



Diocese of Armidale

Ph: (02) 6772 4971
Fax: (02) 5701 5140
Email: chancery@armidale.catholic.org.au

Catholic Chancery Office
3/131 Barney Street
PO Box 93
Armidale NSW 2350

FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION & MISSION

DIOCESAN SYNTHESIS

Invitation to make submissions

Bishop Michael Kennedy opened the Diocesan consultation phase of the Synod on Synodality with a message to the Diocese and formally opening this with Solemn Mass at the Cathedral of Saints Mary & Joseph, Armidale on 17th October, 2021.

In providing the Synod material to participants, the Bishop noted that the Diocese of Armidale had a current focus on responding to the Holy Father's call for a missionary Church. In keeping with this focus, he encouraged each individual and group to consider particularly the Mission dimension. This focus is reflected with the majority of Diocesan submissions being on the Mission dimension.

Participation in the consultation phase was encouraged through direct contact with parishes, priests, schools and Diocesan agencies. In particular, the Bishop asked that there be active reaching out to people where they were at including participation of the poor, marginalised, vulnerable and excluded.

Further outreach occurred via the Diocesan website and social media pages. The Diocesan Director of Mission & Evangelisation spoke in a number of Parishes at Masses on the topic of synodality and was available to assist local groups as they considered the questions.

Participation profile

Actual participation was somewhat limited with relatively few people engaging formally in the process. There were 11 individuals who provided individual submissions, another 71 individuals participated in 8 group sessions and lodged a submission via the portal. Additionally, there was commentary provided directly to the Bishop's Office from about 20 people – either individually or part of a group.

The Catholic population of the Diocese is 42,490 with weekly Mass attendance averaging just under 3,000 so the actual participation of Catholics within the Diocese was minimal. This is likely to be comparable to other Dioceses especially those in rural and remote parts of Australia.

Initial observations

This level of participation highlights the difficulty, particularly in a geographically large rural Diocese, of effectively engaging with both those who have an active connection with the Church through parish and school communities and those who have a nominal or even no connection whilst still identifying as Catholic.

As such this is arguably one of the most significant outcomes of the consultation process and poses a critical challenge for a missionary Church.

A further significant factor was the divergence of views expressed by those who participated, while this is to be expected, at times these views are so wide ranging that they bear little resemblance to each other and are at times seemingly irreconcilable. On occasion, the views are expressed in such a way that suggests a lack of charity or openness to the perspectives of others.

Some feedback suggested that the faithful are suffering an information or consultation overload. This can be explained by the fact that the Diocesan consultation phase occurred whilst the Australian Plenary Council is also occurring. As if to further emphasise the divergence of views, some people expressed gratitude for the opportunity to again be consulted.

Additionally, the Diocese and many of its people were impacted by the effects of drought, fires, floods and the pandemic. There was a certain detectable weariness and sense of being burdened as well as expression of what is the relevance of the consultation – will those involved be listened to, would their concerns be acknowledged?

Responses received – themes

Whilst these initial observations may not give a particularly hopeful or optimistic first picture, an analysis of the responses received does enable one to find a number of recurring themes which serve as an effective starting point for further listening, discussion, and discernment.

From the responses received the themes expressed by a number of respondents were as follows:

- The opportunity for the Church at all levels to listen to the voices of all and not just a select few, which provides an opportunity for dialogue avoiding lost opportunities and single-minded perspectives.
- A recognition of the power of accompaniment – a journey of presence and attentiveness with another on their pathway to discovering God.
- The people of God embracing differences whilst sensitively and clearly articulating the Church's teachings, standing for Christ in a secular society. This includes an openness to charitable and humble dialogue which allows others to grow in faith rather than demonising them or isolating them because they are different.
- The importance of prayer – personal and in groups – which provides opportunities for growth in faith and discovery of the gift and talents each person can bring to building the Kingdom of God.
- Integration of a multi-dimensional practice of faith – knowing the teaching of Christ and the Church, having an interior spiritual life, expressions through works of charity, teaching and sharing the message of Christ to others.
- The integral and complementary roles of both laity and clergy/religious in evangelisation and in the discernment of what is required in a particular community

- A cynicism that any change would occur especially in light of what was identified as a lack of outcomes from the Plenary Council submissions.
- Perceived power/influence imbalances between priests and the laity.
- Concern at the seemingly low-key Church, even to the point of the Church lacking in energy and a sense of purpose.
- Lack of recognition of the participation, faithfulness and good work undertaken by many in the Church. This was recognised at a local Parish level, in various groups and through ecumenical activities.
- Concern around the credibility of the Church and priests
- Reaching people where they are rather than within the context of Mass attendance
- The need for formation and education in faith including providing opportunities for people to gather to listen and to be listened to. This also highlighted the need for a variety of resources and opportunities to assist people in faith formation.
- Developing a real community and expression of our Christianity through interaction with each other and for each other which goes beyond, and is in addition, to attendance at Mass.
- The challenge to the laity to be part of the solution in becoming a missionary Church and not leaving this to the priests and religious.
- A recognition of our common baptism and the opportunities and challenges this presents each of us in living our Christian faith.
- Formation of priests and bishops.
- Being open to listening to other voices and providing opportunities for dialogue
- Avoidance of a culture of dictatorship or closed decision-making processes
- Focusing on accompaniment – a journey of presence and attentiveness with one another on the pathways to discovering God
- Being authentic Christians and Catholics
- Being respectful – respecting the views, choices and opinions of others.
- Able to articulate the Church's teachings, to be comfortable with who we are and how we represent and stand for Christ.
- The importance of the Sacraments and outreach to others through prayer and other activities particularly building communities of faith.

- Developing people who pray, seek holiness, listen to God and walk with others.
- A desire by parishioners to be informed and involved in their Parish.

Other responses received

Other responses, usually expressed by one person in the individual submissions, were as follows:

- Catholic Schools being a sign of hope
- Vatican II – opinions were expressed that:
 - Either implementation of this had been missed
 - Or that its implementation has ruined the Church
- Latin Mass, receipt of Holy Communion on the tongue, and other what could be described as “traditional” practices:
 - Either strongly in favour
 - Or strongly opposed
- Clergy
 - Either support for a celibate priesthood
 - Or wanting to allow clergy the option to marry
- A sense of alienation coming from one or more factors including
 - gender;
 - sexual orientation;
 - ethnicity;
 - clericalism;
 - divorce and remarriage;
 - being indigenous;
 - age;
 - having an advisory rather than deliberative involvement at Parish level;
 - use of language (example given was the word “consubstantial”)
- Ecumenism:
 - Either being an effective evangelisation effort
 - Or not relevant
- Language and practices
 - Either modernisation required
 - Or revert to previous forms
- Missionary priests from other countries
 - Either the positive role of and opportunities from having them in parishes
 - Or the negative experience of difficulties with language and different cultural and religious practices
- Lack of Australian vocations

- A boldness of witness to faith and morals required by Catholics in face of secular opposition.

Conclusion

The submissions have identified what are known divergences in views of people in the Diocese with some preferring and advocating for more traditional practices and approaches, some preferring and advocating for more modern practices and approaches.

The challenge is how to encourage a more open, respectful, charitable, hopeful and faith filled dialogue between some who have such contrary views. The language of some of the submissions was strong and critical of the views and practices of those with different views. This makes a respectful dialogue challenging to say the least.

Challenging – yes, but certainly very possible. For, despite the differences, the submissions demonstrate a great love and concern for the faith and the Church. There is a depth of connection the contributors have to the Catholic Church and to their own journey of faith. The concern expressed for others and the willingness to reach out to others gives hope for the Church to continue to be missionary, and a true community that is participatory.

In particular, the common themes which emerged will serve as an effective starting point for further listen, discussion and discernment.