



ARCHDIOCESE OF BRISBANE

## Diocesan Testimony: Synod for Bishops

In December 2023, Archdiocese of Brisbane began preparing for **SYNOD24: I am making all things new**, our Archdiocesan Synod linked to the Australian Fifth Plenary Council. Around this same time all dioceses were asked to take part in the Synod for Bishops consultations. This meant that we took the time to think intentionally about how we could move together synodally as part of the global church, as well as moving together as an archdiocese within our own context. We needed therefore to consider how we would honour the experiences, stories, hopes, and challenges of the People of God that were shared throughout the Australian Fifth Plenary Council journey, while also making space for the creativity of the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us anew.

Considering the Brisbane Archdiocese was highly engaged in the Plenary Council process, there has been a strong sentiment among the community that now is the time to act on what we have heard. The question therefore, **“how can we be a more co-responsible church on mission”**, became the foundation of our synodal process both for the Synod for Bishops consultations and **SYNOD24: I am making all things new**, so that the archdiocese could begin exploring what practical, measurable and Spirit-led actions could be implemented to help us be a more co-responsible church on mission in a way that authentically reflects the Plenary Council Decrees.

However, in genuinely seeking to walk together, it has been important for us to acknowledge from the beginning how richly diverse our Archdiocese is, and to therefore shape a process that allows us to dream boldly while being realistic about the challenges the complexity of diversity poses. Moving together synodally for us means to ensure that all are seen, heard, valued, and loved. It means seeking to hear from those on the very edges of our community who have been excluded, hurt, abused, dismissed, silenced, disenfranchised, and ignored by the church. It means intentionally seeking out voices, stories, ideas, and questions from those whose perspectives and approaches can be challenging and even at times difficult to dialogue with. It means honouring those who are the faith-filled building blocks of our communities, and allowing honest self-reflection to drive us humbly outward in search of those who are noticeably absent, or who perhaps have never felt welcomed in the first place. It means providing spaces for inter-generational and inter-cultural mentorship and accompaniment so emerging leaders can step up, be formed, and go on to lead their communities with experience, energy, and bold creativity. It means keeping in view an ideal, such as reading the signs of the times in light of the Gospel, while being willing to acknowledge when and how the ideal falls short, and the impact this has in the lives of many desperately seeking the fullness of life that being part of the Body of Christ provides.

With this in mind, we have drawn on the wisdom of both the Australian Fifth Plenary Council journey and the global Synod on Synodality. We engaged in spiritual conversations to help create an environment where each person present in a consultation has equal opportunity to listen, and equal space to be heard. These consultations have also been intentionally designed to reflect the diversity of our archdiocese and have, at times, challenged participants to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit talking to them through the experiences, stories, wisdom, and challenges of people with very different perspectives to their own. The responses from the spiritual conversations are beginning to be analysed through a SEE. JUDGE. ACT. inspired lens, helping to see more clearly the realities within our archdiocese, which ought to be affirmed and which need addressing.

When considering best practice, our synodal journey so far has taught us the importance of stepping out of our comfort zones to embrace the fluidity of a Holy Spirit led process, even though this can prove difficult at times. For many people, psychological and emotional safety is found in structure, predictability, scaffolding and the black and white. When it comes to issues regarding faith and change, particularly around hot-button issues such as the participation of women and inclusion more broadly, psychological and emotional safety are key to ensuring productive, robust and respectful dialogue and discernment. Synodality, however, is reliant upon the movement of the Holy Spirit and, in order to be faithful to the process, it requires us to remain responsive to what the Spirit is saying while also patiently allowing the process to unfold as it needs to. Being aware of psychological and emotional safety also calls us to be cognisant of the fact that exploring avenues for change within hot-button issues could, if not done carefully, be harmful towards an already vulnerable group of people. What would be the impact, for example, of putting forward action plans that reflect the needs of our most marginalised within our community, only to have these actions voted down with an overwhelming “no”? To trust in and fully participate in a synodal process is therefore can be challenging. Challenging not just for those that find the notion of change within the church difficult, but also poses a challenge for those that have been seeking change within the church for some time, or for whom change would mean a genuine sense of welcome, belonging, and authentic inclusion.

Perhaps this is where we take guidance from “Towards a Spirituality of Synodality” and draw courage and hope from the understanding that “synodality begins in forgiveness and reconciliation<sup>1</sup>”. In authentically and intentionally moving together to discern practical, measurable, and Spirit-led actions that will reflect the diversity of our archdiocese and honour all that we have heard through the Plenary Council, we must all challenge ourselves to walk this journey in humble service of Christ. We must first actively choose to be co-responsible, by whole-heartedly engaging with the content being discussed, proactively and respectfully sharing concerns and questions as they arise, offering our unique giftedness, experiences, stories, knowledge, and wisdom where needed, and being willing to change course, and adapt when the Holy Spirit leads in unexpected directions. We must all heed the call to seek out opportunities to listen open-heartedly to a diverse a range of perspectives and stories, and then to pay attention to the wrestling and stirring within us that this listening provokes. In grounding ourselves in the hope, joy, and mission of the Risen Christ, we must all be willing to walk together without agenda, keen to hear the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in what challenges and changes us, just as much as we want to share what inspires and affirms us. In doing so, we are able to move together as a co-responsible church on mission, open to the creative and bold Holy Spirit making all things new in us and through us.

This testimony was written by Archdiocese of Brisbane Synod Chair: Auxiliary Bishop Tim Norton SVD and Archdiocese of Brisbane Synod Executive Officer: Steph Unger. All enquiries regarding this document can be sent to: aobsynod@bne.catholic.net.au

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<sup>1</sup> Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group, “Towards a Spirituality of Synodality,” 2020, <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/towards-a-spirituality-for-synodality.html>, 12.