

Executive Summary

Catholic Diocese of Parramatta: A Case Study of Becoming a Synodal Church

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The Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, the first Australian diocese to call a diocesan synod after the 2021/2022 Plenary Council, is the subject of this second Sense of the Faithful case study on synodality. It explores the diocese's efforts to implement "a synodal way of being Church" – a collaborative, inclusive, Spirit-led style of governance and mission – as demonstrated in its 2023 Diocesan Synod and subsequent 2024 Pastoral Plan.

The idea of a synod – "walking together" – is rooted in early Church practice. Pope Francis used "synodality" to describe the style and processes of listening, shared responsibility and discernment by all the baptised, needed to implement the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, in contrast with governance by clerical decision-making alone. Synodality was the way God intended the Church to live in the third millennium, the pope said.

Parramatta Diocese was established in 1986 to serve Sydney's rapidly growing and multicultural western suburbs, incorporating 1.3 million people, with almost a quarter identifying as Catholic – one of Australia's most diverse Catholic populations. While its numbers are stable, the community is ageing, though younger in profile than many dioceses. The diocese includes 45 parishes, 80 schools, and significant migrant, Indigenous, and refugee communities.

Bishop Vincent Long, Parramatta's fourth bishop, convened the Diocesan Synod, held in October 2023, which was shaped by wide consultation with 5,000 people. It produced 24 resolutions, which became 49 commitments and 57 local action examples in the Pastoral Plan, *Behold I Am with You Always: Diocese of Parramatta's Pastoral Plan for a Synodal Church*. The plan identifies five priorities – prayer, mission, formation, listening/dialogue/discernment, and community – with actions ranging from creating ethnic chaplaincies and First Nations councils to promoting lay leadership, youth engagement, and outreach to the LGBTIQ+ community.

Implementation of the plan is being led by diocesan facilitators in dialogue with the diocese's 45 parishes and multiple organisations, supported by the Mission Enhancement Team and diocesan communications. A key plank in the plan is to renew pastoral councils – at diocesan, deanery, and parish levels – as vehicles of synodal listening. Catholic Schools Parramatta has introduced governance reforms and frameworks to align schools and parishes in mission. The Holy Spirit Seminary has also begun embedding synodal formation in clergy training.

Parramatta has seen strong support for synodality at diocesan and some parish levels, particularly in new, multicultural parishes such as Marsden Park. Yet responses vary: some parishes remain "business as usual," and many clergy express uncertainty or resistance, fearing loss of authority or doctrinal compromise. The uneven reception is a significant challenge, alongside cultural inertia, lay passivity, and intergenerational gaps. Engagement with young people, First Nations communities, and marginalised groups is advancing but requires greater reach and consistency.

Parramatta's synodal journey demonstrates both the promise and difficulty of building a synodal Church. There is promise in the strong episcopal direction, inclusive structures at a diocesan level and the pastoral Plan's harmony with the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops. But a successful foundation for a Church that is collaborative, missionary and attentive to those on the margins depends on sustained formation, attitudinal change, and ongoing dialogue between clergy and laity.