

Sense of the Faithful Newsletter No 7 - 23 June 2021

We have posted two new articles on the [parishes webpage](#). The [first article](#) of two pages is by renowned biblical scholar [Fr Frank Moloney](#) SDB. He provides a brief historical and current perspective on the role of the Word of God in the life of the Catholic Church, lamenting how many Australian Catholics lack an understanding of the four Gospels. The purpose of his note is to outline a seven-part proposal to the Plenary Council to set up a diocese and parish-based program of biblical formation for all parishioners, funded nationally.

The second article is by Therese D'Orsa, who is [Professor Mission and Culture](#), at BBI-The Australian Institute of Theological Education, and Sense of the Faithful committee member. Her article is entitled '[Entering the Story of God's Mission: A Key to Parish Renewal](#)'(14 pages). The article is intended as a conversation starter on what the concept of mission entails and how it applies to parish life.

Plenary Council agenda now available

The agenda for the plenary council has [just been released](#). It is in the form of 16 questions under the six headings of: conversion, prayer, formation, structures and governance.

Proposed changes in parish structures for the Archdiocese of Melbourne

The PC agenda includes one leading question under the heading structures (rather than communities). This question asks 'how might the church in Australia be better structured for mission, considering the parish, the diocese, religious orders, the PJP's (public juridic person, a canonical legal entity) and new communities?

This question reflects the proposed changes announced by Archbishop Comensoli in late May 2021 for the Archdiocese of Melbourne. He has proposed a [five-year strategy](#) to move from some 210 parishes to 50 to 60 missions. The key elements of this strategy in Archbishop Comensoli's own words are spelt out in his follow-up email to the 170 or so lay parish leaders who attended the meeting.

Let me reiterate to you what we are striving to accomplish overall:

I am calling us all, as God's people, to see how we might identify and arrange the Archdiocese into Mission locations, each comprising a family of communities. This is not about parish amalgamations or closures, nor the grouping of parishes into already prescribed boundaries.

There are no pre-determined models or propositions at this stage – only some data and logic that may provide food for thought as we work through our conversations at local levels;

There will be places that are ready to embrace a Mission quickly, and others that will take time. This is not a race, but a way to build up our communities of worship and faith for our children, and their children;

Our task now is to see what our faith families might look, feel and live like – what gifts our communities can bring to each other's lives, before questions of the number of parishes or communities within each Mission might be properly asked; and,

The pathway ahead will be a time of prayerful discernment, and an openness to building towards a deeper encounter with Christ within local circumstances.

Source: email to parish lay leaders, 10 June 2021

The opportunity presented by the proposed strategy

Disruptive change can be just as much an opportunity to achieve better outcomes as it is a threat to existing, taken-for-granted arrangements. Top-down initiated change may be necessary when bottom-up responses have been slow in coming. This has been the case with changes to parish communities. Changes to parishes have taken place. One example is the partnered parish of Sacred Heart Diamond Creek, St. Mary's Greensborough & St. Thomas the Apostle Greensborough North. Another example is the merged Holy Trinity Parish comprising the three communities of St Peter's Bentleigh East, St Paul's Bentleigh and St Catherine's Moorabbin.

However, top-down change needs to be open to allow bottom-up responses to emerge. This opportunity is available under the proposed strategy of the archdiocese. The plan is for parishes to move towards new collaborative arrangements where they see value in doing this. The strategy aims to have two to three missions identified by the end of 2021 and to make them operational by the end of 2022.

This more open-ended approach appears to be in reaction to earlier attempts by the Archdiocese to impose a top-down solution of shared priests on a group of parishes to address a problem of parish priests retiring and the need to replace them. This was acknowledged at the parish lay leaders meeting as a particular problem with the recent formation of the Bayside mission which comprised parishes that did not first have a chance to identify what elements they had in common.

What is missing from the proposed strategy?

What is missing from the top-down proposed change strategy is a mechanism that ensures that the lay voice can take an active role in this change process, rather than a passive reactive one, as it now appears to be the case. Archbishop Comensoli has already set the parameters for how the change is to be conducted without any input from an official lay advisory body such as a diocesan pastoral council. At the meeting for parish lay leaders, mention was made of support for the parish priests of ten parishes seeking to make changes. However, no mention was made of an equivalent programme of support lay leaders of these parishes or other parishes requesting it.

There is a need for better lay preparation for the more decentralised discussions at a regional level within the archdiocese which are taking place in early August. An outline of an agenda or background information on the strategy's suggested parish areas for closer collaboration are not yet available. Instead, parishes have been offered online weekly prayer sessions as well as an online workshop to help parishes to 'engage deeply with the content of the pastoral letter'.

What is needed in setting up more collaborative arrangements with other parishes is an opportunity for lay parish leaders to find out what has worked in the past and what has not worked. Now we lay people of the church have a golden opportunity to voice an opinion. However, the opportunity requires strong action and commitment immediately.

Call from the Vatican for lay consultations related to the Bishops Synod on Synodality in the Church

The need for a more formal process of lay consultation is also needed to respond to the recent [request from the Vatican](#) in the form of the Cardinal Secretary General of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops. [This request](#) is to each diocesan bishop to arrange by the end of October

a diocesan phase (October 2021-April 2022) during which each individual faithful can participate in the diocesan consultation. This phase will end locally with a pre-synodal assembly: the culminating moment of diocesan discernment.

The themes of the Bishops' Synod are 'For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission. These themes are close to the reasons Archbishop Comensoli has given for the changes he has proposed. So a diocesan level consultation on issues related to the 'Take the Way of the Gospel' journey is needed to respond to both the Pope's intention and the gap in the Archdiocese's approach to date.