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Diocesan Synthesis
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Introduction

Echoing St Paul's exhortation to the church in Corinth "You are to imitate me, as I imitate Christ." 1 Cor 11:1 the last words of St. David our Patron saint are "Do the little things, the small things you've seen me doing" remind us of our Christian vocation and mission to become like Christ. Core to the synodal process is the patterning that emerges from the discernment we have embarked upon. A patterning which the Holy Spirit evokes within the "2 or 3" who are gathered in Christ's name. Presented with each of the synodal foci through prayerful reading of scripture, reflection, and spiritual conversation (Lectio Divina) we have attempted to led by the Spirit into a spirit of discernment. This diocesan synthesis has been undertaken with attentiveness to the emerging patterns found in the fruitful responses submitted by parishes, groups, and agencies.

The invitation of Pope Francis for all the People of God to engage with the synodal process has not been without its obstacles. From the outset understanding what was being asked of us was a challenge. This is after all the first time since the Council of Jerusalem that the whole of the People of God by virtue of their baptism have been consulted in such a manner. Initially the timeframe was confusing and pressurised. Resources from the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops were substantial. There was a reluctance in recruiting among the parishes and groups due to anxiety about COVID. However, by December around 53 parish facilitators had completed training. They were enthusiastic participants willing to engage with this new venture. They were also realistic in their expectations of its initial outcomes. While the synodal process offered renewal of parish life and witness, what level of engagement it would procure was unpredictable. Many if not all clergy engaged with the process for the most continue to support their facilitators. However, one or two declined to become personally involved or promoted the process within their parishes. All our catholic schools were invited to take part. Disappointingly many due to COVID were unable to muster responses.

The diocesan team comprising of 11 members produced the proposed methodology and material (cf. above) for use in the parishes and schools. These were made available on the diocesan website for download. It is evident from feedback the either the resources or process were not wholly observed in parishes. Schools that did take part used material tailored to their pupils' abilities. COVID restrictions curtailed meeting together in some parishes. Hence foci were printed in newsletters put on parish websites and parishioners were asked to submit their responses in writing. This risked obscuring the spiritual process of discernment and threatened to skew the process towards a that of a survey. Some parish priests took it upon themselves to collate these and submit their parish report. A few complaints were made indicating that the material reported did not necessarily reflect the spiritual conversations of meetings that took place.

Assessing the level of engagement of parishioners, we note that the turn out to gatherings was on the low side, perhaps as little as 10%-20%. Note that many of our parishes are numerically small in practicing catholic. One deanery given the small numbers in parishes opted to undertake a deanery wide approach with a day given to the process to which members of parishes were invited. One parish managed to engage different groupings:

parish, university chaplaincy, youth, and members of a lay movement; each making a separate submission.

Despite the anxiety surrounding the notion that the process was going to undermined Catholic Teaching, the quality of the responses shows a willingness and commitment to seek the changes necessary to renew the church at all levels. They were thoughtful and thought provoking. That things cannot continue as they are surfaced in many of the reports. How change is going to come about remains uncertain. A recent Ad Clerum has spoken that those areas of pastoral practice which were highlighted by consensus were to be pursued where practicable and in resonance with Church Teaching. Some parishes have taken this on board and are already doing so.

We are reminded by Pope Francis that this venture is about creating a different Church not a new Church and is another step in attempting to augment and implement the teachings of the Spirit of the Second Vatican Council. It seeks to rebalance, recover, and embed the Church's understanding of the baptismal vocation, rights, and responsibilities of All the Baptised in her mission to preach the gospel in word and action rather than continuing to favour the perceived remit of a solely clerical elite. The way forward walking the pathway to a synodal church needs continuing ongoing discernment owned by all for all.

The Report

The follow report is comprised through the lens of Communion Participation and Mission. Each being written by six members (paired) of the Contact Team. As such the style of writing varies from section to section. Whilst it may seem odd it also reflects something of the synodal listening process itself. Given the nature of the content overlap between each section was inevitable. The general consensus of all three sections is given first followed by those areas in which there was a significant resonance but no consensus and finally an areas of dissonance section, where we give acknowledgment to sole or few voices. Each section has been reviewed by the whole team prior to compilation and endorsed by all. The concluding paragraphs focus on the main themes that are coming through, quotes from parish facilitators who shared their experience and some of the actions parishes have already gotten underway.

General Consensus

Communion

The responses reflect a clear vision of a Church as an inclusive and welcoming communion of believers, where all its members are aware of how the Holy Spirit acts in our lives and listen and respond to the will of God. There was also widespread consensus on a vision and dream for a Church that is missionary and evangelising at its heart –a Church whose members are ‘bridge builders’ rather than ‘castle defenders’. Existing experiences of journeying together with members of other Christian faiths and denominations are highly valued, as well as the necessity to join together in both prayer and mission. We have a shared baptism that must be recognised as this will allow us to jointly support our communities in our missions. There was an acknowledgement that what we share is far more, and more significant, than anything that divides us.

Our diocesan responses acknowledged that each and every person has a wide range of God-given skills and talents, and the Church has a long history and tradition of individuals using their own abilities for the benefit of the Church and the common good, and it is important that this should be encouraged and continued. All baptised Catholics are called to pray and listen to the Holy Spirit to awaken enthusiasm for ways in which they can help the Church either by volunteering for a particular ministry and/or having an input into discernment and governance within the Church. In this respect, prayer and liturgy are fundamental in inspiring and guiding our common life and evangelising mission.

Our responses identified some ways forward for further reflection to the realisation of this vision:

- Welcoming seems to be practised rather superficially; it is more than being a ‘friendly face’; it entails active listening, understanding, and getting to know one another.
- The Church needs to be more visible in the local community and to work alongside community groups in order to offer support to those close to us.

- It was noted that certain groups are excluded from communion e.g. divorced and remarried Catholics, LGBTI and young people.
- There is a lack of participation by the laity in decision making.
- Formation programmes focus almost exclusively on sacramental preparation and do not enable baptised Catholics to cultivate an active commitment to their Christian life.
- The sacraments, instead of being a celebration of the whole community, have become privatised.
- There needs to be a more effective use of social media and online formation resources.
- There seems to be a mutual lack of trust between Church and society, and this prevents fruitful cooperation; the institutional Church is sometimes perceived as being too close to the rich and powerful.
- The Church does not seem as engaged with the local community as other Christian churches.
- Not enough is done to attract and retain young people. Children are often lost soon after they are confirmed.
- It seems hard for lapsed Catholics to return to the Church.
- In respect to Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* Holy Communion for those in 'irregular relationships' is seen as providing a pastoral pathway in permitting them to receive communion and ought to be promoted.
- There is a feeling that some 'established' voices bully and crush debate and will not allow discussion. Therefore, people do not want to or feel able to speak.
- Women's voices are not generally heard, especially when it comes to ministry (Deaconate) and governance.
- Those who have left ordained ministry to marry should possibly be given an opportunity to return where prudent.
- There is a perception that dogmatic rigidity is more important than support, love and understanding.

In order to journey towards that vision, our diocesan responses identified some priorities:

- A shift in pastoral approach and emphasis is required, one that cultivates a more proactive, attentive, open, and outward facing community that engages with other groups, agencies, organisations as well as other churches of differing denominations.
- Fostering bonds of friendships through retreats and pilgrimages, prayer groups that meet in homes and/or online
- Education in terms of Bible studies, the Church's social and moral teachings, papal encyclicals, theology, and pastoral initiatives are needed to expand the parish horizon beyond the church doors. Such education fosters confidence being able to bring together the daily experience of living a life of faith as well as the means to respond to peoples' inquisitiveness about the Christian Life.
- Develop opportunities for collegiality through Parish Pastoral Councils

- Reinvigorate liturgy, especially Children's Liturgy, more collaboration between schools and parishes
- Reach out to 'lapsed' and 'remarried' Catholics as well as to those who are searching for meaning. A more missionary outlook is required for this.
- Develop communication at a variety of levels, especially the role of social media, not just as a source of information about 'events', but as a channel for sharing our Christian life.

PARTICIPATION

Our diocesan responses reflect our dream for a Church that is welcoming of all its members in their rich diversity, and where people feel respected, valued and a fully participating member of the community; a Church that is radically centred on the example set by Christ of unity and inclusivity, that has the preferential option for the poor at its core and gives special attention to children and the young. Our dream is for a Church that is not reduced to the reception of the sacraments, and that journeys with fellow Christians and other people of good will in our mission of building the kingdom of God on earth.

The responses offered a number of insights into what is hindering our Diocesan Church from beginning to realise this dream. Different types of barriers were identified:

1. Institutional

There were generally two points of consensus in this area: 1) that authority and governance in our local Church is almost exclusively exercised by the parish priest, and 2) that it is necessary and desirable for the laity to be significantly more involved in the running of our local Church. There was a wide consensus that the laity felt that things were 'done to them' rather than the laity being involved in decision making. There is also a disproportional focus in the Church on the reception of the sacraments and this seems to reinforce the 'clerical' model with regards to governance. When the laity exercises responsibility, it tends to be through ministries such as readers and Catechists, that is, ministries that relate to liturgy or preparation for the sacraments.

2. Social

Practical difficulties given the variety of commitments and responsibilities of lay parish members such as family and employment also hinders participation. Secularisation and individualism prevent us from being more pro-active in the life of the Church.

3. Personal

There may be an unwillingness to take on responsibility on the part of some members of the laity; this may be the result of negative past experiences; fear may also play a part, for example, the fear of being wrong, of being laughed at, embarrassment, going against popular opinion, not feeling supported or having the perception that 'always the same are asked', or of 'treading on someone else's toes'.

4. Marginalised groups

The responses identified a number of groups that are either excluded or feel alienated from the Church: divorced and remarried Catholics, the young, the poor and LGBTI. A number of responses also identified the marginalisation of women in terms of equality and co-responsibility.

5. Communal Worship and Liturgy

An overstretched clergy, a general lack of dynamism and ageing congregations may be stifling creativity; this may also contribute to our difficulties in engaging the young.

6. Church scandals

The Church response to corruption and scandal has damaged the credibility of the Church and this may hinder internal and external cooperation.

The responses identified some areas that have yielded good fruit but that could be developed further as we journey towards the realisation of our vision for the Church:

- There is a general consensus that prayer (both public and private), the Mass, Confession and the format of the Liturgical Year are fundamental to our identity. Nourishing our spiritual life enables us to take more responsibility in both the Church and society. In order to engage children and the young, Children's Liturgy should be reinvigorated and reintroduced, and we should not be afraid of using our creativity in prayer and liturgy. There needs to be more flexible opportunities for people to gather and pray, reflect on scriptures and discuss matters arising within the local community. It is important to foster bonds of friendships through retreats, pilgrimages and prayers groups that could meet in homes or virtually.
- There is a call for a much more proactive and collaborative use of Parish Advisory Councils and Finance Councils.
- Getting the gospel message across requires a better use of social media; a number of resources can be accessed and used online. Church services and outreach programmes could be promoted through radio, newspapers and online community groups.
- There is a general consensus that ecumenism is the way forward, both institutionally and as individuals working together in joint projects. We must build on current experiences of joint worship and social cooperation in food banks, activities for refugees and asylum seekers and night shelters.

MISSION

What the mission of the Church should be.

There is a general consensus that the mission of the Church is to be a welcoming, open and listening community where everyone feels valued and respected. It should be missionary and evangelising and needs to reach out to the young and marginalised whilst always seeking to bring back the large number of lapsed Catholics. It has a duty to speak out on behalf of those in need and on the margins. Its schools need to instil Catholic values and we should all support them in whatever way we can. It needs to join, build, and maintain local networks and be more visible in the local community. There are numerous opportunities to engage in outreach and these should all be joyfully grasped. Involvement in local issues can raise the profile of the parish Church.

What it actually is.

Whilst there is general consensus as to what the mission of the Church should be, unfortunately the reality does not live up to that expectation. There is a distinct divergence of opinion as to who should take the lead. Some parishes feel that it is the responsibility of the priest to lead in all things and allocate roles amongst the laity whereas others feel that the core of the problem is that the priest is too busy, and that the laity should take the burden off him. Ecumenical services are held regularly in some parishes and some of the laity work in food banks/night shelters and assist asylum seekers and refugees. However, there are not enough doing so, and it tends to be the same minority of people whereas the vast majority do nothing.

Factors helping mission

Knowing from our faith that we are doing the right thing and are speaking with the love of God in our hearts and our voices. Those who engage in outreach activities benefit greatly from the experience and see them in a very positive light. This positive experience helps them to keep going and inspire others to volunteer.

Factors hindering mission.

Society is quick to judge Catholics against contemporary secular values and there is a lack of awareness of the concept of sin – we live in an “anything goes” world where simply to speak against a particular behaviour is likely to lead to the speaker being demonised. This leads to a fear of being vilified or ostracised on social media as current morals and laws are too often in conflict with Church teachings. It is not surprising that, against this background, only a few will put their heads above the parapet.

Catholics have never been good at mission, and many see the obligation to their faith as fulfilled simply by going to Mass on Sunday. Today priests have many administrative responsibilities outside their core vocational duties that did not previously exist which take up a considerable amount of their time. The laity seem to be either too old or too busy to fill the gap. There is a clear need for the laity to take on a far greater missionary role in the life of the Church. Despite this most Catholics do not see themselves as missionary

believing it to be a gift only given to a few. There is a view that mission is carried out by the clergy/sisters on behalf of, as opposed to in union with, the laity.

There appears to be a genuine desire on the part of the majority of Catholics to spread God's message and to show his love through their words and actions. However, only a few have a missionary zeal with the rest sitting quietly in the background due to the fear of being labelled a religious fanatic, a belief that they do not have the time to commit or being unaware of the opportunities available. We must all hope and pray that one of the benefits of this process will be to inspire and enlighten the faithful to share their belief with others and to engage in a least one voluntary activity for the benefit of society at large.

AREAS OF RESONANCE AND DISSONANCE

PARTICIPATION

Areas of resonance:

- The corporate and hierarchical nature of the Church as an obstacle to the realisation of the dream
- Women unable to fully participate until Ordination is open to them.

Areas of dissonance:

- One parish response acknowledged a lack of enthusiasm for the project of a 'synod on synodality'; this was regarded as too 'remote' and irrelevant to the life of the Church ('nothing will change').
- One individual response pointed to the detrimental nature of the changes brought about by Vatican II in terms of liturgical participation.

Conclusion

The emerging themes have emerged that warrant further discernment and quotations from parishes expressing their experiences of the Synodal process thus far.

Communication

The technological age we live in requires us to become savvier with the means of communication in getting the gospel message across. COVID has seen an explosion in online networks that 'virtually' bring families, parishioners, parishes, and a myriad of ecclesial groups together. What new channels of communication need to be developed between parishes, schools and diocesan entities that foster a drawing closer together? Conversely, how much of these means are used to promote and disseminate the gospel in a missionary spirit, and reach beyond the faithful? What kind of language are we using to communicate the gospel life? Verbal or iconographic? Are local parishes, ecclesial groups visibly seen as engaging with local issues, online or in real life?

Sacramental Formation and Education

There has been a shift in educational means. Our schools use interactive material over diverse technological platforms with which to educate. There is a focus on expressing feelings, playing, sharing experiences, etc., yet our children's catechetical programmes are word heavy, apologetical rather than kerygmatic and book bound. The pace of life, work, and family situations regular or irregular make it more and more difficult to gather numbers together for parish-based catechesis in set blocks of time in particular places.

Adult and child sacramental formation does indeed require prayer, and reflection as well as the reading of Scriptures and information on the Teachings of the Church, how can these be facilitated online in such ways as to promote 'in the flesh' gatherings?

As a means of developing the spiritual life of the community what of accessible courses (online or otherwise) in the education and training of spiritual directors?

Sacramental Life, Worship and Ecumenism

There is an acknowledgement that formation programmes up until now focus solely on sacramental catechesis. The climate of individualism and focus on receiving the sacraments practically to the exclusion of all else seems to have contributed to an exclusionary perception. How do we cultivate an atmosphere of inclusivity for those in mixed marriages, divorced and remarried, LGBTI? The sacramental life of the community embraces a wealth of experience in the area of spirituality. Can we or do we want to develop a sense of being spiritual oases within parishes that offer, prayer groups, spiritual guidance/direction, non-sacramental liturgies of the Word, Lectio Divina or simply a place where the excluded can indeed find a listening ear a voice?

The triad model of Parish, School and Home Life needs greater support to draw them closer together.

Charity is the work of all Christians whatever their denomination. Ecumenism is more than simply participating in shared worship. How can we promote and foster closer ties with other denominations without a sense of proselytism? There is an opportunity for sharing insights and experiences of the spiritual life as well as addressing social and injustice issues. At Haverfordwest the local Anglican Church adopted our methodology used in the parish and has decided to incorporate regular Lectio Divina into its parish and liturgical life.

Governance, Parish Life and Outreach

Many parishioners are aware of the burden of responsibilities placed upon parish priests. There is a call for a more effective voice for Parish and Financial Councils in sharing out the burden of administration as well as informing and nurturing the life of the local parish/deanery. What can be done in accommodating parishioner involvement in the decision making and taking process necessary for parish life? What of the voice and role of women too who make up the largest numbers in parish life and worship? How do we educate parishioners of their canonical obligations and rights in this respect? Do the pertinent canonical norms require revision/adaptation/further defining?

Below are some quotations from the parishes about their experiences of not only being involved but also moving forward with taking action:

"A number of the suggestions for us as a parish have been initiated with success, such as the Lenten lunches with other local parishes, and our food bank collections that were done throughout advent are now being done throughout lent. Our coffee mornings have restarted and have been supported by the parish. Stations of the cross has taken place and has much more in attendance than previously- with parishioners involvement." *Our Lady of Margam*

"One of the fruits from the Welsh session has already been implemented, with the introduction of a Welsh language Mass on the first Sunday of every month. [...] This Mass was initiated as a direct result of the Synod conversations, addressing a need not met for some years in the parish." *Welsh Martyrs, Aberystwyth.*

"We have started a food bank in the parish." *Our Lady's, Llandoverly.*

Our first attempt at becoming a listening church has already achieved a level of listening hitherto unknown. What is evident from this process so far is that there is an openness to new possibilities and a sense of hopefulness among the People of God within the Diocese of Menevia.

Diocese of Menevia
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