

# Archdiocese of Melbourne Synthesis

## Synod of Bishops 2021-2023

For A Synodal Church:  
Communion, Participation and Mission



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE  
OF MELBOURNE



Dear friends in Christ,

It is a great joy to share this report from our local Church in Melbourne to the sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

Pope Francis has invited the Synod to reflect on the following:

### **For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission**

Such a momentous theme, and such a challenge for us all!

Each of us has a humble but crucial role to play in the sharing of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The mission to share that Gospel has been with us since the beginning of the Church, and is done so in the strength of a new life offered by Jesus. In fact, that mission is the reason for the Church's existence.

Dioceses around the world are undertaking the shared journey of becoming a more Synodal Church in every kind of diversity and cultural context. It is heartening to consider that the various reports of local Churches will be submitted to the Synod in many languages, identifying challenges facing our sisters and brothers who wish to share the Gospel in their homes and local communities.

The Church in Melbourne has its own distinct history and story, and we offer this report on behalf of our people, conscious of the great changes taking place in our society and in contemporary Australia.

For Australian Catholics, the Synod takes place at a time in which we are also journeying with the Plenary Council, a pilgrimage of synodality in which all of us have been invited to give voice to what we have discerned the Holy Spirit is saying.

The path of synodality can be rocky, and it draws together Catholics who do not always agree with one another, or do not always share the same vision for the local mission. The journey of encountering difference, respectfully listening to others, and of hearing the Holy Spirit's call even in the midst of competing voices, is the challenge we must step towards. Australian Catholics are meeting that challenge with hearts on fire for Christ and for his beloved, including those who face loss, loneliness, deprivation or vulnerability of any kind.

In reading the various submissions made by our people, I was keen that we make the report public and strive for transparency in our journey together. The report is long, and I urge a patient and thoughtful reading of its contents in light of the hope Jesus offers us at every step of the synodal journey.

The report will now take its part in a combined national report, which will be sent to the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops as a Synthesis to be considered respectfully alongside contributions from other parts of the Church around the world.

On the path ahead, each of us is invited to do the hard yards of ongoing discernment, and you will see some key questions in the report with which to wrestle and pray. Also in our local context, this synodal path is connected with the parish work of *Take the Way of the Gospel*. If you have not yet given thought to this work, please read our [Archdiocesan website](#) and be involved in your local parish.

The Body of Christ in Melbourne shares in a great opportunity at this time, to foster again our deep sense of *communion* with each other, and of an attentive prayerfulness for the wellbeing of those who have experienced great suffering, those with heavy burdens in their daily lives, and for the young as they look out on an uncertain future.

As well as *communion*, I hope we will all re-discover the need for *participation* in the call to live a life of discipleship with the Lord, and to take our rightful place in the *mission* of the local Church.

The following report is not made up of merely data and statistics, but should stir up in us a desire to love our local Church more and to further its mission with a lively and searching faith.

May the Lord be our beginning and end in the mission ahead.

Yours sincerely in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter A Comensoli', with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

**Most Rev Peter A Comensoli**  
ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE



# Listening and discerning

Having listened to and discerned the submissions received from individuals and communities within the Archdiocese of Melbourne, we submit this synthesis to the Synod of Bishops.

The following is a brief overview of the submissions received and the demographic details of those who participated:

- The Archdiocese of Melbourne has over 1,000,000 Catholics<sup>1</sup>, with approximately 77,000 attending Sunday Mass on a regular basis<sup>2</sup>.
- 86 individuals made submissions, and 53 groups made submissions, representing over 500 people. (Some group submissions did not provide the details of the number of participants, and it is likely the number of those represented is higher.)
- The vast majority of submissions received were via the online portal available through the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPD) with others received by email or post to the NCPD, and a number received directly into the Office of the Archbishop.
- Approximately 76% of individual submissions were received from those aged over 60 years and only two individual submissions were received from those aged under 29 years.
- Group respondents were asked to estimate the ages of members (although not all group submissions provided this information) and 60–79 years age group was the largest group represented with smaller but significant groups of the 30–59 years and 18–29 years.
- The synthesis presented below was prepared by a small team of three lay persons, a priest and an Auxiliary Bishop, who read and considered all the submissions.

The engagement in the local Synodal process was much reduced in comparison to previous similar processes (Synod on Family, Synod on Youth and Plenary Council 2020), resulting in a lower number of submissions from the Archdiocese. It was noted, both anecdotally by the Archdiocese and in some submissions, the short timeframe for discernment and submissions was an impediment to full participation. At a diocesan level there was effort in seeking engagement and enthusiasm for the Synod consultation phase. Whilst some submissions observed an ‘annoyance with the continual seeking of opinions’, the majority referred to the timing of the consultation period as insufficient ‘our wish was that this process was given more time’.

Of particular note, the timing for the Archdiocese of Melbourne coincided with the ongoing COVID lockdown until November 2021. The ability of parishes, and all the people of God, to engage in a wider synodal process was largely hindered by the exhaustion of living with restrictions, the fear and challenge that COVID had brought to many in their workplaces, families and parish-life. Even once restrictions began to lift, we entered into the liturgical season of Advent, Christmas and then the summer holiday time in Australia. As school, work and parish life began to return to normal, the consultation phase was closing.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census.

<sup>2</sup> Mass attendance count, 2021 – note this figure was impacted by COVID19 restrictions such as social density limits in parishes in the Melbourne metropolitan area.

Despite the lower level of engagement by individuals or communities in the synodal process, we were heartened by the submissions received and we particularly noted the:

- Consistent sense of commitment and responsibility that individuals and communities have for the Church and their desire to contribute and passion to see the body of Christ flourish.
- Desire to care for others and ensure they are enabled to find a home within the Church.
- Impact of secularisation in society and the growing perception of irrelevance of religion to individual's lives.
- Deeply critical but respectful submissions that had been long discerned and sought to be heard through this process.

We were challenged and humbled by the large number of submissions that came from those who had been left hurt, disappointed, or damaged either by individuals within, or the institution of, the Church. The pain of this hurt and the loss of trust in the Church as an institution was strongly evident from a large number of submissions. The suggestions for what must change, and how to bring about this change, were almost as varied as the number of submissions. There were many submissions that lay in stark opposition to other submissions. A significant level of division was particularly evident between those submissions that sought radical change, in contrast to those submissions desiring a return to past practices or ways of being Church.



# Themes for synthesis

Submissions received were often directed to a particular Synod theme; Communion, Participation or Mission; or to a variety of subthemes. In developing this synthesis, the aim has been to identify the points of convergence, where there is an agreement on the theme to be addressed, even if the way in which this theme might be addressed might be quite divergent. It was discerned that nine themes emerged that provide a synthesis of the submissions from the Archdiocese of Melbourne:

1. Ongoing impact, learning from and response to the sexual abuse crisis.
2. Co-responsibility between clergy and laity.
3. Welcoming the gifts of women in the Church.
4. Liturgy and prayer.
5. Community beyond liturgy.
6. Welcoming people on the margins.
7. Catholic education and formation of teachers.
8. Zeal for mission.
9. Families at the heart of renewal.

As much as possible, the aim has been to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the voices of our Archdiocese by providing quotes from submissions that might best represent the spectrum of views expressed.

***Direct quotes from submissions have been highlighted in colour.***

THEME 1:

# Ongoing impact, learning from and response to the sexual abuse crisis



Throughout the submissions, it was clear that the impact of the sexual abuse crisis is still felt, both within the Church and without:

The laity were and still are shaken to the core by the bishops' betrayal of our trust.

There is a **dream** for a Church that '**promotes healing** and restoration of dignity for victims of clerical sexual abuse.'

It is of particular importance that the voices of **those hurt by the Church** be brought into a **meaningful dialogue** with those holding the power of **institutional reform**:

Renewal and reform are needed with open consultation gathering the voices of those hurt by the Church ... where an honest and repentant acceptance of the failures of the past work towards a commitment to meaningful change.

There was a deep recognition that what is at stake is not simply a human institution but **the very face of Christ** this institution is supposed to reflect. It is about '**restoring the face of Jesus, just action, meaningful redress.**' It is about responding to the very call of Our Lord:

Jesus' challenge to all people, including the Church he founded, is to seek God's truth, to confess, seek forgiveness and make real reparation for crimes committed against the abused, and in the practice of the love that Jesus taught us, their healing might be achieved.

## THEME 2:

# Co-responsibility between laity and clergy

The theme of co-responsibility and greater empowerment of the laity was often identified in submissions as a sought-after response to the sexual abuse crisis. It was stated several times that amongst the Church hierarchy there was a lack of 'transparency', and that greater consultation of the laity needed to be fostered.



We also encourage co-responsibility of the laity because they can help the Church to foster a sense of family.

Importantly, co-responsibility was seen to be a way that the hierarchy could **rebuild trust** with the laity. The hierarchy was frequently characterised as a 'club' that made decisions in the dark, disconnected from the realities of the people. One aspect of **decision-making**, highlighted by several submissions, was to do with the movement of clergy.

Some submissions recounted experiences of the arrival of a new parish priest, depending on his personality and way of operating can have the potential for a dis-empowering effect on the community, leading to the suggestion that parish communities should have more involvement in the priests sent to them:

Given the scarcity of priests, this means that a vibrant parish community can find itself at the mercy of a priest who is not pastoral.

While far from this now, both hierarchy and laity can have an equal sense of ownership of the Church, sensitively approached.

There was no consultation re the appointment of the parish priest and now our alive community is destroyed.

Co-responsibility was also seen as an antidote to the 'curse of clericalism' which 'hinders God's work.' There was also a strong emphasis on the **mission of the laity** needing to be **emboldened**.

The role of the laity within the People of God needs to be enhanced and affirmed.



**THEME 3:**

# Welcoming the gifts of women in the Church

Many submissions reflected the concern that the institutional Church does not sufficiently welcome the contributions of women:



We want a Church... which acknowledges that everyone is equal because of their baptism, so women should have their voices heard, and have roles opened up for them.

Like the theme of co-responsibility, fuller inclusion of women was seen to be a necessary response to the impact of the sexual abuse crisis. Principally, including more women in positions of **leadership** was consistently called for as the way forward:

[The Church] Must elevate women to leadership positions if it is to restore trust following sexual abuse scandals and enable those wounded by the Church to find a new home and encouragement.

Some submissions expressed strong concerns over the possibility that 'women are kept in passive roles' and even that 'Women's voices are silenced.'

Although this is beyond the authority of the Church, there was also a strong contingent of submissions that urged the Church to include women in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, both in response to the modern world and as a sign of Christ's inclusive love:

In the secular world, inclusion and gender equality are the norm.

Equality between men & women in both governance & ministry in line with what is considered normal in 2022.

Embrace divorced people, women, gay, LGBTQI, and marginalised people without question into every aspect of church life including ordained ministry. Jesus excluded no one from his love and mission.

On this question, divergent voices also appeared, urging the need to remain faithful to **traditional norms**:

The traditions of the Catholic Church are more important than ever before ... Do not change what our Church Fathers have taught us and listen to the voice of God instead of humanity.

More time should be spent on developing the Spirituality and beautiful traditions of the Church . . . Politics and feminists pushing for more power in the Church, sadly are contrary to the teachings and example of the Lord. . .

## THEME 4:

# Liturgy and prayer

The submissions regarding liturgy reflected the sharp divides in the Church perhaps more than any other topic. They oscillated between:

- Recommendations that liturgical language be “updated” to reflect modern-speak.
- Recommendations that urged for more devotion to the 1962 Missal (Traditional Latin Mass).

Perhaps this divergence is a reflection of divergent ecclesiologies, manifested in the expression of liturgical practice.

However, at the root of these recommendations was discerned **tremendous import** associated with the liturgy. The **division of the Church** into various ideological camps – whether “**conservative**” or “**progressive**” – was lamented and the need for deeper catechesis was recognised:

Greater catechesis on the liturgy is needed to enable the full, active participation of the faithful, so they are able to better receive the nourishment our Eucharistic Lord gives and bring him to others.

One submission suggested that the liturgical crisis facing the Church today is due to ‘**the loss of the mystical experience** from our modern liturgies.’

Indeed, the **power of prayer** was seen by several to be of utmost importance for renewal in the Church:

Above all power of prayer must be cultivated through families, churches, schools and catechists. May we see revival.

What moves us along the Christian path is PRAYER: PRAY-PRAY-PRAY.

Praying at home can be a visible act for children to see their parents praying for them.

The most important form of prayer recognised was the Mass, the specific gestures of which ‘provide a powerful catechetical function that increases devotion and understanding of the reality of the sacraments . . .’ Between the discordant paths desired for the liturgy, the desire for great reverence and beauty was also on display:

I would want to encourage bishops to make the reverent celebration of the Eucharist throughout the diocese a key focus of the Church’s work.



Liturgies should be beautiful and reverent, to reflect what we celebrate, inspiring our common life.

The question posed by one person is pertinent:

How can we embrace communion in a way that is truly blessed with the faithful present really feeling as if they are at the table of the Lord?

## THEME 5:

# Community beyond liturgy

Many submissions lamented ‘a loss of the sense of community.’ Beyond the liturgy, beyond Sunday Mass, there was a notable gap in terms of how community is built and maintained, resulting in the question:



Where is the community that nourishes people?

There was identified a need to ‘form a community spirit’ so that when newcomers arrived at the parish, they would be able to be seen, heard, known and loved. Part of the problem seems to be with the attitude of parish attendants themselves.

Parishioners need to change from being **mere onlookers or consumers of liturgy** to work out ways they can foster a parish community.

One submission spoke of the reality that people ‘are often busy or have other priorities,’ making it difficult to ‘create community engagement after Mass.’

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting absence of physical communities meant that parishes were forced to turn digital to keep their people engaged. There was a sense that the Church should explore what more could be done in the digital space for the community:

This of course does not replace real-life community but is a motivation to want to continue to be part of community.

**THEME 6:**

## Welcoming people on the margins

Expressed throughout the submissions was concern for those ‘on the margins’ of the Church, particularly groups who identify as same-sex attracted, the divorced and remarried, and women. There was concern that these groups are in some way ‘actively discouraged’ from being seen in the Church:



Some groups are actively discouraged from taking their rightful place in the Church, most notably: women, the divorced and remarried, LGBTIQ+ people.

The Spirit speaks through their [LGBTQ+] lives, their identities, their loves, and continuing exclusion and discrimination is a denial of God’s infinite creativity.

There was an appeal to move outwards, a need to walk with these communities and people instead of simply talking about them in an abstract way.

I believe we are called to “walk together” with our non-Church attending officemates, peers and friends. Our “availability” and “sincerity” in encountering them helps us grow as companions to them. We need to be “present” to them so there is an opportunity to “share” the Good News we have in the Catholic faith — either by explaining it or exemplifying it in our lives.

## THEME 7:

## Catholic education and formation of teachers

While the Catholic Education system has been a hallmark of the Church's social role in Australia for many years, we discerned a sense from the submissions that there was a need to reimagine Catholic education, particular in regard to religious education.



The Church is very good at producing Catholics through its sacraments and education institutions, but it falls short of retaining and sustaining all its people as a growing, nurtured and flourishing body of Christ.

One challenge identified was the number of teachers involved in Religious Education who do not themselves believe the tenets of Catholicism:

Many teachers find it difficult 'teaching' religion when they don't necessarily believe what they are teaching. They still teach from a literal perspective which is what they believe the Church teaches and which they reject.

There seems to be an overall impression that religious education 'lacks clarity, definition and purpose' resulting in students with 'only a vague knowledge of their religion.'

There was a strong urging for Catholic Education to become stronger and more effective.

The bishops must revitalise the teaching of the faith in Catholic schools by improving the RE syllabus and training RE teachers to deliver the beauty of Catholic teaching faithfully.

**THEME 8:**

## Zeal for mission

A running thread throughout the submissions was a glaring **lack of missionary zeal**, or, in the words of one submission, ‘a **global lethargy amongst Catholics**’ that has made people complacent. A lead cause is perhaps a lack of conviction:



We have been **catechised without conviction . . .** we need more than just knowledge but the truth about our faith and the role of the Holy Spirit that has been poured on all equipping us together for mission.

Catholics must ‘be **joyful bearers** of the Good News’ for those inside the Church and out, prompting the question: Do Catholics understand the Good News?

At the core, it seemed evident that the baptised needed help ‘to **acknowledge their baptismal call**’ to be **missionary disciples**. There was also the reality, it was suggested, that over the past several decades, the authentic content of the faith has been replaced with ‘**meaningless jargon**.’

‘Post the COVID-19 Pandemic,’ a submission wrote, ‘the Church needs to focus on rebuilding itself in such a way that people of all ages and cultures will be drawn back to Christ and his teachings. This will require proactive evangelization by the Church.’

The need to instil a fresh proactivity was felt strongly:

The word “evangelism” is used liberally but in practice our parishes are closed shops.

Of particular concern for people was those on the margins: the poor, the homeless, those hurt by the Church, the divorced and remarried, and those identifying as same-sex attracted:

Commitment to those “on the peripheries” is a hallmark of an evangelising Christianity.

**THEME 9:**

# Families at the heart of renewal

At the heart of so many submissions, regardless of which end of the Church spectrum they were on, was a deep and abiding **concern for families**. This made itself felt most strongly in the lament that children are walking away from the faith in staggering numbers.



‘Most of my friends and family have left the Church,’ someone wrote, ‘even my children which is **heartbreaking**.’ Another submission said:

So many of our own families . . . have just given up.

There is a recognition that in parishes ‘the younger families are no longer involved, and most parishioners are ageing.’ A serious question we are being asked to consider is:

What is the institutional church doing for young families...?

Even the way priests operate has changed: ‘Priests are so busy that they don’t visit families, and do not know the young ones,’ someone said. What is the response to this crisis?

We discerned that a renewed focus on the formation of families is essential. It was suggested by one that families become ‘the **focal point of mission**’ and parishes work to identify ‘families who may serve as role models.’ It was also suggested there be a

Proper, sustained, and genuine pastoral engagement with all God’s people focussed on catechising and supporting families through all stages of life.

One of the individual submissions observed: ‘Our church community does not form people,’ and to believe it can is a legacy of a ‘top-down hierarchical culture . . .’ The matrix in which people are formed are instead their ‘family-of-origin’ and the ‘social and cultural milieux (sic)’ of their upbringing. This, in turn, forms the community:

Hopefully our shared faith, Gospel and the love of God are able to touch and inspire people who, in their turn, acting together in love and compassion, then form our church community.

What this represents is perhaps a need to reorient the mission field and start reviving families, who will, in their turn, revive the parishes.

## Conclusion

In light of the listening and discerning of the submissions received from people and communities in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, it is proposed that the following questions be further discerned for the Church going forward. These questions are faithful to the spirit of the submissions and the call of the Holy Spirit:

- How do we welcome people who feel marginalised without sacrificing truths that are essential to the Church's faith?
- How do we form the laity more effectively for their own mission field?
- How do we journey with, and faithfully form, the families in our community who are the source of the Church's renewal?
- What steps can be taken to revitalise Catholic Education and make it a more effective organ for evangelisation?
- What steps can be taken so that parishes can become authentic communities of love, where people can be seen, heard and known?
- How can we, as a Church, put Christ at the centre of our evangelisation once again? How can we move beyond the talking points, slogans, and concern about governance, so that we do not lose "the fragrance of the Gospel"?

## A Church that "goes forth"

We would like to conclude by echoing the words of Pope Francis, who said that the Gospel 'invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and **to go forth from ourselves** . . .'  
(*Evangelii Gaudium* §39).

Throughout the process of drafting this synthesis, we **listened deeply** to the voices of **those crying out**. We recognised the conviction that lay behind them, and even the hurt, anger, bewilderment, or frustration. This journey of listening has been a vital step in discerning the call of the Holy Spirit and where the Church in Melbourne needs to journey together next.

We discerned, perhaps above all, a need to move beyond the introspective tendencies of today's Church, and instead, a need to place Christ at the centre of our proclamation once again.

'Christ is the Light of the nations,' *Lumen Gentium* tells us, and the imperative of the Church is to bring that light to all people (§1). It is Christ and Christ alone that holds the key to the mystery of human life. At the heart of true synodality is a journeying together **with Christ and towards Christ**. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of our journeying. A synodality that is divorced from Christ and his express intentions for the Church is not a true synodality.

*'For it is not ourselves that we are preaching, but Christ Jesus as the Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake'. (2 Corinthians 4:5)*

