

Most Reverend Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv DD STL, Bishop of Parramatta  
Address to the Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA) Governance Forum  
1 July 2024

## Good governance, leadership and mission in the Synodal Church

### Introduction:

It is a privilege for me to speak at this forum. To say that we the Church in Australia are at a critical juncture is probably an understatement. Australian Catholicism is a damaged brand. We are still coming to terms with the Royal Commission's findings and working to bring about the changes needed to regain our credibility and effectiveness.

It is worth noting that the Royal Commission does not see the Catholic Church as monolithic. It recommends, for instance, that the clerical governance structures be reviewed, drawing from the modes of governance already implemented in Catholic health, community services and education agencies. Many of these entities are the legacy of religious congregations, which have evolved into largely lay-led PJPs. They have largely adopted the best business practices and even become models of contemporary leadership, management and governance.

But as has been noted, these more accountable, transparent and participatory practices need to "cross the aisle" to dioceses, parishes and perhaps religious orders themselves, too. The time has come for the leaders of the Church to not only admit the need for change but to discern with the faithful as to what the process and the agenda for change should look like going forward. In other words, for the Church to be truly synodal and listening, for the Church not to fall back to its default position, the inclusion of the *sensus fidelium* in all deliberations and responses is critical.

### Synodality in Governance:

One of the key priorities that I was passionate about was to implement and promote good governance in my own diocese. We could not go on business as usual in the wake of the Royal Commission. It was time to ensure that our diocesan governance includes standards like accountability, transparency, diversity and shared decision-making. It was with this in mind that we conducted the most comprehensive, independent and external review of our governance in any diocese in Australia. It provided the impetus and a launching pad for a root and branch reform of how the Church in Parramatta should conduct its mission.

We are seeing the fruits of the governance reform that has been recommended by the review. The Diocesan Curia for instance is no longer just a preserve of the ordained. Lay and women members provide diverse perspectives and grassroots input into our governance and decision-making process. This is replicated across the board. Our major agencies have been successfully incorporated as companies limited by guarantee, that apply the principles and values of the civil and canonical governance framework. We might have had some teething problems. But I believe the change has been largely positive and reflective of the direction we want to be headed for. This has been truly a momentous leap of faith and a significant milestone in the life of the Diocese as we move decisively towards a synodal way of governance, decision-making and mission.

We were also the first diocese in Australia to launch the synodal journey known as the Diocesan Synod and despite the challenges, we have responded boldly to the call of Pope

Francis to rebuild and revitalise the Church with the synodal vision and framework. We have proved that it is not only possible but indispensable to build a culture of consensus and unity in diversity that leads us to being a model society and an effective vehicle of the Good News for the disadvantaged, the planet and all God's creation.

The Diocesan Synod confirmed the ecclesiological paradigm, direction and the way of being Church for us going forward. We showed that it is possible to find common ground and strategic goals despite our divergent views, differing positions and even conflicting hopes. We actually decided on a series of meaningful and significant resolutions that will guide our pastoral response. Mutual listening, learning and discernment led us to become a community of mutual empowerment.

Going forward, we are in the process of developing the Diocesan Pastoral Plan for the future. My hope is that we will not only develop structures of governance that will drive the synodal vision of the Church but also nurture a strong culture for synodality as well. As the saying goes, "culture eats strategies for breakfast", the nurturing of the culture of deep listening, consensus, mutual trust, discernment and decision-making is a critical task. Pope Francis often warns us of putting all our eggs in one basket of structural or institutional reform at the risk of failing the ultimate test of conversion to the Gospel. The synodal journey is, after all, not an event or a program, but a journey of conversion to the movement of the Holy Spirit who is the chief protagonist of ecclesial reform.

#### **Myth drift or mission-focused:**

One of the biggest challenges for faith-based organisations and specifically one with an economy of scale is the danger of losing or weakening its mission focus. The ever-increasing pressures to balance the budgets and to respond to corporate demands, coupled with secularism of the wider culture will impact on the mission.

When the business pole of the tension has the upper hand, the mission narrative ceases to be the senior partner. This phenomenon is known as a myth drift that is not uncommon in Catholic health, aged care and social services institutions. The litmus test for us is not to lose our founding story but to embody afresh the Gospel of mercy and witness to the values of its mission.

It is particularly essential that key leaders, e.g. trustees, CEOs, board directors, accept and interiorise the founding story. If not, their decision-making and operations will run counter to the founding story and its values, e.g., corporate values will dominate. Formation of key leaders in the founding story, therefore, is critically important for the survival and growth of the mission and its different ministries.

As key leaders, you stand on the shoulders of the pioneering sisters and continue their spirit of missionary and innovative leadership. You owe it to them not simply by repeating what they did for the people of their times but by reimagining and re-contextualising the Christian story that drove them in the first place. You owe it to them to put flesh on the marrow of the Gospel for the people of our time.

One of the implications for those leading in the post-Christian culture is the fostering of our sense of identity. Clearly, we need to be at home with our minority status with all that entails. It means that our value system is often at odds with those of the dominant culture. It means that our engagement in the public sphere may be fraught when we advocate for matters that government and other civic powers oppose.

We are called to be a blessing for the Church and the world by the measure of our authentic witness. This authenticity lies in our courage to be the voice of the minority and

the conscience of the outsiders to the totalising system. We are called to be like the prophets of old who have the burning passion, urgency, discomfort and the itch to speak God's alternate vision for humanity. Now we need to embody that vision in living as contrast communities, avoiding cultural accommodation and demonstrating a different way to be a society.

I believe that our primary objective is embodying the lifegiving, circular, symbiotic and cooperative relational God in our structures and relationships, internally and externally. It is never about short-term profit and the bottom line. When we embody the God that we believe in, we learn to consider a complex and nuanced bottom line. We know there is another line beneath the bottom line, what we might call the space where God signs off on what we have done. That is to say, we are not simply satisfied when we are in the black; we are only satisfied when our work reflects the values we espouse, the mission we profess and the governance that frames our decision-making processes.

Being mission-focused means not only being faithful to the founding charisms of the congregations that gave birth to the lay-led ministerial PJPs. It also requires a certain re-imagination that may lead to new expressions to the congregational traditions. We need to put new flesh on the marrow of the Gospel and nurture an identity that is critically engaged, prophetic and mission-oriented. To this end, we need to invest in educational, formative and developmental processes to ensure that mission is actually driving the business in decision-making and values-based outcomes.

#### **Conclusion:**

We can draw inspiration from our forebears who modelled another way of living and relating. In the world where the rules were made by the strong and the structures of power favoured the privileged, they embodied the boundary-breaking spirit of Jesus. They mirrored God's kingdom where those socially marginalised were brought to the table and in turn contributed to a more inclusive, caring society that is Australia today. The Kingdom vision of Jesus guides us as we endeavour to be a community that serves as an antidote to the politics of fear, self-interest and the economy of exclusion in our society. We are privileged to be partners with God's plan for a shared destiny of hope, communion and life for all.

Bless all those gathered here today as we come together in friendship and fellowship. Thank you for the blessings of our individual and collective God-given gifts. Place in our hearts the desire to make a difference to our families, to our community, to our country, and to the many cultures and peoples worldwide.

Bless all who, following in the footsteps of Christ, give themselves to the service of others; that with wisdom, patience, and courage, they may minister in His name to the suffering, the friendless, and the needy; for the love of Him who laid down His life for us, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, God, forever.