



# AMRI Submission on Synodality

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# AMRI Submission on Synodality

## 1. Introduction

The Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI) represents and promotes active collaboration between Religious Institutes, Societies of Apostolic Life and Lay Missionary Organisations. It seeks to respond to existing and emerging realities both in Ireland and overseas by supporting and energising the life and ministries of its members and of the wider Church with a renewed sense of hope and relevance.

Towards preparing a submission to the universal Synod, the AMRI Executive established a Synod Working Group drawn from among the member institutes. This Working Group looked at how to invite all members through their leaders to participate in the process. A series of questions was devised and sent to all AMRI members inviting them to hold conversations. Over 25 member institutes responded, and the Synod Working Group now offer their responses in collated and synthesised form.

There were also two other conversational processes organised by AMRI which were happening simultaneously – a series of webinars on Synodality hosted by the Lay Mission Committee of AMRI, and a series of webinars held on the Experience of Women Religious which has evolved into ongoing conversations between women Religious leaders and the Irish Episcopal Conference.

The series of questions sent to member institutes included three groupings of questions – one for leadership teams, one for all members, and one for those among whom we minister. The reason for these groupings was to encourage not only conversations among Religious themselves but also responses derived from engagement in conversations with those among whom we live and minister. Thus, it was hoped to capture a response from people on the margins of the Church. While the response from leadership teams and communities was positive, the outreach to those who we minister with and to was limited. AMRI regrets that this voice from the margins is largely missing from our submission. As reported by one congregation *“we were very surprised at the lack of engagement from these people who would normally engage around issues and wonder what this means?”* However, it is also true that many AMRI members did not invite people to engage, due to time constraints and other reasons. We believe that this offers us an area to work on in the future, as we move into the next phase of the synodal process.

This submission is a synthesis of the responses submitted by member institutes. Quotation marks are used to indicate direct words from submissions received. As Consecrated men and women and as members of Societies of Apostolic Life, we offer this lived experience of Synodality, we share our hopes and fears for the synodal process, as well as our dreams for a Synodal Church to which we are whole heartedly committed.

This submission, as well as the submission gathered from the conversations on Synodality hosted by the Lay Mission Committee, and the submission from those involved in the conversations on the Experiences of Women Religious, comprise the three separate submissions from AMRI.

## 2. Our Experience of Synodality

Consecrated life whether apostolic, contemplative or missionary, both male and female, is at its heart a charismatic, prophetic, radical way of following Christ. As communities committed to living the gospel in accordance with our individual charisms, it is implicit that members share fully in the responsibility for the life in mission of their local and also the global Church. Charism, in this context, is a gift to the Church, to be welcomed in principle and in practice for the enrichment of the entire faith community.

## 2.1 Rooted in Prayer

At the heart of our life is our prayer as we seek to deepen our relationship with God. We hold our local and global faith communities, as well as the entire human family and all of God's creation, consistently in our care and concern. Our prayer has been invited specifically for the 'fruitfulness' of the synodal process. For this we are encouraged. Our contemplative sisters and brothers speak of *"offering a service to the Church and the world in a particular way, in their life of prayer and listening."*

The daily rhythm of our lives, centred on our liturgical prayer, *"keeps us rooted as we pray the psalms, crying out with the poor for help, praising God for God's goodness and asking for God's graces and blessings."* In this we keep faith, hope and love alive in a world which is sometimes bogged down in despair and seemingly hopeless. Our monastic sisters say: *"we believe that our hidden presence is a comfort and support to others and increases the sense of our belonging to the one family of God."*

## 2.2 Listening to one another and to God

We view Synodality as *"a privileged eavesdropping on a conversation between God and God's people"*, a key element in this process being the ability to listen. This resonated with a Benedictine monastic community for whom *"the first word in the Rule of St Benedict is 'listen'. This listening brings about a change of mindset in those who truly engage."*

Our contemporaries look to us to be like the prophets, that is *"people who know the Lord..." Only then will they listen to us. The more we experience God in our personal lives, the more we empower others to do the same."* Listening, is the most important part of the synodal process. *"We long to listen ever more deeply to God's Word; 'let ourselves be dug into by the word' and listen with new ears to the present moment in history, with all its uncertainty and anxiety."* Without the ability to listen and an appreciation that the synodal process itself is the most important aspect of the Synod, not the individual submissions, we will miss a valuable opportunity.

## 2.3 Daily Life in Community

As communities of sisters and brothers we share in the daily life of each member, in the joys and sorrows of each one in sickness and in health. Together we engage in scripture and faith sharing and in our daily rhythm of prayer and liturgy. For many their life was often rooted in the ministry of the congregation. However, this is changing as we let go and empower lay colleagues who share our charisms, to continue the work we began. This can also be life giving and freeing, enabling us to take on new ministries and engage in outreach in new ways.

The Synodal process is about inclusivity. As a community we are called *"to mirror this in how we live together"*, reaching out to those on the margins of the community due to age, disability, etc. and trying to draw everyone into the full circle of communion. *"Synodality is about Fraternity"*, as Pope Francis writes in Fratelli Tutti. Our Carmelite brethren reflect thus: *"Saint Teresa wanted all her sisters to be true sisters; each loved, helped, and cherished. Our life of love and prayer in Carmel enlarges our hearts to embrace the world where everyone is our sister, our brother..."*

## 2.4 Our Decision Making

All congregations have moved to more participatory ways of being, including all in consultation, valuing different voices, especially those on the ground. Making decisions through consensus is encouraged at all levels, involving discernment, deep listening and consultation. The value of subsidiarity is empowering members to take responsibility for decisions made and actions taken. This begins in the local community

with listening exercises to prepare well for assemblies and chapters, be these provincial, regional or general. The feedback received by local communities engages them fully in the process and empowers members to take ownership of all decisions affecting the life of the group. In this we have learnt that *“dissenting voices can be wisdom voices”* and that we must *“be prepared to be surprised.”*

All this enables congregations towards becoming more one Body. For example, one female missionary congregation spoke thus: *“In the past each entity worked more or less independently, e.g. Ireland had ministries in Nigeria and Ghana mostly involved in education and medical work; Sisters from France worked in French speaking African Countries and were very much involved in pastoral work; whereas today there is more collaboration and dialogue between country groups.”*

A congregation of Religious Brothers reflected on how their process of discernment has been very beneficial in recent years, especially related to issues of governance and stewardship. The time given for reflection and discernment has led the Congregation to make decisions that were *“difficult and challenging but very beneficial in our efforts to move forward.”* At assemblies and chapters, the facilitators they chose were women. This was a deliberate decision on their part. *“Each of these women enabled the members of the Congregation to embrace the process of discernment in a truly fraternal fashion.”*

One congregation of apostolic women Religious spoke of their experience that *“every process towards change needs communication and participation.”* Opportunities for people to share about issues is necessary. They use the method of *“listening groups where people listen to each other without response or comment. Then when all have shared ask people to share ‘what did I hear?’ and then gather these responses so that they can be consolidated.”* Facilitation for these groups is essential to the process as a whole. As we engage in these processes, we acknowledge that God is the beginning and the end of this story; that God is present in the depth of faith sharing that happens between participants and that God is present in the transformation that can happen in the lives of the individuals involved. We are all called to listen, learn and not to be afraid to take the first step.

## 2.5 Our Reality Today

We do all of this in the context of our declining numbers and high age profile. Consecrated men and women in Ireland today continue to provide very valuable, meaningful, courageous, and relevant ministries to the poor and marginalised, both at home and overseas. Today we want *“to be at the heart of the local Church; able to engage in mutual empowerment with every encounter, be able and willing to live with uncertainty and doubts in the pursuit of Truth/Reality.”*

## 2.6 Our Learning Over Time

Over the years we have learnt much about how to live synodally in our communities and with our lay colleagues, shared by one missionary society in this way: *“As missionaries in a variety of countries in Asia, Oceania and Latin America, we were inevitably vulnerable outsiders, limited in our mastery of complex cultures and languages, and therefore so much more dependent on lay leadership in the various communities in which we served. So often there was a lack of ordained priests and therefore we had no option but to trust and train lay leaders who gladly undertook the various ministries. In retrospect, it is clear that it was often the actual shortage of ordained ministers that enabled the laity to take their God-given role. We can see now that our very inability and vulnerability as strangers became the most valuable corrective to the kind of clericalism we had absorbed inevitably in our early formation. We knew that basic equality and dignity in the Church is rooted in our common Baptism and that therefore a synodal Church needs to encourage and empower the laity. We knew it in theory, but the practice of working with multiple lay-led communities brought it home in a new way. We experienced the essential role of laity in responding to missionary challenges and*

*especially the indispensable contribution of women in ministry. Little by little we learned in practice that leadership really does consist in service.”*

## 2.7 Our Witness to Living Synodally

To live synodally and to engage fully in the process of deep listening and discernment towards consensus requires members to be open to participating in the gatherings and to be open to hear the voice of others. As Religious we acknowledge a failure sometimes to engage enthusiastically and creatively in our own congregational processes. Working together inter-congregationally has greatly enhanced our experience of Synodality as we share in ministry, in prayer, in formation and in study.

Our experience as Religious of living synodally is often not reflected in diocesan and parish life. This needs to be addressed to enable greater participation by all people in the life of the local faith community and in the wider Church. The pandemic has called on us to accompany one another through challenging times and has created an unexpected space and the possibility for change. It has shown that we are all interconnected and are ultimately responsible for each other. We have learned to connect and re-connect in new ways. Our hope is that this will create new ways of being and new openings for action as we move forward. Together we need to *“re-learn that the Church is in service to the Reign of God, and we must be constantly open to being surprised by the presence and activity of the Spirit”* beyond Church boundaries.

We have experienced synodality *“bearing fruit in our congregations and local communities, leading to a desire for connection and participation and on-going encounter with one another as we listen to the Holy Spirit.”* As we sat together in conversation to prepare our community submissions, we saw the giftedness of each member: *“wisdom, creativity, generosity, collaboration, and focus on the poor, an understanding and ownership of ‘being Church’, an understanding that Community is essential.”*

## 3. What do we as Consecrated Men and Women have to offer the Church?

### 3.1 We offer our life experience

Consecrated men and women by their calling are witnesses to the radical call of the gospel as it is addressed to all in the community of disciples, as well as to the missionary thrust of that call. In our time, members of Religious Orders/Congregations/Societies of Apostolic Life are especially well placed to explore and mediate, for the benefit of the Church in general, the widespread polarising of religion and spirituality. We come to the wider faith community with varying degrees of experience of dialogical and discerning approaches to decision-making, including processes of planning and the selection of personnel for service in positions of formal leadership. In our experience the *“seed of Synodality is found in the mission of the parish. Everyone unites around the mission, laity is actively involved, small Christian communities are alive and flourishing, people are involved at a practical level, and various faith groups, participating together, strengthen the growth of the Church.”*

### 3.2 We offer our prayer

Living our lives rooted in prayer and contemplation we are open to sharing this with others especially our lay brothers and sisters. *“Putting God and the whisper of the Spirit at the centre of our lives rather than doctrine and law...calling us to learn to listen to the Spirit through stillness and contemplation and deepen our commitment and unity.”*

Our contemplative brothers and sisters observe *“Many people in our world do not experience love, if this free love of God that is available in the Eucharist was transmitted it would bring great joy. We experience this joy, which is life-giving in living our monastic life, especially in our life of prayer, singing psalms of praise*

*and thanksgiving in choir and in the intimate communion with Jesus and in communion with others, e.g. visitors, guests, when we gather for worship.”*

They see themselves, as do many Religious today, as *“a witness to the value of being over doing. In a world that is becoming increasingly obsessed with productivity, witnesses to a different way of living are indispensable and badly needed. A witness to true identity: because contemplative life shows that authentic ‘doing’ flows from ‘being’ we are in opposition to the message of our culture which tells people that their identity comes from their achievements, their social status, or their careers. The problem with this identity is that it is restrictive and lacks the spaciousness that the human personality needs to flourish. Contemplative nuns and monks witness to the fact that one’s identity comes from God and is something very deep and precious that is worth paying attention and giving time to. The crisis in identity might go some way in explaining why many people/young people have uncomfortable relationships with themselves...there is something liberating about the witness of contemplative life in this regard that is a very valuable gift to the world.”*

### 3.3 We offer our repentance

We come as a humble group of men and women conscious of the hurts caused by our failures in the past, but also our striving to reach out, to care, to love, to nurture, to heal and to educate especially those whom society cast aside. For our failures we are truly sorry.

Today we seek to build bridges *“with people who have been hurt by the Catholic Church over the years, and with others who are hostile to the Church as a result of its dominance in post-Independence Ireland (with all the implications that dominance had for a number of areas), and with a large majority, including members of the Church, whose faith in the institution is badly shaken by the recent and ongoing revelations about clerical and Religious child abuse and cover-ups.”* We recognise the importance of listening to survivors. As part of our efforts to help with healing, we have, with the Irish Episcopal Conference, established Towards Healing and Towards Peace, which offer counselling and spiritual support respectively, as means to reach out to all who were affected in many ways by abuse in the past.

The National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI) was established by the IEC and AMRI to advise, train, monitor and ensure best practice in the area of child safeguarding. We continue to learn from our past and move forward in new ways.

Today we, and indeed the whole Church, need to *“let go of wrongful traditions, preaching false doctrine instead of the gospel and cease putting rules and regulations before people.”* It necessary that we, as Religious men and women, *“seek to restore right relationships between God, people and the earth where these are broken due to lack of knowledge and distortion of the truth.”*

### 3.4 We offer our learnings

Most of us grew up in a Church *“where we ourselves did not have strong expectations of being consulted, nor did we question the ‘status quo’ in the Church.”* We had little experience in sharing feelings so that what we really felt remained concealed. In our formation and subsequent ministry there was more emphasis on teaching people what to believe and do, than on listening and being taught by them. We were blessed in our call as missionaries *“to be at home in very different cultures, challenged to learn and be evangelised by those to whom we had been sent, especially the poor and marginalised, but we had to learn painfully through our mistakes.”*

Today we seek to contribute effectively as ‘dynamic forces’ and signs of hope in our local Church communities of parish and dioceses (and/or other ecclesial movements), and we are challenged to make

ourselves available in our local contexts for ministries/services in keeping with our expertise and experience. We are open and willing to avail of training in the skills of dialogue, listening, and faith-sharing in formal and informal spaces, in public *fora*, in print and social media.

### 3.5 We offer our ministry experience

In our ministries we are constantly engaging with people from all strata of society and for us this *“reinforces the importance of education as the Church evolves into the future. Laity will have a central role and in order to ensure that they have the tools to take leadership roles it is essential that they have a good grounding in the scriptures, theology, pastoral skills etc. As Pope Francis has demonstrated in his writings, an inclusive approach to the methodologies that are used will help people to absorb the content with which they are being presented. People will learn best when their learning is in dialogue with their own experience.”*

We are called to learn from those we consider ‘other’, listen to the pain of the shaken faithful, and engage with other institutions and organisations that can help with the kind of reform the Church needs in order to serve more faithfully the Gospel it proclaims. We are called to have courage, to think beyond the immediate local scene, to have an expansive heart. The Church is universal, and our concern must also extend beyond our own shores. Mission outreach is a call but also a wonderful enrichment. *It is “not about ‘successful’ projects but standing shoulder to shoulder with people.”*

We open ourselves up *“To ask not what the Church can do for me but I, as part of the whole people of God ask, ‘What can I do to build up the Body of Christ on earth?’”* We are ready to become *“leaders of the change we want to see.”* This will call for an openness to accept the losses or pain that can arise from changes, such as changing the physical structures of the Church. That we let go of old ways and let our light shine as we embrace change and move to a new future together as the Body of Christ. Religious communities are ready to *“make our places available and welcoming for the up building of the wider parish community.”* Following Vatican II Religious *“were in the forefront of the renewal called for by the Council. We adapted our way of life, we availed of courses and programmes and invited the experts in the new spirituality and emerging theology to work with us. Our rooms and libraries were well stocked with the latest writings of some of the best interpreters of the Council Documents. Our lay sisters and brothers were not introduced to any of this for many years, if ever. Can we find creative, meaningful ways to share some of the resources we have and help to bring about the renewal which God – and Pope Francis, dream of?”*

The Synodal Pathway offers an opportunity for this renewal and Religious men and women can play a significant role in bringing it about. Using our facilities, our experience and our resources, we can perhaps sponsor some of these programmes in our local places.

### 3.6 We offer our courage to change

While we fully acknowledge the dreadful hurt caused by some Religious, we are also conscious that the good work done by so many Religious in diverse areas of life over many years is overlooked and ignored and some feel we are the scapegoats for all that was wrong in how society operated. For many Religious today these events took place before they joined their institute and *“absorbing anger and projections regarding events completely outside my lifetime or life experience can be very painful.”* Within this pain there is also a call to continuous renewal, in faith, love, humility, and truth, seeking to be faithful to what God is asking of us.

Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are called to continuously and courageously seek to be faithful to their charism and the vision of their founder and *“it is this commitment to our charism which underpins our vision, mission and ministry”*. This charism and vision must be read and reread in contemporary times so as to respond to new and emerging realities.



Women Religious speak of themselves as *“not bogged down with dogma ... and often move ahead in many social, environmental and justice issues. As Religious in Ireland, we are no longer in leadership roles in the Church: i.e. through schools and hospitals. We are in the background, and while this is a little intimidating and can be painful, we realise a lot of ‘letting go’ must take place. We also realise that this is a healthy reminder that our identity was linked too much to what we did. We need to grow into the realisation that we are ‘contemplatives in action’, the importance of our self-identity as consecrated men and women and not just our working function.”*

We see the Church as a family, and we are all part of it. The Holy Father in his letter about synodality highlighted three important activities, *Encounter, Listening and Discerning*, all very important in our lives of faith. *“We would like to see the community/family aspect of parish fostered with lay people taking up their role in the parish. The Priest’s role is to administer the sacraments and offer pastoral care to his flock.”* This will require a letting go of traditional stereotypes to allow us *“to see the priests freed up from administrative work and spend all their time in pastoral care of the people of the parish.”*

### 3.7 We offer our hope

As Christians we are called to be *“beacons of hope to our world which is breaking down. There is a collapse of old certainties due to war, climate change and abuse among other issues. As Religious we must dare to engage in courageous hope-filled prayer with Mary as our Model and Mother of Hope. Our hope is based on Jesus’ promise: ‘I am with you always...’ Things will not return to what they were before. We need Easter eyes... to see the NEW emerging Church. This was the experience of the Apostles after the Resurrection. We too have to know in our hearts the Risen Lord.”*

We are encouraged that *“Pope Francis is eager to involve the whole Church – all the People of God, calling us as a pilgrim people, to walk together, working for the Kingdom of God. This acknowledges that all people are informed, and that God reveals his mysteries to all people including the least and simple, not just the hierarchy.”*

From our experience we believe that in general *“people appreciate the fact that they are being asked. They are willing to respond but if they consider their responses are not being listened to or considered then the willingness to respond may decline. This raises the whole question of expectations.”*

## 4. Our Hopes for the Synod Process

We are inspired by the leadership of Pope Francis which we experience as pastoral, compassionate and marked by integrity. We hope that it will lead us all as Church to read and respond with love to the documents from Pope Francis such as *Evangelii Gaudium, Amoris Laetitia, Laudato Si, and Fratelli Tutti*, as guides for living synodally, welcoming all people to the table of the Lord. As expressed by one congregation *“Laudato si has taken importance in how we live our lives, use our resources and inform our decisions.”*

We are hopeful that this Synodal process will bring forth:

### 4.1 A Church that is open and welcoming.

We desire a Church that is *“open to the Holy Spirit so that all, women, men, children... are given their rightful place in the Church”*; in this way it will become *“an inclusive Church, that is always open to all.”* This pathway will *“challenge the Church to transcend difference and to embrace and celebrate diversity”* as it *“listens to the voices of those on the margins.”* This new Church will *“look with justice and fairness at the current failure to fully include blended families, those in second relationships and LGBTQI+ people.”* We hope this will lead *“to a revisiting of the reasons why some people are not allowed to receive Holy*

*Communion*” – let the Eucharist be, as stated Pope Francis, “not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.” The focus would then turn towards the reality of family life today which is where we need to meet people and build lasting relationships with them. In this Church, where all feel welcome and feel that they belong, *“they will be empowered to share their gifts for the common good of all.”*

## 4.2 A Church that listens

Throughout the process, listening must be its beating heart – in the words of Saint Benedict on calling the brethren to counsel, *“all should speak, beginning with the youngest... because the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger”* thereby *“allowing, enabling and empowering all people to have a voice – a voice that is heard and respected.”*

Our listening together will require us to *“cultivate deep contemplative prayer, study of the scriptures and theology so that we can respond to the needs of our times.”* We must extend our thinking *“beyond our own shores”* having an expansive heart so that we can learn from those we consider *“other”* allowing for the *“difference manifest in our fast growing and changing society.”* Deep, respectful listening will surpass the discrimination felt by many people today so that their *“joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties”* from their diverse backgrounds, gifts and orientations are held with a compassionate heart in this process. We must listen with tenderness to the *“pain of the shaken faithful”* many of whom stayed when others walked away from the Church.

Our listening needs to move beyond just ourselves so that it responds to Pope Francis’s urging to *“hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.”* At the same time, we also need to acknowledge that we can learn from other Christian denominations and from other faiths. Are we open to dialogue with other Christian Churches and to inter-Religious dialogue?

## 4.3 A Church that offers education and formation for all

In our hearts we desire that *“our heritage of faith will be passed on to the next generation.”* At this time, we are concerned that this may not be so going forward for many reasons. It is imperative that as Church we *“engage the vision, generosity, enthusiasm, empathy of laity, giving them any training needed to undertake leadership roles and then trust them to go into ministry in our faith communities.”*

Some think that *“faith formation ought now to be taken out of schools by ensuring the availability of trained, informed catechists grounded in the ongoing revelation of God in our world”*, while others are passionate about the faith formation role and the witness of Catholic school communities in a secular society.

The Church will need to design and offer programmes of catechesis and Religious education, including effective sacramental preparation and adult faith development, that are open and accessible to all who may wish to participate. Going forward the Church needs to engage in *“ongoing, open dialogues between the ‘three public voices’: the wisdom of the faithful, the ministry of theology, and the teaching authority (the magisterium).”*

The formation of priests has been raised as needing attention. *“Many young priests, as soon as they are ordained, return to pre-Vatican II vestments, rituals, and practices. Priests need to be out and about among the people, visiting homes, listening to them, engaging in the joys and sorrows of the daily life”* of the people they serve. *“They need to be well formed in the liturgical celebration, inclusive language and inclusion of the laity in the celebrations.”* Formation for clergy, and many desire this to include both men and women, *“needs to have a solid foundation that can dialogue with the contemporary world”*.

The institutional Church needs to *“undertake a critical review of its position on Priesthood, Diaconate, and the role of women in a 21<sup>st</sup> century Church”*, rather than putting excessive energy into maintaining a model of the Church which no longer resonates with the call of the Spirit and the needs of God’s people today.

#### 4.4 A Church Open to an Outpouring of the Holy Spirit

We pray that the Church together experiences a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit - a new Pentecost, and is *“willing/able to live with uncertainty and lack of control”* just as the disciples experienced at the first Pentecost. In this way *“we will remember why Christ came among us and who we are called to be in our service of all God’s people.”*

We will experience this new Pentecost *“prepared to be vulnerable and trusting in mutual, respectful conversation, in genuine dialogue; aware of our brokenness and sin; aware of the need for and willing to ask for forgiveness”* from those we have hurt in the past. This will allow us to become *“a humbler more contemplative Church.”* From this new stance we will see *“the Church as community and not just a building, Christ is not only in the tabernacle but in the midst of the people of God and in the natural world.”* We will be *“challenged to let go of what does not make sense, and what has lost meaning. Faith is not static, it is evolving.”*

As Religious and missionaries we have rejoiced in our experience of sharing in the life of faith communities across the globe and we hope in this journey we can work towards togetherness, *“intensifying the emphasis on Basic Christian Communities”*; and an openness in the *“European Church to priests and missionaries from other continents to work among us for the purpose of re-evangelization.”*

#### 4.5 A Church open to change and development

For the people of God to join this ‘walking together’ we feel there needs *“to be clarity around the steps”* towards bringing about this synodal Church. As Religious men and women *“what we try to model - involvement, consultation, discernment, inclusiveness - we hope will be seen as a model for the future Church.”*

We are encouraged to see Pope Francis appoint women, including Religious women, to some of the roles in dicasteries of the Roman Curia; we hope this is a beginning of a real change and that we will see more lay and Religious men and women assuming leadership roles in the global and local Church.

As Church, we need to create a culture of journeying together as pilgrims on the road in the spirit of the Gospel, seeking renewal and reinvigoration, ever open to the *“development of doctrine in light of reflection on experience”*; *“emerging knowledge uncovered through ‘new’ sciences”*; *“wisdom emerging from dialogue across difference”*; *“the contribution of young people from their particular perspectives.”* If we engage in this task, we will then need to develop new structures which reflect its synodal nature, including pastoral councils in every parish and *“integrated pastoral planning, guiding and enabling vibrant, active faith communities”*. *“This will call for co-responsibility of all the Baptised in the life of the Church and its vitality in mission”* with protocols for transparency and accountability at all levels.

This synodal Church must focus more on what Church really is – all God’s people gathered around the table where all are invited to share in the decision-making process and are listened to with trust and openness. *“The clerical structure of the Church, something often highlighted by Pope Francis, needs to be challenged, and alongside this, serious consideration needs to be given to the way bishops are selected. This, we feel, is in need of some reform to make it more inclusive.”*

The concept of collegiality needs to be a key conversation – *“the relationship between the bishops and the pope and by extension the entire people of God. What kind of authority do the bishops have over the Church at large when they act collectively, that is, collegially; how is that authority exercised in relationship to the Pope?”*

Having expressed all these hopes, we believe that synodality is worth the effort. Through it we will be more united, more peaceful, and more joyful – with nobody excluded. The fruit of Synodality is community, brotherhood/sisterhood, where all are invited to participate as equal members of the Body of Christ.

## 5. Our Fears for the Synod Process

While we are committed to the synodal process as a new opportunity for the Church in the world and are willing to participate and to encourage others to participate too, we are conscious of our own fears and challenges regarding the process towards creating a synodal Church, some of which we name here:

### 5.1 Fear of the process

We fear *“that exercises will be done, but people will not be listened to”* and that time and resources will be invested into *“an already decided project.”* There are those among us who *“feel not much will come of all the sharing”* and conversations we have engaged in, in our communities, parishes and other groups.

*“When people are invited to invest time and energy in responding/reflecting/sharing their thoughts and experience to questions/issues in the life and mission of the Church, they expect some feedback and action to follow. When this does not happen people become cynical and disillusioned.”* We hear this expressed when we invite participation with us in these conversations.

### 5.2 Fear of Change & Lack of engagement

Many Religious sense *“a lack of enthusiasm for the vision of Pope Francis in the local Church.”* and some say *“Synod never mentioned in our parish.”* The *“lack of dialogue, openness and fear of change coming to the Church”* is preventing some parishes from inviting participation, especially some parish clergy and *“rigid/closed thinking groups”* that are present in the Church. Some believe this comes from a *“love of power by some in the Church.”*

It is also true that there is a tiredness and lack of energy among some Religious. In many cases this is due to health and age; in other cases, it is due to ministerial and governance responsibilities. This can lead to lack of engagement.

### 5.3 Indifference to the Church

We feel there is an apathy among the people, *“a refusal to be involved, and a belief that the problems or things needed to be done in the Church are not their business because they are more concerned with the cares, concerns and busy-ness of their own life.”*

We fear there will be inaction on behalf of the Church and this leads to participants, both Religious and lay, becoming cynical and disillusioned.

## 5.4 Lack of education in faith

In our experience *“there is a lack of spiritual formation and faith development of laity in our Church today”* and this needs to be addressed so that all people feel able to participate in this process as equals.

## 5.5 Marginalisation and Exclusion

Many people are marginalised in the Church: *“Many voices are not sought or heard especially those on the margins of society or the Church or people who are different in race, gender or sexual orientation.”* It seems to us and to many others that *“not everyone is welcome!”*

There is clericalism/institutionalism among some Church leaders and some laity. There is the exclusion of women from leadership, ordained priesthood and diaconate, and the exclusion of laity in general from influential and decision-making roles in the Church. We have experienced *“decision-making without dialogue or discernment”* and this needs to change so that all voices are given space and time to be heard.

As Religious we often feel excluded in the Church and know this is also true of our lay brothers and sisters (and perhaps some clergy!); it is also true of the poor, young people, and those who do not live up to institution expectations. This exclusion may be due to *“un-reflected practice or possibly unquestioned ideology.”*

The Church is *“challenged to let go of what does not make sense, and what has lost meaning. Faith is not static, it is evolving. At present the Church is stuck in a model that does not always support the reality of people’s lives. The Church needs to be seen as a compassionate Church.”*

## 5.6 We question ourselves

We ask ourselves is this process towards the Universal Synod in 2023 and the Irish Synodal Pathway worth investing time and energy into? Are we afraid to hope for dialogue and discernment towards change? Will we be heard? Is it just too complex? We haven’t been heard in the past and have found other ways of belonging within the institution. Will we be hurt again if we invest our energy into it? Will our participation make a difference and indeed will the Synod make a difference? Will women’s voice be allowed to come in?

The ‘language of Synodality’ must be void of clerical imposition. Together, clergy, Religious and laity need to build and deepen their relationships – with God, with each other and with all of creation – to ensure that change will happen and will last into the future.

We know from our own experience that Synodality is very challenging; *“to make it a reality it needs a real change in attitude toward others and a belief that the Spirit is working in all people of good will. It needs sincerity. It will take patient and sincere listening and action”* for it to become a reality in our Church.

In the past there have been Synods that have produced working documents, but little became of these. We fear that this could be repeated, and therefore it is incumbent on all people within the Church, including Religious, to take responsibility for moving the process forward.

## 6. Our dream for a Synodal Church

As consecrated men and women inspired by Pope Francis, we dream of a Church that is open and welcoming to all people without question so that all feel they belong, can participate, and their giftedness, knowledge and experience is valued. We daily hold the Church and this process in our prayer, both personal and communal. It is only through prayer and a deepening of a relationship with the Lord that Synodality will become a way

of life for all of God's people. We desire a Church that is identified as *the "People of God and not as an institution, a building or the hierarchy."* This will require a change in emphasis and a change in language and attitude by all people. We believe this will *"energise the Church"* as it moves forward to create a loving community of God's holy people where all are respected and cherished.

We share in *"God's dream of Synodality as expressed in so many Gospel stories"*: **at Emmaus** - were not our hearts burning as he talked to us on the road; **at Pentecost** - the Spirit comes into our midst when we are afraid and uncertain; **at Cana** - the abundance and generosity; **Let the little children to come to me** - no one is excluded; **at the Last Supper** - Jesus asks us to share at one table.

We see the need to bring people together, searching and discerning together how to bring this dream alive in the world of today - it is imperative that we become people who continually invite others. This will challenge us as Religious *"to listen to prophetic voices which call for deep transformation, openness to new ways of membership and of living our vowed life, as well as keeping informed, up-to-date and in touch with emerging consciousness of our times, and in particular that of young people."* As Religious we must become living witnesses to the dream we are pursuing.

We commit as Religious to offering our experience of living synodally and our resources to this process to empower and enable the participation of those who would otherwise not contribute for many and varied reasons. We see the need for laypeople to be catechised and educated on the doctrine of the faith, so that they are enabled to engage critically instead of standing back with misunderstandings. *"When we are educated in our faith, it is easier to understand the less-attractive elements of our Catholicism instead of the current situation where people criticise the 'model' without knowing the good reasoning behind particular aspects of the beliefs we hold."*

This Synodal Church we seek to create will be humble, prepared to be vulnerable and trusting in mutual, respectful conversations among all people. It will need to understand its global and local contexts, and be immersed in their socio-cultural diversity. At the forefront will be its compassionate heart, drawing close to those who suffer, so that it bears *'the smell of the sheep'* and becomes ever more attuned to creation, as partner in the human endeavour on behalf of justice for all and for our common home.

While we yearn for comfort and the known, we need to open ourselves to the unknown uncomfortable new that will emerge. This will call us to let go of much that we have and understand, and *"to depend on the providence of God that it is God's dream for his people and not ours to control. This calls us all to return to the essentials of the Gospel and call each other to journey forward in community"* so that together as one Body in Christ we can share the Gospel with all nations of the earth. It is beholden on us that as we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic, we, as Church, do not return to what went before but rather take this *"opportunity for a new beginning."*

As a Church we have a dream and it is imperative that *"we share it with other like-minded people, otherwise it will not come to life."* This is God's dream *"that everyone in the Church, irrespective of age, sex, race and creed, realise that they are loved by God equally and each person has an important role in the body of Christ (the Church) and to take these roles seriously."* If we share our dream for the Church, it will inspire others. If we dream of a holy Church that is more Christ-like and is a loving community, *"it will move people and this desire will grow and develop. It will be in our prayer and drive us on to accomplish whatever we desire. Sharing dreams can change the Church."*

## 7. Conclusion

The most important contribution to this synodal process will come from the Holy Spirit. Unless we develop a culture of listening to each other in respect and above all listening to the voice of the Spirit, there will be no

true synodality. We have to remember it is God's work, not ours to control, and this will require our openness to a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all people, men and women, rich or poor, educated or not, those who participate in the life of the Church and those who do not.

Having struggled over many years to change our own ways of living our Religious life and governing our individual institutes we know this process towards change is not an easy road to walk and we offer our experience of letting go, of changing structures, of living subsidiarity, of inclusive dialogue and discernment to this process. To assist the Church as a whole we offer our resources, our personnel and our prayer to this universal process towards a Synodal Church and to the Synodal pathway of the Church in Ireland.

We bring our hopes and dreams for a more inclusive Church that is open to all people and is constantly inviting participation by more people as the Gospel is spread to the ends of the earth. This will ask much of the Church now and into the future. We need to move with *“humility and sincere outreach allowing the spirit of the Gospel to be our guiding star informing our actions and our decisions beyond literal and prescriptive interpretation.”*

Although the claim is being made *“that ‘Synodality’ has no equivalent in the world of politics or sociology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, most of us have been born and bred into a democratic expectancy which must be weighed and assessed in any such vocabulary. It will be a question of careful preparation, lucid and precise explanation, psychological know-how, if such a delicate concept is to be inserted into the popular Catholic psyche.”* If the synod process is to continue forward in every time and place it will be imperative to distinguish between democracy and Synodality. Education and formation will be key to every stage of the process – for all clergy, Religious and laity of all ages – this must include engagement with the media to allow the story to be told effectively in the public forum.

As consecrated men and women we commit to our dream of a prophetic Church, an inclusive Church, a community of love, the Kingdom of God; a Church that embodies faith, hope and love, visible in the here and now. We are ready to begin, with all our brothers and sisters, to create this Church by walking together as Jesus did with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. Only when we can journey towards this dream we have for the Church together will we experience true communion, participation and mission in the world.

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