

SYNOD 2021 – 2023

Synthesis of Communal Spiritual Discernment: Diocese of Ferns

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation & Mission



INTRODUCTION

Throughout the preparatory phase, in consultation with Bishop Ger, the Council of Priests, the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Synodal Planning Group, careful consideration was given to processes that could reach every part of our Diocese. Various methods were utilised to invite participation in the Diocesan phase of the Synod. All were invited to pray for our Synodal Pathway.

Preparatory materials were made available to encourage a more fruitful engagement with the themes of our Synod. The main points of the Synodal themes were distilled into questions to invite dialogue in a more ordinary way based upon people's lived experiences. Within the flexibilities of conversation, key questions remained as consistent as possible throughout the Synodal process. In all circumstances, conversations were oriented around Pope Francis' central question: *'What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?'*

Bishop Ger 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.

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 our Diocese. Each meeting was attended virtually or in person by Bishop Ger. Participants sat in groups and addressed questions designed to broadly capture where we've come from, where we are now and where we're going. People explored their best and worst memories of the Church, their hopes and fears for life and how the Church can help them as well as their views on what the future Church might look like. Verbal feedback was recorded on a flipchart and written feedback was also collected to ensure that every person felt that their contribution was valued. All the written responses were read in a spirit of prayerful contemplation and contributed to this synthesis.

While Deanery meetings were open invitation, it should be noted sensitively that Survivors and Victims of clerical abuse in our Diocese have not been formally met with as a distinct group within the opening phase of the Synodal process. In a very deep sense, our Synodal processes continue, and no voice can be excluded. The need for listening and for atonement remains alive within our hearts.

A thematic analysis was undertaken to identify the themes that emerged. This process helped the synthesis drafting team to engage more fully with the richness and complexities of the diverse perspectives within our Diocese. This process also helped to identify the patterns of meaning that could be discerned from the various submissions. A draft synthesis was prepared by a small team and published on www.thehookoffaith.com, a Diocesan initiative for communication and evangelisation.

Several elements were important to our Diocesan community. From an historical perspective, the fear inculcated by a judgemental Church, the preferential treatment of some people and the exclusion of others, the treatment of women and children, and the hurt caused by the clerical abuse scandals and their mishandling by Church leadership were foremost in people's worst memories of Church. In contrast, good memories included the beauty of liturgy, the grace received through the Sacraments, the embrace of the faith community, the sharing of faith through pilgrimages and prayer, and the supportive culture that once surrounded people of faith.

Approximately 1000 people attended one type of meeting or another, providing us with a synthesis that represents 1000 voices from our Diocesan community. Following publication of the draft synthesis and consultative presentations with the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Synodal Planning Group and the Council of Priests, an open-invitation Pre-Synodal Meeting was attended by 150 people. Over 90% of participants were inspired by some aspect of the synthesis with a preference for words, such as Christ, Spirit, inclusion, deep dialogue, community, local, gathering, small-group, faith formation, ground up, people, belonging, hope and unity. Negative comments expressed by 6% of participants viewed the synthesis as either too focused on the Church or too focused on the people. The remaining 4% of comments simply expressed a strong desire for practical steps to be taken in response to the consultations. This focus on practicality was also evident in other comments. Overall, 90% of the participants agreed that they had a better understanding of the Synodal path and that the balance of the synthesis was representative of the journey to date.

COMMUNION | PARTICIPATION | MISSION

The cultural image that we wish to draw upon to sum up our experience of Synod is that of a campfire to describe how we are drawn together by the light, warmth, peace, community and comfort of our local Church, which is especially important in dark times. The same can be said of each of our sacred places. From the Stations of the Cross upon the slopes of Tara hill to the living waters of Our Lady's Island, we gather as a people to draw comfort and wisdom from our faith in God and explore the rich landscape of our Christian heritage.

The reality of gathering in response to the deeper experiences of life and orientation towards Truth resonated again and again in discussions. Indeed, the oldest operational lighthouse in the world had its origins in the fire lit by the monks of the Hook Peninsula in the fifth century. A fire can also be a beacon that orients people in the world as they navigate through the journey of life.

Fire also symbolises a renewal of mission. The quotation inscribed upon the commemorative stone of the Cross from the old Parish Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Bunclody is apt: *'Take from the altar of the past the fire and not the ashes.'* We all need the fire of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit's actions. During our Synodal conversations and consultations, four themes emerged strongly: The People of God; Our Local and Universal Church; The Potential of Deep Dialogue; and The Life of Christ.

The People of God

Throughout our Synodal journey, there was a sense that we 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 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.

People 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 makeups, 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'.

People hoped for a more proactive, dynamic, joyful and loving Church, one that can contribute more powerfully to the development of a fair and equal society, foster respect for truth and life, support people's Christian spirituality, encourage less materialism and find ways of inviting more young people to actively participate in the life of the Church and help people to discover or rediscover the breadth and depth of the Catholic faith.

People spoke about their preference for a 'listening' Church that can respond more openly to the needs of people, arrange social events and activities to increase intergenerational participation and contribute to age-appropriate systems of support for people across their lifespans.

There was a sense that the gifts of the laity were under-utilised by the Church. Increased lay involvement in the leadership, management, life and mission of the Church necessitated increased faith formation opportunities, educational initiatives, co-responsibility frameworks and shared authority structures. People also expressed a need for and interest in Scripture studies, various approaches to prayer and liturgy as well as other forms of catechesis, community and communication including approaches using technology.

Generally, 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.

Young people felt that there should be some focus on different expressions of faith and how they might be connected and grounded in love. It was also felt that the John Paul II awards, the living out of the Beatitudes, a need for 'gathering' and a 'Youth 2000 approach' pointed the way forward.

Young people also felt the absence of a vibrant faith community and a disconnect between their individual faith and that expressed in the wider culture. They thought that social media could help bridge the communication divide between the Church and youth culture as there was inevitable challenges for priests in 'big towns'. They offered the view that everyday Eucharistic moments were not promoted enough amongst the wider Catholic community.

There was the realisation that the challenges to the life of the Church and to wider society more generally required a change within us and how we live in the world, how we participate in the life of the Church and how we are recognised by the Church. This was particularly evident in discussions regarding social justice, the dignity of life from conception to natural death, the role of women, the participation of young people, the engagement of minorities

and preserving our common home. Helping people to integrate the worlds of nature, science, culture and faith was also important.

Overall, there was a sense that well-supported Synodal processes could help to sustain hope for people in the possibilities offered through God's grace in every moment of our lives within our homes and Parishes, in our Dioceses and nation as well as in the universal Church and across the face of the earth.

Our Local and Universal Church

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.

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. Opportunities to hear external speakers and Christian radio programmes were spoken of positively. There was a sense that the universal and local dimensions of Church are bound together. This was evident in people's happy memories of Papal visits, pilgrimages, missions and sense of belonging to both the local and the universal.

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. In this regard, 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. People wished for quiet reverence to be shown during worship while others expressed their need for active or lively services. A desire to re-evangelise the culture and for the teachings of the Church to be preached and taught in a variety of contexts was also evident. There was also the view that it was OK to adopt a 'live and let live' approach or to prioritise compassion and love within the Church and society more generally in service of the greater good.

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.

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.

There was a preference for associations and conferences to enable people to learn and share what is working in their communities e.g. the establishment of a Web Site containing resources and an annual conference for Parish Pastoral Councils. It is worth noting that there was a developing understanding that moving forward was not a matter of discarding our traditions and practices but instead involved a renewed drawing upon the deep well of intellectual, spiritual and pastoral treasures within the Church. It is worth noting that people expressed a real need for a humbler and more courageous Church. There was a strong sense that the wider Church was moving gradually towards a more consultative, inclusive, hopeful, positive and joyful model of Christianity.

The Potential of Deep Dialogue

People appreciated the opportunity to openly discuss their experiences of the Church and their hopes for the future. It is noteworthy that many of the phrases and perspectives expressed during discussions and in written submissions echo aspects of the Christian life that are also linked to wellbeing: humility, gratitude, letting go, forgiveness, imagination, perseverance, goodness, self-knowledge, presence and prayer. Running through various accounts was the sense that these help us to foster a deeper dialogue with each other and with God in whom 'we live and move and have our being'.

There was also some careful thought given to altering Church teaching or Canon Law to reflect changing family circumstances, be more aware of Parish realities and deal with difference more sensitively. There was also the broader sense that our Synodal experience empowers us to respect the integrity, coherence and consistency of Church teaching while also living pastorally in communities. It was felt that such a pastoral approach supported us all to revitalise our mission identity and encounter difference while allowing a healthy space for doubt at the same time.

People spoke about different expressions of the Catholic life which they engaged in as a way of navigating complex personal environments, such as family, work or culture. There were also some reports that people felt uncomfortable with hearing about expressions of faith or viewpoints about Catholicism that did not match their own experiences or perspectives. There was also the sense that dialogue at the deeper level has the potential to foster awareness of and encourage a loving response to ‘moments of difference’ in the continuing announcement of the Kingdom of God that could lead to the further development of invitational and welcoming environments for unity around Jesus.

People spoke about dialogue as a route to realising the subtleties, sensitivities and contexts of life within the Catholic community and wider society. There was also the sense that some contexts require further exploration. This was evident in people’s use of the term ‘inclusion’. For instance, there was the wish for all baptised people to be included in the life of the Church regardless of gender, family circumstances or sexual orientation. This can be summed up in the sentence: ‘We are turning people away’. However, there was also the view that the Sacraments should only be celebrated by those who participate or include themselves in the life of the Church. This opens issues in relation to First Holy Communion and Confirmation and all the Sacraments more generally. It should be noted that understandings of inclusion vary within the different submissions.

Throughout the Synodal processes and meetings, there was a desire to engage in inter-religious dialogue, participate in ecumenical services and express greater solidarity with those who live on the margins. There was also an identified need for sharing testimonies, prayer experiences and creative ideas for contributing to a dynamic, active, joyful and loving Church at all levels.

It is also evident that our discussions encourage us to expand our view of Church from an institutional model towards a Christ-centred community model in a way that has the potential to re-engage people and young people in particular, invite greater creativity and commitment within our faith communities and revitalise Parishes while balancing tensions within a broader sense of unity. In this sense, deep dialogue can contribute to a Wisdom-seeking culture in today’s world that is centred on the life of Christ, supports the experiential development of the virtues and fosters a profound sense of belonging and connected community.

The Life of Christ

The word Synod is synonymous with Church and has its roots in journeying together with Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is a mode of being that is integral to the Church's core nature. It encourages us to reflect upon personal experiences through the deeper relationality made possible by the living Word of God. There was the sense of a loss of trust in God, the Church, wider society and/or ourselves as the People of God but there was also a significant focus on ways of supporting people to form a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

There was also the fear expressed of something being lost. There was a sense that we all have experienced brokenness and feelings of travelling through the wilderness feeling disoriented. This woundedness yearns to be healed. There were deep concerns raised in relation to the future regarding the availability of the Sacraments, spiritual guidance, a shared community identity and Parish coherence. There were also concerns regarding administrative efficiency. There was also the view that priests, who are now 'thinner on the ground', can find it challenging to 'let go' or 'find their feet' within developing co-responsible processes and structures.

In general terms, people identified our 'we' or 'us' mainly as a smaller subsection of the greater whole. This is our neighbourhood. This insight reflects the teaching of Jesus when he gave us the two greatest commandments to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves. Emerging through the conversations and discussions was a strong sense that we need to transition in some way from purely hierarchical systems of governance towards a model that incorporates purpose-driven interdependent faith-filled communities at the neighbourhood, Parish, Cluster, Deanery and Diocesan levels.

Throughout the Synodal conversations, there was an emerging sensation of 'energy', a sense that timidity in the face of challenges is misplaced and that a relationship with Christ could help us to engage the world with courage, conviction and compassion. The need for Church leadership to take this message on board was highlighted. People expressed a deep reverence for the Eucharist and the desire to share the Eucharist with all the baptised members of the Parish, regardless of family circumstances.

There was a sense that we are now navigating a renewed interior and exterior life, a certain dynamic that reflected the interdependence, love and unity of the Holy Trinity. There were heartfelt experiences of coming forth, of transformation and of accompaniment. In the words of one young man with a disability: 'The more independent I become, the more doors open to me, the more whole I become'.

There was the emerging sense that Synodal processes help us to collectively respond more fully to changing circumstances, counteract a paralysing fear of ambiguity, creatively navigate the volatile terrain of the world today and be the hands and feet of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Significant thanks are due to all the people who participated in our conversations and discussions. It is no small thing to open one's mind and heart to the wider community. In many ways, this synthesis cannot fully capture the breadth and depth of our experiences of faith, our deep concerns about our history or our dreams for the future. A short synthesis must necessarily be incomplete. Yet, our communal spiritual discernment has led to the four pivotal themes in which to aggregate the key elements that emerged through our conversations along with the relationships that link them. These relationships, each in their own way, acknowledge the brokenness of the Church and the painful hurt enabled by a model of Church that was too self-referential, centred upon hierarchical structures and distant from the lived experiences of its people. This woundedness remains with us in the suffering experienced by the Survivors and Victims of abuse, their loved ones and in the solidarity expressed by members of our Diocesan community.

An underlying feature of life today that emerged through our Synodal conversations 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 our Diocesan community, there is commitment to utilising existing talents and developing further skills in the Synodal processes of companionship, listening, speaking out, celebrating, dialogue, discerning, participating and ministering.

The Synodal experience in our Diocese has been positive, worthwhile and Spirit-filled; with many rich and varied discussions taking place. There is a clear desire to help our 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.

There are specific points raised in this synthesis that require the further discernment of the Church, such as the option of marriage for priests, the balance of authority within the local and universal Church, the ordination of women, the greater inclusion of people living in diverse circumstances into the life of the Church and the location and timing of preparation programmes for the Sacraments as well as the inclusivity of the Sacraments. These we submit in faith, hope and love to the wisdom of the wider Church.

There are already many facets of 'lived Synodality' that exist within our Church, and these can be built upon and strengthened in the future. Furthermore, it is important that these existing facets of lived Synodality be more widely communicated and promoted.

There are also several points that may be considered as we continue to journey along the path of Synodality within our Diocese. These include further opportunities for dialogue at Parish and neighbourhood level; various approaches to faith formation & development opportunities for clergy and for lay women and men; improved communication processes; specific use of technology for evangelisation and faith formation; the further development of alternative

forms of active, devotional and/or contemplative prayer services within Deaneries and Parishes; and the wider development of a suite of approaches to co-operative ministry and decision-making within Parishes, Clusters, Deaneries and the Diocese.

Emerging through our Synodal processes was a strong sense that when our individual and collective lives as Church are truly centred in Christ and grounded upon the living Word of God, the more wholesome our outreach and presence in the world will be. There was also a clearer sense of our shared mission today, to be both nourished and led by the Word of God in our daily lives, share our experiences of faith with each other and find dynamic ways of expressing this deep reality to the wider culture.

The shape of our Synodal path emerged from the image of leaning in around the fire and the image of the cross that came from thematic analysis. This emergent experience strongly speaks to us of hope and unity. This experiential shape envelops our Synodal journey and reminds us that we are transformed through, in and with Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit to the wondrous glory of our heavenly Father. The Spirit of the Father and the Son draws us towards a deeper Sacramental life and strengthens our bonds of communion, participation and mission as we progress forward together in faith, hope and love.

ENDS