

Report on meeting of parish representatives with Archbishop Peter Comensoli on 22 May 2021: *Take the Way of the Gospel: Re-Imagining our Local Church as Mission Communities*

As you may have read in the pastoral letter from Archbishop Comensoli, there have been two meetings in May, one with the clergy of the Archdiocese and one with lay representatives of the 209 parishes in the archdiocese. I attended this second meeting as a representative of St Thomas' Parish. The purpose of these meetings was to begin the consideration of how the Church in the archdiocese may be best organised for the future. By looking at the demographic and economic data that has been gathered, it was clear that the current structures were unsustainable and have been for some time, with declining numbers of Catholics participating actively in parishes and a declining number of priests available to minister in individual parishes.

The vision that was presented spoke of missions, not parishes, a family of local faith communities coming together that provides for personal and community faith development and worship, responding to the sacramental and pastoral needs of the community, and outreach and service to others.

Each family of parishes will be “tasked with developing strategies for cooperation in order to establish more vibrant and sustainable entities “fit for mission” to provide quality sacramental and liturgical life and to promote the good news, the mission and outreach of our faith”.

Emphasis was given to the importance of local communities discerning for themselves those local faith communities that may naturally fit together. It was stressed that this process was not about forced parish amalgamations or closures. Each parish and each region has to discern what they need and what is best for them. This process of discernment includes parishes talking to each other, listening to each other, about who we are, our needs and where we see ourselves moving into the future. Arrangements in each mission will evolve locally. There will be no directives from “Head Office”.

The composition of each mission may vary and vary over the time to be established.

An example was given of the forming of the Bayside Mission last year. This brought five parishes together, at a time when some priests were due to retire

and there was no filling of all these positions – what was going to happen? So the parishes were brought together. However this was a difficult process and mistakes were made, as admitted by the Archdiocese. They realised that change like this cannot be imposed and that the parishioners needed to make those decisions as to how they go forward as faith communities. The experience with the bayside parishes provides many lessons for this process of forming missions and also provides some hope that local parishes have the ability to discern and determine their futures.

One possibility for us to think about is that the parishes of St Mary's, Sacred Heart and St Thomas the Apostle may consider themselves even now a mission and are on the path already of working more closely together as local faith communities.

What is the process and timeline for establishing missions?

It is envisaged that 62 missions will emerge from the current 209 parishes. We are in the Northern Region. There are currently 58 parishes. It is envisaged that there will be 14 missions.

- The next 12 months – the beginning of the identification of the various mission areas in the regions in which parishes will be located. Regional gatherings begin in June/July to discern those missions in each region. Each region then determines the next step.
- By the end of 2021, 2-3 missions to be identified in each region
- By the end of 2022, all future missions to be identified in each region
- Establishment of missions to begin in 2022 and continue through to 2026

These timelines are not set in concrete and it was stressed often that parishes need to take time to discern, to communicate, to consult, and not to rush.

There will be leadership support for parish priests and facilitators to lead the discernment of identifying missions. There is also *Proclaim – the Office of Mission Renewal* for support.

At parish level it is important that we come together to consider, reflect and discern the way forward for us. Good communication and strong leadership is essential. All parishioners have a role to play in determining the future of our faith communities.

If you have any questions about the formation of missions, the process and timeline, please contact Father Steven or one of our assistant priests, the pastoral associates at St Mary's or Sacred Heart (Jacinta Bright or Sr Margaret Sapsford) who also attended the meeting, or Cathy O'Brien.

You may also wish to consult the following website:

<http://www.melbournecatholic.org/mission>

Cathy O'Brien

St Thomas the Apostle Parish