

Report on the ACCCR Convocation of Catholics,
Synod on Synodality: Why we should care
2 February 2023

Lay Catholics: The future of the church.

Over 2,300 people registered to participate in a *Convocation of Catholics*, an update and discussion on **Synod on Synodality: Why we should care**, presented online by the *Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform* (ACCCR) on 2 February 2023.

The convocation was deftly moderated by Christina Reymer of *Be the Change, New Zealand*.

Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) introduced the Convocation with encouragement to all participants to remember that the Synod was for listening and discerning by and for all. He urged lay people and the ordained to be open to the Spirit and be ready for surprises with patience.

The focus, 'Why we should care' was addressed by all speakers.

Susan Pascoe skilfully provided the Australasian context for this world-wide movement, with references to Vatican II, Pope Francis' heavy investment in the synodal process, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Australian Plenary Council and the current momentum around the Voice to Parliament. She did not shy away from recognising the issues that feature so prominently in submissions from around the world but sees hope in the commitment of ordinary Catholics. There are considerable honest efforts in many quarters to make the processes authentic, without "filtering out" unwanted agenda items, as exemplified in the Document for the Continental Stage, '*Enlarge the Space of your Tent*'

Francis Sullivan posed the question, '*Do we not sense the desire for a different Church, one that is more welcoming, inclusive and relevant to our daily lives and the lives of those we love and care for?*' He spoke of '*a deep disquiet brewing, of a sense in the Catholic world that things are not in order*', and went on to present a vision of the Church he dreams of. It will require a paradigm shift to radical inclusion, an embracing of human life in all its forms, a church where no one is throwing stones or judging others, where love is the bond bringing us closer together. Our bishops seem to be out of touch with the existential demands of ordinary human living, developments in the sciences, particularly the human sciences, and forms of socio-political organisation. Customs that diminish the dignity and rights of women must be immediately addressed. '*So where will be the episcopal voices to take us to beyond our fears?*'

He quoted Pope Francis: 'the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a source of healing for us all.' Tensions relating to the status of women, excluded LGBTQIA+, the divorced and remarried, must be resolved. The Synod documents call for '*radical inclusion*'. This means facing the hard questions full on and embracing everyone in love.

Unity is important but, more so, how we hold that unity; where the revelations of human experience are acknowledged as manifestations of divine creation rather than with unchanging characteristics and beliefs. '*Our challenge in this synodal process is to integrate modern understandings of human nature with bringing*

a wholeness to our sense of being Church' he said. The task is daunting but success will be a church worth the effort.

Grace Wrakia spoke of growing up as a third generation Catholic in Papua New Guinea. She likened the synodal style to her own Melanesian tradition, of discussing things as a community before making decisions combined with her Lassallian training of 'together and by association'. By participating in Melbourne with the Writing and Discernment Group for the Oceania gathering of bishops of Australia, New Zealand, PNG and the Solomon Islands, and the Pacific regions, she felt valued by the self-affirming and respectful synodal practice of the group. Her experience of synodality is one of empowerment.

Patricia Gemmell offered a grass-roots perspective arising from her experience in developing responses to the Synod process and the Plenary Council. She described meeting apathy among the clergy, plus a minimalist effort by bishops to promote the Synod and largely uninterested lay people. This has not dampened her spirit or slowed her enthusiasm for renewal as she sees opportunities for growth at the parish or local level. The Document for the Continental Stage was like an invigorating breath of fresh air.

Patricia is drawn by the vision of Pope Francis for a listening and compassionate church. The Synod handbook summarises our journey, *'to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission.'* Each one of us is responsible for this work, according to our gifts. It is a matter of bringing people together to learn and experience what it means to be a synodal church. We have to make it happen.

Lay leadership is coming to the fore. We have a choice to make; the future of our church is at stake. *'Lay people are the energy, the power for renewal and reform, and the best hope for the future of the church'*. We who care have to make it happen. It is time to build a people's movement. *"Why does the Synod matter? Well, it's one of those forks in the road, isn't it, where we have a choice to make a difference, to dream of a different way of being church and to make it happen. It's simply the future of the church at stake,"* she said.

The questions and comments in the chat ranged widely, covering issues of when information on the Plenary and the Synod would be made public, how lay members were chosen to attend Synod meetings, fundamental changes required in the Church's governance such as a culture of inclusion, the full equality of women in ministry and leadership, and whether the opposition of some bishops to a synodal church will prevail.

The message that came across loud and clear from this well-supported Convocation of Catholics, organised by and featuring lay Catholics, is that lay people are the energy, the power for renewal and reform, and the best hope for the future of the church. Synodality should open the Church's leadership to the sense of faith of the faithful as envisaged by Vatican II.

Eleanor Flynn and Peter Johnstone
Co-conveners, ACCCR