



# Holy Spirit Catholic Parish, Gungahlin

*'Empowered by the Spirit to Serve'*

## **Submission to the Plenary Council**

### **Background:**

Holy Spirit Catholic Parish Gungahlin was established in 1993 and has rapidly grown to cover over 17 suburbs and 18,000 Catholics. Holy Spirit parishioners consists of in most part, young families from extensive and diverse multicultural backgrounds. The parish priest Fr Mark Croker and Parish Pastoral Council agreed that the Parish would provide a submission to the Plenary Council which identified the issues raised by many parishioners but not exclusive of the range of topics which concerned many people. Parishioners were invited to contribute to the parish's Plenary Council response and to also submit their opinions directly to the Council.

This submission has been prepared from a Parish perspective as the parish still functions in a practical way to facilitate our worship and prayer while simultaneously making possible the other great desire of Australian Catholics: fellowship and community.

Holy Spirit believes that the future Australian Church will draw on each person's gifts and talents, regardless of gender, ordination, marital status or ethnic background. The Church will be led by representatives of ALL its people and the laity will, over time, take the majority say on Church operations.

The four primary areas this submission deals with are:

- 1. improved, effective governance with power sharing with the laity;**
- 2. enhanced, equal roles for women across the Church;**
- 3. effective liturgy and music as vehicles for prayer, change and multicultural inclusion; and**
- 4. reform in the recruitment and training of the clergy.**

Other issues of great concern to the Parish include: young people and their relationship to God and the Church; placing social justice at the heart of the Church's teaching and action; communication strategies across the Church, and, not surprisingly, a just and equitable response to the damage suffered by victims of sexual abuse by clergy and religious and the placement of that behavior in a criminal context.

### **Recommendation 1: Governance and power sharing**

Many Catholics have turned away from the Church because of the actions of the very people who promised to protect it and lead us to God. The actions of those perpetrators, not only domestically, but internationally, and the subsequent inaction by those at the highest levels to remove those members of the clergy, have hurt victims and the faithful alike. The Church's bureaucracy has the appearance of being too slow to act, and in many cases looks as if it prefers to protect and defend the perpetrators than support and hear the victims. While the scandal of sexual abuse is the current reason many have abandoned the Church, the process has been going on for many years. Many self-identified Catholics, brought up in the Church and who received a Catholic education, have left because the Church is stuck in the past, protecting and defending its clerical power instead of embracing the talents and calling of all Catholics to participate in all aspects of Church life.

The formation of a National Pastoral Council (NPC) and a Diocese Pastoral Council (DPC) for each diocese will provide a platform for parishes, and especially the laity, to have a strong voice on



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matters facing the Church, and recommend action to be taken.

## **1A: The formation of a National Pastoral Council (NPC) and Diocese Pastoral Councils (DPCs)**

**DPCs:** A Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) would primarily be the voice of parish throughout the diocese. It would convey the opinions and advice of parishes to the Bishop and improve and extend the voice of the Bishop throughout the parishes.

They would be the peak advisory body to the Bishop on the direction and formation of pastoral life in the diocese. This would include supporting the Bishop in the execution of strategies from his office and the Plenary Council, and utilizing feedback from parishes to overcome challenges faced by the Church at ground level. The DPC would also provide an effective forum for parishes through-out the diocese to listen to one another and to learn from each other about issues, problems and solutions concerning pastoral affairs.

DPCs would consist primarily of the chairs of the diocese's parish pastoral councils and will be gender neutral. Terms of reference would be developed in consultation and would give the DPCs clear responsibility for defined topics and tasks in the diocese. Each DPC would consider models to liberate the Bishops from the burdens of administration and trial new models of governance.

### **NPC:**

A National Pastoral Council (NPC) would consist primarily of chairs from each DPC, and would be given authority to make recommendations to the national Church leadership, and make these recommendations based on responses from Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils. In turn, the NPC will lead and support the Church in the execution of strategies throughout the country.

Both bodies will represent the voice of the laity in the Australian Catholic Church. However, it is the National Pastoral Council which will clearly signal the clergy's desire to share the burden of leadership and change. It will have many practical matters to consider, especially after the Plenary Council, but it is its symbolism as a peak body of shared responsibility that will provide a renewed confidence in the Church of our future.

## **1B: Undertake governance reform and review on a regular basis**

In being time poor, the laity has increasingly relied on priests to not only be pastoral leaders, but General Managers of our parishes. The results are greater dependency on the clergy to make decisions for us rather than with us. **Underpinning the governance reform will need to be an education program based on teaching, mentoring and assessing dioceses and Parishes regularly,** not just a one-off Council of Bishop reform. This assessment must be a joint and equal exercise between clergy and laity.

Modern associations undergo continuous review and improvement, which benefit their members and keeps them involved. This has to be a basic tenet of future arrangements in the Australian Church. The clergy and the laity must work together, using their specific talents and experience, to maintain a regime of constant review and improvement. At the same time, every parish is unique in its own way and needs flexibility and autonomy to deliver a liturgy that the Parish needs and responds to. Our parish, for example, has 51 per cent of its Mass attendees born overseas and many of these have quite different expectations of liturgy and prayer - which we need to integrate with our current models.

The right balance of review, reform and change is best met by working through the Councils:



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National, Diocesan and Parish.

## **Recommendation 2: A more inclusive role of Women**

The Parish recommends that on all representative bodies of the Church, including Parish Councils and the proposed DPC and NPC in recommendation 1, there be a mandatory 50 per cent representation of women. We also believe that the many gifts and talents of female Catholics are ignored or discounted by the Church hierarchy and that the women of the church be encouraged to take leadership positions by mentoring and training, paid for by the Church. Women's roles within the Church should no longer be controlled or circumscribed on the basis of gender.

Consequently, the Plenary Council needs to move to implement gender-neutral language throughout the Church, and especially in the liturgies, as a matter of priority.

## **Recommendation 3: Liturgy & Music**

### **3A: A revision and refresh of music**

The hymns currently available for Parishes to utilize have not been updated since the 90's. Noting that all Parishes are limited by copyright restrictions, there is a desperate need to have more songs made available, especially to further encourage the youth participation in the Church. The Church has lost quite a few young people to Christian groups such as Hill Song, where music plays such a critical and essential role in prayer and worship. Parishes must have more songs available, both traditional and new, to engage the Catholic youth.

### **3B: Parishes be given the opportunity to vary liturgy**

This recommendation does not require variations to the core elements of our Mass or liturgies, however we suggest that parishes be permitted and encouraged to implement local variations in liturgy, such as liturgical dancing at Pentecost or Christmas, and other notable events on the Catholic calendar. As commented above, our Parish has many culture and languages and a wider sharing of their Mass experience would be of benefit to our whole community.

Moreover, priests should be able to reword some basic prayers, such as the Introductory Rites, into more user friendly / easier to understand / simple English, but keep the same meaning. Some of these prayers are very difficult - not only to read, but they lose their meaning due to the complexity of the English used. It would be far more preferable if the Plenary Council were to take up this challenge, along with gender neutrality, at a **national level** and fast-track meaningful changes in wording.

## **Recommendation 4: The Clergy**

### **4A: Allowing Priests to Marry.**

The Parish notes that despite a small increase in men entering seminaries in Australia, there is undoubtedly a need for more priests throughout the country and the world at large. Men of all ages should be strongly encouraged to join the priesthood, not just those in their late teens. This would be amplified by permitting priests to marry if they wish. It is appreciated that such a decision cannot be taken lightly, noting the financial and doctrinal challenges, but it is important to the future of the Church and cannot be ignored.

In the meantime, those priests who left their vocations to marry should all be invited to once again take up their priestly duties in full communion with the Church. We also support the question of women priests being put back on the agenda in Rome.



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In the absence of sufficient priests, the Australian church, with advice from its lay Councils, should share more of the priestly pastoral role with the parish laity. There are always laity in every parish who want to extend their call from God but are restricted by clergy guarding their territory.

## **4B: Revision of Seminary Training to include Business and Life Skills.**

The Churches most beloved priests, many of whom entered the priesthood young, do not have the necessary life skills to run a parish. To assist and support our priests, they need training at the seminary in:

- Small Business Management and Administration;
- People Management and Psychology;
- Media Management;
- Self-Management, including how to look after their physical and mental health.

Without doubting the sincerity of the young men who have gone to the Homebush seminary, what sort of training and ways are being instilled into them? They may be well versed in religious knowledge but they express it in a convoluted way which does not connect with the Australian community. The church needs men who are confident in themselves and who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. Those who have been through Homebush have been educated with plenty of theory but seem to lack understanding of what "service" really means. They are not sensitive to where people are at – and they appear not to care. So many issues depend on the priest's reading of the situation and this is one ability that mature men have in greater measure; especially if they begin their formation to the priesthood at an older age. Mature age vocations have proven themselves to provide priests who have stronger pastoral skills which have been developed from years of experience in the secular world. Vocations may well be nurtured with the effort being put into reigniting youth groups; however, young fish are not allowed to be taken unless they are a legal size. Leave them in water to mature.

In our experience, putting young seminarians into a parish is a cost rather than a benefit. That time would be better spent working for an employer. Hopefully, they would become more responsible, would know what it means to work their way up and to earn people's respect. And they would find that there are no special favours because they wear a collar.

We believe that there are many men and women who would be very suitable in ministry, who have experiences in the broader world which have allowed them to discern the potential of a vocation and the understanding that they have much to offer to the Church. All should be made welcome.

## **Recommendation 5: Marriage and Divorce**

Very few couples are requesting marriage in the Church. While they are undoubtedly just as committed to each other and their marriage as those who do marry in the church, they shy away from a church wedding. We recommend that the Church undertake detailed research to discover how best to fortify and re-embrace the sacrament of marriage. How to bring it into the modern age and make it a desirable option for young couples.

Each generation seems to have less knowledge of and commitment to the church's teachings (even though they are educated in Catholic schools). This is obvious in the area of relationships – many drift into long term casual sex and cohabitation. On the other hand, when they do marry they know that if things get tough they can easily divorce. Once a Catholic marriage ends in divorce, the parties are abandoned and ostracised by the Church. This is not fair or just and has to change.



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Does the Church recognise the pain and heartbreak it imposes on couples and individuals who have done all they could to save their marriage but find themselves divorced from their partner **and** from the Church? Does it recognise how it hurts those who request annulments, but fail? Does the Church understand that divorce is a permanent persecution of the individual when the "sins" of most others may be forgiven and those "sinners" allowed to receive the sacraments? Does the Church think it is doing God's work when it punishes a battered spouse for fleeing a violent marriage? What is it thinking?

The Church underpins its consideration of annulments with the question about informed consent and conscience. When so many young people do not attend the Mass and sacraments, how many of them have the capacity to be truly sacramentally married?

It is time the Australian church decided that all marriages should be celebrated by a civil celebrant. Then, if the couple is committed to the church's understanding of sacramental marriage, they may undergo the Church's preparation and have their marriage recognised. If they do have their marriage recognised in the Church and wish to seek an annulment, they can proceed through a system similar, but more reasonable than, the current one.

This means, of course, that no person will be barred from the sacraments on the grounds of divorce.

## **Conclusion**

Holy Spirit Parish Amaroo appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Plenary Council and will keep the Bishops of our nation and the Church as whole in our prayers through this journey.

With kindest regards,

Holy Spirit Parish Amaroo ACT.