

Diocese of Kerry Synodal Team

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Pentecost Sunday, 5th June 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We are happy to publish this 10-page synthesis, the contribution our Diocese is making to help the Irish Church draft her submission to the Synod of Bishops (www.synod.va) in Rome. It represents what was said ‘on the ground’ and our effort as a team to understand what could be learned from the voices of those who participated.

This is not the final product of the listening exercise. It is one of the early fruits of our response to Pope Francis’s challenge to learn how to be a more synodal Church. It is not intended to conclude a discussion, but rather to open up a broader conversation, inviting individuals, parishes, Pastoral Areas and the Diocese as a whole to respond concretely to the hopes expressed by the People of God. It is also a reminder to us that the journey in our Diocese goes ahead in communion with the Church throughout the world.

When we gathered together the reports from all the Listening Sessions, the notes taken at focus groups and the on-line and written submissions received, we were faced with the task of condensing over 500 pages into a 10-page document. We have tried to do justice to every contribution, but we are keenly aware that not everything could be included in this document. However, we will do our best to ensure that the ongoing work of our team will draw on everything we have heard and read over the past few months.

We hope that this synthesis and the experience of listening to each other will encourage a collaborative and inclusive approach at all levels of our Church. We are being challenged to learn the new language of synodality, a new way of doing things for the sake of the Church’s mission. That mission began on the first Pentecost Sunday when the Holy Spirit gave the Apostles courage to leave the upper room and inspired them to speak to the crowds in “[their] own language about the marvels of God.” (Acts 2:11)

We thank everyone who participated. We welcome feedback on the contents of our synthesis so that further conversation and discernment can help the work of pastoral planning in our Diocese. We hope that we can foster a genuine *meitheal* spirit of co-operation as we take part in the Irish Church’s own Synodal Pathway (www.synod.ie) in the coming years.

Yours in Christ,

Ailish Walsh O’Connor

Fr Bernard Healy

Des Bailey



Foreword

Sincere thanks for the time and energy given to this initial stage of the Synodal Pathway in the diocese of Kerry to:

- Our Diocesan Synodal Team
- All who took part in the initial consultation process over recent months

Continue to ponder two quotes from our initial diocesan document, *‘Beginning the Journey’*:

“What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod’. Journeying together – laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome – is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice.”

Pope Francis, 17 October 2015

“The purpose of the Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but “to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to be nourished, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.”

Preparatory Document, 32, 7th September 2021

Journeying together as a people of faith
is not just for some months or some years,
it is for all the way to the arms of Jesus Christ in eternity.
Listening, truly appreciating the viewpoint of the other, is for always.

+ Ray Browne

Pentecost Sunday

8th June 2022.

Diocese of Kerry Synodal Team

Synthesis Document for the 2023 Synod of Bishops

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Introduction

The following synthesis is the work of the Diocese of Kerry's Synodal Pathway Team. It gathers together the fruits of the listening process to date, and is a starting point for further listening, dialogue and encounter within the diocese in response to Pope Francis's teaching that synodality is "what the Lord expects of the Church in the third millennium."¹

This listening process is part of the worldwide consultation called for by the Pope to prepare for the 2023 Synod of Bishops in Rome. The documents setting out the scope of this consultation (*The Preparatory Document* and the *Vademecum*) were published on the 7th of September 2021, with the diocesan launch of this process happening in St Mary's Cathedral, Killarney on Sunday 17th of October 2021. The diocese selected Ailish Walsh O'Connor, Fr Bernard Healy and Des Bailey to serve as the Synodal Pathway Team.

This work follows on from previous consultations and pastoral planning. As part of the preparation for a new Diocesan Plan, the diocese held Listening Meetings in three of the twelve Pastoral Areas of the diocese in March 2020 and conducted a Listening Process with the clergy. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented the completion of this work. The results of these processes were made available to the Synodal Pathway Team.

Preparation for this listening exercise and the ongoing work of the Synodal Pathway Team has been challenging. The first challenge – and one which will be an ongoing issue for the work of the Team – is the fact that *synodality* is a relatively novel concept, even though it tries to express something fundamental to the life and mission of the Church. Consequently, explaining the scope and intent of the worldwide consultation exercise has proven difficult. A broader cynicism about the consultation process based on previous negative experiences was named by some as a barrier to participation.

The Synod's theme as set out in the official documents is very broad, and encourages a wide range of discussion. The actual process of learning how to discuss fundamental issues of faith and Church life in a way that allows the voice of the Holy Spirit to be heard demands patience and reflection. The Synod keywords *communion*, *participation* and *mission* help in focussing discussion, and the whole premise of the Synod presumes a gradual process of learning and growth towards a more collaborative Church.

¹ Pope Francis, Address to Members of the International Theological Commission, 29 November 2009

The Work of the Synodal Pathway Team

The work of the Synodal Pathway Team was underpinned by a number of principles. Where possible, giving people the opportunity of prayerful in-person discussion was seen as the best way to achieve the kind of spiritual encounter and pastoral conversion that Pope Francis encourages. In-person listening was supplemented by an on-line questionnaire and the opportunity for written submissions, ensuring that the process was open to all. On social media, the Diocese encouraged reflection on the themes proposed by the Synod's documents. Targeted focus groups gave us the opportunity of drawing on the insights of people with particular experiences of the Church or who might otherwise feel marginalised or excluded from participation in this process.

The task of organising consultation was entrusted to the twelve Area Pastoral Councils, allowing the timing and format to be best suited to local circumstances. Most Pastoral Areas facilitated at least one open Listening Session. The generous cooperation of diocesan and parish staff, clergy and parish volunteers, and the personal involvement of the Bishop made this listening process possible and we acknowledge the work of all who made this stage of the consultation a reality.

The COVID pandemic reduced the timeframe for in-person listening, whilst the challenge of translating the expectations of the Synodal Process to a rural Irish context mean that our consultation has been less extensive than we would wish. However, we have been privileged to have been able to listen to the voice of the People of God in the Diocese of Kerry who have done us the honour of speaking frankly and with integrity. We see it as our duty to listen well to all that has been said and to treat every contribution as valuable. We acknowledge that not everyone felt able to contribute to this process and are mindful of those who were missing from our synodal gatherings. Doing full justice to everything we have seen and heard in one short report is an impossibility, but we offer this synthesis as one of the first steps towards cultivating stronger communion, greater participation, and a renewed sense of mission in our local Church in the context of the call for greater synodality.

Reflection on Listening Exercises in Pastoral Areas and Parishes

Listening Sessions at Parish and Pastoral Area level were the primary manner of consultation in our synodal journey to date. The Team prepared resources for these Listening Sessions, with Pastoral Areas being asked to make the decision locally about how to proceed. A small number of Parishes and Pastoral Areas opted for other forms of consultation and the feedback from these are also dealt with here.

In general, the listening sessions went ahead in a positive and constructive manner and were structured to facilitate open discussions in small groups, with the insights of all being recorded. There were also opportunities for points raised within groups to be shared with all assembled. This approach did receive some criticism on the grounds of being too tightly-controlled. All participants were invited to make individual submission to the Synodal Team if they felt that their perspective was not heard, and we acknowledge those who followed up on that invitation.

Although the listening sessions were a positive experience for those who took part, the general consensus was that the number and diversity of people participating were disappointing, even in parishes and pastoral areas where invitations were distributed widely to all age groups. Those attending were mostly over-60, with a small number of younger people being present, and those in their 40s and 50s being largely absent. This generation gap was a concern frequently noted by those present as reflecting the absence of many of the baptised from the life of the Church more broadly.

Most participating in the consultation at Parish and Pastoral Area level felt part of their Church community and could recount positive experiences of the Church in their youth that laid the foundation for their current involvement in their parish. Participation in the Eucharist is cherished as being at the heart of people's faith, although a variety of diverse and sometimes contradictory concerns were raised about the celebration of the Eucharist and the preaching at Mass. This sense of "being part" was not a universal experience and the voices of those who felt isolated, neglected or excluded by the Church were acknowledged. Those who feel "at home" in the Church feel the absence of those who don't, and there was a general desire to make inclusivity and community a hallmark of parish life.

Some participants suggested that further acknowledgement of past abuses of power within the Church would be a welcome step to encourage greater inclusion. When asked to identify factors that led to exclusion from Church life sexual orientation, being from abroad, social class, membership of the travelling community, age and peer pressure were frequently mentioned. There was no clear answer as to how exclusion could be overcome. Some identified Church teaching as an obstacle to participation, whilst others indicated that the Church herself was inclusive, but that the message of inclusivity wasn't being heard.

One of the points upon which there was consensus was the issue of *representation* – people feel more at home in the Church when they see people they identify with as being active and involved in their parish. "*More opportunities for participation*" was the universal message.

Related to the issue of inclusion, was that of participation in the life and decision-making processes of the Church. Whilst not every participant in the process expressed a desire to be more involved in the decision-making processes of their parish, there was a broad agreement that a wider and more representative pool of laity be involved in local-decision-making and ministry. Cliquishness was named as an issue by many participants, albeit with the recognition that volunteer recruitment was difficult and that exclusion was in many cases unintentional.

Personal invitation from the local priest was proposed as the most effective way of sourcing new volunteers. However, there was a concern that this makes active involvement in parish life “a favour for Father” rather than part of the mission one receives at baptism. Many clergy share this concern. The idea of a *meitheal* spirit was cited as an ideal, where the Church had the kind of community spirit where participation and involvement was part and parcel of membership. Although the majority of Church volunteers, lay ministers and participants in the consultation are women, the lack of female involvement in decision-making was widely flagged.

A number of other points came through strongly – despite the damage that the COVID pandemic caused to parish life, many parishes saw their response to restrictions as demonstrating a spirit of cooperation and a willingness to adopt new technology to stay connected. There was a general concern about the sharp decline in priest numbers, albeit with a recognition that parishes without a resident priest have come to a new understanding that their parish’s pastoral life is broader than the ministry of the priest. There was a recognition that communication and greater in-depth discussion was an urgent need in the Church, with one participant noting that “*we hear the same thing in Church, but we don’t all get the same message – we need dialogue and understanding.*”

There is a sense that the Church has much to contribute to society, but that a division has grown between the Church and the local community. Funerals were identified as one of the few times when Church and community are as one. Whilst the parish serves as a place of pastoral activity, there was a general sense that it was not a place of dialogue or for discerning our role in society as people of faith. One submission noted: “*opportunities for charitable work allow me to live out my faith, but these opportunities are never offered by my local church.*” The issue also arose as to the extent to which people’s religious formation may have led them to having a strong personal faith, but left them ill-equipped to share that faith with others.

Individual Submissions (On-line and Written)

Supplementing our listening at Parish and Pastoral Area level, the Diocese received almost 100 on-line and written submissions, reflecting a broad geographical and demographic spread, with

the majority of submissions (c.65%) coming from women. The feedback received reflected what was heard at the Listening Sessions. The opportunity for written submissions allowed for deeper engagement with the questions asked and for thoughtful reflection on the lived experience of participation in parish life. These valuable submissions will continue to inform the ongoing work of the Synodal Team.

Many on-line contributors reported feeling less connected with their parish community in recent times. The issue of the exclusion of the divorced and those in a second relationship from the sacraments was frequently raised. The ministry of priests at a local level was broadly appreciated. A number of submissions questioned the value of clerical celibacy. Passing on the faith was proposed as a key priority for the Church, with young people seen as being forgotten about or left behind by the local parish community. Suggestions for new or renewed ministries were made such as reaching out to young people, caring for the lonely and migrants, and journeying with the bereaved. A small number of written submissions called for a more formal approach to the celebration of Mass and a more assertive proclamation of Church doctrine.

Reflection on Contributions of Particular Groups

In addition to our general consultation, the Synodal Team met with a number of groups in line with Pope Francis's desire that this process should include everybody, particularly those who might not otherwise be heard or who have a particular insight to offer to the Church.

Female Perspectives

As women can often feel marginalised within the Church, we felt that it was important to listen to their voices during the Synodal journey. We identified a wide range of women who are actively participating in the Church: those who have undertaken roles at Diocesan level, an Intergenerational Women's Group ranging in age from mid-20s to the mid-70s, and members of the Presentation Order. Two focus groups – members of the LGBTQI + community, and Parish Secretaries – consisted entirely of women.

These groups shared some very positive experiences of Church, including the sense of community and belonging from participating in the sacraments, Corpus Christi and May processions. They observed the importance of marking significant moments in their lives such as birth, marriage and the deaths of loved ones. Some did feel however that this sense of community was being lost and were looking for a return to these community experiences. They were appreciative of the ministry of clergy, and were hopeful that clergy would have the courage to be more sociable and accessible within their communities and go out to the people and invite them to participate once again.

Women have a lot to offer to their Church. They display great faith and a solid understanding of their mission as Catholics. However they did feel that they were not always listened to or that they do have not an equal role in the Church. Some did feel that they were listened to, but only because of the role they fulfil e.g. parish secretaries and Church employees.

There was a feeling that there is a glass ceiling which women cannot break through in the Church as it currently exists. The women we spoke to are willing and want to share their gifts and talents but felt that this was not always possible, and at times their ideas and opinions were unwanted. This was a source of sadness and frustration for many.

These groups expressed the hope that they would see the Church reach out to young families, to teenagers and young people, to lead them to Jesus Christ inviting them to practise their faith through pilgrimage, retreat and prayer. They expressed a wish to see adult faith formation provided in local communities and were hopeful for a future where women would be seen as equal to men and that a day would soon come where we would have a female diaconate. Many women felt there was a need for the Church to acknowledge the equality women enjoy in the surrounding culture and reflect women's cultural experience in terms of leadership, education and theological formation.

All of the women we spoke to identified LGBTQI+ people as being marginalised and excluded. They are tolerated but kept at a distance, which has caused significant harm and upset. It is felt that LGBTQI+ people have a different perspective to offer on spirituality which has been developed from living on the margins. Their pastoral insights need to be woven into the story of the Catholic Church so that parish communities have a more comprehensive and wholesome picture of what it is to be human and what it means to love.

The LGBTQI+ group called on the Church to listen to their community and to integrate their perspectives on sexuality, relationships, theology and ethics. They feel excluded from the Catholic community and feel that they have been left to find their own values without the support of the community to which they belong by virtue of their baptism.

Second and Third Level Students

Young people are the present and the future of our Church. We therefore felt that this was a significant group of people who needed to be listened to and heard. We reached out to all Second Level schools in the Diocese and offered to hear what they had to say. Six schools participated – four Catholic Secondary Schools and two Comprehensive Schools. Those who engaged were aged between sixteen to eighteen and both male and female. We also engaged with male and female

Third Level students in their late teens and early twenties from the Tralee campus of Munster Technological University. Two students of different faith traditions – Islam and Buddhism – also joined in the conversation.

For these young people their positive experiences of Church centred around participation in the sacraments, acting as altar servers and participation in school retreats and pilgrimages. Amongst Second Level students, belief in God and faith in Jesus Christ was important, and they see bringing about the Kingdom of God and living as Jesus did as their mission in life. The need to be heard and involved was important for this age group generally but they felt that there were very few opportunities to offer their viewpoint, or that if they offered an opinion it would not be listened to. Many called for a Youth Council in each Pastoral Area or Parish where they could participate or engage in their faith. They spoke of a ‘sameness’ to all liturgies in the Church. They called for more appealing liturgies and opportunities to engage socially with their faith communities and emphasised the importance of spirituality in their lives.

Second level groups mentioned two aspects of marginalisation within the Church which were significant for them, namely the exclusion of the LGBTQI+ Community and the lack of equal opportunities for women. For them this is seen as outdated thinking and disrespectful, and they felt that this is not how Jesus would behave. The status quo of the Church on these issues was seen as being an obstacle for them.

In contrast, disengagement from the Church and a disinterest in faith was more of a deliberate choice amongst the Third Level Students we spoke to. They recognised the importance of faith to older generations but were largely indifferent themselves.

Other Perspectives

The Synodal Team engaged with twelve adult members of the Kerry Traveller Community. As well as naming positive experiences of the Church similar to other participants, the Travelling Community mentioned the importance of traditional devotional practices, holy wells, Marian devotions, receiving a visit from a priest or religious, and the support of clergy during times of tragedy and bereavement. Despite these positive experiences, they felt as though they were not always welcome or respected in their local Church community, with ministries and decision-making being closed to them. They asked that local parishes might do more to reach out to them, and expressed the hope for a “*strong and inclusive*” Church.

A number of people in addiction recovery were interviewed as part of the Listening Process. These individuals were a diverse group united by their experience of having overcome addiction through

attendance in a 12-Step Programme, which in turn led them back into practice of their Catholic faith. The community aspect of Church experienced during childhood was valued by this group. The Church represented a place where they found a sense of belonging, regardless of “*social status, education or maturity of faith,*” with the church building being a place they could go and pray, light a candle and find refuge. This group expressed the desire that parishes would be more welcoming, inclusive and proactive in inviting people to be involved. They would like to see different opportunities at parish level for faith formation and development. One novel suggestion was that, analogous to the dynamics of AA groups, that catechesis should happen within a personal one-to-one supportive relationship. With such an approach, all baptised Catholics would have the opportunity “*to testify their faith to others*”. In this context, the group challenged Church leaders to be less institutional in their approach. Their vision for their local Church community was that it would become “*more relatable, that the beauty and mysteries of the faith could be better communicated*”, a place where the emphasis would be on the spiritual rather than the political, a place where the approach would be to engage with the individual on a personal level leading to growth in faith.

A member of the Synodal Team took part in a one-hour listening session that took place in a Rehab Day Care Centre with nine adult service users in attendance to learn more about the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities as members of the Church. Amongst the cherished memories of this group were moments of fun when the parish priest visited their school, the presence of Santa Claus at a Christmas Eve Mass, being included in liturgies through singing and Sunday Mass attendance as children. They wanted to see their local priest as a friend and someone involved in the life of the community, rather than as someone distant. They asked that choirs might be more open to everyone, and suggested that Gospel passages be acted out in “*drama as theatre pieces*” in their local church building. They proposed that the local Church might be more social, more celebratory and more lively, with opportunities for community get-togethers outside the context of Mass. Their vision for the parish was that it should be a community that reaches out more, that organises parties, parades and community events, and through involving the whole local community, makes contact even with those who might not be church-goers.

Representatives of prayer-groups and members of the Neocatechumenal Way also engaged with the listening process, through in-person meetings and written submissions. As well as sharing many of the hopes and concerns expressed at parish level, they call for a greater emphasis on evangelisation and they desire to be more integrated and fruitful within parish communities.

Conclusion

For the Synodal Team of the Diocese of Kerry, this time of listening has been a blessing. Every contribution made was an act of faith expressing a concern for the life of the Church and expressing hope for the future. Even in contradiction and disagreement, there is a shared commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and a desire that the Holy Spirit might guide us as a community to a greater unity and mutual understanding.

The People of God in the Kerry Diocese have answered the call to speak boldly; we have heard what has been said. There is now a task before us as a community of faith. Our clergy know that they are being challenged to share more broadly the responsibility of leadership and decision-making. The laity as a whole must step forward and accept new roles of administration, faith formation and leadership. For change to happen and barriers to be removed both clergy and parishioners need to have the courage to embrace change. Our parish communities and our tradition of faith depend on greater synodality in order to survive.

In broad terms synodality means recognising that the Church consists of the People of God who, through their baptism, are individually and as a body guided along the way by the Holy Spirit. Within the People of God, there are specific gifts, roles and responsibilities. In a Synodal Church leadership supports the whole People so that they might grow in faith, hope and love, with a strong sense of mission inspired by the Gospel, and a desire to be inclusive of all.

Growth in synodality is a gradual spiritual process. It must be learned and cannot be imposed from above. Those who exercise leadership have the opportunity to support or impede it. Synodality hears all voices, recognises that the Church does not set her own mission and is led by the Holy Spirit who has spoken to and continues to speak to the Church.

The Lord says to His people, “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”² The people desire a renewal of community spirit and active participation in liturgy and ritual. Opportunities to live out the message of Christ in their local parish is something they value. The courage to name how we think things ought to be demands a readiness to cooperate generously when opportunities are given. Learning to walk together, attentively listening to every voice and working out the path forward, we trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit in making this aspiration a reality.

² Matthew 7:7

In calling for this worldwide focus on synodality, Pope Francis has shown how his ministry as Pope can be used to support the whole People of God in their own vocations. All who exercise leadership in the Church are being called to place their authority at the service of broader and deeper lay participation in the life of the Church. We ask the Synod of Bishops to consider how the teaching authorities of the Church and those in leadership can more effectively support and encourage all the baptised towards embracing their role in the life of the Church.

Our listening exercise has made us keenly aware of those whose voices were missing – those who are at the heart of the Church but whom we did not hear, and those amongst the baptised who feel alienated from or indifferent to the Church. At every level the question must be asked: “Who is missing and how can they be welcomed in?”

As a Church, we are called to read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel³. The Church in Ireland bears the weight both of past glories and failures, and is no longer a dominant social and cultural force. The Church carries with her many of the expectations and structures of her past reality, while leaving various contemporary needs unmet. Faithfulness to her mission will inevitably mean difficult changes at all levels of Church life. By looking honestly at the reality of parish life and society we can adapt accordingly rather than have change imposed upon us by circumstances. We can be more deliberate about providing opportunities for community life and opportunities to deepen and enrich faith for those who desire it, in an increasingly secularised and atomised world. Parishes and Pastoral Areas are being called to embrace the role of leading people to develop a mature faith.

Our Listening Process over the past few months represents the first tentative steps of our synodal journey. It is the beginning of a series of conversations which will be carried forward into the future. It is an invitation to learn how to listen better to each other and to the Holy Spirit. It is a call to all who exercise responsibility within the Church to strive for deeper listening, greater inclusion and broader participation in a way that honours every member of the People of God in their baptismal calling.

The Diocese of Kerry Synodal Team,
The Ascension of the Lord, 29/05/2022

³ C.f. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 4