



SYNTHESIS

Diocese of Waterford & Lismore



Synod Synthesis

‘Christ has no hands, but your hands’

The synodal journey of the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore commenced with the formation of a task force by Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan. Together with the Bishop, its members set out on the journey of preparing and executing the spiritual and practical aspects of the diocesan phase of the process. After several encounters via Zoom, Bishop Cullinan and the task force met in person at Holy Family Mission in Glencomeragh. The participants engaged in an opening exercise which helped them recognize and reflect on the giftedness of each person in attendance. Fr. Charlie Davy, S.J., then shared a reflection of Pope Francis on the importance of spiritual discernment and ways of distinguishing between the voice of God and the voice of the evil one. (see: Sunday Address of 4th May 2020, in *Aleteia*, May 2020). They also discussed the Synod of Jerusalem, 48AD noting the similarities between that important gathering of the early Church and the current Synod on Synodality.

During the other preparatory meetings, the task force followed a full business agenda, concentrating on several aspects of their responsibilities. These included, among others, the formation of questions and an agenda to be followed in the faith conversations. The diocese also opened an online forum to facilitate public engagement through the set of published questions which could be answered anonymously online.

There followed “pilot” meetings in urban and rural groups of parishes, followed by an evaluation session, based on the responses of the people who had participated in them. This resulted in certain modifications to the questions and the format of meetings in the parishes. A timetable of parish cluster consultations was then published and facilitators and recorders were recruited to conduct the small group conversations.

In addition, a specific set of questions was prepared to give transition year students in secondary schools the opportunity to offer their contributions to the synodal process. A representative group of such schools throughout the diocese participated in this way and their contributions have been included in this report.

By way of conclusion to the meetings process, Bishop Cullinan engaged with and received contributions from four diverse cultural communities within the diocese.

Their love for Christ, their active participation in the life of the parish community and their eagerness to evangelize were edifying and encouraging.

Throughout the faith conversations in the parishes, the task force members and the table facilitators were affirmed in their work by the honest and passionate engagement of the participants. Although there was no consensus on some of the issues, each person freely expressed their real-world view of the Church, pleased that their ideas were listened to and respected. Their appreciation of the relevance of the process and their commitment to the faith were noteworthy. This direct involvement of the people gave voice to the broad spectrum of Church issues that give them hope as well as concern. The willingness on the part of many to assume ownership in the process of revitalisation of parish life was valued as essential to continuing the journey together to build more vibrant faith communities.

‘Yes, I believe I have a role in the Church because I am the younger generation and the future of the parish’

Theme of ***Young People*** came up strongly during the conversations. 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 our Diocese. We need study groups with faith formation based on the Bible and Papal Encyclicals that contain rich spiritual nourishment. 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 peoples 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.

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. The Church should support the schools more on the ground, as young people like volunteering and being part of clubs/groups. 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.

They asked that the Church 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. This is one way of ensuring they are responsible and giving them a sense of 'belonging' to the Parish. Perhaps a Parish Youth Café could be organised in some places. Family days that include prayer was also mentioned as an option for encouraging young people to the practice of the faith. *'I see God active in my life in all the good things in my life. He is always there. He is present in friends, family and animals'.*

'Faith develops as you share'

Faith Formation was a big discussion point throughout all the gatherings. It was generally felt that religion was visible, 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.

‘We cannot remain where we were or do things as we always did. We need to move on!’

Vision for the Church was discussed in great detail. In faith, we must lead by example. Jesus is at the core of the Church. 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, e.g. family difficulties, funerals, etc. It is a balance of taking the Mass forward from Sunday to everyday life – *‘The Mass is ended, glorify the Lord by your life’*. 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. *‘I have a very positive view of the Church. For a time, I was borderline atheist but I stayed because I felt welcomed’*. 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. *‘Faith is in the heart first’*. 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.

We also need to realise that the Church has been through these difficulties before and has survived. Some asked the question if priests had been brainwashed previously? It used to be all ‘fire and brimstone’. Now it seems to be the opposite. Some reported that the Latin Mass was a good experience of Community where the priest was welcoming and engaging.

‘The Church must become 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. When it comes to the norms in today’s society, the Church is lagging behind. Any inaction will lead to alienation, especially when it comes to the youth.

We need a balance between conservative and liberal views. We also need to have gratitude for what is positive in our Church today.

The Ministry of Catechist needs to be looked at, especially as it is now recognised by Pope Francis - called upon in light of the Holy Spirit.

‘The Church needs to return to the teachings of Jesus, with love, communion and equality for all. We need to feel and act on what Pope Francis calls the urgency of passing on the Good News. Church is corrupt but the people are good’.

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.

Some felt that we journey with people of faith in our communities, not necessarily with the ‘Church’, where we look to the realities of today’s world. We need to reach out and support people who are struggling with their faith.

Others felt supported by teamwork, together with a strength that the Church gives a sense of belonging and friendship. Many felt that we may journey together as Church, but separate with divisions between ‘laity’ and ‘clergy’.

One lady felt very welcomed in her parish as a committed and spiritual lay person, but subsequently, ‘unrecognised’ when it came to being involved.

Some felt that this faith conversation exercise was done before with regard to the Pastoral Plan, but nothing changed! Authority is top-down.

Journeying together means inclusivity – of all family members – for example, same sex couples. If they are not included, they obviously will move away from the Church.

There are many lonely and disappointed people among us – it is a disease that is permeating the world. The Church needs to minister to them. If we are to journey together, the Diocese and Parishes need to communicate better information about local Church news as well as faith-based and local initiatives in their area. The loyalty and support of people involved in parish groups, like the Parish Pastoral Council, was prominent. Support for each other was also felt at Funerals and gatherings that involved people from the locality. When the priest is approachable, parishioners feel a sense of security and good guidance. Unfortunately, some felt a sense of being dealt with in a ‘hard fisted way’.

On the area of online services during Covid-19, it was felt that the sense of community has been curtailed a lot, and some people had not returned to in-person worship and parish life.

It was suggested that we have one large congregation at a Mass rather than a few small congregations at multiple Masses that are being celebrated at the same time.

The broad area of ***Hospitality*** came up in most gatherings. People need to be welcomed to their parishes and people need to be welcomed to Church when they gather for Mass/Sacraments etc. Coffee mornings after Mass would be one way to gather and share stories. Many felt that people now rush away to their cars and nobody has time to chat. Parish halls are important for this type of hospitality. If you have a welcome and a togetherness, new friends are made through Church. In some sense, they become a ‘Church family’.

It was also mentioned that the celebration of Mass could take place more outside of the Church building e.g. along the seashore.

‘Women feel isolated and undervalued’

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.

'On the train, it is sometimes bumpy but it is a good journey'.

Lay involvement in Church is now a crucial element to the Church and Parish survival. We have a duty to be involved by the grace of our baptism. Everyone has a role to play in the parish but it is up to each person to act out their role. Priests need to delegate more to the laity.

There are many ministries we can be involved in – Reader of the Word of God, Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, Baptism Teams, Parish Pastoral Council, Hospitality Team. Sometimes the priest acts like his parish is his ‘kingdom’. Sometimes, the lay people end up listening and observing.

Many parishioners are frustrated when their talents are not appreciated and valued.

The idea of having a parish manager was mentioned, where a lay person would manage the administrative areas of the parish, allowing the clergy to focus on the pastoral & sacramental side of parish life.

One difficulty and hurt among some, was when lay involvement in a Parish was undone as a result of a new priest being appointed to their parish and he would not take into consideration the good work that was already in progress by them. Some said that the Holy Spirit speaks through the laity, but it is the Bishop and the priests that do not listen.

It was also pointed out that when Our Lady appeared in Knock, Fatima and Lourdes, she appeared to lay people and not to priests. The priests need to realise that the laity need to be involved in their faith community in order for it to work as a faith community.

Lay structures need to be enhanced and revised with clear missions and guidelines incorporating training, recruitment and ongoing formation programmes.

'The Eucharist and Reconciliation are vital to the Church'.

The whole area of ***Liturgy*** also came to the fore during the conversations. It was mentioned that the Eucharist and Reconciliation were vital to the people of God. Not sharing the Blood of Christ from the chalice was perceived as stopping us from having the full Eucharistic experience of sharing the body and blood of Christ.

The Sacramental Preparation in schools was considered inadequate for a grounding in the Faith. There is no continuity between First Holy Communion and Confirmation.

The question of how many Children attend Mass after these Sacraments was also mentioned a few times. It was suggested that a parish based 'pilot' programme be organised and take the Sacramental preparation into the parish, review it and then report back on how it worked. It was felt that in doing this, the whole idea of involving children and parents more in a parish would work better.

Children and young people are often turned off by insensitive preaching by the priest. It was felt that the Church is not connected to the language of young people. Involving youth in the ministries was another way of helping them understand the Liturgy. Sermons could be given by lay people, men and women, as well as clergy. Church needs to have a more social engagement, like the Evangelicals. Jesus sent out people 'two by two'. In Ireland, we are now in missionary territory, but we have no faith spreaders to spread the word of God.

Working with other faith denominations was also a discussion point. We would all learn from each other. Many felt connected the Liturgy by their involvement in the various ministries. One student mentioned that they felt Mass for was 'old people' – it was not modern enough for young people and they found it difficult to connect to it. Mass can appear to be long and boring and not understood by so many, therefore formation needs to be paramount so that people understand it.

Funerals should now be allowed to come back to having the removal on the evening before. This practice was stopped during the Covid period. Eucharistic Adoration needs to be promoted more. Small gatherings at the Easter ceremonies this year showed that the people are moving away from the Church. We need to have retreats, e.g. Life in the Spirit Seminars.

Lay led liturgy needs to be introduced urgently due to the shortfall in vocations. A Liturgy of the Word on the days where a priest is not available would be very beneficial rather than a sign on the door saying "No Mass today!"

Communication is key in these days of modern technology. There is room for a greater communication process in the Church – a greater expression of thought. The genuine voice of the people must reach the highest level within the Church and inform future direction, commencing with this synodal process and urgently at diocesan level. Diocesan Communications and planning require review and reform at this point.

A co-ordinated and professionally resourced model of media at national and cross diocesan level promoting the Church in the community would be welcome.

The Synodal Process itself was also discussed. The idea of set questions was said to be ‘framed’ and a few participants felt they were not allowed to say what exactly was on their minds. Some said the experience was welcomed, but they hoped that the answers would be listened to and acted upon. Many said they were there because they cared about the Church. The Synodal process to date suffered from a communications deficit and lack of uniformity of information.

‘Who will replace us ageing people when we are gone?’

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. 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.

Faith conversations also took place with the *diverse cultural communities* in our Diocese. Some felt that they were not made feel so welcome, and they had more involvement in their own faith communities in their various ministries. The language barrier is also a factor for consideration. They have Rosary every week which engages them as a faith community. More work is needed with their young people to ensure their involvement and the continuation of the faith. Adult faith development would also be welcome through various seminars, with the Catechism having a role, but making it more simplified. It was noted that attitude to faith is nurtured through life experience and the parish community. Models of faith from the older generation help to nurture the younger people. Maintaining the Sacraments, Sunday Eucharist and Confession are important. Children follow their parents blindly in the faith, but do not necessarily understand it. It was felt that the Catholic Mass does not encourage any interaction like other faith cultures. Social media plays a part in the disconnect of young people to the Church these days.

In Ireland, the predominant focus on a Sunday is centred on sport, therefore, young people are not attracted to attending their Sunday worship. Prayer in our daily life, guided by the Holy Spirit, should become more important than secular attractions.

Discordant views also came through. 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.

Due to falloff in numbers, parishes are now facing ongoing financial burden, and therefore there is a shortfall in funding to pay necessary parish staff. Buildings and general property maintenance absorb available funds. It was also stated that there was no follow up on the Diocesan Pastoral Plan, where communication on this was poor or non-existent.

So now we reach the ***conclusion*** to our Synthesis. The Synodal process has been a positive experience from a Church that puts its hope in a more vibrant and collaborative expression of faith filled and joyful communities. We are all aware of the challenges that face us, but we trust in the Holy Spirit to ensure that the faith continues to be nurtured and shared.

Prayer was mentioned as being the one thing that we 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.

We bring all these themes to the Synodal table with trust in the Holy Spirit to guide the Church as we move forward together. Our fervent prayer as members of the Church in the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore is to accompany the entire Church in this ongoing and Spirit-led journey.

'Whoever has ears, let him listen to what the Spirit is saying' Revelations 2:7