

# Executive summary

## A guide to a unique consultation process and results

The 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality is has been the first time an extensive, bottom-up process of consultation.’ This started at the parish level, followed by a discernment process that produced diocesan and national synthesis reports.<sup>1</sup> The next stage involved further discernment to produce the [Working Document for the Continental Stage](#) (DCS) called ‘Enlarge the space of your tent’ (Isaiah 54:2) and further consultations at the parish level to provide a national response. These national responses to the DCS were then used as the basis for deliberations at each of the seven continental assemblies. These continental assemblies have been unique events for most regions in the Catholic Church. As the European Continental Assembly noted:

*It was the first time in Europe that the People of God - bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, lay men and women - gathered to listen to one another and dialogue in an atmosphere of prayer and listening to the Word of God. It was a new and unexpected experience. The joy of being part of the Church, which we had previously experienced in the diocesan stage, flourished and multiplied. Everyone had the opportunity of getting to know realities different from the one in which they live. Together we discovered our common adhesion to Christ. Sometimes we experience tensions and uncertainties, but we realize that trusting the Lord, we can go on (Para 2).*

The purpose of this note is to offer readers a guide to the documents that have resulted from this extensive consultation and discernment process. Not only is the bottom-up process a complete departure from past practice. The resulting documents are also unique, in their focus, content and involvement of key Church leaders, as noted in the quote above. See the paper: ‘What is different about this Synod’ for analysis of the pressures on the bishops in the First Assembly in Rome to move out of their comfort zones.

## Key findings on a range of changes proposed

The most recent product of this discernment process is the guide for delegates to the First Assembly in Rome called the [Instrumentum Laboris or Working Document](#) (20 June 2023). This summarises the key priorities identified by the continental assemblies using the national responses as sources (See the paper: ‘Introduction to the Working Document’ for key highlights on the issues First Assembly will discuss).

### **New Zealand and Australia compared: why such a stark difference?**

The papers we have produced aim to highlight the changes that many in the Church are seeking as well as evidence of the reluctance to change on the part of some bishops. A comparison of the national syntheses shows up marked differences in how the bishops have responded. This applies particularly to the comparison of the Australian and New Zealand national syntheses. The New Zealand bishops have proposed a range of reforms that can be implemented locally in addition to the reforms they have asked the Synod in Rome to consider. The New Zealand

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<sup>1</sup> The Diocesan Synthesis reports, the Australian national synthesis and national syntheses around the world can be found on the [global Church webpage on the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops](#) of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

bishops have highlighted the need to embed synodality in the Church and remove the barriers to it. They have promoted inclusion for LGBTQI+, divorced and remarried, and urge the blessing of loving relationships irrespective of gender or marital status. They are also open to optional celibacy for priests and women ordained to the priesthood. The Australian bishops, in marked contrast, have offered at the end of the national synthesis very few and banal recommendations for change.

### **Archdiocese of Brisbane is the only diocese to advocate changes in Church canon law**

No recommendations for change in the Church's law has come from the Australian bishops at a national level. Only one Australian diocesan bishop, Archbishop Coleridge, offered recommendations for change for the Synod to consider (see the paper: 'The responses of the Australia and NZ bishops compared'). The recommended changes in the Brisbane Synthesis emphasise **inclusion**: 'That the Church develop clear pathways of inclusion that make clear that all are welcome especially for those in irregular situations'; **women ordained as deacons**: 'That the Church prioritise the question of the diaconate for women to settle the issue'; **married priests**: 'That the Church examine the possibility of married men for the presbyterate...'; and more **ecumenical dialogue**: '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?'

### **Differences between dioceses on three key issues**

We provide further insight into differences within the Catholic Church in Australia by looking at the diocesan syntheses and their websites. The paper focuses on the different responses of Australian dioceses to three key issues endorsed by the Plenary Council and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference: Indigenous recognition, diocesan pastoral councils and Laudato Si action plans (see the paper: 'Different responses of Australian dioceses').

We have used the available information from the diocesan website to put together a case study of the steps undertaken to set up a diocesan pastoral council. The case study is of the Diocese of Sandhurst in Victoria, whose bishop, Shane Mackinlay, one of the two bishops selected to be delegates to the Assembly in Rome.

### **Regional similarities and differences in the Catholic Church**

The final paper we have prepared looks at the profile of the similarities and differences in emphasis in the Catholic Church between regions. This paper: 'Synod Continental Stage process and key priorities' summarises how the seven different continental assemblies engaged in a synodal process and the priorities they identified. What is notable is the extent to which a range of issues are common between the regions, as well as the differences shaped by history and current socio-political pressures and uncertainties.

The priorities listed in the Oceania synthesis report also include many of the changes advocated by the New Zealand bishops. These include the need for the Church to become more synodal, the urgency of cultural and structural change in Church leadership and giving much greater attention to the role and place of women in the Church. However, the response of the bishops at the Oceania Assembly, under the leadership of Bishop Anthony Randazzo from the Diocese of Broken Bay NSW, was qualified and the opposite of the enthusiastic response of the bishops at the European Assembly (see the paper: Synod Continental Stage process and key priorities' for the details of the bishops responses in both instances).