

The Very Long Road to Synodality

How refreshing it was to hear the Bishop of Broome, Tim Norton, a financial ARC member, give an address in May about his efforts to engage as many as possible in his diocese in genuine conversation. No fancy structure inhibiting a comfortable meeting of minds, just a willingness to be present with an attitude that clearly exuded 'I want to learn'. Driving many miles on his own, often to only small communities in his vast diocese, he demonstrated to those on the 'bush telegraph' his genuineness in meeting people on their terms.

In this issue we also have two more stories where the exercise of authority with humble communication can be so powerful – that of a truly participative church in India (page 3) and that of an archbishop in Kuala Lumpur who quietly showed how to be a servant (page 10). We need to know and read about examples like this to overcome the scepticism that we might have about achieving the equality of opportunity and open-hearted dialogue that will satisfy our desire for accountability and transparency in our church communities.

Our hope for this was emboldened when five years ago, so many groups of Catholics as well as individuals, enthusiastically responded by making submissions to the Plenary Council in Australia. Despite the fact that we have since learned that the vast majority of these submissions were not even read, there was expectation that good results would still come from it. But where are the identifiable results now? John Warhurst (page 8) notes that the decrees of the Council have not been given recognition by the Vatican as yet and, despite a few bishops trying to 'get on with it', the 'old Church ways continue to prevail'.

Old Church ways were clearly evident, but dressed up as new, when one looks at the so-called synodality process of the recently concluded Synod of the Archdiocese of Sydney. It is reported that the archbishop chose the agenda, chose the people who would drive it, invited mostly those who are employed by the Church, and he alone will decide what he wants

from it. This is the antithesis of what synodality means. The Final Report on Synodality published by the Vatican emphasises that the broadest participation is essential in order to include those who are at the margins of the Christian community (paragraph 82). *The Catholic Weekly* compounded the ignorance by praising the process and adding that the selected participants even had time to engage in discussion!

Terry Fewtrell (page 4) outlines four ways that some bishops in Australia have found to negate the impact of genuine synodality. He has also summarised the guide-lines from the Final Report that should be addressed in setting up initiatives at diocesan and parish level, adding dot points for quick reference. The guidelines are lacking because they do not address how representation should be established to ensure genuine participation. However, you should read these guide-lines at 'News and Views' on the ARC website at:

www.australianreformingcatholics.com

and have the courage to discuss them with your parish priest with regard to any parish council arrangements.

John Buggy

IN THIS ISSUE

Editorial .. 1

Letters .. 2

John Singarayar: *Five small parishes model the future of the Church* .. 3

Terry Fewtrell: *Finding clever ways to slow-walk synodality* .. 4-5

The ARC Website has been updated .. 5

Thomas Reese: *Why we are not in a Catholic revival, despite increase in adult baptisms* .. 6-7

Synod on Synodality: Summarised by Brian Bright .. 7

John Warhurst: *The forgotten Australian Plenary Council* .. 8-9

Jane Harty: cartoon .. 9

Joseph Masilamany: *In the Sandals of a Servant* .. 10-11

John Buggy: *How True Christianity is Demonstrated* .. 11

Gareth Gore: *Pope Leo XIV faces major test over Opus Dei reforms* .. 12

New Book: Isaac Slater OCSO (Author) *Wisdom for a Polarised World: Allowing Wheat & Weeds to Grow Together* Review by (Sr) Patty Andrew.. 13

John Buggy: *Vatican II and Revelation Part 2: The Scriptures and Religious Truth* .. 14-15

Introducing St. Lucia Spirituality .. 15

Letters

I enjoyed reading the latest *ARCVoice* – although ‘enjoyed’ might not be the best word – there were some very good and provocative articles about the ordination of women to the diaconate to think about in this issue.

The most painful blow is the statement from the Petrocchi Commission that to allow women to become ordained would be ‘...a rupture of the nuptial meaning of salvation’. This is offensive.

On a happier note, John Selby Spong has been a hero of time. Perhaps you also know his earlier book *Jesus for the Non-Religious* published in 2008. He has been an enlightening and challenging source for my spiritual journey and for understanding the scriptures. 1 Corinthians 13:11 comes to mind...

‘When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.’ KJV

Thank you John and all the contributors to *ARCVoice*.

***Helen Stirling
Kiama***

John, my thanks to you and the team for another excellent edition of *ARCVoice*. I will try to find time to make the odd reflection on one or more of the articles. Best wishes.

***Paul Casey,
Callala Bay***

Reply to Drew Porter's letter in *ARCVoice* 100:

Dear Drew,

Bear with me as I try to give you an answer to your important remark on Jesus' teaching in His Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5:27-28).

You question the words of Jesus, who is teaching the crowd and puts some of the ancient laws into a new light of love and understanding.

‘You have heard that it was said ‘Do not commit adultery’. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’

First of all, we have to establish a firm basis to shine a light on this text. If the words of Jesus were to be put to question, where else could one find truth? Jesus said: ‘I am the Way, the Truth and Life.’ The word of God stands forever.

In your query you ‘assume that about ninety per cent of the Australian male population is guilty’. Is that an excuse in order to ignore the words of Jesus? Since when is something OK because ‘everyone’ does it? Or do you think that Jesus has to come to you so you can inform Him of the weakness of man?!

If you read the ensuing text (Matt 5:29-30) you will find Jesus makes his point extraordinarily clear: He almost exaggerates, so to speak, to emphasise the seriousness of this issue:

‘If your right eye causes you to sin, pull it out and throw it away! It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go to hell.’ These are strong words.

I believe that no one knows man's weaknesses more intimately than Jesus. When he was struggling with temptation in the desert, He uttered these words: ‘Man does not live of bread alone, but of every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ When he faced his passion and death he admonished his disciples: ‘Keep awake and pray that you may not succumb to temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.’ Just like Jesus had to struggle, so must we. Life is a struggle. Without it, there would be no challenge, no victory, no purpose, and therefore no real value. It is a matter of awareness, of closely observing our thoughts and mind in order to achieve mastery over them. In the good and wise government of one's thought lies the value of a person's life.

God knows how difficult it for us to follow Jesus and become ‘complete and perfect like the Father in heaven is perfect’, for ‘no imperfection goes to heaven’. In His boundless love He assures us to help and strengthen us. He is forever full of compassion and mercy. If we have the will and love to make Jesus the centre of our being, He will help us to master our thoughts. Practice makes perfect.

Elizabeth Roth, Mascot

Five small parishes model the future of the Church

John Singarayar

I recently spent time in five small parishes. What stayed with me was not the scenery but the way the Church functioned in these villages.

The priests were clearly the spiritual leaders. They celebrated the Eucharist, administered the sacraments, and guided the faithful.

Almost everything else that sustained parish life was carried out by the parish or village council.

Preparations for a jubilee celebration made this vivid. Weeks before the event, parishioners were organizing the liturgy, arranging decorations, coordinating food, and planning the gathering. Meetings were held, responsibilities assigned, and the work moved forward with quiet efficiency.

The priest was present and supportive, but the initiative came from the community.

This was not a special arrangement. It was the ordinary rhythm of parish life.

Shared responsibility as a way of life

Parish councils played an active and trusted role. Members oversaw finances, maintained church property, organized pastoral programs, and coordinated community activities. Practical decisions were discussed collectively and responsibilities distributed among volunteers.

The atmosphere was not one of delegation but of participation. Parishioners did not see themselves as helpers assisting the priest, they saw themselves as responsible members of the Church, entrusted with sustaining its life and mission.

This structure also created healthy clarity about the priest's role. Rather than managing every practical detail, the priest could focus on celebrating the

sacraments, preaching the Gospel, and accompanying people in their spiritual journeys.

A model of synodality

The experience resonates with the global conversation about synodality – a Church that ‘walks together’, shaped by listening, collaboration, and shared responsibility. In many parts of the world, this is still being explored through consultations and pastoral reflections.

In Mizoram, northeast India, it is simply how the Church lives.

Parish councils are not symbolic bodies. They function as active partners. Discussions about finances, events, and parish needs take place in an atmosphere of collective responsibility.

The laity feel genuine ownership – not in a possessive sense, but in the deeper sense of stewardship.

A lesson for the wider Church

In many parts of the world, parish life still revolves around the priest as central administrator of almost everything. This places an enormous burden on clergy and unintentionally limits lay members who are ready to contribute more.

The Mizoram model suggests another possibility.

When lay leadership is trusted, communities become more vibrant and resilient people take responsibility because they know their contribution matters.

Freed from constant administrative demands, priests can devote more time to pastoral care and spiritual accompaniment.

While the global Church continues to reflect on what synodality means in practice documents and assemblies clarify the vision, but the most convincing examples come from lived experience.

In the villages of Mizoram, clergy and laity work together with a clear sense of their distinct roles. Responsibility is shared. Participation is natural.

John Singarayar SVD holds a doctorate in Anthropology. He is an author of several books and regularly contributes to academic conferences and publications focusing on sociology, anthropology, tribal studies, spirituality and mission.

(Reprinted with explicit permission from ‘Flashes of Insight’, published by Church Resources Ltd, a charitable limited liability company registered in New Zealand)

Finding clever ways to slow-walk synodality

Terry Fewtrell

For most lay Catholics, ‘synodality’ is simply the latest buzzword for what is really just ‘business as usual’ with the trappings of walking together and invoking the Holy Spirit.

The clerics are in control. Bishops are key to this. Some are on board and fully transparent. Others are not, and these are their strategies:

Controlling the narrative

Controlling the Narrative is a common term for a key technique used by some bishops. It is a strategy that has served them well in the past.

In relative terms, few lay Catholics would have read the full Synod Report. They rely on information filtered down to them and then determine the extent to which they are motivated to engage.

To the extent they discern an offering that is ‘more of the same’, they largely turn off. Heard all that before.

Had they actually read the full report or had it fairly outlined to them they would likely recognise, like most who have read it, that this is something different – an easy-to-read Vatican document that holds the promise of real reform.

That is incentive enough for some bishops to not seek to enlighten their flock any further. If the people don’t grasp the full significance of the report, then that makes things easier for those in charge.

This is clericalism at its most sophisticated. But other strategies are emerging to underpin and support this approach.

Skewing the message

A great virtue of the Synod Report is that it grounds the vision of a church of shared participation, decision making and accountabilities in a rich theology and spirituality drawn from the early church.

The report evokes a committed people walking together in their faith, sharing, growing and building relationships, inspired by the Spirit.

This is an authentic way of being church, but it is process. Part III of the Synod Report sets out the vision of a church that evolves from this praxis.

This is the goal – not an end point in itself – but a goal, nonetheless. So, emphasise the process not the vision.

Comfortable synodality

While the Synod Report grounds synodality in the practical operation of the church, it does so to facilitate a new order. But if bishops aren’t comfortable with that vision, the easiest solution is not to seek to get there – just keep going around, walking and engaging with the Holy Spirit.

In one case it is described by a diocese as ‘our pilgrimage is not about reaching a destination but allowing ourselves to be constantly transformed by Jesus’. Or perhaps that is an excuse for inertia!

Go slow on Formation as it only highlights the difficulties. But if other tactics begin to fail there is always the reassurance that comes from keeping most lay people in the dark about the real nature of the conversations to be had.

To ensure that doesn’t happen laity need to be confident in their baptismal rights, no longer intimidated by clerical status and have ready access to shared data about parish and diocese.

It is in this realm that many priests, not to mention bishops, feel threatened and underprepared.

The Synod Report recognises there is a significant need to provide formation and skills development to both clerics and laity. It stresses Formation is ‘needed to engage in decision-making processes grounded in ecclesial discernment and which reflect a culture of transparency, accountability, and evaluation’.

But most bishops fear talking about Formation because it taps into the insecurity and doubts many priests express about their ability to meet the synodal challenge truly. It is unsettling.

Fear is a great brake on human endeavour. So don’t rush into formation, let it come later. But increasingly the overseas evidence is that Formation is essential to change hearts and minds and then behaviours – as is true with most human activities.

Playing the metrics

Faced with the Implementation Pathway, dioceses are resorting to adding up what they have done: Parish assemblies, Diocesan assemblies, and attendance at information sessions that don’t focus on what is different and challenging.

If the assembly conversations are with the usual people, operating within the usual parameters then they are likely to produce only the usual deposits.

Dioceses are playing the metrics game – lots of numbers, not much about quality. But the Synod Report calls for creative solutions and experimentation!

Fear and a lack of imagination are driving much of this. Bishops seem to realise that their work is under scrutiny by the Implementation Secretariat.

They are busy, but much of it is looking for ways to avoid grappling with the real challenges. The people need to call this out.

But also let's hope Pope Leo and Cardinal Grech are awake to these games.

TERRY FEWTRELL is Chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn. He has prepared summaries of the final report on Synodality and analysed the implications for implementation at Diocesan and Parish levels. You are encouraged to read this on the 'Noticeboard' page of our website www.australianreformingcatholics.au/noticeboard. How much evidence do you see of these points in your diocese and particularly in your parish?

The ARC Website has been updated

Our Web Editor, Peter Albion, has worked with other Secretariat members to develop and test an updated website. This gives the site a fresh appearance which should make it easier to use. The big advantages are:

- Much faster download and movement between sections
- More items of interest posted regularly with notification to you, in addition to the quarterly mailed *ARCVoice*
- Important Institutional Church happenings will be tracked, as well as matters directly related to the need for reform
- Members will be able to update their profile directly and indicate how often they wish to receive new articles and information
- Opportunities for you to write and submit comments without having to register nor even identify yourself, if you so wish
- Membership payments can be made easily directly on the site

All ARC members have been enrolled on the site and you can now log in using your email address or a username you should have received by email. If necessary, use your email address and the 'Forgot Password?' link to set a new password. We encourage those without email to try to get it or ask a relative to receive information for you.

The ARC Secretariat

Why we are not in a Catholic revival, despite increase in adult baptisms

Thomas Reese

Across the country, scores of catechumens were baptised into the Catholic Church for Easter this year. Many of these new Catholics were young people. Even though precise figures won't be available for some time, there is enough anecdotal evidence from both pastors and secular media to draw attention.

Whether this amounts to a Catholic revival remains to be seen. I hope so, but I doubt it. In the latest year for which we have data, 2024, the Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a Georgetown University-affiliated research centre that studies the Catholic Church, reports that 34,501 adults were baptised into the Catholic Church. This is up from the pandemic year, 2020, when only 25,356 were baptized, but still down from 2019, when 35,799 adults were baptised.

And the numbers of adult baptisms in the past were significantly higher, according to CARA: 118,622 in 1964 80,035 in 1974 87,996 in 1984 66,886 in 1994 76,605 in 2004 and 42,751 in 2014.

Clearly, the number of baptisms has been generally decreasing since 1964. It would take a huge increase in adult baptisms to get anywhere near the numbers we had then. And until that happens, we should not speak of a Catholic revival.

Since then, the number of priests and religious has also declined significantly, while the number of people who have left the church has gone up. Church attendance is also way down, which research has found consistently.

Some have personal explanations for these declines. Reactionaries blame the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, conservatives blame the excesses of liberal pastors and theologians, liberals say that Vatican II did not go far enough, and reformers blame clericalism and the sex abuse crisis.

All of these explanations are too simplistic. The decline began long before clerical sex abuse became known. And if liberal excesses drove people out of

the church, why did the numbers continue to decline during the papacies of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI? If the Catholic Church needs to be more liberal or conservative, why are both liberal and conservative churches in the United States seeing declines?

And for those who think that people leave the church over doctrine, it should be noted that many people stay Catholic even when they disagree with the church about issues like birth control, abortion, migration, women priests, peace and social justice. It is also highly probable that many people joining the church disagree with it on one or more of these issues. Perhaps doctrine is not as important as bishops and priests think.

Catholics do have some unique features that have changed and probably had an impact on numbers. Prior to Vatican II, non-Catholic spouses tended to convert. At a minimum, they had to promise to raise their children Catholic. Catholics also went to church at high rates because the church told them that if they missed Mass on Sunday, they committed a mortal sin and would go to hell. Research shows that if a married couple is of the same religion and they go to church as a family on Sunday, their children are more likely to stay with their church.

In Europe, where Christianity thrived for centuries, we find an even more secular and unchurched population than in the U.S. We thought we were exceptional, but perhaps we were just slower to change.

We know, for example, that rural areas are more religious than urban. And even in cities, people with strong roots in their ethnic neighbourhoods are also more religious. Those who move away from family and neighbours also tend to lose contact with their religion.

In villages and ethnic neighbourhoods, if you were not at church, the neighbours noticed and commented. In the past, social pressure kept people going to church even when they no longer wanted to. Now, nobody cares if you don't go to church. It is a personal choice, a commitment you have to make on your own.

In countries where Christianity is part of the cultural fabric, churches become lazy because they have a guaranteed audience. Like monopolies, they do not listen to their customers (congregants), they do not innovate, and their marketing (evangelising) becomes boring.

Young people today say that they are interested in spirituality and are longing for community. Almost by definition, that is what Christianity is supposed to provide.

The Catholic Church has a rich tradition of spirituality, but it needs to do more than simply repackage old products. Contemporary spirituality needs to respect developments in psychology, science and culture.

The church also needs to be more welcoming if people are to see a community that they want to

join. This means more than offering coffee and doughnuts after Mass. The church must be a place where people are spiritually nourished and feel welcomed and at home. That would cause a real Catholic revival.

The Rev. THOMAS J. REESE, a Jesuit priest, is a Senior Analyst at Religion News Service. . Previously he was a columnist at the National Catholic Reporter (2015-17) and an associate editor (1978-85) and editor in chief (1998-2005) at America magazine.

Synod on Synodality:

First Part of the Final Report of Study Group 7

Summarised by Brian Bright

ARC Secretariat

The purpose of Study Group 7 was to help the Church to understand and carry out the process of selecting candidates for the Episcopate as an ecclesial moment, guided by the Holy Spirit and characterised by an attitude of prayer, listening and discernment. Below is a summary of the main points in the executive summary of this report.

The selection of a Bishop:

- account be taken of the ‘synodal competencies’ of the candidates;
- from the earliest centuries, the local Church has been consulted in various ways in the process of selecting its own Bishop.

In a process of discernment of the needs of the diocese, the diocese:

- identifies priests to be proposed as candidates for the Episcopate;
- formulates a profile of the future Pastor of that local Church.

In this process, numerous subjects are to be involved, in different capacities:

- the local Church guided by its Bishop;
- the Bishops belonging to the same Ecclesiastical Province;
- the Apostolic Nuncio (Nuncios themselves should first possess a synodal and missionary profile).

The Bishop convenes:

- the Presbyteral Council
- the Diocesan Pastoral Council

Each of the members then submit to the Bishop the names of Bishops or Priests whom they consider suitable for succession.

The Episcopal Conference:

The results of these consultations must be presented by the Bishop to the assembly of the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference, who will draw up a list of candidates for the Episcopate that is as much as possible an expression of their consensus.

Committee for the provision of the local Church:

At the moment in which the local Church becomes vacant or the Holy See authorises the initiation of the procedures for succession, it suggests that a Committee for the provision of the local Church be established in the Diocese, of which the Apostolic Nuncio avails himself in order to clarify the state of the Diocese, the profile of the new Pastor, and also to obtain opinions on possible candidacies.

The Apostolic Nuncio:

The Nuncio receives the results of the consultations carried out in the Diocese and in the Episcopal Conference and integrates them with further consultations. In this regard, the Group recommends consulting not only Clerics, but also an equivalent number of lay and consecrated persons.

The purpose of the consultation is to bring out as much as possible the truth, both regarding the state of the Diocese and its needs, and regarding the worthiness and suitability of the possible candidates for the Episcopate.

The full executive summary can be found at:

<https://www.synod.va/en/the-synodal-process/phase-3-the-implementation/the-study-groups/final-reports/group-7.html>

The forgotten Australian Plenary Council

John Warhurst

The synodal process in the Church in Australia has a longer history than just about anywhere else in the world. The second and final assembly of the 5th Plenary Council of Australia ended almost four years ago, in July 2022. This followed an extensive consultation period involving 17,500 submissions and the participation of 220,000 individual Catholics. It was ground-breaking. Now it has been almost forgotten.

In November 2022, at their next six-monthly plenary meeting, the Australian Bishops formally approved its acts and decrees and announced that they would now be sent to the Apostolic See for review. That review, including approval, is known by the Latin word ‘recognitio’. Six months after recognitio, those acts and decrees would then become the law of the Catholic Church in Australia.

The Plenary Council (PC), despite local scepticism, was widely applauded as a ground-breaking precursor to the Synod on Synodality. Pope Francis spoke glowingly about it in his book, *Let Us Dream*. International church media figures agreed. The new President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), Archbishop Tim Costelloe, reflected after his 2022 trip to Rome on ‘how closely the Church around the world was watching the Plenary Council and how aspects of it are being lived out through the Global Synod for a Synodal Church’. This larger synod had been announced on the final day of the Plenary Council’s second assembly.

Australian church members waited anxiously for the recognition, under the understanding that it was important. But it has never come. Despite serious efforts in quiet church diplomacy by senior Australian bishops on visits to Rome, it has never materialised. One would be forgiven for thinking that it has been forgotten. Soon, four years will have elapsed. We know that the Church moves slowly, but as the PC members left Sydney in July 2022, even the most pessimistic would have expected Vatican action by now.

Some senior bishops are embarrassed and frustrated that nothing has happened. If they are aware of any specific reason for the inordinate delay, they have not shared it with the Catholic community. That is not how things are done within the Church.

To complain publicly would imply criticism of the Roman Curia. Still, a public statement of the state of play would be a welcome demonstration of the new transparency supposedly central to synodality.

It may not be entirely fair to say that the Plenary Council has been forgotten. Understandably, it has been somewhat submerged by its global big brother, the Synod on Synodality, but no announcement has been made by anyone that this is the reason for the lack of formal Vatican approval of the Council.

The PC decrees cannot be promulgated until they have been reviewed by the Apostolic See (Canon 446 of Canon Law). That means the formal third and final implementation stage of the Council cannot begin. It matters because, at the very least, it means that formal implementation has not proceeded as envisaged. That implementation included a much-vaunted new National Catholic Synodal Life Roundtable, elaborated in Decree Seven.

This new roundtable was to be established jointly by the ACBC, Catholic Religious Australia and the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons ‘to foster, assess and report periodically on the development of synodal leadership across the Church in Australia’. It was to bring together representatives of Diocesan Pastoral Councils (once established) and other national bodies, including social and community services, health, and education. It was going to be a big deal.

‘The breach of faith and trust involves dashing the legitimate expectations of the Catholic community that their generous time and energy, encapsulating their strongly expressed wishes about the future of the Church, would be respected by the official Church.’

There was some initial national episcopal action. In November 2023, a first interim report called ‘A Letter to the People of God in Australia’ was issued, preceded by a pastoral guide called ‘Carrying Forward the Plenary Council’. But those steps didn’t get the Church in Australia very far. The second interim report, scheduled for 2025, was quietly shelved because the Vatican *recognitio* had still not been received. No one noticed because the Council had already been forgotten.

There are two schools of thought among those few who have given it a second thought.

For optimists, it is a mere irritant. One senior bishop, while frustrated, explained that ‘we are just getting on with it’.

This optimism assumes that the essence of the decrees had always been in the hands of Australian diocesan bishops. Only changes to Canon Law and universal church matters, such as women deacons, were out of their hands. The essence included the bulk of the content of the decrees.

After the Council, these matters to be implemented were allocated to the various ACBC commissions for implementation. Business as usual.

Optimists also have a rosy view of the acceptance of the spirit of the Council by Australia's diocesan bishops. There was some patchy early energy in 2023 in some dioceses. Those optimists without such a rosy view of other bishops trust in the obedience of their fellow bishops to the pro-synodal proclamations and intentions of Popes Francis and Leo.

For pessimists, the failure of the *recognitio* to materialise is a major impediment to the full implementation of the Council decrees and a breach of faith with the Catholic community, which reflects badly on all concerned.

The breach of faith and trust involves dashing the legitimate expectations of the Catholic community that their generous time and energy, encapsulating their strongly expressed wishes about the future of the Church, would be respected by the official Church. After all, the Holy Spirit was at work in the Council. Surely that larger Spirit would not be trifled

with by the Vatican and/or local bishops.

The major failure in implementation is the absence of the promised major new synodal structure which the Council members, by a clear majority, wished to have carry forward a truly synodal Church.

The realistic view is that implementation of synodality in Australia is balanced on a knife-edge. It needs all the human help it can get. The Vatican *recognitio* is crucial. In the words of the 2023 ACBC interim report, it should provide 'revitalised impetus to Mission' and also a further, much-needed injection of authority on the side of synodality. It would be wind in the sails behind both those church leaders who are getting on with it and those who are lagging. Its continued absence is a shocking revelation that the old Church ways continue to prevail.

The final report on the implementation of the Plenary Council outcomes has been promised for 2027. Without Vatican recognition, followed by official promulgation of the decrees in Australia six months later, it will be a hollow document, if indeed it ever appears.

JOHN WARHURST is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University and a director of the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform. He was a member of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, 2020-22, from the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn.



© Jane Harty 1999 with permission

(This cartoon was published in the first edition of ARCVoice, October 2001. Is it still relevant today?)

In the sandals of a servant

Joseph Masilamany

A day before he died, Jesus did something his disciples could not quite understand. He removed his outer garment, knelt on the ground and washed their feet. It was not a gesture of politeness. It was a reversal of power. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them.

In Asia, we might. Because here, we know what it means to touch another person’s feet – or even their sandals.

But in which country would a Catholic cardinal, clothed in the dignity of Rome, stoop down to pick up the missing sandals of a Buddhist chief monk? Malaysia, perhaps. And the cleric could only have been the late Cardinal Anthony Soter Fernandez. This story, ‘The Catholic Cardinal and the Sandals of a Buddhist Monk’ has since entered Malaysian ecclesial folklore.

That night, after an interfaith gathering at the Buddhist Maha Vihara in Kuala Lumpur, religious leaders were putting on their footwear in the dimly lit compound. The late Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda Nayaka Maha Thera, the revered chief monk of Malaysia and Singapore, was still looking for his sandals. Soter – then archbishop of Kuala Lumpur – found them first. He did not call out, nor did he gesture. He picked them up quietly, placed them at the abbot’s feet, and stood back meekly.

The chief monk was startled. ‘What? You are the archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, and you have touched my sandals. Do you know what that means?’ Soter replied, with characteristic understatement: ‘I am only the archbishop of Kuala Lumpur. You are the chief monk of both Malaysia and Singapore.’ The two men laughed. They embraced. But beneath that moment lies something that Holy Thursday helps us see more clearly.

In Asian culture, to touch another’s sandals is not a small gesture. It is a posture. It says: ‘I am your servant.’ And that is where the Gospel begins – not in titles, but in kneeling.

The quiet antidote to clericalism

Clericalism thrives on distance – between clergy and laity, between office and ordinary life, between title and tenderness. It is the subtle temptation to believe that ordination elevates one above rather than sends one below.

On the night of the Last Supper, Christ dismantled that illusion with water, a towel, and human feet. Pope Francis repeatedly warned that clericalism distorts ministry. It turns shepherds into functionaries and priests into administrators. It confuses authority with entitlement. Soter dismantled clericalism not with

documents or decrees, but with a pair of sandals. He declined state honorifics – Datuk and Tan Sri titles – even after being created a cardinal in 2016. ‘Just call me Soter,’ he would say.

This was not affectation. It was theology lived publicly. At retreats and seminars, parishioners recall how he would quietly join them after meals to wash his own plate and cup. No announcement. No optics. Just his hands in soapy water.

On Holy Thursday, the Church re-enacts the washing of feet. Soter did not re-enact it. He lived it.

‘Be a servant’

During the First Asian Mission Congress in Chiang Mai in 2006, preaching to a congregation that included several cardinals and bishops, Soter spoke with unusual directness. ‘The leaders of the world lord it over their people,’ he said, echoing the Gospel proclaimed across churches on Holy Thursday. ‘Whosoever wants to be more important among you, make yourself a servant first.’

Then came the line that must have made some ecclesiastical spines stiffen. ‘Who are the high priests mentioned in the Gospels? They were the arrogant who oppressed the people under the laws of that time. We, the leaders of the Church, are the high priests today.’ There was no anger in his voice. Only clarity. ‘As high priests, our vocation is to serve, and not to be served.’ It is one thing to preach about washing feet. It is another to kneel at our neighbour’s feet.

Authority without armor

Soter was small in stature but immense in moral presence. A senior priest once described him as a man of paradoxes: firm yet gentle, unafraid to stand for justice yet quick to reconcile once peace was possible. Late one night, when Special Branch police officers arrived at his residence to arrest a religious brother accused of being a Marxist sympathiser, Soter met them with quiet authority. Serving them coffee, he simply said, ‘You do your work, and we will do ours.’ It was authority without theatrics – firmness without arrogance.

He was also a rare ally of the press. Catholic journalists in secular media valued him because he was accessible, candid, and unafraid of scrutiny. He offered not just quotes, but conscience.

He fasted with Muslims during Ramadan. He attended the Hindu Deepavali and the Chinese New Year open houses. His Muslim friend, Dr. Amir Farid Isahak, wrote a one-line eulogy on his passing: ‘Some of you may wonder how a Muslim became the godson of a Catholic cardinal?’

That question needs no answer. Clericalism builds distance. Servanthood builds communion with all and sundry.

The red hat and the basin

Soter was born on April 22, 1932. He was ordained in 1966. He became a bishop, archbishop and eventually a

cardinal. But his witness is best understood not in ascent, but in descent. On Holy Thursday, the Church places before us not a throne, but a basin and a towel. In a global Church still grappling with authority, transparency, and the wounds of abuse, his memory becomes more than nostalgic. It becomes diagnostic.

The opposite of clericalism is not weak leadership. It is leadership that kneels. We know that the red hat signifies readiness to shed blood in service. Soter seemed to understand something even more immediate: that before one sheds blood, one must first be willing to stoop low enough to wash feet – or, in our Asian reality, where feet are respected, to touch another man's sandals. Soter died on Oct. 28, 2020. But Holy Thursday does not allow the Church to remain at tombs or memories. It brings us back to the floor, to the basin, to the uncomfortable nearness of service. If Soter once stooped to touch another's sandals, then the question before the Church in Asia is no longer historical. It is immediate. Who among us is willing to kneel?

Ministerial priesthood, servant-priest

The red hat was placed upon his head – a sign of honour, even of martyrdom. But it was in stooping down that Soter most resembled Christ: the Lord who rose from supper, took a towel, and showed the Church that true leadership is found not in elevation, but in servanthood. For it was also on this very night – Thursday – that Christ instituted the ministerial priesthood.

At the Last Supper, He offered the first Eucharist and commanded His apostles, 'Do this in remembrance of me,' entrusting them not only with a ritual, but with a sacred identity: to serve, to shepherd, and to lay down their lives.

In that quiet stooping, more than in receiving the red hat, the truth of Soter's priesthood came into full light – not as a dignity bestowed, but as a life poured out in the humble calling of a servant-priest.

With thanks to *Union of Catholic Asian News (UCA)* and Joseph Masilamany, where this article originally appeared

How True Christianity is Demonstrated

John Buggy

If I had to choose between religious-right Christianity or atheism, I would have to choose atheism.' A disillusioned reader expressed this just last month to Martin Thielen, a retired American Methodist pastor and author.

With the various conflicts occupying our TV screens every evening, coupled with some politicians choosing passages from the New Testament to justify anything they approve in war and claiming to be Christian, is it any wonder that religion is seriously questioned. When you add the attempts by others to justify various forms of discrimination by drawing on biblical sources, Martin states that it is understandable that 'huge numbers of people have chosen 'no religion' over 'religious-right' religion. He states that there is an alternative which he calls 'Progressive Christianity' and outlines it as follows.

Progressive Christianity:

- Emphasises grace over judgment;
- Is committed to social justice;
- Values reason and science;
- Prioritises Christian living over doctrinal conformity;
- Affirms divine mystery and ambiguity;
- Welcomes questions and doubts;
- Practices inclusion rather than exclusion;
- Affirms and values the LGBTIQ+ community;
- Believes strongly in women's equality;

- Respects other religions;
- Celebrates theological diversity;
- Gives people permission to harbour non-traditional beliefs;
- Seeks to follow the example and teachings of Jesus;
- Focuses on living a life of love;
- Treat immigrants compassionately, as Scripture clearly teaches;
- Seek justice for and reconciliation with our indigenous brothers and sisters;
- Care for all of God's creation, of whom we are a part, by the way that they live out their daily lives in our universe.

Progressive Christians are more interested in right living than right beliefs. They understand that the Bible is important in knowing about God but needs to be interpreted. They are comfortable in challenging doctrines in seeking the truth for themselves and hold that their conscience is their guide in determining how they should act.

If we add respect for the authority of the Pope and our bishops and priests, is there anything more to add or take away in order to for you to call yourself a Progressive Christian or Progressive Catholic? Is there really any significant difference in the way one would live? Would you continue to identify as a member of ARC if ARC reflected these beliefs in its statements and publications?

Please consider these thoughts and take the time to write some notes, comments or a letter to the editor. *ARCVoice* and any public statement ARC makes always attempts to reflect the approach and position of the large majority of its members. Your feedback helps us to maintain that objective. □

Pope Leo XIV faces major test over Opus Dei reforms

Gareth Gore

When Pope Leo XIV summoned the leader of Opus Dei to see him last month, in one of his first official audiences, Vatican watchers immediately began to wonder what the meeting meant.

Some said it was a clear olive branch, a peace offering from a new pope who wanted to heal relations with a group they felt had been unduly attacked by Pope Francis.

Others said the urgency of the meeting betrayed the new pope's frustration over delays to the group's new statutes – first requested by Francis three years ago – and a signal that reforming Opus Dei was a clear priority.

Opus Dei quickly hailed the 'closeness and affection' of the discussion.

Other readouts from the meeting seemed potentially more ominous.

'The Holy Father asked about the current study of the Statutes of the Prelature and listened with great interest to the explanations given,' Opus Dei said in a statement about the audience.

Three-year saga

The future of Opus Dei – and proposed statutes to be imposed on the group – have hung in the balance for three years since July 2022, when Francis announced his shock decision to impose sweeping changes to the operation of Opus Dei, the conservative, secretive and controversial Catholic group.

Francis explained that his decree – or *motu proprio* – *Ad Charisma Tuendum* was designed to 'protect the charism' of the group, indicating that something had perhaps gone amiss. He ordered the group to rewrite its statutes and placed it under oversight of the Dicastery for Clergy.

While the timing of the unanticipated decision puzzled many at the time, it later emerged that the *motu proprio* had come just months after a formal complaint from 42 women in Argentina, who alleged that Opus Dei had coerced them – many of them as children – into joining the group as unpaid servants for its elite members known as numeraries.

Federal prosecutors in Argentina have since formally accused Opus Dei of human trafficking and serious labour violations. Four of its priests will stand trial in coming months.

Three years later, the new statutes still have not been implemented.

According to the Spanish newspaper *El Diario Opus Dei* has submitted two drafts but each has been rejected. In June 2023, dozens of former members from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom filed another complaint against the group, alleging widespread abuse, the cover-up of criminal acts – including child abuse – and institutionalized fraud towards the church itself.

A few weeks later in 2023, Francis followed up with a second *motu proprio*, removing Opus Dei's authority over its lay members, stripping it of its ability to operate independently of local dioceses, and giving the Vatican critical powers to stage an intervention if it failed to act. The move was seen by many as a warning to Opus Dei to hurry up the process of rewriting its statutes, which were approved by Pope John Paul II when the group was made into a personal prelature in 1982.

But progress since then has been slow. Some suspected the group was waiting out the end of the Francis papacy in hopes that a new pope would be more sympathetic to the conservative organization. Following the second *motu proprio* Tim Busch, co-founder of the Napa Institute and a prominent Opus Dei supporter, said it appeared Francis wanted to rein in the organization.

'I think he's tightening the noose, but I don't think he's going to have enough time,' Busch said in an interview for the book, *Opus*. 'Is the next pope going to succeed in doing the same thing? Or are they going to back off?'

With regards to the statutes, Opus Dei's Manuel Sanchez said, 'All announcements will be made through our website when the time comes, in agreement with the Holy See.'

GARETH GORE is a London-based financial journalist, author and investigator known for his in-depth research into corporate, financial, and religious institutions.

Book Review

Isaac Slater OCSO: (Author)

Wisdom for a Polarised World: Allowing Wheat and Weeds to Grow Together

Review by (Sr) Patty Andrew OSU

In this time of rapid change, when there is a rupture in the world order, we long to find a continuous thread which will illuminate hope in the many situations of chaos and darkness emerging both locally and globally.

Our first response to this disorder is to seek a meaningful perspective. As people of hope, we desire to create a faith-based way of seeing, that brings a coherence to assist us simplify the growing complexity of life, in this first quarter of the 21st century.

Isaac Slater, in his recently published book, *Do Not Judge Anyone* (2025), offers us a way to live this time with love, compassion and purpose. He explores the ancient wisdom articulated by the contemplatives of our Christian tradition known as the ‘desert fathers and mothers’. These men and women lived their Gospel-centred lives in a radical way that illuminated the teachings of Jesus, especially in terms of their relationships with others.

Slater suggests that our tendency towards simplification and judgement is our constructed way to hold complexity at bay. He notes that in doing this our first response to situations of conflict is frequently to moralise. This places a moral ideal on others without explicitly indicating how grace is the means for effecting a change of heart. Slater claims that grace is the means for effecting a change of heart. Slater claims that moralism may be the besetting sin of the Western Church.

He proposes opening our hearts to the ‘the gratuity of grace’ as a healing pathway to offset

moralism and self-righteousness. Through grace we are empowered to embrace both justice and mercy. This enables attentive presence to the other which liberates us from being trapped in an introspective mindscape that is judgemental.

Healing such negativity disposes us to cultivate what Slater describes as a non-dual heart space. This enables us to embrace our own complexity with simplicity and relate empathetically with others. While this non-judgemental process brings healing, Slater assures us it is not about the absence of conflict. Instead, it offers us a way to foster a stable presence within it.

We begin with prayer because it provides the trusted and intimate space for all our emotions to rise before God including anger, which needs to be ‘rocked, cradled and cared for’ (p.75). Sourcing his core insights from the teachings of the Desert Fathers, Slater describes prayer as ‘the seed of gentleness’ (p. 33), reflecting things as they are – like a mirror – without judging.

Such prayer is grounded in the expansive nature of God’s infinite love. We are reminded that our sins and those of the entire world are no more than a handful of sand within the vast ocean of divine mercy and that, ‘we can never underestimate our need to soak in and savour, to marinate in divine mercy’ (p. 17).

Held securely in God’s love, we defer judgement to our Creator who allows the ‘wheat and weeds’ to grow together.

Sr Patty Andrew OSU is the Vicar for Consecrated Life.

Isaac Slater: *Do Not Judge Anyone: Desert Wisdom for a Polarized World*, Liturgical Press, 2025, pp160 – available on amazon.com.au

This article was originally published in the 2026 Lent & Easter | Autumn edition of the *Catholic Outlook Magazine*. It is published with permission

Vatican II and Revelation

Part 2:

The Scriptures and Religious Truth

John Buggy STL

The Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II opened the way for a new look at how we interpret sacred scripture. It recognised that we have to understand the scriptures in the culture of their time, not ours. Modern studies of ancient languages and archaeology, along with literary criticism and literary forms, enable us to continue discovering the meaning behind what has been revealed to us. But what does this really mean?

With so much technology around us today we tend to forget that there were no printing techniques or even carbon paper to have many records at the time that the scriptures were written. Even in New Testament times they were compiled, at best, from a few hand-written fragments of what was recorded in the period following Jesus' death. The writers, firstly Mark and Paul, drew from different sources, then Matthew and Luke drew from some of those sources and from Mark and Paul themselves. We do not even know who the writers of the Gospels were since there was no copyright in those times and there was a tendency for writers to sign off with the name of a more famous person to give a document more authority. The person who wrote the second epistle of Peter, for example, was not the same person who wrote the first one, but it might not have been included in the New Testament if the real author had put his name to it!

Literary criticism has enabled us to piece together a little more accurately what was originally written or said closer to the time of Jesus. Successive writers have added in, for example, what they estimated that Jesus said and did. Sometimes 'comments in the margin' of a text made by a commentator would find their way into the body of another version or stories from other sources would be used to fill out the proverbs, aphorisms and parables that Jesus used. A lot of filtering has to be done to get towards what Jesus would have actually said.

Dissecting the styles and forms of writing in the scriptures helps us to understand some of the

meaning. For example, the letter to the Hebrews, which for some time was thought to have been written by Paul, contains many words that Paul never used and is more refined Greek language than the other Pauline epistles. Such techniques along with the analysis of passages in the New Testament that are often parts of phrases, hymns, prayers, and even secular writings enable us to distinguish between what was captured at the time immediately following Jesus' death and the emerging and changing perspective of the early Church. This serves to illustrate how we can still be in the process of gaining a deeper understanding. Not everything is revealed at once, as the Vatican II document stated.

Perhaps what many people find the hardest to accept is facing up to some sections that are not literally or historically true. Many parts of the scriptures are made up of distinct literary forms that are quite foreign to our modern way of writing. One of these is 'midrash', the form used by ancient rabbis to probe and tease out hidden meanings, often retelling stories from the past to illuminate a new experience. For example, Luke (the author of both his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles) is the only evangelist to have a descriptive account of the Ascension and Pentecost. This account draws upon the circumstances of Elijah's going to heaven and sending his spirit onto his anointed disciple Elisha as recorded in the Second Book of Kings. It is meant to enliven the faith of Luke's followers, not to be an historical record of events. The other evangelists simply speak of the passing of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit in the context of the Resurrection.

The accounts of the birth and infancy of Jesus are also 'midrash' attempts to interpret the power and impact of the adult Jesus. There was a need in that culture to include something about the type of origin that such an important, yet humble, person would have had. Mark and Paul, the earliest writers, make no mention of Jesus' early life their focus is on his teaching as an adult. Matthew and Luke fill it in with accounts that do not match up. Open each of them up side-by-side and have a look at the significant differences. Amongst a range of variances, each has a different reason for Joseph and Mary being in Bethlehem. Matthew describes them as residing in a house, then fleeing to Egypt after the visit of the Magi. Luke's story is of shepherds and the manger, with no mention of Magi and fleeing to Egypt, etc. There is no point in trying to reconcile them since the recording of history is not their purpose. We do not even know if Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But archaeology gradually allows us to know more about

the culture of the people of Galilee and Jesus' environment. An acceptance of this enables us to concentrate on the real messages that the Gospel writers are attempting to convey.

The truth of the scriptures is contained in their religious meaning that is wrapped up in the literary forms used by a particular culture. Would we criticise a piece of modern poetry (one of our literary forms) because the scene it may be describing is not literally accurate? Would we accuse the poet of not telling the truth? And what about the child who comes in enthusiastically from school with an exaggerated account of a sporting victory? Is a lie being told even if the trophy is in his hand?

The great tragedy in relation to the interpretation of the scriptures today is that the Church has not embraced all this learning about biblical interpretation in order to help overcome the fundamentalism that is now very much on the rise. Fundamentalism insists on taking the Bible, or the Koran, literally and using it to force followers into

very illogical and extreme views. It saps away the spirit of what the writers intended, because it ignores the literary context of the writings themselves. In the years since the Vatican Council, encouragement should have been given to biblical scholars and theologians to draw out and extend what was already researched, even prior to the Council. Unfortunately, the power of a very conservative few has stifled so many attempts to bring the benefits into our understanding and expression of our faith and its practice.

In the final part, I will attempt to illustrate, to only a small extent, what we could have gained in our understanding of the message of Christianity if the genuine scholars of scripture had been encouraged to follow the lead given by the Constitution on Divine Revelation.

Next Issue – Part 3: The Potential Effect on Faith, Morals and Religious Education

Introducing St. Lucia Spirituality

St. Lucia Spirituality is an inclusive spiritual community where seekers of all backgrounds can find connection, guidance and belonging. They state: 'At St. Lucia Spirituality, our purpose is multifaceted. We believe in empowering seekers to take ownership of their spiritual journey, encouraging them to navigate their path with personal responsibility. Our mission is to cultivate an inclusive community of spiritual seekers, fostering online dialogues and establishing intimate discussion groups in local neighbourhoods. We aim to curate a wealth of resources on diverse topics to stimulate the exploration of ideas and insights, nurturing spiritual growth along the way.'

Although the majority of the members are Catholics, membership is open to anyone who wishes to identify with their approach and activities.

'Our approach is rooted in openness, humility, and shared exploration. We don't claim to be theologians or experts. We instead offer invitations – questions, reflections, resources – and encourage you to take ownership of your path. Community spaces, conversations and tools are built so that everyone can inquire, doubt, wonder and grow together. We believe spiritual awakening happens when people feel safe to explore without judgment.'

In February this year, Brian Bright and I, as representatives of ARC, met the founders of this group, John Scoble and Robert van Mourik, via a Zoom link. We explored the similarities between the objectives of the group and ARC, along with common synergies, with a view to exploring how we might liaise and interact in the future, perhaps with a joint activity or two.

Apart from offering their members a wide range of educational material, the group holds monthly Zoom meetings where a brief presentation is given on a particular topic and a discussion follows for a total of about 90 minutes. You can join any of these discussions simply by registering on their website. They will then inform you about upcoming topics each month. Check it out at <https://www.stluciaspirituality.com/>

John Buggy

Have your say

ARCVoice is a report of news, opinions and reflections on the renewal and reform currently experienced in the Catholic Church.

Your contributions, letters, articles or comments are most welcome.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or of ARC.

Please send material to:

The Editor
ARCVoice
Unit 68/28 Curagul Road
NORTH TURRAMURRA NSW 2074

OR (preferably)

email: mknowlden@bigpond.com

Tel: 0431 198 161

ARC Website

www.australianreformingcatholics.au

Contains all back copies of ARCVoice

ARC Secretariat

Peter Albion 0402 046 749 palbion@me.com

Brian Bright 0401 768 688 bbright45@bigpond.com

John Buggy: (Spokesperson) 0419 217 543
jbuggy@ozemail.com.au

Laurie Chilko 0423 317 359 laurie.chilko@hotmail.com

Alan Clague: 0409 030 689 clague@aapt.net.au

Wayne McGough 0408 505 356 waynemcgough48@gmail.com

Margaret Knowlden (Editor): 0431 198 161
mknowlden@bigpond.com

Patrick Nunan 041 8153 405 patnunan@hotmail.com

(Sister) Mary Walsh, 0418 249 126
mary.walsh2607@gmail.com,



Annual Subscription (from 1 July to 30 June)

Membership Subscriptions for 2026 - 2027 are due NOW

Membership: \$30 Concession: \$20 for Religious and Pensioners (not Seniors)

Please add a donation if you can afford it

Name

Address

..... Postcode

Telephone (....) Mobile

Email

Subscription \$

Donation (always welcome) \$

TOTAL \$

Please make your payment
on the ARC website
www.australianreformingcatholics.au
at the 'Membership' page
by entering your card details
or at the bank by deposit to ARC's
Westpac Account BSB 032-089
Account No.14-7944

Would you like to share in the work for ARC in any way? Circle: YES / NO

If YES, please let us know what you would want to do.

Send to:

Patrick Nunan, ARC Treasurer, 4 Grasmere Court, Mt Lofty, TOOWOOMBA, QLD 4350