

Brief note for the Ad Limina Apostolorum visit (Brunei)

A. In the local Churches

- **What were the main gifts and fruits received during the consultation and listening phase of the synodal process, on which you can now build? What were the main difficulties encountered?**

When the synodal journey began on 17 October 2021, we were in the second wave of COVID-19. We consulted a survey in all three parishes from November 2021 to February 2022, receiving 370 responses from active Catholics, lapsed Catholics, and children. This survey (and COVID 19) gave us an opportunity to register our parishioners and to identify what help is needed in our nation. Key fruits included: **renewed appreciation of lay co-responsibility; extraordinary solidarity** during COVID-19 (assisting over 1,900 families – there were also many Catholics we did not know existed until they apply for assistance); inter-parish cooperation through a **joint PPC Assembly** (April 2022); **online Masses** for the first time, and an **active youth** community. Main difficulties encountered: during **COVID-19, restrictions** limiting engagement to online platforms; **difficulty reaching** lapsed Catholics; and the **“delegation” mentality / mindset** must cease.

Proposal to start a group of **good listeners** (Ministry of Listening) to listen to those who have left the church. Victims and survivors to be welcomed and supported with greater **sensitivity and compassion**.

- **What areas of experimentation have been initiated at the local level, for example with regard to ministries, decision-making and discernment processes, accountability and evaluation, and participatory bodies? What good practices would you like to share?**

Parishioners were trained in the **Conversation in the Spirit** method at the October 2023 PPC Assembly. Two parishes used this method with the Instrumentum Laboris worksheets. St. John’s Parish used the First Session Synthesis Report for its 2024 PPC Assembly, selecting four priority themes: Christian Initiation, Church in Mission, Synodal Formation, and **Listening and Accompanying**. Inter-parish joint assemblies and **anonymous online feedback mechanisms** have also been introduced. Greater involvement in the **care of our common home being promoted. Bottom-up decision making**, encouraging lay people to come up with activities, recommendations and proposals, instead of relying always on the priest.

- **How have the basic principles presented in the Pathways - rootedness in the Second Vatican Council, centrality of mission, relational perspective and exchange of gifts, ecumenical impetus, dialogue with other religious traditions and with society - guided decisions and/or the evaluation of the paths taken? What polarities or tensions have emerged? (cf. Pathways, 3.1)**

The centrality of mission has shaped the Vicariate’s identity as a witnessing community in a legally restricted context, where **service and quality of community life** are themselves acts of mission. The relational principle is expressed through **inter-**

parish cooperation and engagement with FABC and the CBCMSB. Ecumenical relations, though legally constrained, are maintained through annual prayer services, joint Christmas Carols with Anglicans, and shared cemetery management. The principal tension is between the desire to be fully listening and accompanying — especially toward those on the margins — and the significant legal and social restrictions of Brunei's context. A further tension is the urgent need for formation against the severe shortage of qualified clergy and formators. We need to create opportunities for our younger generation to experience vocational and mission life and hopefully, this will produce more priests and active laity for the Vicariate.

- **Have synodal teams been established and accompanied by the Bishop at the diocesan and deanery/parish levels (cf. Pathways, 2.2)? To what extent are they proving effective in animating and forming communities in a synodal manner in view of the mission? What difficulties remain? What tools or support would they need to progress with greater momentum?**

Given the Vicariate's unique structure — three parishes, three priests, no chancery, no bishop since May 2021 — synodal teams have functioned informally through the Synod Working Team and Parish Pastoral Councils. These have proven effective in animating consultation and engaging with synodal documents. Key difficulties remain the absence of a bishop, the lack of qualified formators, trained religious educators, qualified animators and theologians, and the administrative burden carried entirely by three priests.

- **How have participatory and consultative bodies at the various levels (presbyteral council, pastoral council, finance council) changed? Has access to positions of responsibility and leadership not linked to the sacrament of Holy Orders increased for lay men and women and for consecrated persons?**

The PPCs remain the primary participatory bodies with the young people encouraged and trained to take up more leadership positions and facilitator roles and missionary work. Lay ownership has grown significantly through the synodal process. Parents are asked to play a greater active role in handing-on the faith. The Vicariate identifies the need to establish formal offices with qualified lay personnel to support the Vicariate's ministries and commissions, which are currently distributed among the three priests.

- **What are the principal needs in the area of formation in synodality? What has fostered growth in synodal spirituality? What contribution has come from theological faculties? Are new synodal-style formation programmes emerging in your territories?**

Priority formation needs include: synodal spirituality for all, Conversation in the Spirit, catechist formation, youth and family ministry leadership, and ongoing clergy formation. More collaborations between parishes is needed. Help from regional and neighbouring formators are needed, as extended overseas formation is costly and logistically difficult. Clergy formation: One priest went on Pastoral Leadership

formation in 2024; another in 2025. Our clergy normally joins the annual clergy retreat organized by the neighbouring dioceses.

A **welcoming and inclusive church** will foster greater synodality. Building friendships **online groups** has enabled us to stay connected and active and more people to share their talents and wisdoms.

- **In what way have your Churches, under your guidance and with the support of participatory bodies, contributed to discernment and decision-making in a shared and co-responsible manner? What practices of accountability - not only financial - and transparency have been developed? What forms of evaluation are becoming customary?**

Shared discernment and planning take place at **annual PPC Assemblies** and **inter-parish activities**. **Anonymous suggestion mechanisms and regular Q&A sessions** are being introduced. The Vicariate Finance Committee meet twice a year to **cross-check** each other financial practices, share accounting practices, projects, and address any common or regulatory issues. We have started working on a **joined Universal Guideline Framework for Protection of Minor**, working with the Catholic Bishops Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei (CBCMSB) and the Conference of Religious Major Superior (CRMS) to develop a common safeguarding guideline for the Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei region.

Regular coordination and evaluation of our catechesis and catechists, to ensure that children and adults feel safe in church and are formed in all dimension (intellectual, affective, relation and spiritual) and adults will become missionary disciples.

B. In the bonds between Churches

- **How do you assess the level of communion between the local Churches in your territory? And the functioning of collegiality among the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference? What might foster deeper and more vibrant growth in this regard?**

Although we do not have a bishop, the Vicariate continue to **participate in the CBCMSB** and is grateful for the strong support of the regional bishops. Communion at the regional level is excellent. Deeper growth requires above all the **appointment of a new Bishop, establishment of key commissions and various expertise/legal advisors, and more regular formation** of the Vicariate's clergy and laity and learning from our neighbouring dioceses.

- **Have synodal teams been established and accompanied at the regional, national and continental levels? Have you planned for regular regional ecclesial assemblies?**

Yes. We have nominated **one representative** to the regional CBCMSB Synodal team and formed a **Vicariate Synodal Team** comprising on PPC heads. We tried to participate in regional CBCMSB and FABC level as much as possible. The Vicariate also participates in regional assemblies and commission meetings. Practical support — including travel assistance — will be helpful to us to enable greater participation

given our limited resources. **Annually we host one CBCMSB commission meeting** in Brunei. Unable to host FABC event due to limited resources and religious restrictions here.

- **What could make communion between Churches and the exercise of collegiality more profound and effective, not only at the national level but also at the regional/continental and universal levels?**

The Vicariate proposes: **prompt appointment of a new Bishop**; more **synodal formation and the temporary stationing of qualified regional personnel** in Brunei; greater attention at the universal level to small minority Christian communities in restrictive legal contexts like Brunei; and concrete mechanisms of solidarity — **financial and personnel** — between local Churches, reflecting the principle of the exchange of gifts.

- **Taking into account the various stages leading up to the Ecclesial Assembly in October 2028, what are your main expectations and suggestions for preparing for it in the best possible way, so as to encourage an exchange of gifts between local Churches and a shared evaluation of what has been accomplished so far?**

The Vicariate welcomes the three-year implementation roadmap (2025–2028). We intends to use 2025–2026 to deepen formation, strengthen synodal practices, and begin establishing new lay-led structures, in preparation for the 2027 diocesan evaluation assembly.

For the exchange of gifts to be genuine, the Vicariate asks that **smaller and constrained ecclesial communities be given a real voice** in the preparatory process. The witness of a Church journeying faithfully without a bishop, under legal restrictions, sustained by lay co-responsibility, is itself a gift to the universal Church. The Vicariate further suggests that preparation for 2028 include specific focus on **vocations, youth engagement, and accompaniment of those on the margins** — all priorities identified in its own synodal journey.