



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE
OF MELBOURNE

Synod 2021-2024

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission

ARCHDIOCESE OF MELBOURNE
CONSULTATION REPORT

MARCH-APRIL 2024

For the past two years, the Archdiocese of Melbourne has journeyed together in mutual listening and discernment. Thousands of representatives of the people of God across Melbourne engaged in the initial two-year process of local, parish-based consultation, with input forming part of an Oceania response which was provided toward the first Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in October 2023.

Following the discussions of that first assembly in Rome, a [Letter to the People of God](#) was published along with a [Synthesis Report](#), which formed the foundation for a particular diocesan consultation phase in preparation for the second Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will take place in October 2024.

In February 2024, dioceses were advised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) of the process and local guidelines for this stage of diocesan consultations assisted by the document [Towards October 2024](#).

While the initial process involved broad and extensive parish-based consultations, it is important to note that this most recent stage did not involve going back to the grassroots of parish consultation again. Rather, building on what had already occurred, it was recommended that dioceses engage with existing structures, particularly with leadership and key stakeholder groups already present in the diocese, to reflect on key questions and identify future pathways and tools for mission. As a result, the participation in this phase of diocesan consultation occurred in the following ways:

1. Parish Pastoral Council consultation and submissions

Parish Pastoral Councils (or Parish leadership teams, however named) were encouraged to identify if they wished to participate. The [Reflection Guide](#) prepared by the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) was to assist groups with the process. Three parishes chose to respond via this avenue.

2. Diocesan Hosted Consultation Sessions

In addition to any parish-initiated participation, the Diocese also hosted a series of sessions for people across regions to come together in providing their feedback. These sessions were aimed at those in leadership positions within parishes, communities and movements (including clergy, chairs of PPCs, ministry leaders, community/movement leadership etc). There were five sessions originally offered, but only three sessions were able to proceed with sufficient numbers of participants registered. There were 45 parish leaders who attended across those three sessions.

Other specific groups were intentionally invited to hold consultation sessions however for various reasons they were unable to proceed. Engaging lay leaders and clergy within the Archdiocese of Melbourne has been challenging for this phase of the Synodal consultation process. While there has not been an in-depth study of the cause/s, anecdotal feedback from clergy and lay leaders suggests two main factors for lower engagement:

- Following consultations phases of the Australian Plenary Council (2018–2022) and the Synod of Bishops (2021–2024), there is a sense that some feel ‘over-consulted’ and it has required effort to remain engaged and enthused across multiple phases, themes, and synthesis documents.
- The timing of this phase (as required by national and universal Church timelines) has been short and scheduled across the most important time of the year in our liturgical calendar. As parishes journeyed through Lent and prepared for the Easter liturgies, it was often expressed that there was less ability to engage in this consultation phase.

It should be noted before reading this summary that the themes and quotes come from a very small number of parishes and leaders across the Archdiocese. There is hesitation, given the lack of engagement, that this should be considered a truly representative consultation. However, given the timeline restrictions, this is the fruit of those that did engage—and we are grateful for those parishes, communities and movements, that participated and provided helpful reflections on their prayerful engagement with the Synthesis document.

Despite this challenge of engagement for those who did make submissions or participate in the Diocesan gatherings, there were fruits.

While reflection on the proposed questions was always encouraged and redirected to, conversation during the gatherings covered a range of topics, inspired by a wide variety of experiences and contexts in faith, life and the Church. Hearteningly, there was a genuine desire to listen to the experience of others being shared and the conversation was animated by sincere respect for divergent opinions as well as passionate agreement in other areas.

The results of this round of consultation have been categorised into five broad themes that emerged: ***Faith Formation, Families and Youth, Governance and Co-Responsibility, The Role of Women***, and ***Listening and Accompaniment***.

Direct quotes from submissions have been highlighted in colour.



Faith Formation

A recurring theme throughout the consultations and submissions was a deeply felt need for ongoing adult faith formation.

It was proposed by submissions that the kerygma ‘needs to be proclaimed by all, as we are called to do through our baptismal calling’ and ‘we must proclaim the Gospel, to give a similar experience as the first Disciples had with Jesus.’

This was described by one group as a ‘massive’ need ‘across the Archdiocese.’

One of the diocesan-held consultations heard that formation ‘is a crucial journey for all laity, emphasising the importance of adult formation in our continuous growth and understanding of faith’.

A shared concern was not only the lack of formation in the fundamentals of the faith—especially as articulated by the Catechism of the Catholic Church—but formation in other areas too. The need for initiatives that adequately equip ‘those taking on leadership’ was expressed, as was the need to support people in how to share their faith with confidence.

One parish submission suggested the need to ‘Inculturate all Catholics, particularly youth, in scripture, theology, synodality and subsidiarity.’

One group submission proposed that new ways of coming together in prayer could be explored:

‘For this task of becoming a synodal Church, we all need to be formed and learn to pray more deeply. We will need to walk the path of Christ more bravely than we have. We may need to experiment in the ways that we come together as Christian communities to nourish our faith and support each other. Some initiatives may need to evolve separately from those undertaken by the formal institution.’



Families and Youth

Related to the theme of faith formation was the recognition that faith begins in the family, and that more was needed to support the passing on of faith to children.

‘Families are the heart of our community and we want our children to desire the Church,’ one parish submission said.

A parish submission offered this reflection:

‘In our discussion group, it was a shared concern that we have not passed on our Catholic legacy to our children and grandchildren. The love we have for the Eucharist is not shared and we recognise the sobering reality that it only takes a few generations for the essence of our faith to disappear.’

From one of the diocesan consultation sessions there was consensus to:

‘Grow youth and children’s ministry through families growing in faith and sharing their parent’s faith stories. Use cross-generational catechists to pass on the faith through invitation and accompaniment using inspiring testimony and witness of parishioners willing to mentor, i.e. preparation for baptism, marriage, and sacrament ministry.’

A model of discipleship that encourages older parishioners to ‘mentor’ the youth was seen as needed.

In the area of family, the need for stronger connections between parishes and schools was also noted, broadening the mission ‘from the church doors into our schools.’



Governance and Co-Responsibility

The desire for 'transparency' and 'accountability' in the arena of governance was a strong theme that emerged throughout the consultations and submissions, both as a response to the lasting effects of the sexual abuse crisis and for the sake of clear communication among the Church's members.

A recurring idea for how to ensure transparency and accountability came with the repeated suggestion for 'mandated' and 'obligatory' Diocesan Pastoral Councils, as well as Parish Councils.

One submission suggested the Diocesan Pastoral Councils be a 'skills-based council' of 12 to 15 people, representing 'diverse' experience and backgrounds, but some with 'formal governance education'.

It was recognised by one group submission that if pastoral councils were to become the norm, then there would need to be adequate 'formation for those who take up roles in them,' particularly formation in the culture of synodality.

Another group noted that 'clergy must embrace co-responsibility with the laity, but this requires formation and accompaniment for both'. This was further expressed by another submission: engagement needs to be more than merely volunteers, it requires people who are co-responsible – not just in tasks but in the mission! Co-responsibility must be under-pinned by mission.

The desire for regular diocesan synods was also expressed by a number of individual and group submissions.

One parish submission spoke of the need for 'Governance education for all in Church leadership roles,' and in response to how differentiated co-responsibility can be enhanced suggested involving 'the faithful' in the selection and appraisal of clergy and episcopal appointments.

Stronger and clearer forms of communication between the Archdiocese and its parishes was articulated during the consultations, especially as a means of promoting 'better engagement' with parishioners.

The Role of Women

It was well recognised that key to enhancing and promoting synodal culture in the Church was to make more space for the gifts of women.

Some submissions reflected on this theme more broadly, lamenting ‘the historical inadequacies’ of the Church’s inclusion of women into leadership positions, while others offered more specific suggestions, such as the repealing of certain sections of Canon Law to make space for women in ordained ministry.

One parish submission encouraged episcopal conferences to be ‘opened to lay persons, including women, lay religious and priests.’

During the consultations it was felt that ‘the different perspectives and gifts’ brought by women to the mission of the Church ought to be recognised, perhaps by finding ‘more opportunities for women to preach.’





Listening and Accompaniment

A word that recurred frequently was 'listening'.

One parish submission wondered whether a lack of attentive listening had kept people at a distance from their communities.

'How many people have hungered to be heard and nourished by the Church? ... How many people have remained strangers in their own faith communities and felt unwelcome in their Church?'

The importance of practicing the art of 'conversation' was noted by a group submission, drawing out how important open conversation is to 'conversion'.

A parish submission offered a practical suggestion for how to encourage a culture of open conversation, modelled on their own practices:

'[Our] parish priest regularly meets with school children for Q&A sessions on life and faith. This is an opportunity for the parishes to listen deeply to what our young people think, to learn from them and to enable us to guide them.'

Open conversation was seen as vital to a culture of synodality, and one that must be practiced if those who feel marginalised by the Church are to be recognised, included, and accompanied on their journey.

Conclusion

As we journey towards the final Assembly of the Synod on Synodality, it was deeply encouraging to see how people are responding to the practice of ‘spiritual conversations’ as a tool for discernment, despite the lower engagement this time around. Through the practice of listening, prayerful consideration, and allowing areas of convergence and divergence to sit gently with the group, there have been opportunities for people to practice the art of attention to the Holy Spirit—a practice we greatly need more of today.

While opinions and suggestions have varied, these conversations have always been marked by profound respect for others. They have also been an opportunity to bridge the divides that can keep people apart, as those who gathered expressed a common desire to see the Church flourish and the Gospel proclaimed more authentically.

We pray once again that this journey of synodality can be a journey with Christ and towards Christ as we approach October 2024.