

# A Synod of Missed Opportunities

Response to the Instrumentum Laboris for the second Synod Assembly

By Australian Reform Groups:

For the Innocents (Ftl), SA Catholics for an Evolving Church (SACEC),  
Welcoming Christian Community, Women's Wisdom In The Church (WWITCH)

Commenting on the Instrumentum Laboris (IL) raises a unique issue. On one view, it marks a significant move forward in church thinking and planning for the future. The document is positive, hopeful and upbeat, reflecting the mood of the Synod. It is optimistic and suggests a transformed church.

On an alternative view, the IL misses numerous opportunities for laying out a program that would relate practically to the socio-cultural context of the 2020s. Further, progress seems to be measured against Vatican II which is already sixty years in the past.

What began as an invitation to all Catholics to participate in the renewal of Catholicism as a force for good - personally, communally and publicly - has dissipated into a pattern of insiders discussing among themselves how they are to keep the ship afloat, still stunted by an obsession with outdated structures and intellectual positions. Meanwhile ordinary Catholics are disengaging in droves or barely hanging on by their fingernails.

The initial Synod call - 'For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission' (Preparatory Document, 2021 #1) - drew a flood of responses and contributions. Catholics worldwide envisaged opportunities for new life, inspiration, the freedom of the Spirit to 'blow where it will' and a church committed to dealing with the life-issues they experienced.

Most Catholics in Australia, and probably worldwide, now regard the Synod as irrelevant for them - if they think about it at all. The IL barely acknowledges their concerns and, where it does, offers hope and further discussion rather than effective solutions.

The focus is now on the church and its way of going about its task rather than responding to the cries of the faithful for reasonable reform and renewal. The Synod could be offering practical solutions to many of the issues that continue to cause pain and grief, spiritual and mental suffering, relationship distortion and disruption, loss of faith and depression.

The ACCCR assessment is that the IL is, in a limited way, helpful, affirmative of the positive elements in the church and is on a positive path. There is a great deal of inspiring material here. The critique is that, for much of its presentation, it is too hesitant and tied to structures and positions that are no longer valid. ACCCR dreams of a courageous, forward-looking, open

and welcoming church that truly and unambiguously articulates and actualises the vision of Jesus.

**The following are some of the areas where a more intentional approach guided by the near-universal concerns of Catholics could lead to a kinder, gentler, more welcoming and caring church.**

**Specific groups.** A genuine sacrament of unity would welcome everyone. Catholics worldwide had hoped the Synod would end this unchristian discrimination.

- **Women's ordination.** The current position constitutes an abuse of basic human rights which accord equality to all. It is discrimination which reduces women to subservient status in the church. Institutionally, the refusal to benefit from the must surely rank as the worst counter-productive position of the century. This blatant discrimination discredits and undermines every church statement on equality and respect for people.
- **LGBTIQ+.** The Synod could have taken the opportunity here to review its misplaced, unevidenced and discriminatory position on LGBTQ+ people and non-binary relationships. The evidence for a spectrum of human sexuality and gender is conclusive.
- **Divorced and repartnered Catholics.** Good people are made to feel guilty and ashamed because initial relationships do not always work out and finding love in a second is unacceptable to the archaic rules of the institution.

**Well-founded positions.** Positions adopted in times of poorer understanding of theology and human sciences could now be updated in the spirit of *aggiornamento*.

- **Authority.** The IL repeats the hollow claim: 'In a synodal Church, the responsibility of the bishop, the College of bishops and the Roman Pontiff to make decisions is inalienable since it is rooted in the hierarchical structure of the Church established by Christ.' (#70) Theologians now recognise that the foundation of Christian life is in a relationship with Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit. Responsibility for decisions follows.
- **Basis of unity.** The IL presents '... the ministry of the Bishop of Rome as the visible principle of unity of the whole Church and of each Bishop as visible principle of unity in his local Church ...' (#88) This could have been contextualised with references to love of God and care for others as the core values that bring people together. Organisational unity and institutional features are derivative not determinative.

**Sharing power.** In a world where power is given and received by free and legitimate cooperation, monarchic and unrepresentative lordship must be replaced.

- **Governance.** Good governance, including such features as transparency, accountability, responsiveness and effectiveness, is widely promoted in the IL but it stops short of suggesting limits to the autocratic power of bishops and the Pope.
- **Pastoral and Diocesan Councils.** These and similar councils are positively promoted as ‘essential instruments of pastoral activities’ (#91) but left as consultative bodies with no decision-taking authority. Democratic processes, which do not necessarily mean party-political style divisions would enhance the effectiveness and credibility of church structures.

**Safeguarding the process.** Authentic ‘walking together’ is more fruitful when all issues are on the table, responsibility is shared and everyone feels, and actually is, included as they are.

- **Hollowing out the synod.** The IL, of course, emphasises the Synod as the fulfilment of the consultation process begun in 2021. It could have pointed out that the sidelining of central issues to ten Commissions, the pronouncements of *Dignitas Infinita* and the Pope’s intervention on women’s ordination mark a hollowing out of the synodal process.
- **Synodality:** For the IL, synodality refers to consultations, conversations in the Spirit, even participation in shaping questions for decision but not taking decisions, responsibility or sharing authority/power. There is still much to be done to establish synodality as a creative life-giving force in a community of equals.
- **Spiritual and religious experience.** They are not mentioned. This misses an opportunity for establishing common ground with many Catholics who no longer engage with Church liturgies but live by their spiritual experience – surely an essential feature of a church in mission. Pope Francis’ *Motu Proprio, Ad Promovendam Theologiam*, (October 2023) provided an unmistakable opportunity for including the sense of faith in the Synod agenda.
- **Sense of faith of the faithful.** Another major missed opportunity for placing believers, the faithful, at the centre of church life and ecclesial practices. The long tradition of recognising the inherent sense of faith of the faithful is virtually absent from this document. Although specifically referred to by Jesus (‘Your faith has saved you’, ‘Have faith’), Augustine, Aquinas, John Henry Newman, Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan among many others, the IL seems to regard it as unimportant other than as assistance for ecclesial discernment. (#58)

**Being responsible.** The legacy of Jesus is a gift to be shared by all, with all, for all. It has the potential to assist people, whatever their background or faith tradition to be all they can be.

- **Leadership.** The IL discusses some features of modern living but in terms of challenges to the church. Contemporary society needs more - strong credible moral leadership that offers a vision and a future for our communities, our country and our world.
- **Communion.** The Eucharist 'is not a prize for the perfect but a generous medicine and food for the weak' (Evangelii Gaudium). The Synod could have initiated a movement towards true welcome and communion for all who seek it. 'All the baptised' implies all Christians. 'People of God' surely includes other faiths. We dream of an open table with room for everyone rather than a club with closed membership criteria.
- **Subsidiarity.** The document calls for greater "decentralisation of governance and pastoral planning" (#96), whereby Episcopal Conferences can make decisions specific to their jurisdictions, "including genuine doctrinal authority" (#96) This is welcome – as far as it goes. However, it stops with the bishop. No further subsidiarity, such as a role for the faithful in discerning the action of the Spirit, is recognised.

**Speaking clearly.** The clearer we can articulate and communicate our message, the more likely we are to create communities of love and care – as well as be authentic ourselves.

- **Church, People of God, the Baptised.** These are fluid concepts throughout the document. Sometimes the organisation constituted by canon law is intended. At other times, they seem to refer to the community of believers formed by mutual care, shared common beliefs and values. Differentiating between the church as organisation and as community of believers and consistent terminology could greatly clarify many points including hierarchical versus community authority and decision-taking roles.

## Conclusion

The second Assembly of the Synod in October will be a test of the ability of the church to show that it hears the pleas and responds effectively to the expressed needs, concerns, anxieties and hopes of ordinary people. If people continue to walk away, it would be a problem; if the leaders prove to be unresponsive and ineffective, it would be disastrous.

Will the Synod regenerate the impetus and energy required to restore integrity to the church and reinstate the vision and values of Jesus as a credible lifestyle in the modern world? We wait in hope – and pray.

*For the Innocents (Ftl),  
Welcoming Christian Community,  
August 2024*

*SA Catholics for an Evolving Church (SACEC),  
Women's Wisdom In The Church (WWITCH)*