



## DISCERNMENT

By Rt. Rev. Mark Davies, Bishop of Shrewsbury

In response to the written contributions

### A TIME FOR LISTENING

It is a challenging moment when someone asks us to stop and listen. This has been Pope Francis's challenge to us. A challenge, first and foremost to enter into reverent silence before God which is the prayer of adoration.<sup>i</sup> Through such prayer we become more attentive to the spiritual and material need around us. In the words of the Apostle James, *"It is for us to be ready listeners ..."*<sup>ii</sup>

I wish to thank everyone who has contributed written reflections in this time of listening with such evident love for the Church and concern for her mission. The numbers who took part in meetings or chose to submit personal written reflections may have been relatively small. However, the fruitfulness of our listening depends on our renewed attentiveness to the Lord, and many will have shared this prayer. In the synthesis brought together by a lay team coordinated by Barbara Davies, as Diocesan Lead and Canon Jonathan Brandon, the Episcopal Vicar for Mission and Evangelisation, we can hear voices ranging from those of young children in our primary schools, to some of our most elderly parishioners. If at times, we hear contradictory or discordant voices, we can also recognise a shared desire to be more faithful to the mission which Christ entrusted to His Church.

### A TIME FOR DISCERNMENT

'Discernment' is a word Pope Francis often uses. It means being able to recognise and choose what is truly good. That is why the Holy Father warns in his Apostolic Exhortation *"Rejoice and be Glad"*.<sup>iii</sup> that we need *"... to know if something comes from the Holy Spirit or if it stems from the spirit of the world or the spirit of the devil."* The Holy Father insists, *"without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend"*.<sup>iv</sup> This is far from being a new challenge, as the Apostle Paul had urged the first generation of Christians *"Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to know the will of God, and know what is good, acceptable and perfect."*<sup>v</sup> We need to understand the world of our day, yet the spirit of our time (zeitgeist) can mislead us into embracing what only appears to be good. We will find a sure guide in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the Popes who followed the Council. For Our Lord promised we would never be alone in discernment as the Holy Spirit would keep His Church in all truth and remind us of all that He taught.<sup>vi</sup> The Gospel describes people being struck by the awesome authority with which Jesus Himself spoke. It is with this same authority that His Catholic Church has spoken for 20 centuries on all things necessary for salvation. It is to Christ's voice in the Church that we need be attentive, since as Saint John Henry Newman beautifully wrote, *"Holy Church is his creation, and her teachings are his own"*.<sup>vii</sup>

### KNOWING WHAT DISCERNMENT IS FOR

The purpose of all this teaching which bears divine authority, is to help each of us reach the goal of our lives, which is for every one of us to become a saint which is to finally reach the goal of Heaven. The Second Vatican Council reminded us that all the Baptised must strive in every state and walk of life to attain by God's grace, the perfection of charity and the fulness of the Christian life.<sup>viii</sup> Right belief (orthodoxy) would be insufficient without this striving for holiness. In times when the Christian moral path is often rejected or misunderstood, it would be a fatal mistake to think that diluting or obscuring the Christian moral vision will help souls or see better results in our mission.

## A NEW FAITHFULNESS

The need for renewed faithfulness has strongly emerged from this discernment. I hear the pain expressed at the falling away of children and grandchildren from the life of the Church. We all feel deeply the pain of scandals and unfaithfulness to vocations. This must lead us to a desire for an even greater faithfulness in every vocation. In my first Pastoral Letter, I echoed the heartfelt prayer of the first Apostles who said, “*Lord, increase our faith!*”<sup>ix</sup> Greater faith and faithfulness will always be the greatest need of our Diocese.<sup>x</sup> The founding generation of this Shrewsbury Diocese turned to Mary as the Help of Christians in their desire to be always faithful; and with renewed devotion to Our Lady, we must seek this same faithfulness. Through every changing scene and circumstance may we be able to say to the Lord with her, “... *let it be to me according to your word*”.<sup>xi</sup>

## A DEEPER COMMUNION

Many have expressed how necessary an on-going doctrinal and spiritual formation is to deepen our communion with Christ and His Church and enable us to understand and live our Catholic faith better. This leads me to task the Diocesan Department for Mission and Evangelisation to provide new opportunities for adult formation as our priority in preparation for the Synod of Bishops in October 2023. I also ask, as several have requested, that we have new opportunities to come to a deeper understanding of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council beginning with *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

## GREATER PARTICIPATION

It was good to hear of priests and lay people working together. This has been the great strength of our parishes. It was moving to read personal accounts of such working during the pandemic when teams of volunteers enabled the re-opening of our churches and the life and worship of parishes to continue. We have different vocations, but we recognise that everyone is called to participate in the vast fields of apostolate and mission which is contemporary British society. We know that unless each of us is striving for holiness there can be no effective mission and we know that this mission is inclusive of us all since “Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord Himself”.<sup>xii</sup>

## A TIME FOR MISSION

The many practical proposals made for mission indicate a desire to fulfil the lay apostolate for the transformation of our society; and the desire to reach as many souls as possible. Renewed commitment to mission invites us to put our energies into a thousand paths of outward-looking apostolates. It is the Lord who is again sending us into every town and every place where He Himself is to come.<sup>xiii</sup> This has been the call of a New Evangelisation in our de-Christianised western world.

## “WITHOUT ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING” (Jn. 15: 5)

In your submissions, there are also striking calls to return to the Person of Christ and place Him at the centre. Pope Francis reminded us at the beginning of his pontificate that when Christ is not at the centre, everything goes wrong, even when we set out with the best of intentions.<sup>xiv</sup> At the outset of my own service of the Diocese twelve years ago, I took these words of Saint John’s Gospel as the motto for our time, “*Nothing without Christ*” (Nihil Sine Christo). In daily prayer and by frequenting the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, we will come to know more deeply the primacy of Christ and our vital need of union with Him. If this time of listening in the Diocese leaves a legacy, it will surely be found in our renewed striving for holiness and participation in mission. This must be accompanied by the unflinching conviction which Our Lord wanted us to have in giving us the Holy Eucharist: “*Without me you can do nothing.*”<sup>xv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. Homily of Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synodal Path, 10th October 2021

<sup>ii</sup> Jas. 1:19

<sup>iii</sup> Gaudete et Exsultate 2018

<sup>iv</sup> Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis Gaudete et Exsultate no. 166 & 167

<sup>v</sup> Rom. 12:2

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Jn. 16: 13 & 14: 26

<sup>vii</sup> Firmly I believe and truly

<sup>viii</sup> Cf. Lumen Gentium Chapter 5

<sup>ix</sup> Luke 17:5

<sup>x</sup> Cf. Pastoral Letter 3rd October 2010

<sup>xi</sup> Lk. 1:38

<sup>xii</sup> The Second Vatican Council Lumen Gentium no. 33

<sup>xiii</sup> Cf. Lk. 10: 1 & The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People of the Second Vatican Council Apostolicam Actuositatem no. 33

<sup>xiv</sup> Cf. Audience 16th March 2013

<sup>xv</sup> Jn. 15: 5

## THE SYNODAL PATHWAY 2021-2023

### A Synthesis of the Responses to Pope Francis' invitation to take part in the Synodal Process, 'Journeying Together'

#### Stage One: The Listening Process

##### Introduction: A rereading of the experience of Synodality

The Synodal Journey in Shrewsbury Diocese, England, got off to a slow start. Its Ordinary, Bishop Mark Davies, published two Pastoral Letters<sup>1</sup> about it which were to be read at all Masses. Both Letters were published on the Diocesan web site, together with Rome's time-table for the process. They informed clergy and people of Pope Francis' invitation, and how things would unfold in the universal Church and in the Diocese. Out of respect for the Holy Father and the Synodal Process, Bishop Mark published the entire 10 themes as they came from the Synod Office<sup>2</sup>; for those for whom a simpler approach might be helpful, however, he added 4 questions by way of introduction. Clearly distinguished from those from Rome, the latter were in accord with Pope Francis' desire to explore people's experience of the effects of the Covid pandemic over the last two years in the local church, particularly in what concerned **Communion, Participation, and Mission**. Pope Francis indicated these as the three necessary components of a Synodal Church which should be kept in mind as the purpose of the whole process: *"Enlightened by the Word of God and united in prayer, we will be able to discern the processes to seek God's will and pursue the pathways to which God calls us – towards deeper communion, fuller participation, and greater openness to fulfilling our mission in the world"*<sup>3</sup>.

While people could if they wished submit individual and even anonymous responses directly to Bishop Mark, he asked his collaborators, the clergy, to organise the listening phase according to local conditions. As early as October 2021, several parish priests and deacons made significant efforts to inform parishioners of the process to help them enter into what Pope Francis had asked. They sent out emails, explained in homilies and invited people to meetings to engage in the listening stage of the process. As one of the priests said: "We sent out 250 questionnaires by email; 4 replies came back, which was one more than the number who turned up for a meeting!"

This response on the part of the people was, at first, a notable experience in many parishes. Some priests were surprised – perhaps even a little exasperated – that after repeated references to the Synodal Process in homilies as a prelude to meetings, members of their congregations still said they had never heard of Synodality! When asked why there was so little interest in what seemed to other parishioners to be a vital and invigorating innovation, not a few parishioners gave reasons which are also recorded in individual submissions: They were happy with things as they were, and did not want the Church to change; they did not like going to meetings where their voice would not be heard; they were still nervous of the presence of Covid and wondered why this whole exercise was being proposed at this time. In other parishes, however, people responded enthusiastically to the invitation to take part in a series of meetings. In one case, an average of 30 people attended each of 4 meetings and gave "many hundreds of reflections" expressing the number and depth of their concerns. No doubt there are many people throughout the Diocese who have been involved in collecting and collating responses.

There were, however, parishes in which the laity asked their priests to set things in motion, to send out questions for reflection and invite people to meetings; but nothing happened. At times despondent, people either sent in individual submissions or gathered in small groups with family, friends and other parishioners. Several of these did not name their parish. Elsewhere, meetings were arranged very late in the day, by which time people were showing more interest in the process. Submissions spoke of between 2–30 people being present, occasionally more.

As to the submissions themselves, they were extremely varied. Some parishes and individuals meticulously followed the 10 sections set out by Pope Francis<sup>4</sup> and/or Bishop Mark's 4 questions<sup>5</sup>; others drew up their own questionnaires which, although simpler, did not meet with universal approval from parishioners. Several parishes collated all the responses and sent them in as a single submission; others forwarded separately each individual response to their parish questionnaire. While this variety is immensely rich, it does make offering an exact estimate of the number of people who participated in the process rather difficult. Submissions varied in length, ranging from several short, very simple, sometimes hand-written notes, to 11 printed pages (from one individual), and 25 printed pages (from one parish). Clearly, choices had to be made as to how many distinct statements could find their way into this report the length of which was fixed by the Synod Office in Rome. It can safely be said that a great number of responses called for change, though not always in the same direction.

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<sup>1</sup> Appendices 1 and 2

<sup>2</sup> Vademecum 5:3

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* 1.2

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* 5:3

<sup>5</sup> Appendix 2

There was a considerable divergence of views about Synodality itself. One person voiced the eager view of many: *“I am grateful for the opportunity to say what I think. I pray that Pope Francis’ desires will be fulfilled”* (140). Others hoped their comments would be read by Bishop Mark and heard by Pope Francis. One wrote: *“A (synodal) root-and-branch approach is what is needed if the Catholic Church in the West is not to decline into irrelevance and dwindle towards extinction .... This will not be easy”* (117). Others, however, had considerable reservations. In conversation, a convert to Catholicism said: *“I left a church torn apart by Synodality. I fear for the future of the Catholic Church if it goes down that path”*. Another person asked: *“In all of this, where is the reference to the Cross, to obedience and to suffering? I haven’t found it in any of the documents. Christ rose from the dead, but he first had to suffer and to die. We must listen to the Holy Spirit first”* (236).

Detailed figures cannot be given for the number and characteristics of participants in every parish as they were in general not provided. The following overview may be offered:

Number of Parishes in the Diocese of Shrewsbury	89 <sup>6</sup>
Entire (pre-Covid) Catholic Population	191,555 <sup>7</sup>
Number of (pre-Covid) Mass attendees	27,120
Total number of submissions	245
From single or combined parishes	52
From individuals, small groups, families, schools, etc.	193
Participating Parishes as a % of the total number	59%
A non-scientific estimate of the number of participants	1,620
Participants as a % of the entire (pre-Covid) Catholic population	1%
Participants as a % of the (pre-Covid) Mass-going population	6%

No data will be given as to how many people said what. This is out of respect for Pope Francis’ expressed wish that the Synodal Process not be seen as the gathering of information in an opinion poll, and that local churches do not engage in a politicised exercise in democracy: *“(Avoid) the temptation to treat the Synod as a kind of a parliament. This confuses synodality with a ‘political battle’ in which, in order to govern, one side must defeat the other. It is contrary to the spirit of synodality to antagonize others or to encourage divisive conflicts that threaten the unity and communion of the Church”*<sup>8</sup>.

All original documents will be deposited in the diocesan archives. Each submission was given a reference number on the date of its arrival. In keeping with Data Protection, no means of identifying its origin was available to those who assisted in the drawing up of this synthesis. Any use of a direct reference (e.g. to age, sex or marital status) was only made if this was an integral part of the person’s response.

Pope Francis has asked that this report not be a simple list of each of the comments made, but rather a reading of the picture they give. Since there were, in fact, many repetitions, what follows is a representative selection of submissions gleaned from written reports of meetings (large or small) and individuals, or in conversations.

As has been said, many people expressed their gratitude to Pope Francis for the opportunity to express their concerns for the Church, both universal and local. Since this stage of the Synodal Process is one of listening profoundly to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church in Shrewsbury, the final discernment of what that is belongs to its Chief Shepherd, Bishop Mark Davies to whom, together with the College of Bishops as Successors of the College of Apostles, the grace is given.

May the Mother of the Word, she who “kept all these things in her heart”, help us all not only to listen but to hear.

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This synthesis was produced by the Synodal Diocesan Lead appointed by the Bishop, Miss Barbara Davies, and the Episcopal Vicar for Mission and Evangelisation, Canon Jonathan Brandon, with the collaboration of 4 laywomen and 2 laymen. They attest that it is an honest and balanced presentation of the Diocesan submissions in the listening phase of the Synodal Process, ‘Journeying Together’. Bishop Mark Davies, who read each of the submissions as they arrived by letter or by email, received the synthesis on Thursday, 31st March, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics from Shrewsbury Diocesan Year Book, 2022

<sup>7</sup> Pre-Covid figures of 2019 are used as they give a more accurate picture of the Diocese

<sup>8</sup> *Vademecum*, 2.4 pt.8 ‘Avoiding pitfalls’

**“A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together’:  
How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your particular church?  
What steps does the Spirit invite us to take to grow in our ‘journeying together’?”**

**I. COMMUNION**

Some spoke of the deep, supernatural, meaning of “*true communion*” as being with the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit, source of communion with each other in the Church: “*(It) is the fruit of a life lived in Christ surrendered to him. It is a grace that cuts through every human divide making all one in Him. A unity between those in holy orders, religious life and laity, male and female persons, young and old, black and white, rich and poor and every culture under heaven ...*” (138). But this sense of communion, was not commonly expressed, many seeing it as simply **belonging to the Church**. Many spoke of how much they appreciated being members of the Catholic Church, what comfort it gave them to be able to receive the Sacraments and meet with like-minded people. It “*means quite simply everything*” (175). People were especially glad to be able to come together again after the two years of Covid-restrictions. They felt it important to “*belong to something both local and universal*” (175). They found the Church “*friendly, welcoming*”; one woman said her husband “*converted due to the warmth and inclusivity of our parish*” (95). The youngest contributor, an 8yr old little girl, wrote that when she comes to church she “*feels welcome and it’s a happy place*”; she enjoys children’s liturgy “*when I am reading and I’m involved*”. Asked if she behaved in certain ways because of her faith, she wrote, “*Yes, I try to do good things and make the best choices*” (229).

While one parish substituted ‘**community**’ for Communion (65) because this made more sense to them, others interpreted communion to mean the need to be more democratic (42, 46). Most however limited their answers to **Holy Communion**, of the sadness of not being able to receive the Lord during lockdown, but of finding the prayer for spiritual communion extremely helpful. Some said that the whole Covid experience had increased their love and desire to receive the Eucharist (131, 175). Others thought “*no one should be deprived of receiving the Eucharist*” (133, 125). One submission recalled a statistic: “*In a 2019 survey (USA), 69% of all self-identified Catholics said they believed the bread and wine at Mass were only ‘symbols’ of the body and blood of Jesus. Only 31% believed in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist known as transubstantiation*” (66) Another claimed it was the same in this country: “*Most church-going Catholics do not believe in the real presence in the Eucharist*” (11).

Contact with the **Bishop** raised some issues: Whilst great admiration for him and his leadership was voiced, others had a different experience: “*The dominant feeling amongst parishioners is that the diocese is too ‘remote’ – a word used in numerous responses*” (177); “*We need more input from our Bishop. It would be helpful to have the Bishop’s letters read out in church. Most people don’t take a copy or read it at home and don’t see the Bishop for years*” (218). “*The parish depends greatly on the Diocese for support but this is very often lacking and difficult to access*” (236). “*As Church and Parish Communities, we will always need nourishment and encouragement*” (211), wrote one. Another: “*The Sheep need to know that the Shepherd (bishop or a priest) cares for them, listens to their needs and concerns, is not too distant and remote, and shows effective leadership. I make this point in general terms, in the interests of trying to promote an intentional mindset in terms of proactive visibility and availability*” (97).

Concerns were repeatedly raised about the relationship between **parish clergy and laity**. Positively, many people expressed appreciation of their priests in general and real concern for their well-being. They recognised that priests can be overwhelmed by the work of, say, two parishes plus at times diocesan responsibilities. Many thought priests should also be allowed to marry if they wished, taking on marriage and family responsibilities (e.g. 7, 114, 115, 117, 125, 141). One person admitted having “*mixed feelings about this, as it would involve additional commitments*” (237), the consequences of which were foreseen by another: “*Priests should be allowed to marry, but there’d have to be a relaxation of contraception as who’d support their children?*” (175). One answer was voiced often: “*If all our wonderful priests are busy being priests, what are we the people doing? ... I have seen the few leading the many. How wonderful to be part of a church ready and able to be in partnership with the priest. We, the Laity, are waiting to be asked*” (75).

In general, there was an appeal for “**far greater and more open collaboration between priests, bishops and the faithful**” (213). This was a rather typical complaint: “*Too often a vibrant parish community is squashed when a controlling parish priest is appointed. Do/could clergy have training in ‘community participation’ approaches and techniques?*” (197). Many felt the role of the laity is neither acknowledged nor nurtured, nor are they encouraged and formed to fulfil their role: “*Very few (priests) understand the true meaning of the role of the laity or that to be baptised means a serious call to holiness... How many priests fulfil the task that falls to them to acknowledge and foster the role of the lay faithful?*” (138). “*Attitudes of the clergy need to radically change to see the role of the laity as mainstream and not subservient members and (to) realise the value of the baptismal call as equals in following Christ*” (19). “*The Church is too clerical. Too often an ignorant priest tells a well-informed lay person: ‘I know what I’m talking about because I am a priest, and you don’t know anything because you are not ordained... It is in the short-term interest of the hierarchy*

that the laity be ignorant... as a result there are few laity who have any competence in theology, philosophy or scripture; laity are generally intimidated by clergy and terrified of standing up to them when they are manifestly wrong" (28). "Clerical power needs to be balanced by a co-responsible laity working together as teams" (122).

The issue of **abuse** still looms large: "Like so many throughout the world, I am ashamed at how clerical abuse was allowed to continue by keeping priests in active service and covering up for them" (115). "The (lack of) trust is now a problem and it has marginalised many" (62). "Fresh, open and immediate dialogues among all members of the Church, old and young, are imperative to bring about a transformation" (234).

On the **broader theme of Communion**, one parish noted: "32% of respondents want more fellowship; 42% want more opportunities to grow in faith; and 20% want more teaching and guidance" (176). The question of **on-going adult formation** emerged as a recurrent theme in this context, sometimes with a note of sadness: "I know of many other decent, deep-thinking people who have lapsed over the last few years because the Church has failed at a profound level to nurture and develop their faith, but rather has done one thing after another to erode it. When they asked for bread, they were given lumps of rock. When they asked for fish, they were given a serpent" (28). The desire is **not only for intellectual but truly spiritual formation**: "Can it be said that the Church has fulfilled the promise made to each person at Baptism?" (138). "How well are we meeting people's spiritual needs and their personal relationship with God? There is a treasure trove of Catholic spirituality to be opened up" (106). Someone pleaded, "Encourage the recitation of the rosary. It is a powerful instrument as history shows" (239). "There is a need for pastoral councils, people trained in spiritual direction, and counselling to support and mentor" (131). "We all require continued education. Good Catholic teaching on the Magisterium and the Catechism will be very hard to achieve but maybe this is the way forward" (109).

In keeping with the idea of Synodality as '**journeying together**', one person wrote: "Being on a journey means we need a good map; without it we will get lost. We have the Bible and the Catechism... How can I understand unless someone shows me?" (12). Another expressed severe reservations: "Not sure I want to walk on the journey with the Catholic Church.... The ignorance of catechists and refusal to acknowledge justifiable concerns at a corporate and personal level are disturbing. The mystical body of Christ has quite literally been trodden underfoot by the profane and illiterate. I do not trust a process of collecting opinions to guide the mystical body of the Church. I have heard the strident and ignorant for as long as I can remember" (94).

Not a few submissions called for a **greater inclusion in the Communion of the Church** for those who are divorced and remarried and for LGBT persons. A parish submission noted: "It is clear some people feel excluded or fear they may be excluded from the community and so do not benefit from this sense of community and belonging. One person feared they would not be made welcome. Those on the margins felt the obstacles to their re-connecting with the Church were being divorced and remarried, co-habitation, being in a gay relationship" (65). For many, the Church's attitude towards such people gives an impression of exclusivity which, for them, Jesus himself did not manifest. One went as far as to say: "My friends (some of whom were raised Catholic) who are gay or divorced don't just feel marginalised, they feel condemned" (194). A submission from some self-professed "Catholics on the fringes" (aged between 15-50) gave various reasons for not being involved in the Church: some "disagreed with the Church on moral issues", others found it "irrelevant to their lives"; they didn't 'reconnect' due to "a lack of time", and "not feeling welcome because of life circumstances"; they perhaps would return "if the Church were more modern, inclusive... tolerant of divorced or gay people" (125). Sadly, one person with learning difficulties said he or she no longer went to church "because no one would miss me" (112).

There was also an account of **one person's experience of the Church** from which he or she expected to be excluded: "When I returned to the Church after 30 years, I thought I might have to go to another Christian denomination as I might not be accepted due to all the rules and regulations. But I received such healing in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and was welcomed on an Alpha course. I was so mistaken. In fact, many of my previously strongly held views have mellowed considerably thanks to the healing of the Holy Spirit" (189). Although there were repeated calls for the Church to change her moral teachings, including one person saying if the Church is not going to change her teaching then she should explain why not, there were still others who like this person said, "Just leave things alone.... Simply live the Gospel... No negatives. I always feel welcome" (125).

As to those in **precarious situations**, often little is needed, but when it is missing people do feel excluded: "Listening is an act of love. Many people in society and in the Church are not heard and their contribution to society and the Church is overlooked and not valued" (197). "In our parish, 99% of people are on the margins," wrote someone, "our schoolchildren and their families; the drug user who says 'where would we be without our faith?'; the young man who has never been to church since he left primary school and yet knocks on the door and asks to borrow a bible; the woman in the street who often asks questions about our faith that she never understood before; the women in our parish who see – and have done all their lives – a totally male dominance in the Church" (196).

People suggested that in parishes divided between **cultural or language groups** "social events both inside and outside the church could help... They could bring back (the isolated or non-practicing) ... We need to seek them out and not assume that they no longer wish to be part of the Church" (226).

**To sum up:** *"The people's hope is that the themes of reform, renewal, and reaching out ... may be truly embedded in a pastoral and theological vision for the local and universal Church. This vision might be the beginning, it is hoped, of a genuine and humble engagement with the marginalised, those on the peripheries and those who no longer feel a connection with the Church"* (147).

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## II PARTICIPATION

**"Synod is both a gift and task.** *It reawakens us to the challenges and responsibilities traced out by Vatican II; its aim is to exhort people that we, as children of God, share a common dignity and vocation by virtue of our baptism. The fact that we have received the same baptism bestows on us (the) same privilege and responsibility to participate in the life of the Church"* (244). By Baptism, we each participate sacramentally in Christ's mission as Priest, Prophet, King; yet this is far from what most people expressed as Participation. One submission reflected on this and suggested a way forward: *"Priest, Prophet and King – sadly most Catholics won't even have heard of this. It is the beginning of a relationship with Jesus Christ via Life in the Spirit Seminars, Alpha, Sycamore, Café materials, etc. that people want, to know more and go deeper in the faith journey. The fruits of this relationship can change a parish, make it a much more inviting and hospitable place to be nurtured on our journey, but also to want to share with those starting the journey. The fruits of evangelisation can make the difference from 'maintaining' a surviving parish to a thriving community"* (232).

There were passionate calls for **greater openness to the life-experiences of many lay persons**. Some feel that *"the Church simply doesn't understand their lives or even come close to meeting them where they are"* (245). Others called for more sustained collaboration between clergy and laity to allow for greater participation in all parish life. *"I dream of a Church where the parish is the genuine hub of the community... vibrant, nurturing alive with faith and a desire to share joy with everyone... of a reduction in clericalism so that the laity may make a larger contribution and not merely do what Father wants, and priests lead by encouraging their flock to be fully active and to take ownership and responsibility, rather than trying to maintain personal control"* (163). There were requests for well-functioning Parish Councils as a means of greater collaboration, and a desire that parishioners be given more financial oversight in the community: *"Hierarchical structure is self-serving rather than supportive of the discipleship of the faithful... incapable of recognising the value of listening to the insights of the laity... There's an absence of effective structures for lay participation"* (67). *"We need to be guiding (the laity) into leadership roles"* (19).

Continuity in parishes would, it was said, be improved by this **greater participation of the laity**. Some even spoke of a fear of speaking out: *"There are no permanent routes of communication between clergy and laity in a parish. Each priest who comes has a different vision and way of engaging with parishioners, and the parish must submit to the whim of the priest... There seems to be little support for lay leadership... although this could provide continuity for the parish despite the disruption of priests changing so often"* (131). Others suggested the need to discern charisms and apply the principle of subsidiarity in parishes (133).

To enable this participation, there were **repeated requests for the on-going formation of the laity**. This should be both doctrinal and spiritual, starting with Scripture: *"For many who attend Mass, the Bible is a closed book... Could strategies be developed to encourage more interest in Scripture and make it more accessible... Perhaps home liturgies could be developed... People struggle to talk about God because they don't have the language. The spirituality of most people is not being fed. The Church is not doing enough"* (106). Several people asked for a return to the teaching of the Council, one even made a direct suggestion that there be *"a mini course in the diocese on Vatican II, the reasons why John XXIII called it and what happened in the aftermath"* (139). Another wrote: *"How can we increase co-responsibility in the Church? By a renewed and on-going formation for both clergy and laity to the real teaching of Lumen Gentium as to... the universal call to holiness"* (180).

**Regarding the Mass**, there were appeals to *"make it more accessible"* by celebrating it *"later and via live-streaming"* (125), even though it was recognised that the latter is not the same as being physically present. Many said how much they had missed being able to attend Mass during Covid, but had discovered live-streaming as a way of doing so, especially for the elderly and the housebound, and asked that this possibility continue as *"an outreach opportunity for those who want to engage with the Church in a different way"* (40). For many, it was also a delight to be able to find rich spiritual homilies in other parishes and even in other parts of the world. Many said the standard of liturgical celebrations needs to be evaluated. For example, one submission lamented the present situation as a 'culture of minimalism': *"So many parishes exist as minimalist places of faith practice.... The quality of most homilies is quite shocking. The Scriptures are rarely broken in the Mass, meaning the congregation is ill-prepared in the moment to enter the Eucharist"* (138). Another even suggested this as a possible explanation for less candidates to the priesthood: *"Is it any wonder there is a crisis in vocations? If this mindset and culture of minimalism, neglect of homiletics and formation of the laity, let alone the evangelisation of the wider community, forms the basis of how priests are formed. Why would the Lord call more young men to this?"* (106).

There were several calls for the wider use of the **1962 Missal and availability of the Latin Mass**, one request being typical of others: *"I would be grateful if there was a Latin Mass near me. At present I have to drive a long way to attend one"* (240). Another wrote: *"It's strange to hear all this talk about inclusivity. The Latin Mass is being reigned in, the liberals aren't"*

(133). Others challenged the translation of the texts used presently at Mass, believing it to be off-putting especially for the young. In one parish, “...the value of music and singing for helping people feel part of the celebration was emphasised, though some people prefer a quieter experience!” (245).

It was in the context of Participation that reflections on **the role of women in the Church** were most prominent; this was usually prefaced by a call for equality between men and women, clergy and lay. People want less power for the clergy, and more power for women as priests. “There is an urgent need to include women in the sacramental ministry and decision-making processes of the Church” (67). “The laity (need) to offer and be given a greater role in the activities and organisation of the Church, with a greater role for women” (56). “Among the obstacles to mission is the place of women in the Church which is perceived as misogyny” (101). One parish articulated their reasons for a call for women priests and married priests: “These ideas are not simply a response to a shortage of priests; it was felt that for the Church to be truly representative of everyone and all walks of life, it was essential to explore these possibilities” (225); it was, however, also acknowledged that there was divergence of views on these issues: “Not everyone agreed with this, and the way the Church’s position on male celibate priests had developed over centuries was outlined” (ibid). Someone cautioned: “‘Laicising the clergy’ and/or ‘clericalizing the laity’ (men or women!) is not the answer. Apart from the Orthodox, other denominations have tried these things (married clergy, the ordination of women) and have discovered that this still doesn’t bring people back into their congregations” (180).

The **presence/absence and participation of young people** were also an area of great concern. A response from Primary School Children noted that “they felt being listened to helped them to grow in an awareness of the love of God in their lives”. It must be remembered that “Children like to know the weight of things and actions – explain the use of the vestments, why water and wine, standing-kneeling during Mass, the bell at the consecration, etc.” (214).

Many expressed their sadness that there were so **few teenagers at Mass**, a challenge which calls for a combined effort. A former Catholic teacher wrote, “It is very hard work nurturing children if parish life is barren and parental support lacking. There needs to be real, genuine collaboration at all levels” (211). On the same topic of collaboration with schools, one person wrote: “We need to allow young people to have a voice and become leaders in the parish. We have two excellent schools, but we need to include them more and they us in the future vision of parish ministry” (199). One problem is obvious for parents of teenagers: the timing of Mass, given that youngsters face so many other weekend demands, namely sport, and that they do not want to stand out from their peers. A mother pleads: “There is vital need for an evening Sunday Mass” (175). As to whether the Mass as boring for teenagers, an interesting idea was advanced: “It might help the younger generation if they thought that we, adults, were moved by the experience and then perhaps it wouldn’t be boring for them” (155). “We have very talented young people in our community that do nothing. Get them involved in prayer and praise, music and drama, bring them back to church otherwise there will not be a future generation within the church as our community is mainly elderly people” (242). A young professional, a convert to Catholicism, wrote that she was drawn to it by “the reality of Christ in the Eucharist”, adding that people “... are attracted to Mass because there’s something within more Real than anything else on the Earth” (151).

There is both a need for youngsters to develop their faith and engage in **social causes**: “In order for our young people to grow into adult Christians, there is a strong need for them to be able to question their faith with people who understand their point of view” (172). “To attract young people and children, we need a range of different kinds of service to others, e.g. raising money for good causes, involvement in social action, human rights’ issues, etc.” (52).

A generally acknowledged and observable fact was underlined: **young people are looking elsewhere for their spiritual development**: “There is a great need to educate and form our laity about what the Church teaches and why. Many young people are seeking meaning in their lives and will spend hours listening to talks on YouTube and other media sources to feed this need” (182). “The church has all these wonderful riches but we do not proclaim these nor explain them” (ibid). A warning was given: “People seeking God – especially young people – are not typically convinced or attracted by something which they cannot clearly distinguish from the ‘every day’... they seek something distinct, clear and which takes them out of the world, even if briefly” (185). These writers and others went on to cite what several curious observers have noted today: “Many young people have flocked to the Latin Mass to try and find truth and meaning” (30). “Many have been truly captivated and have opened their eyes and hearts as a result of an encounter with the traditional liturgy and the traditional practices of the faith” (185). “Encourage the traditional Mass, it attracts young people and encourages vocations and conversions” (238).

Finally, **Ecumenism** was mentioned several times in the responses, largely expressing the desire for greater union between Christian denominations. An Anglican-Roman Catholic group, wanting to work better ecumenically, asked if “it is not possible for the Catholic Church to allow Anglicans to receive the Eucharist since we all believe in the Real Presence?” (167). Others articulated some caution, however: “Do as much as possible together, but avoid syncretism” (131), wrote one. Another pointed out: “We need to recognise that other denominations really do not believe what we do about the Church; the Eucharist and the other Sacraments; Mary and the Saints; the bishops – including the bishop of Rome!” (180). A convert from Protestantism wrote: “The Protestant Rebellion ushered in ecclesial communities which were, in essence, self-governing and at the ‘mercy’ of leaders of society, be it national or local congregations. There was, and indeed still is, a deep-seated suspicion of any hierarchical form of church government” (27).

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### III. MISSION

**Baptism commits each person to engage in the Mission of the Church** since she exists, as St Pope Paul VI said, to evangelise. The Apostle Paul even exclaimed: *“Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!”* (1Cor 9:16). Someone suggested *“...we can surely only do (this) by friendship and personal relationships”* (202). Another lamented, *“It’s not possible to invite people if nothing is going on”* (211); *“We can’t evangelise beyond the parish if we can’t make our own community more attractive to families”* (91). There is a need to *“develop and foster a missionary attitude among all our parishioners”* (42), together with *“a sense of being missionary disciples”* (103); *“We need to be experts in the art of encounter, the sacraments, pastoral care and reaching out to others outside the Church”* (190). Yet Catholics are reluctant to take up this challenge. Perhaps it’s because we are a minority in our lands? One reason was clearly and repeatedly articulated: The lack of adult formation in the faith. *“What hinders me from being in mission? Lack of knowledge of what it is to be a follower of Christ”* (133). *“Catholics know we should be reaching out, but don’t know how”* (52).

The appeal for **on-going adult formation** came up at least 55 times in the responses, especially on the subject of Mission. Many said for there to be real participation in Mission, the laity must be formed in the faith as adults, not merely sacramentalised as children: *“In order to share our beliefs, we need to know and love them first. I would really hope this synod will help us with our on-going formation. This is really needed”* (11). *“We need more, and much better, formation—particularly for adults. We tend to give a great deal of importance to children’s liturgies and ‘the Youth’. But they are all destined to be adults, and it is as adults that they will be increasingly challenged by the secularistic and materialistic world in which they must live and work. Wide, deep, sound on-going formation of adults will turn us all into apostles for our age”* (180). Another parish report stated: *“Great concerns were expressed about the lack of on-going faith education **relevant to today’s church and accessible to all ages**”* (18); it is given as the reason why people leave: *“The way we process our young people through the Sacraments of Initiation... we wrongly assume that they have heard the kerygma, the initial proclamation of the Gospel and have taken it to heart. In effect, we are ‘sacramentalising’ those who have not been evangelised. Is it any wonder we lose many of them after... Confirmation?”* (201). The same is said by someone else of the **RCIA**: *“What has not gone so well?... RCIA is engaged with as a programme rather than a process, there is a lack of Mystagogia and integration of the candidates and the newly received into the life of the parish. Sadly, many have not continued journeying with us”* (186).

Once again, the importance of **Scripture** was underlined: *“We should be reading Scripture – You can’t love what you don’t know”* (22). *“The stereotype of the average Catholic who does not consult Scripture is perhaps more accurate than most of us would like to admit. Encouraging us all to read a small amount of Scripture daily would... bring about much good for the individual and the wider Church.... Rather than seeing Mass as just something that one does on a Sunday, encouraging all of us to deepen our own understanding of the Scriptures which constitute the basis of our Faith would create a more open and understanding internal disposition to both receive and to pass on the Faith”* (80).

People **expect and want clear teaching from the Church**, as we see in this response and challenge to one of Pope Francis’ questions: *“What do you sense the Holy Spirit is asking of the Church? R/. To help be a guide and teacher in our lives”* (135). However, there was not one answer as to what this teaching should be, and a notable difference emerged. In group submissions, there were repeated calls for the Church to *“reflect modern values”* (128) by **changing her teaching** on e.g. contraception (115, 128), divorce and remarriage (131; 237), blessings for LGBTQ persons (115, 128) and an understanding of their parents (114). One contributor summed it up like this: *“Totally confused teaching on marriage and divorce... Annulment processes that no-one understands, and which can hurt so many people... then Boris Johnson remarrying in Westminster Cathedral... So many who have experienced marital breakdown no longer feel welcome”* (172). *“The church’s teaching on the use of birth control appears not to be observed by some Catholics and is a barrier to many who wish to be united (reunited) with the Catholic faith. Could this controversy be re-addressed?”* (155).

In individual submissions, people repeatedly expressed a desire *“...to see **traditional Catholicism and orthodox teaching**”* (5), and consternation about *“...the widespread failure in preaching in defence of the Church’s teaching on marriage and on sexual conduct in general”* (129). A call for the direction of change said that what was needed was *“Clear and academic teaching on subjects like abortion, same-sex ‘marriage’, divorce and re-marriage, birth control, etc.”* (34). In a moving personal account, someone who had returned to the Church having fallen away for many years and losing their spouse in the process due to their moral choices, put it this way: *“I love Catholic Tradition and orthodoxy. I truly believe what makes Catholicism so beautiful are its traditional teachings and sacraments. I fear the Church is heading for a fall as it seems to embrace the religion of Man, of the times... Traditional Catholicism is necessary for my salvation”* (235).

The **context is clear, the need urgent**: *“In a culture that seeks to diminish and even counter faithful teachings and practice we need to seek opportunities to redress the balance in both the formed and forming faithful”* (194). *“There is a complex problem facing the Church: the presumption that the basic tenets of the faith are known and that faith naturally grows and develops alongside our emotional and intellectual growth”* (51).

Several called for a **return to the Person of Christ**: *“There is a massive emphasis on the social teaching of the Church, very little emphasis on Jesus Christ, his teaching and prayer. I think we need to return to basics... and abandon modernistic ideas which are clearly not attracting young people to Mass and the sacraments, and are a big turn off to faithful Catholics. The lovely traditional truths of our Catholic faith are being diluted and lost, and I pray we can preserve them and teach them for future generations”* (55). People also want to know more about **the liturgy** (56) and **the Sacraments** (65). *“A poor understanding of the **Sacrament of Reconciliation** (is) robbing people of an understanding that it is a place of encounter, of acceptance and of renewal, with the power to transform lives”* (186). Some advocated General Absolution, whereas one response declared *“No one I know uses the doctor in that way”* (22).

One person described what a **comprehensive programme of formation** would include: *“Evangelising retreats, missions, courses through beauty, the arts, music, architecture, media... the lives and prayers of the saints, devotions, a good bookstore, a library... We need to concentrate on education of adults who sadly leave Catholic education knowing very little about our beautiful Catholic faith”* (22). **Respect for lay people and their potential role in this formation** was stressed: *“The Church should not underestimate its congregation. People with little or no education may be perfectly capable of understanding concepts which contain some difficulty”* (65). *“Newman wanted an educated laity. This goal should be vigorously pursued, and the competence of lay people who are well-informed in theology, philosophy, spirituality, pastoral support and/or liturgy be acknowledged, celebrated and utilised”* (28). So, too, for the **role of the family**: *“Faith needs to be taught and supported in families, not just in schools”* (52). *“There needs to be more understanding of the complex nature of modern family life”* (219); *“... we could expand on family faith development groups”* (22). *“We need family catechesis, we need help understanding papal documents, prayer groups, Lectio Divina, devotionals, teaching on the word of God”* (19). From a **Protestant group** came this plea: *“I write on behalf of the New Life Church to urge the Synod to strongly uphold the sanctity of human life and of Marriage between a man and a woman. This is to maintain an uncompromising stand against abortion and assisted suicide”* (14).

The link between **formation in the faith and outreach** was evident to many: *“Faith may be seen as an encounter with Jesus,”* wrote a parishioner, *“we need to learn new and more effective ways of building that relationship; a weekly sermon and listening to Scripture at Mass is not enough – on-going adult formation is essential to ‘grow’ our faith and take ownership of our faith journey; developing relationships is key to encouraging engagement with matters outside church”* (245).

Regarding **the Church’s social outreach**, there was an ardent appeal for Catholics to be more active: *“Our mission should be led by the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching”* (89). *“(Let’s have) a more vocal and public social justice ministry employing the Media. Let us, the Church, reclaim the moral high-ground and be exemplars of Christ-like behaviour”* (195), and *“...support the poor and homeless, refugee groups through SVP, ACN, CAFOD, Caritas food banks and charitable donations”* (241). Not to be forgotten are *“...the housebound, disabled, singles/divorced, the lapsed (who) have much to offer this world in which there is a poverty of hope”* (131). Someone made the pastoral and practical suggestion that *“a dedicated outreach worker would be a valuable resource”* in a parish (141).

As we come to end of this report, let us **listen to the elderly** who have loved and supported the Church for so many years and whose contributions were simple and hand-written: *“I will pray for the Synod”* (92). *“We wish the Synod well and will keep it in our thoughts and Prayers”* (88). *“Young people are to be encouraged, they are the future in our Church. Parishioners need to be encouraged back. I will pray for the Synod in Rome next year and for a good outcome, by continuing to pray the Synod Prayer”* (85).

Having expressed such **concern for youth**, perhaps we might give one of them the last word. Here is that of a young woman, 25yrs old, a registered Health Professional who is thoroughly immersed in the contemporary world. What does she suggest we should understand about those of her age? *“If you want to keep people in the Church (especially young people!) you must be authentic,”* she writes. *“Attempting to appeal to the current culture is doomed because current culture changes so quickly and (because) it is fundamentally antithetical to Christianity.”* She continues with an arresting question: *“Why go to Church for something you can find much more easily on YouTube? If you want people to be Catholic, you must be Catholic and honestly so. Give people something to believe in, and they will believe...”*

What does she see as **the challenge**? *“A weak, half-formed faith-offering where the central message is ‘be nice and everything will be fine’, will never survive the serious struggles people face. Indeed, it cannot, because it fails to offer answers. We must instead preach the truth and act like that is what it is, because the truth is all everyone is asking for right now. That’s hard, and it’s unpopular – but that still doesn’t make it less true. Yes, Christ is risen in Glory – but first He was crucified in agony.”*

And of the **Synodal Process**? *“As always, I pray for the health and wellbeing of all those involved in the Synod process – from Pope Francis himself to the lowliest respondent. May it be fruitful. May people be honest”* (151).

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