



AUSTRALIAN  
CATHOLIC BISHOPS  
CONFERENCE

SYNOD OF BISHOPS

# Australian Synthesis

Continental Stage



For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission



## AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

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# Introduction

## The Catholic Church in Australia

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### Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

1. The Catholic Church in Australia comprises 28 geographical dioceses, seven of which are designated as archdioceses. There are also five Eastern Rite eparchies and two ordinariates, each of which covers all of Australia, and beyond in some cases. The bishops, eparchs and ordinaries all meet twice a year, work together on 11 episcopal commissions and are supported by a range of advisory councils.

### Religious Institutes

2. There are around 175 religious institutes, groups known as Institutes of Consecrated Life or Societies of Apostolic Life. Members of the institutes live in community and adhere to a way of life under vows. Most are governed according to their own constitutions, but in some cases by the local bishop. They work in a diocese with the consent of the local bishop.

### Public Juridic Persons

3. Some religious institutes have transferred their ministries, such as schools, hospitals or aged care, to new public juridic persons (PJPs) – entities established in canon law with a specific function, in this instance stewardship for ministries. As these new entities have responsibility for Church ministries, they are often known as ministerial public juridic persons to distinguish them from traditional PJPs.

## A Snapshot of the Catholic Church in Australia

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4. In 2021:

The total number of Catholics in Australia was 5,075,907.

Catholics made up 20 per cent of the total population.

The median age of Catholics was 43 years.

Catholics aged 0-14 made up 17.9 per cent of the Catholic population.

Catholics aged 65 and over made up 19.9 per cent of the Catholic population.

72.1 per cent of Catholics were born in Australia.

27 per cent of Catholics were born overseas.

Of all Catholics aged 15 and over, 24.6 per cent had a university degree.

## Process for the Continental Stage

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5. In September 2022, the Australian Synod of Bishops Working Group, which had been established by the Australian Catholics Bishops Conference (ACBC) in 2021 to assist with the implementation of the Synod of Bishops process, in conjunction with the ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR), began preparation for consultation and discernment in the Continental Stage.
6. In its national coordination role, the NCPR reached out to Australian local churches via their appointed Synod diocesan contact person', to key representatives of Catholic agencies and organisations including the National Council of Churches, and to groups identified as being on the margins to request volunteers to lead group discernment sessions following the publication of the anticipated *Document for the Continental Stage* (DCS).
7. On 26 October 2022, following the release of the DCS, an article was published on the ACBC Media Blog website calling for groups to participate in the discernment process. From that article and the NCPR's earlier communications, 52 people volunteered to lead small groups.
8. In an attempt to engage the diversity of Church members throughout Australia in the Continental Stage, group coordinators were invited to ensure that members of their group were:
  - a mix of lay, religious and clergy
  - aware of Church matters at a national and diocesan level, and
  - had the ability to read and reflect on the document and provide feedback.
9. To assist groups further, the NCPR created a Reflection Guide (*Appendix A*) to accompany the DCS. The DCS, Reflection Guide, and Frequently Asked Questions released by the General Secretariat of the Synod were added to the Australian Synod website <https://www.catholic.org.au/synodalchurch> and offered as a suite of resources to aid reflection.
10. Further resources that were provided included parish bulletin notices and a Universal Prayer Petitions document which had a number of petitions that could be utilised by parishes or dioceses each week in the journey towards the Synod of Bishops in 2023.
11. In November 2022, the NCPR hosted an online workshop for group coordinators, leading them through the process in the Reflection Guide and answering questions that were raised by the participants. This workshop was recorded and shared with all the group coordinators.
12. Regular email communications were sent to all group coordinators, bishops and diocesan contact persons to communicate progress and update them on the process in a timely manner. This was accompanied by regular articles published in *CathNews* and the ACBC Media Blog to help raise additional awareness of the Synod process.
13. An online portal was created to collect the submissions made by the groups [see copy in *Appendix B*] and was made available through the Synod website. The portal opened on Friday, 4 November and was due to close on Friday, 9 December 2022. Due to requests for extensions, the portal was kept open until the morning of Monday, 12 December 2022.
14. At the close of the submission portal, 77 submissions were received. Seventy-five submissions were from groups and two were received from individuals who were unable to access a group. The groups represented some 750 people.
15. In mid-December 2022, submissions made through the online portal were collated by the NCPR, and the process of drafting and finalising the Australian synthesis for the Continental Stage began. The final report was circulated to members of the Australian Synod of Bishops Working Group and to members of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

## Participants in the Reflection Process

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16. All groups provided general information on their number of members, their ages, location, sex, religious status (clergy, religious or lay) and other relevant information. There was a mix of Catholic parish, diocesan, and religious congregation groups and those representing peak bodies, as well as other associations, movements, committees, networks and informal groups.
17. While specific demographics cannot be reported, groups advised that there was a broad range of ages and ethnicities represented. Many groups reported including members of all religious statuses, and most groups reported both sexes being present. Three groups reported having members under the age of 30 and other groups reported consulting or working with young people.
18. Regarding other representation among participants, there was one group who identified as including and representing people living with disabilities (including those from physical, psychiatric, intellectual and sensory cohorts), four groups who identified as ecumenical, and three groups who identified as including or representing LGBTQI+ individuals. Another two groups represented people in and associated with the permanent diaconate, one group was associated with the Military, and one group represented migrants and refugees. Only one group reported having a member who identified as being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person; however, a few other groups had included members from this community in their consultations.
19. We were made aware of a lack of representation from those with hidden developmental disabilities such as autism and ADHD, and those with complex disabilities such as comorbidity (disability, drugs and alcohol) and dual diagnosis, and that these cohorts tend to be often overlooked in such consultations.

## Experiences of the Reflection Process

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20. Many people embraced the opportunity to contribute to the reflection process and provided positive experiences of joy and gratitude at being invited to share their thoughts and experiences at a continental level. There was some concern that the invitation was not taken up more widely among parishes, but those who participated found it a rewarding experience to be able to speak and be heard.
21. Some participants reported confusion in the initial period as the Synod process for the Continental Stage unfolded rapidly and there was little time for its promotion. The idea of discernment was also new to many, so this took some time to get used to. A few participants mentioned feeling “out of their depth” in terms of familiarity with synodality and related documents. However, many commented on the helpfulness of the Reflection Guide: Document for the Continental Stage, which was particularly helpful for group coordinators to facilitate their reflection sessions.
22. While many groups met at a single meeting, preparation for reflection was done through a prior reading of the document and an exchange of thoughts and ideas. Larger groups facilitated wider engagement from their communities during this time. There was consensus among most groups that the voices of all their members were heard. Group leaders reported having experienced spirited and passionate discussions where there was a divergence of views on issues. Some groups went through several stages of editing before submitting their final response.
23. Most groups made use of prayer and Scripture to get into a reflective, prayerful space that facilitated deep and respectful listening. While some groups acknowledged a strong presence of the Holy Spirit, others commented on being limited by online meetings.

# Experiences of Church

*After having read and prayed with the DCS, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent?*

*Which experiences are new or illuminating to you?*

## General Impressions of the Working Document of the Continental Stage (DCS)

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24. There was much gratitude and praise for the DCS's honest and accurate portrayal of the Church's experiences, hopes and struggles, which resonated with many participants. Many groups were struck by the similarities in experiences and challenges across continents, praising the worldwide "bravery, courage", and "impressive level of participation". Some participants stated that this was their first experience of considering global Church issues. As one group noted, "It was refreshing that complex, challenging problems were openly named, e.g. women, children born of sexual relations with priests, and the plight of women seeking abortion due to poverty and war". Others were moved by the document's emphasis on inclusivity, ecumenism and the call to synodality, noting that its ability to "convey layers of listening and depth of listening" inspired optimism and renewed hope that the Synod of Bishops was "hearing the diversity of voices in the Church", despite obvious challenges.
25. The Tent metaphor was considered "inspiring", "refreshing", and "expansive". One group noted a different, culturally inspired image of the Ocean, which is especially relevant to people on this continent, and noted that the double image of Tent and Ocean "suggests the 'Both/And' of communion in the midst of diversity". There was an appreciation for the recognition of many cultures' unique experiences and contributions, as well as the willingness to read the signs of the times through continuous discernment.
26. A few concerns were raised about the document. The first was the absence of any mention of the role of marriage and family, particularly in the transmission of faith. "Given the strong emphasis on community and relationship in the document, should not marriage as a particularly intimate relationship ... be given more prominence in our [synodal] deliberations?" one group asked, noting that the domestic church, "a community of love founded on matrimony", could be considered a working model of synodality. A second concern was the failure of the DCS to "reflect in any depth on the role and charism of religious orders in the Church". The third concern was the length and structure of the document, which made it difficult for accurate and adequate interpretations to be made in the restricted time available to read and evaluate it and formulate a response. Participants also noted that as the DCS was very "text-based", it alienated those who required visual cues.

## Inclusion and the Participation of Women in the Church

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27. There was widespread agreement that the document's call for inclusion was central to the synodal process: "We appreciate the message and would like to use it as a springboard to encourage everyone's listening, inclusion and active participation", one group stated, while another remarked, "we carry the hope of a synodal Church that truly hears the voices of the poor, the discriminated, and the minoritised, for it is there that the prophetic voice of the Gospel is crying out to all". Some groups emphasised the importance of everyone's role in making the Church "a space of communion, community, welcome, interpersonal dialogue, and human value", citing the unique and rich diversity of peoples, cultures and traditions found in Australian parishes.
28. Participants observed that those who were still "excluded from the Tent" included LGBTQI+ participants and those in irregular relationships, and that ignoring the pastoral needs of these groups was "further abuse of the vulnerable" and a contradiction of Christ's teachings. Advocates of people with disabilities called for their voices to be heard and included in reports, feedback and data collection, as well as for people with disabilities to be involved in decision-making within parish committees, and Church services and liturgical events. Many responses spoke of the need for greater engagement with and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A few groups renewed their calls for "radical inclusivity",



urging the Church to be “brave, bold and innovative” and to reject “any suggestion of being a ‘gatekeeper’, excluding those Christ would welcome into the tent”.

29. Another theme that resonated strongly with many groups was the desire for greater participation of women in the Church. Many groups praised the document for clearly naming numerous global concerns about the role and vocation of women in the Church. Several groups expressed concern about women being treated as “free labour” and not being adequately compensated, as well as being barred from the permanent diaconate and ordained ministry, and from some Church governance and structures. There were numerous appeals in these areas, as groups noted that the continued exclusion of women from these aspects of Church life was “disempowering” and resulted in the loss of their charisms and gifts.

## Experiences of Church Leadership and Governance

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30. Responses from many groups cited their interactions with Church leadership and governance as having considerable resonance in relation to the DCS. While there was gratitude and praise for leaders who helped participants “share in the mind of Christ and feel the working of the Holy Spirit”, there were two key struggles within this area, the most prominent of which was clericalism. Many participants agreed that clericalism in clergy and lay people perpetuates abuse of power and isolates groups, stymies evangelisation efforts, and impedes youth engagement, servant leadership development and the implementation of necessary change. The absence of relational and collaborative leadership was the second experience, and some groups noted that their involvement with the hierarchy was at times “the antithesis of any lived synodality”, while others expressed frustration at being shut out of decision-making or were distressed by some Church leaders’ perceived reluctance to meet current needs.
31. Other realities mentioned by participants included the polarisation and culture wars that exist in many communities, the grief and powerlessness that many clergy feel in the aftermath of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, the pressures of priest shortage, and the experiences of loneliness, isolation and burnout in religious and clergy, particularly “among the elderly, those in country dioceses, and those who come from overseas”, as well as the impact of cultural differences between priests and parishioners.

## On Synodality

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32. Many participants were greatly impressed by the global calls for a synodal Church. This resonated with local experiences because some dioceses and parishes are growing in synodality by listening to diverse voices, being open to new approaches, and including a diverse range of people in leadership and ministry. At the same time, other regions remained “inward-looking”, with a passive laity and clergy. Some attendees recalled the Plenary Council, where synodal processes were affirmed despite painful tensions, and members continued to “walk together” until the end. Ministerial PJPs emphasised the synodal processes of collective decision-making, inclusive consultation, and discernment. From the perspective of Eastern Churches, synodality went hand-in-hand with hierarchy: “Synodality in its very nature implies primacy, which is a real authority and responsibility, whether exercised by the patriarch in his patriarchate, a bishop in his eparchy or a priest in his parish”.
33. One challenge identified was the lack of understanding by baptised persons of the Church’s true purpose, mission and vision, which impacted their interpretation of synodality. There was a call for greater adoption of, formation in, and modelling of Synodal processes, including an authentic understanding of *Sensus Fidei*, as well as ongoing reflection, discernment and “imaginative, shared language” to help bridge the gap between those inside and outside the Church.

## The Baptismal Dignity of All

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34. One theme that resonated with many was the growing recognition of the baptismal dignity of all, as well as the realisation that the Church’s mission of making Christ present was a responsibility shared by all the baptised. There was acknowledgement that more people are seeing Baptism as their common foundation for Church participation; however, greater formation for a deeper understanding of this reality was critical

to empower people. One source of concern mentioned in this area was the large number of baptised Catholics who were disillusioned with the Church. Some groups emphasised the critical need for the Church to be more missionary-focused, while others emphasised the importance of greater prayer, boldness and courage in proclaiming the Gospel in the modern world.

## The Mass and Sacraments

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35. There was a wide range of Eucharistic and sacramental experiences. While many acknowledged the critical role these experiences played in Church life, their responses largely mirrored the sections of the Working Document that recorded the many tensions within this area. Similarly, the range of responses described perceived shortcomings in Mass celebration, the exclusion of certain groups from full participation in the sacraments, the liturgy's "non-inclusive" language, sub-par homilies and musical choices, and a lack of adequate formation in areas of faith, morals and Eucharistic celebration, particularly among the young. There were calls for a more synodal and participatory style of Eucharistic celebration, liturgies that are inclusive of other cultures and relevant to young people, a broader understanding of what it meant to be Eucharistic in essence, and a greater outreach to Catholics who have lost appreciation for these rituals.

## Experiences of the Parish Community

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36. There were many comments from participants who expressed their love for the faith, gratitude to the Church, and their desire to continue to belong: "We are grateful for all the Church has given us and the way we have been supported". Some groups described positive and enriching experiences of Church and parish life such as multicultural engagement, "community spirit and care for one another", "pastoral care from priests", "an open invitation to engage and assist" and lay Catholics "taking responsibility and acting synodally in times of priest absence".
37. Other groups faced significant challenges, citing a lack of structures such as a parish council, overly authoritative clergy, poor financial accountability, a lack of a sense of community and belonging, difficulty in being allowed to contribute as lay people, a lack of younger people, and future challenges in supporting the parish. As one group noted, "We are getting older and more tired, and people have unrealistic expectations of change in the Church," while another commented, "Our parishes are mixed experiences: absent youth, liturgies without life, but also many worthy uncelebrated initiatives. In some parishes, there is a mismatch between the culture of the laity and of the clergy".
38. One shared lived reality was concern about the limited presence and engagement of young people and young families in the parish community, even as enrolment in Catholic schools has increased. A few groups appreciated the DCS's mention of the importance of involving men in Church life. Due to a lack of support from Church leaders, some young people described feeling persecuted and alone while promoting strong faith-based values. Others felt that the Church needed to modernise in order to remain relevant. Participants also mentioned challenges such as "disruption to successful youth programs", "insufficient support for the ongoing faith of children and emerging adults", failure to prepare young people for their work lives, and a lack of adequate faith-based communication within families as exacerbating the problem. Many groups expressed a desire for better accompaniment and formation of young people and their families.
39. Many groups also expressed concern about the impact of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, along with the loss of trust in Church authorities and credibility in the public sphere. The impact on parish communities was considerable, as groups highlighted concerns such as lay people "walking away" and being "so demoralised they have lost the ability to lead". "We are grasping the severity of the crisis while yearning to go ahead. We see our tent shrinking while accepting the path to enlargement is gradual", said one group. Many participants felt that the DCS had not dealt with this matter adequately and believed more needed to be done for the Church to take full responsibility and make adequate reparation.

## The Church's Mission in the World

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40. There was widespread agreement with the global responses in the DCS that Catholics wanted to work together to renew the Church by responding to common challenges. The call to care for creation was a particularly powerful challenge. Another opportunity was the need to work ecumenically with other Christians. Many participants commented that the Church needed to acknowledge current societal changes (indifference/apathy, secularisation, individualism, consumerism, the Australian economic situation), address the causes of failures, and seek to engage in a more synodal manner, open to greater interculturality and appreciation of global ways of being Church, in order to further its mission of bringing God's Kingdom to a contemporary world. Some participants reported the urgency for greater formation and engagement, while others called for more radical change and a move away from formal, traditional structures.

## New Experiences

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41. There were a range of "new experiences" described by participants from different groups, as follows:
- On synodality:
    - The call for collegiality between Bishops' Conferences within the same geographical region
    - "Joy and liberation" for the laity's voice to be ongoing
    - "God-modelled listening and welcome, leading to inclusion and transformation", a process that is gradual and challenging
    - Synodality as a process which "undergirds our pilgrimage as the Church of God"
    - Examples of synodality from people in war-torn countries
  - The image of the Church:
    - As a communion of different charisms and ministries
    - As a tent of meeting
    - The concept of "enlarging the space of our tent"
  - Regarding challenges:
    - The commonality of challenges across the world, and that many are not unique to Australia, even though people had believed them to be
    - The contrast between the Australian situation and that of other countries, e.g. Haiti, which speaks of religious persecution and violence towards Christians
    - Differing responses to asylum-seekers worldwide
  - On evangelisation:
    - The "dialogical approach", and the potential of the internet for communication and evangelisation
    - The common approach that Christians must endorse ecumenical and interfaith dialogue
    - That interfaith activity could become "cerebral exercises limited to the realm of ideas and concepts ... (p 49)". That "the realisation of ideals is dependent upon local action whose fruitfulness is ultimately dependent on the will of the Spirit rather than human will"
    - The Church's invitation to "seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to use our 'Head' to know the existing realities without bias, use our 'Heart' to love everyone unconditionally and our 'Hands' to act without fear so that the barriers are broken for the emergence of a meaningful and Christ-centred Universal Church"
    - That "charismatic gifts freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit which help rejuvenate the Church are inseparable from the hierarchical gifts which are linked to the Sacrament of Orders ... (p 70)", references ensuring the "harmonization of these gifts without pitting them against each other" and reminders that "canon law needs to accompany the process of structural renewal".

## Challenges to Address

*After having read and prayed with the DCS, what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in your continent's perspective?*

*Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?*

### Tensions and Divergences

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42. Group participants considered the question of tensions and divergences from a number of perspectives. Several groups commented on the need to “hold in tension the seemingly conflicting visions, needs and views of all members”. It was also noted that some tensions originated from different values both inside and outside the Church, including within families or other community groups. The temptation to either surround oneself with like-minded thinkers, or alternatively to detach altogether, was acknowledged. It was also recognised that within the Church there are a number of conflicting priorities. However, the value of synodality was mentioned as a way to walk the path between these tensions: “The basic, intimate expression of synodality, for most adults, is walking with their spouse/partner and family members who are mostly disengaged from (institutional) Church”.
43. However, the process of synodality was recognised as having its own challenges too. Some participants expressed confusion as to how a synodal Church should look in practical terms. Several groups mentioned concerns that the process of synodality could be impeded by the current hierarchical structure of the Church, either due to a lack of understanding or perhaps due to a perceived loss of authority. It was stated that synodality required listening by all as a first step, which would then lead to greater things: “It is a conversation that invites conversion”. In particular, one group highlighted the local Indigenous spiritual practice of ‘dadirri’—“taking time to listen, discern ... slow to react and change”.

### Challenges Around Inclusivity

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44. One of the most commonly mentioned challenges was that of inclusion and how to welcome and advocate for those on the peripheries. While some groups were mentioned, such as people living with disabilities (both physical and psychological), LGBTQI+ people, the divorced and remarried, migrants and refugees, there was also a desire to welcome those who are “diverse thinking”, non-practising Catholics and the non-baptised. There were concerns that the exclusion of certain groups from receiving the sacraments was an unnecessary barrier to inclusion in the Church.
45. The challenge of teaching and holding to the faith, while respecting others, avoiding judgement and taking a compassionate and pastoral approach was acknowledged. Valuing the contribution of all, including “those who do not want to be part of decision-making processes but rather to participate through worship and in other ways” was important. In particular, concerns related to LGBTQI+ persons were raised as needing a practical plan going forward for reconciliation. There was also an appetite for finding ways to engage in ecumenical and interfaith relations and by doing so “healing the wounds of division”.

### Indigenous Peoples

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46. Within the Australian context, the need for inclusion of peoples of Indigenous heritage was particularly noted. Several groups commented that the DCS was too brief on the topic. The Church’s role in recognition of and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples was highlighted. In particular, the need to ensure that attention was paid to the spiritualities of the Indigenous peoples of Australia and in Oceania was prominent: “Our listening needs to include the Uluru statement, our Church elders [to] include our Aunties and Uncles caring for Country”.

## Expanding the Role of Women in the Church

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47. Another issue that was emphasised was the role of women in the Church. While some participants were pleased with what had been raised in the DCS, others felt that the document did not go far enough. This was particularly so in relation to women's "full and equal participation" in the Church. Participants recognised that despite the larger proportion of women to men active in the Church, men held the majority of leadership and decision-making roles. The desire to engage women at every level, including through ordination, was evident. Participants also raised concerns about addressing issues relating to misogyny and sexism in the Church, particularly when perpetrated by members of the clergy.

## Addressing Challenges with Youth

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48. There were also particular concerns about the Church meeting the "faith needs of youth". The Church was seen as needing to engage more effectively with young people, as well as encouraging youth to have a voice in the Church. There were concerns about how to do these things effectively. "How do we impart synodality to the young, as the future of the Church, when there are so few young people in the Church today?" The other related issue was understanding and addressing why so many young people leave the Church.

## Challenges Regarding Church Leadership

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49. A number of issues were raised in relation to Church leadership. These included clericalism, declining vocations, hypocrisy, and a lack of trust stemming from the impact of sexual and other abuses by leaders in the Church. The need for greater transparency, accountability and co-responsibility by those in leadership was also seen as being of importance. A number of participants called for a re-examination of the Church's position on married men becoming priests, and on the requirement for celibacy. Issues were also raised in relation to a need for induction of new priests into a parish, and inculturation programs particularly for overseas priests who may be entering a completely foreign culture. Finally, there were concerns raised about the "lack of understanding of the [permanent] diaconate" and the value that those called to that ministry offer the Church.

## The Importance of Climate Change and Stewardship

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50. Particular concerns were raised regarding the impact of climate change and the Church's responsibility for responsible stewardship of creation. A substantial number of submissions not only raised concerns but also reported on the work being undertaken in their particular community. The grave "existential threat to human life" posed by climate change to the island nations in the Oceania region caused significant anxiety to some participants.

## Other Issues Raised

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51. Another issue that was raised was how to resource the various initiatives of the Church, particularly within rural or underprivileged dioceses, and the need for equitable distribution of funds in this regard. In particular, there was a concern for the need to ensure that Church workers receive appropriate compensation for their services.
52. Other issues raised in the submissions included a greater involvement of the laity in decision-making, particularly through engagement in parish and diocesan pastoral councils; a greater focus on families and marriage relationships; the role of Catholic schools, social services, health and aged-care agencies and the

disconnect in their relationship with parishes; a review of the liturgy, particularly in relation to reinstating the Third Rite of Reconciliation; and to the gendered vocabulary used in the Mass. Also included were questions about addressing issues of homelessness, poverty and war; reading and responding to the “signs of the times”; and finally, working within the increasing secularism in society. Learning from the experiences of Catholic agencies, organisations and dioceses who work within ecumenical, interfaith and secular contexts was seen as valuable.

## Next Steps to Address Issues

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53. Participants made a number of suggestions on how to approach the tensions and challenges identified for the Church. A greater understanding of the role and purpose of the Church in the world and enhanced formation of all of the baptised were seen as underpinning the way forward. Several participants talked about the need to “foster awareness of the baptismal call” and to build up and harness the gifts of the faithful. A greater focus on evangelisation and prayer was recommended. A number of participants stated that there was a need for the Church to “be present where people are”, such as in workplaces, schools and other public spaces, not just focusing on attending services.
54. A number of participants raised concerns that the rules and regulations of the Church were at odds with the gospel message, and that greater weight should be given to the “primacy of conscience” and supporting people in a compassionate and pastoral manner to develop a more mature relationship with God.

## The Challenges of Embracing Change

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55. The need to be open to embracing change was seen as of vital importance. Some participants spoke of “things needing to die for new growth to emerge”. But there was also confusion as to how this would come about, and a desire for clear direction to help guide the faithful. A number of submissions expressed concern that ongoing discernment should not lead to avoiding acting on issues, and particularly wanted to see action on previous undertakings of the Catholic Church in Australia, such as the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, those in the *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* and *The Light from the Southern Cross* reports and the outcomes of the recent Plenary Council.
56. The desire for greater unity in the Church was discussed, but there were concerns the laity within the Church were “passive” due to either habit or the ongoing pressures of “life, family and employment”. The need for greater listening to one another (particularly between clergy and laity) was emphasised, as was the increased involvement of lay men. Some noted that listening to one another may be impacted by “consultation fatigue” and lead to misunderstandings. Another group commented on the perceived resistance by some to the “implementation of the Spirit of Vatican II” and how that impacted their lived experience of parish life.

## Priorities and Calls to Action

*What are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world?*

*What should be discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?*

### Inclusion of those ‘Outside the Tent’

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57. According to most participants a significant priority for discussion at the First Session of the Synodal Assembly ought to be the inclusion of the marginalised within the life of the Church. Examples of such people included those with different genders or sexualities, those with disabilities, the poor or uneducated, Australia’s Indigenous population, divorced or remarried Catholics, and, more generally, those “living at odds with Church norms”.
58. There was a strong sense that the mission of the Church is truly linked to the inclusion of all and that “going out” to others, particularly those on the fringes, reflects the Gospel. There was an attractiveness of the language used in the DCS, particularly the “tent” imagery, which offered a sign of welcome to those on the margins who may have felt excluded from some aspects of Church life: “The tent is a much humbler building than great edifices, such as cathedrals, so enlarging space in the tent is a very good image to use”.
59. There was a sense that focusing on inclusion and representation of those “outside the Tent” was not just tokenism, but rather allowed for a diversity of voices to be heard, and over time their inclusion could begin to heal some wounds for those now excluded and damaged by the Church.

### Addressing Inequality and Recognition of Women in the Church

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60. Another significant priority for participants related to the role of women in the Church, which was fairly broad in the types of calls to action required. Many participants called for women, as baptised members of the Church, to be accepted as equal to men and “for their talents, experiences and abilities to be recognised and used at all levels of the Church”. Acting on the inequalities of women called for equal, just and full participation of women in Church governance, mission and ministry which, for some groups, meant recognising their admissibility to any role, such as deacon, priest, or representative on decision-making councils.

### Cultural Change and Rethinking Church Leadership

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61. Many participants called for a cultural shift in Church leadership, emphasising the importance of accountability, transparency and openness at all levels of the Church, for parishes, dioceses and Church agencies and for the bishops themselves. Transparency in leadership was required in all activities, including financial, governance, and when issues of misconduct arose. Many participants believed the “autocratic mode of governance” in the Church needed to be “rejected and replaced with a synodal commitment”. Some recommendations included promoting subsidiarity as a necessary component of participation, communion and mission, being open to new pastoral initiatives, and establishing forums at all levels of the Church.
62. A greater priority than the ordination of men – or women – in such a rethinking of Church leadership was the formation of individuals as leaders dedicated to God’s Word, who could facilitate dialogue, were trained to listen and discern, and were appointed to serve rather than assume power over others. Participants believed that the principles of synodality could be strengthened by including the laity as equal leaders.



## Synodality and the First Assembly

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63. Ensuring that the Synodal Assembly is a true and authentic synodal undertaking was regarded as a priority by participants. The Assembly needed to reflect the genuine composition of the Church, which participants felt should be “ecclesial and not merely episcopal”. One group claimed that the term ‘Synod of Bishops’ was contrary to synodality because it only included bishops. Similarly, it was noted that there was “always a trap that Synods are led by elites that have years of experience” and wider participation from lay Catholics, marginalised people and those from other faiths was needed.
64. A number of participants also noted that more clarification was needed about the expectations of the synodal process and the Assembly itself, including the authority of the bishops in any outcomes. However, it was also affirmed that the process of synodality is not outcome-driven and that some of the challenges raised in the DCS would need cultural or structural change, not just a “bureaucratic response to the challenges facing the Church”.

## More Formation and Education

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65. There were many calls for action for greater formation, which included the laity, priests, catechists, pastoral workers and seminarians. Such formation needed to be based on Catholic Social Teaching and on empowering all to participate fully in the mission of the Church. Genuine formation ought not to “stifle the movement of the Holy Spirit”.
66. Participants agreed that issues such as clericalism could be addressed by educating clergy and laity about the importance of accountability, transparency and dialogue, as well as strengthening seminary formation including the role of women in that process. One group noted that the Synod prompted a “re-awakening of the laity” and a “change in the mindset of the clergy” which provided opportunities for “better listening, deeper dialogue and enthusiastic collaboration”. A need for widespread cultural change was expressed at parish, diocesan and global levels.

## Reform of Church Structures, Governance and Liturgy

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67. It was deemed important to investigate pathways for people from diverse backgrounds to be trained in governance roles, such as pastoral councils or other areas of governance. Some participants felt that Church structures should not be reliant on the priest or bishop and should be open, inclusive and accountable in all areas.
68. Some participants expressed a desire for liturgical reforms that reflect contemporary theology. The proposed reforms covered a wide range of topics, including a better translation of the Missal, inclusive language, lay people giving homilies, flexibility in different contexts, and recognition of various cultures, including Australia’s First Nations peoples. Overall, it was agreed that liturgy should always allow for active participation and be inclusive and open to all.

## Evangelisation and the Mission of the Church

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69. Participants also emphasised the need for the Catholic Church to transition from a “maintenance Church” to a “missional Church” by establishing communities that “join with all humanity in journeying together, in collaboration with humanity and nature”. All Catholics needed to be invited and encouraged to accept their baptismal call to evangelise and proclaim God’s love in unity with others as part of this call. Discord among Catholics was viewed as a distraction from the call to evangelise.



## Communities of Belonging and Engagement

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- 70. As a priority, participants expressed a strong desire for the First Assembly to address the need to continue to develop communities in which people could feel they belong, were encouraged to participate fully in Church life, and genuinely believed they had a voice that would be heard. Such communities would be vibrant, inclusive and diverse, but not uniform.
- 71. Participants viewed engaging and working with other Christian communities and religious groups as a top priority. Local ecumenical cooperation was identified as an activity that demonstrated a “welcoming community walking together to bring Christ to our world”.

## Social Issues of Concern

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- 72. Participants’ priorities also included speaking out more about social, justice, and environmental issues, as well as addressing matters collaboratively with other groups and organisations, and reaching out to and supporting those most affected by the negative consequences. Climate change and environmental concerns were discussed, particularly encouraging action based on *Laudato Si’*, as well as the rights and recognition of Australia’s Indigenous peoples, the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, homelessness and poverty, and societal violence.

## Other Priority Areas


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- 73. There were numerous other priority areas outlined in the DCS that participants flagged as needing a call for action, many of which were interrelated. Addressing and eliminating all forms of abuse in the Church, including sexual abuse, was identified as an ongoing priority, as was the importance of understanding its root causes and the ways in which the Church needed to provide reparation to survivors and victims and to continue to seek forgiveness for past failures, such as through public liturgies of lamentation.
- 74. Many participants called for the elimination of clericalism in its varied forms, with some noting the importance of breaking down barriers between laity and clergy, and for more cooperation in shared leadership of synodality, “not with a presumption of authority, but with a collaborative delight in spirituality and joint exploration”.
- 75. Linked somewhat to the elimination of clericalism was a call for the Church to reform some areas of its theology, teaching and dogma related to the formation of seminarians and the professional supervision, development and support of priests. For some participants, the priority was to “address afresh the whole concept of the priesthood in the Church, including that of the laity”.
- 76. The importance of engaging with young people and training youth for Church leadership roles was considered critical for some. Relatedly, investigating how the faith needs of young people could be met and how youth could be better formed and provided with platforms that allowed them to utilise their skills and passions was significant.
- 77. Other areas of the DCS considered important by a few participants included exploring options for priests to marry, providing better and more appropriate formation for teachers in Catholic schools, and underscoring the role of families, including the role of fathers, in teaching young people the Catholic faith. Overall, some participants noted that the DCS raised many areas of priority needing action, for which “synodality [was] the only way forward”.

## Conclusion

78. Diverse groups and people from across Australia were invited to reflect on the DCS, and the submission process provided a forum for the reflections of those groups to be received, including and especially the views of those on the margins, or those who were able to advocate on their behalf.
79. This diversity was also highlighted in the approaches taken by group facilitators to include people from different demographic backgrounds, ages, geographical locations, religious experiences and life situations. The effort undertaken to obtain such diversity is reflected in the richness of participants' experiences and realities, the tensions and divergences, and the priority areas and calls for action which the First Session of the Synodal Assembly is called on to address.
80. Despite the issues and challenges identified, participants still expressed significant hope for the future of the Church. As one group noted, "the last point is we should never become depressed or given to the belief that the situation in the Church or even in human society is helpless and beyond redemption". The need to find ways to heal, not judge, and to seek to find similarities, rather than emphasise differences, was noted to be particularly important for the way ahead.

## Appendix A: Reflection Guide for the Continental Stage



*A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together."*

*How is this "journeying together" happening today in your local Church?*

*What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"?*

### REFLECTION GUIDE: Document for the Continental Stage

The Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) gathers and restores to the local Churches what the People of God from around the world said in the first year of the Synod. It is meant to guide us and enable us to deepen our discernment, keeping in mind the basic question that animates the entire process: *"How does this 'journeying together,' ... allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?"* (PD, no.2).

**NOTE:** If you are working in a group of five or more, you may need to set aside 1.5 hours to use this guide appropriately.

### PREPARING FOR THE GROUP REFLECTION SESSION

Prior to your meeting with other members of your group, it is recommended that you read through the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* and work through the steps of this document for yourself.

- Take time to pray, perhaps using the synodal prayer at Step 1 in this guide.
- Read the document.
- Allow time after your first reading to meditate on the document and observe your response.
- Read the document a second time, and note what in the document spoke to you.
- Consider if there is anything you believe should be added to the content and themes included.
- Prepare yourself to discuss your reflections with the group.

PRAY TOGETHER

READ QUESTIONS AND REFLECT

SHARE AND LISTEN

PRAY AND SUBMIT YOUR RESPONSE

STEP 01

Pray Together

At the beginning of the group reflection, you are invited to pray together.

The Scripture passage guiding the Continental Stage is from Isaiah 54:2:

*Enlarge the space of your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly, lengthen your ropes and make firm your pegs.*

Take time to meditate on this verse and on what God is sharing about the synodal journey through it.

You may also find it useful to consult the resource on *Scripture at the Heart of the Synodal Journey* for information on praying with Scripture. This can be found at: <https://bit.ly/SynodBiblicalResources>

When you pray, you can use the words written below or just speak to God from your heart.

*We stand before You, Holy Spirit,  
as we gather together in Your name.*

*With You alone to guide us,  
make Yourself at home in our hearts;  
Teach us the way we must go  
and how we are to pursue it.*

*We are weak and sinful;  
do not let us promote disorder.  
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path  
nor partiality influence our actions.*

*Let us find in You our unity  
so that we may journey together to eternal life  
and not stray from the way of truth  
and what is right.*

*All this we ask of You,  
who are at work in every place and time,  
in the communion of the Father and the Son,  
forever and ever.*

Amen.

## STEP 02 Read and Reflect

Read and reflect on the following questions in silence. These guiding questions are found in paragraph 106 of the DCS.

Write a list of all the responses to these questions that come to mind.

### 1. EXPERIENCES OF CHURCH

- After having read and prayed with the DCS, what resonates most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent?
- Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?

### 2. CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

- After having read and prayed with the DCS, what significant tensions or differences emerge as particularly important in your continent's perspective?
- Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?

### 3. PRIORITIES AND CALLS TO ACTION

- Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions:
  - What are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world?
  - What should be discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?

Briefly share aloud your responses, working together in Step 3.

## STEP 03 Share and Listen

### ROUND 1: SHARING MY REFLECTION ON THE THREE QUESTIONS

- The facilitator poses each question and invites the group to respond.
- Everyone speaks for one or two minutes adding to what has previously been shared.
- When others are speaking, remember to listen with an open and humble heart. The focus is to listen to others, rather than simply thinking about what you want to say.
- At the end of each question, the group pauses for a moment of silence. This may help absorb what was said, take a breather, and return to the next question.
- As participants are sharing, the facilitator takes brief notes of what has been discussed.

### ROUND 2: REFLECTING ON THE GROUP RESPONSE

- After the sharing on the three guiding questions, this round is an opportunity to begin to prepare the group response.
- Here the group is invited to answer the question:
  - *As you listened to everyone's reflection, what struck you in a new way?*
- The facilitator makes notes of key points emerging from the group's reflection.
- At the end of this sharing, the group pauses for a period of silence.

### ROUND 3: RESPONDING TO THE DOCUMENT

- In this round, reflect on the question:
  - *Thinking about what you have read in the DCS, and reflecting on the Church in Australia at this time, what should be included in our group's response?*
- After everyone has finished speaking, the facilitator reconfirms the key points with the group and prepares a summarised version of the discussion.

#### STEP 04 Pray and Submit Your Response

At the end of the reflection time, you are invited to pray together. You can use the words below, or you might like to say a prayer of gratitude in your own words.

*Creator God, we thank you for the encounter with one another today.*

*We know that where two or three are gathered, you are in our midst.*

*Thank you for being with us and for the courage to speak boldly and with passion, and the humility to listen with open hearts.*

*We ask you to continue to walk with us, as we discover the pathway toward the future you are calling us to.*

*Amen.*

#### SUBMIT YOUR RESPONSE

- It is recommended that the group's response be captured in a short summary of a paragraph per question. You may find it helpful to compose this in a separate document and cut and paste the text into the online submission portal.
- You will be asked to include 5 to 7 key points that capture the important parts of the discussion.
- Your response should reflect the diversity of views and opinions expressed, both positive and negative. It should be faithful to the people's voices and to whatever emerged from their reflection, rather than a series of generalized or doctrinally correct statements.
- Views should not be excluded simply because they were expressed by a small minority of participants.
- Overall, the response should capture what the Holy Spirit has inspired the group to respond to the DCS.

Your group's response will become your submission to the National Centre for Pastoral Research. From **Friday 4 November 2022**, you will be able to submit your response online at <https://www.catholic.org.au/synodalchurch> via a **SUBMISSION** link.

All responses must be submitted by **Friday 9 December 2022**.



Thank you for contributing to the discernment process of the  
XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

*"Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus,  
Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God  
something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,  
coming in human likeness"  
(Phil. 2:5-7)*



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## Appendix B: Copy of the Online Portal for Submissions



### FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION AND MISSION



#### Feedback for the Continental Stage

The Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) gathers and restores to the local Churches what the People of God from around the world said in the first year of the Synod. It is meant to guide us and enable us to deepen our discernment, keeping in mind the basic question that animates the entire process:

*"How does this 'journeying together,' ... allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?" (PD, no.2).*

You are invited to contribute your reflections on the Working Document for the Continental Stage. You can find the Document here: [WORKING DOCUMENT](#)

Your reflection will be done in groups using the Reflection Guide, which can be downloaded here: [REFLECTION GUIDE](#)

If you have already summarised your group's reflection, this short submission process should only take 5-10 minutes to complete.

**This portal accepts short and succinct submissions only.** *Because of the nature of this synodal process and the very tight timeline, we regret that we are not able to accept additional information.*

We are not inviting individual reflections at this time. If you would like to join a reflection group, please contact the National Centre for Pastoral Research by 30 November 2022: [ncpr@catholic.org.au](mailto:ncpr@catholic.org.au)

This submission portal will remain open until Friday 9 December 2022.

----- PAGE BREAK -----

Firstly, what is the name of your group? \_\_\_\_\_

Please describe briefly the members of your group, such as the type of group (e.g., parish/diocese), age range, special characteristics, ethnic makeup, interest area, etc. Here are some examples:

- *We are a group of 10 Catholics (religious, clergy and laity) of all ages and ethnicities passionate about social justice issues.*
- *Our group is a family of five who are actively involved in our local parish.*
- *We are a group of people with disabilities aged 25-65 from Canberra.*

----- PAGE BREAK -----

Your group was invited to reflect on three areas:

#### 1. EXPERIENCES OF CHURCH

- After having read and prayed with the DCS, what resonates most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent?
- Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?

#### 2. CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

- After having read and prayed with the DCS, what significant tensions or differences emerge as particularly important in your continent's perspective?
- Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?

#### 3. PRIORITIES AND CALLS TO ACTION

- Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions:
  1. What are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world?
  2. What should be discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?

#### 1. EXPERIENCES OF CHURCH

In **ONE SHORT** paragraph (less than 200 words), please provide a summary of your group's reflection related to **EXPERIENCES OF CHURCH**.

#### 2. CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

In **ONE SHORT** paragraph (less than 200 words), please provide a summary of your group's reflection related to **CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS**.

#### 3. PRIORITIES AND CALLS TO ACTION

In **ONE SHORT** paragraph (less than 200 words), please provide a summary of your group's reflection related to **PRIORITIES AND CALLS TO ACTION**.

Can you please include 5 to 7 key points that capture the important parts of your group's overall submission? (Maximum of 250 words)

Lastly, please include your details in case we need to contact you about your submission. *(These details will not be provided to anyone.)*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_



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