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Dear Father,

Thanks for sending us the summary of the Synod so far.

We note the conclusion in that summary, that you have received scarcely any submissions from outside Canberra. So here is a submission from a few of the members of our parish of St. Bede's in Braidwood. (We had hoped to have a wider discussion about this in the Parish but we need to get you something before the deadline at least from a few of us.)

Ours is a small congregation of some 100 active Mass participants. We are mainly older mass goers and indeed the average age of residents of Braidwood is older - an average age of 60+.

We have been very well served in recent years with wonderful priests like Mark Croker, Peter Day and now Mick Burke – all of whom have been assisted by Brother Brian Berg as pastoral associate.

It is quite clear to us however that as the system currently works, when Mick and Brian retire, we will be unlikely to get a replacement.

The days of a male, celibate clergy are over

We have reached the inescapable conclusion that the Church in our parish, the diocese as a whole and indeed across the Western world, is **mandating** the gradual decline of the Catholic Church. We don't want a return to clericalism and indeed the wonderful thing about the last three priests is that they were fully consultative and involved us at every level in the running of the parish.

But we need a priest. We want access to the sacraments.

Mick is in charge of Braidwood, Bungendore, Gundaroo, Tarago and a number of other outlying churches with tiny congregations. That workload is unsustainable and in work health and safety terms, positively dangerous.

The summary you have sent us mentions the loss of the next generation to involvement with the Church.

The only time we can get Mick is at a Saturday vigil Mass. On Sunday mornings he is in Bungendore. That means that we won't get young families in Braidwood attending Mass.

Saturday night is absolutely the worst time for families with children to attend Mass. It is the worst time for young people generally to come to Church. It's the prime time to have a social life given the work pressures on them in the rest of the week.

We all became involved with the Church at a time when we looked up to and were attracted to the Church by young priests we admired and who were imbued with the reform agenda of the Second Vatican Council. It is a fundamental principle of organizational behaviour that 'like involves like'. Young people will very rarely be attracted to a Church led by 60- and 70-year-olds or by people from another cultural background. They will be unlikely to engage with someone who has an utterly different life experience to theirs, weighed down as they are with the pressures of the modern workplace and the demands of raising young children.

It seems utterly clear to us that the whole concept of priesthood needs fundamental reform. It is nothing less than bizarre in the modern world that we require priests to be both male and celibate. And that we require them to stay in the same role for the rest of their lives. There is simply no equivalent set of prescriptions to our knowledge in any institution in the world. We don't have enough priests, we don't have enough young priests, because we impose ridiculous barriers to entry to the priesthood. The young priests that we have are drawn from a tiny subset of the overall population of Catholics.

Who is worthy to be Catholic?

Beyond this issue of the nature of the priesthood, the Church seems completely insensitive to the demographic changes that have taken place in Australian society. When we were young, gay people and transsexuals hid their sexuality. Divorce was relatively rare.

Those days are long gone. Every one of us knows someone who has been divorced or is gay – and we love them. Many of our own family and extended family members are proud of their sexuality whatever it may be. They should understand that they are completely welcome in our Church. We need the richness of their own spirituality, their experience of life. Like us, they struggle with the demands upon them of living in a modern secular world. They are human beings made in the image of God and they make wonderful members of our Church if we just welcome them in.

We will certainly not encourage them to hear the loving message of Jesus Christ if we attack them publicly around issues like gay marriage and if we question the validity of their divorce. The overwhelming impression these communities get is that the Catholic Church is anti-gay and disapproving of people who are divorced.

We are not big on theological arguments. But we are passionate members of the faith community at St. Bede's. The Church as a whole needs to come together – laity and clergy - and do whatever is necessary to ensure that the word of the gospel continues to be heard in communities like ours. We want no part in the extinction of the Church in Braidwood.

We hope that these thoughts might be of some use in determining what is said in the final outcomes of the Synodal process.

Yours in Christ,

Michael Crosby AM and Bronwyn Crosby

Rod and Pauline Coady

Bobbie Beal

Jackie French AM

Wendy McMahon Bell

Helen Bopping