

People of Faith have spoken

Will anyone hear their voices?



BISHOP PAUL DEMPSEY

Accountability has been seriously lacking in Church leadership

PAGE 31

FR PASCHAL SCALLON

Let's get the most out of listening to each other

PAGE 2

MAUREEN KELLY

A Synodal Pathway for a church in crisis

PAGE 8-9

EXCLUSIVE

WHAT YOU SAID - 26 DIOCESAN SYNODAL REPORTS

Synodality - ar aghaidh linn!

Pascal Scallon



There has been a great deal of activity in Catholic dioceses around the country and among Catholics who are active in their parish communities in anticipation of the forthcoming synod(s). Members of religious communities have also been discussing the prospect and the possibilities of a synod at either local or national level. For those who have been able to participate, it has been an interesting and stimulating experience. It has also been a 'curious' experience, in that it has entailed hearing ourselves express divergent expectations, from the hope that there will be doctrinal change to the hope that a synod will simply steady the ship and give a renewed sense of purpose and direction to everyone.

Whatever expectations we have, however, there is a sense that the Catholic Church in Ireland is beyond 'business as usual'. There has been, actually, more than just a sense of this for many years now due to so much that has altered the landscape of faith

all around us. If, for example, the survey commissioned by the Council of Priests in Dublin several years ago, which revealed that by 2030 the number of priests in the diocese would decline by 70%, then we can see we really are in a whole new landscape. The situation all over the country, therefore, will necessarily see the emergence new leaders and maybe new elements in leadership.

Is there a need for concern? Well, even though our thoughts on what has happened to the church in our lifetime make it seem as if every reflection or conversation we have is like an asthmatic gasp caused by an environment over pollinated by all sorts of influences inimical or just unhelpful to the mission of the church, we still have faith, we still have hope and we are inspired by God's love which is not an abstraction but which animates all we do and for which we repent when we are careless of it.

Our wonder that God still calls us and is still active and prompting in the lives of so



Religious have an ancient practice of synodality.

many, is inspired in no small way by our realizing that the Holy Spirit moves within and without the formal structures of the church, and as the teaching of the church confirms, the church rejects nothing that is true and holy outside the tradition.

Concern

Examples of how this is happening are undoubtedly found in concern for the environment and in closer concern for the place of minorities in society and in the church. Pope Francis has written and spoken prophetically on issues which challenge us all. As well-off westerners, we still have much to reflect on but our reflection and our awareness are also part of the prophetic call to greater authenticity where our place in creation is concerned and greater integrity in our dealing with brothers and sisters who have always been made to feel they do not belong.

“The Catholic Church seeks always to be a witness to the best that is in humanity incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ”

One of the proposals before the whole human family is the reform of how we conduct our public life. The West has for centuries extolled its democratic values and its egalitarian politics. Compared to some of the regimes that have plagued human affairs, our versions of democracy look quite good. But Churchill's observation is still pertinent, '...Indeed it

has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' We know too, though, Western democracy is under strain and there is a rise in preferences for various forms of totalitarianism and the bogus security of systems that lionize autocracy. It should not surprise us that so many are seduced by the cheap grace that such exclusivity promises, if I may borrow from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, without, I hope, dishonouring him. Such seduction is surely one of the ways we may reflect profitably on Original Sin, not only as a matter of doctrine but as a phenomenon in human experience.

Transparency

We struggle with transparency, in that there may be too much of it and too little. We are confused by the distinctions to be made and insisted upon between being candid and exhibitionist. We really struggle with liberty and license.

In that context particularly, I am most interested in how the church proposes to grow in its own public life in ways that can witness to the rest of the world and can contribute to the reform of public life generally so that human society in its secular forms move from totalitarianism to forms of public life in which people enjoy real freedom and agency, unmolested by ideology.

In the life of the church, I would be interested in elaborating on and extending the ancient practice of religious communities gathering regularly in chapter and assembly, at local and regional level and even globally. That practice, from the outset of conventional life, underlies, I believe,

the wider use of discursive address and resolution of issues still only partially adopted in civic life and politics around the world.

“One of the proposals before the whole human family is the reform of how we conduct our public life”

The strange thing is that as parliamentary democracy has extended itself around the world (even though true democracies are yet to emerge everywhere), and while the Church calls for it in civic life, the Church itself has restricted the practice native to religious communities to religious communities and has not insisted on synodal governance in the wider Church.

Of course, democratic and synodal governance are not exactly the same. The issue of sovereignty, for example, has to be teased out. In one case it is the people through their representatives in parliament who are sovereign and in the other it is Christ alive in the Church, the body of Christ, the pilgrim people of God. In both cases human agency is the presenting 'face' of what is going on but to what end and in what way? These are the distinguishing features to be recognised and accorded their due in ecclesial and secular life.

All these, perhaps, theoretical considerations aside, it is important to make one practical point. It is critical that the synodal pathway remain precisely that, a pathway. It must not become an end in itself on this occasion. The most important thing about

any synod that occurs now is not so much that it meets at all but that it meets again.

It would be bizarre if, in the life of a community like the Vincentians or the Franciscans, we were to learn that there were to be no more house meetings, regional meetings or Provincial Assemblies and while it is true many of us groan at the prospect of yet more meetings and Assemblies, our dismay would be beyond words were we to be marginalised by the leadership of our communities in such a way.

Opportunity

And this is perhaps the most important point to be made about the opportunity offered by a synod: it will give many who feel that have no place at the liturgy a platform from which to speak and be heard.

We cannot allow our apprehension at what may be raised for discussion at a synod to prevent us seizing this moment. There will of course be demands that will be difficult to hear and difficult to implement but with patience, prudence and above all charity, we can manage ourselves for the good of the church and life of the world.

Nor is it hyperbole to speak in this context of the life of the world. The Catholic Church seeks always to be a witness to the best that is in humanity incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ. Our failures are frequent and often grievous but we are called every day to turn again and, when we have recovered, to feed our brothers and sisters. If, as will seem true to many, we are coming late to a 'democratic' way of things, then so be it but for the life of the world and the good of the church, ar aghaidh linn!

Paschal Scallon CM

Inside this issue

- Build More Community
- Need for healing around abuse
- New Ministries for Laity
- Respect for Clergy
- Ordained Ministry for Women
- Inclusivity for Marginalised
- Bring back young people
- Take care of Creation
- Faith Development is urgent
- Engage with the Vision of Pope Francis
- Synodality is the way forward

Edited by Garry O'Sullivan,
editor@synodaltimes.com.
and Brandon Scott
info@synodaltimes.ie.

Place an Advert

Phone 01 687 4094 or advertising@irishcatholic.ie

Time for Accountability

Garry O'Sullivan
PUBLISHER'S COMMENT

editor@synodaltimes.com



The leadership of the Irish Church needs now to demonstrate clearly that it has heard the voice of the laity and clergy, so clearly expressed in the national synodal listening process. Furthermore it needs to be demonstrably accountable to the laity and clergy as the Archbishop of Dublin has said, ownership is passing from clergy to lay. We need theory to become reality, the time for rhetoric is over.

The charisma of leadership has been bestowed on the bishops for a reason, by the people of God for the good of the Church. The old ways of clericalism do not have the answers for today's Church and only a genuine inclusive and honest engagement will work. We don't need to wait for a Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2023 or for the Pope to issue new decrees for change to happen.

The answers may not come from Rome, but they have come from the people of faith in Ireland. In the Ossory Diocese the Synthesis says that "Some of what is contained in this first phase of this synthesis is actionable locally or even nationally."

Issues

This is because the issues raised by the Synodal Listening process in Ireland have been around for 40 years and people have been saying the same things over and over, pointing to the same issues and asking for visionary leadership for those 40 years as research by Fr Eugene Duffy shows (see P20). These are not voices from the periphery, they can't be dismissed as angry non-practising Catholics, they are the collective voice from the practicing pews. And to date their voices have mostly fallen on deaf ears, or having

been heard, nothing has happened.

For 40 years excuses have been made; the time isn't right, we need to discern further what the Holy Spirit is saying and so on. The Holy Spirit has been roaring and yet here we are today still asking, even with a Pope behind us, will you the Irish bishops lead the change? The issues are clear, the people have spoken.

“The charisma of leadership has been bestowed on the bishops for a reason, by the people of God for the good of the Church”

Time and time again in the Synodal replies people have expressed the fear that this process will go nowhere. Where is the accountability that has been seriously lacking in Irish Church leadership? As Bishop Paul Dempsey writes in this issue; "After all the listening, after all the consultation, who is ultimately accountable in this process?"

Trust is a crucial issue here too. The role of episcopal leadership in holding a diocese to account for what has been agreed in synodal processes is crucial. Disillusionment sets in when there is a failure of accountability.

Conscious

Engaged parishioners are conscious of living in a pluralist society. They are open to dialogue with others in shaping the future of society. There is still goodwill to helping the Church overcome this crisis.

No one expects this level of change overnight and some issues are up to the universal Church to decide. But the local Church can change many things, like the wholesale neglect of the young. Millions of euro have been earned from land sales, how much is being spent on the youth? Let's open up how important decisions are made and allow laity in, not just those who are paid employees of the Church. Let's talk to those in irregular situations and bring a merciful ear to them. Let's engage with women and give them more responsibility in dioceses and have a presence in the highest decision making committees in Maynooth. It's time for courage and honesty. There's no alternative.



What you said - Limerick

The diocese of Limerick is made up of 60 parishes spread across three counties in the Mid-west with a Catholic population of approximately 155,000 out of a total population of 177,000. In April 2016, the diocese held a diocesan Synod, the first since 1937. The principal themes discussed in the Diocese of Limerick are as follows. This is an edited version for space of the full synthesis but remains true to the original in wording.

Faith

Faith is still valued by people. However, people's understanding of their faith is in greater decline, the lack of good catechesis is still an issue.

Most people surveyed agreed that faith in God and being a member of the Church can bring hope and meaning. One group said how it was a 'privilege to have faith'.

Lack of faith shown by young people

Responses from one group of young adults indicated that some young people are



There were calls in Limerick for women to play a more prominent role in the Church

too busy with their everyday lives to give much time or consideration to the Church or spirituality.

Empty pews, uncertain future

There were accounts from "God-fearing people in the parish" who don't go to Mass who also believed that the 'Church needs to be less forceful, you can still be a Catholic and not go to Mass'. What comes across from a

number of respondents is the need for a vision for parish that is wider than going to Mass.

Distrust of Church

In some places there was scepticism around this Synodal pathway expressed in such declarations as 'nothing will change'.

Liturgy

There was broad consensus around the need for rituals and in particular those

related to death, grief and supporting the bereaved. Sacraments are also highlighted and the rituals themselves are considered important and valued.

Exclusion

One of the strongest points raised in the responses from parishes and social groups is that the Church is often not as inclusive and relevant as it should be. There was a clear call for the Church leadership to be inclusive

of the LGBT community, women, single parents and other marginalised groups was made.

A Church for women

There was a sense that little thought has been given to the role of women in the Church. It was submitted that the Church leadership is overtly patriarchal, and that the hierarchy do not adequately value, appreciate or meaningfully listen to the voice of its female members (either lay or religious).

A need for renewed faith development

A gap was evident in people's faith education demonstrating the need for quality teaching, that has not been silenced or watered down, to reach the faithful (young people in particular), who express a hunger for the truth; it is not that they know what they want but they know when it is missing.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

There are many realistic voices re the difficulties that

face up moving on as Church. It is recognised that terrible mistakes were made. The abuse scandals were mentioned by respondents.

Another respondent remarked that 'a lot will be asked of those who stay' while someone else said 'we have to begin again with the weight of history on our shoulders'. 'We have to develop the trust of the people again.' The Diocese questioned if "our Church is ready, able and willing to receive and walk with the person who is seeking to belong?".

To do so, respondents have offered their views that we must offer an alternative story to a prevailing public narrative that often overly focuses on doom and gloom; respond imaginatively to the spiritual needs of the young; be inclusive; and create a vibrant minority.

Moving forward, respondents affirmed that the Church needs to focus on becoming more welcoming, showing we care, listening, helping and celebrating as communities. One respondent mentioned the development of 'basic Christian communities'.

What you said - Cloyne

The Diocese of Cloyne covers Northern and Eastern parts of County Cork. It is represented by 151,711 Catholics and Bishop William Crean, incumbent since 2013. The methodology comprised a survey and series of listening and consultation workshops. In total about 600 were involved in the process with people inputting from various socio-economic groups.

It also included workshops with teachers, farmers, youth and those experiencing social exclusion. These were in-person and face-to-face workshops. The workshops sought the participation and input of laity, religious and clergy on various issues. There was also a web-based listening and consultation process. This comprised an online survey. Similarly, a paper-based version of the survey form was distributed. In total, about 250 survey forms were completed and returned online.

A further 200 hardcopies of survey forms were received. In terms of age profile, one third of the respondents were aged 41-60 years. Two thirds of respondents were aged 61 years and older. Apart from some specific focus groups with youth, all respondents were over 40 years of age. Youth input was listened to through separate focus groups involving Cloyne Diocesan Youth Service and Youth 2000. There was a noted diversity of opinion here.

Faith and spirituality

The question was posed: Are faith and spirituality, as distinct from church, part of your life? The majority

of respondents (75%) stated that faith and spirituality are part of their life. Others either did not respond or raised some doubts. Many confirmed that they had grown up in a strong faith family and always have been very much part of the Catholic Church.

How our faith helps us

Some people described faith as a secure base on the journey through life. There was particular reference to dealing with times of stress, problems, bereavement and key decision-making moments. Faith was described as a positive experience that is a big part of people's lives and helps to keep families together.

Our Church

Some people stated that they shared the understanding that all of the baptised are part of the Church while others listed groups such as clergy and laity as part of the church.

There was a long list that people felt were missing. These included victims of all types of abuse, people who chose to leave church, teenagers and young people, laity and lay ministries, separated, divorced Catholics, the LGBTQ+ community, same sex couples, families, young priests, sinners, single people, many baptised Catholics, other Christians, the poor and the oppressed.

What areas of mission might we need to develop?

The responses also proposed movement on other fronts to support this formation including freeing clergy from administration and offering new opportunities to laity (male and female) to contribute more. The feedback expressed that the church needs to become a more welcoming and visible community.

Evangelisation through new social media forms was proposed with many examples of good practice in this area referenced.

The need for faith formation for all groups and better homilies was emphasised.

More reverent celebrations of liturgy by both priests and people are considered important for some respondents. The relevance of, and engagement with, current global challenges was a key concern for others.

What steps might the Holy Spirit be inviting the Church to take?

The respondents framed their response in terms of a call from the Holy Spirit to be hopeful, to be willing to question and not to be afraid to preach the good news to the world. Also, to be more faithful to the Gospel message.

There was a sense of a call to be humble in the face of the Divine. There was a challenge expressed that as a faith community we need to put God at the centre and before all things, whether political institutions, education, the workplace, health. We need to acknowledge the power of God ever present.

“Faith was described as a positive experience that is a big part of people’s lives and helps to keep families together”

What you said - Cork & Ross

The Diocese of Cork and Ross, covering Cork city and other parts of County, is home to 68 parishes and boasts a Catholic population of 227,900. The bishop of the diocese is Bishop Fintan Gavin, who was appointed in April 2019. The Diocese reported that fifty-five percent of the people who completed the Diocese's questionnaire were over the age of 50 and 215 people participated in round table conversations representing 21 of the 68 parishes across the diocese. More than 100 young people in the 13-18 age group responded to a questionnaire through the post-primary schools. Conversations were facilitated and recorded by volunteers from parishes and school chaplaincy. A need for a more consolidated Catholic community

Participants' submissions revealed that they were aware of the need to build a Church where the spiritual, lived experiences of the people are paramount and move from the strong expression of a personal faith to integrate it into a community of believers in the process.

Being Catholic in a cold climate

The societal changes of individualism, isolation, status, materialism, being constantly busy, and consumerism were underlined as contributors to people experiencing disconnection and stress in our modern world.



A number of young Catholics pictured with Bishop of Cork and Ross Fintan Gavin after his episcopal ordination.

A sense of loss at the current state of the Church

There was deep sorrow expressed at the Church's inability to now attract people into its midst and the struggles faced by parishioners in the Diocese. The lack of full churches, meaningful liturgical experiences and rituals from the past were all points that instilled sorrow in participants. The role of women in our Church

There is a voice highlighting the need in the Church

for ordained women, who can stand equally with their brother priests in serving the People of God.

Regret at the absence of marginalised groups during gatherings

The Diocese of Cork and Ross announced while it offered the opportunity for the disengaged or marginalised to appear, groups representing the Traveller community, LGBTI+, parents of young children and established clubs/groups for

young people and young adults expressed no desire to appear, with their reasons ranging from their anti-religious, non-denominational and non-religious stances. Consequently, these groups were not represented at any of the Diocese's synodal meetings.

Dysfunction of some lay initiatives

Some initiatives are very active while many are inactive or dormant. The participants agreed that there needs to be a plan to support clergy in developing their capacity and abilities

to help the people recognise their baptismal right to hold meaningful leadership roles with appropriate responsibility and authority.

The need for adult-faith formation

There was a regular acknowledgement of the lack of and need for a continuing adult faith formation. This will then lead to capacity building, for sacramental preparation at parish level, to provide a more enriched and vibrant experience for those preparing to receive a sacrament.

Non-native Catholics feeling left out of celebrations

There was a high level of energy around the lack of inclusion of people from other cultures and ethnic groups. People from these groups who participated in the listening process, experienced a lack of appreciation of their own cultural rituals and practices, especially during the celebration of Sunday Mass.

Slow pace of change in Church

There has been a frustration and an impatience with the pace of change in the Church. However, it was also acknowledged that the Church is at a tipping point, ripe with opportunity, and for the mission of the church to thrive, and that we need to embrace many of the ideas contained herein and translate them into action by creating and implementing practical and relevant plans, stated in a language that all can understand.

The desire to belong

A deep need for belonging underpinned all conversations. The need to feel invited and welcomed and encouraged to engage and participate was expressed as a hunger which is symptomatic of where people are at in our world today.

What you said - Kilalla

The Diocese of Kilalla covers parts of counties Mayo and Sligo and is home to approximately 38,715. The bishop of the diocese since 2002 has been Bishop John Fleming. The themes that emerged throughout the Diocese of Kilalla's gatherings were centred around:

What we need to do now (Among adults)

- Youth, Appeal to / Encourage / Include 26%
- Women, increase roles 21%
- Celibacy, abolish 20%
- Participation, enable / encourage 9%
- Education - faith forma-

- tion (for all) 8%
- Prayer 7%
- Children's Masses 5%
- Listen more 5%
- Religion in School 5%
- Parish Councils, strengthen 4%

What we need to do now (Among youth)

- Among Youth Response Frequency Percent Youth, Appeal to / Encourage / Attract 17%

- Modernise / Change 13%
- Celibacy, abolish 12%
- Mass, improve / make more interesting 12%
- Women, increase role 12%
- Accept Everyone 6%
- Relate more to people 6%
- Listening, Discussion, Dialogue, Openness 5%
- Vocations - increase 5%
- Embrace Gay People 4%

What do we need to stop doing now? (Among adults)

- Ignoring Women 4.9%
- Old-Fashioned Mentality 4.9%
- Being Judgemental 4.6%
- Negativity / Complaining 4.2%
- Dictatorship 4.0%
- Hiding Past Atrocities 3.6%
- Celibacy (for priests) 2.8%
- Boring Homilies 2.5%
- Excluding Gay People 2.5%
- Money - talking about / asking for / announcing collections 2.5%

What do we need to stop doing now? (Among Youth)

- Judging People 6.7%
- Mass being boring 6.7%
- Anti-LGBT practices 3.9%
- Old-Fashioned / Closed-Minds 3.9%
- Celibacy 3.4%
- Discrimination / Exclusion 3.4%
- Making-Up People's Minds 3.4%
- Being against abortion 3.1%
- Hiding past atrocities 3.1%

- Forcing People to Believe 2.5%

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

- That Priests be allowed to marry
- That Priests who have married return to active ministry
- That the Church's teaching on Homosexuality and those excluded from the Church be changed to reflect the Inclusion of all people regardless of Sexual orientation, Marital status or Family status
- That women be ordained to the Priesthood:
- That the Mandatory ban on the Ordination of Women be lifted.

“The Diocese of Kilalla covers parts of counties Mayo and Sligo and is home to approximately 38,715”

What you said - Armagh

The Archdiocese of Armagh accommodates 242,860 Catholics and covers County Louth, most of County Armagh and part of counties Tyrone, Derry and Meath. Eamon Martin was appointed archbishop of the diocese in January 2013.

1,500 people responded to the questions posed by the Diocesan Synodal Core Group and the Archdiocese acknowledged that most responses seemed to come from those already engaged with Church at some level. It is noteworthy that peripheral and marginalised voices emerged mainly from the one hundred and sixty online responses and the five hundred responses from young people.

Love for the Church and a continuing belief in God

From the responses and from the experience of the diocesan synodal moment, love for the Church and a strong belief in God still clearly exists.

Commitment to preventing abuse and its trauma

The participants revealed that a deep hurt that exists around sexual and institutional abuse and the diocese reaffirmed its commitment to its safeguarding procedures to help pre-



vent abuse inside and outside the Church.

Optimal celebration of Mass

Some respondents had a longing for the drama and mystery of the devotional practices of the past and they felt that something important was lost in the post Vatican II liturgical changes. What is clear from the submissions is that good liturgy is essential. It was felt that short homilies related to real life were always more effective and appreciated.

Creating lay-led roles and taking away burdens from priests

The over reliance on an ever-dwindling number of ageing clergy in the Church has left it lacking in the energy necessary for a new missionary impetus. Many priests are often tired and weary from doing the tasks that many in the lay faithful could do with the appropriate education and formation. Leaders must acknowledge the current situation and plan for the future in a more realistic way.

Limited structures for dialogue in the diocese.

The submissions revealed that there is a deep reverence for the sacraments and the liturgical moments in Church life and yet these moments do not seem to generate or foster opportunities for dialogue, or conversations around faith, in the many communities across the diocese.

It was also felt that there are no mechanisms within the diocese or in parishes to listen to the voice of those who have contrary views and as a result many have walked away.

The influence of authority in the Church

The Church both at a local and universal level was perceived by those who engaged in the process as very hierarchical. Most people do not feel that they have any meaningful say in how it is administered or in the decisions it makes.

Appreciation for priests and their ministry

For many of the respondents, the priests and deacons they

knew in their own parishes were very open and welcoming. There was a deep appreciation of the important role the priest played in the local community and the pressure the priest was under in a time of declining numbers of clergy. Concern for the ongoing welfare and care of clergy was expressed.

The Margins

Many people perceived that those who were not living within the limits of traditional morality, for example, those who were in a second relationship, had children outside of marriage or were from the LGBTQI+ community, were not welcome to participate in Church life. There was a call from some respondents for the Church to reassess its teaching on these matters. Young people felt that there was little done to make them feel part of the faith community, and women, though involved and committed in many ways, felt they were marginalised and had little say in the decisions that were made.

Additionally, respondents expressed their feelings of disappointment and hurt that the permanent diaconate and the priesthood were not open to women. They questioned how such a policy could be justified, practically or theologically, particularly in a time of falling vocations.

What you said - Ardagh & Clonmacnois

In early 2019 Bishop Francis Duffy formed a planning committee to prepare for a Diocesan Assembly. The on-going restrictions meant that an in-person gathering was still not possible at the time, so the assembly committee opted for a Zoom Assembly in October 2020. What are people concerned about now?

What comes across most strongly is a sense of people absorbed in the challenges of daily living. And in the middle of those challenges by far the most important thing for people is their families. This is true for young and old, across all the minority groups and obviously for parents.

- The three core issues for parents are family, finance, and health.
- For the elderly, along with family their concerns are for their own health and independence; they value their faith and they worry about what kind of world is going to be there for their grand-children.
- For the young, the important issues are family, friends, social life and social pressures.
- For the various minority groups, family and community are core - they long for their families to fit in.

What do people want to say to the church?

On the one hand there is certainly a sense of hurt and anger at how the church has been in the past. This relates particularly to the abuse scandals. But there is also a widely held view that the church people grew up with was often authoritarian and out of touch with their lives. This view is not just held by younger generations, but by older people as well. treats people as equals.

There is a strong focus on priests as core to the church. And here there is a clear call for married priests and women priests.

Positives in the local churches

- Smaller scale services - in many cases the smaller scale of services imposed by the restrictions resulted in a more personal faith experience.
- Technology - the use of social media for services and other church events.
- Appreciation - a greater sense now of the value of our faith and church life, something that we may have taken for granted.
- Flexibility - our ability at parish level to

rise to the Covid challenges.

Submissions from Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Assemblies

35 submissions were received from parishes about assembly priorities for action. The main areas were:

Youth - offering an experience of faith and church that attracts.

Family - supporting parents to promote faith in the home.

Rituals - the potential for our liturgies (including Sunday Mass) and sacraments to relate better and connect better.

Priests - the role of the priest is seen as a key element for the future. Here the desire is to promote vocations and for many, to open priesthood to married men and women.

Lay roles - the role of lay people is seen as complementary to that of the priest. The desire here is to grow the involvement of lay people and to provide the necessary training and support.

Submissions from priests

- the priority of mission,

- the need to address lay roles and lay training for this mission.

- the support needs of priests in the face of 'a tsunami of change', including support for priests from overseas.

The main action points from the submissions were summarised as follows:

Youth

- There is a strong sense of the value of working with systems that already have connection with youth.
- Explore how best to tap into the capacity for peer ministry.

Family

- Make use of key inclusive moments to share the Good News
- Reach out to support families on key issues for them
- Build parish capacity for parish family liturgy.

Lay formation

There is a very strong sense that the time for change is upon us. At the same time the implications of that for such things as parish liturgies may not have dawned on people.

What you said

What you said - Meath

The Diocese of Meath is represented by 267,831 Catholics and overseen by Bishop Tom Deenihan who was appointed in June 2018.

The eight deaneries of the Diocese of Meath were asked to conduct four synodal conversations on the first four Tuesdays of Lent, and to celebrate a liturgy of thanksgiving on the fifth Tuesday of Lent. Facilitators were chosen from each deanery to assist in conducting the meetings and received training for that purpose.

“There were calls for a renewal of the leadership model in the Church”

Each meeting was open to all, but it was also considered helpful to invite certain “focus groups” to each meeting. The first meeting was centred around those involved in the liturgical



Bishop of Meath Tom Deenihan with recent recipients of the Pope John Paul II Award.

life of the Parish meeting. The second involved in the administration of parish life. The third focussed on members of prayer and apostolic groups. The final meeting discussed school communities.

Over 1,600 people participated in synodal meetings. 276 completed questionnaires were returned by people who participated in a meeting in their deanery. 166

completed questionnaires were returned by people who had not participated in an organised meeting.

Stagnation of parishes and Church's overall mission

Respondents in the Diocese of Meath voiced that their parishes were struggling and becoming stagnant as places

of “communion, participation, and mission”. People called for a greater sense of communion, to be invited to participate more actively in the life of the parish, and for a more dynamic liturgical life that is faith-nourishing.

Desire to change leadership model of Church

There were calls for a renewal of the leadership model in the Church. The investment of authority in the ordained ministry is seen by contributors as preventing initiative and impeding the faithful in assuming their responsibility for the Church.

A Church receptive to those on the margins

The participants agreed that linked to the issue of leadership is a strong awareness of the lack of involvement of women, young people, and LGBTQ+ people in key areas of the life of the Church. This is experienced as exclusion by such people, and as contrary to the Gospel by those who love the Church.

Overcoming the lack of practice among young people

Parents and grandparents collectively voiced their

concerns at the loss of faith among their children and grandchildren. The traditional cooperative faith-transmission model of parish-home-school is no longer working. Responses indicated a need for faith development at parish level, and a new evangelisation that offers the Christian vision of the human person, leading to interior conversion and intentional discipleship.

Poor attendance in Diocese for synodal meetings

The Diocese of Meath noted that the engagement by some parishes was disappointing (some participants noted that the synodal meetings were not advertised in their parish) and that they were also disappointed that there was an extremely small number of people who participated when taken in the context of the overall population of the Diocese.

What you said - Tuam

It is indicative of the work of the Holy Spirit that a suite of themes can now be identified, and individual responses can, consequently, be grouped together, as follows.

Church Structures:

The hierarchical structure of the church was listed in many of the responses. While there is a glowing admiration for Pope Francis and his style of leadership, wherein he is seen as non-judgemental and willing to listen, there is also a concern that the voices of the faithful are not being heard.

Sacramental Celebrations:

One of the essential components of our Christian life is the regular attendance at Mass and receiving Holy Communion. Aware of the decreasing number of priests, the importance of having a regular Mass celebrated in each parish was mentioned in most responses. (If we have no priests, we have no Eucharist. If we have no Eucharist, we have no Church!). Many still see the attendance at Mass as a community responding to the call to prayer.

Mass attendance, at a distance, will rob the faithful of this life-sustaining sacrament.

Sacramental life:

For historical reasons, one of the stark challenges facing the Church in Ireland for many years has been the disconnect between Church, home and school. Despite various efforts over the years, little has changed and the preferred option continues to be to allow our schools to be the main providers of religious education. Of course, this is an easy way out – and it worked in the past! But, as mentioned earlier, society was a lot simpler, but in reality, how well did it work? Perhaps a whole generation of young adults has been educated but has no real sense of what a commitment to their Catholic faith means. Some of the replies reflect this in stating, “If we always do what we always did, we will always get what we

Clergy and Religious:

With an increasing decrease in vocations and a lesser number of priests, the burden of parish work is fall-

ing to too few. Many of the responses show the pride that parishioners and communities have in their parish and, especially, in their priests, highlighting their dedication to their work, most especially during and post-Covid. They refer to their constant availability to the people, especially their pastoral care in times of bereavement and in celebrating the Eucharist and the other sacraments.

“The urgent need for an active Parish Pastoral Council to be set up in each parish is clear from the responses”

Discuss and debate a married priesthood openly. A concern at the training currently being provided to seminarians. The role of women needs to be recognised. The giftedness of women is neither recognised or appreciated. Yet, they are the backbone of the church at present. Allow the ordination of women deacons and begin a debate on the ordination of women to full priesthood.

Education:

The importance of a proper religious education in our primary and second level schools was referenced in many responses.

Welcoming Community:

Another common thread running through the responses is the need for our Church to be a welcoming community, to reach out to all baptised members. These include those who are not regular church-goers, those who have lapsed, members of the LGBT community, etc. The need to reach out to those alienated from Church life needs to be addressed.

Young People

One of the most frequent comments made among churchgoers today is that “we didn't see too many young people at Mass today”. This is very clear in the Synodal Pathway responses. What have we done wrong? Where can we go from here? The absence of young people at Mass and at other liturgies is a cause for concern for many, but it is also clear that these young people have not aban-

doned their faith. We see this in their willingness to participate in JP II Awards, and, later, when they decide to marry, and when they bring their child for Baptism. Yet, without the structure, routine and support of liturgy, they will fall by the wayside.

Elderly

Just as there were comments on the role of young people, there were similar comments that the same old familiar faces are the only ones involved in our church today. Celebrate life's milestones for this age group.

Pastoral Councils

The urgent need for an active Parish Pastoral Council to be set up in each parish is clear from the responses. Indeed, it is suggested that the role of the PPC needs to be defined / redefined, especially in the light of dwindling number of priests and many priests now covering two or more parishes.

Care of the Earth

One of the highlights of Pope Francis's ministry as Pope so far has been his encyclical *Laudato Si*. While this document was mentioned specifi-

cally in many of the responses, reference was made throughout for the need for all of us to care for the earth.

Popular Piety

Under this heading is included the local branch of the Legion of Mary, etc. and the work that membership entails. This is mentioned in some of the responses, probably where there is already a branch. Other items mentioned in this category include the call to bring back regular Benediction and the Rosary.

Conclusion: Looking to the Future

In summarising the comments received from such a varied group, as referenced above, we ask ourselves, “What is God asking of the Church in Ireland at this time?” and “How is the Holy Spirit guiding us to be a church more responsive to the needs of our rural and urban communities across the country?”

The engagement of so many people in the process has been encouraging and shows signs of great hope for the future.

An Entirely Synodal Church: The Vision of Pope Francis

Maureen Kelly

The possibilities that the synodal vision of Francis opens up and the profound shift it requires is only gradually coming into view. In effect, he is calling the whole Church, to a new way of being. A few preliminary remarks create the context for reflection on the role of the lay faithful in a synodal Church.

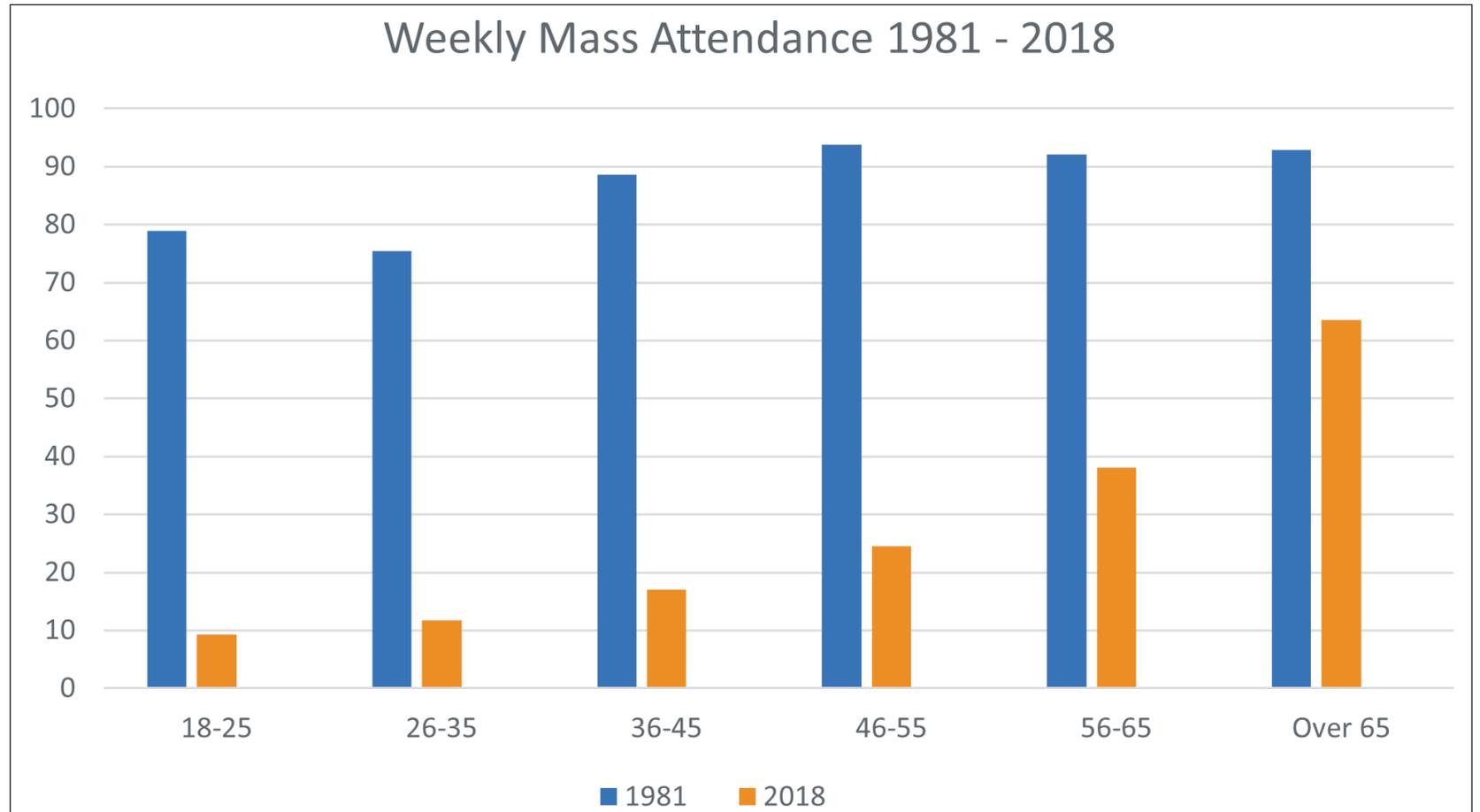
It calls for a wholly participant Church, in which all God's people are subjects, 'by virtue of the dignity of their baptism and their friendship with Christ' and 'through their sharing in the one priesthood of Christ'. 'In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing.'

The anointing of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the 'sensus fidei' – an instinct of faith which allows them to discern what is truly of God.

Synodality is in the service of mission. It is not an end in itself, but should lead the Church to reaching out beyond itself in mission. All are called to mission, so all must listen and discern together where the Holy Spirit is leading the Church.

A Synodal Pathway for a Church in Crisis

Against this backdrop, the Irish Bishops have announced their intention to embark on a synodal pathway for the Irish Church and to hold a National Synodal Assembly within the next five years. The context in which the Irish Church is embarking on this path is stark. There is widespread recognition that the Irish Church is in deep crisis and there is a longing for leadership and a collective



response. The Church system as we have known it is broken. The service model of Church, which came into being as Irish society recovered from the famine, and which thrived for most of the twentieth century, is in free fall. The now Archbishop of Dublin (and then Bishop of Ossory) put it succinctly: 'The Catholic Church in Ireland is in the maelstrom of its gravest crisis in centuries.' If the synodal path is to address this situation, it is crucial that the depth of the crisis be acknowledged.

There is a crisis of participation. Dr Michael Breen's work on patterns of religious practice in Ireland, based on the European Values Studies, allows us to sketch the fall in weekly Mass attendance between 1981 and 2018. Below are the figures for six age cohorts from 18–25-year-olds to those over 65:

Over four decades, participation in Sunday Eucharist, has dropped dramatically and

in some age cohorts has completely collapsed. It is widely anticipated that the decline will be accelerated following from the COVID pandemic.

“Over four decades, participation in Sunday Eucharist, has dropped dramatically and in some age cohorts has completely collapsed”

This profoundly impacts on the local Church. Numbers regularly participating in the life of their local parish communities continue to decline. The pool of people available as volunteers for parish groups and programmes is also declining and aging. Many priests, lay ministers and volunteers continue in parish roles because there is no one

to take their place. Allied to the decline in participation is a decline in financial support for the Church.

The crisis is also apparent in relation to priesthood. In the diocese of Killaloe, over one third of parishes are currently without a resident priest. My experience is of a tiredness and discouragement among many priests, many of whom carry on valiantly, trying to shore up a dying system. Discouragement makes it hard to generate energy or hope about the possibility of change.

On the other hand, there are still significant numbers of people for whom belief in God, prayer and living of the Gospel in their everyday lives gives meaning and hope. Dr Michael Breen points to an interesting finding of the European Values Study. The graph below compares data on participation in weekly Mass side by side with data on the practice of weekly prayer for 2018, the most recent year

of the European Values Study.

Figures for non-participation at Mass do not necessarily mean the rejection of God. Even a significant number of younger people, for whom Mass attendance is no longer a practice, still turn to God in prayer at least once weekly. This suggests an openness to something other than materially-focused and self-interested lives, an openness to the transcendent.

“Figures for non-participation at Mass do not necessarily mean the rejection of God”

It's also true that many families continue to link with the Church at special moments in their lives, through baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation, and at death. This presents the Church with both the challenge and the opportunity to reach out to these families, most of whom are not regular Church-goers.

This is the context in which the proposed synodal process must discern ways forward. This reality may appear bleak, but it is necessary to try to name the truth of our situation if we are to have any hope of addressing it.

Learning from Previous Experiences of Listening

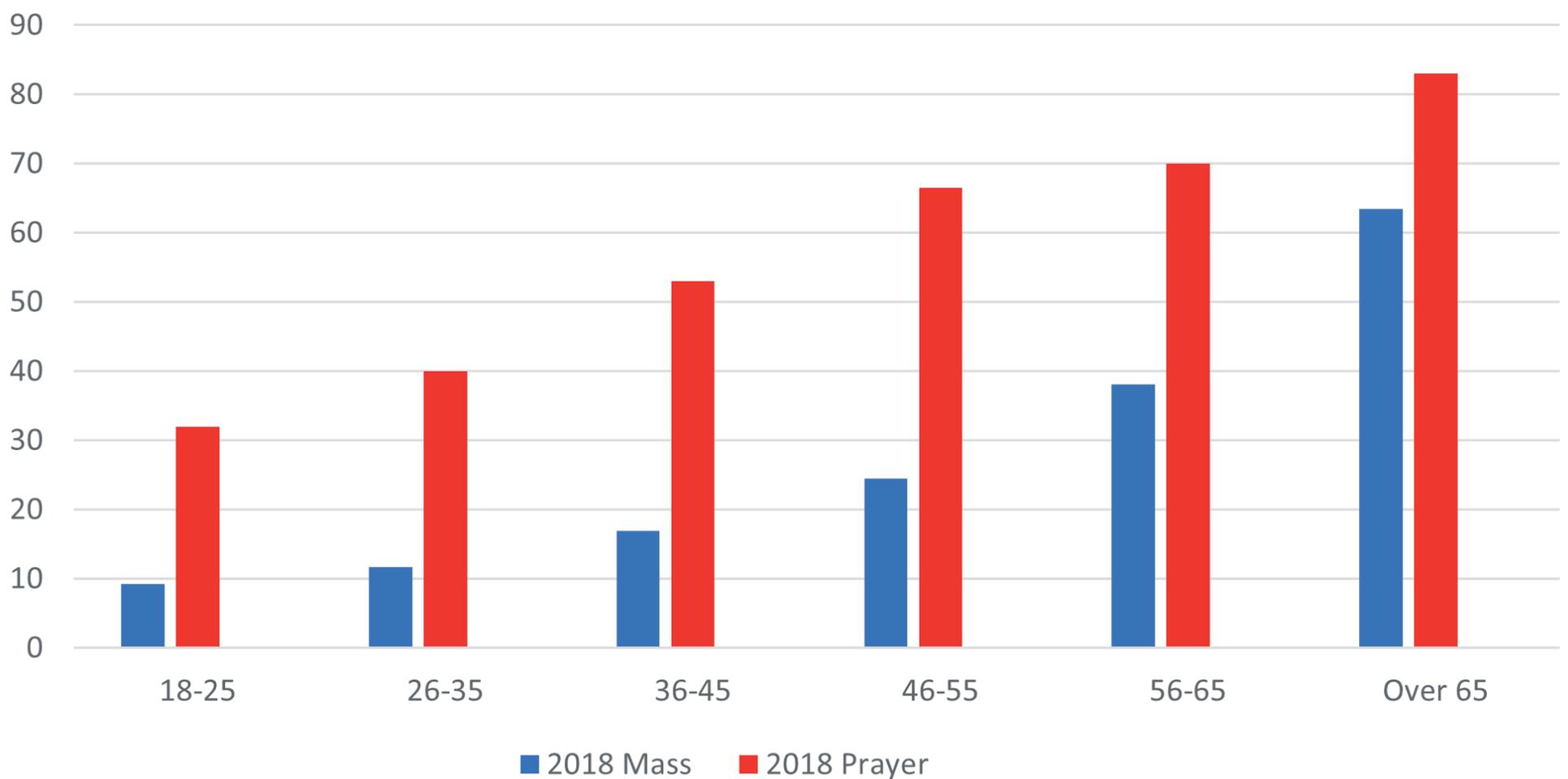
In Irish Dioceses over the past 10-15 years there have been many instances of diocesan processes aimed at identifying pastoral priorities and developing pastoral plans in their respective dioceses. Dioceses such as Down and Connor, Kerry, Kilmore, Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, Killaloe and more recently Cashel and Emily and likely many others have engaged in processes aimed at involving as many people as possible. The Diocese of Limerick instituted a more formal synodal process.

How do these local processes relate to the Synodal Pathway now proposed? Pastoral Development personnel in dioceses which have already had significant listening processes ask if the proposed Synodal Pathway may end up repeating what has already happened at local level. There is also concern that the length of the process, currently proposed as five years, is too long and will be impossible to sustain. Others feel that the crisis in the Irish Church requires ways forward that cannot wait five years. Others still feel that there has been sufficient listening and now practical solutions and actions are needed.

My sense is that the scale of

“The role of episcopal leadership is holding a diocese to account for what has been agreed in synodal processes is crucial. Disillusionment sets in when there is a failure of accountability”

Mass Attendance - Weekly Prayer 2018 Data



the crisis we face as a Church is bigger than can be addressed by local dioceses working in isolation. What does it mean to be a Christian Community in an increasingly secular and materialistic society? How can the Gospel message be proclaimed meaningfully in this culture?

“We are witnessing a tectonic shift in our culture away from a social order that is hierarchical in its order”

Over the past 10-15 years, similar issues have surfaced continually, in one form or another, in listening processes in dioceses all over the country. They have to do with participation and power, with sexuality and the acceptance of different sexual orientations, with young people and their absence from Church communities, with ministry and how it is expressed, with the role of women in the Church and their absence from decision making in the structures of the Church.

Many of these issues are related to culture. There is an enormous disjunction between the worldview of a hierarchically structured, patriarchal Church and that of the surrounding culture. The Church as institution is losing its place in contemporary society, I suggest, because its structures and ways of operating are alienating for those whose worldview

is shaped by post-modern culture. Michael Conway has written powerfully and insightfully about this disjunction.

We are witnessing a tectonic shift in our culture away from a social order that is hierarchical in its order, vertical in its structure and deferential in its dynamics. Our culture is gradually putting in place an alternative order that is horizontal, egalitarian, functional, discourse based, person centred, communitarian and so on ... We are moving from a form of order that was significantly indebted to the patriarchal system to a new form of order that is based on very different principles and values.

Accountability and Trust

There is also the issue of accountability. With the initiation of a process of listening comes the responsibility of ensuring that outcomes flow from the process. ‘We have been through all this before and nothing happened’ is not an uncommon statement in the Irish ecclesial context. When this has been the experience on the ground, it hugely damages confidence.

Trust is a crucial issue here too. My experience is that trust is greatly undermined when what has been agreed by priests and people in diocesan listening and discernment processes is allowed to be ignored at parish level. The toleration by bishops of the clerical mindset, which sees the priest as the arbiter of what happens in ‘his parish’, is incalculably destruc-

“We are witnessing a tectonic shift in our culture away from a social order that is hierarchical in its order, vertical in its structure and deferential in its dynamics”

tive of any effort to work in a synodal way. The role of episcopal leadership is holding a diocese to account for what has been agreed in synodal processes is crucial. Disillusionment sets in when there is a failure of accountability.

Who Are the Laity?

It goes without saying that the laity are not a homogenous group. However, labels typically applied to them such as progressive or conservative do not do justice to the complexities of the different theological outlooks this term includes. In his book on the identity of Catholic Parishes today,¹ Australian theologian and priest Dr Brendan Reed has developed a parish engagement scale aimed at understanding how Catholic parishes – and I hypothesize both parishioners and priests – see themselves in a changed cultural environment, and how would they like to see themselves in the future? The typology which emerged from the study has, I believe, parallels in the Irish situation.

Reed presents four predominant types. He explores the theological emphasis of each type and examines how each

sees itself in relation to the prevailing culture. The four types he identified are as follows:

- The Convinced
- The Devoted
- The Consumerist
- The Engaged

The *convinced* typology looks to the Church to offer certainty and security in a time of turbulence and change. They want the Church to hand on tradition and dogma, which for them is unchanging, in an uncompromising way. The *devoted* typology looks to the Church to provide the comfort of a strong devotional life where prayer and liturgical life are central. There is a strong emphasis on piety, with traditional devotional prayer such as the rosary, attending exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, prayer groups, etc. The *consumerist* type will likely try out a number of experiences of parish before they settle on one that is to their liking. Choice is a critical value for this cohort as well as meeting personal needs.

The *engaged* see the need to explore the meaning of faith and its contemporary expression, seeking to relate

faith to the struggle for life and meaning they see around them. They see the faith tradition as needing to find new expression appropriate to the cultural context in which they live. Engaged parishioners are conscious of living in a pluralist society. They are open to dialogue with others in shaping the future of society.

“The convinced typology looks to the Church to offer certainty and security in a time of turbulence and change”

The above categorisation is not an exact mirror of reality. But they do give us a framework in which to think about the category ‘laity’ under consideration in this paper.

It is likely that every parish has members of each of Reed’s four categories.

The insights of Michael Paul Gallagher SJ on discerning the culture and the seeds of the Gospel inherent in it is a valuable resource in this regard.

Listening with Openness to

Conversion and Change

The Redemptorist, Cardinal Joseph Tobin CSSR, has spoken powerfully of the need for the Church ‘to listen to people who have, in one way or another, been pushed to the peripheries, in a way that is open to conversion and action’. He points out that the ‘septic wound’ of clerical abuse has been compounded by the perennial ignoring of the voices of people who have been wounded and pushed aside by the Church.

Listening to the voices of those who have been pushed to the periphery of our Church may be the blessing of this synodal pathway. It may call us to conversion, to recognising our blind-spots and awakening our sense of needing the mercy and forgiveness of others. Conversion will call us to change those parts of our structures which no longer speak to our culture or which are experienced as alienating.

This is an edited version of the article which can be found in full in *The Synodal Pathway – When Rhetoric Meets Reality* available from ColumbaBooks.com. Article reproduced with permission Columba books.

What you said - Derry

The Diocese of Derry held its gatherings between February and March 2022. Four in-person information and facilitation training gatherings (one in each deanery) were led by Bishop Donal McKeown and managed by two professional facilitators with expertise in restorative justice in the community and church. The Diocese is home to 252,347 Catholics.

35 of the 51 (over 68%) parishes held 'listening gatherings' along with many individuals - young and old, small groups, organisations and schools. A few parishes expressed their disappointment at the numbers that attended despite the work they did to promote the gatherings. Some parishes that used the strategy of explanation and invitation by a layperson at Sunday or weekly Masses reported high numbers of attendees. The Diocese reported that there may be learning to be considered in this.

The predominant themes that emerged during the Diocese of Derry's gatherings were:

Working together for a new Church

For those who participated in the journey, the gathering



Participants in the Diocese of Derry's synodal processes expressed a desire for the Church to reach out to the margins

turned out to be a process marked by much more enthusiasm than rancour. The findings in many ways were in harmony with the three parts of the 2018-2021 Diocesan Pastoral Plan 'God is Love'.

The context of the conversations was generally helpful in making this a God-centred process.

The Church in the Diocese of Derry is in a period of transition. There is recognition of

the need for a new model of Church which may require a certain mind-shift in all of us. This period of transition may also involve conversion at both personal and community levels.

Church-inspired positivity

There is much to celebrate and be positive about in the Church at present. There was an articulated desire to be a

more ministry-rich diocese. The people who participated in this process care and are passionate about their faith and the Church, and many are deeply committed.

Exclusion

Some people experience frustration because they genuinely want to belong to the faith community but are still struggling with feelings of alienation, exclusion and lack of access. However, this indicates a real, underlying care for their faith and the Church rather than indifference or apathy. People do have real dreams and hopes that the Church to which they belong will be more inclusive and merciful.

Empowering laity

There is a clear realisation that people need to be empowered to engage in the Church. Personal invitation is key here and provides a sense of permission for ordinary/lay people to be co-responsible along with the local clergy for faith development in their respective parishes and in the diocese as a whole. To this end, formation and training are essen-

tial if people are to build the necessary confidence which will encourage them to use the full range of gifts that they have for service in the Church. Plans for developing a programme of adult faith formation are already well underway in the diocese.

Diocesan communication

Communication is a clear priority. The Church must learn to speak into the secular age in a relatable manner so that our mission is relevant and so that it can really change hearts and minds. There are clear challenges for the Church in the modern world but we must remain positive and be prepared to roll up our sleeves and get stuck in.

A Church fit for the margins

The responses are clear about the need to make a concentrated effort to reach out to those in the margins, and find ways of building bridges that will make it easy for them to return to full communion with their faith communities, especially those who have for

whatever reason felt a sense of unworthiness.

Lack of practice among younger generations

There is a real concern for those in the 20-45 years bracket who can appear indifferent or disconnected. These members of our faith communities must be encouraged to engage in the next steps of the Synodal process.

Church-wide unity

Many people who participated in this process expressed their desire for more synodality: "walking together". The Diocese believes that this is heartening. There is a huge onus on all of the Church to take co-responsibility for honouring people's expectations about what the process can achieve. People genuinely want to see their ideas being realised, they want the faith community to deliver. The faithful must always remember that the Church ultimately belongs to Christ and that we are all called to be docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

What you said - Cashel and Emly

The Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly encompasses most of Tipperary and a number of parishes in Limerick. The Catholic population of the Diocese is 79,505. The incumbent since 2015 bishop is Bishop Kieran O'Reilly

The five seed groups within the Diocesan Pastoral Council were chosen in addition to people on the periphery of the faith community and those whose voices may not have been heard in the listening process: young adults, young parents, Men's Shed, people from the LGBT+ community and people with additional needs.

Themes from Cashel and Emly's synodal process:

Having listened to and reflected on the experiences of all the groups the themes which emerged are Outreach, Community, Acceptance, Incarnational Spirituality, Connecting Faith Celebrations with Life Experience and Leadership and Co-responsibility.

Four of these six themes are similar to four of the five Seeds of Hope in the recent Diocesan Pastoral Plan in Cashel and Emly.

Surprises

People on the periphery were very open and willing to be part of a conversation about the meaning of community and faith/spirituality for them. This illustrates that each person desires these two elements within their life despite an obvious move away from formal church practices.

Obstacles

There is a chasm between the language of the Synodal documents and the language of the woman or man on the street. This language is a challenge for the practising faith community never mind people who feel excluded from or consider the Church irrelevant. Therefore, when we reach out to those on the margins, we need to use language that speaks to their reality. Christ in the Gospels uses the language of the people to invite them to recognise God in their midst.

Understanding

It is important to recognise it takes time to reach out to people on the periphery and it may not happen within the

time assigned to the synodal process within each diocese. We are requesting to be invited into people's spaces and asking them to be open to conversing with us and allowing us the privilege of listening to their experiences. It may take time to set up meetings and one must accept people's hesitancy and acknowledge that our process may not be their priority. In recognition of this we sent out an online questionnaire to support networks so that people had the freedom to engage or not.

In our experience, God is speaking to us through people whose voices have been ignored by the fact that they have walked away. They have not felt included. They have shown disinterest and apathy because we didn't listen'

Conclusions

As a faith Community we are

called to see all outreach to those on the margins as being part of the ministry of laity and priests. Our ministry is not limited to functions within church buildings but is engaging with the entire community, indeed the global community. Our ministry is to be concerned with the joys and sufferings of all people of every creed and none.

We are not concerned then with numbers or lack of numbers or the age of both our laity and priests inside the churches. Christ calls us to be a people who are looking outwards, who are concerned for the vulnerable of our society rather than the vulnerability of our institution.

Are we called to reflect on those beliefs which serve as a barrier to welcoming people into the Faith Community? Do these beliefs create obstacles to our being followers of Christ?

Surely for many people today the Church is seen as not honouring them for who they are and the lives they are living. Are we then as a Faith Community preventing people from experiencing the love of God for them?

Many of the voices on the periphery speak of feeling excluded due to beliefs which the Church holds. The wish of young parents to engage in Catechesis so that they can pass on the faith to their children is a call to the Faith Community to encourage lay pastoral leaders in this work.

We have begun to listen to people and we must as a Faith Community continue to listen to all people and every generation. This leads to a more humble, inclusive and welcoming community. Our language too needs to be inclusive and the language of the everyday. We need to support people

to experience the presence of God in their lives and speak in words that they understand. If we retain religious language which is specific only to liturgy, then it too becomes a method of exclusion.

Is the Holy Spirit calling us to 'journey together' with those of our own faith tradition and with all peoples in humility, openness and love? A synodal Church 'is open to wisdom emerging from dialogue across difference. It is open to the contribution of young people from their particular perspectives.' (DPC) The co-responsibility of laity and priests for the faith development of parish communities is a response to the new vision of leadership within the Church.

Concrete steps need to include the setting up of parish teams and inviting diverse people from across the parish community to share their gifts on this team. Ongoing faith and skills development need to be provided for lay pastoral leaders to work alongside the priests of the parishes and indeed to reach out to those on the periphery.

“God is speaking to us through people whose voices have been ignored by the fact that they have walked away”

What you said - Kilmore

The Diocese of Kilmore accommodates 69,483 Catholics and covers most of County Cavan, parts of counties Leitrim, Fermanagh, Meath and Sligo. Its bishop, Bishop Martin Hayes, was appointed in 2020.

Meetings were held in late September and early October 2021 to hear the views of the priests on the proposed process. 3. Four Zoom meetings were held in mid-October for parish volunteers inviting them to engage in a listening exercise. 28 parishes (80%) were represented at these.

In parallel with this, a listening process for young people was led by the Diocesan Director of Youth & Young Adult Ministry.

Faith is still good news

- Faith provides guidance and direction in daily life.
- Faith is important to people I love, so I respect that. It gives them meaning in life. Desire for greater participation
- Ensure the parish priest is actively engaged and seen in the community. The other looks for a more synodal church. It sees the need

for greater participation of lay people in the life of the church.

- I would like to see a system similar to the reformed churches, where the laity takes a bigger part in the church. A part that is recognised, valued and supported by the clergy.

“The modern sensibility about justice and inclusion is offended by the church’s treatment of women and minority groups”

Desire for a more inclusive church

The modern sensibility about justice and inclusion is offended by the church’s treatment of women and minority groups, especially LGBTQ+. There is a call for the Church to face up to and embrace change.

Voices of youth

- ‘Faith helped me cope and get through the last year. It



There was still a strong belief that faith provides general direction in life amongst the participants in the Diocese of Kilmore

helped me cope with being lonely during lockdown last year.’ For many young people their faith is based around morality. There is a strong voice that is seeking a more inclusive church for the future and to let go of the past and rebuild.

- ‘I believe in equality for women, which is something the Church does not stand for. The catholic church

does not hold women in the same respect as men, so Catholicism ends up angering me instead of helping me.’

- ‘Be kind and respectful to minorities or marginalised groups, i.e., people of colour, LGBTQ+ people. Treat them with equal respect.’ A lot of hurt and anger is still with young people and when asked about their

own faith, church scandals and abuse is stopping them from exploring their own relationship with God.

- The Church needs to either get with the times or expect less and less young people taking part in a church that has previously condemned them, for example – being gay and giving half-hearted apologies.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

There were differences in how people saw the challenge of the church engaging with the wider society. There were two languages underpinning these differences. Some people used the language of invitation, others the language of obligation. For the former, the church needs to change to effectively connect with the people who have moved away. This group was largely in sympathy with the criticisms of the church in the report. But for the latter it is the people who have moved away who must change. The church needs to hold firm in its beliefs and teachings, and challenge people to live up to the demands of faith. There was a sense of grieving here for the lost position of church in society. A desire that church should teach, and people learn.

There was a concern that the Synodal process in the diocese has been rushed. One round of short meetings in difficult Covid circumstances does not represent deep listening.

What you said - Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora

The Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora encompasses

parishes in Mayo, Galway and Clare. There are 105,707 Catholics in the Diocese and the presiding bishop is Bishop Michael Duignan, who was appointed this year.

Ten meetings, encompassing seventeen parishes, across a diocese with thirty-nine parishes took place. In some cases, parishes combined to hold one meeting.

The Diocesan survey exceeded expectations. There was a total of 377 respondents to this survey, representing about 0.36% of the diocesan church communities in Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora, or an average of 9.7 respondents per parish.

Around two-thirds (68%) of the responses were received through the online survey. What is noteworthy is the consistency in the number of responses with comments (51%) regardless of format - online or paper.

Sacraments and faith-formation

In many cases Confirmation is viewed as the “exit point”. This is in contrast to Pope Francis’ hope that the sacraments are the “special means

for passing down this fullness, a means capable of engaging the entire person, body and spirit, interior life and relationships with others”.

Church as a community

The majority (79%) of respondents experience of church is a community in which they attend Mass. For the majority (81%) of those, the celebration of Mass is a reverent, uplifting and sacred experience.

Less than half (42%) of respondents believe they are listened to in their church community, while the majority (85%) of respondents feel their church community would benefit greatly if there were more opportunities to share views. Approximately half (51%) of respondents took the opportunity to share their personal views as part of this anonymous survey.

Most (90%) respondents believe we all need to

participate in speaking on behalf of our Christian community and less than half (47%) of respondents find it difficult to express Christian values in today’s society. Furthermore, the majority (73%) of respondents agree with Pope Francis when he says “We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty.”

Over 85% of respondents agree that “we are all individually responsible in

the church community to ensure no one is excluded”. As a person of faith 73% of respondents want to help others to live out their service to society in a missionary way.

Women at the forefront

Throughout the listening process the role of women in the ‘Church we dream of’ has been voiced. One respondent captured that sentiment succinctly when they said “Women have a bigger role to play in the church. Women have nurtured the faith through the ages, have passed it on from generation to generation. With the decline in vocations there is a wider role for them in the Church.”

“Over 85% of respondents agree that ‘we are all individually responsible in the church community to ensure no one is excluded’”

What you said

Listening to the Margins

A core team was formed to connect with, and listen to, some of those at the margins of our Church. The participants who shared their insights valued the opportunity, albeit that this was tempered by an uncertainty as to whether the Church would respond and effect the changes that they desired.

Communion

Many people find the Church to be a place of real belonging and a spiritual home where they have been cared for, nurtured and challenged to grow in faith. Throughout the synodal moments, people were conscious of those who were not in the room; it was with compassion that they recognised that the number of people from different ethnicities, younger people, and working families was low and that the synodal experience was poorer for this. There was a resounding desire to respond to the call of Pope Francis to be with people on the margins.

“We heard from the deaf community, adults with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities and here the issue of belonging came up again”

Overwhelmingly, the people who contributed to the synodal process expressed a desire for the Church to be more welcoming of people in general, and people from the LGBTQ+ community and divorced and remarried people were mentioned often.

Some people from the LGBTQ+ community said that they were still practicing their faith despite the Church's position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Those who represented the LGBTQ+ community in advocacy organisations cited examples of people being excluded from participation in family funerals and baptisms due to their sexuality.

Some of the suggestions for going forward were that the Universal Church revisit the teaching and language on sexual orientation and gender and that the Local Church would provide pastoral support.



A core team was formed to connect with those on the margins.

Divorced and Remarried

When it came to those who are divorced and remarried, we heard from some people in that situation that, while Church's rules and regulations might have an internal logic, they are experienced as draconian. Divorced people described the ambiguity that exists in relation to their role in the Church with some priests denying an active role in parish life. Some divorced and not remarried people expressed their belief that they cannot receive Holy Communion. It was reported that many priests avoid the strict implementation of the regulations regarding access

to Holy Communion. This is experienced as helpful but it is 'turning a blind eye to the reality'.

Others who identified as feeling like they do not belong were single parents.

The teaching of the Church on sexuality and relationships informed people's decision making in relation to Mass attendance and reception of the Eucharist, with many deciding not to go to Mass or receive the Eucharist. This was brought up specifically in relation to contraception. Many seek a reconsideration of the Church's teaching on contraception that is more compassionate to women's health, well-being and raising their

families in light of financial circumstances.

Class Issues

Belonging to the Church was not linked to sexual ethics and relationships only. We heard from many people that they felt that they were excluded from participating in their Church Community due to their perceived class. We heard numerous times that the Church caters more for middle-class people than working-class people, and in particular, any decision-making still lay in the hands of the middle classes in many communities.

We heard from the deaf community, adults with disabilities and parents of chil-

dren with disabilities and here the issue of belonging came up again. People with learning disabilities and their families want to be included in the activities of the Church and to have opportunities to take on meaningful roles within the Church.

Liturgy and Welcome

The liturgies of the Church were places where people felt connected to the Church community. People spoke of the central role of the Sunday Mass and the pandemic brought into acute focus how important this was in their lives. People sought that the

Sunday Mass would be an opportunity for joy-filled liturgy, with compelling preaching and an opportunity to express our reverence and gratitude for Christ truly present in the Eucharist.

Participation

The diversity of vocations in the Church was acknowledged, with people expressing their gratitude for vocations lived well. The Permanent Diaconate was welcomed. Many people expressed their joy in using their gifts by serving within the Church, participating as lectors, eucharistic ministers, in music ministry, running adult faith development programmes and helping in children's and youth groups.

People expressed a desire for priests to be cared for and to keep central their role as pastors of the community of faith. They called for priests to let go of some of the roles they currently carry out and to allow others to exercise

“The people who contributed to the synodal process expressed a desire for the Church to be more welcoming of people in general”

Down and Connor



their skills in pastoral work, administration, finance and management of properties.

“The diversity of vocations in the Church was acknowledged, with people expressing their gratitude for vocations lived well”

In all of the synodal gatherings, the role of women in the Church was spoken of. It was recognised that women represent half of humanity and contribute so much to the life of the local church through the volunteering of their time and yet in the places of decision making in the church there are few female voices. Some sought that the Universal Church should review the decision on the ordination of women to the vocation of Priesthood and Permanent Diaconate.

However, many felt that the local church could do more in relation to the role of women in leadership and needed to do so urgently in order to have any credibility, especially with younger generations.

The language of the Church was also discussed as being a barrier, with many finding the masculine language off-putting and excluding women.

Lay Ministry

People said that a more decided appreciation of, and investment in, the development of lay ministry is essential to the life of the Church going forward.

There was a desire for enhanced co-responsibility in our local parishes where priests and people together would make decisions. Some people felt that they were completely removed from decision making in the life of the parish citing that if Father didn't like an idea it simply wouldn't happen.

Abuse

Abuse by priests and Religious in the Church has caused huge levels of hurt and scandal in an institution in which people had placed their trust.

Accountability

People expressed the need for transparency and accountability as being central to having a truly synodal church. In particular, they highlighted the need for transparency over financial matters by publishing both Parish and Diocesan accounts widely and explaining the purpose and impact of the various collections throughout the year.

Dialogue

People expressed their desire for greater dialogue to take place within the Church, especially with Church Leadership. People recognised that while the Bishop would visit Parishes, this was connected to the Sunday Mass and Confirmations, we need to create the opportunity for a more authentic dialogue on the pastoral needs of the Parish Community with the Bishop.

Mission

Among the various synodal contributions, it was on the theme of mission that we experienced the greatest level of consensus. There is a desire to belong to a Church that deepens our love of Christ, feeds our deep desire to know more about our faith, and readies us for mission in a more secular world.

Many people spoke of their love of the Church and the Church being truly present for them on their life's journey.

Need for Faith Development

We heard that people feel ill-equipped to undertake the task of evangelisation. For some living in Northern Ireland has meant that there has been a long-standing tradition of saying nothing about your faith. In more recent times, as peace has grown, so too has secularism, a new stumbling block to speaking openly about faith.

In order to grow in confidence and to be able to share their love of God people called for the Diocese to invest more heavily in adult faith development.

Catholic Schools

The value of Catholic Schools, their ethos and their contri-

bution to the education of our young people was spoken of as a great asset to society. Teachers spoke of how their work within Catholic Schools was an opportunity for them to live out their mission. However, many people queried the sacramental preparation taking place within schools led by teaching staff who were not fully committed to their faith and the teachings of the Church.

Poverty

The starkness of poverty within our Diocese was highlighted in listening to people in poverty and those who work to support them. Some told us that God often appears distant in their lives as they struggle to provide for their families. We also heard a call for greater appreciation given to the work of so many voluntary organisations run by lay people.

The opportunity to learn from, and grow in relationship with, our sisters and brothers in other Christian traditions formed part of what we heard in our synodal listening.

Next Steps

In reflecting on Communion, Participation and Mission there are five areas of priority for the Diocese to discern further and to make concrete proposals for adoption in the life of the Diocese.

The five areas identified are;

Encountering God's Love

We will equip each person to deepen their spiritual lives, through vibrant liturgy, faith development programmes, and gathering for fellowship, prayer and worship.

Special care is required to ensure that programmes are created and taken up by families with young children, people with disabilities, socio-economic difficulties and different ethnicities.

God calls us to serve together

We commit to building a Diocese where all know that they have a vital part to play in the life of the Church. We will work together to create structures and pathways that enable the building of vibrant and sustainable communities of faith where the vocations of all are recognised, supported and valued.

Decision making should be borne out of authentic discernment and we will grow as a synodal church exercising co-responsible leadership across the Diocese.

Action is required to ensure that the voice of women is integral in our decision making.

“A more decided appreciation of, and investment in, the development of lay ministry is essential to the life of the Church going forward”

Being a Church where everyone can find belonging

As a diocese, we must commit to ensuring that our parishes extend Christ's loving embrace to everyone no matter where they find themselves on life's journey..

Being an authentic witness in the world

We will put our faith into action, working in partnership with other churches and faiths, in order to create a just, equitable and sustainable world for all.

Our Church as a loving family

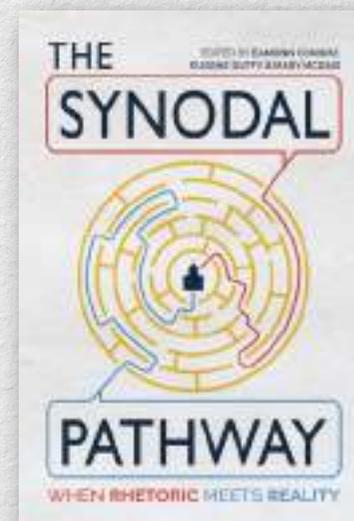
We commit to journeying with people through all stages of their lives - times of joy and of difficulty- helping them to encounter Christ and to discern God's plan for their lives.

Conclusion

This synodal journey has been one of learning, encounter and authentic dialogue. While the levels of participation in this diocesan phase of the Universal Synod, *For a synodal Church*, were good, there is a need to widen our engagement and harness the life-giving power that Synodality can bring to our Church experience.

AVAILABLE TO ORDER NOW

HOW DOES THE SYNODAL PROCESS WORK?
WHERE DOES THE IRISH CHURCH GO FROM HERE?



PRICE: €16.99 + €4.50P&P

All your questions about synods and synodality answered in this practical companion. With discussion questions at the end of each chapter, it's the perfect tool for guiding groups and individuals.

ORDER TODAY 01 6874025

What you said - Dublin

The diocesan Synodal Steering Committee proposed four questions focused on joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, to help local parish gatherings to share experiences.

As participants listened to each other, indications of 'what the Spirit is saying to the churches' emerged. (See pages 16-17)

A total of one hundred and seventy-three parishes hosted gatherings.

Hopes

Synodality a cause of hope

Firstly, for the majority of those who took part in the gatherings this synodal process was a cause of hope. Coupled with this was a high expectation of a humbler, listening clergy, that is, bishops and pastors who engage with people, in real life situations, as all walk and discern together. This can be practically actioned locally, by carefully discerning together what we can do and need to do. This implies that a synodal church cannot go back to silencing divergent voices. Feedback from parishes indicated that this only alienates more and more people.

“In particular, there is a consciousness that change may face resistance to renewal from within the Church and from clericalism”

Pope Francis Inspires

Secondly, a large majority find Pope Francis positive, inspirational and encouraging, in particular his simple lifestyle and his call to care for creation. The desire for an outward-looking church is strong, a church that connects with young people in a more intentional way. For the young, action for social justice is both central to Church teaching and also a means of making the Gospel message more relevant for our time.

Cultural diversity

Thirdly, people coming to Dublin from different cultures are also a positive influence in our parishes: with a vibrant living faith and high levels of participation, they



Majority find Pope Francis inspirational.

are a great example to their Irish friends of how things can be.

Digital Communications

Fourthly, the opportunity to connect to the celebration of the liturgy on-line has been very supportive during the pandemic. Other on-line ways of engaging should now be developed further, making better use of the arts to communicate the Gospel, expressing our symbols and sacraments, using digital communications, music and social media.

Concerns

No Change or Slow Change

Firstly, parishes stated that the synodal consultation was very welcome and there was a strong voice for

urgent change. At the same time, anxiety was expressed that nothing might happen as a result or it might happen too slowly. In particular, there is a consciousness that change may face resistance to renewal from within the Church and from clericalism. The biggest fear is that there will not be a shift in the balance between the pastoral application of Church teaching and community needs. This is aligned with the fear that once the synodal process has finished, there will be a continuation in the decline that sees a drop in numbers of priests, young people in the church, and no change in the role of women in the Church or the option for priests to marry and enjoy family life. There is a hope that women will

have a meaningful role in the life and governance of the Church. Feedback also highlights that a palpable tension exists between the desire to be relevant and meaningful and the fear that traditions and teachings will be lost.

Liturgy language a barrier

Secondly, for many the language in the liturgy is a barrier. The language needs to speak clearly to people, relate to laity and connect with people at Mass. A need for more simplified language is well articulated with the fear that the encounter of the Eucharist risks being lost in too many words, many obscure.

This is aligned to concern about the quality of homilies and their relevance for

today. It is more positively expressed in an articulated desire for good quality faith development and the necessity of re-evangelising across the generations.

Sorrow for absence of youth

Thirdly, an older generation experiences sorrow, guilt and helplessness about their children not participating in the sacramental life of the Church and grandchildren not being presented for baptism. Reaching those who have some affinity with the Church, especially young adults and children is a key concern. One parish stated,

'It may well be that the young people "out there" know nothing about the church experience except the scandals.' A key concern for

young adults is the lack of relational warmth in many Church settings, as they stated:

'The church is a cold place for young people.'

Priests Overburdened

A fourth concern arises about the workload of the priests and the age profile of both priests and people. Many priests are over-stretched and the current model of parish is no longer sustainable. There is an urgent need to develop new ministries.

Trends

The four major trends are:

- the importance of community belonging
- the role of women
- the place of young people
- the inspirational leadership of Pope Francis.

Every parish highlighted the sense of belonging and support as vital, linking this with the celebration of the Eucharist. It would be hard

“As participants listened to each other, indications of 'what the Spirit is saying to the churches' emerged”



Young Catholics at World Youth Day 2019.

to overestimate how enormous this trend is in parish reports, even if among the older generation. For this generation, the sacramental life also retains its significance as an experience that provides life, joy and energy.

All reports highlight and value the role of women. In particular, this includes leadership and ministry, as well as governance.

Every parish mentioned sustainability in relation to the felt absence of the young. It is hard for young people to identify with and affiliate to the church. This is articulated in the following statement:

Across all the parishes and deaneries, Pope Francis is inspiring many and energizing them for change.

Finally, the impact of the abuse scandals is ever present. The abuse scandals caused lasting harm (as well as sadness) and a deep longing for healing is also articulated by many parishes.

Communion Disintegrating

Although the belonging afforded by Church membership and participation are crucial for many people, there is serious worry that it is disintegrating. Correspondingly, this raises the need to promote actively the value of community.

This great value placed upon community can be discerned as the Spirit inviting the Church to reflect on how Christ reached out to the people of his time in their diversity. There is a clear indication to seek a true and

honest inclusiveness within the Church, that welcomes and accepts all those who want to be there.

“All reports highlight and value the role of women. In particular, this includes leadership and ministry, as well as governance”

Parishes are keen to continue the synodal dynamic which can promote community by means of gatherings, both formal and informal.

Scandals

Parishes observed that the scandals, abuses and inappropriate behaviour by some of those in ordained ministry and Church authority have contributed to current difficulties. The Church must continue to implement rigorous safeguarding policies. Coupled with this, parishes generally expressed regret that this has enabled some to opt out of Church, and some media use this to undermine the Catholic way and culture. There has been significant reputational damage, resulting in the loss of moral authority. However, there are other forms of abusive behaviour also named: clericalism, materialism, the remoteness of some clergy and hurtful experiences of exclusion. The communion of the Church has been significantly fractured as a result of these scandals, where many people have left

“Every parish mentioned sustainability in relation to the felt absence of the young”

the Church and may never return.

Participation of Women and Married Priests

The effort to renew the Church must be marked by urgency and also openness to the new. This will include much more significant roles for laity, recognition of the role of women and expanding criteria for who can be ordained. The continued treatment of women as less than co-equal with men is a source of anger as well as of sadness, in the majority of the parishes. Across the vast majority of the parishes, there is great hope that women will have a meaningful role in governance and ministries, including becoming deacons and priests. Parishes also expressed great openness to married men becoming priests. In this way, the witness value of optional celibacy might be more evident.

Parishes articulate the need to facilitate and promote lay leadership at a local level immediately. There is, however, a concern that lay people who respond to the call to serve in the near future will not have the support or formation they need to bear lasting fruit.

Marginalised Groups

There is a call to recognise marginalised groups, through developing church teaching and finding ways of welcoming and becoming more inclusive. In a deanery report, this was expressed as follows:

‘many are demoralised by the Church’s approach to issues of sexuality, raising the need to include all who are seeking God.’

There is a strong plea that the Church should become genuinely inclusive not only in word but also in deed, by reaching out to unmarried couples, divorced, remarried, LGBTQI+. The Church needs to explore how people can be included and stop looking for reasons to turn people away. This also connects with a clearer outreach to those who are disadvantaged and a call for the Church to become the champion of the poor, the oppressed and the vulnerable.

Challenges to reach Youth

Critically, all reports cited a reduction of people in all age categories participating in parish life, a situation that has worsened in the pandemic. In particular, there has been widespread inability to engage the young and

to continue meaningful participation after reception of Communion for the first time and Confirmation.

On the positive side, parishes are more aware that the community of faith is called to reach out to young people—they are genuinely good, with a great deal to offer.

“Across all the parishes and deaneries, Pope Francis is inspiring many and energizing them for change”

A clear strategy is needed to support young people and young parents, with a particular focus on catechetical accompaniment in the parish.

Some young people still have a desire to engage with the Church—this is a sign that the Church can thrive, if it actively listens to the voices of the young and changes. Young Adult synodal participants stated:

‘The Church needs to adapt and bridge the gap between us and them—why does it stay silent on matters of who we can love—the body of Christ is not out of touch, the Church is.’

Mission

Parish reports articulate the need to become more missionary, to be less passive by going out to people and not always relying on them to come to Church.

Faith Development

Parish reports highlight the necessity to grow and mature in faith and to be formed both for living a life of faith and for evangelisation. Faith needs to be fostered and nourished. During the pandemic, various experiences of different activities and projects across parishes are evidence that local parishes are actively beginning to seek to strengthen their faith. It is critically important to form parents/guardians at the time of sacramental milestones of children. Such nourishment will include good homilies, training in prayer and adult catechesis. The lack of this faith development at parish level indicates that there is a crisis in the transmission of faith rather than a crisis of faith.

At the same time, parishes highlighted that Christians must learn to live in an increasingly secularised society. There will be pressure to abandon their faith. The Church must provide support for its members to live their faith in that context. Without such support local pastoral initiatives can flounder. Parishes also articulated a fear that the Church is gradually disengaging from society and going into a cocoon of its own.

Change has to happen – Majority Parishes

More than half of the parishes said change has to happen or the children of tomorrow will never experience Church. While change and renewal are often used interchangeably, some renewal movements can be identified. Parishes are now more conscious that change is required to transform the world for the better, in the spirit of *Laudato Si’*. There is also a sense of urgency that steps must be taken to address the many gaps that have opened up in Church life and are manifested in falling attendances, decline in vocations to priesthood, absence of young and middle-aged people, lack of formation and of leadership.

Fear of Deaf Ears Among Leadership

The Synodal Pathway offers hope but there is also a fear that the Church leadership will not listen and that nothing will change. Change can often be perceived as a dying but, in reality, it is a marvellous opportunity to respond to the Spirit.

Look, I am doing something new, now it emerges; can you not see it?

(Isaiah 43:19)

What you said - Waterford and Lismore

The Diocese of Waterford and Lismore comprises 144,027 Catholics and encompasses Waterford city and County Waterford along with parts of counties Tipperary and Cork. The incumbent bishop is The Most Reverend Alphonsus Cullinan, who has overseen since 2015.

Bishop Cullinan engaged with and received contributions from four diverse cultural communities within the diocese.

The recurring themes that emerged from the synodal gatherings in the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore were centred around the following:

Young people

The theme of young people came up strongly. People felt that a special Mass with children involved in the readings and the singing would help to keep them connected to their faith. It was also mentioned that the Mass should be 'modernised' for them. Another element of keeping young people involved was the whole idea of the JPPII awards that have been successful in the Diocese.

“They asked that the Church be more welcoming of the LGBTQ+ community”

Study groups with faith formation based on the Bible and Papal Encyclicals that contain rich spiritual nourishment must be on offer. Alpha for young people is also a good way for them to learn more about their faith. Pilgrimages with young people to shrines was another way of connecting them to Church and giving them an experience of faith in action e.g. Lourdes. The older generation were worried that if the children are not going to Church now, how it will survive in the future.

With regard to young people's perception of the Church, better communication was seen as a vital element of connection. They asked that the Church be more welcoming of the LGBTQ+ community. One young person said the Church was old fashioned and therefore, they did not feel welcome in Church. Another said that for older teens, the Church doesn't engage – once Confirmation is over, there is no other forum in which they can participate.

It was also felt that the age for Confirmation should be raised to late teens to allow them be more connected and sure of what they were receiving through the Sacrament.



Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, Phonsie Cullinan, with recipients of the John Paul II Award.

Some people expressed an openness to the idea that the Sacraments would be taught through a 'Sunday School' model in parishes with a Catechist, rather than going through the current school structure. Students said that the schools were doing the work of the Church particularly in relation to growing and upholding values like respect, dignity, fairness, justice issues etc. When asked why they didn't attend Mass, they referred back to the Church history of child sexual abuse, linking it to the power that the Church had.

The Church as a beacon of hope

Submissions requested the Church to become more involved in helping people who are trying to turn their life around – ex-criminals, addicts, alcoholics etc. Some felt lonely in Church and felt like they were on a 'losing team'. An enhanced engagement of Altar servers is encouraged, as we seem to have lost this ministry, with some parishes seeing it as a difficulty due to safeguarding paperwork etc. It was suggested that each Parish Pastoral Council would also have a 'teen' version of a Pastoral Council in which the youth would feed back their cares, concerns and ideas to the adult group.

Faith formation

Faith formation was a big discussion point throughout all the gatherings. It was generally felt that religion was vis-

ible, but there was not exactly an understanding of it. Small faith sharing groups would be beneficial in parishes – faith develops as you share. Catholic parents don't always have the tools to pass on the faith to their children. There was a definite hunger among the gatherings that avenues of faith formation should be further developed, with a particular focus at parish level.

Vision for the Church

This theme was discussed in great detail. Hope, prayer and the commandments need to be evident in the regular work and mission of the Church. Decision making to adopt a functioning consultative model is important. A vision of the Church in action right now is the community in which you live. People are there for each other when needed.

People should not be afraid or embarrassed by their faith – and people should SMILE! The future vision for the Church should be about the Love of God coming to the fore more, rather than rules and regulations. Again, gathering in small faith groups was seen as a way forward with faith connection.

Many felt that, as children, they frequented the Church by obligation, but now they feel they can be part of it if the connection is good. Each person's experience of Church can be different of course, depending on their personal reality; it can be a journey together for some, and for some it can be a very lonely experience.

Reversions to the Church do occur and they are profound. Some felt we are currently on a broken journey and perhaps we have lost our way. Many people do not fit into our narrow definition of Church. Churches will be closed, and then the people will desperately seek the Church. It was suggested that a 'Sunday of Welcome' and visitation teams be set up in parishes, and formally invite people to be part of their faith community.

Church as a voice for the voiceless

Unpaid volunteers are currently the 'workforce' for the parishes. Collaboration between priests and people is only now beginning in Ireland. Some parishes have become 'independent republics'. Many see synodality in the GAA, and other organisations but not necessarily in Church, unfortunately.

Our journey in the Church together

Journeying together in the Church was another big discussion point. The vast majority of those who gathered for the faith conversations were of the midlife to senior generations. Many of them were brought to the Church by their parents and never questioned it in any way. They were part of 'truly Catholic' families and schools. Several stated that while they still treasure their faith, their children do not now attend Mass. Some added that their children and grandchildren

are fine, loving and generous people, always ready to be of service to anyone in need, but are just not connected to the Church. One particular person shared the deep loneliness of going to Sunday Mass alone, and leaving after it, without ever a word or even a smile from anyone. Also, this person knows nothing about online courses or other initiatives of the local parishes in the Diocese.

Gender equality in the Church

Gender Equality as an issue in the Church was very visible throughout the conversations. Women were considered to be powerhouses of the organisation but undervalued in their role within the Church. Women need their voices to be heard and listened to with real and immediate effect. It was asked that women be allowed to be priests and deacons in the future. Inclusivity is very important for the Church organisation moving forward if it is to survive. True support and an apology should be offered to all women who have suffered in any way through the direct, or indirect actions and/or neglect of the Church. Renewal comes through healing.

The continuing shortage of priests

The age profile/vocations was another topic that was evident among the people gathered. It was evident in those who gathered for the conversations, but it was also

a topic of conversation as people spoke about the age profile of the clergy and the congregations that attended the various different parish liturgies.

“Deacons were mentioned as being an important vocation to the parishes in these changing times”

Who will replace those who are getting on in years? It is a big worry for the future of the Church. Priests should be allowed to marry if they wish, therefore offering a pathway to more who may desire to join the Priesthood. It was felt that each community should pray for and encourage vocations to the Priesthood. Deacons were mentioned as being an important vocation to the parishes in these changing times.

Discordant views

A view emerged among some people, that the Church has not learnt any lessons from the scandals of recent years and cover up was still thought to be an issue. It was stated that Satan has done damage to people, and to the Church itself, through the tragic reality of child abuse. The post covid fall off in Church attendance is now very visible. A formal financial report should be published appropriately at parish level.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

Prayer was mentioned as being the one thing that the Church can rely on to keep us focused and connected. Without God at the centre of everything we do, we have nothing. The hierarchical Church must now listen, and, more importantly, act on what has been said during these faith conversations. Each person's input was a valued and respected contribution. People were free to speak out boldly and honestly and that was so important. Their input must be seen as essential to conversations that will take place in the future. The willingness of those who gathered to share their joys, sorrows, worries, anxieties and general openness about their love of Church and faith was apparent. They were there because they cared. The themes in bold were the common themes that came through the conversations, with many having a distinct repetition at each conversation.

What you said - Ossory

What was notable during the synodal process was the honesty of the contributions. People who spoke did so out of a real concern for the church community and from a real desire to see us better follow the promptings of the Lord. It was notable too that faith matters greatly to people and as a result there was, many times, a healthy passion to the contributions. (Editor's note: What follows is an edited for space text but remains true to the original language used.)

Some of what people said gave them joy when they thought about their experience of Church:

Attending Mass

- Faith is personal, I get joy and nourishment by attending Mass and receiving the Eucharist.

- A well-prepared liturgy where the homily gives us something to take with us to help us live the Gospel during the week.

- Being involved as readers, eucharistic ministers.

- The opportunity to attend daily Mass.

- Latin Mass has a lot to offer

- The church building being open for anyone to call in to sit with God, the silence and the smell of the church building.

Music and choirs

- Singing and music and an enthusiastic and approachable celebrant make liturgy a joyful.

- Celebration music is an important element, gives the ceremony a lift, brings a different atmosphere choirs encourage children, brings more families to church, choir was missed during Covid.

Funeral liturgies

- Funeral liturgy is very meaningful, funeral liturgies where the priest has engaged with the family and the people come to be present to the bereaved in their time of sadness.

- Funerals in Ireland are very well done and there is a great sense of people coming together in a prayerful manner.

Community aspect of Church

- Gathering of the community in the church, the sense of community that the Church gives in happy times



The General Meeting of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference in session in the Columba Centre, St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

and sad times.

- The celebration of Mass, be it Sunday liturgy, funerals or weddings is the only time the faith community in our parish gathers to be Church.

- Friends that are made through attendance at church

- The great goodness shown in parishes, especially in time of tragedy.

Sacraments

- Sacraments bring joy, even a funeral can bring joy if it's a celebration of life.

- Family Mass groups allow young people to be involved; children's presence brings joy.

Lay involvement

- Pastoral Areas, working with neighbouring parishes more inclusive.

- Active parish pastoral council, establish parish pastoral councils and bring them further.

- Ministries for lay people, develop them.

- Seeing lay people being acknowledged for the work they do behind the scenes in church.

- Various church agencies helping the poor and homeless, parishes helping Ukrainian refugees - gives hope that the human family looks after each other.

Priests

- Having a good priest that people trust and support, the local parish priest.

- Role and presence of the priest at times of bereavement, priests with good short, sermons.

- Dedication of the priest to vocation, priest empowers people and promotes Church.

Young people

The wonderful Youth 2000 movement

- Young people involved in ministries and helping in church gives joy.

- Feeling that children are

safe due to good safeguarding procedures.

Guidelines to live by

- The guidelines to live by given to us by the Church's core values.

- Tradition is something to be proud of.

Pope Francis

- Pope Francis is a great leader. Has brought joy to the Church. Interested in environmental issues. Open to change. Reaches out to everyone. A brave man.

Some of what people said disappoints them when they think about their experience of Church:

Mass and sacraments

- Small number attending church, a lot of children at church but no teenagers.

- Live-streamed Masses reducing physical attendance.

- Inability to receive under both species, no opportunities to renew faith - missions, novenas etc., lack of altar servers.

- Lack of reverence, respect, solemnity and silence in the church.

Involvement of lay people in Church

- No involvement of laity in the running of the parish, no shared responsibility with priest. In decision-making affecting parish life.

- No mechanism in place to ensure that policies adopted at diocesan level are implemented by the parish.

Priests

- Lack of appreciation for priests.

- Declining vocations and number of priests, no appetite

for the help of foreign priests.

We have spent years praying for "vocations" without realising that everyone present has a vocation - this has always frustrated me.

- Sermons not relevant to today's ethical challenges.

- Clericalism, attitude of some clergy.

- Silenced priests.

Young people

- The Church has very little relevance for young people, youth is indifferent to Church, lack of young people in church saddens.

- Young people only attend church for baptisms, weddings and special occasions.

- Lack of youth ministry.

- Young people not exposed to catechism.

Church teaching

- A failure to tackle the need for change, failure at all levels to deal with today's challenges.

- The Church should defend the position of our faith on issues such as abortion, gay marriage and euthanasia.

- Church should not be afraid to criticise politicians.

- Church should talk about sin and hell, about the sacrament of Confession.

Mandatory celibacy for priests

- Is it right to expect the priesthood to be confined to men and that they not be allowed to marry?

- Disappointing that priests cannot marry, priests should be allowed to marry.

- Married men as priests, allow priests to marry.

- Let go of celibacy - why can't we have married priests?

Role of women

- Total frustration at the explicit gender discrimination - women and men are

equal and should be treated as such.

- Patriarchy - male focussed Church.

- Hurt done to women and babies and lack of responsibility for same.

- A bigger effort needed to promote the ordination of women and include women in roles of responsibility and equal standing.

Clerical abuse

- Church was too slow to apologise for clerical abuse of children.

- Child sexual abuse, and how the Church managed it, has caused massive damage; their response hasn't helped those who are angry, lack of honesty on behalf of the Church for abuse victims.

- Sex abuse - image of Church more important than children; bishops ignored it and people lost trust in Church.

Gender issues

- Gay people - gender issues, people may not feel welcome if in minority groups.

- As a mother of a gay child I feel he is excluded now from our Church.

Communication

- The invitation to be part of this Synod was not properly prepared for or publicised, no awareness of this Synod.

- Negativity towards Church in the media.

- Poor communication at parish level, at diocesan and national level.

- Church is not reaching out to many in the community, those who get left behind - it's hard to get back into church - divorced people feel excluded.

Schools

- Level of religion in some secondary schools disappointing, second level schools - no spiritual formation.

- Primary school reli-

gious curriculum leaves a lot to be desired.

- Suggestion to take religion out of schools is a major disappointment.

How could the parish be better?

- Involve children more in the mass. Have a child friendly mass, special readings.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

It is notable that we spoke to people from many/nearly all sectors of the Diocese including, but certainly not limited to, the urban and rural. The synodal group does, however, lament that some voices could be better heard or represented, again included here but not limited to, young families/parents were noticeably light in engaging with the process, as were those in our second level schools, the travelling community, the LGBTQI communities, those who struggle with belief and other groups. We note, then with sadness, that some voices are still largely missing from this synthesis - not from want of our trying to reach out but simply we recognise, at this point in our synodal journey, that more needs to be done to encourage people to take part in future phases of our synodal journey.

It is notable that our Church community contains, in a very real way, those who are at opposite poles - those who feel we are not Catholic enough, in the sense of holding to traditional teachings, live alongside those who feel we would be more Catholic in embracing more modern approaches.

A continued implementation of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan will help begin to realise some of what is desired in these pages.

What you said - Ferns

The Diocese of Ferns is represented by 100,679 Catholics and is overseen by Bishop Ger Nash – the incumbent since last year. The Diocese covers most Wexford and parts of County Wicklow.

The Diocese of Ferns along with other members of our Synodal planning group and the Diocesan Pastoral Council facilitated meetings with a number of people from different groups that included: school students; religious sisters and brothers; Traveller women; the Irish Country Women's Association; the Gaelic Athletic Association; the Irish Farmers' Association, Ethical Farmers' Association, Ferns Diocesan Youth Service, Pilgrimage groups; People with disability; Healthcare workers; Lesbian Gay Bisexual & Transgender persons; homeschoolers, Catholic young adults, Age Action volunteers; Men's organisations; Prayer associations; the Catholic Family Network; Diocesan Adoration Committee, Youth groups; and members of the Polish community. In total, small group meetings were attended by approximately 460 people.

“There was a sense that the laity must relearn to walk together as people of faith amidst a secularising and seemingly post-Christian climate”

Further consultations occurred with the assistance of a trained facilitator through a series of four Deanery meetings. Over 540 people attended Deanery meetings representing every parish in the Diocese.

While Deanery meetings were open invitation, it should be noted that Survivors and Victims of clerical abuse in the Diocese have not been formally met with as a distinct group within the opening phase of the Synodal process at this time.

The main topics of conversation that arose during the Diocese's synodal gatherings were:

The laity as people of God

There was a sense that the laity must relearn to walk together as people of faith amidst a secularising and seemingly post-Christian climate. This sentiment also applied to recent experiences of Covid restrictions. People discussed the difficulties of



Respondents in the Diocese of Ferns expressed that it had become increasingly difficult to be Catholic in such a secular country.

adapting to a volatile world of increasing uncertainty in terms of disease, family breakdown, climate change, increasing poverty, food shortages, migration, loss of biodiversity, conflict, the misuse of technology, the availability of illegal drugs, mental health concerns, a growing lack of respect for life, a politics of division, diminishing moral values, the alienation of people from the Church, an indifferent and sometimes biased media and the decline of religious practice in society.

A welcoming Church

People also spoke passionately about the potential of community, inclusion, togetherness, connection and belonging within the Church as an antidote to the challenges faced by wider society. There was a broad sense that the Church needs to be a more welcoming space, particularly for young people, for families of all make-ups, and for all people who have experienced exclusion. At the same time, people expressed the view that the great turnout for the Synodal meetings were a sign of hope and positivity for the future of the Church, while a few expressed suspicions or doubts about the Synod or felt that it was 'too little, too late'.

More support for young Catholics

Young people experienced and expressed their Christian identity and values in a variety of ways, including sports, hobbies, education, clubs, music, nature, charity, social justice,

fellowship and advocacy. Certain aspects of this 'faith in action' were also evident across the generations. Furthermore, it was felt that social media profiles did not do justice to the deeper lives of young people and that their positive contributions to society and community aspirations were ignored by the institutional Church. Some young people also stated that they would be 'slagged off' for attending Mass. The need for a wider range of forms of worship was also highlighted. There was also a sense that people worried about the faith being lost in wider society but equally there was a sense that the faith is not lost but it appears in different ways now. Social media was touted as something that could bridge the communication divide between the Church and youth culture as there was inevitable challenges for priests in 'big towns'.

Praise for priests and fellow religious

There was a deep appreciation for the work of religious, clergy and laity who have helped keep the flame of faith alive particularly amidst the challenging climate of recent decades. People expressed solidarity with all those whose reputations and character were unjustly tarnished by abuse scandals within the Church. There was also a strong sense that ill-informed or harsh judgement is disabling for individuals and for communities. This was particularly evident in stories concerning the abuse of authority by clergy or religious.

Love for the Sacraments

A great many people showed great affection and love for the Sacraments. There were also reports of a deep sense of loss experienced during the absence of the Sacraments during Covid restrictions. Living the life of faith was also evident in the value given to processions, choirs, Celebratory events, prayer meetings, retreats, voluntary work, home visits, pilgrimages and intergenerational participation in parish gatherings. Faith was also nourished locally through Sacramental preparation and faith formation programmes.

“Concerns were raised over the autocratic and administrative nature of the Church along with the damaging effects of clericalism”

Being Catholic in an increasingly secular country

In terms of healthcare and education, people expressed concern over its increasing secularisation and the decline of some Christian values and symbols. People expressed mixed opinions about the role of religion and sacramental preparation in schools with some wishing for closer ties between Parish and school while others wanted to see

sacramental preparation and faith development moved from schools to families and Parish. It was clear that the role of the family in faith formation requires further exploration. There was also an understanding that the Church should not hold on to a historical authority that does not really exist in the present day in relation to schools and hospitals. There was a certain sense that the Church's mission was hindered unnecessarily in today's world by being seen to cling to an historical authority. There was a yearning for contemplative and/or discussion-mediated approaches to Catholicism that can help people navigate the complexities of life. People also spoke movingly about the sense of 'peace' attained in Church and an awareness of God's presence through Adoration and other devotional forms of prayer.

Engaging homilies

There was also the view that services (and at times sermons) could be too long and irrelevant for some, utilise challenging or archaic language and be unrelated to lived experience. Equally, there was the view that people could be overly judgemental in their attitudes towards priests, religious, fellow parishioners, Church leadership and/or secular society more generally.

Combatting clericalism

Concerns were raised over the autocratic and administrative nature of the Church along with the damaging

effects of clericalism. Equally, concerns were raised about the perceived passivity of the Parish community or wider Church in today's world. It was also suggested that we are all missionaries and need to get involved more in Parish life to support the mission of the faith community and inspire vocations. There were also suggestions that ordination could be open to women as deacons or priests. There was also the view that priests should have the option of marriage and that former clergy could have the option of returning to some form of ministry even if now married.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

An underlying feature of life today that emerged through the synodal conversations in the Diocese of Ferns is complexity. It is clear from the various submissions that this complexity brings great risks of societal and generational fragmentation. Yet, there is a unifying role to be played by faith communities alert to the tensions of complexity and lovingly open to co-operation with each other and the wider world. Within the Diocesan community, there is commitment shown to utilising existing talents and developing further skills in the Synodal processes of companionship, listening, speaking out, celebrating, dialogue, discerning, participating and ministering. There was a clear desire expressed to help the local Church to grow in communion, participation and mission regardless of differences in personal history, life experience, opinions, concerns or hopes. There was also a strong sense of listening to each other with interest, respect and compassion.

The Diocese noted that for in order for the Church to resonate with everyone at a universal level, it must first: dialogue at a parish and neighbourhood level; enhance various approaches to faith formation & development opportunities for clergy and for lay women and men; improve communication processes; improve specific use of technology for evangelisation and faith formation; further develop alternative forms of active, devotional and/or contemplative prayer services within Deaneries and Parishes; and widely develop of a suite of approaches to co-operative ministry and decision-making within Parishes, Clusters, Deaneries and the Diocese.

What you said - Killaloe

The Diocese of Killaloe covers parts of counties Clare, Laois, Limerick, Offaly and Tipperary. It accommodates 119,313 Catholics and has been overseen by Bishop Fintan Monahan since 2016.

Over 500 pages of data were submitted from pastoral area and parish groups and from individual respondents. The emergent themes were focussed around:

Broken trust in the Church

The impact of revelations of abuse by people in positions of trust and leadership in the Church and in Church institutions and the failure of Church leadership to address these issues adequately is an ever-present reality in the Irish Church. The feedback from the synodal process in the Killaloe Diocese suggests that there is greatly diminished confidence in the Church as an institution and that the legacy of abuse is one of broken trust. Deep hurt and anger are reflected in some submissions and calls for change that needs to go deeper than repeated apologies.

Addressing the exclusion of women

It is the view of those who responded that women are excluded from leadership and decision-making bodies in the church. These submissions call for greater empowerment of women at all levels of church life and openness for them to participate in all ministries.

There's a strong view that the inclusion and empowerment of women in the church cannot be sidestepped any longer. The majority of those who responded, of all ages and gender, call for and would welcome the ordination of women. The submissions also acknowledged the vital contribution that women make at Parish and Diocesan levels.

They are seen as the backbone of the local church and the glue that keeps the church community together. They are seen also as a vital link between the church and community organisations.

Groups who are marginalised

Voices that were heard both in group and individual submissions were those of the LGBTQ+ community, divorced, those in second unions and separated couples. The hurt experienced by this community was felt throughout the gathering.

"I feel I am not very welcome because I'm gay. It is not something I chose; it is the way it is. I finally got to a stage where I



Connecting with young people was considered a chief priority for the Church in the Diocese of Killaloe

am accepting it... however, I am still struggling... for years I thought being dead would be easier. People should not have to feel like that in my heart God loves me".

The fear of being judged by the Church is palpable in the feedback. This voice was echoed throughout by a very significant number of submissions from others who call for change in Church teaching, Church language and for the Church to reach out to include all these groups who are marginalised. There was a call for the Church to be more accepting of people who, because of their circumstances, find themselves in 'grey areas'. A number of people pointed out that Jesus himself was marginalised and if we are to follow him, we must reach out to those who are on the margins. Moving outside our comfort zones to embrace those who are different was identified as a challenge for both priests and laity.

“There's a strong view that the inclusion and empowerment of women in the church cannot be sidestepped any longer”

One submission expressed a wish for a member of the travelling community to one day hold a leadership role in the church. More involvement of people from different countries in the life of the Church was welcomed by many and a call for more inclusion of refugees and migrants. A minority of submissions stated that the Church should not 'pander to the minority' and that core principles of the Church should not be changed.

Church language

Many people expressed a view that they find the language

used difficult to comprehend and that there is a need to use more contemporary language. It was commented in some submissions that the language used in some official church documents is harsh and shows a lack of understanding; this is experienced by many as being non-respectful and dismissive of them and is judgemental of their reality.

The challenge for the church is to remain true to its message while finding a language that is easily understood and inclusive. It was acknowledged in submissions that the inclusive pastoral outreach of the local Church, expressed as empathy, kindness, compassion and care for the individual, contrasts with the coldness of the official Church language and teaching. The language of the liturgy was named as an obstacle to meaningful participation.

Outreach to young people

The submissions from young people though small in number, allow us insight into their world. Their memories of First Communion/Confirmation are important to them as positive experiences of Church as well as significant family moments. However, few now participate in Church and with exceptions, most belong to families who no longer participate.

The young people view the Church as out of touch with their reality. They point to Church attitudes towards the LGBTI people and women as outdated. They see the Church as "judgemental", and fear being judged themselves by people of faith.

Submissions indicated that language of the liturgy/Mass was seen as dated and boring; they ask for other forms of prayer experiences. They are attracted by positive role models e.g. school chaplains/teachers/interested adults. Young people see social media as a medium for connecting with them, specifically mentioning platforms such as Instagram,

Tik-Tok and Facebook, as their medium of choice.

The desire to reach out to young people, and to involve them at all levels of Church was a very strong theme among other cohorts. Indeed, engaging with young people was emphasised as a priority by a majority of participants. Many expressed sadness about the absence of young people from parish liturgies. An evident tension point was that older generations hope that young people will return to Mass. The young people ask the Church to move towards them, and their world, developing with them other ways of praying in non-formal settings which speak to them.

Inclusion

Several suggestions submitted were Parish social gatherings such as meet and greet, parish tea party and a cup of tea after the weekly Mass. Also advocated were welcome letters to new families in the area, personal invitations to events and the establishment of formal welcome groups. Increased lay participation in all aspects of the Church community and beyond, from the Parish to the Diocese was advocated by many and the empowerment of lay people to become active participants within the church community.

Suggestions made include the creation of focus groups for young people, outreach ministry to other parish groups, facilitated discussion groups on faith and church matters, training courses, regular parish surveys, and awareness groups for those experiencing addiction. The need for personal invitations to participate was seen as essential if people are to be encouraged to get involved. Some participants see priests as disconnected from the realities of people's lives; these would like to see the clergy outside the church, meeting people where they are at.

The creation of some form of regular listening process was suggested where priests and lay people come together to talk

about faith and life. 'We can't think we have all the answers. A minority mentioned the need for a transparent and properly constituted Pastoral Councils as well as time limits on membership. Rotas for existing ministries would encourage others to see that Church is not closed to new participants.

Connecting and re-connecting with faith

Calls for people to connect and re-connect with faith was a theme in many submissions. For some, there was a desire to keep traditional liturgies and return to faith practices such as parish missions, adoration, house Masses and confession.

Faith renewal programmes were proposed and new ways of connecting with faith including contemporary ways of praying, mindfulness, parish retreats, faith sharing, bible study and intergenerational prayer groups. Others wished the Church to reach out, bringing the Mass church services to unfamiliar settings to broaden the understanding of the Church community.

“The desire to reach out to young people, and to involve them at all levels of Church was a very strong theme among other cohorts”

Re-creating and creating liturgies relating to life events and renewal of liturgies such as harvest liturgical celebration. Reconnecting with faith meant a return to the core teaching of Jesus Christ for some. Others conveyed the desire to hear faith stories from those living out Christian values every day.

Many submissions emphasised the involvement of lay people in the organising and facilitating faith groups, with particular mention of involving parents in sacramental preparation. Use of technology and social media platforms such as webcams and Facebook to connect and create opportunities for faith formation.

Catechetical and liturgy training (online) for lay people to facilitate such groups was seen as needed. The comments in these submissions, especially around the scriptures, would seem to indicate the value of developing opportunities for scripture education at a wide level and encouraging people to participate.

Obstacles to connecting with faith include the use of 'outdated' language, lack of joy in our liturgies, lack of personal

invitation to parishioners, and lack of religious education in post-primary schools.

Staying where we are vs venturing forward

A clear tension of views was identified in the material gathered during the listening process. This was presented as: those who see an urgent need for change, directly opposed by participants who wanted the Church to remain as it is today. In many submissions there was a call for optional celibacy and married priests.

From those who advocated change, many new types of ministries were called for with the specific issue of current celibacy and gender regulations being seen as barriers to developing a more diverse and vibrant ministry within the Church. A minority view noted a concern that it may already be too late to change and that we may have passed the point at which change would be effective. There is a tension between those who want to see a broader development of ministry and those who want to retain the existing model of priesthood.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

The feedback outlined in this document is reflective, honest and comes from a desire for an inclusive and welcoming Church. The majority of participants in the Synodal Process are people for whom faith in Christ and belonging to the Christian Community gives meaning and hope to their lives.

They are also acutely aware of those who no longer walk with us in the Christian community and of those who feel the pain of exclusion. Many of the issues concern systemic issues in the institutional Church about which there are strong calls for a change of attitudes, culture, structures and pastoral practices, issues which impact negatively on the Church at a local level and lead to withdrawal from Church participation.

Re-energizing our outreach to young people, taking initiatives to help people connect and reconnect with faith, opening up possibilities for more participation, and making our Church communities more welcoming to those who feel excluded or no longer participate are but some of the areas that require our response at a local level. It is encouraging that there is energy for engagement and involvement among the respondents. The Diocese believes that this needs to be harnessed.

A Synod or an Assembly?

Eugene Duffy

The practice of holding synods at a diocesan level has deep roots in the history of the Church. The first documented diocesan synod, in the sense of establishing legislation or issuing disciplinary decrees, was held in Auxerre in 585. Documents regarding the diocesan synods that were held in the sixth century indicate that for the most part they were concerned with the transmission of the decisions of provincial councils. By the time of the Gregorian Reform (mid-eleventh – early twelfth centuries), the synodal structure was one of the main ways that papal reform was implemented across Europe.

Reforms

The first time that diocesan synods are mandated is at Lateran IV (1215). In this context, it is quite clear that the reforms of the Council itself are to be transmitted to the whole Church through provincial synods and their decrees in turn promulgated through diocesan synods. The provincial councils are to 'recite the canonical rules, especially those which have been laid down by this general council, so as to secure their observance, inflicting on transgressors the punishment due'. Then each bishop is to hold a synod annually in his diocese: 'Whoever neglects to carry out this salutary statute is to be suspended from his benefices and from the execution of his office, until his superior decides to release him.' Following Lateran IV there was a flourishing of diocesan synods throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. A significant development occurred in 1374 when Pope Gregory XI proposed that synods discuss the problems and issues arising in the local

churches and not just confine themselves to promulgating the decrees of superior councils. Now diocesan synods could bring matters to the provincial council for their attention and not just act as the conduits for those above them. Trent reiterated the obligation to hold diocesan synods annually with a view to maintaining ecclesiastical discipline, settling disputes and implementing the reforms of the Council itself. Following Trent, reform-minded bishops were diligent in implementing the reforms of the Council by means of diocesan synods.

“When John XXIII announced the summoning of an ecumenical council in 1959, he simultaneously announced the summoning of a diocesan synod for the diocese of Rome”

In the latter part of the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century, there was a decline in diocesan synodal activity. This was due to the aloofness of the bishops, the ineffectiveness of the synodal processes and interference by the secular powers. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, attempts were made to make the diocesan synod more democratic in its decision-making processes. Tensions persisted about the respective rights of the bishop and his clergy in confirming the decrees of these synods. Thus, it can be seen that internal and external factors diminished the enthusiasm for diocesan synods until well into the nineteenth century. Vatican I intended to discuss their importance, particularly because annual diocesan synods were not being held regularly. The Council's preparatory documents indicate that the



proposal was to mandate diocesan synods to be held every three years. However, due to the premature conclusion to the Council the matter was not decided.

The 1917 Code of Canon Law (CC 356-362) legislated significantly for diocesan synods, mandating that they be held every ten years to deal with those things necessary and useful for the clergy of the diocese. While the synods

envisaged by the Code did not exclude the laity participating, they were essentially clerical affairs.

When John XXIII announced the summoning of an ecumenical council in 1959, he simultaneously announced the summoning of a diocesan synod for the diocese of Rome. Obviously, the Pope wanted to show that the renewal of the Church and the renewal of the diocese of Rome

were all of a piece. Yet, the contrast between the two could not be more stark. The Roman synod was a disappointment, since it was a clerical gathering and juridical in nature, following the lines of the prevailing ecclesiology and the existing Code. It was then completely superseded by the reforms of Vatican II.

Vatican II as a Basis for Diocesan Synods

The question of diocesan synods did not figure significantly in the work of Vatican II. It has been convincingly argued by Joseph Galea-Curmi that there is no reference to diocesan synods in Vatican II, despite the fact that the use of the word 'synods' in Christus Dominus no. 36 is

often interpreted as referring to diocesan synods. He shows that this term refers to synods in the context of the communion ecclesiarum, not to synodal activity in the particular Churches. The question may be asked then: if the Council did not speak explicitly about diocesan synods, on what basis may its work be seen to support their revitalisation?

The Council itself was a meeting of the global Church, with a representation of cultures and traditions not previously experienced on such a grand scale. The experience of the conciliar bishops in encountering such a richness of diversity in the Church liberated them to appreciate the importance of local customs and traditions. It facilitated the

“The Council affirms in very clear language the value of the insights of the faithful in the Church”

That is the Question



Superiors of women's religious orders meet for the plenary assembly of the International Union of the Superior Generals in Rome, May 2022.

recognition of the need to accommodate ecclesial structures and methodologies to this global diversity, as can be seen in the recommendation to implant the gospel with sensitivity to 'the particular social and cultural conditions' of those with whom it works. The Council affirms in very clear language the value of the insights of the faithful in the Church.

Post Vatican II Synodality in Ireland

Since the Council, synodality has found many expressions in the life of the local Church, apart from the formal convocation of a diocesan synod. Limerick is the only Irish diocese to have had a diocesan synod since Vatican II. However,

“The Council itself was a meeting of the global Church, with a representation of cultures and traditions not previously experienced on such a grand scale”

various convocations of clergy or of clergy and laity have taken place in most Irish dioceses with a view to exploring ways to renew the life of faith in the local Church. The first of those convocations occurred in the 1980s and were generally of clergy only. Yet, despite their almost exclusively clerical membership, they produced significant and useful pastoral plans for their respective dioceses.

Sample

A sample of the final documents from other dioceses show a similarly creative and energetic agenda being set for the renewal of ecclesial life.

The Berger Method, as it was called, was the process used in most of the diocesan assemblies that took place in the 1980s. It involved naming the issues that needed to be addressed, analysing them

and then creatively imagining a future better than the past or current situation.

Over the past decade or so, another round of diocesan assemblies has been taking place. These more recent assemblies have included all the members of the People of God in a diocese, not just the clergy. The formats that these have taken and the processes used have varied considerably. Many of them have been labelled as a 'listening

process' with a view to providing a basis for a diocesan pastoral plan. Although the social, economic and religious landscape in Ireland had changed greatly since the 1980s the issues being addressed were remarkably similar to those identified then.

Undertaken

The most high profile synodal process undertaken in Ireland in recent times has been the Limerick Diocesan Synod, the first to be held in Ireland for eighty years.

The Limerick Synod was a most comprehensive effort in terms of preparation, the integrity of the processes involved, the representative nature of the delegates, the range of issues that was presented for discussion and ultimately for voting. It is obvious, too, that it was a very costly undertaking, given the professionalism with which the whole process was conducted. One hundred proposals were eventually voted on, of which 97 were approved. These then formed the basis of the diocesan plan for the following ten years: 'Moving Forward Together in Hope'. Again, the themes are not dissimilar to those that have been emerging in other dioceses over the past forty years. The Limerick plan is detailed in terms of the way the stages for implementation are set out. The fact that the resolutions of the Synod have a canonically binding force gives the plan greater weight than the less formal assemblies and listening processes that have been held elsewhere in Ireland. The real test of the Synod's success is in the implementation.

“The Berger Method, as it was called, was the process used in most of the diocesan assemblies that took place in the 1980s”

The Limerick diocesan website provides a 'progress report' for the following year, but nothing since then. Obviously, the pandemic has impacted progress, but the questions may legitimately be posed: did the enormous effort expended and expenses incurred prove more fruitful than the less formal and less costly processes elsewhere? Did

the process itself generate a greater commitment on the part of the faithful in the diocese, including the clergy, to a genuine renewal of faith and practice? Have the obstacles that inhibited the efforts at renewal forty years ago been addressed and removed? Did the force of canonically binding resolutions eventually strengthen the Bishop's ability to affect the desired renewal? Is there a sufficiently robust evaluation process in place to identify progress being made and the identification of the blockages that occur? Is there a strategy in place to address the blockages once they have been identified? While some of these questions are specific to the Limerick synodal process, they are questions that will have to be faced by all of those who are engaging in any form of synodal process.

“The Limerick Synod was a most comprehensive effort in terms of preparation, the integrity of the processes involved”

The outcome of all of the post-conciliar assemblies and synod seem to be very similar. There is no shortage of ideas and idealism, but there seems to be a dearth of commitment to following through on the proposals. It is a real cause for concern that the same issues have been presented for about forty years, and little of any great significance has been done to move the agendas forward and to deliver concrete pastoral actions that would respond to the needs which were identified. This surely raises questions about the accountability of leadership in dioceses. Another very serious shortcoming is that is also a great lack of evaluation of all of these undertakings. Perhaps the time has come to explore what it is that is blocking our lack of delivery when it comes to ecclesial renewal in Ireland.

Eugene Duffy is a priest of the diocese of Achonry where he serves as Episcopal Vicar for Pastoral Renewal.

Until his recent retirement, Dr Duffy was a full-time member of staff of the Department of Theology & Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College.

This is an edited version of the full article which is published in The Synodal Pathway: Where Rhetoric meets Reality, published by Columba Books and reproduced here with kind permission.

What you said - Kildare and Leighlin

The Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin encompasses County Carlow and parts of counties Kildare, Laois, Offaly, Kilkenny, Wicklow and Wexford.

The Diocese is home to 262,250 Catholics. Of the 56 parishes of the diocese, 34 participated in locally hosted parish gatherings. Some parishes held single parish gatherings. Some clustered together. Others, including beyond the 34 parishes, signposted their people to the online platform for submissions or left out surveys for people to take home. The online survey generated 171 individual and group responses. Significantly, 37% of online respondents were in the 18-29 age group.

A series of focus groups were identified and approached to be part of our synodal listening. The groups identified were the Travelling Community, members of the LGBTQ+ Community, the Prison Community, those in Religious life, Primary (including parents), Secondary and College students, the African Community and the Polish Community.

While participation in the synodal experience was wide and varied, there were a number of groups of people we experienced as missing and yet to be accompanied in a synodal way. We recognise that, although many clergy did gather with their people in parish listenings, there was no bespoke gathering of clergy. This might have been a rich experience and contributed to the discernment of where the Spirit is leading us. Parents of young children were also invited to participate but have not engaged well as of yet. An effort to do so was made by sending home information and some questions with primary school children, but there was very little response to this initiative. Overall, we can estimate that over 3,000 people actively engaged with the synod questions. In the context of the total diocesan population, from a sampling perspective, this constitutes a more than adequate response to have confidence in the findings. The number does not include those who were aware of the process but, for whatever reason, did not or could not actively take part.

The main themes that arose during the Diocese's synodal gatherings centred around the following:

Sharing the joy and the pain, the highs and the lows of journeying together



Respondents in the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin expressed strong desire to connect with African Catholics living in Ireland

There was a genuine attempt across the diocese to engage in the synodal experience and those who responded did so seriously and with integrity. Many people reported, with great energy, that it was good to be asked their opinion. Indeed, for many this was the first time they experienced the Church asking their opinion on issues that they hold dear. This of itself is of significance. There was a richness of experience for those who took part. It was surprising to many that people who hold very different views on the Church were able to speak and listen to each other, with all opinions being expressed. The experience was therefore one of encouragement to keep going and to repeat this way of being together. It felt like a new model of Church emerging; one that requires us to learn the habit of walking together.

Hope, hurt and cynicism

The experience released hurt as well as hope. People expressed their pain, hurt and disappointment with the institutional Church, and at the same time they were hopeful because of the hard work and support of their local parish priests and parish teams. In this way, the experience was difficult but full of promise. It must be noted that there was a degree of cynicism evident among some, including both clergy and lay people.

This was around trusting and believing that this process will lead to the real change that we are being called to as Church by the Holy Spirit. Yet, there was a joy expressed at coming together. Each gathering was the Church in action.

The sustained distress of abuse

A number of issues were spoken of at practically every gathering and in every focus group and were echoed in the online submissions. Those issues were: The hurt and distress caused by the abuse scandals and their legacy. People spoke of their dismay and enduring pain at what happened but also at the way the issue was handled or covered up which constituted a second layer of pain.

The capacity of people to trust the institutional Church is still seriously damaged and prevents many people from being able to identify themselves with the institutional Church and sometimes with the local Church.

A shared leadership of the Church

There was a strong call to include lay women and men in governance and leadership in the Church, both locally and universally. This necessitates the creation of supporting synodal structures, for example parish pastoral councils. There was a named desire for more meetings such as these listening exercises in order to support a greater walking together locally. Alongside this was a call for training for lay involvement in all aspects of parish life.

The role of women and LGBTQ

There was a very strong recognition of the role currently played by women in local church communities. The observation was often made that the voluntary roles in parish life are in the main carried out and led by women. It was

also observed that women have 'a special place in the Church but not an equal place'. These comments came through all age groups. It was particularly noticeable among young people who see the treatment of women in the Church as an anomaly in the context of their lived experience. In the context of ordained leadership, the call for women to be ordained as deacons as well as an end to compulsory celibacy for priests and allowing priests to marry was made by a significant number of submissions. In addition, many references were made to the loss to the Church of priests who have left ministry in order to marry.

Drawing on the example of the welcoming and loving ministry of Christ, there was a very loud and intergenerational call to more compassion and inclusion for people of the LGBTQ+ community. Some members of this community themselves spoke of feeling the need to 'leave their own identity at the door of the Church'.

A mother of a transgender child said, 'I am always wondering when someone will take issue with it [being transgender] so it can be quite stressful at times.' Others observed that while doctrinal approaches would deny them the Eucharist, it was their anecdotal experience that such approaches do not enjoy widespread adherence within the local Church.

However, in regard to gay partnerships, there is deep hurt that these loving relationships cannot be recognised by the Church. As stated by one gay Catholic man, 'the Holy Spirit moves through my conscious in abject despair that the Church continues to deny those who share the love of God between them the oppor-

tunity to invoke the blessing and affirmation of God of their love.'

Rethinking ordained ministry

In the context of ordained leadership, the call for women to be ordained as Deacons as well as an end to compulsory celibacy for priests and allowing priests to marry was made by a significant number of submissions. In addition, many references were made to the loss to the Church of priests who have left ministry in order to marry.

The voice of the Traveller Community, the Polish and African Community

There was a strong desire among this community for priests and parishioners to pro-actively learn about Traveller culture. They spoke of their experience of anticipating the judgement of others as they prepared for important religious events in their lives such as First Communion, Weddings, and Funerals. They expressed the hope that the community would celebrate their culture with them and that they would feel more comfortable and included in the Church.

The submissions from the Polish Community and the African Catholic Family group highlighted the importance for them of sharing, growing, and living their faith within a community. While they feel welcome in their local parishes, there is a need to recognise their desire to be able to have opportunities to celebrate, share and form their faith as individual ethnic groups.

Young people in the Church

The absence of young people and the loss of their particular gifts and life experience to the Church was stated repeatedly across all responses. One of our intentional focus groups was senior cycle students. Over 500 students engaged with the synod questions. Coming through their responses was a great sense of compassion and a desire to be part of a community. Young people themselves named that they have a lot to offer the Church through their gifts, wisdom and skills, and their immersion in contemporary culture.

However, for many the Church is perceived as a place of rules and regulations and as a place of judgement. A huge difficulty for them is the

lack of peer accompaniment on their faith journey. If and when they come to Church, they see people who are either a lot younger or older but rarely their own age.

The language and position of the official Church in relation to the LGBTQ+ community is an obstacle for their participation in the life of their local Church. As is the role and place of women. These represent a stumbling block for many in their relationship with the Church. In general, the submissions reflected the diversity of cultures, lifestyles and generations within the diocese and called for all to be welcomed and accepted.

Nourishing and deepening people's faith and prayer lives

The need for nourishment for people on their faith journeys was evident through the submissions. This includes faith development programmes for young people and adults and programmes or resources that nourish the spiritual life of people.

There was recognition of the huge amount of work and time given to sacramental preparation. On the one hand this was a key positive experience for young people looking back at their faith journey. On the other hand, there was an oft-named concern about what happens after the celebration of these sacraments and the participation of children and families in parish life beyond the sacramental moment. There was a variety of opinion as to where the key accompaniment of children preparing for sacraments should happen - in school, parish, or home.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

To continue to reach out from and to the margins.

To remember the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.

Deepening a new habit of walking together as a Church.

Listen together to the voice of the Spirit in the life and diversity of people.

Pay attention to language, life experience and culture.

Come to know Christ and our faith.

Greater participation of lay people in the life and governance of the Church.

Address the role of women in the Church.

Reflect on the experiences of the LGBTQ community.

What you said - Raphoe

The Diocese of Raphoe covers most of Donegal and is home to 82,600 Catholics. The incumbent bishop since 2017 is the Most Reverend Alan McGuickan.

The main part of the listening process in Raphoe was a series of meetings held in a number of parishes as well as three 'hub' meetings where parishes came together in either Ards Friary, Letterkenny Pastoral Centre or Rossnowlagh Friary.

The themes encompassed the following issues:

Companionship:

Some people spoke of the sense of vibrancy, identity, belonging and friendship they had experienced as part of their parish community. They spoke of a very positive participation within the parish where people were kind and helpful to each other. The experience of COVID lockdowns was still a very vivid memory when we conducted our listening events and people's comments in some instances were directly linked to the pain and the frustration of that reality.

The positive opinions referenced above were balanced with more negative comments. Some people spoke of the feeling of togetherness being lost and said that people are grieving. Some spoke about how parish life has changed with less interaction between members, more individualism and a lessening of the sense of community.

This in turn was generating a sense of loneliness among the people. It was said newcomers to the church don't feel welcome and many of the disadvantaged in our society had fallen away. Some felt if you are a regular church goer you would be made to feel welcome in and by the parish but if not then you would be left on your own.

Welcoming

The Church has lost contact with younger groups and many parishioners do not want to interact with each other. Several factors helped to aggravate the situation including the age profile of parishes, the clannishness of some groups, the lack of structures within the parish to facilitate dialogue and sharing, the scattered nature of some rural parishes and the lack of appropriate facilities in some of them.

The role of the church must change, and the laity will have to support the priest in

this process. Bishops will also have to be more dynamic, and a bridge will have to be built linking the hierarchy and a shared church. The need for a warm and sustained welcome was repeated and stressed. Some felt the welcome should be by the priest while most felt it did not necessarily have to be the priest but could be a welcoming committee. The important thing was to speak to everybody and ensure everyone was included.

Communication

Communication is a key factor – we live in the age of instant communication and yet we have to hear most of the news regarding the faith on the grapevine. Although a small minority said they were able to take part in parish decisions and put forward their points of view, the greatest reaction was that parish structures provide little or no opportunity for dialogue other than going to the priest and speaking privately. The vast majority said there were no opportunities at all.

Whereas most bemoaned the lack of structures to enable a dialogue to take place, others said it would be of little use anyway as the bishop would make his own decision irrespective of what they said, so it really didn't matter what they thought. Many believed the views of ordinary people get 'edited out' at a higher level and there was a cohort of people who ensure the church remains a 'closed shop'. Others felt people wouldn't participate in such a conversation. Some people pointed to the past and said the church does not do this well – many conversations had taken place in the past and there had been no follow-up, it just faded away.

Speaking out most people wanted to see greater opportunities for dialogue. Channels or forums for dialogue had to be created and maintained.

The margins

To listen to those to whom we have been deaf in the past – the LGBT community, the traveller community, the physically or mentally challenged, women in general. Co-Responsibility There was a recognition that everyone is responsible for the companionship, togetherness,



Respondents in the Diocese of Raphoe expressed an appetite for more adult faith opportunities within the diocese

and friendship within the parish; we are all one church and people must take an active role within the church if things are going to work. It was felt by many that although more volunteers were needed, people needed to be invited to participate – they will not put themselves forward.

New ministries

There was also mention of the need to explore a place for the Permanent Diaconate in the diocese. There was a call for the development of Parish Pastoral Councils in the diocese. Whatever the practical difficulties the main fear was with the reaction of the hierarchy. Some said there was no point in having meetings as the bishops would decide what was going to happen anyway and they would 'toe the official line' from Rome.

Evangelising the next generation

There had to be a welcome for all, but everyone had to realise they were also responsible for getting the message out to other people. For the voice of the parish to be heard it was generally agreed the parishes need far more facilitation so that people can have confidence in voicing their opinions and that the process would be on-going. Education at all levels was seen as significant for the diocese.

There must be an outreach

programme catered to young people. Their participation should be actively sought but this can only be done by inviting them to play an active part within the community and by giving them more responsibility. To many the church was old and stale – it was just for old people. It needed to become more energetic and above all more sincere.

Adult faith development

Adult faith education and programmes in evangelisation need to be increased – there was a hunger for this. The connection with schools was seen to be very important and this link should be defended. The priest making regular visits to the schools was considered to be very important. Faith formation programmes such as those offered during Lent should be extended.

Many young people have not been to church since they made their Confirmation. Many teenagers are lost, and they need leadership during their rebellious years when peer pressure is so strong. Many suggestions related to the celebration of the Mass, such as more youth Masses; more music at Mass including gospel choirs, more involvement in the choir, making the mass shorter and more interactive, more lay involvement, the use of more understandable language, more inclusivity.

Some wanted a place where young people could meet the priest and get answers to any questions they wanted, while others wanted more community events to be organised. The young people said their experience of sharing was limited to the 'meet and greet' with the priest after mass.

The large majority said they had no opportunity to make a contribution. Others felt they had some opportunity but not as much as older people and others felt they had a far greater say when they were younger. Some of them said they didn't get involved because they felt it wasn't their place, others claimed it was because there "are too many rules".

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

A number of themes jump out from the gathering process in the Diocese of Raphoe.

The most prominent is 'welcome'. Some people stated clearly that only those who are already on the inside are made to feel welcome in our communities. New comers or people who only come infrequently are likely to be left to their own devices. It is vitally important for the diocese and every parish to investigate this and respond appropriately.

There is a challenge for the faith community from recognising the fact that in Ireland many people of faith find

that there are more attractive opportunities for community engagement and service in the organisation of leisure activities than in the building up of the faith community. The Diocese expects Christian faith communities to be centres of Joy and Celebration and there is a dawning realisation that this will only grow if everyone makes their contribution.

Many people in our communities feel inadequate to step forward and there is an important insight about how to invite them appropriately and encourage them in the best way. In our diocese there is clearly a call for 'formation'. This would involve both faith development and training in the kind of facilitation skills that would help communities to become more dialogical, centres of listening and learning. There is a recognition that the youth are a particular case.

They leave the practice of the faith in large numbers soon after they make their Confirmation. In many cases they have never been introduced to regular practice. This does not necessarily mean that they lose the faith or have no faith. However, the Church must seek ways to engage them actively and create a culture that will challenge them, listen to them and create authentic communities where they will feel welcome and supported.

We hear many different voices in this report. For some the person of the priest is central; there is an implicit acceptance that he needs to be deferred to, supported and collaborated with. Another voice, calling for a more dialogical approach in the future, asks for training in facilitation for both priests and people.

In our church as it now is the priest bears huge responsibility; everything can end up falling upon his shoulders. He is able to make great things happen. He also has the capacity, because of his own tiredness or limitations, to inhibit the emergence of new initiatives. Two quite distinct conclusions could be drawn: On the one hand, priests need and deserve extra support and encouragement in the very demanding role they now fulfil, especially at a time when our priests are getting older and fewer.

On the other hand the Church needs to look at renewing the structures that can facilitate a meaningful 'synodality' and sharing of responsibility for the life of the church.

“The Church needs to look at renewing the structures that can facilitate a meaningful ‘synodality’”

The 'Sense of Faith' and

**Gerry
O'Hanlon
SJ**

In deciding to embark on a 'synodal pathway' for the Irish Catholic Church the Bishops have been inspired by the teaching and practice of Pope Francis. Francis, for his part, has developed the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on collegiality (between the Pope and Bishops) to embrace the wider and deeper notion of synodality, which involves not just the Bishops but all the faithful.

In his most concentrated treatment of synodality (50th Anniversary Address of the Synod of Bishops, 2015) Francis refers back to the Council (*Lumen gentium*, 12) and its observation that:

The whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf. I Jn 2: 20, 27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God, when "from the bishops to the last of the faithful" it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals.

“The document notes that the 'sense of faith' is not simply identical with majority public opinion, sociological data, opinion polls or the 'spirit of the age'”

These, Francis, adds, 'are the famous words infallible "in credendo" (infallible in believing)'. In this same address he also refers back to his own 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (see EG, 119-126) and his contention that 'all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization' so that 'the *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* (a teaching Church) and an *Ecclesia discens* (a learning Church), since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church'.

Australian theologian Ormond Rush argues that

in effect Francis is making moves towards a synthesis between two notions which are in dramatic tension – the infallibility of the magisterium (Pope and bishops) in teaching, and the infallibility of the People of God in believing. The linchpin linking the two infallibilities, according to Rush, is listening to the *sensus fidelium*, the people of God's intuition in matters of faith and morals. And so, Rush argues, 'the *sensus fidelium*, and listening to the *sensus fidelium*, lie at the heart of Francis's dynamic notion of a synodal church'.

It seems to me that this emphasis on the 'sense of faith', always in dialogue with theology and with the authoritative magisterium, has great potential to unlock some contested issues in the Irish and wider church which are real obstacles to evangelization. First, then, I will explain in more detail the nature and scope of the 'sense of faith', and then explore its relevance to our contemporary mission.

Nature and scope of the 'sense of faith'.

The 2014 document, 'Sensus Fidei' in the Life of the Church' (SF), by the International Theological Commission provides an accessible account of current mainline thinking on the topic. The authors note (1-4) that the *sensus fidei*, as participation of all the baptized in the prophetic office of Jesus Christ, refers to two realities which are distinct though closely connected: the personal capacity of the believer to discern the truth of faith (*sensus fidei fidelis*), and the communal and ecclesial reality through which the baptized converge in recognizing and endorsing authentic Christian doctrine and practice in the lived reality of today (*sensus fidei fidelium* and *consensus fidelium*).

Furthermore, the *sensus fidei fidelis* is 'a sort of spiritual instinct that enables the believer to judge spontaneously whether a particular teaching or practice is or is not in conformity with the Gospel and with apostolic faith' (49). This 'instinct' – also described as knowledge of the heart (as between friends), a 'second nature', a 'sixth sense', a 'flair' or 'intuition' – is connatural, immediate and spontaneous, and of a different order than objective knowledge, which proceeds by way of conceptualisation and reasoning and is a result of rational deliberation (49-55, 70). The deeper one's faith and holiness, the more reliable this



“The whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing that comes from the holy one ”

'sense of faith' is (56-59). At the communal level (*sensus fidei fidelium*) the sense of faith enables believers to discern the 'signs of the times' in a way that is both prospective and retrospective (reception): it 'gives an intuition as to the right way forward amid the uncertainties and ambiguities of history, and a capacity to listen discerningly to what human culture and the progress of the sciences are saying' (70). Its scope includes moral as well as doctrinal developments (72-73). Because the

sense of faith can also be accompanied by elements of erroneous human opinion, there is often need for considerable time, patience and respect until a conclusive discernment is arrived at, with the faithful at large, bishops and theologians all having their respective roles to play (71), the magisterium having the ultimate authoritative voice (77). It is the same Holy Spirit who is present to all the baptized, in that *pastorum et fidelium conspiratio* (the breathing together of the pastors and

faithful) of which Newman spoke (39).

Liturgy is a particularly rich source of the sense of faith (75), as are popular religion and the poor (82-3, 107-112; EG, 122f, 198). The validity of the contribution does not depend on education or theological background, although theology provides a valuable service in explaining the sense of faith with greater clarity and precision (84). Correct dispositions for a more authentic participation in the *sensus fidei* include openness to reason and inner freedom

and humility (88-105). And, it is noted, 'vast multitudes of Christian believers (and indeed of people beyond the visible bounds of the Church) have privileged access, at least potentially, to the deep truths of God' (109). Thus, as is clear from Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church learns from as well as teaches the 'world' (GS, 40-44), and the 'sense of faith' is formed not just by inner-church realities but also by a discerning integration of secular history and culture.

Document

Finally, and crucially for our purposes, the document notes that the 'sense of faith' is not simply identical with majority public opinion, sociological data, opinion polls or the 'spirit of the age' (47, 83, 87, 113-126, especially 118). Nonetheless, SF also notes that 'public exchange of opinion is a prime means by which, in a normal way,

some contested issues



the *sensus fidelium* can be gauged' (125). Therefore, since the 'sense of faith' is so important, since 'it must be recalled that the experience of the Church shows that sometimes the truth of the faith has been conserved not by the efforts of theologians or the teaching of the majority of bishops but in the heart of believers' (119), the faithful need to be consulted appropriately.

Contested Issues in Ireland Today

SF, as we have seen, does not shirk from describing controversial contexts in which the 'sense of the faith' clashes in one way or another with official Church teaching. We have experiences of this in the Ireland of today, most obviously with respect to Church teaching on sexuality and gender. The Irish Bishops reported that the findings of

their questionnaire to Irish Catholics in preparation for the Roman Synod on the Family revealed that many found the teaching in this area was 'disconnected from real-life experience', and that 'many ... expressed particular difficulties with the teachings on extra-marital sex and cohabitation by unmarried couples, divorce and remarriage, family planning, assisted reproduction, homosexuality. The church's teaching in these sensitive areas is often not experienced as realist, compassionate or life-enhancing'

(Statement of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 13 March, 2014).

Response

The Bishops, for their part, pledged in response to the questionnaire findings to 'present faithfully the church's teaching on marriage and the family in a positive and engaging way, whilst showing compassion and mercy towards those who are finding difficulty in accepting or living it'. This assumes that the teaching itself is correct and more effective communication and

merciful application will solve the problem. However, as we have seen in SF, there is also the possibility that indifference or resistance to the teaching is grounded in a 'sense of the faith' which may indicate that the teaching has been adopted without sufficient consultation and needs to be not just clarified but reformulated.

The stakes are high here – the Catholic Church does not lightly go down the path of doctrinal revision, and there is danger of division, and even a version of the 'culture wars' we see so prevalent in the United States. And yet most would admit that when teaching in such intimate areas as sex and gender are disregarded, coupled with an already damaged moral credibility of the clerical Church due to the abuse issue, there occurs a significant obstacle to faith and to the mission of the Church. Pope Francis wants to make the Church 'attractive' – for many young people and women in Ireland today it is not attractive. These are 'signs of the time' which need to be addressed.

Cautious Approach

It remains the case, however, that the Catholic Church is cautious, almost to the point of denial, about developments which seem at variance with previous teaching. And so, in the Synod on the Family, we had a chorus of voices affirming that what was involved in the possible admission of divorced and remarried to Eucharistic reception that was pastoral/disciplinary in nature, not doctrinal. Pope Francis himself can sometimes seem to suggest this position himself – and so, for example, he says: 'Speaking of synodality, it's important not to confuse Catholic doctrine and tradition with the Church's norms and practices. What is under discussion at synodal gatherings are not traditional truths of Christian doctrine. The Synod is concerned mainly with how teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our times' (Let Us Dream, 84-5). No doubt it was words like these, coupled with the instinct to be reticent about doctrinal development of a seemingly disruptive nature, which persuaded the Irish

Catholic Bishops to state on their synodal website that according to Pope Francis, 'Synods are not instruments to change Church teaching but rather help to apply it more pastorally'.

“It remains the case, however, that the Catholic Church is cautious, almost to the point of denial, about developments which seem at variance with previous teaching”

However, Francis is not quite so absolute on this issue as it might seem at first glance: he is referring only to 'traditional' truths of Christian doctrine (what counts as 'traditional?') and says the Synod is concerned 'mainly' (not exclusively) with how teaching can be lived. After all, this is the same Francis who has also stated in his *Motu Proprio Spiritus Domini* (15 January 2021) that the change in Canon Law permitting women to be lectors and acolytes represents a 'doctrinal development ... arrived at in these last years that has brought light to how certain ministries instituted by the Church have as their basis the common condition of being baptised and the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism'. In an accompanying letter he notes that this development occurred due to a number of Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops and cites in particular the Final Document of the Amazon Synod. This case in point, of course fits in well with Hanneberg's thesis of anomalies and exceptions leading to doctrinal development, and historically many other examples could be cited. Francis is too astute theologically not to know this – doctrine develops, teaching changes, and often due to synodal assemblies and councils through which the 'sense of faith' of the faithful is formally and authoritatively discerned – and so Francis can also say: 'Tradition is not a museum, teaching changes, and doctrine is not static but grows and develops' (Let Us Dream, 57).

The Bishops, with Francis, are right to be wary of division, of an exclusively 'parliamentary procedure' which does not rise to the level of discernment, of the 'isolated conscience' and single-issue reform mentality which can easily sow a partisan and sectarian spirit. But it's also true that discernment can

be 'noisy', can integrate and purify vigorous debate and conflict, lobbying and gossip – we are human beings, not angels! Interestingly, Francis himself noted of the Amazon Synod that while it could not in the end rise to the level of discernment on the contested issues of married priests and female deacons (a sign of which was that, unlike in the Synod on the Family, the different sides remained as fixed in their views at the end of the process as they had been at the beginning), nonetheless what occurred was a 'rich, productive and even necessary parliament'. And so, he is saying, let the debate continue, let us ask God's grace to raise it to the level of true communal discernment, so that the urgent questions it addresses may soon be resolved.

Boldness of Speech

Meanwhile, however, we cannot ask Catholics in Ireland to enter a lengthy consultative process, investing themselves in this synodal pathway, and, at the same time, tell them that they can't speak their minds, can't exercise that *parrhesia* (boldness of speech) which Pope Francis so constantly recommends. This would be counter-productive. We are looking to discern the 'sense of faith', confident that it is there we find the leadings of the Holy Spirit, and we need to take all means to ensure that this happens. It is certainly true that on contested issues like the ones mentioned, we all need to be patient as well as engaged: these issues affect not just the Irish but the universal Church, and must await an authoritative final judgement from the universal church. Nonetheless what happens in Ireland can be of enormous significance in bringing about the kind of judgement and teaching which can be received in peace by the faithful, when the conclusions of the Irish discernment are fed into the wider Church.

Gerry O'Hanlon is an Irish Jesuit priest and theologian.

*Dr O'Hanlon lectured for several years at the Milltown Institute, Dublin. He has written extensively on Church reform and on the role of the Church in the public square. His latest book is *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis – A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland?* (Dublin: Messenger, 2019, revised edition). This is an edited version of the full article which is published in *The Synodal Pathway: Where Rhetoric meets Reality*, published by Columba Books and reproduced here with kind permission.*

“The *sensus fidei fidelis* is 'a sort of spiritual instinct that enables the believer to judge spontaneously whether a particular teaching or practice is'”

What you said - Elphin

The Diocese of Elphin did a synthesis of the comments made by approximately 1,000 people throughout the Diocese. Emphasis was placed on comments which form a thread running through the responses, but without losing sight of comments which reflect a minority view. This is an edited for space version of the original synthesis staying as close as possible to the original wording.

We asked people if they experienced Christian Community as a place of listening to God's word. The following captures the essence of what was shared.

Journeying together is about listening to the Spirit who speaks to us through Scripture and the voices of the people.

There was a felt need to hear, proclaim, and understand the Scriptures better.

The Word of God, though proclaimed, is not really heard, or integrated by people. There is some suggestion that the quality of proclamation is poor.

There is a need for a greater understanding and opportunities for people to go deeper into the Word, especially in the context of the Liturgical Year, making use of the Lectionary as a foundation to this exploration and learning. There is also a need to offer more extensive opportunities for people to engage with it outside the context of the Liturgy.

Dialogue/engagement with the Word of God is perceived as offering a way forward, inclusive of others.

The quality of homilies varies.

Some commented on the Old Testament readings, which sometimes contain language and content that is difficult to understand or apply to contemporary society. There is a felt need that appropriate explanation and interpretation of these texts should be offered within the context of homilies.

The proclamation of the Word of God is seen as one of the key ways to participate in the Liturgy of the Church.

Women

Many identified a conflict between the strong and generous engagement of women in the life of the Church and the way in which the Church seems not to value the contribution of women or listen to their voices.

Women are the heartbeat



The largest group to engage in the listening process were youth and young adults

of the life of the Church on the ground.

Many women have conveyed that they are people of deep and abiding faith, and that they have a huge awareness of the contemporary challenges of faith. A high proportion are experiencing frustration, hurt, and disappointment at the lack of opportunity to contribute their gifts and charisms.

Leadership structures in the Church do not adequately create opportunities for women to play an active role in terms of decision making and leadership.

“Young people and young families are experiencing time poverty and finding it difficult to prioritise faith”

Motherhood, its responsibilities, obligations and demands, often make it difficult for women to take on time consuming roles in the Church.

Diaconate Ordination for Women surfaced in some of the conversations around opportunities for Leadership.

Spirituality, Liturgy & Prayer

We asked people to tell us about their experience of Church/Parish/Faith.

Many people express the fact that they have had a positive sense of Church and parish.

For many the engagement with Church is primarily through liturgy. Many refer to:

- Quality of homilies;
- Music;
- Boredom;
- Length of Liturgy;
- Hospitality;
- Lack of heat in the church.

People refer to their participation in good liturgy as uplifting and nourishing.

The connection between Liturgy and life needs to be emphasised more, in particular, its power and grace that helps us to live life to the full.

In terms of liturgy the quality and presence or absence of participation determines the overall experience. Some expressed their frustration and disappointment at the lack of opportunities for participation in the liturgy.

Child and teenage friendly liturgies and spaces are needed.

A More Secular World

“What helps or hinders you in speaking honestly and courageously in your parish or in society?”

Coming out of a society which was predominantly Christian, many said they now found themselves very isolated as Christians in an increasingly secular society.

It is clear that the vast majority of younger parents no longer regularly attend Mass or

Confession, nevertheless, they continue, in large numbers, to initiate their children in the Sacraments of Baptism, First Confession, First Communion and Confirmation.

Some participants communicated that they now find themselves living in very secularised families, work situations and communities hostile to conversation regarding faith expression.

Time, family and work, hinder participation in Church.

Young people and young families are experiencing time poverty and finding it difficult to prioritise faith.

There is little cultural sup-

port for a living faith.

Young People

Seventy percent of young people who participated in the listening process said that they don't think that they have a role to play in the life of the Church or their parish community.

They acknowledged that the Church/Local Parish does some things very well including gathering people together and building community; celebrating nice Masses; funerals and consoling the bereaved; preaching about the love of God; helping people in need; welcoming and kind priests.

They said that the Church could do better at: listening to and involving them and recognising their talents; including/accepting people, among whom LGBT+ receive special mention; listening to and respecting women; making Mass more lively, interactive, and engaging; organising events specifically for them.

Many young people see the Church as being outdated/intolerant.

Teenagers and young adults have expressed the absence of their peers as one of the main hindrances to their participation in Church.

Busy lifestyle is seen by many as an obstacle to their participation in Church activities.

Transmission of the Faith

There was a consistent expression of concern at the failure of the present generation of Catholics to transmit the faith to the next generation.

Faith is seen by many as a gift that they received from their family.

Hurt and Rejection

Many participants expressed feelings of hurt and rejection

by the Church. They speak of a “rules dominated” Church where its reputation is more important than its people.

The misrepresentation of the Church by Irish media remains a source of hurt.

Being rejected from within the Church for being perceived as being “too Catholic”.

Inclusion

On being asked about their personal experience of Church/Parish/Faith, many people, including women, people who are divorced and remarried, young people and people who identify as LGBT+, expressed a deep sense of hurt at what they perceived as their exclusion.

The faith community needs to be more inclusive of people with disabilities, ensuring that spaces, language, and accessibility in all its forms, are better and conducive to full participation.

Absence of Forums for people to speak and be heard

Participants in most of the in-person gatherings expressed their appreciation of having been invited to participate in this process and many of them commented that this was the first time that anyone had asked their views on Church or faith.

“There is a need for a greater understanding and opportunities for people to go deeper into the Word”

Many people, including members of Parish Pastoral Councils and Religious Sisters, expressed the view that there is no forum for being heard in the Church.

Members of the Travelling Community were unanimous in saying that nobody ever asked them their views about Church before this Focus Group.

While it was acknowledged that there are Parish Pastoral Councils, some commented that they have no idea who is on the Parish Council, so there is no way for them to engage with it.

Priesthood

There was no specific question about priests or their ministry but, alongside the comments of priests themselves, many participants made it clear that

their experience of Church was shaped by their experience of a priest or priests.

Mission

- strong commitment to social justice and charitable outreach;
- the consolations, as distinct from the challenges, that flow from having a personal relationship with God;
- recognition of the need for new efforts to encourage youth participation and pastoral

- outreach to all on the margins of Church;
- the need for forums/small groups that will support discussion, growth in understanding, courage and confidence regarding the ongoing transmission of the faith in home, work and parish settings.

Leadership

There is a perception on the part of many that positions of leadership e.g., PPCs are about helping the priest with his work.

Attention is drawn to the absence of a tier of leadership which would facilitate local evangelisation and pastoral initiatives.

Clergy morale is quite subdued.

Many priests, teachers (primary and secondary), persons trained in catechesis and lay leaders of apostolic groups etc., are mindful of their need for ongoing formation and spiritual nourishment.

Local and national Church structures are not adequate for current mission requirements.

Many expressed a sense of inadequacy to the task of leadership in their own faith communities. There was a perception that this is connected with lack of formation and fear of criticism by others.

There is a lack of clarity and definition regarding leadership roles and responsibilities.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

For many it was the first time they were involved in such a process, and as a result, the sense of hope, energy, goodwill, and positivity was palpable. There is a deep longing that a new way of being Church can emerge and that the seeds of hope, captured, planted, and expressed so eloquently, by so many, would form the foundation for continued dialogue, conversations, and engagement.

What you said - Clogher

Clogher Diocese Synthesis Report

The Diocese of Clogher, in the metropolitan province of Armagh is one of the oldest dioceses in Ireland, of the 37 parishes, 20 are in the Republic of Ireland, 15 are in Northern Ireland and 2 others are divided between both jurisdictions.

A total of seven meetings took place across the diocese, with over 800 people participating but with a few exceptions, there was a noticeable absence of younger participants.

Journeying Together

1. Sacramental Life – mostly carried out and led by the priests or deacons (Clogher Diocese currently has two permanent deacons) but with help from lay ministries in some parishes. There were many positive comments – some said that, alongside daily Mass, lay-led liturgies in the parish are a good thing; other good things included the John Paul II Awards, Children's Liturgy, and many of the essential things mentioned above.

Male and Female Deacons

The role of Deacons was mentioned in several of the meetings, including the exploration of the possibility of having women as deacons

Voice of the Youth

From the meetings with post-primary students, it was noted that young people have faith in God and practice their faith, although not necessarily in the Church forum. They expressed how Church provides comfort especially in times of grief. There is a yearning among young people to bring up their own children in the faith that was passed on to them by their own parents/families. Sacramental preparation was highlighted by young people as providing a sound basis for their faith in Jesus Christ.

Developing Family Ministry

Due to the shortage of priests, the capacity of priests to meet with families other than at times of pastoral necessity (baptisms, funerals, weddings, sickness etc) is extremely limited. Therefore, new ways of outreach will have to be developed through the parish structures.



Specific training for lay people was identified as being essential to lead ministry at parish level

Declining Vocations

Currently, Clogher has one seminarian in priestly formation. With the ageing profile of priests the need for vocations is critical. It was expressed by young people that the choice between family life and Church life should not have to be made by priests and for young people this was a sacrifice that they were unwilling to make or even to contemplate.

The Role of Women

It was strongly stated that women very often are the strength of parishes, and yet there are limited opportunities for them to access leadership roles within their Church/Parish. Additionally, the exclusion of women from ordained ministries impacts on both a male and female perspective of a Church which teaches inclusivity.

Several areas for development were identified by the process: Developing Capacity among Lay People

Specific training for lay people was identified as being essential to equip them to become involved in and to lead various forms of ministry at Parish level.

With the declining numbers of active priests and with the possibility of some parishes not having a resident priest the formation of teams within parishes or across a pastoral area needs immediate consideration. Involvement of lay people will be central to the success of such new approaches.

Lay-Led Liturgies

These would alleviate the total dependence on priests for the prayer life of the parish.

It would also allow for small Catholic communities to maintain a presence in a church and area. Sound catechesis will be critical for this to be successful and life-giving. Parishes working together can also help to improve best practice.

Outreach to the marginalised

Young people felt that the Church should be more accepting of LGBTQI+ relationships. These relationships should not be stigmatised by the Church. The issue of same-sex marriage was also discussed.

Clerical Abuse

Also discussed was the question of abuse perpetrated in the past by clergy. Outreach to those affected was also a priority for many.

Evangelisation

Faith programmes and parish activities need to always

be configured in such a way that the invitation to be part of the faith community is always to the forefront.

Media/ Communications/ Public Relations

Young people highlighted negative press coverage and prejudice around Church and Catholicism. They pointed out that there are very few positive media stories. They contend that Church should not hide away from past mistakes and prove that it is trying to change/reform itself.

Social Justice

An issue raised by the youth of the diocese is the area of social justice. At the local and national level, the Church needs to be more visible as an advocate for the most vulnerable in society.

Youth Involvement

The absence in many of our parishes of activities or liturgies specifically for teenagers and those in their 20s was also a concern. So too is the absence of young people from the sacramental life of many parishes. In effect, they indicated that the Church is out of touch with the younger generation.

Ecumenism and Inter-Church Dialogue

There is a recognition of the need for such dialogue to move more into the sphere of lay people as well as into dealing with wider societal questions, activities and dialogue.

Care of Priests

Care of the clergy was mentioned at several of the gatherings. Whatever new arrangements are put in place will have to take account of the numbers and age profile of our priests and respect their lack of capacity to take on new tasks.

Conclusion

One obvious conclusion from the initial phase of listening is that the overwhelming majority of people across our diocese love their local Church community and want to see it at its best. Even though there may be disappointment, fear and apprehension regarding the challenges facing us, there is a faith-filled enthusiasm that should be recognised and honoured.

The model of Church we have is changing fast and it will depend on active lay participation in its leadership in each parish and community into the future. This will also include the leadership of liturgical celebrations, seeing new ministries – ordained and non-ordained – being introduced. Women are the strength of parishes, and yet they have few opportunities to play a more active part. Alongside all of this, there will have to be a much greater emphasis on catechesis at all levels. The role of young people, their potential, their empathy and their concern for the earth and for social justice places before us both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity.

“The model of Church we have is changing fast and it will depend on active lay participation in its leadership in each parish and community into the future”

What you said - Kerry

The Diocese of Kerry covers most of County Kerry and parts of County Cork. There are 146,790 Catholics in the Diocese.

Although the listening sessions were a positive experience for those who took part, the general consensus was that the number and diversity of people participating were disappointing.

Female Perspectives

Two focus groups – members of the LGBTQI+ community, and Parish Secretaries – consisted entirely of women. These groups shared some very positive experiences of Church, including the sense of community. Some did feel however that this sense of community was being lost. They were appreciative of the ministry of clergy.

Some did feel that they were listened to, but only because of the role they fulfil e.g. parish secretaries and Church employees. There was a feeling that there is a glass ceiling which women cannot breakthrough in the Church as it currently exists. This was



Many called for a Youth Council in each pastoral area or parish in the Diocese of Kerry.

a source of sadness and frustration for many.

LGBTQ perspectives

All of the women we spoke to identified LGBTQI+ people as being marginalised

and excluded. They are tolerated but kept at a distance, which has caused significant harm and upset. It is felt that LGBTQI+ people have a different perspective to offer on spirituality which has been developed from living on the margins.

Young people

Those who engaged were aged between sixteen to eighteen and both male and female. We also engaged with male and female third level students in their late teens and early twenties. For these young peo-

ple their positive experiences of Church centred around participation in the sacraments, acting as altar servers and participation in school retreats and pilgrimages. Amongst Second Level students, the need to be heard and involved was important for this age group generally but they felt that there were very few opportunities to offer their viewpoint, or that if they offered an opinion it would not be listened to.

Many called for a Youth Council in each Pastoral Area or Parish where they could participate or engage in their faith. For them this is seen as outdated thinking and disrespectful, and they felt that this is not how Jesus would behave. The status quo of the Church on these issues was seen as being an obstacle for them.

Outreach to other communities in the Diocese

The Synodal Team engaged with twelve adult members of the Kerry Traveller Community. As well as naming positive experiences of the Church similar to other participants,

the Travelling Community mentioned the importance of traditional devotional practices.

A number of people in addiction recovery were interviewed as part of the Listening Process. The Church represented a place for these people where they found a sense of belonging, regardless of "social status, education or maturity of faith," with the church building being a place they could go and pray, light a candle and find refuge.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

The Church in Ireland bears the weight both of past glories and failures, and is no longer a dominant social and cultural force. The Church carries with her many of the expectations and structures of her past reality, while leaving various contemporary needs unmet. Faithfulness to her mission will inevitably mean difficult changes at all levels of Church life.

By looking honestly at the reality of parish life and society we can adapt accordingly rather than have change imposed upon us by circumstances.

What you said - Achonry

The diocese of Achonry encompasses parts of Counties Mayo, Sligo and Roscommon. It has 23 parishes and a total population of approximately 40,000, of whom 90% are Catholic. There are 30 priests in active ministry and approximately 20 religious sisters.

The Bishop met with a representation of people who had suffered abuse in Church contexts and listened to their accounts of their experiences.

Approximately 160 people participated, including priests and religious. There was a good representation of age groups, although the older age groups were in the majority. [This report has been edited for space.]

Listening

Many respondents felt that they were listened to by their local priest and were comfortable sharing their concerns with him. Overall, 53% of respondents said

they had good opportunities to speak freely about their experiences, to be listened to and heard. On the other hand, 47% of those who responded stated that they had very few or no opportunities for their views to be heard within the Church. Some people expressed the opinion that the leaders in the Church would not allow them to speak freely of their life experiences if it did not concur with that of the leadership.

Fears were expressed that the opinions of the laity will be watered down at the higher levels of the Church in Ireland so as to reflect the views of the hierarchy and the direction in which the bishops wish to take the Church.

Speaking Out

Some people felt confident that they could make their views known to their local priests and others were satisfied that their parish pastoral councils provided forums for airing their concerns.

Celebration

The issue of liturgical celebrations figured very strongly in most of the respondents' comments. A significant number of people expressed the view that their regular attendance at Mass was a source of nourishment and inspiration for them in living the life of faith.

A number of people suggested that there is need for greater faith formation at all levels.

Choirs, especially involving younger people, were regarded by many as significant to improving the quality of liturgies, as well as encouraging congregational singing.

“The Bishop met with a representation of people who had suffered abuse in Church”

Mention was made of the need to address the situation of divorced and remarried people who are not able to access the Eucharist. It was suggested that the question of the Church's teaching on contraception needs to be revisited.

Authority and Participation

There was a general impression that decision making and authority were exercised by priests and bishops. While there were positive expressions of support for the work of parish pastoral councils in a number of instances, there seemed to be a significant level of discontent with the processes of decision-making and the exercise of authority at all levels in the Church.

A very significant proportion of the responses articulated the need for women to more seriously involved in decision-making at the highest levels and this included their being admitted to the sacrament

of orders. Among second level students, a very high proportion regarded the ordination of women as the most important issue for the consideration by the Pope, followed by allowing for a married clergy.

What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

There is need for the sacrament of baptism to be better presented

There is need for much better faith formation at all levels

Young people have to be involved more actively
Parish churches might become more welcoming and hospitable.

The place of women in the Church needs serious review.

More effort be put into fostering vocations to priesthood and religious life. In this context, the removal of the obligation of mandatory celibacy recurred as a themes.

“The issue of liturgical celebrations figured very strongly in most of the respondents' comments”

What you said - Dromore

There is an overwhelming respect, recognition, and appreciation for the work of St Vincent De Paul and Trócaire.

Dromore Diocese

Dromore Diocese has had no bishop since 2018. Archbishop Eamon Martin has been acting as Apostolic Administrator throughout the synodal process to date.

Over 700 completed questionnaires were received and a meeting with clergy and about 45 parish representatives took place on 18 May 2022. Archbishop Martin and the Papal Nuncio were also present.

1. COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

The strongest messages we received can be summarised as follows:

Women experience discrimination within the Church. There is no equality between women and men and people are struggling to understand why women are excluded and not treated equally. The role of women in the church is very undervalued, having to accept subservient roles and not being able to be ordained. There are limited roles for women in leadership and church ministry. People have experienced this; it is the strong feeling of many, including our Youth, for whom it was most prominent in their responses.

Clerical sexual abuse has left a legacy which is an open wound about which people feel deeply hurt and spiritually betrayed. Within the Diocese of Dromore people have lost trust in the Catholic Church due to the scandals and clerical abuse. They want no more cover-ups, complete openness, and transparency. The scandals have impacted on people's faith and alienated them from participation in church life.

Young People want an unconditional welcome and a place in the church. They want the church to be meaningful for them with contemporary ideas but feel the church does not recognise these.

Separated and Divorced Catholics have been marginalised and estranged from the church. They feel abandoned and unsupported by it. Mention was made of those with influence & money being able to get annulments while others were left hopeless.

LGBTQ+ people have also been marginalised and estranged from the church. They feel abandoned and



There is an overwhelming respect, recognition and appreciation for the work of St Vincent de Paul and Trocaire.

unsupported by it. There is also a view that the church has compounded their problems. However, in pastoral terms individual clerics have been supportive.

2. LISTENING

There are occasions where listening occurs, creating interest, energy and promise but doesn't always follow through on what people expected. Guest speakers, 'experts' have been employed for parish events, but there are no established faith formation programmes. However, the Lectio Community have a very active and engaged membership with a strong sense of making the Gospel come alive. They are a community who are comfortable with, and who, exemplify Mission, Participation and Communion.

Respondents express a recognition that the Synodal Pathway has opened an avenue, given a voice and hopefully a listening ear to those who feel they wouldn't normally be part of the conversation. There is a strong expectation that something will be done with all the information. There are clearly people who feel on the margins, who are neither welcomed or included and insist the universal Catholic Church recognise the LGBTQ+ community and separated & divorced Catholics. There is a sense that there is no recognised space for minorities, the marginalised or socially excluded.

3. SPEAKING OUT

Transparency and openness are values that are not only expected but people have zero tolerance should it become apparent that they

are missing. The case in point -Dromore Diocese in recent years and the impact of clerical sexual abuse. This is a Diocese with an open wound: "The legacy of abuse has caused deep hurt and damage. Something has to be done to bring healing".

Most parishes within the Diocese have either a Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) or a PPC in formation. This synodal process has encouraged people to speak out, and creating anonymous questionnaires gave people the courage to speak freely as was evident in the responses.

4. CELEBRATION

The Celebration of the Eucharist for those in active participation of Catholic life is paramount. People reflect on life during the pandemic and the sense of being part of the Universal Church through online presence but appreciate that, as we move forward, we need to be mindful that the virtual world is just that and there is a fundamental need to be actively part of the community that we live in.

5. SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR COMMON MISSION

There is an overwhelming respect, recognition, and appreciation for the work of St Vincent De Paul and Trócaire. The outreach, hard work and social interaction with the most vulnerable parishioners is how many see real involvement and walking in Christ's footsteps.

People would welcome family Masses. The realisation that all baptised persons are called and needed in the

mission of the church is not recognised and understood. To make this a reality people need to be informed, educated and supported.

6. DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

As a Diocese we recognise that whilst the dialogue managed to reach some people on the margins, we only scratched the surface.

The key issues that were raised time and time again were the need to recognise the role of women, welcome of the LGBTQ+ community, the inclusion of married priests how separated/divorced catholic feel ostracized.

7. ECUMENISM

The South Down Ecumenical Clergy Group was established in 1968 to nurture good relationships with other churches. A genuine friendship and fellowship evolved across traditional divides.

Christian Unity Week is seen as the time where this happens, but there was no sense that beyond this week there is an active programme of engagement.

8. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION

Some Parishes have embraced the universal synodal pathway and are listening to the insight gleaned from the responses and working on this to help future planning. Other parishes are in formation regarding synodality and getting Parish Pastoral Councils up and running.

There has been sharing of information at some of the group meetings, but it is patchy and not cohesive.

There is a need for clear governance structures, especially as several people queried finances within their parish and Diocese. There are many who don't know how financial governance operates in their parish and this leads to a feeling of exclusion and concern.

9. DISCERNING AND DECIDING

Throughout the Diocese there are several established Parish Pastoral Councils, with a number being formed.

Priests - it was important that priests/deacons be actively involved in Parish Pastoral Councils and engagement with the people. On the other hand, there was a desire for more lay involvement to support overworked clergy.

10. FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY

Throughout the synodal journey people shared their experiences of welcome and inclusion. The way a priest welcomes people at the start of Mass was viewed as particularly significant.

The Youth want to be with their peers and it was noted that youth groups that are well managed and maintained create a space for dialogue and listening. Community fun days and that time just before Mass commences and afterwards is where all age groups engage with each other whether remaining in the church or on its steps. To facilitate this environment and create opportunity for discussion there is a need to have a social place in or around the chapel. People of all ages requested respect and non-judgement. There has been an energy and interest created through this synodal process and it is vitally important that something will be done with this harvest of information.

Conclusions:

As a Diocese we need to take tangible action that demonstrates that people have been listened to but there are also a number of areas where further discernment is required:

Abuse and Scandals- there is a legacy of hurt and enduring damage and a demand for transparency and openness.

Mass- the times of Masses need to be sensitive to modern times & community life.

Family Masses - there was an overwhelming request for the availability of Family Masses and stories were shared how these worked so well in parishes.

The role of Women - there is a strong assertion of the need for women to be treated with more respect, accepted as equal to men and afforded the same opportunities for inclusion in the life of the Church, including its ministries and leadership. There is clear frustration with the hierarchy in this regard.

The Marginalised - the experience of LGBTQ+, divorced and separated people and their families in the Church is a matter of widespread concern. There is a strong desire for significant movement to recognise and include them.

Finances- some ambiguity and questions being asked on how they have been managed. In an age of greater transparency and accountability in wider society, the Church is viewed as old-fashioned and out of step. It is also failing to utilise significant expertise among the laity.

Charity and the tremendous work done by SVP and Trócaire remain strong points of the Church, helping to make it relevant and credible to many people.

Communication

It is important to make best use of technology for e.g. online and Social Media platforms and to be cognisant of those people on the margins who are not getting the message. It is also time to think more seriously about how we engage with those with disabilities. In all these aspects, the new Diocesan web site should become a core mechanism for communication and engagement.

Volunteering Strategy - the introduction of a Volunteering Strategy with clear structures, advice and guidance for those wanting to be involved.

Co-responsibility - Throughout the responses people referenced to "They need to" and "They should be". A senior cleric pointed out that, for the most part, there is no 'they' other than the faithful themselves. The Diocese does not have a large cohort of staff. The Church, from Diocese to parish levels, requires the active participation of its people.

Diocesan Pastoral Council - There are a few practical and tangible matters that Dromore could address and take forward. To ensure this would happen, there is a need for a Diocesan Pastoral Council to be established.

Finally, we have started the journey and through journeying together, we have stirred an energy and ignited interest across our Diocese.

What you said - Clonfert

The Diocese of Clonfert is comprised principally of parishes in East Galway along with a parish in County Roscommon and a parish in County Offaly.

It has been joined with its neighbouring Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora.

1. The perennial value of the Gospel message

Many respondents expressed their belief that the Gospel Message, Christianity, and the Church still had much to offer people as they journey through life.

2. The importance of and desire to experience local living faith communities

There was an evident desire to affirm, preserve and support living local faith communities.

3. Positive experience of local Church communities especially at times of personal joy or sorrow

Many spoke with deep appreciation of the important role the Church and priests play in ritualising key moments of joy and sorrow in their lives.

4. Recognition of the care and dedication of priests to their ministry

There was a genuine appreciation of the ministry of a declining cohort of priests and a sympathy for the strains and pressures they were subjected to even as they advanced in age.

Key Challenges of the Present

1. Integrating the aftermath of Covid-19

The effects the Covid-19 pandemic have had on the practice of the faith, in particular as regards a move from in person to online participation at Mass, emerged.

Decline in belief/faith

Many spoke of living in families, communities, and a country where people no longer believe in God or in the key aspects of the Christian Message.

Decline in faith practice

There was a general recognition of the decline in practice of the faith at parish level and a sadness about the fact that many, including family members and friends, no longer attend Mass.

Ageing congregations

Many noted that young and middle-aged people are absent from Church congregations.



The Shrine of Our Lady of Clonfert has been raised to the status of a recognised Diocesan Marian Shrine

Ageing clergy with difficulty keeping morale high

Many noted the age profile of priests. With an increased workload there was a sense of the need to foster a renewed sense of mission and purpose among the clergy.

Aftermath of decades of bad news about the Church

A sense of a Church battered and broken after years of bad news and having now to negotiate a somewhat hostile environment for believers.

7. Competing with the secular world when it comes to religious activities

Many noted a struggle between the secular world and religion at both a national and a local level

8. Call to be a more welcoming, loving, serving and inclusive Church

The theme of welcome and inclusivity emerged in many submissions. Many dreamt of a Church/parish where people would feel welcomed and included.

Emerging Themes

1. The perceived existence of a disconnect between the

Church and the everyday life of people

Many spoke of a general feeling that the Church was out of touch with the lives of ordinary people.

2. Need to communicate all that is good about faith and the Church

A recurring theme was the fact that much of the good being done by the Church at a national and local level seems to go unacknowledged. There was a general sense that as a community the Church needs to better explain itself and celebrate its achievements in the public space.

3. A Church online

The rather recent reality of access to Church celebrations online was commented on both favourably and with some reservations.

4. Spirituality and Church going not necessarily the same thing

A rather common theme among those who were not regular Churchgoers was a desire for some connection with God and a spiritual life on a personal level but little evidence that this was being found or nourished in the Christian community or by traditional Church practice. Many were willing to identify as spiritual rather than Christians or Catholics.

5. Evangelisation – renewing belief in the Christian Message

Some spoke of a need to present anew the Good News of Christianity and to invite people to consider if it can be a source of meaning in their lives.

6. Concern that the core message of Christian belief and practice might be watered down or abandoned

There emerged from some respondents a fear that, for various reasons, the core message of Christianity was being eroded, faith practices were no longer being insisted on and key Christian doctrines were not being preached about.

7. Need for life-long Religious Education

Many spoke of their own and others lack of understanding when it came to key Christian beliefs and practices.

8. Struggle to understand Scripture

Some spoke of how they often struggled to understand the Scripture readings. Others expressed a desire to learn more about the Bible so that they could better understand and appreciate the message contained therein.

9. More meaningful celebration of the Mass and the Liturgy

A recurring theme was the need to connect the Mass and Liturgical celebrations in a

meaningful manner with people's lives.

10. Importance of preparation for and celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation

The Sacraments of Baptism, First Confession, First Holy Communion and Confirmation were identified as key moments in young people's lives and in the lives of their parents and families. There was a general consensus that more needed to be done at parish level to engage with people at these important moments.

11. The role of Catholic Schools

The role Catholic Schools have in the education of young people in the faith was raised by many. Some complimented the religious education provided in Catholic Schools while others felt what was happening was not enough.

12. Ministry to Young People

The need to reach out to young people was a recurring theme throughout the process. Many recognised the difficulties involved but emphasised its absolute necessity.

13. Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life

Some mentioned the lack of vocations to the Priesthood and Religious life.

14. A new heart for our Priests

There were some submissions that noted a need to bring new heart to priests.

15. The identity of the priest and mandatory celibacy

A significant number of participants mentioned a sense that priests were seen as separate from the rest of the community and as a result out of touch with the realities of life. Many felt that this situation might be remedied by allowing priests to marry.

16. A non-judgemental welcoming Church

Some respondents experience of Church was one of judgement and exclusion. Many expressed the wish that the Church of the future would be more accepting and welcoming of all people.

17. The LGBT+ Community and the Church

A sense of anger and injustice at the Church emerged from participants who were members of the LGBT+ community and also from other participants when it came to the inclusion of the LGBT+ community in Church life.

18. The experience and role of women in the Church

Many participants mentioned the role of women in the Church and advocated developing a conversation on the experience of women in the Church and the development of more meaningful and equal roles for them.

19. Inclusiveness of all levels of society

Some respondents spoke of a certain elitism among Church communities. There was a general consensus that the Church needed to reach out to the various ethnic groups that constitute our society and to stand with the poor and those in need.

20. Need to build a more vibrant Church community

Some compared the experience they had of their local Church community with more vibrant experiences they had of Church communities in other parts of the country or of the world. Many expressed the need to engage in activities to build up and support a living local Church community.

21. Cooperation between and reorganisation of faith communities

Given the context in which some of the consultations took place – the theme of cooperation between parishes emerged. Many focused on their own parish and keeping their local Church open while others spoke of the need for reorganising and restructuring of parishes and cooperation between parishes.

22. Role of the Laity in the Church

There was a general recognition that in the future lay people would have to play a greater role in the organisation of local parish communities.

23. Development of new roles eg. permanent diaconate, catechist, prayer ministry

Some people raised the need to introduce a variety of official ministries in parishes.

24. Need for duly elected and regularly renewed Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees

Within the context of finding a voice for lay people in the Church, a significant number of submissions lamented the fact that parish pastoral councils and parish finance committees were non-existent or not functioning properly.

Conclusion

The challenge from here will be to find ways to develop occasions and structures that favour and promote this type of conversation and discernment within our local faith communities. Conversations and discernment that will eventually lead to the genuine renewal in faith and practice that the majority of participants in this process so evidently desire.

“The Synodal Pathway – When Rhetoric Meets Reality”

Bishop Paul Dempsey



Back in 2011 a new version of the Roman Missal came into existence. We were told it would be an exact translation of the original Latin text and would contribute to the much-needed renewal in the Church. Even though I was ordained fourteen years at that stage, I heard little, if anything, about it. In the months coming up to its introduction I had a conversation with an aunt of mine, a faith filled Catholic. She had been faithful to the Church all throughout her life. When I told her of the impending changes to the liturgical language she replied: “*Could they not just leave the Mass alone.*” Shortly afterwards there was a gathering of three dioceses: Kildare and Leighlin, Ossory, and Ferns. At this gathering the local bishops along with liturgists emphasised that this new translation would be the vehicle for the much-needed renewal in the life of the Church. There was a great deal of scepticism in the room.

Courage

I plucked up the courage to stand up and share the conversation I had with my aunt, asking that things might be just left alone and that there were other more pressing items needed to renew the Church. The comment was met by an uncomfortable silence. I sat down realising that the voice of a faith filled and faithful Catholic, like my aunt, who supported the Church in every way throughout her life was a voice that did not count when it came to decisions in the life of her Church. Interestingly, St. Jerome, the great Doctor of the Sacred Scriptures, spending twenty years to translate the bible into Latin, was not a literalist. He said: “*If I translate word by word, it sounds absurd.*” In any case, I am still waiting for the great renewal that was promised with the introduction of the new translation.

Experience

I share this experience with you this evening as it clearly illustrates the antithesis of synodality. It is a real-life example of people not being asked or consulted about an important issue in the life of the Church. It is a good example of the “*command and control*” model. It is how things should not be done and we need to learn from it. The process of Synodality, encouraged by Pope Francis, offers us

the opportunity to learn how things could be done, where every voice is respected, and every voice is heard. There is no doubt that Synodality is the hot topic in the Church today. I am at a symposium on Synodality on Saturday. In September I will be attending a course for newly ordained bishops in Rome. I glanced at the outline of the eight days and noticed every talk, every input has Synodality in its heading. Thankfully I will be well equipped to contribute to the conversations having “*The Synodal Journey*” with me. Of course, it has already made its way to Rome when it was presented personally to Pope Francis by Professor Eamonn Conway a few weeks ago. I understand Pope Francis was particularly attentive to the subheading “*When Rhetoric Meets Reality.*”

“I sat down realising that the voice of a faith filled and faithful Catholic, like my aunt, who supported the Church in every way throughout her life”

The reality of our situation as Church is quite stark, it is outlined very clearly and succinctly in the fifteen essays presented to us in “*The Synodal Pathway.*” There is no doubt the footprint of Catholicism is weakening rapidly within our society and the scaffolding that was familiar within parish life that supported so many generations in the faith, has collapsed. The reality is that faith no longer speaks, not only to people “out there,” but to many within our own families and circles of friends. As Michael Paul Gallagher SJ reminded us: “*God is missing, but not missed.*” How this has come about is a deep and complex question. Charles Taylor, the Canadian Sociologist grapples with this question

in his comprehensive work “*A Secular Age*” where he poses the question:

“*Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?*”

Closely related to this, Michael Paul Gallagher SJ asks the deeper questions: “*Behind the statistics of religious decline, what is happening to people’s spiritual imagination? What is really happening to people’s deeper selves? What is happening to their felt meanings and values?* His concern is that the “*loss of such anchors can leave people existentially stranded and adrift.*” That, I believe, is the reality of so many people’s lives today, especially in the West, if you scratch the surface many are drifting, many are struggling with the question of meaning. I heard it put simply by a speaker on one of the TED talks, where he said: “*the reality of life for so many today is that they are working long hard hours, at jobs that they hate, to enable them to buy things they don’t need, in order to impress people they don’t like!*” That is the experience of many people today. When Pope Francis tells us the Synodal Church is a Church that listens, a point he has emphasised so many times and is illustrated in “*The Synodal Pathway,*” I believe he wants to hear the existential cry within people’s hearts. For Pope Francis the synodal journey, the synodal way of being Church is not just about hearing the controversial issues or so called “red button” issues, so familiar to us all, it is about listening to the deep cry of the human heart and trying to respond to that cry with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When we speak the language of synodality, we are journeying on sacred ground.

So many of the essays in “*The Synodal Pathway*” remind us that Synodality is rooted in the vision of the Second Vatican Council, especially the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Pope Francis wishes to reenergise this vision. The emphasis on the People of God is critical here, we do not journey alone, we journey together. As has been pointed out, it is significant that the sequence in *Lumen Gentium* places the People of God before the Hierarchical structure of the Church. This is key in understanding the essence of syno-



dality. The hierarchy is at the service of their brothers and sisters, something we may have forgotten as the emphasis often weighed more heavily on the side of self-preservation and importance rather than mission and service. Synodality has shone a light on this and brought it into sharp focus.

“Are those who carry the charism of leadership, truly ready to listen and perhaps respond in ways that were unimaginable before?”

Pointed

Pope Francis has clearly pointed out that the way of synodality is not just something he desires but it is something God desires. Several references in the essays, reminded us of what he said during the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops in 2015. On that occasion he told us: “*it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium.*” This clearly shows the depth of importance Pope Francis has placed in this way of being Church. It also brings home the weight of responsibility we have as the People of God to respond to this call.

Challenges

It also exposes many challenges, too numerous to men-

tion here, but clearly outlined in the chapters of “*The Synodal Pathway.*” Some of those challenges might be as follows: How do we truly listen to what people are saying? As the understanding of the human person changes, people experience the world in a radically different way today from just a couple of decades ago, how does the Church speak to this? Are those who carry the charism of leadership, truly ready to listen and perhaps respond in ways that were unimaginable before? Is this a way of being Church that some are going along with for now, but deep within, are not convinced and have no intention of going this direction and will remain in and continue to live the clerical model? How does synodality challenge the current mode of governance in the Church? Many of the questions raised by synodality today have already been discussed in local churches over many years, but no significant progress has been made, what is to say this will be any different? And what of accountability, something that has been seriously lacking within Church leadership? After all the listening, after all the consultation, who is ultimately accountable in this process? These are just a few of the questions that emerged in my heart as I read through the various essays presented in “*The Synodal Pathway.*”

Congratulate

I wish to thank and congratulate most sincerely the editors, Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy and Mary McDaid. I mentioned earlier how synodality is the hot topic today. There are so many books, articles, commentaries dedicated to the topic. “*The Synodal Pathway*” is a clear and concise resource for anyone who wishes to understand the concept and the complexities of synodality. The authors are informed by good theology, real pastoral experience, and solid

life experience. It is a stimulating read, which I found quite challenging as a Christian, as a Catholic, and as a bishop. It opened up for me many questions that I am continuing to reflect upon. It is wonderful that Pope Francis himself was presented with it during your recent visit to Rome.

The well-known 20th Century theologian, Karl Rahner SJ said that the Second Vatican Council was: “*A watershed marking the transition from a European and western-Church to a world-Church... moving towards a more missionary style aiming to speak to those for whom Christianity had become alien.*”

“Is this a way of being Church that some are going along with for now, but deep within, are not convinced and have no intention of going this direction and will remain in and continue to live the clerical model?”

Today Christianity has become alien to many, Pope Francis wishes that we, the People of God, through the prism of the Second Vatican Council and open to the Holy Spirit, would once again discern and discover our missionary zeal so that Jesus Christ can touch the hearts of those who are searching and are open to the new possibilities the joy of his Gospel offers.

This address by Bishop Paul Dempsey was given at the launch of *The Synodal Pathway- Where Rhetoric Meets Reality* Edited by Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy and Mary McDaid and is reprinted here with permission.

“Pope Francis has clearly pointed out that the way of synodality is not just something he desires but it is something God desires”

THE SYNODAL TIMES

in Your Parish

Ireland's synodal pathway is ongoing and *The Synodal Times* has 32 pages of news, analysis and commentary to break down what the synod is and what it means for the future of the Irish Church.

Parish Councils and parishioners need to know what's going on now more than ever. *The Synodal Times* will be available with analysis of the latest developments and articles from leading scholars about how we as a Church can embark on our future with hope.

To subscribe to *The Synodal Times*, please fill in the form below and post it to us:

Parish: _____ Name (CUS Number if applicable): _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

Address: _____ Eircode: _____

Please put quantity next to amount required:

___ The Synodal Times (€2.50 each)

___ The Irish Catholic (€2.50 each)

___ Magnificat (€4.50 each)

**The Irish Catholic, Unit 3b,
Bracken Business Park,
Bracken Road, Sandyford,
Dublin 18, D18 K277**

**For more information,
call 01 6874096**

THE SYNODAL TIMES