

Instrumentum Laboris

Working Document

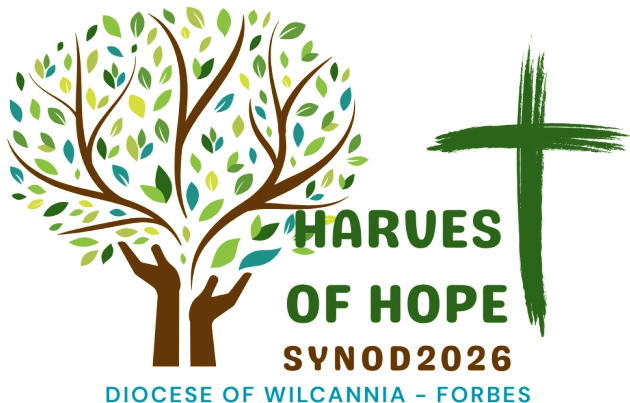
of the Synod of the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes

We are a people of hope. United under Bishop Columba Macbeth-Green across the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, we are walking together. Where are we going? “The whole point of a Synod is our final end...First is Jesus Christ: to know him and love him and serve him better in this world...Ultimately, our eternal life is at stake, which is peace and happiness and hope in a better future”.¹ This is a spiritual journey – to deepen our relationship with God, that our lives might inspire others with the love of Jesus. The overall theme of the Synod is **Harvest of Hope**. “We trust and believe in God’s harvest as we plant our seeds of faith, even when we cannot see the end results.”²

Therefore, we have been preparing for this Synod with various ways of listening. We had over 250 responses to the initial survey, gatherings in each of the 3 deaneries (10 years on - Survive? Thrive?), and have received other submissions and group or individual feedback. We wish to thank and ask God to bless each person who has generously shared in our common endeavour. Here is some of what was said in answer to the question ‘In your experience of Catholic life, what brings you joy?’

For many respondents, joy is rooted in personal encounter with God through the sacraments and the rhythms of worship. The Eucharist and Mass are mentioned again and again as the heart of Catholic life – not only as ritual, but as a source of peace, belonging, and encounter with Christ. Adoration, the Rosary, Reconciliation, and personal prayer feature strongly, with several people describing faith as a compass or anchor that gives shape and meaning to their daily lives. The homily holds particular importance: it can lift the spirit and nourish faith if it is inspiring, relevant, and practically grounded. For some, joy is deepened by the traditions, seasons, and liturgical heritage of the Church – including a small number who specifically treasure the Latin Mass and Gregorian chant.

Alongside the spiritual, joy is inseparable from people and community. Belonging to a parish family – the warmth of connection before and after Mass, shared social gatherings, and the feeling of being welcomed – emerges as a powerful theme. Many respondents who work for CatholicCare or in Catholic schools speak of joy found in helping others, walking alongside families, and empowering vulnerable people; for them, service is an expression of faith. The sight of children growing in faith – receiving sacraments for the first time, singing at school Mass, or simply showing up – brings particular delight. Family life, too, runs through almost every response: the transmission of faith across generations, and the sense that Catholic life holds family and community together.



What follows below are the diocesan action themes emerging from the consultation to date. This document will form the basis of the Agenda for the Synod itself. As a Working Document, these themes will be discerned and refined further over the coming months to produce recommendations. We invite you to pray with and reflect on this document, as it touches your life of faith. On this Feast of Pentecost, may the Holy Spirit enlighten and guide us.

The Synod Subcommittee
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Pentecost, 24 May, 2026

¹ Bishop Columba’s introduction to the Deanery Gatherings.

² Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes Synod website: <https://www.wf.catholic.org.au/synod-2026/>

Synod Theme 1: Harvest of Hope: Between the Branches and the Roots

Speak to us: Communication, Transparency and Belonging

Across every document and every corner of this diocese, people named the same wound: they feel disconnected from their Bishop, from other parishes, and from decisions being made. This includes and goes beyond the mechanics of communication. People want to be genuinely informed — to understand the life, the decisions, and the direction of their diocese, including its finances and its future. They want to share in both the challenges and the good news: the stories of faith, the signs of hope, and the moments of grace across this vast community. Too many feel alone in their faith journey and are asking for openness and transparency that brings them into the full picture. The sense that the diocese is something that happens *to* them, rather than something they belong to and help shape, must be honestly acknowledged and addressed.

The requests that surfaced were both practical and pastoral. People asked for financial transparency, wanting to understand where collections go and how the diocese will sustain itself in the future. They asked for safe spaces to give honest feedback about difficulties in their communities without fear of being dismissed. They called for visible, *active* parish pastoral and financial councils. They asked for communication, in all its forms, that is timely, meaningful, and genuinely worth engaging — including a stronger virtual presence that connects parishes. People expressed a heartfelt desire to see their Bishop among them - a presence that goes beyond special occasions and becomes part of the ordinary rhythm of parish life.

Underneath every practical request runs a single urgent question: ***Do we matter to the Church that claims to be our home?***

*'Lay believers are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of **being** the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the common Head, and of the bishops in communion with him. They are the Church.'*

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 899

When people feel like passive recipients of decisions made above them, this vision is not being realised. The Synod is an opportunity to change that. This is a profoundly relational vision, the Diocese as the people's home, shaped by mutual relationship and genuine encounter.

Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, offers an honest assessment that many in this Diocese would recognise: that the parish has not yet become the environment of living communion and participation it is called to be (EG 28). But his vision is also more demanding and more beautiful — the parish as a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey. The people of this Diocese are asking for exactly that. This Synod is the moment to begin.

This theme asks the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, through the Bishop, to do three things.

1. Empower Communications. Invest in and equip communications personnel and media to deliver regular, relevant, and relational updates across the Diocese, making communication a ministry worthy of proper support.

2. Build Financial Transparency. Cultivate a culture of financial accountability at both the diocesan and parish level — where members are genuine stakeholders, reporting is open, and processes are clear and accessible.

3. Commit to Ongoing Dialogue. Review and renew the existing structures of discernment and governance, identifying what is working, strengthening what is not, so that dialogue and shared decision-making become more effective and enduring across the Diocese.

Synodality calls the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes to a new and intentional way of being together. The People of God reveal and give substance to their being as communion "*when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission*" (Synod on Synodality, Final Document, 2024).

Synod Theme 2: Harvest of Hope: Watering the Crop

Form Us: Faith Formation for Every Stage of Life

Throughout the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, one desire kept coming up again: go deeper. Not simply to attend Mass or fulfil religious obligations, but to truly know and understand the faith and to find pathways that make that possible at every stage of life. From the youngest child preparing for the sacraments, to the adult seeking RCIA, to the parent unsure how to pass on a faith they never fully received, to the regular parishioner who wants to deepen their faith, the hunger for genuine formation is both urgent and widespread.

There was a widespread and heartfelt hope to better invest in and build the capacity of Catholic educators in forming young people in the faith. The school is part of the parish family, and both have much to offer each other in the work of formation. Yet this mutual dependence is not always recognised or practised. People from both settings are asking for a closer, more intentional relationship — one built on shared vision, genuine communication, and a common understanding that they are, together, the one community of faith, forming the next generation.

The question running beneath all of this is not merely practical: it is spiritual: ***How do we build a diocese where no one child, adult, parishioner or teacher is left to find their way in faith alone?***

'The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.'
Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 5 (1979)

Vatican II's Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*, reminds us that the Catholic school exists not simply to transmit knowledge but to form the whole person — and that this formation is inseparable from the mission of the Church itself. Catholic education participates in the 'evangelising mission of the Church' by upholding and teaching the truths of the Catholic faith. (GE 8). The desire to build the capacity of Catholic educators, expressed so consistently across this diocese, is not a criticism of what exists — it is a recognition of how much is at stake, and how worthy the task is of serious investment.

The repeated call for bible study groups, RCIA and prayer groups across the diocese finds deep resonance in Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*. The Council teaches that ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ and that prayerful reading of the Word is not an optional extra but a source of genuine spiritual nourishment for every member of the faithful (DV 25). The people of this diocese are asking for more opportunities to sit with the Word together.

This theme is ultimately one of hope. The hunger for formation that has emerged across this diocese is not a sign of failure — it is a sign of life. People who want to go deeper in their faith have not given up. The diocese has been given a gift, and the invitation now is to nurture it, by committing to a culture of formation that is accessible, ongoing, and woven into the ordinary life of every parish and Catholic school. The people have expressed their desire honestly and with trust. This Synod is the moment to listen, and to respond with the same generosity. Formation is not a department of the Church. It is its heartbeat.

This theme asks the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, through the Bishop, to do three things.

1. Invest in Catholic Educators. The Catholic Education Office deepen its commitment to resourcing, supporting, and forming Catholic educators — equipping them not just as teachers, but as witnesses of faith.

2. Strengthen the School-Parish Partnership. Catholic schools and parishes commit to regular, structured opportunities for collaboration — sharing vision, deepening communication, and embracing their common identity as one community of faith, forming the next generation together.

3. Build the Culture of Formation. Diocese to empower parishes in offering accessible formation pathways such as, sacramental preparation, RCIA, bible study, prayer groups, and adult faith formation. so that no one is left to find their way in faith alone.

Synod Theme 3: Harvest of Hope: Producing Fruit

Send Us: Mission, Outreach and Life in the Community

The people of the Diocese of Wilcannia Forbes do not want a Church that waits. Across survey responses and deanery documents, the same vision surfaces again and again: a Church that moves outward, that goes to meet people where they are, that is visible and active in the community rather than sheltered within its own walls. This is not a new idea — it is the oldest one. It is the Church's original impulse, expressed anew in the specific geography and context of rural and remote western New South Wales.

The practical expressions of this vision were rich and varied. People proposed soup kitchens, community volunteer groups, and support for those without housing. They called for yarning circles and positive outreach, especially to Aboriginal and multicultural communities. Some asked for youth groups that begin outside the Church and gradually draw young people in. They proposed *Laudato Si'* action, social justice programs, community events, family days, inter-parish gatherings, pilgrimages, and ecumenical activities. They suggested the repurposing of empty Catholic buildings, and their contents, as community assets.

What unites all of these is a single conviction: faith is not a private matter. Pope Leo XIV, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te* (2025), speaks with striking directness: *'We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor'* (DT 36). He grounds this conviction in the words of Christ himself: *'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'* (Mt 25:40). For this diocese, stretched across communities that face real, daily hardship, this is not a distant theological principle. The people at the margins, geographically, economically, culturally, are precisely where the Church is. Christ is waiting to be recognised and responded to.

The question beneath this theme is theological as much as practical: ***What does it mean to be sent? And what does it cost us to go?***

'The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.'

Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 2 (1965)

Mission is not one activity among many; it is the very nature of the Church. To be the Church is to be sent. And Vatican II's teaching in *Ad Gentes* makes clear that this mission belongs to the whole People of God, not only to priests or religious: *'The Christian faithful, having different gifts, according to each one's opportunity, ability, charisms and ministry, must all cooperate in the Gospel'* (AG 28). Every baptised person in this diocese is an agent of God's mission.

This theme asks the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, through the Bishop, to do three things.

1. Outreach and Service. Audit the gaps and resources to better serve Christ in those who are suffering in our diocese together.

2. Cultural Presence and Belonging. Establish a formal, ongoing process of genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and multicultural communities across the Diocese.

3. Discerned and Sent. Introduce a diocesan-wide process that calls forth the gifts of the baptised, equips and commissions them to live out their identity as missionary disciples.

Theme 4: Harvest of Hope: Replenishing the Soil

Sustain Us: Vocations, Leadership and the Future of the Diocese

Running beneath every other theme in this Synod is a question of survival, not in a spirit of despair, but with the sober realism of a community that loves its Church and fears for its future. The Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes is shrinking in clergy and growing in need. Parish income is declining. Communities are aging. The gap between what is required and what is currently available in the ordained, consecrated, lay leaders, and financial resources is real and widening. In 10 years, there was a repeated concern about what would thrive, or even survive. The people of this diocese have named this honestly, and they deserve an honest response.

The practical requests were clear. More priests. Greater roles for women. More permanent deacons. A genuine diocesan strategy for vocations and lay leadership. Parish pastoral councils that are functional, visible, and trusted. A diocesan response to the question, asked plainly by many: What comes after the Synod? What is the plan, and how will we know if anything has changed?

This is also a financial question. Several voices raised concerns about how the diocese will sustain itself financially as the number of contributing parishioners continues to decline. Others pointed to the need for better administrative support for small parishes that lack the capacity to manage their own finances and planning. Beneath these practical concerns is a theological one, already raised by Bishop Columba: if the whole People of God are co-responsible for the Church's mission, then co-responsibility must also mean a genuine sharing in its governance, not merely its labour.

The question beneath this theme is one of hope as much as strategy: ***Who will carry this Church forward, and how will we form and support them?***

'[Clergy] also know that they were not ordained by Christ to take upon themselves alone the entire salvific mission of the Church toward the world... It is their noble duty to shepherd the faithful and to recognise their ministries and charisms, so that all, according to their proper roles, may cooperate in this common undertaking with one mind.' **Lumen Gentium, 30 (Vatican II, 1964)**

The Synod on Synodality's Final Document (2024) called explicitly for co-responsibility by all the baptised, insisting that pastoral councils and diocesan structures must become genuinely functional rather than nominally present. It appealed for the strengthening of vocations to the permanent diaconate, and for the full implementation of the roles available to women under canon law. These are not distant ideals. They are authoritative proposals that now fall to local churches, including this one, to implement.

Pope John Paul II stated that 'the Church must never cease to pray to the Lord of the harvest that he send labourers into his harvest' (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 38). Vocations cannot be manufactured, but they can be cultivated — through communities that are alive and joyful, and through the witness of those whose own faith is lived with evident depth and purpose.

This theme asks the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, through the Bishop, to do three things.

1. Call forth and nurture vocations. Every parish, school, and Catholic community in this Diocese is to identify, invite, and accompany those among their people who show gifts for ordained ministry and lay leadership.

2. Form and support vocations. The Diocese will continue to form and support those called, offering ongoing spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation to equip them for dedicated service, and sustaining and encouraging them throughout their ministry and leadership.

3. Build genuine co-responsibility. Empower lay people, including women, to hold real authority and responsibility in the leadership and decision-making of this Diocese, to have a genuine share in how this Church is led.

The future of this Diocese will be shaped not by what is decided in this Synod, but by what is done afterwards. The Holy Spirit has already begun this work. This is the moment to cooperate with it.