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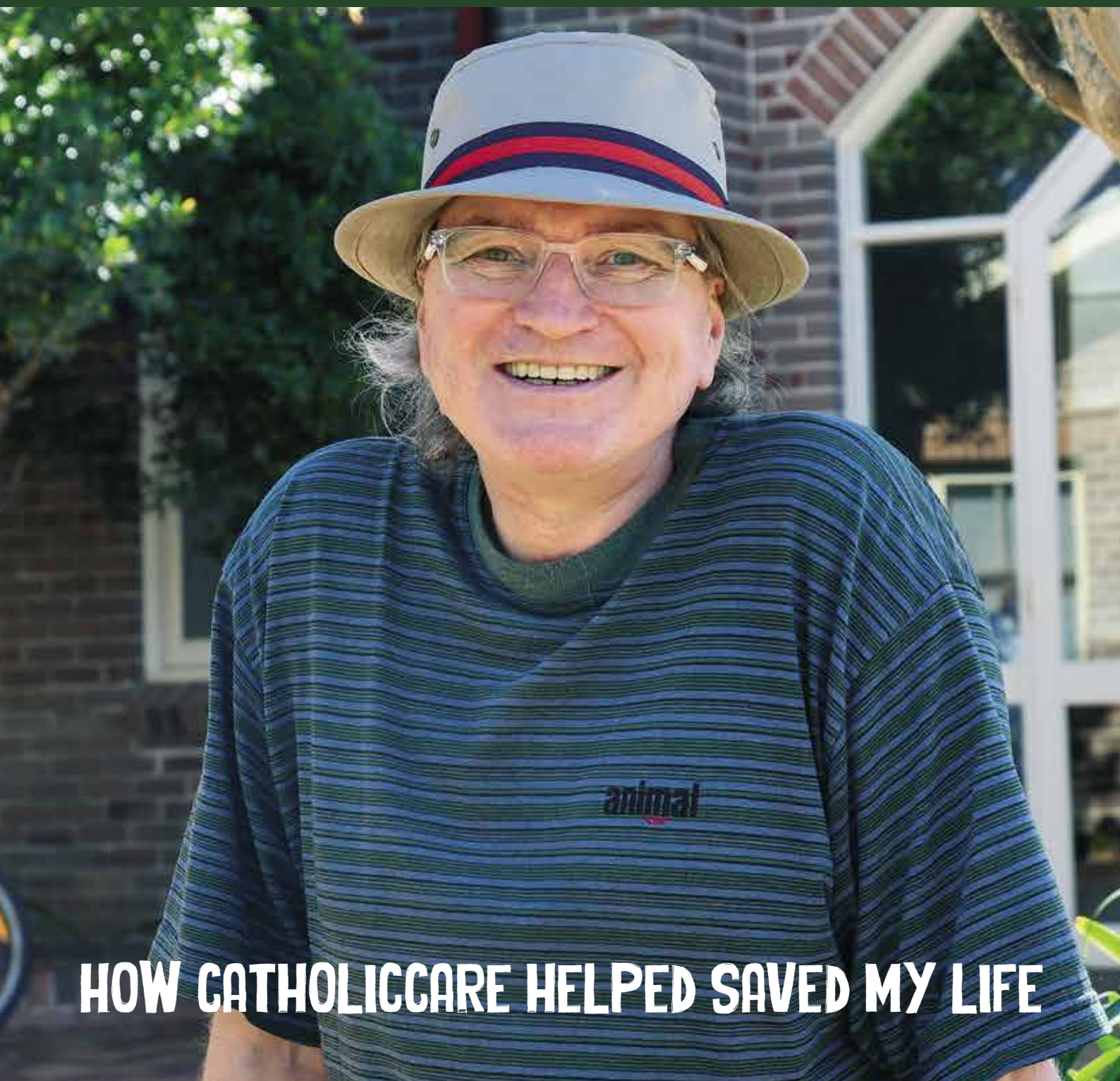
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HOW CATHOLIC CARE HELPED SAVE MY LIFE

Global Meeting of Parish Priests in Rome

by Fr David Ranson

Indeed, it was a singular privilege for me to be one of two priests nominated by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to attend the Special Meeting of Parish Priests for the Synod of Bishops, along with Fr Paul Crotty, Parish Priest of Coober Pedy in the Diocese of Port Pirie, South Australia. The meeting, organised by the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, along with the Dicastery for Clergy and the Dicasteries for Evangelisation and Eastern-Rite Churches, was held just north of Rome, at a large conference centre, in Sacrofano, from Sunday 28 April to Thursday 2 May, 2024. Just under 200 priests from 99 countries participated, providing a remarkable overview of the catholicity of the Church – men from Siberia to Switzerland, from the Congo to Canada, from Vietnam to Venezuela. It was a fascinating experience to meet these men, to grow in appreciation of their diverse contexts, and to be inspired by the way in which they are seeking to animate their communities of faith in the most effective way possible. I am still astounded by the declaration of one priest from Uruguay of the way in which he tries to create a unity out of the 72 churches in his parish! And from the question from a priest from Burkina Faso who asked how does one practice synodality in a context of terrorism.

Throughout our week we listened to a number of key theologians, notably Fr Giles Routhier from Canada and Tomas Halik from Prague. However, the largest part of the day was spent in small language groups (English, French, Italian and Spanish) in Conversation of the Spirit. This is a particular methodology of shared discernment by which each person in the group is given the opportunity to respond to a question without interruption, followed by time for each person to share what they heard in the group, and concluded by arriving at a shared conclusion of what the group itself discerned. I can think of no better way to convey the fruits of the entire meeting by sharing the syntheses of our group.

Day One

We have been enriched and inspired by the sharing of other's stories which has widened our horizons. For us, it has been a demonstration of how the processes of synodality can transform affectivity (sharing of experiences) into effectivity (impetus to action). We recognised many are the forms of synodality exercised in our parish communities. These can often be in the form of what we might call,



Fr David meets with Pope Francis following the global gathering.

micro-synodality by which small groups encourage fuller involvement of its members and many volunteers enlisted, through to parish pastoral councils representative of the diversity and complexity of the parish, through to an entire community being a parish-in-council. There is not a single way of being synodal and the context will speak out the mode. However, foundational is the exercise of a synodal leadership. This means listening intently to and learning from the People of God entrusted to our care, inviting their participation at many different levels, and developing a shared course of action to which many have contributed. The synodal style of leadership is imbued with 'closeness' 'tenderness' 'proximity'. This begins in the way priests care for each other which then ripples through the community and its members' way of being present to one another. This creates a care-giving community, a Church serving humanity together with the Lord and on the model of Jesus himself. The desired outcome is engagement of all the baptised, with a co-responsibility for mission. This however renders pastors vulnerable, especially to criticism, and in need of support for there is a possibility for synodality to become subject to destructive agendas. Therefore, the balance between the exercise of authority and the empowerment of the laity requires careful consideration in order to avoid moving from one extreme to another. The challenge might become simply a power play between clergy and laity. Synodal leadership requires formation, the development of particular skill, and above all, the spirit of humility.

Day Two

Jesus never called for volunteers. Instead, he personally invited people into discipleship. So too, for us, we seek to engage others into the life, ministry, and mission of our parish communities, not only in the members of the communities themselves but even through the engagement of Fidei Donum priests.

This impels us as synodal leaders to understand the nature of charisms, to have both the hospitality and skill to identify and welcome their manifestation in our community, and to commission them in the exercise of ministry. By this, we affirm and honour the presence of persons in our communities and enable them to sense how they can contribute to the life of the Church in its entirety rather than simply at the service of their own interests. This begins by developing a spirit and ministry of welcome in our communities, the effectiveness of which should not be underestimated.

This is Pentecost: to release the power of the Spirit given to each one at their baptism! It is the heart of the Eucharist from which we are sent in Mission! We heard examples of parishes who have strong ministries of outreach, especially to the unchurched and the marginal, without self-referentiality. These are significant means of evangelisation.

Most importantly, our discernment of charisms cannot occur without prayer. Prayer is the space of waiting; it widens hearts

of vigilance; it purifies motivation. It is the foundation for our pastoral listening that is confident that the Spirit gives to each community, not all the charisms, but those it requires to be what the Lord intends for it. Therefore, it is the foundation of trust. Trusting the charisms given our community frees us from the burden of undertaking everything ourselves. It empowers communication, consultation, and collaboration. In turn, this generates connection between people that develops into widening networks through which the Spirit breathes ever new life. This has been a particular feature of our own experience during these days as we have shared our experiences together and heard many personal stories.

At both a parish and diocesan level, we have been especially enlivened when our leadership has opened up a space from which the sound of an orchestra of charisms and ministries has come forth. All this will require new orientations in the formation of candidates to priesthood so that the discernment and promotion of charisms comes more to the fore.

There are challenges everywhere but so, too, is there great hope.

Day Three

‘If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.’ We have recognised this wisdom through our many experiences of fostering collaboration through the various organs of discernment we have already in place in our parishes and in our dioceses – Parish Pastoral Councils, Parish Finance Committees, parish committees and commissions of many different colours, similar entities on a diocesan level. These have been especially significant in our pastoral planning and in a range of pastoral initiatives. Though them we have learnt the importance of opening spaces to listen to others. These spaces also invite connection between people, and discernment works most effectively when there is a profound connection between people.

What connects us with one another most foundationally is our shared focus on Jesus himself, our Christocentric goal. It is this, above all, that endows us, in turn, with the freedom to grow in our personal relationships which become the animation of our consultative bodies.

Our capacity to sustain such relationships, which are occasionally complex with competing viewpoints, is in no small way dependent on also opening space for ourselves, and constantly placing ourselves before the Word of God which shapes our hearts so that we might be those who respond with fullness to the spiritual needs of our people on the journey of salvation. In our engagement with our consultative bodies, we also realise that we cannot abdicate our own thinking and judgement. This may be the very catalyst for the consultation we engage, but it may need also be the factor that guards against a kind of synodality which may have us wandering aimlessly in conversation, but which has lost its end point, Christ himself and the salvation he brings us. Then, in our engagement with our various consultative bodies and processes, we emerge with the leadership of the Good Shepherd with genuine spiritual paternity: listening and encouraging, creating connections between people, cultivating communion.



Pope Francis addresses parish priests from across the globe.

We recognise that the leadership of our Bishop is very significant in this. His care and concern for his priests translates into our care and concern not only for our people, but most importantly also for our care and concern for our brother priests, a fraternal love that is, for us, a most significant expression of synodality even as it presents often enough not without challenge. If a Bishop is synodal, then too will be the diocese/eparchy. We see that this can oscillate from bishop to bishop.

Notwithstanding our active engagement of the various consultative practices given by law and by practice, we do also recognise that new circles of listening and discernment are required. If Synodality is the Church, and the Church is Synodality, we will need to recognise that Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees, though important, are not sufficient for the task ahead of us. New methods, processes, and structures will also be required.

There were thirteen such small groups and the syntheses of each group will now be forward to the General Secretariat of Bishops to assist in the working document (the *Instrumentum Laboris*) for the October session of the Synod of Bishops.

It was a very special part of our meeting to return to Rome on the morning of 2 May and to have an audience with Pope Francis. Though no longer as mobile as before, he is undimmed in his animation and he both encouraged and delighted us with many of his own pastoral experiences. In his generosity he met each of us personally, and in the presence of the gathering signed a Letter to Parish Priests throughout the world which can be found at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240502-lettera-parroci.html>. What better way to conclude our meeting with Mass celebrated at the Chair of St Peter in St Peter's Basilica.

The gathering widened my own understanding of 'synodality'. Importantly, is first and foremost a way of cultivating relationships between us in such a way as to identify, encourage, and celebrate each other's charisms, to bring these into action so as to widen and deepen the experience of participation, belonging and shared mission. Synodality is not about doctrine, nor is it about management. It is about developing our commitment to the mission given us by our Baptism. We are called to move beyond suspicion and mistrust to develop a new pastoral theology, and more importantly, a pastoral spirituality in which there might occur not only a conversion of mind and heart, but also of skill. There is much work to be done!