

Building stronger parishes

The need to revitalise parishes in decline is top of mind for many Catholics, and was one of the top eight issues identified in our analysis of the recommendations of the six Working Group Reports. How to revitalise the parish is not discussed as a single issue in the Working Document and no strong recommendations are made about what changes at the diocesan and parish level are needed. The following general question is asked under the heading ‘journey together in discernment’:

Do diocesan and parish structures match the pastoral needs of contemporary Australia and how might they be renewed to serve the mission of evangelisation? (para 48).

Para 53 also notes that ‘There is desire for consultative and collaborative approaches to governance at all levels in the Church’ and suggests that ‘Diocesan Pastoral Councils and Parish Pastoral Councils are two widely supported avenues through which the expertise of lay people could be better utilised’.

Parish Governance

In our view, the Working Document fails to highlight the urgency of the need for change in relation to diocesan and parish governance. The document does not provide information about what the Church’s Canon Law requires and recommends regarding these structures. Nor does it provide evidence on the current status of these structures in Australian dioceses.

To provide a sense of clear direction, the document could have referred to the requirement in Canon Law (#511) for every diocese to have a Pastoral Council [which] ‘investigates, considers, and proposes practical conclusions about those things which pertain to pastoral works in the diocese, ... to the extent that pastoral circumstances suggest it’. The Church’s own governance rules expect each diocesan bishop to have a Pastoral Council, but in Australia only seven of the 28 Australian Catholic dioceses have pastoral councils. They are missing in the major archdioceses of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth.¹

Canon Law (#537) also requires that: ‘In each parish there is to be a finance council which is governed, in addition to universal law, by norms issued by the diocesan bishop and in which the Christian faithful, selected according to these same norms, are to assist the pastor in the administration of the goods of the parish’

However, Canon Law (#536) states that the requirement for a parish pastoral council in each parish is left to diocesan bishop to decide:

If the diocesan bishop judges it opportune after he has heard the presbyteral council, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish...

It is, therefore, clearly within the scope of the Plenary Council to discuss and recommend that each bishop set up a diocesan Pastoral Council and encourage each parish in his diocese to set up its own pastoral council.

Limited reference to the role of lay leadership in parishes of the future

The Working Document states (para 43) that the parishes ‘that flourish exhibit great strengths such as a committed leadership from the parish priest, strong parish community, active parish

¹ David Timbs, 2021, ‘[Catholic Bishops cannot govern their dioceses without pastoral councils](#)’, Pearls and Irritations, 14 February.

groups, a welcoming attitude and attempts to be inclusive'. However lay parish leadership is mentioned only as a measure used where priests are not available: 'some parishes in more isolated areas are invigorated by lay leaders and pastoral workers, who lead Sunday liturgy in absence of a priest'.

Para 44 reinforces this point about parishes coping a lack of priests for rural areas but also notes that some rural parishes 'thrive through innovative leadership structures, strong community and ecumenical engagement and adaptability, planning and vision'.

Para 45 calls for new models for parish life but without any suggestions about what this might involve.

Many submissions expressed a strong appreciation of the importance of parish life and a desire for parishes to be vibrant, inclusive places of belonging and outward-looking communities. Newer ways of being parish are needed to support younger generations engaging online and through schools and universities. New models are needed.

Para 52 does highlight the role of lay pastoral ministries in different settings, including parishes.

The emergence of lay pastoral ministries in parishes, schools, hospitals and welfare organisations has given new vitality to evangelisation, pastoral care and outreach. This has led to an increase in collaborative approaches to ministry in the parish context. Many submissions recognised the need for appropriate formation and support to assist lay people in discerning and using their gifts wisely.

The reference given related to this affirmation of lay pastoral ministry is a July 2018 report by Australian Catholic Bishops Conference called '[Faithful Stewards of God's Grace: Lay Pastoral Ministers in the Church in Australia](#)' (pp 40). However, what is not acknowledged is the large number of Catholic laity with appropriate theological and pastoral experience who could take on lay leadership roles in parishes.

Para 124 notes that the sustainability of some parishes, and of the pastoral care provided by priests, can be an acute question for some country dioceses and is becoming more widespread in urban dioceses as well. But the response to this situation is not directive. It is only suggested that this reality **might** provoke discussion about how to address the problem.

In some rural and isolated parishes in Australia lay women and men lead Sunday liturgies in the absence of a priest. This reality might provoke discussion about how the Church in Australia best provides support for parishes ...

The possible solutions suggested include the following: the consideration of diocesan boundaries, inter-diocesan collaboration and other forms of mutual support, the sharing of resources and essential personnel for the sake of the faithful in these parts. However, para 125 suggests, without mentioning lay leaders that 'the Plenary Council **might** (my emphasis) consider ways in which the formation, resourcing and support of clergy and religious can be enhanced at a national, diocesan and parish level'.

Conclusion

The Working Document notes at various points the importance of building strong parishes and some of the options available, but does not stress the urgency of this issue nor explore in any

detail any of the options. We are seeking contributions from people who are addressing, or have addressed, these issues within Australian parishes, to help bring these issues more to the fore at the Plenary Council.