

Discernment Paper #3

This document is an abridged version of one of the six thematic Discernment Papers from the communal discernment process leading to the Plenary Council. As such, it is only a “taste” of the original document, albeit a close reflection of its approach, spirit and content. To read the full text from the original Discernment Paper, go to the Plenary Council website:

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/continuing-the-journey-of-discernment/>

Key Question

How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is **Prayerful and Eucharistic**?

Executive Summary

God is calling us to be a Christ-centred Church that is a *community* which *participates*, is *formed* and is on *mission* as reflected in the Emmaus story. Being “prayerful” is part of a broad tradition, and “Eucharistic” is also understood in the largest sense, encompassing all that draws us towards the Eucharistic table. This document seeks to support God’s people in their praise, reverence and service of the living God.

I. Reflection on the Theme

The Listening and Dialogue responses revealed people’s desire and yearning

- to be invited to “full, conscious and active participation” (SC, 14) within the sacramental life of the Church;
- to be empowered to live out their Baptism;
- to understand their faith and how God takes flesh in their lives;
- to nurture their relationships with God, one another and creation;
- to nurture the communal aspect of the Australian Church, while being open and welcoming to all who seek membership in Christ’s body.

Many asked that ordained ministry be open to more people among the baptised.

Respondents care deeply about the language and words of the prayers at Eucharist. There were diverse views about what kind of translation of the Missal is needed, with some emphasising clarity of language and others dignity of expression. It was noted that Pope Paul VI encouraged translators to combine both clarity and dignity.

II. Pastoral Reality

Within a complex and rapidly changing Australian society, the Church experiences many challenges. There is institutional rejection, a decline in the trust of Church leaders, and a

decline in Catholics joining parish communities, participating in the Eucharist and seeing Sunday as a sacred time of rest and renewal. The ministry of priests is greatly appreciated. However, some priests in country dioceses, in large archdioceses and from overseas cultures are especially stretched and face particular difficulties.

Parents are affirmed as the first and foremost educators of their children. Parents and caregivers continue to value Catholic education, with one out of five Australian students attending a Catholic school (ABS, 2019). However, the number of children receiving Baptism in Australia is declining, and many families who do present their child for Baptism are not closely connected with a faith community. For many children, the first time they hear about God or experience a liturgy is through attendance at a Catholic school. Teachers are actively on mission in their schools.

There is a great variety of liturgical experiences of Catholics in Australia. Cultural and linguistic diversity has grown. Migrants and refugees, many of them Eastern Catholics, have brought with them a strong faith commitment. Multicultural situations in parishes result in a rich variety of liturgy and prayer, as well as the challenge of maintaining unity in diversity.

III. Theological Vision

As a Church, Christ is present to us in various ways, including many prayer forms and liturgical traditions. In the different liturgical families of East and West, we see a rich variety of rites, expressing the one prayer of Christ.

The Emmaus story (Lk 24:13-35), with its antecedents of both Word and Eucharist, helps us to hear God's call. At Emmaus, the Risen Lord offers eucharistic hospitality and expands our understanding of Eucharist. Like the two disciples, we often come to the Eucharist disheartened, not fully understanding that God's love remains with us in suffering and death.

The story of Jesus meeting the two disciples, listening to them and journeying with them is a model for formation in the "art of accompaniment" (EG, 169). From this our pilgrim Church can learn how to walk with all those who yearn for the company of Jesus.

The conclusion of the Emmaus story shows how an experience of faith is shared with a wider community. This is significant for the sharing of faith in small groups within the wider Church. At prayer and at Eucharist, we encounter Jesus Christ in our hearts. The heart is the place of truth, of encounter, of decision, and thus a place of listening and discernment. Seeking help from the Holy Spirit, prayer can lead us to gratitude for God's gifts, to ask for grace, and to dispose ourselves to meet Jesus each day, and thus be drawn into the life of the Trinity.

Our crucified and risen Lord remains with us today, calling us to return to our disillusioned community and to find new ways to bring hope through the Good News. This mission is entrusted to us at Baptism, nourished in the Eucharist, and enlivened by prayer.

IV. Major Challenges

Four areas were discerned as major challenges to becoming a prayerful and Eucharistic Church.

Community

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20).

Scripture offers inspiration from the early disciples’ experience of small, loving, outreaching communities, sharing faith over meals in the home (Acts 4:32-35). Intimate prayerful communities help people engage with Scripture and integrate the Gospel into daily life. These experiences complement the experience of Sunday Eucharist, but they are rare. Amalgamation and clustering of parishes has not been helpful in nourishing community.

The art of “communal discernment” is helpful to building community, however many are unfamiliar with its elements of listening, depth of prayer, time and letting go of one’s opinion.

Pope Francis’ image of the Church as a “field hospital” challenges us to become a community where people find space to rest, heal and recover their vitality.

Participation

Today, most of God’s people do not participate in parish celebrations, and the experience of Sunday Eucharist is often not inclusive. Priests are stretched and parish ministries struggle to find people to serve. Many Australian Catholics challenged the Plenary to consider the priesthood of the baptised laity (1 Pt 2:9) and what part they could have in liturgical ministry. More expressions of ministry for lay people, especially women, would enrich our sacramental life.

Formation

Our sacramental processes have become disconnected in their timing, age and understanding and thus could be reformed to allow the Church to better “accompany” the life of each person.

Our priests and seminarians need formation and support as leaders of prayer and worship, as do lay people who are engaged in liturgical ministries.

“Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1). Like the early disciples, God’s people today would appreciate help to integrate prayer and life. Couples and young people want help with important decisions, pointing to a wider challenge for the Church: formation in discernment.

Mission

A prayerful and Eucharistic Church is one that undertakes hands-on commitments among the human family. Our celebration of the Eucharist will always be incomplete while the poor go hungry. The challenge will always be there to connect our prayer with action for justice.

“The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open.... The Eucharist...is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak” (EG, 47). We face the challenge that many people are disillusioned, wounded or isolated members of our community.

V. Priorities and Proposals

Community

Prioritised question: How can we develop as a prayerful and Eucharistic community that is united in Christ while valuing and celebrating diverse spiritualities, customs and authentic liturgical practice?

Proposals for change:

1. Review and reimagine the model of parish and connected communities.
 - Implement a renewed emphasis on local communities.
 - Support the creation of small communities, centred on prayer with Scripture and sharing, that gather regularly over a meal and for spiritual nourishment.
 - Further develop ministries of hospitality and welcome.
 - Learn from the pastoral innovations that have taken place during COVID-19.
2. Implement structures that facilitate the collaborative pastoral leadership of clergy and laity.
 - Implement a new collaborative model for parishes to be led by clerical, religious and lay leaders.
 - Prioritise the establishment of parish and diocesan pastoral councils.
3. Ease the conditions and limitations under which the local bishop may permit the celebration of the third rite of the Sacrament of Penance, especially during Lent and Advent.
4. Encourage communal discernment as a privileged way of making important decisions.
 - Train clergy and lay leaders, together, in communal discernment.

Participation

Prioritised question: How can we best encourage full, conscious and active participation in the liturgical and prayerful life of the Church community?

Proposals for change:

1. Expedite and implement a review of the current translation of the Missal.

2. Implement a revision of the Lectionary that is accessible and considers inclusive language.
3. Implement a collaborative model of ordained and lay sacramental ministry.
 - Commission capable, trained lay people to specific sacramental ministries, including Baptism, preaching, blessing and witnessing marriages, officiating at funerals.
4. Develop further liturgical and prayerful events that are not dependent on clergy to lead them, including:
 - liturgies of the Word, with or without distribution of Holy Communion;
 - formally approved opportunities for breaking open the Word;
 - liturgical events in response to significant events (bushfires, floods, drought, war, grief, pandemic).

Formation

Prioritised question: How do we walk together as a pilgrim Church that effectively accompanies, ministers to and forms people, in light of secular and religious practice, as a community of Christ's disciples?

Proposals for change:

1. Renew the sacramental life of the Church to facilitate the participation and formation of God's people across life's transitions.
 - Implement national stage-related and age-related steps in preparation for sacramental initiation that recognise the understanding required for these sacraments. Begin by surveying dioceses.
 - Recommend that qualified educators, working with parents, lead the sacramental preparation of children.
 - Equip small local communities within a parish to assist parents in the sacramental preparation of their children.
 - Develop new liturgical and prayerful experiences that meet transition moments in people's lives.
2. Proactively teach people to pray.
 - Call on the ACBC to fund and develop a comprehensive national "ways to pray" online hub, app and social media page for all Catholics.
 - Call on all relevant bodies and personnel to develop and share Australian, theologically-sound educational resources on prayer, including traditional prayer forms (e.g., Our Father, Lectio Divina, scriptural Rosary).
 - Encourage dioceses to prepare programs in prayer and discernment.
3. Invest in ongoing formation opportunities for the people of God.
 - Form liturgical ministers, musicians and educators who lead prayer and worship.
 - Build discernment houses as 'hubs' for younger people.

- Link ministries of faith and discernment with Catholic schools and teachers in order to reach school leavers.
 - Explore a national approach to marriage formation.
 - Train liturgical musicians through diocesan sponsorships.
4. Improve how we form and equip clergy.
- Consider how formation of priests accompanies that of laity.
 - Ensure priestly formation is comprehensive, ongoing and reviewed regularly across the lifespan, including ongoing liturgical formation.
 - Ensure seminarians have the best possible training, including formation in liturgical leadership.

Mission

Prioritised question: How can our practice of being prayerful and Eucharistic draw us and others to Christ?

Proposals for change:

1. Encourage greater links between Eucharist and mission.
 - Review the Dismissal rite.
 - Encourage discerned involvement of the faithful in concrete ministries of service, justice and ecology.
2. Implement pastoral strategies to engage with disillusioned, drifting, wounded and isolated members of our community.
 - Through the NCPR, convene a team of pastoral theologians to survey spiritual needs.
 - Equip diocesan, parish and retreat centre teams with resources to respond to the findings of the survey.
 - Find new online and in-person ways to inform consciences on important Church teachings.

Abbreviations

ABS. Australian Bureau of Statistics.

ACBC. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

EG. Pope Francis. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World. *Evangelii Gaudium*. 24 November 2013.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

NCPR. National Centre for Pastoral Research.

SC. Second Vatican Council. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 4 December 1963.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.