuanced and adequate anthropology informed by the human sciences that acknowledges and cherishes the rich diversity of our humanity as women and men.

## **3. Co-responsibility for mission**

The Spirit is calling us to honour our baptismal calling and to truly journey together in governance, leadership and decision-making, particularly in the area of pastoral planning and strategies for missionary outreach. More diversity in leadership and the effective partnering of laity and clergy in the exercise of this leadership will only strengthen Church governance, leadership and decision-making. There seems to be a deeper call to an acknowledgement of shared responsibility through the realisation of an authentic spirituality of vocation. From this insight the unique and diverse gifts of all the faithful might be recognised, tapped, developed and strengthened in the service of mission.

## **4. Formation for mission: clergy and laity**

There is a hunger for meaningful formation for mission, and the Spirit is inviting us to listen, discern and respond to this need. As well as a common curriculum, there will also be different needs, so differentiated pathways should be considered. For example, all may need to grow in the skills and practice of discernment, intercultural learning, community outreach and engagement. There is a call for a much greater appreciation of cultural nuance and exchange at the parish level for both international and locally born clergy. Clergy may benefit from courses in basic business management practices and formation for

pastoral outreach that is culturally appropriate and responsive to local need. Initial and ongoing formation for clergy that leads to an open, vulnerable, dialogical, adaptive and creative ministry of leadership in partnership with the laity is called for. Some lay people may require a basic theology or scripture course. Opportunities for faith formation, encouragement in the life of prayer and the development of spirituality are required and ongoing for all. Whatever the case, all formation must be at the service of God's mission.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Next Steps

There are a number of steps that could be taken in response to the calls of the Holy Spirit. It should also be noted here that after the conclusion of the first phase of the Plenary Council and prior to the Synod on Synodality consultation, the Bishop of Sandhurst Most Reverend Shane Mackinlay, ordered an external review of a review of the strategic, consultative and administrative structures of the Diocese.<sup>6</sup> Many of the key conclusions and recommendations of the review report, known as *Go Forth*, speak to and make explicit the kinds of steps that could be taken to respond concretely and creatively to the calls of the Holy Spirit. With the existence of this report in mind, the next steps could include:

1. That all parishes establish a Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Leadership Team.
2. That the Bishop continues to implement the recommendations of the *Go Forth* Report, particularly the establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council (to be known as the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council) and develop processes and formation for shared governance, leadership and decision-making in the diocese.
3. That the Church consider strategies and formation for a renewed understanding and practice of the sacrament of penance and the ministry of reconciliation, including reinstatement of the Third Rite of Reconciliation for occasions when it is appropriate.
4. The discernment and implementation of strategies for the authentic inclusion of women, young people and those at the margins in the life of the Church.
5. Seminary formation programs are adjusted to include training in basic business management practices and formation for mission and pastoral outreach that is culturally appropriate, responsive and adaptive to local needs.
6. Formation for mission programs are sourced and made accessible to all members of the diocese, particularly those who hold leadership positions. Wherever possible these programs should be targeted to needs.
7. Given many of the clergy who serve in the diocese are born overseas, formation programs should include a commitment to formal and informal intercultural learning for both the ordained and the laity.

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<sup>6</sup> *Go Forth: A Review of the Strategic, Consultative and Administrative Structures of the Diocese of Sandhurst (2020)*.

8. All parishes and Catholic schools have an active *Shared Mission Commitment Statement* which is regularly reviewed and updated.<sup>7</sup>

### **Key points important to this synthesis**

1. Participation in the consultation for this Synod was negatively impacted by the ongoing pandemic. People are worn out and worn down. There is also a sense of ‘consultation’ weariness and a perception that ‘we did all this before’ for the Plenary Council.
2. The people of God in this diocese experience division with the Church, especially between lay and ordained, women and men, schools and parishes.
3. There is frustration and disappointment that so many people self-exclude from the life of the Church, such as young people, families, and people with diverse sexual orientations, sexual identities and genders. There is further frustration and disappointment that there is apparently little commitment to or energy for a genuine missionary outreach at any level.
4. Underneath the frustration and disappointment at the *status quo*, of our Church’s inability to transcend the confines of the present, there is a genuine stirring of hope, an expression of the *sensus fidelium*: that the Church can be and become more for the world. People are longing for an inclusive Church, one that truly journeys together and is energised by a missionary impulse reaching out to all.
5. The Spirit is calling the Church to renewed approach to the ministry of reconciliation. We are called to the rediscover the healing and restorative gifts of the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of penance and use of the Third Rite of Reconciliation.
6. The Spirit is inviting us to truly honour and receive the gifts, expertise, and life experience of women.
7. The Spirit is also inviting us to genuine encounter with people with diverse sexual orientations, sexual identities and genders and to listen deeply and respectfully to their experience.
8. The people of God are seeking formation that is targeted to their needs and at the service of the mission. This should include opportunities for intercultural learning.

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<sup>7</sup> Catholic Education Sandhurst Limited, *Shared Mission Framework & Commitment Statement: Sandhurst Schools & Parishes*.



## **APPENDICES**

### **Local Context Material**

The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst is a regional diocese located in southeastern Australia in the state of Victoria. Officially the diocese has 40 parishes, but many of these parishes are paired or organised into clusters with one or two priests serving multiple suburbs, towns and/or villages. According to data from the most recent National Census (2016), the Sandhurst diocese had 90,189 Catholics from a total population in the region of 380,580. Catholics therefore make up 23.7 per cent of the total population. A total of 34,869 families identified as Catholic and the median age of a Catholic in the diocese was 42 years. 8,583 Catholics in the diocese or 9.5 per cent were born overseas and 7.3 per cent were born in a non-English speaking country. In 2022, 15 of the 34 active clergy in the diocese (44 per cent) were born overseas in a non-English speaking country.

### **Quotes from Participants and Groups**

These quotes are organised according to the theme or question to which the participant or group response was made.

#### **Communion**

“For those of us who are immersed in parish there is a great sense of walking together, though we may sometimes differ on approaches to our faith there is a sense of community and personal support. There is however a degree of exclusivity as those who are not Mass attenders can feel excluded. To truly walk together with those who have become separated from our Church community we need to extend compassion and understanding to overcome barriers to return and to embrace those making initial steps into our church family.”

“It hurts to be a female in a Church that values me less than men. I have a deep pain inside every time I walk into a church and feel that women are to be seen and not heard. I am sick of being preached at by men who don't understand what it is to be a woman. I am in pain daily because of this. All I can think is I have misunderstood God's love for all people. It terrifies me that the Church might actually represent God's plan for humanity. That God could possibly want women to be treated as less than men. That God

could want to separate the genders in a way that creates misunderstanding and hurts. Of course, the other possibility is that the Church is treating women in a way that is completely against God's plan. That feels more likely to me. I can't accept that the loving God that I know loves me any less and expects any less of me than he does of the men I see running the Church."

"Those who have non-traditional lives and families do not feel welcome in the church, what can be done to make them all feel welcomed?"

### **Participation**

"[There is a] real need to be open to new and creative ways of connecting with those not present inside the church building. We can learn from old ways of doing this but need to be open and supportive of new ideas, initiatives and approaches."

"Clergy are the visible leaders in their Parish. Formation for seminarians and priests need to focus on developing culture change within clergy to empower laity in shaping the Church's focus and direction."

"The Church should look to successful models of shared decision making and open-mindedness and learn from this. There are good examples of parishes and priests that highlight shared participation and community, but this is not the norm."

### **Mission**

"It is essential to be a listening Church (we have 2 ears and only 1 mouth). For too long the Church has been too focused on telling people what to do / say / think. Pope Francis continually calls us to accompany and to practice synodality (i.e., listening)."

"Women are biggest attendees, but leaders are all men. Women are often seen but not acknowledged formally for what they are doing for mission and are getting frustrated and feed [sic] up. Women are treated like they should be Martha or Mary-serving in the kitchen or listening to other people teaching. They are not allowed to be Mary Magdalene."

"There is a great need for the Church to enter into a new understanding of humanity- how we can help everyone to flourish in a new understanding of man, woman and other. There is a 'dodgy anthropology'

about the complimentary roles of men and women which negatively effects our understanding of human sexuality, Church law, power. There is a desperate need to enter into a new understanding of humanity.”

### **Multiple or all themes**

“To transform Catholicism into a truly synodal Church, we have to begin at the parish level. Unless the structures at that level become synodal, nothing will change. What then is required of us at the parish level if our parish community is to become Synodal, built on communion, participation and mission? We need a parish structure which involves many of the parishioners in the life and mission of our parish community.”

“I have just not felt educated enough in my own faith to teach others...I want my Church to teach us how to evangelise in an inclusive way”.

“I think people are included and welcomed in parishes but there is an attitude of we are here, and they can come to us rather than an attitude of outreach and welcome.”

