A letter to the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech - 'For a Synodal Church' - from Catholic Church Renewal organisations throughout the world

Your Eminence,

We write concerning the Canonical Commission's recent report, 'For a Synodal Church', and the importance of implementing synodality effectively throughout the Church in accordance with the Final Document (FD) of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. We welcome your assurance in Pathways that "all the Baptised share responsibility" to implement the Synod. We are concerned however that canon law is not sufficient to ensure the full adoption of the synodal spirit in dioceses without further direction from the Vatican. Our views are informed by global networks.

We respectfully ask the General Secretariat to further reinforce to dioceses the explicit directions of Popes Francis and Leo (FD) and the guidance of the Secretariat (Pathways; Towards the Assemblies; and Recollecting) on adopting the FD as part of the ordinary Magisterium. A synodal culture is envisaged throughout the Church with the full engagement of the faithful, both individuals and organised groups. We seek to respond to Pope Francis' call: "The local Churches and groupings of Churches are now called upon to implement, in their different contexts, the authoritative proposals contained in the Document through the processes of discernment and decision-making provided for by law and by the Document itself." (FD)

We welcome the Canonical Commission's Report, 'For a Synodal Church'. The report formalises most proposals of the FD and provides a synodal framework in canon law for the Church in its governance and mission. The Report reinforces the role of synodality in expressing values central to the teachings of Jesus, Christian relationships, and the early Church: respectful listening, inclusion, transparency, and accountability. These values are vital to genuinely Christian governance. Synodality offers a direct response to the clericalism condemned by Pope Francis and to failures of episcopal accountability, such as the concealment of clerical child sexual abuse.

Despite the FD's insistence on synodality, endorsed by Popes Francis and Leo as central to Church teaching and governance and reinforced by the proposed canonical changes, many bishops continue to lead and decide unilaterally and autocratically. Many of the mandated diocesan synods are in fact episcopally controlled, far from the spirit of synodality, with bishops determining the agendas, the participants, processes, and outcomes. Strong directions are needed from the General Secretariat to ensure that synodality truly reflects the FD and 'For a Synodal Church', is open to the guidance of

the Holy Spirit, and is not reduced to a charade with autocratic episcopal decision-making uninformed by the sensus fidei fidelium.

Similarly, many of the proposed mandatory diocesan pastoral councils might in practice be merely symbolic, with bishops controlling membership, meetings, and advice while disregarding both existing canon law, the FD and 'For a Synodal Church' - ineffective synodal charades.

Many parish pastors throughout the world have received little synodal leadership or information from their bishops, have limited understanding of or commitment to synodality, and fail to engage their parishioners on the topic let alone adopt synodal decision making. Few pastors have promoted synodality, leaving many of the People of God with little awareness of its meaning or practical implications. Many pastors predictably maintain a clericalist and autocratic approach to parish decision making. Synodality cannot become Church culture and practice without diocesan leadership and parish adoption.

'For a Synodal Church' does not pick up sections 65 and 188 of the FD regarding the contribution that 'associations, movements and new communities' can make to the growth of synodality. Many groups of committed Catholics, particularly those seeking Church reform, report that their approaches have been rejected or ignored by clerics at every level, also not an uncommon experience for individuals. 'For a Synodal Church' makes sound provision for selecting members of the faithful for synodal participation as individuals. Yet many groups of individuals have formed to represent collective experiences of Catholics whose commitment to the Church has led them to work for change. Genuine synodality must also hear these group perspectives. As you have stressed, "the entire People of God . . . are the subjects of the synodal journey" (Vatican, 29 June 2025).

A further concern is the governance restrictions in canons 129§1 and 274§1, their relationship to canon 1024, and the exclusion of women from Church leadership and ministry. The FD noted: "There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped."

Although this fundamental governance issue was outside the Canonical Commission's scope, it cannot remain outside the wider synodal reform of the Church. Canon 274§1 reserves to 'only clerics' those 'offices the exercise of which requires the power of order or the power of ecclesiastical governance'. In practice, this defines the Church's 'ecclesiastical governance' as the work of a clerical hierarchy in dioceses and parishes, roles held exclusively by clerics, who under canon 1024 can only be 'baptised men'. A synodal culture of respectful listening, inclusion, transparency, and accountability must confront the exclusion of women that results from this canonical framework. The appointment of women to senior leadership roles in the Vatican Curia and dioceses is

welcome, but women remain excluded from the governance of the Church to the Church's detriment: we request review of canons 129§1, 274§1 and 1024 with a view to their repeal.

Throughout the world, we have many reports of episcopal resistance to synodality disguised by synodal charades, viz. episcopally directed assemblies, determined autocratically without consultation presented as synods. 'For a Synodal Church' is a valuable contribution to legislating genuine synodal provisions throughout the Church but that is demonstrably not sufficient to ensure spiritual acceptance and enthusiastic implementation of genuine synodality in structures and culture. The FD proposals, mostly translated as canonical reforms in 'For a Synodal Church', are vital to the Church's effectiveness, but implementing synodality as a core element of Christian culture, supported by canonical provisions and truly synodal structures, will require firm direction and clear accountability.

In summary, we request the General Secretariat to ensure that bishops commit to synodality in practice and culture, requiring that all diocesan structures and decision making reflect genuine synodal practices throughout dioceses and parishes, particularly diocesan synods at all stages: participants, agendas, discernment, and outcomes. We ask that committed groups of Catholics, not necessarily formally established by the Church, be included in canonical provision for synodal engagement. We also request review of canons 129§1, 274§1 and 1024 with a view to their repeal.

We would also be grateful for any guidance the General Secretariat can offer on how the faithful, particularly laity and organised reform groups, can support the implementation of synodality. We note the importance of genuine implementation to ensure progress at the 2027 evaluation Assemblies.

Finally, would you please bring this letter to the attention of the Holy Father with our thanks for his leadership and our prayers for his pontificate.

With every good wish for your work in advancing an effective, accountable and synodal Church committed to its mission from Jesus.

Sincerely in Christ

Catholic Church Renewal organisations of the world –

We Are Church International, Root and Branch, Council of Australasian Catholics, Spirit Unbounded, Catholic Church Reform International, International Church Reform Network, Association of Catholic Priests

CAC supports seekers of a way of living that is spiritually meaningful, fosters integrity and builds relationships.

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