

HOW IS GOD CALLING US TO BE A CHRIST-CENTRED CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA THAT IS

# Inclusive, Participatory & Synodal?



*Continuing the journey of Discernment  
toward the Plenary Council*

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of this great South land upon which we live, pray and work. We honour Elders past, present and future, and thank them for their sacrifice and stewardship.

We commit ourselves to the ongoing work of reconciliation and healing with all communities.

We acknowledge the lifelong trauma of abuse victims, survivors and their families, the failure of the Catholic Church to protect, believe and respond justly to children and vulnerable adults, and the consequent breaches of community trust.

We commit ourselves to fostering a culture of safety and care for children and vulnerable adults.



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See more information online at: <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/themes/inclusive/>

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*Please note: The discernment papers are the fruits of communal discernment, which does not necessarily reflect the individual perspectives of each of the group members. The Plenary Council team sincerely thanks all*

## Foreword

The commitment of time, faith and giftedness which has been so willingly given by the Chairs and Members of the Discernment and Writing groups over the past months is a witness to the work of the Spirit alive in our Church. As President of the Plenary Council, I wholeheartedly thank Sharon, Renee, Peter G, Peter H, Catherine and Selina for their leadership of the communal discernment process which has produced the fruits that can be found in these six thematic Discernment Papers. I also thank all the members, in particular the writers, of the Discernment and Writing groups, too many to name here individually. Thank you for responding to the call of the Spirit in this way. Your contribution has been a great blessing for the Church in Australia. Finally, thank you to the many individual people, families and groups who gave advice, shared wisdom and testimony, answered questions and provided support and guidance to the Discernment and Writing process.

The starting point for the Discernment and Writing groups was to reflect on our people's responses to the question: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* These responses were gathered during the first stage of discernment: Listening and Dialogue. The 17,500 written responses gave rise to six further questions for discernment, asking all of us to reflect upon how we are called by God to live and minister as the Catholic Church in Australia:

*How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church that is missionary and evangelising; humble, healing and merciful; prayerful and Eucharistic; inclusive, participatory and synodal; a joyful, hope-filled servant community; open to conversion, renewal and reform?*

The six Discernment papers are an important contribution to the Church in Australia's ongoing discernment toward the Plenary Council. They are the fruits of discernment themselves, and help all the faithful as we work together to listen to God, praying, listening, talking and writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each paper provides a reflection of some elements of the relevant pastoral reality, articulates a theological vision, outlines a number of challenges to be overcome, suggests prioritised questions to be answered and develops some proposals for change.

The papers themselves, of course, now become an important contribution to the challenge and privilege of discernment in which we are all engaged. While not in any sense the final word on the six thematic areas which emerged from the Listening and Dialogue process, I encourage you to receive them in the spirit of faith and discernment with which they have been written. They both invite and challenge us to continue to "listen to what the Spirit is saying".

Yours sincerely in the Lord,

**Most Reverend Timothy Costelloe SDB**

Archbishop of Perth,

President of the fifth Plenary Council for the Church in Australia.



# Executive Summary

*All things were created through him and for him. He exists before all things and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:16-17)*

This report unfolds the meanings and implications of being a Christ-centred Church that is “inclusive, participatory and synodal”. It tries to honour the pastoral concerns expressed in the Final Report on the “Listening and Dialogue” phase. It seeks to discern a call and to provide both a vision and a way forward for the Church in Australia. In particular, it gives priority to the inclusion of the poor and vulnerable. It urges a greater openness to, and celebration of, the diversity of peoples and expressions of faith within the Church in Australia. It calls for a change of attitude and culture within the Church in Australia, so that all persons are welcomed and recognised as the faithful move together with Christ and on the way of Christ.



## 1. Reflection on the Theme

### “Inclusive”

In the context of the Catholic faith, the touchstone of inclusion is Jesus Christ, who at the Last Supper prayed for all to be one, as God is one.<sup>1</sup> He includes people who have faith in him. He tells them they are never far from the Kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup> He seeks people out to visit their homes.<sup>3</sup> He includes people in a personal way: they touch his garment, He takes them by the hand.

Christ rose above the taboos of his time, welcoming and helping those who were outcasts in their society on the basis of sickness,<sup>4</sup> poverty<sup>5</sup> or sin.<sup>6</sup> He repeatedly called on his followers to welcome the poor, disabled and sick, to provide for their needs.<sup>7</sup> He welcomed women among those he taught,<sup>8</sup> looked past the social blindness of his time to see the depth of their faith,<sup>9</sup> and welcomed their support of him in his ministry.<sup>10</sup> He welcomed the simple faith and love of children and called his followers to do the same, and to strive to emulate their faith.<sup>11</sup> Christ repeatedly

refused to condemn people, even where their wrongdoing offended everyone around him,<sup>12</sup> but instead called these into his fold, giving them an opportunity to start again. In some cases, Christ stepped in to defend a person that others wished to condemn. Following in the footsteps of Christ, the apostles called on Christians to “welcome one another as Christ welcomed you”,<sup>13</sup> to welcome strangers,<sup>14</sup> not to exclude or have different standards of admission on the basis of wealth,<sup>15</sup> social standing or sex,<sup>16</sup> of gifts and talents,<sup>17</sup> but to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>18</sup>

The Church, founded by Jesus Christ, is a forum of welcome to “the great multitude from every tribe, tongue and nation”.<sup>19</sup> This biblical image invites us to imagine anew the ways in which the diversity of unique gifts can contribute to an organic and authentic common building of the Church. This is especially crucial in Australia, where the Church is manifest in the great multitude of ecclesial expressions from East

1 Jn 17:21.  
2 Mk 12:34.  
3 Mark 5:35-36.  
4 Mt 10:8, Mk 5:34, Lk 5:14-15, Jn 9:1-3.  
5 Lk 4:17-19, Lk 6:20-21.  
6 Mk 2:17, Mt 9:11-13, Lk 7:36-50, Jn 4, Jn 8:1-11.  
7 Mt 25:35, Lk 3:11, Lk 12:33-34, Lk 14:13-14.  
8 Lk 10:38-42.  
9 Mk 5:34, Mk 12:41-44, Lk 7:44.  
10 Lk 8:1-3, 8:21.  
11 Mt 18:1-10, 19:13-14, Mk 10:14-15, Lk 18:15-17.  
12 Lk 7:36-50, Jn 4, Jn 8.  
13 Rm 15:7.  
14 Hb 13:2.  
15 1 Tim 6:17, Jas 1:27, 2:1-5, 1 Jn 3:17.  
16 Gal 3:28, Col 3:11.  
17 1 Cor 13.  
18 Eph 4:3.  
19 Rev 7:9

and West. The words that St John Paul II spoke particularly to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may be applied to all Catholics in Australia: “the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.”<sup>20</sup>

Some experience exclusion, isolation and even homelessness due to cultural differences, personal characteristics or life circumstances. An inclusive Church begins by listening and with humility, with self-examination and conversion.

A Christ-centred Church is inclusive of persons rather than of ideologies. Inclusion entails more than solidarity and accompaniment, which are grounded in creation and basic humanity. Inclusion recognises that every person is a doorway into the mystery that is the Body of Christ. A well-meaning effort to be inclusive of one group should not result in the exclusion of another person or group.

“Participatory”

Jesus invites us to participate in his own mission to “make disciples of all the nations”, who together make up the Body of Christ, which is the Church, a gathering of the people without distinction.<sup>21</sup> Christ’s radical inclusion was not limited to mere ‘acceptance’ of those he met. Jesus met people where they were, yet he loved them far too much to leave them where they were. Every person Christ encountered was changed by the experience. Many were healed.<sup>22</sup> People were

forgiven.<sup>23</sup> Some were chastened, especially those who sought to use their religious standing for their own gain.<sup>24</sup> All were called to the kingdom of God,<sup>25</sup> called to turn away from self-destructive attitudes and behaviours,<sup>26</sup> not to judge others<sup>27</sup> and urged to consider how God’s love could be more fully lived in their lives.<sup>28</sup> Most importantly, believers were called to imitate the love of Christ by loving each other unconditionally.<sup>29</sup> This love cannot be mere words,<sup>30</sup> because it is an imitation of Christ’s own love for every person, a love that forgives, transforms and brings those who hear him into the fullness of life.<sup>31</sup> Jesus not only cures the sick and dines with the outcasts, he calls them to conversion and to justice and restores them to a place in the community of mission where all can contribute towards the common good.<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis calls Christians to “... share their joy,” and “ ... point to a horizon of beauty and ... invite others to a delicious banquet.”<sup>33</sup>

Christian people have the “... right and duty by reason of their Baptism”<sup>34</sup> to participate in the sacred liturgy. This right and duty to a common participation should find its appropriate place in all of Church life. Further, lay Christians “... are entrusted by God ... to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all ... throughout the earth. ... Their activity ... is so necessary that, for the most part, the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it.”<sup>35</sup> Being participatory recognises that the Body of Christ has many parts,<sup>36</sup> that every person in the Church brings unique graces and gifts, and that all persons play an important role in extending the Body of Christ to the

ends of the earth. As such, 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, and the needs of our community.

There is a risk in the recognition of particular gifts that the Church will be divided up into groups of works—parishes, schools, hospitals, community services and so on—that then end up being separated from each other. A Christ-centred, participatory Church will find a way to restore the sacramental heart of the Church, and let the grace of the sacraments nourish the works of its agencies. There are outward and inward ways of participating in the life and mission of the Church for example in apostolic work and in contemplative life. There can also be layers of participation in the Church’s journey, with important collaborators, not limited to those who have been baptised in the Church, contributing to the Church’s mission. Being more participatory will entail exploring the new ways for people to find connections that deepen the communion of the Church.

“Synodal”

The word “synodal” combines two Greek words that combined mean to “walk together.” Jesus’ ministry is largely spent on the road with his disciples and followers, on a long winding journey to Jerusalem. Synodality thus offers an attractive image of the way a Christ-centred Church would proceed: stepping through everyday life together with Christ. In this image, the Church is a “caravan of solidarity”, guided by Christ, and so has direction and intentionality. It is his way.

In addressing the 50th anniversary Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis thus remarked:

A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realises that listening “is more than simply hearing”. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth”,<sup>37</sup> in order to know what He “says to the Churches”<sup>38, 39</sup>

While Pope Francis continues to use the word “synodal” in this way, he explores its meaning not so much as a structure as an attitude, including a “listening” connected to the “base” of the Church, a listening to people. In this sense, being synodal engages the whole community and gathers not just the bishops but all the people. Synodal describes a way of inhabiting structures. It shapes both an inclusive and a participatory culture. Jesus appointed Peter as the rock on which to build his Church,<sup>40</sup> and the Spirit he sent dwells in and guides the Church, giving the Church “hierarchical and charismatic gifts”<sup>41</sup>. To be synodal is to value a dynamic form of togetherness, guided by the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup> In a synodal Church there is an openness to the Holy Spirit in a genuine process of conversion by both a humble leadership and an actively engaged community.<sup>43</sup>

There is a risk that “synodal” could become a “buzzword”, but fail to be a vital and dynamic reality. In discerning a more synodal path for the Church, every person and office—whether lay, consecrated, religious or ordained—necessarily forms a single complementary reality, bringing together every facet of the divine and human elements on the journey back to God.<sup>44</sup>

20 Pope St John Paul II, *Address to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Blatherskite Park*, (29 Nov 1986), 13.  
21 *Evangelii Gaudium*, §15  
22 Mt 4:23, Mt 8:3, 13, 14-16, Lk 5:14-15, 13:12, 17:13-14, Jn 9:6-7.  
23 Mt 9:2, Lk 5:20, Lk 7:48.  
24 Mt 23:13-36, Mk 12:38-40, Lk 6:24-26, Lk 11:37-54, 20:9-19.  
25 Mt 4:17, Mk 1:14-15, Lk 4:43.  
26 Mt 19:21-26, Lk 3:7-9, Lk 3:12-14, Jn 8:11.  
27 Lk 6:27-42.  
28 Mt 22:37-40, Lk 6:43-45, Jn 13:34-35.circumstance  
29 Rom 13:8, 1 Jn 3:11, 1 Pet 4:8.  
30 1 Jn 3:18  
31 cf Jn 10:10  
32 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §189  
33 *Evangelii Gaudium*, §14  
34 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §14  
35 CCC 900, c.f. *Lumen Gentium* §33  
36 Ro 12:5

37 Jn 14:17  
38 Rev 2:7  
39 Pope Francis, *Address at the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops*, (17 October 2015).  
40 Matt 16:18  
41 *Lumen Gentium*, §4  
42 *Lumen Fidei*, §9  
43 International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 2014, p91. “The subjects of the sensus fidei are members of the Church who participate in the life of the Church, knowing that ‘we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another’ (Rom 12:5)”; cf. CCC, 92.  
44 *Lumen Gentium*, §8





## II. Pastoral Reality

Many submissions received indicate both the intense hope and concern held for the Catholic Church in Australia. While they reveal a desire to belong to the Church, some submissions also described experiences of disconnection, whether on a day-to-day or on a more profound existential basis. There are no simple ways to address this complex array of contributing factors. To try and do so would be to dismiss the dignity of each person, the profundity of each hurt and the uniqueness of each experience. Christ's followers are asked to accompany rather than to judge, and to carefully and respectfully walk with our fellow Christians through these experiences that all might grow in grace together.

In this context, the writing group identified the following concerns in the submissions as significant elements of the pastoral reality, though these are not to be read as an exclusive list.

Indigenous Catholics, in their accounts of the dreaming, in their stories, art, language and culture, respect "the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator" and "a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion".<sup>45</sup> In this sense, they bear within them the "preparations of the Gospel", a furrow in the land of Australia that allowed the seeds of the Word of God to be sown.<sup>46</sup>

Indigenous Catholics have too often suffered under misguided attempts of those who are ignorant of the rich diversity of languages and traditions, which is both a treasure and a pastoral challenge for Indigenous Catholics. The writing group also heard the frustration of Indigenous communities as they struggle with the great difficulty of passing on their culture to younger generations.

A growing dimension of the Church in Australia includes Catholics from diverse cultural backgrounds, all of which enrich the experience of the Church and in many ways, their contributions transmit the Gospel of Jesus Christ both publicly and privately.

The contribution and role of women within the Australian Church was a significant component of the final report of the Listening and Dialogue stage, expressing a longstanding concern within the Australian Church. A common refrain among the submissions was a call to recognise the unique gifts of women, who with men are equally made in the "image of God". In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spoke of a need for "still broader opportunities for a more inclusive female presence in the Church". This includes discernment on "the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life".<sup>47</sup>

Young people are of particular concern for the Church today. The parish community is not well equipped to address the myriad of challenges facing young people today, nor is it always able to provide opportunities for guidance, formation and companionship. Many young people perceive the Church's doctrines as a barrier and the Church as less than inclusive, and are less likely to want to be part of the Church themselves. However, young people have a deep desire to work for justice and equality. Many young people find themselves in proximity to the mission of the Church through its social ministries. Those young people who are interested in faith not only want to be accompanied by the Church, they want to accompany the Church on its journey, hoping their contributions can influence growth in the Church.

Our society has become increasingly indifferent, sometimes even hostile, to family life in all its stages, and to those who make family a priority. At each stage of the growth of their children, families experience unique joys but also struggles which, if left unattended, can lead to disengagement and rift, both with each other but also the Church. Placing great importance on marriage, the Church also recognises the deep hurt and disengagement that comes when the marriage bond is damaged. At every level, parents, those who are separated and divorcees often struggle.

The Church is often perceived to be negative about sexuality. Many couples are choosing not to marry in the Church and those who are married often feel at odds with Church teaching. Several submissions asked for the Church to be less judgemental and more caring of people with same-sex attraction and various sexual orientations. They highlighted the isolation, humiliation and persecution experienced, which is not a true reflection of Catholic teaching. All persons are created sexual beings. Sex and sexuality are core

elements of a person's identity — part of our makeup intended by the Creator. Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in different ways. The union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator's generosity and fecundity.<sup>48</sup> This gift needs to be cultivated and directed, to prevent the

"impoverishment of an authentic value".<sup>49</sup> But in the course of human experience, our understanding of our own sex and sexuality sometimes becomes such that it would escape convention, or easy categorisation. As a result of these experiences, matters of sexuality can become a source of pain and confusion, rather than what is intended by God, as a celebration of love between and abundance of life for his creatures.

The Church makes a unique contribution to the social fabric of society through many social ministries and services, particularly those in health, aged care, community services and education. While the Church is rightly proud of these vital ministries, it is also aware of the religious diversity of those who serve and who are served in the Church's name. Many staff do not personally identify with the Church yet share a passion for and contribute greatly to the specific ministry.

In general, men in Australian society do not seem to be flourishing. Statistics speak of increasing rates of suicide, depression and anxiety, alarming increase of victims and perpetrators of violent crime and disengagement from traditional forms of community. There has, in fact, been relatively little attention given to masculinity and manhood in the Church's teaching until very recently. The pastoral consequence of this is the decline of the engagement of men in the Church.

Mental illness goes to the very depths of a person's psyche and inner life; to experience mental illness confronts the very mystery of the human identity.

<sup>45</sup> *Laudato Si*, §71, §76  
<sup>46</sup> *Lumen Gentium* § 17  
<sup>47</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, § 103-104

<sup>48</sup> CCC, 2335

<sup>49</sup> *Amoris Laetitia* §150 "...it is also important to allow room for a "popular" youth ministry, with a different style, schedule, pace and method. Broader and more flexible, it goes out to those places where real young people are active, and fosters the natural leadership qualities and the charisms sown by the Holy Spirit. It tries to avoid imposing obstacles, rules, controls and obligatory structures on these young believers who are natural leaders in their neighbourhoods and in other settings. We need only to accompany and encourage them, trusting a little more in the genius of the Holy Spirit, who acts as He wills."

Those who experience any mental illness may experience an additional burden of a profound isolation and loneliness, which can be compounded by being stigmatised. The isolation of mental illness is an experience that few others can even imagine. It may strike at the heart of a person's self-understanding and even their sense of God.

The absence of full lay participation in parish and diocesan governance, along with the "culture of clericalism", were significant concerns. Diocesan Pastoral Councils<sup>50</sup> and Parish Pastoral Councils<sup>51</sup> would provide avenues through which the expertise of lay people could be utilised, yet both remain optional and advisory. While increasing numbers of lay people are involved in the governance and leadership of national education, health and community services, their powers are limited and their expertise is not fully utilised across the Church.

**"While increasing numbers of lay people are involved in the governance and leadership of national education, health and community services, their powers are limited and their expertise is not fully utilised across the Church."**

This is not an exclusive list of the major pastoral concerns evident in the submissions made during the "Listening and Dialogue" phase. The focus is on the pastoral reality in relation to inclusiveness, participation and synodality. In seeking to honour the uniqueness and complexity of every person created and loved by God, it is important to avoid simple answers to address the complex array of circumstances. Inclusion recognises that every person is a doorway into the mystery that is the Body of Christ.

<sup>50</sup> c.511  
<sup>51</sup> c.536



### III. Theological Vision

The concerns and hopes so urgently expressed in the "Listening and Dialogue" phase are signs that God is asking for the transformation of the Church in Australia so that the living presence of Jesus Christ is evident to all, and all are welcome. A Christ-centred Church that is inclusive, participatory and synodal is a community made of people who, by virtue of their Baptism, are equally part of the Body of Christ. Different gifts for ministry will be discerned and encouraged. Openness to the Holy Spirit is a mark of this Church. It is Christ who sets the example of a Church that is inclusive, participatory and synodal. A Christ-centred Church is relational and personal. In Christ, the People of God who follow him have the model of welcoming all people.

Flowing from this, Christians not only participate individually, but as the Body of Christ, a people of God with a common goal of mission. This alerts us to an ecclesial dimension of faith in which our part in the Church becomes a key theme. The Second Vatican Council speaks of the Church in its entirety as a People of God<sup>52</sup> on pilgrimage back to the Creator that called them together.<sup>53</sup> This vision is founded on belief in a God who continues to gather all that are scattered into one family. All have been liberated by the incarnate Word and sacraments and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are constantly called to purification, revival and evangelical renewal, so that God's faithful can fully become a united Christ-centred Church.

<sup>52</sup> *Lumen Gentium* §31  
<sup>53</sup> *Lumen Gentium* §21

The key to this renewal is the abiding presence of the Body of Christ, who Himself underwent the pain of separation and journey of the cross. With Christ present, the diverse members of the Church become a caravan of solidarity journeying towards a deeper communion and unity in the Church.

To deepen their communion, members of the Church are called to participate in the creative work of the Word, patiently listening and joyfully receiving the experiences of others, with all their joys and sorrows, hopes and aspirations. This requires creativity, not just in the sense of finding new ways to embrace the uniqueness of each experience and gift. It requires divine creativity, which only the Christ event provides, to open hearts and minds beyond familiar frames of reference. It requires new connections to be made between fidelity to ancient faith and the experiences of the communion of saints here and now, with Christ at the centre, in whom all things hold.

While there are many levels of inclusion, the primary level is that Christians become part of the Church through Baptism. Catholics all reject the ways of Satan, declare their belief in God, commit themselves to following the way of Jesus and accept the teachings of the Church. On these matters there can be no exclusion or division.



God is calling the Church in Australia, at this time, to be inclusive in the way that Jesus was inclusive, to embrace the diversity of cultures and peoples, and to be united in Christ, without division, opposition or isolation.

God is calling the Church in Australia, at this time, to recognise the variety of gifts among its members, and to invite and enable full participation in liturgy, ministry and governance.

God is calling the Church in Australia, at this time, to transform its culture and governance so that it becomes a united synodal community of listening and learning, guided by the Holy Spirit. This calls for coordinated change across all elements of the Church, not just in disparate corners of the Church.

**“God is calling the Church to do more than reiterate teaching or refine current practices. God is calling all Catholics to open their hearts to Jesus Christ and transform themselves and so breathe new life into a Christ-centred Church.”**

God is calling the Church to do more than reiterate teaching or refine current practices. God is calling all Catholics to open their hearts to Jesus Christ and transform themselves and so breathe new life into a Christ-centred Church. Ultimately, the Church is the sacrament of Christ, because it is a community of people committed to following the way of Jesus, a Church that shows the holy face of God, a joy-filled Church, a Church for the poor, where each creative outreach to our brothers and sisters must thus always come with a constant turning back to the centre of Christ.



The “Listening and Dialogue” phase revealed many challenges and concerns. In the spirit of inclusion, participation and synodality, however, there is also a concern for Catholics whose voices have not been heard, who are disengaged from the Church or who have felt unable to participate in the “Listening and Dialogue” process.

One great challenge facing the Church in Australia is to be united in God’s call to become an inclusive and participatory Christ-centred Church. Shared vision and a synodal culture of listening and learning are essential if the Church is to be united and transformed. Resources will need to be developed to gather, inform, listen to and support communities and groups along this journey.

Another major challenge is to develop an attitude that is inclusive, participatory and synodal. At every step along the way the key questions are: 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?

As a Church, the faithful need to discern ways in which the unique personal gifts of all the baptised may in different ways contribute to the common life of the Church.

Finally, on considering the priorities and proposals below, a fundamental challenge to the Church in Australia is to develop a culture of lifelong learning, deep personal reflection and mutual respect in formation in faith, which are essential if members of the Church are to come to know Christ, grow in faith and bring new life to the Church’s beliefs and practices. This would include more effective instruction in the faith through the liturgy, Catholic education, Catholic communications, ministry to young adults and leadership training.

## V. Priorities and Proposals

Jesus says that he is “the Way, the Truth and the Life”.<sup>54</sup> In showing Christ as the way, the writing group seeks to put the living encounter with Christ at the heart of these proposals.

To begin with, in following the way of Jesus, priority is given to accompanying individuals who are **poor, powerless, on the margins** or without a voice, and yet searching for healing and a faith community. **It is proposed that** the whole body of the faithful find appropriate ways to identify and include individual persons who are seeking community yet find themselves in need at the edges. Persons living in remote locations, who are homeless, without income, in prison, new arrivals, aged persons, people with mental illness, differently abled persons, people of diverse sexual orientation and persons who feel isolated or excluded in other ways, should constantly find the Church, including its ministries, representing the gospel with accompaniment, assistance and assurance of the profound dignity and beauty of every human person; and that all Catholics, parishes agencies, institutions and schools investigate ways in which our missions can respond practically to the rapidly growing numbers of people who find themselves on the margins of society.

Further, these individual persons may belong to groups who are also excluded because of cultural differences. This is especially the situation of **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics**, who have not been well

treated in Australian society and whose culture and spirituality was for so long unacknowledged, even though they have so much to contribute to the wider Church. **It is proposed that** their contributions and concerns, expressed through the state and territory ministries and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, should be joyfully received and acted upon at local and diocesan levels, particularly in relation to Reconciliation Action Plans, the recognition of language and culture, the identification and appropriate training of future Deacons and catechists, cross-cultural training for non-Indigenous ministers and measures to improve faith formation, employment and mental wellbeing.

There are also many **Catholic communities** whose cultures enrich both the Australian Church and Australian society, including groups gathered according to country of origin, ethnicity, language or new ecclesial communities. **It is proposed that** the faithful welcome and celebrate the cultural and linguistic riches of various cultural communities, particularly within parish life and in new ecclesial communities. This attitude would include a spirit of mutuality, special care for refugees and other people who have been forced to migrate, and helping foreign clergy to adapt successfully to the diversity of Australian life.

Regarding the **role of women** within the Australian Catholic Church, many baptised women seek to have their giftedness recognised and celebrated within the

Church, in key decision-making forums within the Church community, especially at the heart of diocesan and parish communities. **It is proposed that** the Council takes whatever steps are within its power to ensure that translations of Lectionaries, Missals and Sacramentaries include and respect both women and men; that women be given more than advisory participation in parish and diocesan leadership. Where the universal Church is already investigating these matters, and where the Plenary Council has limited powers, including discussion among the faithful on allowing women to be lectors and acolytes and the inclusion of women to the permanent diaconate and priesthood, it is proposed that the Council notes these local concerns and an eager interest of the progress of the Church’s investigations.

**Young people** want to accompany the Church on its journey, hoping their contributions can influence growth in the Church. **It is proposed that** the Council endorses ongoing dialogue with young people, recognising the gifts that young people bring and addressing their cultural and health concerns; that the Council seeks to establish opportunities for young people to be involved in the leadership of the Church in Australia through initiation, formation, missioning and accompaniment in their transition to adulthood; that it gives practical encouragement for the participation of young people in the various ministries of the Church and affirms the understanding and use of new technologies as places for authentic connection and evangelisation; that it seeks stronger links between in-school and post-school faith formation and re-imagines the Church’s ministry to young people. It is important to develop communities and parishes which are able to welcome, accompany and celebrate the gift of young people and address their pastoral needs with joy and love. This will include developing broader and

more flexible ministries to youth, not limited only to youth already closely associated with the Church.<sup>55</sup>

Many concerns about inclusion and participation had to do with **sexuality and marriage**. God created sexuality, which is a marvellous gift to his creatures. This gift needs to be cultivated and directed, to prevent the “impoverishment of an authentic value”.<sup>56</sup> **It is proposed that** the faithful be encouraged to develop a theological understanding of God’s creation in regard to human sexuality which informs a pastoral approach to issues like contraception, IVF, and surrogacy; that the community of the faithful renews its efforts in preparing, accompanying and supporting couples; that greater pastoral care is provided for couples when a marriage ends in divorce or separation, including more sensitive pastoral practices in marriage tribunals; that there be patient listening to, and solidarity with, people who feel excluded from the Church because of their sexuality or relationship status; that opportunities are provided for communicating the Church’s rich theological teaching on the dignity and wonder of human sexuality.

**Catholic health, education and social service ministries** are an expression of the outward-facing role of the Church, offering a window into faith, education and compassionate accompaniment to the millions of Australians who seek their services every year. There is a risk that these groups of ministries could become silos largely separated from each other and from other parts of the Church. Nurturing and inspiring leadership, along with ongoing formation, is needed to ensure the ministries remain an authentic expression of a Christ-centred Church. **It is proposed that** better recognition be given to these ministries as integral to the mission of a Christ-centred Church; that priority be given to effective formation; that Church leaders collaborate with Catholic health, education and social

54 Jn 14:6

55 *Christus Vivit*, 230.

56 *Amoris Laetitia* §150 “...it is also important to allow room for a “popular” youth ministry, with a different style, schedule, pace and method. Broader and more flexible, it goes out to those places where real young people are active, and fosters the natural leadership qualities and the charisms sown by the Holy Spirit. It tries to avoid imposing obstacles, rules, controls and obligatory structures on these young believers who are natural leaders in their neighbourhoods and in other settings. We need only to accompany and encourage them, trusting a little more in the genius of the Holy Spirit, who acts as He wills.”



service providers in a spirit of shared stewardship, to support collaboration between these services; that shared stewardship of Catholic faith manifest itself in joint announcements on key issues, inviting leaders of ministries to speak on behalf of the Church, seeking of expertise of these ministries before engaging in Church statements; that consideration be given to a process that brings together health, education and social services so that they work more collaboratively, within and across diocesan boundaries; that consideration be given to how the Church leadership works effectively with, and supports, ministerial PJPs in a culture of mutual accountability.

In light of the Church's teaching that all have a baptismal vocation — as priest, prophet and king — there is a pressing need for significant changes to be made to **Church governance** and address the “culture of clericalism”. **It is proposed that** the Plenary Council strongly encourage the establishment of Diocesan Pastoral Councils that represent the needs of each diocese; that Diocesan Assemblies of clergy and laity be held at least every five years; that Parish Pastoral Councils be established in every parish; that Parish Assemblies be held at least every five years; that lay pastoral directors and pastoral associates be employed across parishes in Australia with particular attention to remote and rural communities. It is proposed that the

Church prioritise formation for every position, in every structure, to equip them to listen, engage and respond to others as Christ did.

Particular concern was expressed for **people with special needs and parents and families where children have special needs**, who often feel excluded from parish and school life. **It is proposed that** priority be given to building better training of pastors and educators to assist in the integration of adults and children with special needs. Catholics must tirelessly and fearlessly affirm the unique dignity of each and every child, and the inestimable value of the labours of every parent.

Particular concern was also expressed for **the “missing men”** who no longer participate in the Australian Church today. **It is proposed that** priority be given to research and action to address their needs and their role in the Australian Church.

All the above proposals are suggestive rather than prescriptive, because in a synodal process it is better for there to be broader discussion and for issues to be addressed at the local level, according to the principle of subsidiarity, thus developing the culture of an inclusive, participatory and synodal Christ-centred Church.

**“Catholics must tirelessly and fearlessly affirm the unique dignity of each and every child, and the inestimable value of the labours of every parent.”**