

# **Vastly different views on reform: Australian and New Zealand National Synod reports compared**

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## **Differences in authorship**

There are significant differences in content and authorship between Australia's national synthesis report for the bishops' synod and the equivalent national report from New Zealand. Before focusing on the differences in content, the difference in authorship of the reports needs to be noted. The [Australian national synthesis for the Bishops Synod](#) was prepared by the National Centre for Pastoral Research, which is an agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Three staff members of the centre listed as the authors. Acknowledged also as contributors are members of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the Synod of Bishops Diocesan Contact Persons in Australia Catholic Religious Australia and The Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons. Also acknowledged as contributors are the members of the Australian Synod of Bishops Working Group.

The [New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference National Synod](#) synthesis, on the other hand, lists the five bishops, under Cardinal John Dew as the Conference President, as the only names referenced in the report. This difference in authorship helps to explain the different content of the two reports. The authors of the Australian report were given the brief of summarising the consultations, which they have done competently. However, the bishops collectively were not able to offer any significant response to the issues raised. The New Zealand report was owned by the bishops from the start, and this is reflected in their detailed set of recommendations for the Catholic Church in New Zealand in the here and now. In addition, the New Zealand bishops accepted the invitation from the Synod Secretariat to make recommendations for change for the Synod to address.

## **The Australian National Synthesis on changes needed is minimal**

The Australian national report noted (Para 12) that:

*Overall, there was a need to recognise and acknowledge the 'signs of the times', to be more energised, more willing to listen, able to acknowledge past failings, humbler and to bring healing and be more faithful to Gospel values. Some areas for change were recognised as being women in leadership and in all ministries; professional development for laity and clergy, including bishops; leadership within dioceses and parishes; and lay people in all areas of ministry. People voiced the need for courage for the Church to move forward on mission'.*

However, the Australian Bishops failed to respond to this call by offering any sense of future direction or to propose specific changes. The only recommendation mentioned in the conclusion (Para 72)) was 'communicating the Word of God to future generations in language that they can use in the Australian community, continuing to work for a more just, compassionate and equal world, and being ever welcoming to people of different age-groups and backgrounds who are searching for relevance and inclusion and, in the end, are searching for Christ'.

## The New Zealand Bishops recommend a range of changes

The New Zealand bishops, in marked contrast, have been much more forthright in their responses to the issues raised in the consultations. They listed five areas for action at the local level. These are:

- Embed synodality and discernment as our way of working together
- Listen further to those who feel marginalised
- Deepen our understanding of the bicultural nature of the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Learn to journey together in a synodal way by sharing decision-making, with clergy with decision-making power listening carefully to lay people. Also encourage greater use of the bishop's power to authorise lay pastoral ministers to baptise and conduct funerals in parishes.
- Focus on mission. This requires acknowledging that there is confusion about what mission involves, and the need to find ways to provide clarity; use discernment processes in parishes to identify particular forms of mission locally; reinvigorate our approach to social justice, focusing on the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor; build up our local ecumenical relationships and find ways to move forward from the abuse crisis to engage in mission.

The NZ bishops also responded to the request from the Synod Secretariat for suggestions on those points that the bishops believe require further discernment of the Church. Five areas for further discernment of the Church are proposed.

1. **Remove barriers to journeying together in a synodal way:** Enable co-responsible leadership, with decision-making shared by priests, bishops and lay people; Remove barriers to collaborative ministry involving clergy and laity; Allow the local Ordinary to mandate lay people to anoint the sick as part of collaborative ministry; Allow the local Ordinary to mandate lay people to routinely give homilies in his diocese; and Ensure active and transparent involvement of the local Church in the selection of their bishops.
2. **Promote inclusion:** Accept intercommunion between Christians of different denominations; Welcome LGBTQI+ people without restrictions; Welcome with compassion divorced and remarried Catholics to the Eucharistic table; Change the language of Church teaching and catechesis to be fully inclusive and sensitively worded; Support and bless committed loving relationships, irrespective of gender or marital status; Reform liturgical language so that it is welcoming and inclusive of all.
3. **Carry out discernment with open minds and involving the whole Church on these issues:** The possibility of optional celibacy for priests; The possibility of the ordination of women to the priesthood or at least diaconate, to extend the many ways in which women participate in their local Church; The Church's sexual moral teaching, taking into account contemporary scientific understanding and the lived experience of the People of God (*sensus fidelium*).
4. **Review the formation of priests:** Provide more community engagement in the formation of seminarians; Form seminarians in co-responsibility and synodality.
5. **Revitalise our liturgy:** Entrust liturgical reform (at least to a limited degree) to local bishops' conferences; Initiate a new English translation of the Roman Missal.

## **Australian diocesan views on the reforms needed**

At the diocesan level in Australia, diocesan bishops made a range of recommendations. However, only one bishop, Archbishop Coleridge, offered in the synthesis for his archdiocese similar suggestions for further discernment by the bishops Synod. In the [diocese synthesis for Brisbane](#), these recommendations were made.

**Companions on the journey:** That the Church develop clear pathways of inclusion that make clear that all are welcome especially for those in irregular situations

That adult formation become a priority in the Church, focusing on what the Church believes, why, and how these beliefs interface with an unbelieving society. Formation also needs to outline the distinctions between what is essential and unchangeable, compared with those aspects of our tradition which may develop further.

That the Church actively promote a renewal of liturgical music and liturgical engagement, which involves the active encouragement of musicians to write and produce new liturgical music that resonates with their respective cultures. Laity are encouraged, empowered, and formed in all areas of lay liturgical engagement.

**Participation:** That the Church prioritise the question of the diaconate for women to settle the issue. Given that the ordination to the order of deacon configures the ordained to the person of Christ as servant, not priest, it seems unclear why women would not be admitted as candidates for the diaconate.

That the Church examine the possibility of married men for the presbyterate in line with what the Church already has developed for ordained married men coming to Catholicism from other Christian traditions.

That processes of decision making in the Church be made transparent and open. This includes procedures for appointing bishops and priests, as well as making changes at an Archdiocesan level and the parish level.

That both the lay and ordained do professional development on the concept of synodality and how it applies in the Church, recognising that synodality is not necessarily democratic.

**Mission:** That the Church prioritise formation, particularly in relation to the mission of the Church and what it means for all the baptised. Formation must include active participation in missional initiatives related to making disciples and living as disciples, which means actively engaging in social and climate injustices.

That formation on mission focus on the art of dialogue and debate with an eye to what the Church teaches and how these teachings interface with the world.

That a focus of ecumenical dialogue be on those Christian traditions that are growing. What might we learn from what they are doing, and how might some of their strategies be integrated into a Catholic context?