

THE SYNODAL PROCESS: A NEW ZEALAND PERSPECTIVE (November 2022)



1. INTRODUCTION

The pope and the college of bishops have created an opportunity for Catholics world-wide to express their views on our faith journey and to identify the challenges facing our contemporary church. This Synodal process which started in 2021 will end in June 2024 with the publication of an encyclical. Meanwhile a working document is developed (*Instrumentum Laboris*). The process to date has generated an awareness of initiatives and changes that are needed locally (NZ) and which can be addressed immediately. Other changes that have been mooted will require further consideration and approval from Rome.

2. THE SYNODAL PROCESS

The secretariat in Rome distributed a set of ten key Synodal questions to parishes, religious orders, various groups, and individuals. The responses were collated by a team in each diocese and this information was presented to a diocesan synod gathering. Feedback from these gatherings was collated into a report from each diocese. A national Synod then reflected on the findings from the six New Zealand diocesan gatherings. This New Zealand wide collation was then sent to Rome. The Vatican then prepared a working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*, dated 24/10/2022) which responded to the world-wide input on the 10 key synodal questions. This world-wide review by the Vatican will now be reviewed by each NZ Diocese which has to respond by early December 2022. These responses will then help form the basis of a proposed papal encyclical.

A process called a “Spiritual Conversation” was adopted for the small group discussions at the Diocesan Synod gatherings. This process was aimed at focusing the discussion on the main issues and was conducted in a prayerful climate open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Participants were required to exercise thoughtful reflection and attentive listening.

My understanding of the important outcomes of this extensive Synodal process will be

-)] A range of needs were identified in the NZ synod gatherings for further consideration and subsequent action in New Zealand. All of which can proceed immediately.
-)] The implementation of likely significant changes that will be identified by the College of Bishops leading to the creation of an encyclical for the faithful worldwide.

3. HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SIX NEW ZEALAND SYNOD MEETINGS

This writer has focused on what seem to be the most important themes. For other points published in the synod summaries, but not mentioned here, they can be found in the six diocesan summary reports (syntheses) on the web site below.

<https://www.catholic.org.nz/news/media-releases/diocesan-synthesis/>

Needs (*These can be implemented locally*)

- A strong call for a more welcoming and inclusive church community.
- A strong call for opportunities to grow in faith primarily by attending small groups for prayer, scripture study and Christian life sharing.
- A call for much better provision for the spiritual growth of teenagers and young adults.
- A call for Liturgical reform to facilitate the engagement of all people especially the younger age group.
- A call for the fuller participation of the laity in the liturgy especially the Sunday Mass.
- The fuller inclusion of Te Reo and Maoritanga in liturgies and other Catholic gatherings.
- The successful introduction and implementation of music in liturgies to suit a wide cross section of preferences (e.g. traditional hymns, and contemporary songs). Including songs in both in English and in Te Reo.
- A stronger effort on Ecumenism (i.e. regular engagement with other Christian churches)
- The inclusion of meaningful Catholic practices for those from other countries and cultures.

Challenges (*These require guidance and approval from Rome*)

- A fuller lay involvement in both parish governance and the celebration of the liturgies.
- The genuine inclusion and support for the poor, disadvantaged and prisoners.
- To introduce the option for priests to be married.
- The opportunity for women to be both ordained and to serve the church and community in roles that are currently restricted to men.
- The inclusion of divorced and remarried people back into the worshipping catholic community.
- The fuller inclusion of LGBTQI+ people into the Catholic community.
- Acknowledging the frustration pain and grief of many who have been severely hurt in several ways including sexual abuse by priests and religious. Developing ways to engender confidence in those hurt to a healing and growth in their faith within the catholic community.

4. HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE NEW ZEALAND NATIONAL SYNOD MEETING

There were **six** strong themes in the report prepared by the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference (Aug 2022) on the Diocesan and National Synodal gatherings. This was sent to Rome.

Inclusion: There was a call for the inclusion of people who feel marginalised or excluded.

Gathering: There was a call for homilies to help people encounter Jesus in the reality of their lives; more opportunities for small groups for prayer and scripture study; and a call for a new English translation of the Roman Missal.

Leadership: There was a call for a more collaborative leadership and ministry, and for the equal participation of women and men in ministry.

Mission: There was a call for more active engagement in social justice and bicultural issues, ecological issues, and ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

Education &

Formation: There was a call for more catechesis in Church teaching, formation in safeguarding, and further formation of seminarians on community engagement and cultural sensitivity.

Synodality

& Change: A call to learn to journey together more effectively in a synodal way.

A full explanation and discussion on each of these themes is available on the NZ Catholic Bishops Conference web site, using link below to read the National Synod document:

<https://www.catholic.org.nz/assets/NZCBC-National-Synod-Synthesis-Aug-2022.pdf>



APPENDIX A

Commentary on the issues raised in the New Zealand Synodal process

- Current leadership models are not seen as appropriate now and much more lay involvement is being called for.
- The significant challenge of providing young people with inspiration and nurture of their faith especially after leaving catholic schools.
- The strong desire for the opportunity for people to grow in faith especially in small groups.
- Liturgical reforms being called for to encourage more involvement and relevance.
- A call for opportunities for women to the ordained ministry and more involvement in church leadership.
- A call for the option for priests to marry (*and presumably for married people to be ordained.*)
- A call for more a comprehensive inclusion of other cultural practices and perspectives including Maori and of the many immigrant groups now in New Zealand.
- Reminder of the need to continue the dialogue with other Christian churches.
- Reminder for the church to be more actively engaged with social justice, environmental issues, the poor and needy (*local and overseas*).
- Reminder of the role of mission (spreading/sharing) the faith which seems to have been reduced to individual efforts rather than group activities.
- A call for including people with alternative life styles (e.g. LGBTQIA+) in the catholic community.

APPENDIX B: The summaries the six themes identified by New Zealand National Synod

INCLUSION

- *We want the Church to be a non-judgmental and safe place of welcome and belonging.*
- *Church teaching which excludes some people from the Eucharist is causing pain and hurt.*
- *Awareness of those who feel marginalised or excluded can lead to new attitudes and action.*
- *Action on inclusion must be part of our synodal journey.*

LEADERSHIP

- *Collaborative ministry becomes the norm, with greater sacramental involvement for lay people*
- *Co-responsible leadership with barriers to lay participation in decision-making removed, is part of our synodal journey*
- *Women participate equally in decision-making, and have greater participation in liturgical roles.*

EDUCATION AND FORMATION

- *Further formation is needed for both lay people and clergy in discernment and synodality.*
- *There is a need for catechesis in Church teaching.*
- *Education and formation in safeguarding is essential for both lay people and clergy.*
- *Seminarians' formation should involve more community engagement, and include biculturalism and cultural sensitivity.*
- *Both clergy and laity need formation in collaborative ministry and co-responsible leadership.*

GATHERING

- *There is great love for the Mass, but also concerns about inclusion and lay participation.*
- *A new English translation of the Roman Missal is needed.*
- *Homilies must help people to encounter Jesus in the reality of their lives.*
- *If lay people are allowed to give homilies, they must have good formation.*
- *Small groups for prayer, formation, scripture study, and mission build community.*

MISSION

- *Formation is needed for mission, and help with engaging in mission collectively.*
- *Ecumenical activity and interfaith dialogue need to be embraced as part of mission.*
- *Shame related to abuse in the Church makes evangelisation difficult.*
- *Prophetic leadership is needed in the community on social justice, ecological and bicultural issues.*
- *The only public voice of the Church for many is on euthanasia and human sexuality.*

SYNODALITY AND CHANGE

- *The Synod process is exciting and transformative.*
- *We want to bring back those who are missing.*
- *Synodality and discernment can help us change while holding on to what is central to our faith.*
- *We want to learn to journey together in a synodal way.*