



A Christmas Message

to the Catholic Diocesan Bishops of the Local Churches in Australia

Dear Diocesan Bishops,

Vatican II's *Decree on the Bishops Pastoral Office in the Church* told you that it 'earnestly desires that the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with new vigour'. The *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops* advises you that 'the diocesan Synod is the instrument *par excellence* for assisting the Bishop in establishing the canonical ordering of the diocesan Church'.

The years of inertia

However, in the 46 years from the close of Vatican II until 2011, only 5 of the 102 diocesan bishops who governed the 28 local churches in Australia (Bathersby, Walker, Carroll, Clarke, Foley) convened a diocesan synod.

Prior to 2011 the bishops of 13 dioceses had not convened a diocesan synod for over 50 years, the bishops of 5 dioceses had not convened a diocesan synod for over 90 years, and the bishops of 5 dioceses had never convened a diocesan synod.

In May 2011 when Catholics for Renewal began, its members were aware that the Australian diocesan bishops were refusing to convene diocesan synods. They were also aware that they had the right, and even the duty, 'to express their opinion on things which concern the good of the Church' (*Lumen gentium*, 37).

Their first action was to draft an [Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI and the Catholics Bishops of Australia](#) which included 'we call on each diocesan bishop to convene at an early date a synod in his diocese, under the provisions of Canon Law (c. 460-468), to discuss how the local Church might be a more authentic witness in the 21st century.'

A total of 8164 Australian Catholics from every State and Territory signed the *Open Letter* in the hope there might be some response. However, in the 10 years from 2011 to the First Assembly of the Plenary Council in October 2021, only two of the 27 new diocesan bishops who had care of the local churches decided to convene a diocesan synod (Holohan, Wright).

In response to [The Light from the Southern Cross](#) report you all committed to convening a diocesan 'synod' – not an 'assembly' – within 5 years of the close of the 5th Plenary Council. This was confirmed with Decree 7 of the Council. But now, two and a half years later, only

two bishops (Long, Coleridge) have convened the promised synods, and only one other (O'Regan) has a synod planned for May 2025.

For the Catholic faithful who care about the renewal of the Church in Australia, your collective inertia has been staggering - 129 diocesan bishops convening just 9 diocesan synods over 58.5 years.

A change in epochs

But times have changed. Pope Francis has said: 'We are not living in an epoch of change, but in a change in epochs', and the Catholic Church is at the centre of this change.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the ***Final Document: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*** of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,¹ approved by Pope Francis on 26 October 2024 to be part of the ordinary Magisterium.

Francis says it is now up to the diocesan bishops of the local churches to accept and implement the proposals. And he encourages you to approach this phase with courage, creativity, and humility. He also expects you to report on the choices you make in your local Church concerning the proposals in the *Final Document*.

***When the Australian bishops come to Rome for their ad limina visit
"each bishop will be asked to discuss what choices have been made
in his local church regarding what has been indicated
in the Final Synod Document." - Pope Francis***

While Francis acknowledges that it will take time to address certain issues that require consensus across the global Church, the Catholic Church in Australia is possibly the best-positioned in the world to move quickly on implementing these proposals, having held a Plenary Council in 2021/2022.

Implement the proposals without delay

For that reason, Catholics for Renewal and the many Australian Catholics who desperately want renewal in our local churches, urge you, if you have not done so already, to implement without delay the following proposals:

- make the local churches welcoming with the culture and praxis of accountability and the involvement of lay men and women competent in pastoral and financial planning;
- publish an externally audited annual diocesan financial report, showing how the temporal goods and financial resources of the diocese are being managed;

¹ [ENG---Documento-finale traduzione-di-lavoro.pdf](#)

- publish an annual report on the mission of the diocese, including its safeguarding initiatives, progress on lay access to positions of authority and decision-making, and specify the proportion of lay men and women;
- conduct periodic evaluations of all the ministries and roles within the local diocese;
- establish a diocesan pastoral council, and ensure that its members can propose agenda items similar to that allowed for the presbyteral council;
- mandate parish pastoral councils and ensure that its members can propose agenda items similar to that allowed for the presbyteral council;
- ensure that the membership of the pastoral councils include greater involvement of women, young people, and those living in poverty or on the margins;
- convene a diocesan synod as your more highly valued participatory body for regular consultation between you and the portion of the People of God entrusted to you. Make it the place for listening, prayer and discernment, particularly when it comes to choices pertaining to the life and mission of a local Church. And ensure you convene the diocesan synod regularly to demonstrate your accountability and evaluate your implementation of your diocesan pastoral plan.

If you begin implementing these proposals without delay, we are convinced that you will be offering the Catholics of Australia the most wonderful Christmas Gift that they could possibly have imagined.

Warmest best wishes for a Joyous Christmas,

Catholics for Renewal

6 December 2024



Nativity and Journey of Magi, tempera and gold on panel,
Marchigiana School, Vatican Museum.