

The Parish as Synodal

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The Parish of our Lady of Dolours, Chatswood, in the Diocese of Broken Bay, Australia, is an urban, multicultural community. It presents as an ecclesial hub for the region of northern Sydney. Three large Catholic colleges operate on its precinct, and it enjoys a very active pastoral life with very significant opportunities for redevelopment. The article outlines its commitment and engagement of a synodal pathway both to nurture its pastoral activity and consider its future growth. Fr. David Ranson, is Vicar Genial of the Diocese of Broken Bay and Pastor of the Parish of Our Lady of Dolours.

In his letter to Parish Priests on 2 May 2024, Pope Francis starkly declared, “We will never become a synodal and missionary Church unless parish communities are distinguished by the sharing of all the baptized in the one mission of proclaiming the Gospel. If parishes are not synodal and missionary, neither will the Church be.”

The Parish of Our Lady of Dolours, Chatswood, in the Diocese of Broken Bay, on the north shore of Sydney, Australia has sought to implement this in a direct, innovative, and strategic manner. A relatively large, urban, multicultural community, the parish, entering its second century, has considerable opportunity for development spiritually, pastorally, materially. The possibilities are of such order as to outstrip the contribution a traditional Parish Pastoral Council might make, limited as its structure is to the participation of a few. Something more inclusive, more participative, more engaging is required.

Subsequent to Pentecost 2021 at which the new pastor published his perceptions of the nature of the community he had recently been entrusted to shepherd, a broad pastoral strategy of engagement was envisioned with him by key leaders in the community. It pivoted on five questions: What are our dreams? Where are we today? What is our Mission? Where do we want to go? How are we going to get there? Some 90 people responded in writing to the dreams they had about our community, our church, and our precinct which every day welcomes 2000 students across three Catholic schools, and some 1200 worshippers each Sunday. To answer the second question, Where are we today? a renewed community census was undertaken and

several surveys were initiated including through the Australian National Church Life Survey. We acknowledged the many pastoral associations existing in the community, bringing them into ten Ministry Circles: Worshipping Together (our liturgical ministries), Leading Reflective Lives (our prayer and scripture groups), Growing in Faith (our catechesis and adult formation initiatives), Nurturing Relationships (our associations which support and encourage our members) Caring for One Another (our various means of support for each other), Igniting Young Hearts (our Sacramental Preparation programmes through to our youth ministries), Caring for our World (our social justice and ecology commitments), Sustaining our Community (our temporal and material supports), Sharing the Good News (our evangelising, ecumenical and interfaith enterprises). These are supported, and encouraged, by our Animating Our Future Circle which acts as the key executive advisory group to the pastor. This engagement with the many ministry groups enabled us to introduce the question, What is our Mission? It led further in 2022 to parish workshops on the topic, then to a broader process of discernment at Sunday Masses. The initial response to the question led to 239 submissions: a further part of the process to 590 responses. The final stage of the process, with 545 responses, enabled us to propose to the community the fruit of its collective discernment: the Mission of our Parish, "Bringing the light of Christ to the City: We love; We grow; We serve." This was published at Pentecost 2023 and now actively informs all our activity, both pastoral and missionary.

Throughout the process, in the light of the scope of the opportunities before us, inspired by the vision of Chapter 3 of the Benedictine Rule, "Summoning the Brothers to Counsel", motivated by the synodal ecclesiology enunciated by Pope Francis in 2022, and encouraged by the methodology of 'table talk' learnt from a civic social action group, Sydney Alliance in February 2023, the notion of becoming a Parish-in-Council emerged for consideration.

We understood the innovative character of this term, spending considerable time developing and sharing its rationale and its methodology. Being a Parish-in-Council did not mean "community town hall meetings." It was not a forum for issues related to parish management; nor was it the appropriate theatre to raise everyone's ideas about what might assist the growth of the community. Nor was it to suggest a democratic process to shape the future of the community. The role of the pastor in calling the Parish into Council, deliberating on its discernment, and deciding its outcomes remained critical. Rather, being a Parish-in-Council was to represent a sustained, prayerful reflection on our Mission as a faith community and how we might give life to this. To this end, we committed to being a Parish-in-Council three times a year: in May, August and November.

Each gathering since its inception in May 2023 has been characterised by fellowship, prayer, formation in faith, and discernment. A five-hour gathering is planned, beginning with a shared meal, leading to a Liturgy of the Word, unfolding to formation on charisms, at the service, then, of some hours engaged in Conversation in the Spirit, according to the now familiar methodology of the Synod of Bishops (2023-2024). Thus, the parish had taken to heart proleptically, the words of Pope Francis to

Parish Priests in May 2024, “With all my heart, I suggest that you *learn to practise the art of communal discernment*, employing for this purpose the method of “Conversation in the Spirit”, which has proved so helpful in the synodal journey and in the proceedings of the synodal Assembly itself.”

To be as inclusive as possible, during the afternoon the children of families that may participate enjoy their own “Kids-in-Council” by which, in an age-appropriate way, they too participate in the discernment that is the subject of the particular convocation.

Now, we have further initiated a “Youth-in-Council.” This brings some 80 senior students together from the two Catholic secondary colleges in the parish precinct, at a separate time, using the same methodology of Conversation in the Spirit to share together on important matters related to them as young people. Our first such Youth-in-Council focussed on the theme of ‘belonging.’ Impressed by the level of the students’ engagement and their feedback on the experience, we seek now to sponsor at least two such Youth in Councils every year, relating them to our sessions of Parish-in-Council so that young people, largely unchurched, may nonetheless have the experience of directly participating in, and shaping, the future of our local Church.

From May 2023 to August 2024, we have enjoyed four occasions of being Parish-in-Council. Through the sustained discernment they have represented, the parish community has identified in the Spirit five pastoral priorities: Creating a Sense of Belonging for All Participating in the Life of our Parish; Igniting Young Hearts; Reaching out with Love; Serving our Community. Subsequent to the first two sessions, at Christmas 2023 the pastor published a ten-point strategy that responded to the community’s discernment in practical ways, further outlining the means by which the community’s first discernment on Creating a Sense of Belonging for All could be implemented. These are captured by the development of a shared awareness of our identity, purpose, and culture, to financial investment in assets that might underscore our pastoral priorities, to formation programs that assist us in achieving those priorities such as masterclasses in the Ministry of Welcoming. In light of this pastoral framework, we have focussed at our third session of Parish-in-Council on the nature of community hospitality in more depth. The fourth session will continue to develop the priority of Igniting Young Hearts.

Throughout, the mission of our Parish becomes more clear. Most importantly, it is doing so with an increasing sense of shared responsibility. Over each session we have had over 100 members of our parish community involved. Though this may be only a segment of those who worship with us, it is, nonetheless, a significant leaven. Given the methodology of the sessions of Parish-in-Council, every participant knows that their voice will be heard and respected. Subsequently, those who would never contribute ordinarily to a community meeting, participate fully. Through our sustained formation on the nature of charisms, a culture of encouragement is promoted that gives life and possibility to our community, with the most remarkable and generous engagement of so many. Through the experience of each session, we have developed a remarkable pool of community leaders who have now been formed

into the Ministry of Facilitation in Conversation in the Spirit, and who now act as the engine of our gatherings.

This journey as a Catholic community of faith has unfolded organically. It was not planned in advance, but has unfolded, rather, with each development acting as the stepping stone for the next. We recognise, however, that we are privileged in the way that we are being led by the Spirit to highlight the potential of a genuinely synodal way of being 'parish.' The journey has only just begun. And yet, precisely through our own experience, we are confident that the ecclesiology of synodality is not only a possibility but the most effective means of being Church today. "If parishes are not synodal and missionary, neither will the Church be." Our Church is synodal indeed, not least because one community of faith is so.