

The Association of Catholics in Ireland

SYNODAL SYNTHESIS FOR THE NATIONAL SYNODAL GATHERING



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Introduction</i> | 2 |
| <i>WHAT BRINGS YOU JOY</i> | 3 |
| <i>WHAT BRINGS YOU SORROW</i> | 4 |
| <i>WHAT BRINGS YOU HOPE</i> | 7 |
| <i>WHAT BRINGS YOU FEAR/ANXIETY</i> | 8 |
| <i>GREATEST HOPES AND WISHES FOR THE CHURCH</i> | 10 |
| <i>CONCLUSION</i> | 12 |

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Catholics in Ireland started in November 2012 at a meeting of over 300 people in the Regency Hotel, Dublin, to discuss the participation of laity and the need for reform and renewal in the Church. The Association is committed to a reform and renewal agenda in the Irish Church in the spirit of Vatican II. We are committed to a Church that is inclusive and accepts the equality of all by virtue of their baptism. Our activities have included talks, conferences, meetings with bishops, submissions to the Vatican and the Irish bishops on the Synod for Families, and the World Meeting of Families. Our most recent campaign is on the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* article 37 which requires structures to be made available for the laity to express their opinions and participate in the mission of the church. We have a very active website, www.acireland.ie and Facebook page with news on national and international church matters.

Pope Francis has been speaking about synodality since 2015 when he called for a listening church, walking together in synodality. The Synod of Bishops 'For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission' will be held in Rome in October 2023. The Irish bishops responded by embarking on a Synodal Pathway leading to a National Synodal Assembly within five years. The ACI have wholeheartedly embraced this initiative by Pope Francis and the Irish bishops, seeing it as the first time the People of God have been given the opportunity and a structure to express their opinions on the state of the Church and how the Holy Spirit might be guiding us for the future.

We have run a series of nine talks to create awareness of synodality, 40 minutes for the talk and 40 minutes for the questions and answers. This provided an opportunity and the vocabulary to enable the laity to examine the synodal process to determine how we can make an effective contribution. The talks featured a wide range of excellent speakers, including Dr. Nicola Brady, Chair of the Steering Committee for the Irish National Synodal Assembly, Prof. Linda Hogan, Chair of Ecumenics TCD, Tom Inglis, sociologist and author, Kate Moynihan, CEO LINC advocating for lesbian and bisexual women, Rose O'Connor, Limerick Synod and Chair Women in Church Leadership, Prof. Thomas O'Loughlin, Historical Theology Nottingham University, Fr. Brendan Hoban, Killala Synod, Fr. Sean McDonagh, eco-theologian, and David Timbs, Australian National Plenary Council. The talks were well attended, representing all the People-of-God, laity, priests and bishops.

Following the invitation to participate from the Synodal Pathway Task Group, we held a Synodal Gathering via Zoom on 5th May. The contributions were captured and a questionnaire provided for participants to complete and return.

Our Synthesis has been prepared from the following inputs:

- Views expressed during the Question & Answer sessions at the nine talks

- The Synodal Gathering held on 5th May via Zoom, with participants completing a questionnaire.
- An online questionnaire on our website and Facebook page.

SYNTHESIS OF THE VIEWS COLLECTED FROM THE THREE SYNODAL PROCESSES OUTLINED ABOVE.

The contributions have been collated under the themes used by the Dublin Diocese Synodal Gathering process, Joy, Sorrow, Hope and Fear. For people submitting the questionnaire, we posed an additional question – ‘What are your greatest wishes and best hopes for the Church?’ to find the vision people have for the Church when no constraints are placed on them.

WHAT BRINGS YOU JOY

The major sources of Joy were expressed as community and participation in the Sacraments and liturgy.

COMMUNITY

- The joy of being part of a loving and worshipping faith community.
- Quote *“The joy of community”*
- Parents want children to have a sense of liturgy, of worship, a sense that God is close to them. They don’t want children to disbelieve in God..
- The belief that God is with us is a source of joy.
- Involvement in ecumenical activities with fellow Christians.

SACRAMENTS AND LITURGY

- Participation in the Sacraments
- The Eucharist is a prime source of joy.
- Going to Mass is important, they like the ritual and sense of community.
- Music ministry, playing music and singing in the choir brings joy.
- Quote *“A purpose-designed Children’s Mass was enthusiastically received”*
- Participation in Bible study and Prayer groups is a source of joy.

OTHER

- The work of Pope Francis is bringing joy and hope to people.
- LGBT+ *“It has to be said that there are very welcoming parishes - they are not all excluding, but for us families it is not always clear whether or not we would be welcomed, you sometimes feel very vulnerable and open to criticism even though it hasn’t come to me - you are kind of always on your guard. A bit of*

clarity would take the stress out of it.”

WHAT BRINGS YOU SORROW

It is not surprising that the most frequent mention of experiences that brought sorrow or feelings of sadness were themes of clericalism, the abuse scandals, the treatment of women in the church, the church’s irrelevance to young people, the treatment of LGBT+, Catechesis, and the reduction of Sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation to rites of passage.

CLERICALISM

- That leadership within the Church continues to operate through patriarchal, hierarchical, feudal structures.
- That the structures of the church are not inclusive and that the voice of the laity is not listened to.
- That so many parish priests still speak of ‘their parish’ rather than ‘our parish’.
- Quote: “The Curia’s preoccupation on Papal infallibility to the detriment of everything is a cause of sadness. It was a mistake to adopt the concept of Papal infallibility. Having to distance ourselves from Papal encyclicals is a cause for sadness.”
- Some clergy appear to believe they don’t have anything to learn and are not willing to start a conversation.
- A ‘top down’ attitude to parish councils. Many parishes do not have an effective parish council and those that exist are often a box-ticking exercise for the parish priest.
- Quote: “Many of the younger clergy have adopted rigid stances and have recourse to the comforting certainty of traditional devotional style religious practice in the face of the messy problematic reality of community life”.
- The failure of many Irish bishops to take the Synodal Pathway seriously.
- Quote from Pope Francis: “Do not repeat the attitudes of aloofness and clericalism that at times in your history have given the real image of an authoritarian, harsh and autocratic Church.”
- The ‘Closed Clerical Box’ caught in a clerical recruitment poster logo, “Chosen, Anointed, Set-Apart”.
- Canon Law blocking collaboration with lay people anxious to develop the influence of Parish Pastoral Councils.
- The Church treatment of divorced and remarried people.
- The current all-male clerical system fails to vindicate the declared right in Lumen Gentium Article 37.
- The breach of human rights in relation to Tony Flannery’s treatment by the CDF/ denial of respectful process even today.

- The silencing of “heretics” Teilhard de Chardin who was silenced for a lifetime, yet whose unified vision of reality inspires many today.

BURDEN ON PRIESTS

- Quote: *“Clergy are worn down; a lot are elderly and tired from constant public negativity towards the Church.”*
- The hurt and discouragement of priests in the face of recent scandals are often ignored or underestimated.
- Traditional desire for devotional religious practise is threatened by the language of synodality.

ABUSE SCANDALS

- Quote: *“The absolute distrust in how the institution is perceived and rightly so. How far the Church has sunk in its neglect of the most vulnerable. The cover up of clergy abuse probably ranks among the worst of sins.”*
- Quote: *“Sad to see many clergy succumb to cynicism and/or despair simply because the culture of secrecy is endemic. Who really listens to them?”*
- Quote: *“That the institution of the Church has been - and continues to be - an abusive and deeply corrupt institution that consistently fails to live out Christian values.”*
- No Catholic bishop has yet acknowledged and recognised that the clerical abuse issue was exposed by a human rights oriented secular society and that Catholic societies were slowest to face up to the issue.

WOMEN AND THE CHURCH

- Women are treated as second-class citizens in the Church.
- Discussion is denied on the question of women priests.
- Advancement of women’s roles dependent on parish priest’s willingness to engage in collaborative style ministry.
- Only male lay diaconate offered in Limerick despite the outcome of the synod in Limerick Diocese.

CHURCH’S IRRELEVANCE TO YOUNG PEOPLE

- Quote: *“We have failed young people in particular by failing to promote their innate spiritual instincts, promoting dogma and doctrine instead.”*
- Quote: *“The ridiculous garb of the hierarchy makes me laugh but also makes me angry. How can they ever get young people to really embrace Catholicism when the hierarchs dress like peacocks?”*

- Quote: *“The images of ordained in dresses and lace are risible, perpetuating the message of inequality between ordained and lay people, and alienating the youth.”*

LGBT+

‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you came to birth I consecrated you’ *Jeremiah 1:5*. The faithful cannot accept that their children, grandchildren and fellow human beings are rejected by the church because of their sexual orientation.

- The ‘Tradition’ declaration that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered is extremely distressing to LGBT people, their families and allies.
- The exclusion of LGBT people from parish ministry is unacceptable.
- Quote: *“I too am gay and I’m active in the church (I am a music minister) which is why I feel vulnerable to be honest.”*
- Quote: *“Surely the main question must be ‘Would Christ condemn or welcome my transgender son?’”*
- Quote: *“Schools are rightly teaching inclusion and equality for all parts of our communities as part of the national curriculum - how can Catholic schools sign off on such a curriculum whilst excluding the LGBT community. This generation of people question the fairness of this exclusion and I feel the Church risks dissolution at some stage in the future, which would sadden me greatly”.*
- Quote: *“I estimate that between 25% and 40% of clergy are gay. During the marriage equality referendum I wonder why so many clergy hid. I have never seen the subject discussed at any diocesan assembly of clergy. I wonder why this is the case?”*
- The lack of visible, open and joyful representation of LGBT+ individuals in Church leadership roles is damaging in particular to young people who are struggling with the stress of having a minority identity, and whose wellbeing increases when they see their minority identity represented well in their community or organisation.
- Ballyfermot parish had to bow to pressure and take down their Pride flag.
- Quote: *“The problem is the Church’s attitude to sexual expression of human beings, both LGBTQ and heterosexual”.*

CATECHESIS AND THE SACRAMENTS

- Quote: *“The charade of First Communion and Confirmation really appals me. I wish the Bishops would just cancel these events and give parents responsibility of making real decisions about their own religious beliefs. I think that we have depreciated the Sacraments by allowing them become money making rites of passage.”*

- Quote: *“The education of our children should be community based not left to the schools.”*
- Quote: *“It is sad that there is little catechetical instruction for adults to help nurture mature faith”.*

WHAT BRINGS YOU HOPE

The greatest source of hope identified has to be this Synodal journey initiated by Pope Francis and the possibility that change, reform and renewal of the Church may happen.

- The willingness of people to engage with the process and to create a new beginning.
- The hope that one day men and women will be treated as equal in the church.
- That there will be recognition of the major role women play in the church. Quote: *“The ordination of women should be allowed. In Killala 69% supported this.” “The ordination of women to the diaconate should be allowed. In Killala 73% supported this.”*
- That LGBT+ people would begin to be welcomed in the church. Quote: *“Our national synod needs to shape up and follow the Synod in Killala’s example where 86% said church teaching on LGBT+ must change.”*
- That there will be religious institutional changes within the church on human rights on grounds of sexuality and orientation, with a successful working transition.
- That divorced and remarried people would begin to be welcomed in the church.
- Hope that the church will take responsibility for failings and damage created by the church. Church to employ and train people to assist those who have been hurt by the church, who have lost faith, and those who feel marginalised.
- Increased understanding of the church as the People of God, the strengthening of grassroots community and the development of the domestic church in people’s houses.
- That recognition of the role of the laity leads to proper structures to be established for full participation.
- Canon Law must be changed to allow the inverted pyramid model of church required by synodality.
- Adult faith development to be provided in parishes.
- Pastoral care of the family to be prioritised. Parish governance to change to facilitate parent’s participation in spiritual development of children.
- More inclusion in church activities for those with disabilities.

- The drying up of clerical male celibate vocations. A new model of pastoral leadership to be developed.
- That there will be a willingness of priests, religious, bishops and archbishops to engage in reform.
- Young people, while not churchgoers, having strong moral Christian views. New programmes / initiatives must be developed to encourage youth involvement.
- That we have organisations like the Association of Catholics and the Association of Catholic Priests working for reform and renewal.
- That the language of human rights, which is essentially a unifying , universal language of human flourishing, wellbeing and community, be adopted fully by the Church.
- That reform-minded lay Catholics will stand for human rights within the church and not be complicit in perpetuating the 'Blind Spots' the institutional church holds.
- That Laudato Si and Catholic Climate Movement are positive developments. That the church will be more active and speak more of climate crisis. That Eco-Congregations, such as in Prosperous and Westport, be encouraged. That audit of parishes be conducted on energy consumption reduction, e.g. Clogher Diocese.

QUOTES:

“The theology of priesthood as understood at the Council of Trent is essentially what was taught to the apostles by Jesus - and is therefore eternal”.

“Some people in the Church are practicing equality in the Church”

“The lived reality of the People of God must inform our efforts to recognise and celebrate God in the “bits and pieces of everyday”.

“I go to both English and Latin Mass. Love both. Find both conducive to community”.

“Washing of feet is a symbol of grace to serve; I could testify that most of the leaders of the church seem to be living this in their lives”.

WHAT BRINGS YOU FEAR/ANXIETY

The overriding fear is that the Synodality process will fail, that the Universal Synod of Bishops in 2023 will not deliver reform - with the result that the Church will continue to decline and contract / disappear.

SYNOD WILL FAIL

- ‘Gatekeepers’ will filter proposals and minimise change.
- That voices for reform will not be heard.
- That there will be no recognition of reality of situation.
- Attempts at transparency will go backwards.
- That Synod 2023 will not work
- That Pope Francis will not be followed by a reform-minded Pope
- We have been here before many times. That people’s views will be ignored as before and they won’t want to bother again.
- That there will be no change in celibacy rule.
- There will be persistence of stifling ideas – e.g. Baptism as ‘washing away’ of original sin.
- The opponents of change will win.
- There have been multiple complaints about lack of opportunity to participate due to lack of parish or even diocesan support and communication and avenues for input.
- 5 Year time frame for Irish Synodal Pathway – a lack of urgency?
- Will ‘Synthesis’ dilute questions / concerns? Might some topics / questions be vetoed?
- Why no public advertising – press, radio, TV – to reach non church-goers?
- The Church’s ambivalence /and failure to see and acknowledge that its internal blind spots regarding Human Rights is about protecting the structure of patriarchy and maintaining a lack of transparency.
- Quote: *“As a moralist - those in power do not even know the basics of Christian ethics! If those with power do not know what is left and right, we have got a problem.”*
- That if Pope Francis' process of Synodality fails to deal with the issue of the equality of women and the issue of LGBT rights it will all have been a waste of time.
- That Synodality will depend on the collaboration of the clergy and the limitations of Canon Law.
- Can synodality be seriously offered if no revision of Canon Law is in prospect?

CHURCH WILL DECLINE / DISAPPEAR

- Growing shortage of priests.
- Resultant loss of Sacraments.

- Amalgamation of parishes with loss of community.
- Churches will be closed.
- Synodality will not continue.
- Clericalism will continue.
- No appointment of pastorally committed leaders.
- No committed preaching of Gospel.
- No 'going out' to those who know nothing of the Good News of the Gospel.
- Continued marginalisation of minorities and of women
- Deprivation of opportunity of faith for younger generations.

“My grandchildren will not have the opportunity of faith and church-going.”

- The fragility of Ecumenism.
- *“My own hypocrisy in staying when there is so much with which I disagree?”*
- Due to their formation and training it will be difficult to get priests to accept a new way of being church.
- Quote; *“With the greying of congregations accompanied by school-centred faith formation for Sacraments being seen as ‘not fit for purpose’ (ACP August 2021) – will family and parish faith formation be a priority and in need of research?”*
- Quote: *“Why do our clergy never see or speak of the issue of bullying of all minorities as a repetition of the crucifixion – and of the Trinity as in solidarity with all who are bullied?”*
- That there will continue to be a lack of awareness of 50 million abortions annually.

GREATEST HOPES AND WISHES FOR THE CHURCH

We asked the question “what are your greatest wishes and best hopes for the Church?” to find out what kind of vision people have for the Church when no constraints are placed on them. The common converging themes that emerged were as follows.

PEOPLE WISH FOR:

DEEP AND FUNDAMENTAL REFORM OF INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES INSPIRED BY JESUS AND THE GOSPEL MESSAGE:

- That the message of Christ becomes central and all the institutional paraphernalia becomes secondary and defunct in many instances.
- The Church will decentralise; subsidiarity will replace centralism.
- Feudal structures will be replaced by a Church which is based less on authority and more on the “Kingdom of God” – that stands for 'simple' ideas of

the Gospel such as openness and inclusivity; encounter and relationship; compassion and service; justice and peace.

LAY MEN AND WOMEN WILL PARTICIPATE FULLY WITH POWER DIVESTED FROM AN EXCLUSIVELY CLERICAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM:

- Introduction of full equality of women in all aspects of church governance, leadership and management.
- No distinction between lay people and ordained ministers; professional management of church affairs by suitably qualified and experienced persons to replace an exclusively clerical hierarchy - Unity in Diversity

A WELCOMING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY FULL OF VIBRANCY AND CELEBRATION. WHERE OUR BELIEFS TRANSFORM EVERYDAY LIVES TO WORK FOR JUSTICE, PEACE AND EQUALITY FOR ALL:

- A place for youth to come to; a place where all the marginalised feel welcome
- To be out with all humanity; the broken, the marginalised, the poor...as Jesus Christ was.
- A church of love, not rules and regulations; willing to embrace change, to listen to the young, to women, to the marginalised, to the hurt, to the excluded.

MODEL OF PRIESTHOOD WILL BE RESTORED TO NEW TESTAMENT PRESBYTER RATHER THAN OT PRIEST:

- All baptised will share Priesthood of Christ. Through deep spiritual, pastoral and social renewal all to be treated as a priestly people.

SMALLER MORE INTIMATE COMMUNITIES BASED ON EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH THAT ARE:

- Less centred in church buildings and more centred around the warmth of true hospitality as role-modelled by Jesus, eg. house eucharist's / people gathering in their homes to pray together / communion of all baptised sharing one table.

SIMPLER LITURGIES THAT:

- Include meditation, stillness - finding the God within us.
- Contain simple, accessible language that is infused with the mystery and joy of the Gospel.

A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF THE MYSTERY OF WHAT WE CALL "GOD":

- An openness and welcome to all who are searching. Wherever they are on that journey, they are listened to. God is “a God” for all; He loves us all equally.
- Exploration of what is a meaningful and authentic faith in 21st century world.

THAT THE CHURCH WILL MEET SOCIETY WHERE IT IS AT TODAY WITH:

- More humility and simplicity and less pomp and ritual.
- Interpretation of Gospel as Jesus intended rather than mediated by clerical 'political' circumstances and a 2000 year old Middle Eastern cultural and social narrative.
- Adoption of the two great commandments "Love God" and "Love your neighbour"

THAT IT BECOMES A COMMUNITY GUIDED MORE BY THE BEATITUDES AND LESS BY COMMANDMENTS:

- And by doing so attracts young people into a life of reflective practice based on the liberating message of the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

WHAT THE HOLY SPIRIT IS SAYING TO US

Karl Rahner said: “In the days ahead, you will either be a mystic or nothing at all.” It would be wonderful to say that the Holy Spirit had spoken to us but our conclusions have been formed by 15 months of meetings, discussions, questionnaires and discernment involving hundreds of participants. The strong messages of this discernment are:

- We must protect and build on the strong sense of community at parish level.
- Smaller communities centred in domestic churches, as in the Early Church, will have a role to play.
- The two great commandments “Love God” and “Love your neighbour” must become the focus instead of dogmas, rules and regulations.
- The Church must become a more inclusive and compassionate body where all are and feel equal and welcome.
- That the abuse and cover-up scandals will continue to damage the church until there is total transparency of and reparation for the past and structures to ensure protection for children in the future.

- That structure must be put in place to allow lay men and women to participate fully in church leadership, recognising their shared Priesthood of Christ as People of God.
- The contribution of women in the church must be recognised and roles established, up to and including diaconate and ordination.
- The Church's teaching on homosexuality and the language of rejection of LGBT+ people by the church must change, with a sincere apology by the Church for the trauma it has caused by oppression of LGBTQ+ people.
- Divorced and remarried people must be accepted as equal members of the Church. The denial of the Eucharist to people of goodwill, who are part of loving relationships outside the Church's strict definition of marriage, is unacceptable.
- Young people find Mass, rituals and rules irrelevant to them. The Church must be willing to make radical changes, making it welcoming and relevant to all generations. It must dismantle barriers to participation by young people and build the bridges needed so that young people actively want to participate and enrich our faith communities with their new perspectives and goodness.
- Married priests should be allowed, in line with the acceptance of married Anglican clergy into the Catholic Church. Clerical celibacy should be optional as in the Orthodox Church.

