

Catholics for Renewal



Editorial July 2021

Renewing the Archdiocese of Melbourne

Archbishop of Melbourne, Peter Comensoli, now accepts that his diocese is in a huge existential crisis. He told his diocesan clergy on 28 April 2021 and parish lay leaders on 22 May 2021 that the diocese is on a 'threshold' and either we do something or 'sink into the sunset'. [1]

But Melbourne is not unique among Australia's dioceses. It is the reason why a Plenary Council has been called.

The Melbourne crisis

The Archdiocese currently has 209 parishes with an average 5052 Catholics. But only 13 percent of Catholics across all parishes typically attend weekend Mass, and in the largest parishes as few as 6 per cent attend. The 209 parishes have reduced from 233 in 1999 and of these just 80 per cent have a full-time resident priest. Currently, just 226 priests are actively engaged in parish ministry, and less than half (45%) are Australian-born. Only some 70 locally-born diocesan priests remain, and 20 will retire in the next 10 years. In 2020 just 2 new locally-born diocesan priests were ordained for Melbourne.

The crisis has been building since the 1960s and, even before the clerical child sexual abuse scandal, Catholic youth had sensed their church had gone '*off mission*'. Over 40 years hundreds of locally-born young men had responded generously to a call to the diocesan priesthood, with annual seminarian numbers from the Victorian and Tasmanian dioceses surging from 11 in 1924 to 215 in 1964. But in 1971 numbers had fallen to just 146 seminarians and by 1986 to 81. [2] This drop-off in locally-born candidates for the diocesan priesthood occurred across Australia and now, 50 years on, there are insufficient new locally-born priests to replace those who retire or die. This is the result of a church gone '*off mission*'.

The challenge is more than just to '*attend to the manner in which the local communities of the Archdiocese are arranged and function*'. [3]

Finding a solution

Melbourne's archbishops have consistently refused to share their concerns with their people and to give them a voice in finding solutions, ignoring the call of Vatican II to '*let synods flourish with new vigour*'. None since 1916 has convened a diocesan synod or assembly to open up a meaningful dialogue with all their people, clerical and lay, and listen to their instinct of faith (*sensus fidei fidelium*). [4]

Vatican II also declared it 'highly desirable' that a diocesan pastoral council be established in every diocese and Canon Law expects one '*in so far as pastoral circumstances suggest*' (C. 511). Pastoral circumstances have long suggested it, but a Melbourne diocesan pastoral council is yet to be established.

Following Vatican II, Pope Francis has insisted that any '*proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory*'. [5] He has directed bishops '*to encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in Canon Law and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear*'. [6] At the 2014 Synod on the Family he told the bishops that synodality means '*not some of the bishops some of the time but all of the Church all of the time*'. [7]



Image (upper): Abstract, Steve Johnson, Unsplash. Into the Sunset

But Archbishop Comensoli has rejected such synodality. Instead of convening a diocesan assembly or synod, laying his concerns before his people, and inviting them to join him in a 'communal search', he has made a unilateral decision, settled on his own proposal, and then, only afterwards, invited them to comment on its implementation. That is not synodality.

Why the Archbishop has taken this precipitate decision is not clear, but it might be to forestall the division of the Archdiocese. Sydney Archdiocese was divided in 1986 when Catholics numbered less than one million. Melbourne now has over one million Catholics in a massive urban sprawl.

Plenary Council



Image (lower): All Saints, 1920, St Denis Parish, Menlo Park

Most worrying is that Archbishop Comensoli has effectively spurned the Plenary Council which commences in less than 80 days. Council Members from all dioceses will come together to 'make provision for the pastoral needs of the people of God' (C. 445), and the agenda will address specifically "How might the Church in Australia be better structured for mission, considering the parish, the diocese . . . ?"[8]

In pre-empting the Plenary Council, the Archbishop is dismissive of the highest governance body of the Catholic Church in Australia.

Pope Francis and Synod on Synodality

Pope Francis recently re-ordered preparations for the 2022 Synod of Bishops, calling for a new 2-year process of consultation at diocesan, continental, and universal levels.[9] He has instructed every diocesan bishop to LISTEN to 'all the baptised' of his diocese, beginning at the grassroots with 'the smallest parish, the smallest diocesan institution', and has specified a 7-month window for it: October 2021 to April 2022.[10]

With no commitment of synodal processes, what will Archbishop Comensoli do?

A synodal suggestion from Catholics for Renewal

Catholics for Renewal has a suggestion for the Archbishop: *Put your restructuring proposal on hold. Pause it for a year, even longer, and take the following steps.*

Step One: Announce that you will convene a diocesan assembly after the 1st Session of the Plenary Council. Make it a fully-fledged LISTENING exercise, with all the baptised of the Archdiocese invited to participate. Make it a face-to-face dialogue with the faithful. Focus it on synodality and make it a practical exercise in synodal governance, with bishops, clerics, religious and lay persons all together, speaking and listening to each other on the broader pastoral issues facing the Archdiocese. And for an informed dialogue, make public the substance of your 2019 *Quinquennial Report*.

Step Two: Retain the proposed regional assemblies now being organised, but refocus their agenda: away from the implementation of your restructuring proposal and towards the priority issues identified by the Melbourne faithful[11] and the broader issues on the Council agenda. Use the insights from these assemblies to assist the Archdiocese's Plenary Council members to better contribute to the Council, as well as prepare the ground for the diocesan assembly after the 1st Session of the Council.

Step Three: Convene a diocesan synod after the Plenary Council has concluded. Hopefully, the Council will have charted a way forward to get our Church 'back on mission'. That will be the time to plan the implementation of the Council's pastoral solutions and, if appropriate, restructure the diocese.

The Plenary Council is a commitment of Australia's bishops to a nationwide renewal of the Church in Australia. The Archbishop of Melbourne must demonstrate that he shares that commitment.

- [1] Archbishop Peter Comensoli, *The Way of the Gospel: Families of Communities*, Address to Archdiocesan Clergy, Bulleen, 28 April 2021.
- [2] At end-2020 there were 39 diocesan seminarians at Corpus Christi College. Half were overseas-born.
- [3] Archbishop Peter Comensoli, *Take the Way of the Gospel*, Talk to Lay Leadership Gathering, 22 May 2021.
- [4] Vatican II, *Christus Dominus*, n. 36
- [5] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 33
- [6] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 33
- [7] Archbishop Mark Coleridge, Knox Lecture, May 2016, East Melbourne: [the-knox-lectur21.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#)
- [8] <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au>
- [9] Vatican says 2023 'synod on synods' will be a process, not an event ([cruxnow.com](#))
- [10] Pope Francis, Address to Italian Bishops Conference on their decision of plan a national synod, 24 May 2021. He reminded them that "the whole people of God – all of them, from the bishop on down – is infallible in belief" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 12) : <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/synod-process-must-begin-bottom-pope-tells-bishops>
- [11] Plenary Council, *Diocesan Report for Melbourne Archdiocese: Microsoft Word - Diocesan Final Report - Melbourne FINAL.docx (catholic.org.au)* The priority issues were: care of neighbour, better faith formation, greater role for women, greater involvement of the laity, ending celibacy and allowing priests to marry, ordination of women, greater inclusion of all, fighting for human rights issues, outreach to youth, and more transparency and accountability on child sexual abuse.

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