

Open Letter to the Australian Bishops and the People of God in Australia

Dear Bishops and Archbishops,

As you are aware, on 11 March 2025 the Holy Father approved the introduction of a third phase of the current Synod of Bishops process. Rather than merely proposing another new Synod in due course, he wishes instead to consolidate the path taken so far. He has called for all local Churches (i.e. Dioceses and Episcopal Conferences) to implement key proposals of the Synod. We are writing to you as the key person of authority in a diocese to implement these changes.

The Synod's final document, which the Pope has declared 'is part of the ordinary magisterium of the Successor of Peter', calls on local Churches 'to make consistent choices' in implementing its authoritative proposals. This requires 'adapting the changes appropriately to local cultures and the needs of communities'.

You will have also received the details of this new phase, set out in the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Grech's public Letter of 15 March 2025 to the 'Bishops and to the People of God of the whole world'. This new phase will have two dimensions: the development of implementation paths in individual dioceses (June 2025-December 2026), followed by evaluation processes at diocesan, national and continental levels (December 2026-June 2028) leading to a concluding ecclesial Assembly in Rome in October 2028.

In terms of local implementation paths, Cardinal Grech notes that:

It is of fundamental importance to ensure that the implementation phase serves as an opportunity to re-engage the people who have contributed the dialogue already initiated in the listening phase will continue. The process will rely on the work of synodal teams composed of priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, laymen and laywomen, accompanied by their bishop: these are fundamental tools for accompanying the ordinary synodal life of local Churches.

He also notes that:

This process will also offer Dioceses that have invested less in the synodal path an opportunity to recover the steps not yet taken and to form their own synodal teams.

In terms of the evaluation and harmonisation process, Cardinal Grech notes that:

'the process will also be an opportunity to evaluate together the choices made at the local level and recognize the progress made in terms of synodality (cf. n. 9). Thanks to this process, the Holy Father will be able to listen to and confirm the orientations deemed valid for the whole Church.

This third phase provides both an opportunity and a challenge for the Catholic Church in Australia. While the Pope looks to national Episcopal Conferences for leadership in the synodal reform, the reality in Australia is that dioceses differ greatly in the extent of synodal change being pursued. Some dioceses are moving ahead rapidly, while many others have barely begun.

At a recent (19 February 2025) well-attended webinar organised by the Sense of the Faithful Group on the topic *The Synod and the Australian Church: where to now?* participants were invited to say whether they could identify synodal practices in their parish and diocese. Nearly two hundred engaged participants responded¹. Of these, 40 came from dioceses in which more than 50% of respondents were aware of synodal practices in their diocese; the average awareness rate for these respondents was 82.5%. Among the 157 respondents from all other dioceses, the average awareness rate was 17.2%. While such data must be interpreted with care, they are indicative of the obvious fact that the implementation of synodal practices varies widely across Australian diocese

Although not a representative sample of active Catholics, these responses are indicative of a group of concerned Catholics who want to know more about the Synod and the next steps. A representative picture of the nature and extent of the implementation of synodal practices can only come from a systematic monitoring of diocesan websites and other documents made available by diocesan authorities.

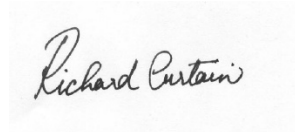
The timeframes outlined by Cardinal Grech mean that there is real urgency in shaping an Australian response. We call on the Australian Catholic Bishops to do three things:

- (i) Empower the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to take a stronger role in leading the implementation of the synodal path in Australia. Not only is this necessary given Australia's fragmented approach, but it is clear that Pope Francis looks to Episcopal Conferences to play a leading role.

We note that the Synod's Final Document proposes (at para 125) that decisions made by an Episcopal Conference impose an ecclesial obligation on each Bishop who participated in the decision in relation to his own diocese. This would mean that bishops can no longer return to their dioceses, having participated in a collegial decision, and then do nothing.

- (ii) Monitor and evaluate openly, regularly and critically the implementation by individual dioceses of the authoritative proposals on synodality for local Churches of the Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.
- (iii) Put in place a process, involving the whole of the People of God, for the implementation stage (June 2025-December 2026) to consider the application of the decisions of the Synod in the conditions of the Australian Church. This process should seek to recreate the involvement and commitment evident in the first phase of the Plenary Council.

Yours sincerely



Richard Curtain, on behalf of the Sense of the Faithful editorial committee.

¹ For a fuller report see <https://www.senseofthefaithful.org.au/>.