**Examining how religious beliefs and their expression in each of the other aspects is intended to engender and nurture meaning.**

**Aspects and meaning in general**

The human search for meaning is central to religious traditions. All the aspects of a religious traditions are expressions of the shared vision of meaning and truth held by believers. The search, as such, is a matter of key importance to the religious tradition and is not left to solely to chance. The tradition is proactive about expressing its worldview and uses the many elements of the religion to make clear its central understandings of ultimate reality, the nature and purpose of human life, the fact of death and beliefs about afterlife, the relationship between ultimate reality and humans and indeed the rest of the natural world including the cosmos. The approach to the communicating the truths of the tradition is often staged through the journey of life so that from infancy through childhood and emerging adulthood to mid-life and old-age the truths are reiterated to suit life’s evolution. Religious traditions understand that he search for meaning is as long as life.

Each aspect of the tradition plays its complementary role in this meaning making process. It is an integrated thing. The aspects work in unison to express faith. Rituals speak of, or specifically use, the symbols of the religion. They often take place in sacred places in view of, or using, sacred spaces and at sacred or special times of the day, the week or the year. Sacred texts and stories are the carriers of the truth that is interpreted by the authorised leadership of the religious tradition. Moral and spiritual experience reflects the central patterns of thought and worldview of the tradition.

**An example from the Roman Catholic Tradition**

The Roman Catholic Church is focused not so much on itself as it is on the person and the mission of Jesus the Christ. All Christian faith is centred on the reality of Jesus as the manifestation of Godly concern for all of created reality. Belief in the revelation of a creator God personally calling all to renewal in a kingdom of peace, forgiveness and justice is a hope that addresses the deepest longings of the human heart.

All the aspects of the tradition are intend to bring about the reality of Christ’s mission in the lives of the faithful adherents and in the hearts of all humans. The final document of the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Latin Church, Vatican II, spoke clearly of the meanings that have their place in the hearts of Christians. In *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, we read the opening lines

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. GS #1

The Church can say this with assurance because it is a contemporary way of expressing the mission of Jesus and the demands of faith in Christ. This Constitution forms part of the magisterium, official teaching authority of the Church. The bishops in communion with the pope are the structural matrix of authority in the Catholic communion. That kind of teaching authority makes its claim on the unbroken line of the papacy to St. Peter, the rock on which Jesus built his Church. The Council would produce four constitutions in the sixteen documents that were finally agreed to by the bishops at the council. The documents and the post-conciliar documents would ultimately address all aspects of the expression of Catholic faith.

The gathering place of the council, the Vatican, is itself a sacred place. It is the temporal home of the Holy See, the Bishop of Rome, and it contains many sacred spaces, including St Peter’s Basilica and the Sistine Chapel. The basilica sits on the resting place of the first pope, St Peter, and is a place of pilgrimage for many Roman Rite Christians. It is the spiritual home of Roman Catholicism. It is a symbol of unity of the faith expressed in the Nicene Creed concerning a church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The gathering of the bishops in this place spoke to the world of the importance of the council that was to last from 1962 until 1965. The leaders of the largest denomination of Christianity were meeting in the largest Catholic Church in the world to deliberate on the nature and meaning of the Catholic faith in Jesus Christ.

The Council of Vatican II is an excellent example of the intentional use of the aspects of a religious tradition to engender and nurture meaning. The rituals of the council captured the imagination of the world as over two thousand bishops from around the globe processed into the Vatican at the behest of Pope John XXIII to consider the state of the Church and with particular reference to its mission in the world.

The council’s deliberations were many and impacted on all aspects of the Church. Pope John XXIII, Angelo Giuseppe Roncali, used the Italian word, aggorniamento (updating) and the French idea, resourcement (return to the ancient sources) to describe his intentions for the council. The beliefs of the Church were not up for question by Council participants but the expression of those beliefs clearly was on the agenda.

The turn in Catholic biblical scholarship that came with *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Pius XII, 1943) allowed the bible, the sacred text of the Catholic Church, to gain prominence in council deliberations. The Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, declared that the sources of faith for Roman Catholics are to be found not only in the revelation of Holy Scripture but also in the ongoing tradition of the Church. The significance of renewed biblical scholarship in the council proceedings cannot be underestimated. The authority of the sacred text was called upon often to engender meaning and bring clarity to the vision. The stories of the martyrs and the fathers of the church, the thinking of outstanding theologians and moralists, the prayer texts of liturgists and the words of ancient homilists are all a part of the rich heritage of meaning that is Roman Catholicism. These would all be quoted liberally by the council in its documents.

The most obvious and sudden change in expression was in the prayer life of the Church. For much of catholic history, Latin had been the language of official prayer. The Ritual Romanum, the Missal from the Council of Trent had been the key prayer text for Catholics for 400 years. The Council fathers wanted the liturgy to be fully, consciously and actively participated in by those assembled and an obvious move was to allow the prayer to be conducted in the vernacular, the language of the people. Approved translations of the new Latin text into the languages of the world were urgently pushed out to parish churches around the globe. Soon liturgical roles once only performed by the clergy like proclaiming from the sacred texts and assisting with the distribution of communion, were made available to the non-ordained, or laity. The ritual expression of the faith was forever altered.

The notion of collegiality, working together, experienced by the bishops at the council was to be recommended as a better expression of the communal nature of Christian life. The Catholic hierarchy, a masterfully successful approach to leadership for over 1000 years, in a three tiered structure of celibate, male, ordained ministry, was to be lived out more collegially. There were to be synods of bishops to discuss on-going concerns. Bishops were to work in local and regional bishops’ conferences. There were to be councils of priests to support the work of diocesan administration and even councils of advisors from among the laity to support parish life. Social structures of the Catholic Church had changed but the call to greater change from feminists has been consistently resisted by the Church. Lay people were encouraged to consider what their mission, founded on their baptism, called them to in both the church and in the world. The term lay apostolate was used to describe the role of the non-ordained.

A renewal of the moral and ethical approach of Roman Catholicism was to follow the council. At a personal level, the manuals of mortal and venial sins and appropriate penances that were the cornerstone of catholic morality were supplanted steadily by a renewed vision of forgiveness in Christ and a deeper appreciation of the moral development of the human person. The sacrament of confession was renewed to include readings from the sacred texts and options for communal celebrations. At the social level, the Catholic social teaching began to emerge from being the best kept secret of the church. The principles of Catholic social teaching began to be used to critique the reality of social sin, locally, nationally and globally. These principles included dignity of the human person, subsidiarity, solidarity and the common good. The principles are becoming the touchstones of a socially conscious Catholicism. The Church’s mission is Jesus’ mission: a joy-filled vision of peace, forgiveness and justice.