

A National Synod/Plenary Council for the Catholic Church in Australia in 2015

Vatican II, in its 1965 Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (*Christus Dominus*) stated that *'this sacred ecumenical synod earnestly desires that the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with fresh vigour. In such a way faith will be deepened and discipline preserved more fittingly and efficaciously in the various churches, as the needs of the times require'* (n. 36).

The *Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI and the Catholic Bishops of Australia*, sponsored by Catholics for Renewal in 2011 for the Australian Bishops' *ad limina* visit to Rome and signed by more than 8,000 Catholics, contains the recommendation 'that each diocesan bishop 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'.

In December 2011, Dr Peter J Wilkinson published the results of his research *Catholic Synods in Australia, 1844-2011*, a comprehensive outline of the Church's teachings on synods and the history of synods in Australia¹. Since the 2nd Vatican Council in 1965 called for synods 'to flourish with new vigour' and insisted that the laity have an active role in them (*Christus Dominus*, n. 36), no plenary or provincial councils or synods have been held in Australia, and only five Australian bishops have convened just six diocesan synods. This is a serious concern for many Australian Catholics who feel they have been denied official church forums for their voices to be heard and their views to be properly considered.

Catholics for Renewal proposed to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in April 2012 that a National Synod/ Plenary Council for the Catholic Church in Australia in 2015 be developed as a substantial initiative flowing from the Year of Grace and as a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the completion of Vatican II. The Bishops have stressed that the Year of Grace will provide 'a thousand opportunities to start afresh from Christ'. Through this year, the bishops have implored a new sending of the Holy Spirit, Who alone can breathe new life into the Church.

Catholics for Renewal believes that a synod undertaken in accordance with canonical provisions and in the spirit of Vatican II would be an important step in "*starting afresh from Christ*" through listening to the People of God, encouraging communion with the bishops and clergy, and promoting the co-responsibility urged by **Pope Benedict XVI** in his address to the 2009 Synod of the Rome diocese: "*It is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is promoted.*"

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¹ The full report is at : <http://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/documents.htm>

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A national synod is both necessary and timely, and would offer the Bishops of Australia a major opportunity to ensure that the key principles of Vatican II, especially relating to subsidiarity, collegiality and co-responsibility are embraced². A national plenary synod would also offer the Church in Australia the opportunity to reflect on a range of reforms which a Spirit-guided reading of ‘the signs of the times’ might suggest are needed.

In working towards a plenary synod in 2015 there is a need for some transitional steps. Such steps should include the holding of diocesan synods and the establishment of diocesan pastoral councils – with appropriate representation of the laity including gender balance, and the development of pastoral planning objectives.

We have asked the Archbishop of Melbourne, as President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, to provide leadership in this regard and establish in his own diocese of Melbourne a Diocesan Pastoral Council as urged by Blessed John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* - “*It is in the local churches that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified*” - with a brief to develop a Diocesan Pastoral Plan, and to set in motion steps to hold, for the first time since 1916, a Melbourne Diocesan Synod.

Noting the provisions of Canon Law and the authority of individual diocesan bishops, we propose that all Australian bishops should be encouraged to establish diocesan synods and diocesan pastoral councils in their dioceses. Some have already taken significant steps in these matters.

At the close of the Great Jubilee, **Blessed John Paul II** stated in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* that “*the theology and spirituality of communion encourage a fruitful dialogue between Pastors and faithful: on the one hand uniting them a priori in all that is essential, and on the other leading them to pondered agreement in matters open to discussion*”. Our proposals are directed to this purpose, consistent with Pope Benedict’s call for improved pastoral structures so that “*the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is promoted*”.

Catholics for Renewal has submitted a detailed report to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference proposing **A PLENARY/NATIONAL SYNOD IN 2015, preceded by diocesan synods throughout Australia, the establishment of diocesan pastoral councils, and the development of diocesan pastoral plans as essential preparatory steps.**

We have also sought the support of the National Council of Priests and Catholic Religious Australia. We are confident that these proposals will be strongly supported by the People of God in Australia.

For further information about the Australian synod proposal or any aspect of the work of Catholics for Renewal, please refer to www.catholicsforrenewal.org or contact: *Peter Johnstone OAM, Chairman* pj@pjgovernance.com.au Ph: 0419 307566, or *Frank Burke, Secretary* flb1942@yahoo.com.au Ph: 0407 998781

² For current reflections on Vatican II, see ‘A forum to promote and defend the vision of Vatican II’ at www.v2catholic.com

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"Christ's faithful have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred pastors their views on matters which concern the good of the church." (Canon 212, par 3)

"... let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything." (Gaudium et Spes 92)