

FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
AT THE SERVICE OF COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, AND MISSION: GOVERNANCE

1. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit gives believers, and therefore the whole Church, a special gift so that together they can faithfully interpret and live the Christian Gospel in the diverse circumstances of history and culture – the *sensus fidei* (*Lumen Gentium* n. 12; cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, nn. 24, 56, 113). The Spirit enables ongoing discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel (*Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 4, 11). All the baptised participate in the three offices of Christ as a priestly, prophetic, and royal people (*Lumen Gentium*, nn. 31, 35).
2. By calling for the practice of synodality, Pope Francis aims to embed more deeply in the life of the Church the central teachings of Vatican II. These include the Council’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s gift of the *sensus fidei* to each, the participation of the entire faithful in the mission of the Church and its call for dialogue within the Church and beyond. Synodality is a constitutive element of the life of the Church, Pope Francis says, quoting Saint John Chrysostom: “Church and Synod are synonymous” (*Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*).
3. The practice of synodality requires greater transparency in decision-making and the overcoming of “a ‘culture of clericalism’ that promotes privilege and enables abuse of power.” Pope Francis has stressed that “it can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general” (*Evangelium Gaudium*, n. 104). Attending carefully to Pope Francis’ reminder and the principle of subsidiarity, those whose roles involve responsibility for decision-taking need to ensure that decision-making is not confined to those who exercise sacramental ministry. Those who will be affected by a decision should have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and express their view before the decision is taken, to the extent that this is possible and appropriate. As decision-making authority in the Church is most often exercised by the ordained, there should be careful attention to ensuring that the voices of lay women and men, as well as Religious, are heard and considered on all matters, especially those that impact distinctively on them (cf. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, nn. 105,104; *Evangelium Gaudium*, n. 102).
4. As Vatican II and Pope Francis have emphasised, the practice of synodality is integral to the Church’s discernment of what the Gospel demands in particular circumstances and to what pastoral action this requires to serve for the good of all.
5. **THEREFORE**, this Plenary Council:
 - a. affirms that governance in the Catholic Church should be exercised in a synodal manner, with the appropriate participation of all the baptised. For a diocese or eparchy, this would mainly involve the participation of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Council of Priests, the College of Consultors, the Diocesan Finance Council, the Diocesan Curia, various boards and governance bodies, and, at times, a Diocesan Synod. For a parish, this would mainly involve the participation of the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Finance Committee;

- b. recognises and affirms the commitment of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference that “within five years following the closing session of the Plenary Council . . . each Diocese conduct a Diocesan Synod and every ten years thereafter” and encourages dioceses and eparchies to begin planning for this after the conclusion of the Plenary Council (*The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia* (2020), recommendation 56; cf. Response of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to *The Light from the Southern Cross*);
- c. calls for all dioceses and eparchies to establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council and affirms the continuing work of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the National Centre for Pastoral Research to develop guidelines and provide resources for the establishing and flourishing of Diocesan Pastoral Councils, Parish Pastoral Councils, and other appropriate synodal structures (*The Light from the Southern Cross*, recommendations 50–55);
- d. recognises and affirms the many initiatives already undertaken at parish, diocesan, eparchial, and national levels to implement recommendations agreed to in the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference response to *The Light from the Southern Cross*; and
- e. commits the Church in Australia to fostering the discernment and synodal leadership envisaged at Vatican II, called for by Pope Francis and experienced in the Plenary Council’s journey through the actions proposed below.

DECREE

Article 1

That dioceses and eparchies support parishes to establish and strengthen appropriate synodal structures by developing guidelines and providing resources for the flourishing of Parish Pastoral Councils, Parish Finance Committees, and other parish bodies.

Article 2

That representatives from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons form a working group to conduct appropriate and broad consultation, to develop and establish a National Catholic Synodal Life Roundtable, to foster, assess, and report periodically on the development of synodal leadership across the Church in Australia. The roundtable will bring together representative members of those groups with Diocesan Pastoral Councils and other key national bodies of the Church, including Catholic social and community services, health, and education.

Article 3

That the National Centre for Pastoral Research be commissioned to study the implementation of recommendations from *The Light from the Southern Cross* which has already happened, to identify examples of effective initiatives that have been taken and thus promote further implementation of those recommendations judged helpful and practicable.

The Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia will interpret the decrees of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia in accordance with the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches and the traditions of each church *sui iuris*.

In accordance with canon 446 of the Code of Canon Law, this decree is not to be promulgated until it has been reviewed by the Apostolic See. It will be promulgated in *Australasian Catholic Record* and the website of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in accordance with its usual practice. The decrees will oblige six months after promulgation.