Faith in Our Future: Pastoral Planning in the Diocese of Parramatta

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The Australian Catholic Church confronts serious challenges now and in the immediate years ahead. Chief among these are the recovery of institutional trust, confidence and credibility in the wake of a sexual abuse crisis; the steady decline in religious practice that will reshape the organisation and vitality of parishes markedly in the next decade, and the related and urgent demand of self-reflection; and pastoral and administrative reform, if it is to live its evangelising mission with renewed integrity and vigour into the future.¹ However, this way of conversion is pressed upon the church not only by challenges past and present but also by receptivity to the Spirit of God, who calls the church onward to engage with the work yet to be done, ‘God who awaits us in our action, in the work of the moment, and God whose two hands stretch across us in our struggles, in ways more active and penetrating than the diminishments we undergo’.² As ever the Australian church at this time must meet the task of living the faith that it professes, to translate theology into practice and hope into action, drawing on the resources of tradition and the

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¹ For an outline and commentary on religious practice among the dioceses of the Australian Catholic Church, see Robert Dixon, Stephen Reid and Marilyn Chee, Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment. A Report Based on the National Count of Attendance, the National Church Life Survey and the Australian Census (Melbourne: ACBC Pastoral Research Office, 2013). Several findings of this report are shared in this paper.

Spirit-given gifts of its people, all the while sensitive to the conditions that pertain to a twenty-first-century mission.

It is with this dual sense of promise and responsibility that the Diocese of Parramatta, alongside other dioceses in Australia and abroad, has undertaken the work of pastoral planning. This work, most deeply understood, is not as Benedict XVI describes the mere ‘bureaucratisation of pastoral care’ but is in fact the practical outgrowth of an ecclesiology that places an encounter with the mystery of Jesus Christ anew at the heart of the church’s self-understanding, organisation and mission.³ As will be canvassed, pastoral planning is ultimately a response of faith to the call of God in Christ to grow the Kingdom through the witness and outreach of the church in each generation for the sake of the world.

The past two years have seen the Parramatta Diocese engage this process of pastoral planning with the invitation to its parishes and agencies, clergy and laity, religious institutes, migrant chaplaincies and ecclesial movements to contribute to a shared vision and discern in common practical initiatives for the renewal of the church in Western Sydney. It has culminated in the promulgation of Faith in Our Future: Pastoral Plan for the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta (2014–2018).⁴ This article will outline the context and theological principles that informed the development of the diocesan pastoral plan, describe the processes and challenges involved in its realisation, and identify the primary learnings and insights gained through this process in a local church undergoing significant growth and change. It seeks not only to contribute to the history of such planning in Australia but also to promote a stronger culture of intentional planning in the church as an integral element of a new evangelisation.⁵ To this end, the paper will conclude with brief remarks on planning as intimated by Pope Francis in Evangelii Gaudium and on other occasions in his pontificate, underlining the significance of this ecclesial activity as a resource for a ‘new chapter of evangelisation marked by joy’.⁶

The Pastoral Context

In accord with the methodology of ‘the pastoral cycle’ most familiar to the fields of missiology and pastoral theology, the Parramatta planning process commenced with a review and analysis of the basic pastoral realities of the local church as revealed through statistical research, including census and diocese-specific data; an account of existing parishes, ministries and diocesan

⁶. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium (Strathfield: St Pauls, 2013), no. 1.
commitments; and identification of emerging social trends, including migration and housing development across Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains. Together with ecclesiological principles outlined in the following section of this paper, this data provided a sound basis on which planning could commence and raised a number of pastoral priorities of immediate significance for this diocese of twenty-eight years.

Drawing on the assistance of the Pastoral Research Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the planning team was able to determine the primary demographic features of the Parramatta Diocese and its forty-nine parishes. The 2011 national census revealed a diocese with an average parish size of 6,778 Catholics and a total of 332,120 Catholics among a general population of 1.05 million. Thus, almost one-third of those living within the boundaries of the Parramatta Diocese are Catholic, a higher proportion than the national average of 25.3%. One-quarter of Catholics within the diocese were born overseas in a non-English-speaking country (25.5%) and more than a quarter speak a language other than English at home (28.4%). In its diversity the diocese also includes the largest urban concentration of Indigenous Catholics in Australia, while it is also youthful by Australian standards with almost one-third of Parramatta Catholics under the age of nineteen years. The National Count of Attendance disclosed a Mass participation rate in the diocese of 15.2%, compared to the national average of 12.2%, and confirmed the conclusions of the national Mass count study—that those dioceses with higher percentages of Catholics in the total population, of adult Catholics born in non-English-speaking countries, and of adult Catholic populations with university degrees are likely to have higher attendance rates than those without such demographic features.

It is worth remarking on a national basis that the rising age profile of Mass attenders and declining rates of religious practice in the church will have a significant impact on the organisation of parishes and the practice of pastoral ministry by clergy and laypersons in the next decade. Described by researchers as a ‘critical moment’ in the life of the Australian church, the number of dioceses with Mass attendance rates below ten per cent rose from two to fourteen between 2006 and 2011 and this could worsen to twenty-three of the twenty-eight territorial dioceses in Australia by 2016. Also, almost one-third of current Mass attenders are aged between 60 and 74 years of age, while attenders on the whole are ageing. The pastoral consequence is that parishes in Australia are likely to

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become, over the medium term, geographically larger and numerically smaller; their congregations will age; and along with the practice of parish amalgamations, and ‘multiparishes’, there will be a continuing erosion in those identifying as Catholic.\textsuperscript{11} The pressing need for structural reform of parish communities, and an increasingly challenging landscape for faith only bolster the argument for pastoral planning in the present.

With its own particular context and features in view, five immediate pastoral priorities were discerned for the Parramatta Diocese under the leadership of Bishop Anthony Fisher OP, in consultation with parish pastoral councils: family life, youth, ethnic diversity, vocations, and the mission of evangelisation. While not mutually exclusive, these five categories best expressed the demographic and ecclesial realities of the local church at this time and provided concrete themes for the consultations that would follow the preparatory phase.

\textit{Theological Bases for Church Planning}

The theological resources available to pastoral planners are vast, given this work takes place at the intersection of ecclesiology, missiology, pastoral theology and canon law. Touchstones of the tradition taken up by our own diocese include the twin ecclesial documents of Vatican II, \textit{Lumen Gentium} and \textit{Gaudium et Spes}; John Paul II’s \textit{Redemptoris Missio} (1990), and his \textit{Novo Millennio Ineunte} (2001), which locates pastoral planning firmly within the paradigm of holiness; and, most recently, Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation \textit{Evangelii Gaudium} (2013), which will be explored for its programmatic significance.

While not exhaustive as bases for pastoral planning, several theological foundations arose as key to the unfolding of the Parramatta process. First of all, there is the conviction that planning is nothing new to the church and has, in fact, been a common part of ecclesial life from the very beginning, as given witness by the New Testament. This includes the Acts of Apostles, in which Luke describes the organisation of the community’s life (Acts 2:42–47), the provision of care for those without by the revision of ministries (Acts 6:1–6) and thoughtful address of the need to catechise the great numbers in Antioch (Acts 11:19–26). Hence, from the outset, the community of faith including its leaders discovered pastoral needs, discerned ways to respond to them, and made considered choices under the guidance of the Spirit. Decision-making within the nascent Christian community expressed an intentionality about its mission, the desire to ‘make disciples of all nations’ (Matt 28:19) and to bring about the fullness of life that the Kingdom represents. Making plans for the life and growth of the faith community is not ancillary to this Kingdom-mission of the church but integral to it.

As intimated in the thought of John Paul II, the work of pastoral planning
also mediates between an unchanging Gospel and the varied circumstances in which the person and message of Jesus is proclaimed and encountered. In *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, John Paul II grounds ecclesial reform, and planning for reform, in both the eternal life and relations of the Trinity and in the temporal conditions in which the mission of the church is ultimately lived. He writes:

> It is not therefore a matter of inventing a ‘new programme’. The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem … But it must be translated into *pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community.*

Recognised also in John Paul II’s promotion of an evangelising mission ‘new in its ardour, in its methods and its expressions’, the church is called to manifest its permanent identity as the sacrament of communion in Christ in the concrete and ever-evolving conditions of human history. Pastoral planning is central to the ability of the church to realise this goal, grounding the universal mission of the Gospel in the particular and distinct context of the local church, its parishes and communities.

Underpinning a diocesan commitment to planning as well is the need to foster, articulate and promote a common *vision* for the local church. Without a vision that is shared across a diocese, parishes and their associated groups, ministries and members can become introspective or self-enclosed; and they can simultaneously struggle to be united in their prayer and pastoral activity without a clear and common direction. Without a vision that draws upon the perennial mission of the church and local realities and concerns, members of a diocese are unable to engage with any future-oriented aspiration, with the result that pastoral energy is more often than not absorbed in activities and issues of maintenance rather in the imperative to grow and build up the life of the community and its outreach to others. More positively, when a theological vision for a diocese is discerned in common and then shared, it contributes significantly to the motivation of the whole community to act and to do so with a greater sense of ownership for mission, even in those aspects obliging change.

Closely related to the discernment of ecclesial vision is the importance of consultation in the pastoral planning process. In drawing upon the insights of all members of the local church (clergy, religious and laity), the development of a vision and of pastoral initiatives rests on the principle that the sense of faith of

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the faithful is a source of the church’s life. At its best, pastoral planning provides a structured and orderly process by which those responsible for governance and leadership can be receptive to the faith of all members. When viewpoints and experiences of the past and present church are shared with a view to future possibilities, the ecclesial Spirit-given capacity of the faithful to shape the church’s life is affirmed, as it is by John Paul II with reference to St Paulinus of Nola: ‘Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes’.

Together, the preceding principles highlight for communities of faith that wanting to grow is not sufficient. Dioceses and parishes need to plan to grow and be organised to grow the faith of their members, and they need to evangelise and attract new members to the life of Christ and his church. Indeed, the experience of Christian communities confirms that making no plans for growth results in little or no growth every time and such complacency even places communities at risk of decline as the surrounding culture changes and becomes less open to the offer of faith. Planning enables faith communities to respond effectively and proactively to change, not to be mere victims of external influence, and it enables adaptability, flexibility and resourcefulness in the midst of change by providing a baseline and coherent structure for the development of pastoral life.

In naming the principles that underpinned the Parramatta process it is imperative to highlight that pastoral planning, rather than reflecting an emergency or panic response to conditions that are less than ideal, is in fact a proactive response of faith to the call of God to grow the church and its mission by critical thought, prayer and effort, all the while imploring the graces of God. Grounded in the history of the church as well as magisterial thought, pastoral planning emerges in its integrity as part of the church’s stewardship of the gifts and talents that God gives for the sake of his mission. Far from expressing a bureaucratic or else Pelagian approach of the church’s life—a suspicion that can be engendered by the language of ‘community engagement’, ‘stakeholders’ and ‘best practice’—the activity of pastoral planning recognises the church’s existence in history as sacrament. As a spiritual communion and an historical people, baptised and baptising, given as the bearer and mother of faith and as a forward endeavour, in the words of de Lubac, ‘a life that is passed on’, the church is both gift and task, exalted and labouring. In its mediation of grace and history, the work of pastoral planning affirms and at the same time challenges the church to be ever more ‘in Christ a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity’.

15. John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, 45.
The Consultation Process

With this theological promise in view, the Parramatta consultation process began in February 2012 with twenty-nine consultation events taking place over the following eight months. On the weekend on which the consultation process was launched, a DVD or audio message from the bishop was played at parish Masses throughout the diocese while a ‘Diocesan Information Guide’ was also distributed through the publication Catholic Outlook, providing an outline of major features and latest demographics for the local church. The bishop’s message appraised the contemporary context for faith, articulated the five diocesan pastoral priorities and invited wide participation in the consultation sessions to follow.

In order to foster and witness to a collaborative spirit from the outset of the process, the planning team invited the majority of parishes to join together with neighbouring parishes in joint consultation sessions. A small number of larger parishes hosted a stand-alone consultation evening on account of size and related practical considerations. It is perhaps indicative of the wariness with which pastoral planning can be received that the invitation to join together for common consultations was read by some participants as a precursor to, or herald of, parish structural change, such as twinning or amalgamation, though such considerations had not yet entered the planning process. As elaborated at the two-hour consultation sessions, the foci of the parish-based consultation remained issues of mission as approached through the pastoral priorities of the diocese to which structures then, and only then, could be considered or attuned in the months to follow. This focus on pastoral activity and outreach in consultation, over and above issues of organisation and administration, expressed the ecclesiological conviction that structures ought to match the church’s mission, with the latter providing the context for consideration of change within the local church. It was also necessary and important to acknowledge in consultation that the pastoral plan would be developed within the current parameters of church teaching and church law and that there was a healthy expectation of diverse views as well as common ground on a range of issues. In declaring some of the issues raised in consultation as beyond the scope and authority of a five-year diocesan plan, and more properly the concern of a synod of bishops, ecumenical councils and popes, the views of participants on contentious issues were received while the tradition and norms of the church were affirmed and upheld.

Each parish consultation began with a recap of the bishop’s message articulating the rationale for the process, an outline of the itinerary for the evening, and an opening prayer led by the host parish priest, before a brief overview of the major features of the diocese as provided in the ‘Diocesan Information Guide’. It was not expected that all participants had read the

19. These materials are available on the Parramatta pastoral planning website, www.faithinourfuture.org.au, as are all other diocesan documents referred to in this paper.
literature provided on the launch weekend before their attendance at a consultation session, and our expectation was, on the whole, realised. The second half of the session was dedicated to group discussion, with participants invited to nominate one of the five pastoral priorities about which they were most passionate, dedicated or experienced, and to move to the relevant tables to share their views. Respondents were asked to discuss and record their views on their chosen priority through the lenses of the following questions: What are we good at? What are we not so good at? What should we start doing?—and how? These questions provided the diocese with information on perceptions of strengths, weaknesses and opportunities within the local church that our agencies and ministries could then respond to in due time; they provided a basis on which parish-specific recommendations or suggested actions could be developed for inclusion in the pastoral plan. Following a short break in the consultation session, in which responses from randomly selected tables were typed up and displayed onscreen, a plenary review ensued. Sample responses from tables were shared and considered in further depth with participants before the session was closed with an outline of the next phase of the planning process and a final prayer of thanksgiving. Summaries of the evenings’ discussions were placed on the pastoral planning website (www.faithinourfuture.org.au) and emailed direct to registered participants within days of each consultation.

The primary learnings from this eight-month process across the diocese included the importance of thorough preparation for consultation, above all the design of a process that is well-structured to ensure an orderly discussion and reception of views and yet flexible enough to respond to the local priorities, concerns and dynamics that shape the identity and mission of local communities. There was gratitude among many respondents for the opportunity to express their experiences, concerns and hopes for ecclesial life, and there was tremendous goodwill to bring about renewal even if there was not always accord on how that might best be achieved, given the diversity of our people and communities. Some cynicism and healthy scepticism were also encountered in consultation about the discernment and decision-making process in general. This called forth the assurance that no predetermined outcomes were in hand other than the need for renewal as the abiding norm of the church’s life in response to new circumstances.

Altogether the consultation experience afforded the diocese an opportunity to witness to a listening and receptive church and to foster a spirit of communion through dialogue with laymen and -women at the grassroots of parish life, ministry and mission. In addition to serving as a form of catechesis on the church within the aforementioned theological framework of renewal, the consultations challenged participants to concretise their suggestions and hopes within the realities of the contemporary church. A basic example was the broad support for the establishment of dedicated youth ministers in every parish of the diocese, an aspiration that became more complex to envisage being fulfilled when the
limitations of parish finance were raised in achieving such a goal. Hence, the process sought to raise awareness of the multidimensionality of church life, planning and organisation, moving from theological principles and a search for a common vision to practical implications and possibilities for action at the level of the local parish as the basic unit of the church’s life and mission.

Recognising that those who attended consultations were likely to represent those already well engaged with the life of the church, a parallel consultation was also conducted through the Catholic education system with parish-specific and broader ecclesial questions placed within an annual ‘Quality Catholic Schools Survey’ initiated by the Catholic Education Office. This survey was offered to all school staff, 30 students per year group (Years 5–12) per school, and 60 parents (randomly selected) per school. In total, in 2012, some 3,186 staff participated (80.4% of those invited), 10,072 students (93.7% of those invited), as well as 2,557 parents (54.5% of those invited). It is fair to suggest that many of these school families, staff and students are not embedded in parish life or regular faith practice and so the effort to gather views of this cohort was in keeping with the diocesan priority to evangelise and reach out better to those on the margins of ecclesial life. Another resource that formed a part of discernment in the development of the diocesan pastoral plan was the 2007 research report of the Pastoral Research Office, Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass, and the response offered soon after by the then Australian Catholic Council for Clergy Life and Mission (2008).20

In September 2012, an interim report was published by the diocese, sharing the major insights and feedback gathered from the parish consultations to date. In the following month, the twelve agencies of the diocese, including CatholicCare Social Services, the Office for Worship, the Vocations Office, and the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, were asked to propose a number of recommendations for consideration by the bishop and his consultors in response to this feedback and the priorities of the diocese. Over the year that followed, this internal consultation process would yield over 150 actions for the five-year term of the pastoral plan in addition to almost 100 parish-specific strategies and actions that were developed, drawing on consultation feedback as well as research into best practices for community growth and evangelisation from Australia and abroad.

A Vision of Growing and Shared Faith

In moving from the consultative phase of the planning process to the development of concrete actions, it was critical for the diocese to articulate a clear and compelling vision within which all practical initiatives of the pastoral plan could be read, understood and engaged. It is notable that the vision for the

Parramatta pastoral plan emerged out of the consultation process itself and was clarified by ongoing discussion rather than by being on hand from the outset.

The vision outlined by *Faith in Our Future* for the next five years of diocesan life is twofold: that all parishes, ministries and members set themselves toward the goals of *growing in faith* and *sharing their faith*. ‘Growing in faith’ denotes ongoing conversion to the person and message of Jesus, coming to know him personally and receiving his Gospel into our life, while ‘sharing faith’ signifies spreading the Good News that we have received, being witnesses to the life that the risen Jesus offers us and the wider world. The pastoral plan insists that each parish should be reflective, focused, and organised to achieve these two goals, which reflect the twin commandments of Christ as heard in the Gospel of Matthew, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind … and your neighbour as yourself’ (Matt 22:37–39). To grow in our faith is to grow in love of God; to share our faith is to love our neighbour and invite him or her into a personal relationship with Christ.

In order to concretise these goals for parish communities, each goal was translated into general signs and indicators of growth and increased outreach. Hence, it was conveyed that a parish that *grows* in faith should observe its people: growing in a personal relationship to Jesus; developing a more intense life of prayer; initiating dialogue about discipleship; sharing individual stories of ‘conversion’ as something normal more frequently; developing a deeper hunger for the sacraments, Scripture and Catholic teaching; and experiencing a deeper sense of belonging to the church as the community of disciples on mission to promote the Kingdom of God. When communities grow in faith, small groups also begin to multiply and attract new members, and hospitality and social gatherings become more frequent and normal as parishioners enjoy sharing faith and life together as members of the one body. Parishes and people that *share* their faith should: see an inflow of new disciples into the community as more and more people are baptised into the life of Jesus and the church; actively encourage the sharing of stories of faith within the community; see an increase in their outreach to the poor and dialogue with others beyond the church; and encourage prayer and conversation about the faith within the home. These stories aim to assist communities in visualising parish reform and renewal at a local level.

The link between the twin goals of growing and sharing faith was also articulated by the pastoral plan. If members of parishes and other faith communities grow as disciples, they will become better *witnesses* and actively share their faith with others. Additionally, if our communities *evangelise* and bring new people to Christ and his church, these neophytes promote the growth of existing members by their witness and freshness of experience. This phenomenon can be observed in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) where new members, while not always yet fully mature disciples, often become catalysts or a leaven for others, renewing an awareness of what it means to live a Christian vocation for all.
For the diocese this two-fold vision was shaped not only by the biblical command to love God and neighbour as an expression of faith but it was also given sharp focus by the 2011 denominational profile for the Catholic Church, which revealed that 50% of Mass attenders experienced only some or no growth at all through their parish community while well less than one third of Catholics (27%) were willing and invited someone to church in the last twelve months.21 These statistics present a challenge not only for the local church but for the Australian church more generally, raising the reality that mere attendance at Mass is no guarantee for actual growth in faith and that not all parish initiatives, groups and cultures foster the growth of faith among members or support the mission of evangelisation to the extent that is desired. In placing a renewed and explicit emphasis on actual growth and evangelising outreach, the diocesan pastoral plan seeks to offer parishes a compelling vision for reflection and practical assistance toward putting energetic and creative responses into action.

Faith in Our Future

The diocesan pastoral plan was launched by Bishop Anthony on the weekend of the 22–23 February, 2014, with a launch DVD played in parish Masses accompanied by the distribution of summary and complete versions of Faith in Our Future, including translations of the document in the primary non-English languages of the diocese (which include Filipino, Maltese and Arabic). As intimated, the plan contains numerous strategies and actions for parish communities to take up in the five areas of pastoral priority—family life, youth, ethnic diversity, vocations, and the mission of evangelisation—and outlines the plans of diocesan agencies in the same areas of pastoral concern. While numerous initiatives are suggested and announced, the plan underscores that ‘new missionary energy in our Diocese will come as a result of a renewed encounter with the God of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit’, affirming the primacy of contact with the source of Christian life from which all witness and evangelisation flows.22

Implementation guides were also developed and included in the document, providing parish pastoral councils, parish ministry groups, migrant communities, religious institutes, families and individual members of the diocese with step-by-step guides to assist them in their engagement with the pastoral plan. Other diocesan initiatives announced in the plan include the establishment of a Pastoral Planning Office to support the implementation of the plan by parishes and agencies, and to provide resources, workshops and advice to foster a culture of planning across the diocese. The establishment and promotion of adoration chapels within deaneries, and an increase in the awareness and availability of

sacramental confession throughout the diocese, including school communities, are among initiatives of prayer, while significant, additional investment in social support services, education and youth are also part of plans for renewal. The theological education and pastoral formation of clergy are also addressed with an especial focus on: Scripture and homiletics, to strengthen the celebration of liturgy; pastoral readiness for ministry in the areas of marriage preparation and enrichment, and relationship breakdown; and a review of support programs for international priests and seminarians as a part of the diversity of the diocese now and in the years ahead.

It was further announced in *Faith in Our Future* that some parishes in the diocese are to be reconfigured and new ones established in order to respond to population growth, demographic change and emerging needs. The underlying goal and guiding principle of such change is to ensure that all parishioners continue to have access to Mass, other sacraments of the church, and pastoral support to live their baptismal mission; that diocesan priests are able to serve in areas of greatest need, particularly in the growth areas of north-west and south-west of the diocese; and that parishes remain viable into the future. As in our consultation process, the theological concept of ‘mission’ is that which provides the framework in which structural reform and change can be best understood and contextualised. Indeed, in announcing such change under the heading ‘New Structures for Mission’, the pastoral plan seeks to promote an ecclesiology that goes beyond a territory- or facility-focused understanding of the church and that centres instead on its vocation to grow faith in Christ and evangelise through its witness and presence as sacrament in the world.

*Church Planning in the Thought of Pope Francis*

As the theology and practice of pastoral planning matures, dioceses such as our own have benefited greatly from the thought of Pope Francis, not only in his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, but in statements prior to this programmatic document. Among these earlier thoughts stands Pope Francis’ address to CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal Conference, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, at the conclusion of World Youth Day 2013. Here the pontiff remarked:

In Latin America and the Caribbean there are pastoral plans which are ‘distant’, disciplinary pastoral plans which give priority to principles, forms of conduct, organisational procedures ... and clearly lack nearness, tenderness, a warm touch. They do not take into account the ‘revolution of tenderness’ brought by the incarnation of the Word. There are pastoral plans designed with such a dose of distance that they are incapable of sparking an encounter: an encounter with Jesus Christ, an encounter with our brothers and sisters.
Such pastoral plans can at best provide a dimension of proselytism, but they can never inspire people to feel part of or belong to the Church. Nearness creates communion and belonging; it makes room for encounter. Nearness takes the form of dialogue and creates a culture of encounter. One touchstone for measuring whether a pastoral plan embodies nearness and a capacity for encounter is the homily. What are our homilies like? Do we imitate the example of our Lord, who spoke ‘as one with authority’, or are they simply moralising, detached, abstract?  

This exhortation to a ‘revolution of tenderness’ and the raising of spiritual encounter as the defining measure of all pastoral planning aligns with the concern of previous popes that such planning activity not become, as Benedict XVI himself described, ‘self-referential’, or insular, with little impact on those who may have drifted away from regular practice of the faith. In Pope Francis’ appraisal it is not, in the end, organisational change or efficiency of administration that create communion but rather a sense of relationality and intimacy that must characterise the local church and its pastoral work, a ‘nearness’ or proximity to real lives and concerns that opens people to encounter Christ as well as their neighbour. 

This same outlook is carried over by Pope Francis into *Evangelii Gaudium*, promulgated a few months after his CELAM address and heavily influenced by the *Aparecida Document* of the same Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops. In addition to a repeated focus on the homily as a key means of pastoral renewal, Francis’ apostolic exhortation cautions us about a distant and bureaucratic approach to church life, a ‘spiritual worldliness’ that can ‘lead to a business mentality, caught up with management, statistics, plans and evaluations whose principal beneficiary is not God’s people but the church as an institution’. With the responsibility to read, measure and respond to the ‘gap’ between the present life of the church and its aspirations for the future, it is not difficult to see how such charges could be brought against pastoral planning when a mode of ‘managerialism’ overtakes its genuine evangelising impetus. While not at all proscribing a role for statistical research and critical evaluations of pastoral effectiveness, Pope Francis recognises that church processes and projects can in fact compromise the greater goals of holiness and mission if they

24. Benedict XVI, *Ad Limina Address to Bishops of Western France*.
become ends in themselves and substitute for contact with persons in their immediate need of healing, and for fostering interpersonal bonds of communion and holiness. He describes with typical candour the kind of pragmatic professionalisation of which ecclesial ministers, including planners, need to be wary of in their work:

How often we dream up vast apostolic projects, meticulously planned, just like defeated generals! ... we waste time talking about ‘what needs to be done’—in Spanish we call this the sin of ‘habiaqueísmo’—like spiritual masters and pastoral experts who give instructions from on high. We indulge in endless fantasies and we lose contact with the real lives and difficulties of our people.²⁷

At the very least, this cautionary note affirms the necessity of community consultation as a vital part of any planning process for it provides the vehicle for hearing the concerns and aspirations of those very persons in whom the faith of the church is actually lived, expressed and carried forth into the wider community.

Also helpful to the exercise of pastoral planning is Pope Francis’ desire to guide the church and its pastoral workers between the Scylla of good intent without action and the Charybdis of practical proposals devoid of genuine spirituality. He avers:

Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelisation, nor are dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts. These unilateral and incomplete proposals only reach a few groups and prove incapable of radiating beyond them because they curtail the Gospel.²⁸

The consequence for those planning for evangelisation and renewal is to avoid a false abstraction of the church out of history, embodied in fideistic notions that outreach will take place without our best effort and the best thinking and practices of the local church. Indeed, the pontiff actively encourages the churches to be ‘bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation in their respective communities’.²⁹ However, these practical plans and projects cannot be devoid of a genuine spirituality, an inner life grounded in the spirit of the Gospel, for it is this attentiveness and intention that supplies pastoral initiatives and plans with their vitality and evangelising power.

²⁷. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 96.
²⁸. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 262.
²⁹. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 33.
Reiterating the thoughts of his predecessors on the subject and imbuing them with his own style of Christian personalism, Pope Francis brings to pastoral planning a renewed awareness of its potential and responsibility in the midst of evolving landscapes and human situations to which it is called to respond in faith. As an ecclesial activity, pastoral planning shares in the responsibility of the whole church to carry out its work imbued with what he describes as ‘a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation’. Australian dioceses such as Parramatta are taking up this challenge with faith in the gifts and abilities of its people, trust in the vitality of the Gospel and a hope-filled commitment to planning for the sake of a mature and missionary future of faith.