



DIOCESE of  
PARRAMATTA



# WHAT LIES BEHIND THE FIRST EVER SYNOD OF THE DIOCESE OF PARRAMATTA?

POSITION PAPER BY FR PAUL MARSHALL

## The Current Reality of Parish Life

We are confronted with a tsunami of change at every level in parishes. Traditional parish structures are groaning under duress. This is not to say that parishes cannot be re-configured in new and exciting ways. We are witnessing the slow death of local churches in the light of Covid and more struggling economic times which have curtailed incomes of many faith communities. Lack of personnel and finance are reconfiguring the way we imagine parish at the grass roots. Priests and Deacons are ageing, and the phenomena of Pastoral Associates and Parish Teams are struggling to survive.

We are continuing to juggle “Maintenance Models” of Parishes and Deaneries and Dioceses.

## What might a Missionary Parish look like? What might a Synodal Parish look like?

What does the Diocese or Parish look like in the 21st century in western Sydney? It is characterised by parishes struggling to articulate their cultural self-understanding in a multi-ethnic environment and seeking a new ecclesiology and a new form of ecclesial leadership. Parishes seem to be polarised in their approaches either going the restorationist pathway or one that seeks to be deeply missionary. This dualism within our Church threatens to divide our faith communities and is presently confusing many people.

What might be the vehicle that carries us further into the 21st century as church? Can Synodality be the deal-breaker to bring together at a higher level the current split between the Sacristy model of Church and the Missionary model?

“Pope Francis has offered a missiological vision similar to St. Pope Paul VI’s in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: The conditions of the society in which we live oblige all of us therefore to revise methods, to seek by every means to study how we can bring the Christian message to modern man.”

Pope Francis has offered us a vehicle for us to “revise our methods” and “bring the Christian message to modern man.” He calls it ‘synodality’ which calls for a disposition in people of deep listening to one another and what the voice of the Spirit is saying in each other and through each other. Karl Rahner says that the Christian of the 21st century must become a mystic for Christianity to survive. Synodality offers the hope of deep listening and reflectivity on the signs of our times and does Synodality provide the segway to becoming a more mystical Church? Is this the deeper call of what the Spirit is really asking of us in the 21st century?



## Revising our methods of being Catholic today

Ordinary Catholics i.e. those who are not clerics (and, often, even those who are clerics), are often “at sea” with the terms ‘Synod’ or ‘Synodality’. Pope Francis has said that ‘the church of the future must be a synodal Church.’ If this is so, and so few know or understand the value of synodality, we must first, before launching into processes leading to the Diocesan Synod, help people see the importance of synodality and what it offers to the Church today.

Pope Francis is calling the Church to be a Missionary Church urging every believer to become a missionary disciple. The pope has instituted the synodal way as the vehicle to move us from a maintenance and declining Church to a missionary and growing Church. The synodal process comprises mutual listening, prayer, discernment and collective consensus-rather than decrees from above. It is set in the context of a dialogue between the Baptised and the ordained. What characterises Francis’ pontificate is the word ‘synodal.’ ‘Synodal’ is the primary vehicle for Francis’ pastoral agenda. Over the last 10 years, he has convened synods of Bishops and these have addressed pastoral themes such as the Amazon, the nature of the Church’s mission, young people and family life. The synodal journey begun by the Pope in 2013 will find more expression in two summits of bishops in Rome in October 2023 and October 2024. Bishop Vincent has set the Parramatta Diocese on a parallel track of convening a Synod process beginning also in October 2023 and mid-year 2024.



## Some Definitions For Consideration

What does a 'Synod' mean and what does 'Synodality' mean in a Catholic context today?

- Bernard Franck has described the “synodal spirit” as follows: “Mutual listening, exchange and communication, sharing and solidarity, the desire to reach consensus, or a common conviction. It takes the will to collaborate and to co-operate, to accept and to welcome, to give and to receive. This supposes relationships marked by respect, charity, humility, and poverty. This is the synodal spirit.”<sup>1</sup>
- Synods seek to inspire missionary renewal and unity within the Diocesan community. In this way they contribute to the shaping of the pastoral activities of the particular Church and lend continuity to its own liturgical, spiritual, and canonical traditions. The work of the synod is to:
- Assist the Bishop in his office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing the Christian community,
- Consult and collaborate with the diocesan community in order to build up the body of Christ,
- Discern the will of the spirit with the Diocesan community, the pastoral activities and direction, for the good of the Diocese,
- Foster a sense of communion and missionary renewal.<sup>2</sup>
- “This implies that we listen to everyone to discern ‘what the Spirit is saying to the churches.’ (Revelation 2.29)”<sup>3</sup>
- Synodality in the strict sense refers to the “communal reality of the Church that develops in a place, in the local or particular church (Canon 368)
- The implementation of synodality requires the widest possible involvement of the baptised.
- Now the Spirit “speaks” through different mediations such as the listening to the Scriptures, the silence of prayer, the faithful re-reading of life and of events, the signs of the times, the confrontation of points of view, the *sensus fidei*, theological reflection, the testimony of the saints, the pastoral authority, and so on.”<sup>4</sup>
- Synodal leadership “emphasises participants coming together from across all areas of ministry, including the ordained, women and men, experienced and less experienced.... (and) will model a Church oriented to mutuality and partnership, synodality, co-responsibility, inclusion and subsidiarity... (and) will employ a range of learning approaches that meet the different qualifications, experiences, learning styles and roles of participants. Prayer and reflection will be an essential element of the process.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Franck “Les experiences synodales apres Vatican II,” 77

<sup>2</sup> *Nature and Purpose of the Synod in Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, Synod Directory, 2*

<sup>3</sup> Alphonse Borras *Ecclesial Synodality, Participatory Processes, and Decision-making Procedures in For a Missionary Reform of the Church, 221-222*

<sup>4</sup> Alphonse Borras 223

<sup>5</sup> Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford *Leadership in a Synodal Church (Mulgrave, Victoria, Garratt Publishing 2021) 84*



## Understanding Synodality as we have lived it in Parramatta Diocese

Before we embark on the technicalities and structures and processes of pulling together a Synod for the Diocese, what are the stories of the parishes and ministries of our Diocese since its inception in 1986? A Synod is simply a formalisation of the back-stories of the People of God. A Synod needs to bring on-board a diverse cross-section of people, including the ordained and religious with their stories, hopes and aspirations. Synodality moves us away from specific pre-packaged reforms by giving ear to as many voices as possible. These are the stories of the “Emmaus moments” where Jesus has broken into our lives in our times of seeking, struggle, joy, sadness and breakthroughs to deeper understandings and belief. When life’s moments are synchronised with the Gospel message in prayerful reflection, we find God participating in our human adventure-and we experience the Emmaus moments and, it is in naming these moments as equals in the faith community, that we are becoming the Synodal Church. What can we recall of previous ‘Emmaus moments’ where we have felt Jesus walking with us as the People of God in the history of our Diocese?

It takes in the stories and vision of our founding Bishop-Bede Heather and his successors-Bishops Kevin Manning, Anthony Fisher, and our current Bishop Vincent Long. It recalls the impact of Pope John Paul’s visit to the Transfield factory in Seven Hills in 1986, World Youth Day 2008 and our Diocese’s hosting of pilgrims from around the world. It recalls the “Faith in our Future Pastoral Plan” for the Diocese for 2014-2018. It takes in our Plenary consultations begun in 2019, interrupted by Covid-19 in 2020-2021, the 2nd Assembly of the Australian Plenary Council in July 2022 and the publishing of the Diocese’s contribution to the Synod of bishops in Rome later this year, entitled “Go out into the deep: Become the Church Christ calls us to be.” (2022) All these papers and events and previous parish consultations, along with the re-telling of our parish stories from 1986, will help focus our agenda for the Diocesan Synod in October 2023.

Synodality needs to begin with an understanding of the Church as Communion in unity around the Word and the Eucharist. It also needs to embrace a wider concept of Presence-Presence beyond the consecrated host. The GIRM speaks of the four Presences of Christ at Mass-in the Congregation gathered, in the priest, in the Proclamation of the Word and in the Eucharist. This pluriform way of embracing Christ bids us to recognise the Mystery of Christ in more than one way. This expansion of meaning of Church through theological thinking in the four presences recognises unity in diversity.

Synodality proceeds from this place of unity in diversity. Through deep listening and respectful dialoguing in prayerful reflection around notions of differentness we are engaging in the process of synodality. In this place, we hear how the Spirit is calling and where God speaks to us, and where we are led to greater participation, communion, and mission.

Synodality is found “in listening to the Scriptures, the silence of prayer, shared prayer, the reading of life and events through the eyes of faith, the *sensus fidei*, theological reflection, the testimony of the saints and pastoral authority”<sup>6</sup> all coming together.

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<sup>6</sup> Alphonse Borras, 223