

Two Responses from St Carthage's Parish to 'For a Synodal Church: Working Document of the Continental Stage'

1. St Carthage's reflection group 27 October 2022

Following an invitation to parishioners to participate in formulating a response, the following summary is the fruit of a discussion group of eight people in the parish who met on 27 Oct or engaged in subsequent email discussion to reflect on the working document. The summary has been written up by Constant Mews.

1. EXPERIENCES OF CHURCH

While the local church community is perceived as providing mutual support, there is also a widespread feeling of frustration about the lack of visible commitment within the episcopate to the cause of reform and renewal pursued by Pope Francis. While this involves acknowledging the reality of sexual abuse, such reforms must go beyond this, involving a return to the values of human dignity central to the Gospel. There is perception of the Church retreating into a silo, and repeating platitudes lamenting the influence of secularism. The Church must draw on the skills and insights of all its members, not just those of a small leadership elite. Many people do not experience "the common dignity of all the baptized" (par. 5) It needs much more attention and clarity as to how the Church can become an inclusive, open and welcoming Family of God (par. 16), especially to the hurt and disillusioned. Church leadership is perceived as remaining a male bastion, generating a catastrophic loss of confidence among those raised in its traditions, evident not just in decline of vocations to religious life (as if the word vocation was relevant only to rejecting married life), but in broader participation in sacramental life.

2. CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

The planet is undergoing an ecological crisis unparalleled in its history. It must be a collective responsibility for all Christians to care for creation, as laid out by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*, and to promote this as central to our calling. The Church must be involved in this movement. While the need for greater involvement of women in ecclesial structures was mentioned in par. 60-72, there was surprisingly little in the document about a transformation in awareness of multiple forms of gender and sexuality. Widening the tent must involve recognition that the eucharist should not be denied to those classified by the church authorities as outside communion because of their marital state or sexual identity. There is a need for reconceptualising official roles of leadership in the church, namely in considering the role of deacon, priest and bishop as able to be undertaken by women as much as men. The notion of priestly celibacy (which assumes that marital state is more important than moral probity) lacks foundation in scripture and is seen as symptomatic of the Church belonging to a past era, not recognising how society has changed.

3. PRIORITIES AND CALLS TO ACTION

Ordain women in the role of deacon, a category that refers to service not to gender. Denying ordination of women as deacons contradicts scripture (Rom. 16:1-2). The example of the Anglican Church shows that women are fully able to serve as priests and bishops. The Church must recognise pluriformity—different modes of being faithful to the gospel, whether through liturgical practice or sexual identity, just as much as through other forms of social identity. It demands reassessing traditions in the light of the Gospel. Pastoral Councils must become normative, and women must be involved at every level of decision making. Transparency needs to be brought to the forefront. The laity must be involved in decision-making at every level. Par. 20 rightly draws attention to the scandal of abuse. It needs to address the question of how the Church can regain moral authority when some bishops are perceived as still protecting the status and privilege of their peers rather than exposing the persistence of abuse? Synodality must be based on true metanoia, or our Church will continue to lack any congruency with the teachings of Christ. For the bishops to inaugurate public liturgies of lamentation and repentance would be a start.

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

- Church leaders and communities must publicly commit themselves to the cause of caring for creation as a core Christian responsibility as outlined in *Laudato si'*. Moral behaviour must be seen as involving corporate social behaviour as much as individual behaviour.
- Church leaders must commit themselves to pursuing Pope Francis's campaign to overcome the dangers of clericalism through true synodality, understood involving all levels of the community of the baptized. There is a need for conscious efforts to avoid resorting to condescending platitudes about religious devotions, without understanding that synodality must be based on true metanoia, or our Church will continue to lack any congruency with the teachings of Christ.
- Acknowledging the dignity of all the baptized, including those who are divorced and identifying as LGBTQ+, as able to receive the eucharist.
- Expanding the role of deacon as relevant to women as much as to men, and exploring.
- Revisiting the rules of celibacy as a requirement for priestly ministry, as part of a deeper reinterpreting of what vocation may mean (as applying to all people, not just a religious elite)
- Mandating the practice of establishing pastoral councils at parish and (arch) diocesan levels, involvement of women at every level of ecclesial organisation and responsibility.
- Bishops to be involved in public liturgies of lamentation and repentance for having allowed sexual abuse to go unpunished for decades, without regard for its consequences in the community.

2. Meeting to prepare a submission to the Bishops Synod in Rome October 2023

Convened by Richard and Jan Curtain for St Carthages Parkville, 8 December 2022

Richard outlined the purpose of the meeting. He noted that as it was a global consultation, the first for the Church, it was important for us to respond to the invitation to contribute. At a minimum, the effort we make can be shared and appreciated by others in the parish.

Richard read from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians Ch 4:1-16 on synodality and led the group of eight participants in a prayer suggested in the Reflection Guide. The focus of the discussion was on the working document for the Synod: **For a Synodal Church: A working document for the Continental stage (DSC)** entitled "enlarge the space of your tent"

The three questions we have been asked to discuss were:

1. Which intuitions resonated and which experiences were new or illuminating for you?
2. What substantial tensions or divergences emerged for you? What are the questions or issues that should to be addressed in the next steps in the process?
3. What are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shares with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?

1. Ideas that resonated

The pain of priests and the faithful struggling with the persistent and widespread destructive effects of sexual abuse; Clericalism as an ongoing problem; Anything that can assist and promote local activity is a good thing; Liked the analogy of "the tent" as it suggests the direction the Church needs to go outside its own small group; Ecumenism is essential -One God-so we need to get together with other Churches; In order for the tent not to sag we need discernment; The tent analogy is good - the Church needs to be expansive to be capable of sheltering all.

2. Tensions

"Change of Culture" critical to survival. Doubts were expressed about outcomes from the process because the Church has been unwilling to change. For example, the Plenary Council wasn't an exercise in Synodality as it was structured around Canon Law and not the Popes view of Synodality. Twenty of the 129 recommendations from the PC were about Governance. All the documents and the Plenary Council ignored the need to care for animals. Need to discuss the local parish more "think Globally act locally". There was a similarity of issues around the world. The impact of sexual abuse in other cultures has not been addressed. The Role of Women in the Church not resolved. Women's contribution to the Church needs to be valued through their representation and participation at all levels of Governance of the Church. Women's work in social justice also needs to be valued particularly their work in Australia on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers, the homeless and addressing climate change. The role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the Church also needs to be valued.

Richard outlined five key issues identified by the PC that could be implemented now, without the need for any reference to Rome. These same issues were raised in the Synod Working Document. 1. They are: (1) recognise the spirituality of indigenous peoples and support for Uluru Statement from the Heart; (2) implement action plans on the environment based on *Laudato Si'*; (3) establish Diocesan and parish Pastoral Councils and other synodal processes; (4) develop new opportunities for women in ministry, (5) and promote ecumenical and interfaith relationships.

2. Key Issues

What key issues emerged from the working document as the basis for identifying priorities?

What is the mission of the Church in the West? This needs some analysis. Vatican II recognised that the world has changed. [*We haven't worked out how to engage with the modern world, particularly in the West*]. To be missionaries to our world, we need to understand the world we are to minister to and live within. Neither the Plenary Council nor the DSC document demonstrate any convincing analysis of the modern world, especially the Western World.

Formation in the Church stops for many people at age 12-the end of Primary School. Formation is the beginning of participation in faith, not simply about faith. There is significant need at the parish level for Formation. The word itself is not a good one. Rather its meaning relates to more action less words- it's a growth process. The Formation concept is not passive. It's a process of development and growth – a change of attitude. It requires leaders who understand where people are in their development and are able to challenge them to move forward. Leaders need to understand how to engage with those they have been asked to lead – It needs to be an iterative developmental and transformative process.

For many Catholics, including highly educated Catholics, their faith stopped developing at age 12. As young people are more educated, they move into more complex thinking and they question what they have grown up with. A special focus should be on young people who are grappling with developing a more mature understanding of their faith and its place in their lives.

We need a faith that engages with the modern, secular world. With family breakdown, economic stress. The Church needs a better way of engaging with and understanding the modern world. Evangelicals are offering a sociological solution to community and are very active in building their communities. Leadership that understands this and the modern world is needed. Mentoring is important and we can all do more.

One group that has changed significantly is the position of women in the modern world. The gap between the Church and the wider society's view of women is great. Women with much better access to higher education are increasingly engaged in paid work on a par with men. This has produced a substantial change during the working life of most of us. There is a lot of evidence that women were an integral part of the leadership in the early church ministry. Baptism opens ordination to all as 'humans beings'. The current model of priesthood does not work because it promotes clericalism. The contemporary formation of priests needs to change.

3. Priorities

Valuing women	Through women’s participation in all levels of Governance in the Church, which can be acknowledged now by welcoming women to the diaconate.
Local Autonomy- subsidiarity at the local level	Responsibility, accountability and transparency locally. People in local churches should be given authority to discharge their duties as they see fit to do so. That there be triennial diocesan synods.
Greater ecumenical focus	“Unity is strength”. More effort to engage at the local level with other churches/ faiths. This requires a ” cultural change” to a welcoming culture. And ecumenical unity in action too – for climate change, refugees and the marginalised in our societies.
More lay responsibility for involvement in the liturgy and better understanding of Biblical texts used in the liturgy.	Training and peer support is needed. The language of the Liturgy needs to be reworked to use plain English. This also requires better understanding of the bible and biblical texts used in the liturgy. The homily is important for its ability to educate and spread the message
Concern for the welfare of animals	The rights of animals as sentient beings should not be subservient to the ecological system and to prevent its future occurrence.
Climate Change and Laudato Si	What is the Church doing in Australia to support the ideas articulated in Laudato Si as the Church response to climate change globally? More action needed at parish level, and with other churches, to develop action plans.
Sexual Abuse in the Church	How to respond that ensures that the process is one of healing and not just financial reparation. Highlight mandatory reporting obligations.

Priority rank order for the final submission, based on six participants’ priority scoring. 1 = top priority. It was possible to rate more than one issue with the same priority.

Priority ranking	Rank
Valuing women, not only in terms of involvement in governance, but also in diaconal ministry	1
More lay responsibility for involvement in the liturgy and better understanding of the Bible and Biblical texts.	2
Do more to promote the healing of those affected by Sexual Abuse in the Church	3
Local Autonomy needed- subsidiarity at the local level	4
More action at parish level on Climate Change and Laudato Si	4
Greater ecumenical focus	6
Show concern for the welfare of animals as sentient beings	7

Jan Donovan/Curtain, 9 December 2022, revised 11 December based on participant feedback.