

**Report of the Listening and Discernment
in Local Churches
First Phase [October 2021 – April 2022]
Leading up to the Assembly of Bishops in Synod
in October 2023**



**Diocese of Lismore
New South Wales
Australia**

WHAT IS THE CHURCH I DREAM OF?

Over the last five years, a freak hailstorm, two floods, three bushfires, and the COVID pandemic have consumed the available energy of the Diocese of Lismore. People have been overwhelmed simply being church rather than reflecting about church. Despite these real crises, they engaged substantially with the process, giving supportive guidance through passionate and reasoned synodal responses.

The Australian Church is in the midst of the Plenary Council process. Much of the work of the Synodal consultation was seen to overlap with the process of the Plenary Council and drew similar responses. Since the fruits of the Plenary Council have not yet been seen in the local church, some questioned whether this consultation was premature. In summary, responses called for clearer, collaborative, and servant leadership, inclusive of marginalised groups and people, and listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit in *the sensus fidei*, particularly concerning the ministry of laity, the place of women, clericalism, and priestly formation.

Responses conveyed hope in the mission of the church, so that despite the significant problems and challenges that lie before us, we are God's people and will be led to a new reality. As one respondent put it:

The ingredients are all there; the mixture and process could be better. Our frame (worldview) must compete for attention in society. It must make sense to people and contrast with the competition.

However, respondents have significant doubts in the integrity of the process and the ability of the institutional church to effect change.

In this report, quoted responses will be italicised and deidentified.

WHO RESPONDED AND HOW?

Over 110 participants reported through the online portal, representing eleven groups and 15 individuals. Verbal feedback indicated that the process was too prescriptive and the options numerous. Several people reported giving up on the process before submitting a response. Twenty respondents emailed the Diocesan contact directly and fifteen others submitted verbally. The majority of individual respondents were aged 60-80, with slightly more women and men while group respondents tended to be younger. All group responses came from parishes which encourage and have structures to support lay participation. Most parishes disseminated information through weekend bulletins, with five parishes actively engaged beyond this benchmark. Most individual responses came from these parishes, with a sprinkling from other parishes. Several responses came from those who are not Catholic, Catholics not actively involved in their parish, or Catholics not involved at all in the Church who were alerted to the consultation.

One respondent submitted a book he had authored. Some provided written or verbal feedback that they declined to enter the process because of their doubts concerning its efficacy and integrity, quoting previous consultations that bore no tangible fruit in the Australian church.

I have little faith that this synod will achieve anything. In my experience, meetings and talk remain just that. Bishops, priests and laity must all look inside and ask "Who am I? How does the reality of God change my life?"

Although the majority of responses came from those informed by contemporary Catholic social justice teaching in light of the 'signs of the times', some passionate responses displayed varying ecclesiologies, including emphases on Marian apparitions and the Tridentine liturgy. For respondents in the latter groups, the way forward is easily charted by following the revelation of seers or select doctrinal statements.

The following report seeks to bring together the responses of the people of the Diocese of Lismore who chose to engage with the process. The report will follow the three main areas of consultation: communion, participation, and mission. Each of these areas will have subgroups which were used in the guiding schema. This synthesis seeks to discern the movement of the spirit within respondents pertaining to the theme.

DISCERNMENT OF THE COLLECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

What I see is the woundedness of the Church today, it is weaker than ever before, overwhelmed by confusion.

The heartfelt lament of a respondent summed up the feelings of the faithful permeating the consultation and provided the springboard for the divergent approaches facing this reality. All respondents in some way touched on the wounds of the Church, often so publicly displayed, and the diminution of power, prestige, priests, and position this has affected. The suggested ways forward were manifold, with the respondent above wishing a return to certainty, whereas the majority of respondents are happy to be on 'a losing team' in secular terms on power, prestige, priests, and position, as long as we are a church of integrity and honesty. One respondent offered:

The challenges faced by our church today are to listen to what the Spirit is saying through ALL the People of God.

COMMUNION

Communion attracted the greatest number of responses of the three main themes. The comments under the headings of the other two themes seemed to be dependent upon the primacy of communion in the church. This was best summed up in the first subheading of companions on the journey.

Companions on the Journey

Many respondents indicated a desire to walk with others in the journey of faith, acknowledging our mutual need of each other, one putting it succinctly:

we all need to work together and not just be soloists.

This aspiration was not restricted to the Catholic community but extended to the bonds between all Christians which was emphasised in several responses. There was an emphasis on the connectedness of people with one another with a strong subtheme of the equality of all people who identify as Catholic.

The Church must be inclusive of all people. There should be no discrimination against divorced people, former priests or those identifying as LGBTIQ+ people. The Church is called to be the light on a hilltop and salt for the earth. It is behind civil society in some respects, and not leading the way, especially regarding equality of women and men.

Central to the journey is the place of the ordained clergy in the family of the church. Respondents expressed their appreciation of and love for the ordained leadership of the

Church, emphasising the need to have well-formed and educated servant leaders who are open to communication and challenge. Some expressed the frustration that local leaders of the church were not on the same page. One group issued the heartfelt challenge:

Most of us have lived here all our lives and watched as priests come and go all with different agendas and the work of our better priests has easily ceased by the predecessor (sic) who doesn't listen to the community. So, we keep praying and we think this is the heart and soul of our parish.

Among respondents there was an overwhelming openness and optimism to new church members:

While many Churchgoers are older members of society there is always room and encouragement for younger families.

Inclusivity was an underlying theme in many of the submissions. The marginalisation of Aboriginal and Islander people, LGBTQi+, and those who have suffered sexual or other abuse at the hands of those in church leadership was mentioned many times. The place of women in ministry was almost universally held to be inadequate. Some called for public declarations in favour of those who may feel or be marginalised including those who have been in active ministry or religious life and are now living a lay vocation.

Listening

While expressing positivity, respondents doubt the willingness or capacity of the institutional church to hear and respond adequately to the needs of the people of God, particularly in light of the findings of the Royal Commission. A respondent commented:

It's like we Catholics often only want to listen to what is in line with our Catechism classes 50 years ago.

The majority of verbal respondents despaired that their opinion would be heard, let alone acted upon. A repeated response among those of all age groups and degrees of church affiliation was *I'm just hanging on by a thread*. An older respondent offered:

I wasn't going to have my penny's worth but my children who only come to Church every now and again insisted I should.

He continued with some sadness and self-deprecation:

Forgive me for giving up on the Church but when our wonderful Parish Priest recently got hospitalised his replacement was a priest who wears black and the white collar every day and just reads his homily like he's reading a textbook.

Other respondents made statements like:

We don't seem to be listening to the voice of laity calling for inclusion of marginalised people including women in ordained ministry.

Acknowledging the efforts of the synodal process to seek input outside the normal channels of communication, some issued a cry to redouble efforts to listen to the voices of the many Catholic families that are blended, divorced, LGBTI, or dysfunctional. Some feel that Church documentation and preaching perpetuate the myth that most families fit a particular standard mould.

One contribution asked whether the effect of the greater polarisation of society had eroded trust within the church itself.

Amid quite challenging responses to the question of listening one respondent group offered a parochial experience of positivity and hope:

Through a vision process of shared leadership, the gifts of the local church are recognised and promoted. A non-clerical Church is called to listen and encourage.

Celebration

Under the subtheme of celebration, two opposite views emerged, concerning the understanding of liturgy.

On one hand respondents called for a nurturing and creative church, responding to the liturgical needs of particular worshipping communities. These responses included discussion of the place of youth and women in worship, the quality of teaching and homilies, and accessibility of language including *the clunkiness of the current liturgical books*. Respondents called for the avoidance of exclusive language and concepts, encouraging *enriching rather than empty rituals ... not slavishly following the book*.

On the other hand, several respondents commented on the need for stricter liturgical adherence and greater delineation between lay and clerical ministry. It was suggested that this will lessen confusion in the church and lead to more participation. One respondent stated:

The Mass itself will always meet people's needs as it has been instituted by Christ as the way God chooses to communicate Himself and His grace to us.

Some respondents find that:

The Mass is not beautiful or sacred, and leaves Parishes frustrated.

PARTICIPATION

The second theme of participation elicited the most detailed responses, many of which involved the optimum exercise of power and leadership in the church. Many of these comments pertained to clerical leadership and clericalism. The comments in this section draw out the first subtheme of companions on the journey and the issue of inclusivity.

Authority and participation

Many participants showed a desire for the proper use of authority in the church and a genuine concern that those vested with this authority be sufficiently competent and steeped in the practise of servant leadership. These responses are best summarised in the following two statements submitted by two groups of parishioners in different parts of the Diocese of Lismore.

The Church's governance and structures must reflect equality of all the baptized. Therefore, it must reflect that men and woman have the same rights and responsibilities. Clericalism is a cancer that must be removed and replaced by life-giving power and structures that are shared.

A true, relevant 21st Century church is one where decisions are made together with the baptized and the ordained, under a formal process (Parish Pastoral Council), so that the church, diocese, mission and parish will grow to its fullest potential.

There was a common and often repeated theme of inclusion and communication in decision making, particularly among younger respondents. The lack of women and the marginalised, including openly LGBTIQ+ in significant positions of power and responsibility was the subject of comment.

If the Catholic Church is prepared to be truly inclusive and representative of our community (in the broadest sense) that the church should welcome those who identify as LGBTIQ+ into positions of power and responsibility.

In a discussion about the competence of some parish management, a respondent passionately exclaimed: *People who have dedicated years of their lives working for the Church are treated poorly.*

The saddest response in the consultation came from a young person who has been deeply involved in youth ministry over many years.

I was left burnt out and frustrated. I go to Mass on a Sunday, and it brings me to tears. I am so frustrated and tired at the hypocritical nature of the Church. I don't know how much longer I can last.

Several submissions expressed concern at the management of significant parish assets and the need for a framework to ensure these assets are managed optimally for the People of God. One person commented:

As Pope Francis says the goods of the Parish belong to the parishioners, the Parish Priest is the steward.

The comment was repeated that few priests have the aptitude, interest, or necessary training to make significant business decisions. There was disquiet that no local law compels parish priests to listen to the advice of their finance council. It has been noted that the most functional parishes are characterised by priests skilled in servant leadership who accept expert advice in areas outside their scope of competence. Several responses raised the increasing need to clearly separate the administrative/financial and the spiritual/pastoral/liturgical aspects of parish life. Comments indicated that with an increasingly educated professional and competent laity at the service of the church:

It is vital that Priests do not dictate the management and administration of any parish.

One group response reflected on their parish experience:

We do our best to balance authority and government by respecting the skills and talents that individuals have to contribute.

Forming ourselves in synodality

Most respondents had difficulty with the concept of synodality, with some doubting the catholicity of the concept. It was obvious that clericalism is not merely a clerical problem!

One respondent summed up the verbal responses of others who found the use of technical language exemplified the problem of communication within the church:

Please drop the expression "Synodality!!!" It is not a word that resonates with ordinary people and is therefore meaningless.

One succinct contribution provides food for thought:

Operationalizing is the problem.

MISSION

The burden of providing challenging feedback to the first two themes of the consultation gave way to an explosion of hope and confidence in the future when considering shared responsibility for our common mission. Among respondents this theme elicited a response in faith and the courage to *put out into the deep*. There is a call to embrace active participation, conscious that this is difficult without the growth encouraged by the response to the first two themes.

In the words of one respondent group:

With prayer, compassion and love, with a firm faith and trust in God's love for each of us, with good deeds and example, we demonstrate commitment to God and the Church. There are parishioners each day doing many acts of kindness, in a joyful, friendly and welcoming manner, building trust and community.

Far from this challenge being daunting, groups acknowledged the mission already in action:

We spread the good news of Jesus Christ through established groups.

In a jolting response one contributor opined:

It's time for the bishops and priests to start living more radically and to call the laity to do the same. As Bishops and priests, you have given your lives in service of Christ and His church, start acting like it.

Several groups expressed great hope in the future where church members support and empower each other *to bring people to know God and to make the world a better place*. Continuing this theme, another group offered their reflection:

We dream of a Church that is adventurous and curious, with opportunities and spaces for all people, all cultures to contribute without being intimidated, fear of reprisal, or being ostracised

Encouragement was provided by several respondents who urged the church not to cower from negative responses. A parish group contributed:

The Church took a mighty leap of faith when it adopted the doctrines of Vatican II. We need to build on the joyful challenge of these doctrines, not retreat from them into 'traditional' approaches which can make some of us feel safer, but which would further shut us off from the world that we are meant to reach out to.

Groups and individuals provided encouragement to action by good leadership from all parts of the Church. Our mission is to be counter cultural, always promoting a positive culture of life, inclusion, acceptance and love despite the challenge of a

cultural style - within the church and wider - of demeaning others rather than edifying, of complaint rather than affirmation, of finding fault rather than supporting the good, of draining out the gnat and swallowing the camel.

One respondent provided a summary of the theme of mission:

We dream of a servant-leadership Church, one that is not hierarchical, one that is brave enough to have a Church of equality, men and women priests, married and single ministers.

KEY POINTS FROM THE CONSULTATION

- Hope in the future
- An inclusive Church
- Acceptance of divergent perspectives of theology and pastoral practice
- Clear and transparent processes and responsibility
- Servant Leadership of clergy and laity
- Greater opportunity and presence of women in leadership
- Competent and collaborative ministry
- Courage to move forward

CONCLUSION

This report has synthesised the submissions that were received by the Diocese of Lismore both through the online portal and directly by email or verbal contact. The process has sought and listened to the People of God as they respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and share the insights, joys and challenges of the synodal experience.

I have been privileged to be asked to lead this consultation in the Diocese of Lismore and listen to the people of God speak from their hearts. Conscious of my own inadequacies and bias, I have attempted to convey the searingly honest and visceral reflections the people of the mid to north coast of NSW have entrusted to the process. This is important not only for the Synod in Rome, but for our local church.

There is a great weight of responsibility on us church now to honour this trust and move forward in faith and hope. Most of those consulted do not think that change can occur overnight, but most expressed that we need to step out into the deep in faith and hope.

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