



Take the Way of the Gospel Re-imagining our local Church as Mission Communities

**Most Rev Peter A Comensoli
Archbishop of Melbourne**

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When Archbishop James Goold came to Melbourne in 1848, he immediately set out to arrange the Diocese into local pastoral areas, but he did not do so by establishing parishes. Rather he created Missions of various shapes, sizes and purposes. He would spend the next 38 years of his episcopacy setting up new Missions into the locations and regions where God's people had settled. These locations are still very familiar to us: Melbourne-town itself; Kilmore; Richmond; Heidelberg; Flemington; Kyneton; Brunswick; Bacchus Marsh; Brighton; Keilor; Dandenong; Epping; and of course Geelong, to name a few. He would travel to the location, where he would "*select in the township a site for a church, clergyman's residence and schoolhouse*" (to quote from his diaries). Not all the Missions that he established were territorial; he also created Missions to particular groups of people: for example, to prisoners, the Missions to the port workers, and to migrants.

While each Mission was unique, and while there was no fixed definition of what would constitute a Mission, there was something programmatic about Goold's purpose. He would only establish a Mission where there was an existing community of faithful with a growing need for missionary outreach; and he would only allow this to happen if it could be properly resourced, both materially and ministerially. If there were insufficient finances to sustain it, or no property where a church could be built, or the sacramental and pastoral needs of the people could be attended to from a neighbouring Mission, or he did not yet have a priest to send there, then he would hold off creating a Mission.

Strikingly, Goold was not too focused on local parochial structures; these would come later on. This doesn't mean he didn't create parishes; indeed, he established many. But this was primarily something that happened consequentially to the establishment of the Mission, and would come about after the communities within a Mission had had time to work out where the churches and the other structures would best be located. In those locations where a number of parishes emerged, the relationship between them remained strong. They identified and organised themselves as in a family of communities – a family of faith, worship and life.

You may be wondering why I've started with a history lesson, when we have gathered to look to the future. The reason for this goes back to the first meeting of the new Council of Priests, in August 2019. At that meeting we entered into a conversation concerning the present life

of the Archdiocese, and identified some of the priorities we might need to attend to in proclaiming the Gospel into our communities at this particular time. Without a doubt, the vibrancy and vitality of our local communities, and the effective use of our resources – material and ministerial – surfaced most prominently.

As the minutes of that meeting note:

“In looking to the future and how best to organise our Parishes as the basic cell structure of Gospel life within our wider community, we must look to newer ways of thinking... Our current structures are unsustainable... There is a feeling of urgency to bring forth change...”

A quick read back through the minutes of past Council and Senate meetings, going back to Cardinal Knox’s time in the 1970s, reveals a very clear pattern in what was identified so sharply in that meeting. Over many years now, our Clergy and people have identified an ever-increasing sense of urgency to attend to the manner in which the local communities of our Archdiocese are arranged and function. What we are gathering to give impetus to today is something you have been pleading to happen for a very long time. I want to acknowledge that. I also want to acknowledge the various efforts undertaken to bring about a re-framing of the local Church to become more vital and viable for God’s people.

Listening to the Acts of the Apostles in our weekday Mass readings, I have been struck by the way in which the early Church adapted and changed tactics as their circumstances changed. We looked to the change brought about by the first persecution and when the disciples first went out beyond Israel – and then moved to the conversion of Paul, that brings about that seismic shift in the Church, which opened the path to Christ for the Gentiles. The way of the Gospel was, from the very beginning, a changing of arrangements to engage with changing circumstances.

We now stand on such a threshold. Do we do something, or do we sink into the sunset? I don’t think any of you want that. So, how do we take up a change of tactics now – how do we re-frame the picture – in the changed circumstances of our time and place?

Melbourne is a city of cities, meaning it is a territory comprising many diverse locations, each different in character, history, and culture. This observation has revealed its truth to me as I’ve made my way around the expanse of our local Church. Mernda is not Meredith, which is not Moonee Ponds, which is not Malvern, which is not Mornington, for each is highly distinctive in shape and feel. We are a local Church that is made up of many and varied realities, and this is deeply embedded into our history. Goold’s vision to set up Missions to these various localities within the Archdiocese was a critical decision in allowing for the proclamation of the Gospel, and the people’s participation in the life of grace, to be able to flourish.

These ways of framing the Archdiocese – as a series of distinctive faith localities that lend themselves to being lived out locally in family-like arrangements – have, I believe, a renewed purpose for us today. They offer a way of framing our common missionary calling of proclamation, worship, fellowship and service – of *kerygma*, *liturgia*, *koinonia* and *diakonia* – within a mission family of communities, and with an eye to a more effective and life-sustaining way of resourcing this mission, both materially and ministerially.

With this in mind, we begin the task of re-imagining and re-framing how we arrange our local communities of grace, be they parishes, language communities, or movements. The re-framing

I am proposing is that we begin the task of identifying with our people the various Mission areas of our Archdiocese, and start the process of arranging the resources we need to bring these about. My hope is that we might undertake the task of identification with our people over the next 12 months or so, and move to a staged establishment of them over the next three to five years. Noting of course that all of this will be 'organic'. It can't happen overnight, nor at the same time or in the same way. I envisage around 50 to 60 such Missions, though this is not predetermined. Some Missions will be very readily identifiable, while others not so. Some will need to be established quickly, while others can take some time to work through.

I hope you have noticed I have not spoken of parish amalgamations or closures. I am NOT proposing such things today. We all know that this has been attempted here and in many other dioceses, often with great pain and with little renewal. No, this is not what I am calling us all to. Rather, let us see how we might arrange ourselves into Missions, let's see what our families look and feel and live like, before questions of the number of parishes or communities within each mission might be properly asked. Some Missions will comprise a single parish (such as Werribee), while others will comprise a number of parishes (for example, the newly established Bayside Mission).

Family households were the ordinary locations in which the Church gathered in its earliest years, including at the beginning of our own Archdiocese – 174 years ago this year. The earliest definition we have of a faith community comes from St Paul, where he described the gathering of the community in Corinth as “**the Church that meets in [Aquila and Priscilla’s] house.**” (1Cor 16.19) This is the first definition we have of a parish. A parish is where God’s people gather as a household of households, a neighbourhood of Christian families assembling in faith, worship and life. As both Saint John Paul II and Francis have said: a parish is “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.” (EG.28; cf. CL.26)

It is worth noting that these images of a parish do not draw on a territorial framing. Rather, that the language is incarnational – it is flesh and blood. A parish is essentially a body with a distinctive face, and not a building in a certain location. It is to this image of a parish that our local Church in Melbourne will need to look if we are to build family and neighbourhood communities of grace and Gospel energy, that go out beyond territorial boundaries. Pope Francis has been quite explicit about this, calling on local Churches not to struggle to hold on to what it has left behind but to see itself as a mission church moving outward. (cf. EG.28; 33)

I also want to be explicit today with the following points:

- We are not proposing the closure of parishes;
- We are proposing the establishment of Missions, into which parishes will be grouped;
- Each Mission will comprise a family of parishes/communities;
- The composition of each Mission will vary according to its local needs and realities;
- The number of parishes within each Mission will be discerned at local levels.

Today’s questions are these: Where are the local Missions of our time and place? What parishes might be organically formed into a family of communities for the purpose of bringing people into the fullness of the Gospel of life, and for the sake of pastoral viability and sacramental vitality? How might the Missions of today be effectively resourced – materially, ministerially and spiritually? The sessions to follow will start to give shape to these questions. My task has been to lay out a path which we might take.

You do not need me telling you of the uncertainty that the future holds in our current circumstances. The Gospel we have given our lives to is seriously challenged by cultural shifts, by social disinterest, by pandemic-induced loss, and by a very painful history. You know this already; you feel it in your bones. So do our people. It is hard yakka being servants of Jesus Christ in our current circumstances in Melbourne. But we also recognise that our present way of doing things needs reframing; we know that a change of tactics is needed in the changed circumstances in which we live. Calling our people to this change is never easy, but it is our hope.

Through our Baptismal graces, we share in the responsibility of each other's lives. We do not stand alone; which I find deeply encouraging. But nor are we to act alone. We are responsible for each other, and to each other – we are stewards, not owners, of God's grace, for the sake of God's people; and we do this together. In inviting you to this work today, my prayer is that the Lord will prosper the work of our hands. (Ps 90)

Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us.

St Joseph, pray for us.

St Patrick, pray for us.

St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, pray for us.