

The Irish Crisis of Faith

...and ways to solve it



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Steadily slaloming our way

Prof. Eamon Conway



The first two phases of the Synod of Bishops 2021-2023 concluded on August 15th. The first involved listening and consultation at diocesan level and at the level of religious institutes and other bodies. The second involved the preparation by episcopal conferences of a synthesis of the outcomes from the various listening processes and consultations. Those involved in producing synodal syntheses at diocesan and national level across Ireland deserve our gratitude. It was a monumental undertaking within a tight schedule. So, what comes next?

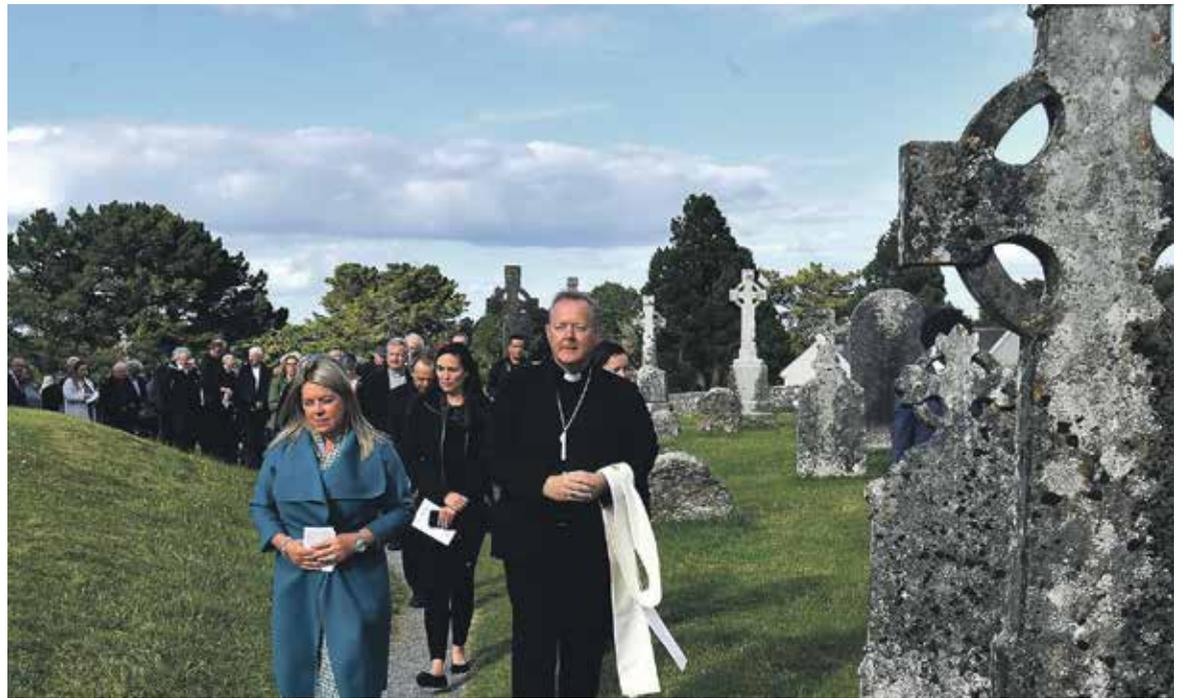
Globally, the next step is the continental phase. Within the next couple of months a document pulling together the various submissions from all over the world will be released. So as not to lose touch

with those 'on the ground', bishops have been tasked with ensuring that the forthcoming document will be discussed and reflected upon in the local dioceses. Catholics in Ireland can therefore expect that before Christmas they will be invited to express their views again as part of the synodal process. Those who have yet to have their voices heard will therefore have another opportunity.

Church

The reason for this goes to the heart of what Pope Francis has initiated. He wants synodal listening at grassroots level to be the *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, that is, the 'reflex muscle' of how the Church lives and works into the future.

Early in 2023, assemblies of representative groups of lay Catholics,



Authentic synodality requires proper discernment by episcopal conferences of what surfaced in the diocesan consultations – has this been apparent in our case?

religious, deacons, priests and bishops will take place in each continent. For Europe, it is expected that this gathering will take place in the Czech Republic next February. The stage will then be set for the fourth phase: the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023. In the past, these assemblies were made up almost entirely of bishops; few others were present and hardly any of these had speaking or voting rights. This is expected to change. One of the first fruits of the synodal pathway will be much more participation in the General Assembly by lay people. Of course, the entire synodal process is consultative: at the end of the day the Synod of Bishops can only function legitimately 'with and under Peter'. So even decisions taken by those authorised to vote in synods remain subject to the Pope's authority.

“The Church today ought to be championing the dignity and equality of women as indeed it did in previous times”

Between the continental phase in spring and the universal phase in autumn, various documents will, in effect, form the agenda for the October gathering. In the past, a synod concluded with the publication of an exhortation by the Pope. Until now, generally, post-synodal exhortations have enjoyed long shelf lives and little else. They have had little meaningful impact on the day-to-day life of the faithful. However, from the outset the Synod 2021-2023 has envisaged implementation of outcomes as a key moment in the syn-

odal process. This movement from local to universal and back to the local brings to life the rich and mutually sustaining relationship between local dioceses and the world Church so beautifully articulated at Vatican II in *Lumen gentium* (n. 23).

Syntheses from bishops' conferences in countries such as Argentina, Spain, The Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, Poland, England & Wales, Italy, Australia, France, as well as Ireland, have consistently mentioned three core issues: the role of women in the Church, how authority and power are exercised in the service of the Church's mission and by whom, and the inclusion of those considered on the margins of Church and society.

Women

Regarding the role of women, Vatican II taught that “every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent”. It specifically mentioned the right of women “to embrace a state of life or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 29). The Church today ought to be championing the dignity and equality of women as indeed it did in previous times. Instead, the perception today, virtually universal both in and outside the Church, is that the opposite is the case. This has now become a very serious impediment to the Church's mission. The issue of the voice of women in the Church and their role in ministry must be addressed meaningfully and urgently, and this has to begin on the ground.

Regarding the exercise of authority and power, the extent of the loss of credibility by Church leaders in several cultural contexts, including our own, is incalculable. It is not all down to cases of sexual violence and their mishandling. It is also due to a history of spiritual abuse and manipulation experienced especially by many in the older age groups, and indeed among them many priests and religious as part of their upbringing, formation and ministry. Credibility will only be recovered by a new generation of servant leaders in local faith communities who are genuinely close to those they are called to serve and who are able to exercise a convincing yet gentle form of personal authority that evidently flows from a deep, humble, and life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ, and who, as Pope Francis has said, understand their role as that of forming people's consciences, not replacing them.

“Meanwhile, much can be done to formally institute catechists and integrate them into the life of the faith community without awaiting any decision or directive from Rome”

The reality is that in many countries, ours included, diocesan priesthood is on the verge of collapse. We are increasingly dependent on priests coming from overseas and on permanent deacons. The diaconal ministry is important but is primarily at the service of witnessing

“The issue of the voice of women in the Church and their role in ministry must be addressed meaningfully and urgently, and this has to begin on the ground”

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down the synodal pathway

in justice and love to those on the margins. There is only one reason to ordain permanent deacons, namely, a shortage of deacons, not a shortage of priests.

With the arrival of Ukrainian refugees into Ireland, many of whom are of the Greek Catholic tradition, we are getting used to married Catholic priests and their families in our midst and it is difficult not to see this as other than a blessing and an enrichment. Celibacy is still valued in the Eastern Catholic Churches but is associated predominantly with monasteries where celibate priests have the support of a community. Celibacy makes sense in the context of community; it seems increasingly unsustainable, however, where priests are likely to be isolated and without meaningful and vibrant community support. So, the issue of mandatory celibacy for diocesan priests in cultural contexts such as ours will have to be addressed but again, a decision on this from a General Assembly of Bishops called to address synodality is unlikely. Meanwhile, much can be done to formally institute catechists and integrate them into the life of the faith community without awaiting any decision or directive from Rome.

The third core issue mentioned in the various bishops' conferences syntheses is about those on the margins of society and who feel excluded from the Church. The Irish bishops' national synthesis highlighted the plight of the Travellers, refugees and of LGBTQI+. The Church in Zimbabwe identified those in prison, single mothers and fathers, those widowed, those in polygamous marriages, homebound individuals, the blind, street kids, people living with disabilities, ex-priests and ex-nuns.

Outreach

Generally, the Irish Church has been better at outreach to the marginalised than it is often given credit for but nonetheless there are some findings in the synthesis that give cause for concern. For instance, it is worrying that, seven years after the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* (also known as *The Joy of Love*), the exhortation that followed two Synodal Assemblies of Bishops in 2014 and 2015 on marriage and the family and is a formal part of magisterial teaching, recommendations from the synods regarding the pastoral care of LGBTQI+ have, according to the national synthesis, seemingly not had any impact on the ground. *Amoris Laetitia* affirmed the dignity of every person, regardless of sexual orientation, and called for the pastoral accompaniment both of LGBTQI+ people and their families (n 250). Yet the synthesis reports that LGBTQI+ feel that the Church "indirectly creates an atmosphere where physical, psychological and emotional abuse of gay people is tolerated and even encouraged".

Another concern is that for the divorced and remarried the Church's teaching is considered 'draconian' and that some believe

that they could not receive communion even though they weren't in second unions. This is particularly concerning because it shows that the exhortation that followed has not yet been properly taught or received here.

I know of one diocese, for example, in Austria where, following *Amoris Laetitia*, divorced and remarried people were offered and received accompaniment in a pastoral discernment process so they would be able to judge if in their particular circumstances they could in conscience receive communion. In turn, some of those who were accompanied have become part of a diocesan outreach to others in similar circumstances.

“This misrepresentation of *Amoris Laetitia* in the synthesis is therefore quite unfortunate and misleading”

Regrettably, the only reference to *Amoris Laetitia* in the Irish bishops' synthesis misconstrues its meaning. The synthesis states that: "Pastoral care of members of the LGBTQI+ community can be enriched. In accordance with *Amoris Laetitia*, we can engage in a 'dynamic discernment' in making a 'what is for now the most generous response which can be given' to those in non-sacramental unions, remaining 'ever open to new stages of growth and new decisions'".

This seems to be suggesting that, following *Amoris Laetitia*, the Church ('we') is to engage in a 'dynamic discernment' resulting in

the most generous stance we can adopt to those in non-sacramental unions, while remaining open to new stages of growth and new decisions. Growth in regard to what, and decisions by whom is unclear. In any case, this is not what *Amoris Laetitia* states.

The paragraph quoted by the bishops (n. 303) refers in general terms to those in "certain situations that do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage". The exhortation encourages people in irregular unions to grow in the discernment of their consciences and in particular calls upon them to recognise 'what God himself is asking amid the complexity of one's limits.' While encouraging them to recognise in conscience 'what for now is the most generous response which can be given (by them) to God', it reminds them that 'discernment is dynamic' and that as such their discernment of their situation before God 'must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realised'.

Marriage

The ideal being referred to is the Church's understanding of marriage and the family and this is core to the pastoral strategy that *Amoris Laetitia* is promoting here. This misrepresentation of *Amoris Laetitia* in the synthesis is therefore quite unfortunate and misleading. Taken together with the recent intervention by Bishop Phonsie Cullinan in which he expresses concern in regard to an undue emphasis being given to some topics over others, one must ask if sufficient time and attention was given to Phase 2 of the synodal process, which required

a proper discernment by episcopal conferences of what surfaced in the diocesan consultations. It is to the bishops' credit that they did not wish to censor the diocesan syntheses. Nonetheless, it is surprising, for instance, that defence of the unborn is not mentioned even once, neither as an issue of concern raised in the diocesan consultations nor even among the issues bishops note, that "did not emerge in a significant way".

“The national synthesis is valuable in that it provides what is in effect an agenda for the Irish Synodal Pathway which is also underway”

As far back in 2013, Pope Francis stated, "It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound "decentralization". It is likely that the synodal process is going to hold up to the light just how effectively bishops' conferences are functioning in terms of leading the Church's mission at local level, bearing in mind that Francis is the first Pope since Vatican II to affirm the key role that they must play in Church governance. Apart from the three core issues identified above there is much in the national synthesis for the Irish Church to be getting on with without any nod from Rome necessary. The national synthesis is valuable in that it provides what is in effect an agenda for the Irish Synodal Pathway which is also

underway. In a more systematic way than heretofore and without awaiting any further phases of Synod 2021-2023 efforts should also go into the implementation of previous synodal recommendations.

Acknowledges

As the bishops' synthesis acknowledges, "The recommendations of *Christus vivit* need to be attended to", referencing the exhortation that followed the synod on youth four years ago. This exhortation called for intense pastoral accompaniment of young people so that they could develop the inner freedom necessary to choose their true vocation in life. *Amoris Laetitia*, which followed the synods of 2014 and 2015, recommended far better preparation and accompaniment of couples preparing for the sacrament of marriage and support for them in the early years of married life.

It also spoke powerfully about the need for the care and support for the elderly and the need for education in sexuality for the young that reflects the Christian understanding of the human person. Clear action now on the outcomes of these synods would imbue confidence in those contributing to Synod 2021-2023 that their efforts are likely to bear fruit.

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A loss of identity among Catholics

Fr Joe McDonald says that we have to be careful not to point the finger outside only when looking for reasons for the Church's current problems

Fr Joe McDonald



Crisis of faith! Crisis of religious practice! Crisis of vocations. So run the attempts to diagnose the ongoing malaise that besieges the Church. However the malaise is in fact endemic to the Church. It seems like a case of 'don't mention the war!' We are slow to take a good look at ourselves. We tend not to speak of a crisis of leadership and we are much less inclined to address our crisis of identity. Consciously or otherwise it is interesting that our attempts to explain our present plight invariably tend to pose scenarios that are ever so slightly removed from our direct responsibility.

“Whilst this is important it still falls short of naming the core crisis”

“It is true that secular humanism has had a huge impact on people's belief systems. The scandals, yes largely historical, and yet leaking contemporaneously, are all the while eroding practice. Yes it can be argued our society is so materialistic that it is effectively hostile to vocations. Of course there is some truth in these various strands of this defensive narrative.

Truth there may well be in

these propositions yet in point of fact they are also fundamentally flawed. The reality is that secular humanism is quickly exposed as not satiating the deep hunger in people for meaning and fulfilment. If there was a meaningful vision for the reform and renewal of the Church articulated and presented freshly for people, there is no doubt there would be plenty of people willing to become part of it. Vocations? A shortage of vocations? Again this is only partly true. There are in fact plenty of vocations, mostly lay, and most of these women. Lay women on fire with the Holy Spirit, bringing a myriad of richness to a Church starved of the fullness of the feminine. What do we say to them? Or rather what do we say to those women who have not as yet given up on us. Indeed is it too late to try and speak to those who have?

I think the real crisis is much closer to home. Uncomfortably so. In fact our inability to name, never mind respond to this truth, is at the core of my contention that the Church's condition is in fact terminal. In my view only the most radical prophetic leadership will enable the Church to recover in any meaningful way. So yes there is a crisis or perhaps more correctly a series of mini crises.

Might we call them shockwaves? If so where is the epicentre? The more external, the less severe, the less pressing.

“In a nutshell I believe we have lost our way. I think we are not really clear who we are”

For example let's take the issue of vocations: is it not the case that vocations are the work of the Holy Spirit and we play our part. It is God who calls. God calls through the power of the Holy Spirit. Could it be that our ongoing lack of vocations is the Holy Spirit saying 'get your house in order and I'll send the vocations'. Indeed from a human perspective is it not true that if we were attractive, relevant and dynamic, people would be naturally drawn to us. They would want to be part of what we do and more importantly would be inspired to become part of who we are.

Crisis of Leadership

So there are various crises but two are particularly pertinent. The first of these is the crisis of leadership. This is true at parish, diocesan and national levels. Admittedly at every level, one will find great goodness, holiness, intellectual capability and to various degrees genuine pastoral concern. The missing component is the prophetic. This would include, if we could find it, a courageous, innovative and dynamic witness that would inspire people to draw

“Is it not the case that vocations are the work of the Holy Spirit and we play our part. It is God who calls. God calls through the power of the Holy Spirit”



closer.

Whilst this is important, it still falls short of naming the core crisis. This is not in my view the epicentre. So what is the fundamental crisis that ripples out and causes the series of crises sketched above. What then is the epicentre?

Crisis of Identity

The major crisis that faces the church is a crisis of identity. It is the great cancer, the disease that has gone unchecked, and indeed continues to spread. Some of the fundamental questions that we were discussing twelve months ago, as things that we would need to tackle in the next five to ten

years, are now imminent. This has been one of the great pandemic graces. Empty churches, rather locked churches, and at least as significant as this, the almost empty coffers, have shaken many, not all, church people, out of that cosy stupor that often goes with religion.

Yet we are living in a time of graced opportunity. Like Bartimaeus, we are blind and poor. We were blind pre-pandemic but now we are poor as well. The grace here is that we might just get it. Like Bartimaeus, we may well see and then follow the Lord.

At what point did Zechariah get his speech back? His speech returns as he spoke God's will, on



In the wake of multiple crises afflicting the Church, what will its future look like?

naming the Baptist. We have been losing our voice for a long time. I wonder might we gain it again if we realigned ourselves with God's will? Could it be that our way back lies somewhere in the naming. One might say it is too facile to say the greatest crisis facing the Church is a crisis of identity. So what does this mean?

In a nutshell I believe we have lost our way. I think we are not really clear of who we are. Not so much what we are about, and the danger is we might see new ministries, or indeed the revamp of standard ministries as the way out of the yawning hole of irrelevancy that we sink deeper into. Of course any injection of vitality

into ministry is to be welcomed. However this too might not get to the nub of the problem as I see it.

“Like Bartimaeus we are blind and poor. We were blind pre-pandemic but now we are poor as well”

A big yawn

I see the core of our identity crisis as rooted in how we preach. Specifically the preaching of Christ. For much of the time we fail to preach Jesus and when we do it is usually vague, insipid

and notional. What should be the most exciting, the most life giving, the most challenging and inspirational encounter, has in our hands, become routine, predictable and in reality a big yawn! We have become purveyors of boredom par excellence. It would be more honest to welcome people to the lethargy than the liturgy.

Most of us have not got a notion of what is happening at the Eucharist. We have moved further and further away from the Nazarene and what a price we are paying. The sad truth is that much of the enormous mess we are in, is very definitely of our own making. Before we will make any fist of either reform or renewal we

need to name what is wrong and take responsibility for it. Sadly even this is proving to be beyond us. Perhaps I should do just that, here and now.

Preaching a prissy pious Jesus

What is wrong? We do not preach Christ. Whose responsibility is this? The shepherd/pastor, nationally, at diocesan and local level. To be fair sometimes we offer a rather patchy and morbid crucified Christ, but an uplifting preaching of the risen Jesus remains a rarity.

When we do preach Jesus, is often a trite superficial version of him made in our own image and

likeness. Two extremes come to mind. The first, a cuddly, prissy pious little Jesus, cute but non-existent. The second is a Jesus that can be wheeled out for every occasion, usually to beat somebody over the head. This Jesus is also non-existent except in the heads of the pious lazy bones who have settled. Settled for a Jesus, hinted at by someone else, at a different time, usually long ago. We settle for these pale imitations rather than engage in the daily graft of developing the unique personal relationship with Jesus that has been gifted to us through our baptismal call.

“When we do preach Jesus, is often a trite superficial version of him made in our own image and likeness”

Responsibility for enabling this lies directly with the shepherd, the pastor. To put it another way, we as Church must take responsibility for the fact that many people in this country after twelve years in the Catholic education system know little about how transformative our relationship with the Lord can be. It should be no surprise that the apparently omnipotent Church is rendered impotent. We do not know who we are because we have not preached Christ in a long time. How many people participating in the Eucharist even glimpse the radical counter cultural Christ? I genuinely believe the main reason we are in this crisis, a crisis which I believe is essentially a crisis of identity is that we are badly out of step with the Spirit. Part of this is because we are a community who says lots of prayers but struggle to be a community of prayer.

Why do we not preach Christ in his entirety?

Perhaps it is that Christ is just too much. Maybe the truth is that this Jesus is just too hot to handle. I wonder is it, at some level, that we actually know if we get serious about Jesus we will not be able to remain as we are, to do what we have always done. I think we know that our true identity is to be found in working at getting to know Jesus, wrestling to understand him a little more and consequently being taken up joyfully into that loving relationship. Of course were this re-rooting, this re-routing to happen, our ministry, our liturgy and our catechesis would all be fundamentally changed. Maybe we are just not up for this.

The pandemic days offered us the opportunity to kickstart radical reform. That said, given the amount of church people, especially, and most worryingly, the number of priests who seem 'hell bent' on getting 'back to normal', I fear the danger is we will settle once again for tinkering. For my part I hope there will be no going back and I pray for the grace to resist any attempts to take us there.

Fr Joe McDonald has been a teacher, an author and for over 10 years, a priest of the Dublin diocese. Originally from west Belfast, Fr Joe currently minister as parish priest in Celbridge, Co. Kildare.

In an uncertain world for the priesthood there is one certainty – the future is flux

Brandon Scott

YOUNG CATHOLICS



“What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful” – many will be familiar with Pope Benedict’s widely trumpeted quote encapsulating the anguish that Catholics currently face in a world that is no longer receptive to the presence of God and moreover, chastises those who are.

Although strategically unveiled by the Pope Emeritus with the intent of providing insight into the sustained decline of Christian practice in the West, it contextually also bears relevance to the hitherto monolith of the Church – the once holy priesthood.

The mere topic of the Catholic priesthood elicits a gamut of emotions from the faithful. Is the priesthood an unconditional necessity in our current climate? Are laws pertaining to celibacy too austere and unjust by today’s societal standards and moreover is such a deprivation of harm to the individual? Fundamentally, once sacred and inviolable, the importance of the priesthood is gradually becoming moot and its future mired with uncertainty.

Witnessed

An example of this new conditioning can be witnessed in the results of Germany’s synodal process – the results may come as a shocking revelation to traditionalists, but to others it is a window into the revised convictions of Catholics in Europe – and these stances are proliferating. As many already know, in October of last year, the Church’s once sacrosanct bulwark, the priesthood, came tantalisingly close to being abolished in accordance with the views of the German synod’s participants.

The results of the ensuing German synod evidently petrified the nation’s bishops enough to force them to abruptly move to derail the listening process and extend it to 2023 – presumably enough time for them to recuperate and catch their breath before being subjected to another round of quickfire reform endorsed by the German faithful.

The priesthood still currently stakes its claim as the distinctive form of Catholic ministry. Diaconates have now been introduced in certain dioceses across Ireland, but bishops have always been quick to reassure that nobody is invading anybody’s territory and as of now deacons in the Church are not being trained to replace priests – they are being trained to provide their own unique brand of pastoral ministry and simply be deacons in their own right.

We’re currently in an agonisingly flux period for the Church – we know that change will manifest but we are truly unaware of the forms and consequences of this change. Vocations Sunday is still underlined with the utmost of enthusiasm by clergy, and parish bulletins across the country display advertisements urging any young man who feels that they have been bequeathed with something to offer the Church to get in contact with their diocesan director of vocations.

“When I reflect on the future of the priesthood, my mind immediately focuses on the tagline of a popular horror film, ‘Who will survive and what will be left of them’”

But parallel to this vestige of tradition is a growing cohort of Catholics in favour of reimagining the once impenetrable fortress and with these developments in mind, where does it leave the few aberrations who are still possibly discerning a vocation to the Holy Church? The official Vatican line continues to be ministry through the medium of vocation, but the populist line is increasingly gaining support. Caught in a cacophony of voices, the prospective seminarian has become entangled in a web of confusion, trying earnestly to decide which one accurately conveys the Church’s future.

Realism is a crucial ingredient in the mind of anyone considering a vocation in the Church. The Church in Ireland



An increasingly infrequent sight. A man receives the Sacrament of Ordination in a Church.

“The results of the ensuing German synod evidently petrified the nation’s bishops enough to force them to abruptly move to derail the listening process and extend it to 2023”

should have one objective for the next ten years and that is to ensure its tangible existence for the future – anything else must be considered overreach given the complications that the entity has plunged itself into.

Once bustling national seminaries, metaphors for the Catholic pride of the nation, have now either been closed or attempting to survive on limited numbers walking their hallowed halls every year. The unquestioned deference is over; the national culture of Catholicism dissipated. For the first time, men must go searching for their vocation in the wilderness.

Discern

Those who manage to discern something in this climate will soon realise that a priest may not be the epicentre of the parish or community as he once was, but nevertheless society’s expectations now far exceed what is reasonably possible for one person to do without becoming chronically exhausted. There are less priests, more roles for them to perform as individuals and even less respect for their services in society. The white collar has been permanently stained in the last few decades and when exposed in public, could potentially provoke hostility inspired by tragedies that took place decades before one’s birth attributable to a societal trauma that will now always persist. Knowing what we know now,

it’s justifiably too heavy a cross for some to carry.

Reconcile

If you do manage to reconcile yourself with the first tribulation, you’ll soon find that another of immensely greater proportions is there to greet you: the vow of celibacy. I often found that in the past, men were quite literally moulded for the priesthood – it was easier too. The local primary school in the parish was most likely co-educational, but these were quickly separated just before the chaotic era of exploration and awkwardness took hold. Dances, at times regulated by the local priest, were the only way in which one could meet a potential suitor. The lack of choices and rigid sexual norms ensured that men were engaged in a process of conditioning for the role before they even developed a cognisance of their personality.

Even if a vow of celibacy has been personally volunteered by a seminarian, the desire to be loved in some form is innate in all humans and we have reluctantly come to accept over time in this country that these urges are inherent in all human beings and unnatural to suppress. With sexuality almost regarded as a characteristic in society’s current fabric, what type of person is willing to disavow what currently dominates discourse and fixates popular culture?

In the past, priests were in a better position to sooth this ailment. All channels ran through

the man’s ministry as the it’s de facto leader of the town – along with a certain prestige. Invitations to family homes on a Sunday were the norm; compare this with the attitude toward priests today, it would come as a shock to me if more than a third of the town knew the name of their local priest. Celibacy has been a legally binding canon law policy for centuries, but I feel that now more than ever that the implications are only now being felt to their fullest extent for priests who uphold.

“Once sacred and inviolable, the importance of the priesthood is gradually becoming moot and its future mired with uncertainty”

Additionally, a priest’s role has become explicitly transactional to a younger generation – you quite simply perform the sacraments for each member of the family and get prepared to most likely never see them outside of these events. Although this type of “Catholic” is now the commonest variety found, they’re also the least likely to question nor refute the sacramental validity of a deacon performing a baptism, wedding or funeral if a priest became ill and there was no replacement – only the devout minority would take

exception. There is a paradoxical element to making sure your shop front is clean and presentable primarily for the purpose of those who are wholeheartedly ambivalent to Church affairs.

In spite of these stark figures and snares, certain orders have experienced a growth in interest and a greater influx of novices in their ranks. The advantage of this is that the novices may be able to fully immerse themselves in a certain strand of Catholicism that has remained untampered for centuries – a true and authentic experience.

Candidates

Many of these orders rely on a nominal number of candidates per year to survive, and it appears that they are meeting these numbers. With this in mind, the future appears to be a lot brighter for devotees of a traditional flavour or strand of Catholicism when compared to a fixed parish structure. It may also mean that churches belonging to orders will withstand the enduring onslaught, while parish churches across the country close en masse. Some have even said that the only crisis exists within the parish structure – but given the importance of the parish configuration to Catholics across the country, a failing parish structure will ensure that Catholics nationwide will be frozen out of celebrations if there is no priest available to offer their ministry.

Ominously, when I reflect on the future of the priesthood, my mind immediately focuses on the tagline of a popular horror film, “Who will survive and what will be left of it?” – or in this context – “What will survive and what will be left of it?”. Who’d be a priest, eh? Well, maybe in the future the option won’t be there for you to decide.

‘Nothing done for young people for decades’

Thoughts from a former youth leader

There is a question of how much enthusiasm the Irish bishops have given to encouraging young people. There has been a lot of parish based commentary on the ‘absence of young people’ and the perennial question of ‘what about young people?’ How many bishops led or attended a synodal gathering with young people? I think Bishop Donal McKeown from Derry hosted a conversation with youth leaders. There have been previous Synods on youth, on family, what have they learnt from these?

Very little has followed up the previous synod on young people. Aside from the Papal Exhortation *Christus Vivit* and *Exploring Christus Vivit*, published by Veritas, very little effort has been made to unpack the vision of young people in the Church. Not every diocese participated in the previous synodal preparation on youth. Yet we didn’t really follow up the Synod on Family even though we hosted the World Meeting of Families.

When they’re gone they’re gone

Pastoral staff in many dioceses are still dealing with pastoral responses to the pandemic - but some ‘youth ministers’ have left, or their offices closed or contracts ended - this is a crucial point for the future - there is little or no investment. It is ten years since the largest Catholic youth organisation in Ireland, Catholic Youth Care closed. There has been a decline in the numbers of people employed directly to work with young people. The pandemic has left the young church in a far from healthy state.

Many young people have not really been participants in the online Church over the last two years. Now the in-person Church is back but many have not returned. Many parishioners are now wondering what happens when they are gone because they see many of our young people seem to be happy living life in but not belonging to our parishes. A number of



Losing patience? Young Catholics have been left out in the cold for too long.

youth leaders now have commented that those who have disappeared from our programmes won’t be back. Yet is this not the challenge, to reach the ‘departed’? Where will the investment and energy for this come from? Will dioceses continue to let youth ministry fade out and become a memory?

“Many who have helped to keep ‘streaming’ masses or digital presences are now wiped out with fatigue”

Around 2005 Archbishop Diarmuid Martin spoke about a ‘listening humble church’. Have we listened? It would seem the key lifestyle issues faced by people such as LGBTQ, divorced Catholics

and those in second unions are still the hot topics of the synod pathway as people ask for change and a more compassionate Church. Many are questioning the role of ordination and access to it for the married and female. Are we an equal church that listens? Many are afraid that nothing will change. Listening sure, but hearing?

Tired Parishes

Parishes, priests and parishioners are very tired. Many who have helped to keep ‘streaming’ masses or digital

presences are now wiped out with fatigue. This includes clergy, sacristans, musician, cantors, Parish Pastoral Councils; they are working harder for less people attending. The model is wrong.

A fellow parishioner serving on a PPC - (Parish Pastoral Council) - a good person - says the Synod is at the wrong time - no one in the pews has a clue as to what it is - what’s it all about? She is no clearer.

The numbers of those attending the synodal gatherings is not massive.

It is mainly the same people who attend other events. Some parishes and some dioceses have not really made an effort. Some dioceses have put a lot of effort into it.

It is less than three years since Pope Francis was here - the Church is less energetic and seemingly less relevant. Isn’t “Why?” a question we as Church should be asking!

The Church is no longer relevant to many Millennials and non-practicing Catholics.

Pope Francis would seem to suggest this is the periphery that needs to be accompanied. Are they represented on the national or any diocesan committees? How can dioceses respond in new ways to emerging generations if they have downsized, or ceased their youth ministry programmes?

“Many young people have not really been participants in the online Church over the last two years”

We now have many new and younger bishops. What is their vision for a Church with young people? Are they doing anything in their ministry and not just school based outreach?

“Pastoral staff in many dioceses are still dealing with pastoral responses to the pandemic”

Unappreciated talents, silenced

Mary T. Malone



There are not many signs to indicate that the Roman Catholic Church, with its patriarchal hierarchy, is capable of, or even desirous of, bringing about an inclusive Christian community after the model of Galatians 3:27-28: “as many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”.

Even Pope Francis, with his refreshing new openness to new possibilities, has definitely linked himself with his predecessors on the subject of women, at least on the subject of women's ordination. When he speaks of a new theology of women, he is definitely not speaking about Christian feminist theology, but about a theology of women done by men, as it has always been done. There is, however, an alternative tradition that we can call on, and this is the history of Christian women, who, from the very beginning have been followers of Jesus.

However, from approximately the year 55 CE, in the writings of Paul to the Corinthians (of which there will be much more later), women have been silenced and considered of little or no account in the Christian community. Nothing has ever been expected from women except obedience – even up to the present day.

Participate

If women are going to participate more fully in the Christian community, it is only on the whim of the male clergy. Nothing is needed from women in terms of female theology or liturgical leadership. In one of the most recent Papal allocutions given at the close of the recent Synod of Bishops, women are again confined to the home, where indeed, it is implied, their efforts at the new evangelisation are sorely needed.

But this is to emphasise, yet again, the private nature of women's Christian lives. This is the distinction I make between being a Catholic woman leading a private, non-participatory Christian life, and a woman Catholic, who brings the whole of her bodily being to her faith, and worships the God in whose image she is made, as a woman. Catholic women are prescribed to lead private lives, mostly as mothers, and to keep their faith to themselves.

The Church seems to have no need of this faith. As far as the institutional Church is concerned, little has changed since Paul's Corinthian letter in 55 CE. Women are to be silent in the churches, subject to their husbands from whom they learn all they need to know. Not only is it unlawful for women to speak in church, it is shameful; that is, such behaviour would go against their very nature.

“If women are going to participate more fully in the Christian community, it is only on the whim of the male clergy”

It would fly in the face of everything that God has intended for the female of the species. This is the backdrop to all papal and episcopal pronouncements about women. The Church is a hierarchical patriarchy, a graded society where women are placed on the very lowest rung. The interpretation of Paul's letter to the Corinthians was questioned by Pope Paul VI in the late sixties, shortly after the close of Vatican II. He requested the Pontifical Biblical Commission to examine the text to see what it might really mean. He offered two possible choices, which offer a quite unique insight into the

new Testament exegesis of the time.

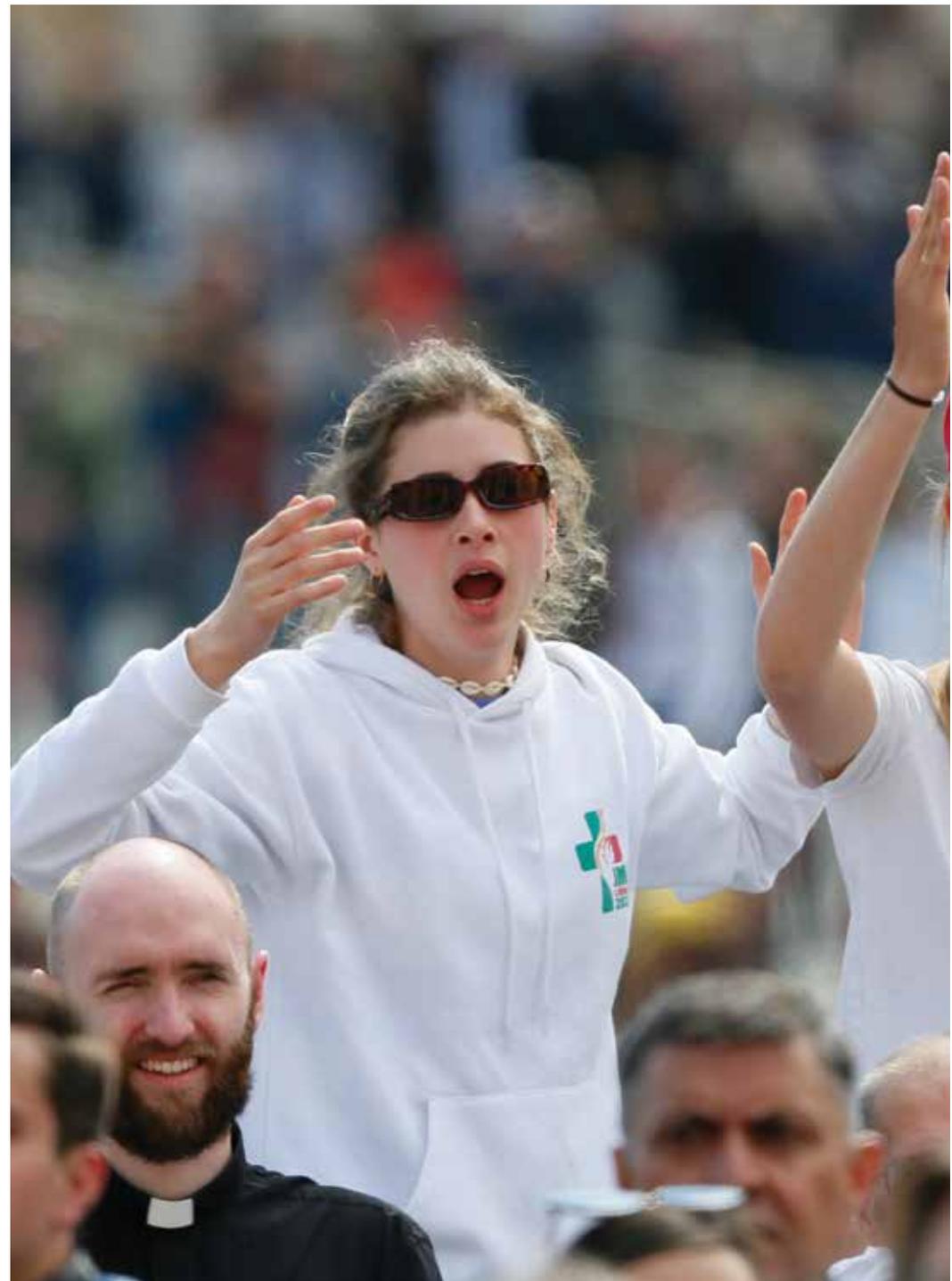
The first possibility was that this text was indeed the Word of God, inerrant and true for all time and in all places, and therefore impossible to change. The second possibility was that this text represented a pastoral decision made by Paul in a particular place, Corinth, and at a particular time, the middle of the first century of Christianity. If this were so, then the teaching could be changed in another pastoral decision in another place and at another time. The Pontifical Biblical Commission opted for the latter solution.

Decision

Apart from all the questions this particular decision raises for those who tend to read the Scriptures literally and see the Word of God contained verbatim in each word of the text, it gave Paul VI the opportunity to declare publicly that the Church now believed that women's silencing and invisibility were at an end. The possibility that the Church could now begin to harness the gifts and energies and wisdom of women presented itself. This is not, however, what happened. Pope Paul chose to make a symbolic gesture, which in fact was missed by most of the Church. Perhaps that was precisely the intention, since symbolic gestures, by their very nature, are easily ignored or misinterpreted.

What Pope Paul VI chose to do in 1970 was to make Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila Doctors of the Church, Catherine representing all lay women, and Teresa representing all consecrated religious women. The occasion, important though it was, barely caused a ripple, and the consequences, in terms of the intentionality of the act, have been almost negligible.

Since then Thérèse of Lisieux (1997) and Hildegard of Bingen (2012) have been made Doctors of the Church with similarly negligible consequences for Catholic women and even for many women Catholics. The intention surely was to announce to the Church that the writings of these women had been recognised as of similar importance to the Church as the writings of the male



Can we say with certainty that the gifts of women have been fully acknowledged in the Church?

doctors, but no analysis of this situation has become general, and the writings of the four women doctors remain practically unknown. The one exception might be Thérèse of Lisieux, but it is usually not her doctorate for which she is remembered, but her ‘little way’.

It is within the possibilities offered by Pope Paul VI to the pontifical Biblical Commission in the late 1960s that the characteristics of Catholic women and women Catholics are clearly and definitively

delineated. Catholic women, it is believed, are placed by God in a particular position of silence and invisibility, obedient to men and at their bidding and service. They are the ones who are taught, and they are never to be seen as official teachers, especially as teachers of men.

“The Church is a hierarchical patriarchy, a graded society where women are placed on the very lowest rung”

Women are the listeners, the taught, the silent unquestioning ones, and even though the vast majority of Catholic women would probably reject this designation, this is precisely the basic ecclesial premise of their lives. It is also the basic ecclesial practice of

the Church of our day, including the Church in Ireland.

Women have no official role in the Church, except occasionally, on the whim of men, to fill in gaps, that would always be better filled by any available man. Women study men's theology – the theology of the new women doctors of the Church has never become integrated with ‘mainstream’ theology. Women often have spoken and unspoken misgivings about this state of affairs, but it is universally believed that there is just ‘theology’, a kind of pseudo-generic phenomenon, created by men for men in the words of men, and altered hardly at all by the presence of women students. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a brilliant example of this wholly-male theology, and according to a Synod of Bishops, it was the main instrument of teaching for the Year of Faith (2012-13), and the new evangelisation,

“Women have no official role in the Church, except occasionally, on the whim of men, to fill in gaps, that would always be better filled by any available man”

voices – The women of our Church



in preference, it seems, both to the Bible and the official documents of Vatican II.

The language of the Catechism is so male-centred that it is often unintentionally humorous. Whether Catholic women notice this or not, women Catholics find it almost impossible to read or take seriously. They are not addressed, their lives are not considered, and they are subsumed under the male persona. I am using the term 'Catholic women' to include all those who apparently find this situation to be quite normal, impossible to change, and relatively tolerable.

Apparently

'Apparently' is the important word in the above sentence, for even if such Catholic women have questions about this situation, they keep their questions to themselves because they see no possible alternative to the current situ-

ation. They often focus on the personality of the local priest or bishop, his kindness, pastoral concern or good homilies. The larger ecclesial situation remains beyond their concern. There is an alternative to the current male-dominant situation, and there has always been an alternative. There is a genuine, legitimate, and continuous tradition of Christianity as experienced, celebrated, and interpreted by women.

Even the teaching of the four women Doctors of the Church has been treated as almost an irrelevancy, and their doctorates are seen as honours rather than as a distinct contribution to the theology and meaning of Christianity. Unless attention is paid to women's contribution to Christianity, then Christianity will practically disappear. The fading of what can be called 'men's church' is already well under way.

There is an insistence, in

Vatican documents, that the language of the Church always be male, to represent the real humanity of men. Women are subsumed within this and do not need to be mentioned separately. What men do is 'normal' and sufficient. In the ecclesiastical context, these prescribed roles of women and men have continued relatively unaltered down through the centuries to our own day. These roles take their origin in the physical shape and purpose of female and male bodies, roles that have been socially and religiously articulated as 'femininity' and 'masculinity'.

Nature

Women are designed by nature – and God – to function mostly in the private sphere in silence, service, and obedience, and in their particular 'genius' of nurturing. Men are designed for the public arena as rulers, thinkers, teachers,

masters and decision-makers. In this dualistic world of strength and weakness, ruling and obeying, men always appear on the positive side of the dualism and women on the negative. The first theological articulation of the reasons for women's silence and confinement to the private sphere comes in the First letter to Timothy, Chapter 2, vv. 11–15: "let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing".

“There is an insistence, in Vatican documents, that the language of the Church always be male, to represent the real humanity of men

This has always been seen as the biblical explanation as to why women have to take the second place, humanly speaking, and why they are not really seen as fully human. This theological explanation of the position of women in God's plan became a kind of mantra and was repeated constantly and consistently throughout history – women were 'created second and sinned first'. From this all manner of conclusions were drawn and still continue to be drawn in papal writing explicitly, and in most other ecclesiastical writing by impli-

Celibacy

This is also one of the main reasons for priestly celibacy, since the male cleric must be preserved from the sinful female. It is obvious that, even though not expressed as such, this is the main and definitive reason against the ordination of women to the priesthood. The exclusion of women from priesthood is so great that it cannot even be discussed can this church which still functions explicitly in the sphere of 'ontological complementarity', women are not seen to have full human qualities, and certainly not the qualities of leadership, intellect, decision-making and teaching that are necessary for ordination. No more elaborate explanation need be sought as the former Bishop of Meath said in a television interview (20 January 2013) on the subject of women, 'This will not happen'.

The silencing and even excommunication of clergy

who espouse the cause of women are by now, sadly, too numerous to mention. With the exception of a brief period in the fourth century, when it was taught that after the renunciation of sex women and men were equal, ontological complementarity has remained the official teaching of the Catholic Church for millennia. This teaching has also vastly influenced the inner life of most other churches, even of those who ordain women.

Within the Catholic Church, the voice of women is never heard. All is prescribed for women by men. There is not the slightest interest in what women think about anything, even the most intimate issues of their lives. Mutuality is a recognition that women and men come to a relationship, or exist as separate beings on their own terms. It moves beyond the strictures of femininity and masculinity. It recognises that women and men are interdependent and that the voice of women and the experience of women is just as essential to this situation as the voice of men. Mutuality is a move beyond stereotypes and a discovery of the unique gifts of each person.

Ordained

This is where the woman Catholic exists, knowing that her femaleness, her womanhood, cannot be predetermined by men, ordained or otherwise. Even though, throughout the history of Christianity, woman Catholics/Catholics have been seen as an intrusion on the Church of men, and have been treated as such, there is a long, continuous history of women believers who thought for themselves and imaged God for themselves and taught this to others.

The woman Catholic is a self-defined woman who fully accepts her female nature and the Christian teaching that she, as female, is made in the image of God. This God, then, cannot be an exclusively male-metaphored God.

The fact of femaleness is the starting point, and for most women Catholics, it is a starting point of grace, not of original sinfulness. 'Just to be born is grace enough,' they profess, and 'my real me is God,' as the mystic Catherine of Genoa proclaimed. This sets up a completely new theological agenda, starting from the lives of women and their God, as reflected on by women. The difficulty lies in the fact that the history of women in Christianity is largely unknown. It has been erased from the consciousness of male historians, male theologians and male clergy, from Pope to parish priest. nevertheless, it is

possible to trace a continuous history of women Christians from the very first days of the Gospel story.

With the exception of the women mystics of the Middle ages, these women have left little trace of their lives, and certainly nothing of their voices. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace their presence, as endless synods, episcopal and papal pronouncements, and theological and saintly denunciations of the activities of women litter the pages of Church history.

“The woman Catholic is a self-defined woman who fully accepts her female nature and the Christian teaching that she, as female, is made in the image of God”

For women, the Second Vatican Council was, for the most part, a repetition of the ancient prescriptions, but as always, when a door is opened, women rush through. This time, against all the odds, it was the door of women's ministry. As a result, the face of the church, though not its teaching, was changed dramatically. As well as this, the promotion of biblical scholarship and biblical spirituality by the Council awakened in women a need to participate in their own traditions and spirituality that has not been, nor can it be, quenched. Around the same time as the Second Vatican Council, that is the mid-sixties, the arrival of Christian feminism brought a whole new sense of liberation, at least to some women Catholics.

Feminism vastly disturbed the Catholic women, that is most women in the Catholic Church, and this breach has never been healed. Christian feminism opened doors to women theologians, exegetes and other scholars to begin a female-based exploration of the traditional documents of the Church.

The official Church, at every level, fears this development and denounces it at every opportunity. The long, continuous, brilliant and radical history of women's Christian presence may break the deadlock of a Church which seems to be stuck in its own intransigence.

❶ Extract taken from Mary T. Malone's book, *The Elephant in the Church*, published by Columba Books and used with permission.

Catholic bishop's conference



National Synthesis Document 22nd June 2022

The Experience of the synod

To many of those taking part the synod was a revelation. People remarked on the novelty of speaking freely and being heard in organised conversations that were open-ended and attentive to the movements of the Spirit. They spoke of how, after decades of churchgoing, they had been asked to speak for the first time.

The resistance of a portion of the clergy to the synod process is remarked on in many reports. Special mention is made of the mistrust of some former Anglican priests who cited negative experiences of synodical parliamentary-style governance of the Church of England, with its motions and votes, pressure groups and campaigns, which “are not easily forgotten”.

While the synod roles of ordinary faithful and the bishops were clear, that of the clergy was more uncertain.

A wounded Church called to conversion

The reports show people's passion for the Church to be what they believe Jesus Christ calls it to be; they are frustrated and critical when it falls well short. From the reports emerged a powerful message that

There is a real sense that the Church requires healing and conversion to live out its

own nature and purpose to the full.

(i) A Church that embraces

A desire for churches to be places of *closeness* is a striking feature of the reports, expressed in the word *welcome*, along with related words such as *integration* and *inclusiveness*. There is a constant call for the Church to embody God's unconditional embrace of all, not least the stranger and the marginalised, and criticism that the Church is often unwelcoming either to specific people, or to new ideas and inspirations.

(ii) Priests who enable

There is great love of par-

ish priests, cherished as “holy men who care deeply for those that they serve”. People are aware of the heavy workload carried by clergy managing more than one parish community, and want them to be relieved of the burden of non-priestly tasks to focus on pastoral and liturgical activity. The reports highlight the need for a change in the way priests and lay people relate in order to see themselves as both responsible for the mission of the Church. This was one of the strongest constant themes in the submissions.

There is criticism of “routine celebration, mediocre liturgy and homilies that do not speak to the real world”. Poor homilies are attributed to overworked, distracted or poorly trained

clergy. This criticism is often accompanied by a call to allow women to preach. (iii) **The Church as ‘other’** Lay faithful feel disempowered: “the laity felt that things were ‘done to them’” rather than with them.

“The lack of co-responsibility was critiqued also in terms of the Church's communication”

Decision-making and initiative are seen as the prerogative of the clergy. Potentially “synodal” bodies – parish and deanery councils – have little or no impact, a point that is repeatedly recognised and regretted. Yet the reports

consistently call for more of them, and for them to include a broader range of people and to have more impact.

The distance felt by ordinary faithful from the organs of governance of the Church is expressed most vigorously in criticism of the sex abuse crisis. The crisis is seen as a dramatic indictment of clericalism, of an institution seen as self-serving rather than serving, concerned with itself and its own reputation.

(iv) **The art of accompanying** Running through the reports is a clear vision of how the future can be different when all the People of God – lay, religious, clergy, bishops – act together, in their distinct roles and functions, but all as missionary disciples. A call for greater participation and collaboration is a constant.

(v) **The desire to be formed** For many, the dream of a Church of collaboration and shared mission goes along with a passionate call for “training for lay leaders to encourage the formation of missionary disciples”. The

“A desire for churches to be places of *closeness* is a striking feature of the reports, expressed in the word *welcome*, along with related words such as *integration* and *inclusiveness*”

of England and Wales

behind strong critiques in the reports of the way the Church teaches, presents itself, and operates.

There is regular mention of the need to re-examine sacramental disciplines, above all those that restrict access to matrimony, holy orders and the Eucharist.

The model of a welcoming Church was perceived to be particularly compromised by the failure to integrate certain groups particularly in the case of three categories – women, LGBTQ+ people, and young people.

'Marginalised' groups

(i) Women

The place of women within the Church was the cause of "passionate, repeated and strongly expressed concern" in the synod listening. It was a constant theme, occupying substantial sections of every diocesan report, and should be regarded as one of the headline findings of the synod in England and Wales. The exclusion appears broadly under two categories: the failure to make good use of the contribution of women in the Church, and the issue specifically of women's formal ministries.

On the whole, women were not considered a marginalised minority so much as a silenced, unrecognised majority. Despite being the "lifeblood" of the Church, women are seen as excluded from the leadership and ministry roles that correspond to them in ways that are both self-defeating and damaging to the Church's mission and credibility.

Sadness and frustration that "women's opinions were not taken seriously

or felt judged to be second class" permeate all the reports. A minority contest the idea that women were excluded or not valued.

(ii) LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ groups who organised synodal meetings in Westminster diocese were grateful for a twice-monthly Mass specifically for them but otherwise felt they were "rendered invisible". A constant voice in the reports laments the exclusion and sidelining of LGBTQ+ Catholics.

“The place of women within the Church was the cause of “passionate, repeated and strongly expressed concern” in the synod listening”

Church teaching was commonly raised, as well as the language in which that teaching is expressed, notably the expression "intrinsically disordered" that some church documents use to describe the same-sex orientation.

(iii) Young People

The absence from the Church of young people was another common theme, but often spoken on behalf of rather than for themselves. Present in almost every submission was the pain in the older generation at the absence of young people from the Church, along with a bewilderment that the means of passing on the faith in a previous generation through family and parish had broken down. The question was often voiced: "how can we encourage them to come back?"

(iv) Divorced and remarried

Those who are divorced and remarried without an annulment were mentioned often as a marginalised group in the Church who "expressed great hurt at their exclusion" from the Eucharist. There was a perception of injustice, "particularly where the innocent party is concerned", along with criticism that rules barring them are "unnecessarily dogmatic and hurtful on the part of the Church".

(v) The Traveller Community

A number of submissions mention the Traveller community, helping them to feel welcome and at home, and understanding their needs. One submission talks about the community wanting to be more involved in parish life and included in parish ministries. "Catholic Traveller families generally expect not to be welcomed in parish communities up and down the country".

(vi) Those with additional needs

The voices of those suffering degrees of incapacity – whether deafness, blindness, mobility, learning difficulties, etc. – have called in this synod for attention to be given to their needs. They want to participate more in the life of the Church.

(vii) People of colour

The racial and cultural diversity of Catholics is seen as one of the great gifts of the Church in England and Wales. However, this diversity is not reflected in leadership roles in the Church, which are "almost exclusively white", which produces a sense among some people of colour that "decisions are not made for us, but are instead made for us".

(viii) Traditionalists

Although very few in number, a sense of grievance and marginalisation is strongly expressed by those who worship using the Missal of 1962. In response to questions about marginalisation and exclusion, both TLM adherents and those committed to "maintaining traditional Catholic teaching against what they interpret as harmful modifications" feel "badly treated by the bishops and by Pope Francis."

Towards a synodal church in England and Wales

The experience of the synod, while stumbling and uneven, has "begun something momentous" in the People of God of England and Wales.

“Church teaching was commonly raised, as well as the language in which that teaching is expressed”

There is a felt desire in the reports that the synodal process now be embedded in dioceses and parishes, and that structures and formation be introduced at every level to enable this. There is a consistent call for formation in synodality, including a better understanding of how it was lived in the early Church and developed in the different Christian traditions.

The path to a synodal Church requires reviewing and removing obstacles to listening and participation. The reports hope for a "new leadership style" that reflects a relationship

between priests and lay faithful of collaboration and co-responsibility, and for structures that facilitate dialogue, discernment and participation in decision-making processes, while respecting that decision-taking is the task of designated authority.

Without yet identifying concrete steps, many reports announce diocese-wide conferences over the next year to reflect on the fruits of the synod listening, stressing that such reflection should not need to await the outcome of the synod's conclusion in Rome in October 2023.

Becoming a synodal Church means listening better, sharing information more broadly, and becoming more transparent and accessible. It means making better use of digital platforms and social media to develop a more networked, horizontal style of communication.

Along with the thirst for formation is a dream that the disconnect between Church and world be bridged by ordinary faithful "who know where they stand" (St John Henry Newman) and who can express their convictions in ways that are clear, confident, and joyful.

Conclusion

Coming out of the pandemic, the synod has opened a new horizon and direction for the Church in England and Wales, awakening in the faithful a desire for discipleship and the call for a new way of living and thinking that deepens communion, enables participation, and equips all for mission. It is an invitation that must be acted on, lest the hope the Spirit kindled in the hearts of the faithful grow faint.

i This is an edited for space version of the full document but stays true to the original.

A prominent feature of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales' National Synthesis was the need for church inclusiveness.

thirst for formation is a striking and constant feature of almost every synod submission.

They desire formation in Church teaching, spirituality and scripture, as well as practical tools and skills to enable discipleship: missions, retreats, adult catechesis, spiritual formation, and so on.

(vi) The call to communicate

The lack of co-responsibility was critiqued also in terms of the Church's communication, which can either be an enabler or a barrier to synodality.

"There are no mechanisms for listening, mutual input or communication between laity and hierarchy. Consultation is virtually non-existent," is a common complaint. "The laity are simply not informed of what is happening and why."

Truth, mercy and welcome

The vision of a Church, one that does not firstly judge and exclude but unconditionally embraces, lies



Coming together in the name of synodality.

15 Themes of the Irish Catholic

The 15 themes were signed off on in August by the Irish Bishops and sent to Rome in preparation for the Synod of Bishops in 2023. What lessons do we as Irish Catholics need to draw from them in order to continue our Synodal Pathway in Ireland? What follows below is the original text of the Synthesis with questions inserted by *The Synodal Times* to draw out action points in the original text.

ABUSE AS PART OF THE STORY OF THE CHURCH

Physical, sexual and emotional abuse and its concealment by the Church in Ireland was described as an 'open wound'. This experience affects victims/survivors and their families at every level of their being, including their soul. The submissions relate and link this abuse to so many other areas – our understanding of sexuality and of power; the absence of women in decision making roles; transparency and accountability in governance; clericalism.

The Church is invited to interrogate how its own structures and modus operandi contributed to this crisis. In this sense it is a lens through which all else needs to be viewed.

Q: How does the Church leadership intend to respond to this invitation?

The scale of abuse within the Church has created a huge sense of loss which infused

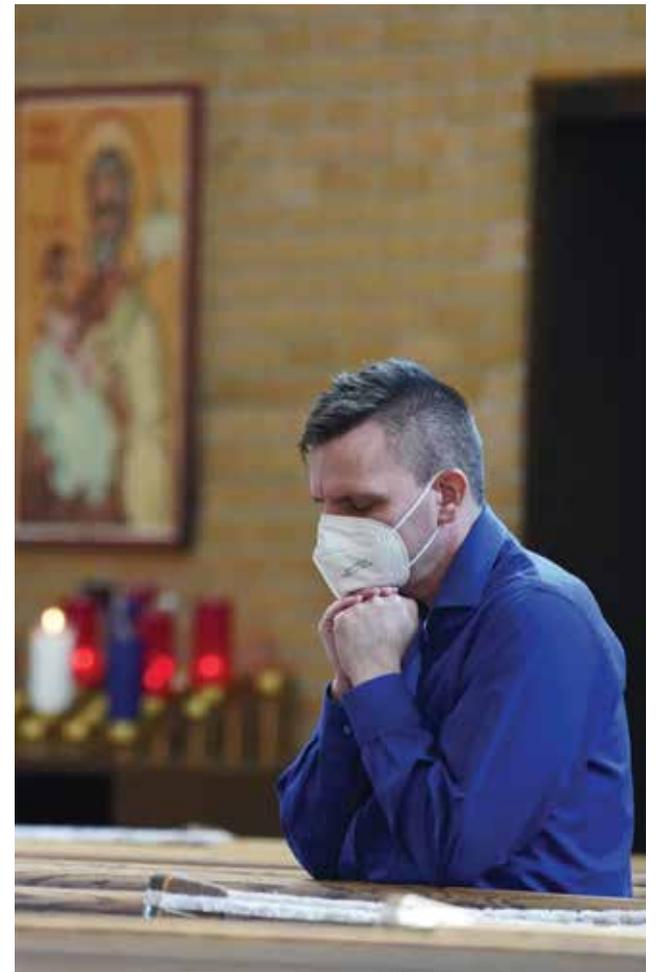
the responses in our consultation. This sense of loss coupled with continuing anger was expressed by survivors themselves and their families, lay faithful who have become estranged from the Church because of it, and many good priests and religious who also feel betrayed.

Alongside the enormous amount of good work on safeguarding, we need to continue our efforts to provide times and spaces for lamentation, to grieve this shared loss. The contributions about abuse, therefore, represent a call for penance and for atonement at a national level. One submission noted: In our view nothing adequate has yet emerged from the Church nationally in terms of atonement or reparation: while another remarked; Words that are carefully chosen and spoken with humility and sincerity help, but they are not enough.

Q: How does the leadership of the Irish Church envisage a response to the call for penance and atonement at a national level?

At the national presynodal assembly, gratitude was expressed for the willingness of survivors to engage with the process and it was agreed that their searing words be included in an appendix to the submission to Rome.

Institutional abuse in contexts such as Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and orphanages is inherent to the deep hurt of this wound. Strategies of concealment of institutional abuse by the Church have further wounded survivors. Surprisingly, while abuse has contributed very significantly to the loss of trust in the Church in Ireland, there were some submissions which placed relatively low emphasis on the abuse crisis. In summary, enormous gratitude to survivors for their engagement was expressed by many involved in the consultation process for the synod. There was a palpable sense that despite many efforts by the Church, a 'reckoning' had not yet taken place, and the synodal process generated a clear imperative to place this issue at the heart of any Church renewal and reform.



CO-RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

Accountability, transparency, participation, sharing, good governance - these are all key words used to express the hopes of participants for the future of the Church in Ireland when it comes to leadership. These words named what was absent in the lived experience of the Church for many of those responding to the synodal consultation. Many people feel that decision-making and authority are exercised solely by priests and bishops.

This power structure pro-

voke discontent in them, frustration and anger with the processes of decision-making and exercise of authority at all levels in the Church. It was asserted that Canon Law itself places obstacles to co-responsible leadership and there is obvious exclusion of laity, in particular, women and youth, in these processes and in leadership roles more generally within the Church.

A reading of the submissions reveals a lack of clarity around leadership roles and responsibility. Parish Pastoral Councils, Finance Committees and other consultative councils should be balanced

in their representation of the communities they are called to represent and not be elitist or groups that simply talk about doing. Instead, Parish Pastoral Councils and other representative councils are called to be cultivated as praying and discerning communities of faith whose actions arise from that discernment.

Adult faith development, resources for lay ministries and collaborative decision-making was flagged as poor or non-existent. Clergy acknowledged that in many contexts they are too tired and weary to engage in these developments. However, they are aware that with

education and formation, laity could and should be more involved in co-responsible leadership. Such approaches must be faith-based and focus on a model of servant-leadership to avoid becoming purely managerial or administrative.

Some still feel that the laity should not have a voice in the decision making of the Church/parish; that this is primarily the 'priest's role'. They are happy to be 'volunteers' and just help where needed rather than be actively involved in leadership. Others, however, are more than ready to be involved in charting the way forward, especially through the synodal process.

CLERGY

Participants expressed much appreciation for our priests. Their dedication, hard work, presence and pastoral care was frequently acknowledged during the consultation process. Many of those responding to the synod recognised that they are over-worked and often feel burdened by the weight of governance and administration. In the submissions, there is a lot of concern expressed for our ageing clergy.

Q: How do we respond to the very clear concern for ageing clergy?

The role of the priest is valued and will continue to play an essential part in communities of faith. Some participants were concerned that some younger priests are very traditional and rigid in their thinking and may not have the requisite skills for co-responsible leadership. There were calls for better training for our clergy. Priests need to be formed in the skills required to minister and lead in a synodal Church.

Some priests themselves said they would need this assistance. Others are reluctant to let go of long-held roles. Others are feeling "edged out" with diminishing power and relevancy. At the national pre-synodal assembly, concern was raised that the voice of clergy was not as prominent as it might have been in the process. Practices varied in terms of whether listening sessions for clergy alone were organised as part of the synodal process.

However, the invitation to participate as members of the wider 'priesthood of the faithful' was not always accepted, which may speak to the mindset that priests did not see themselves as part of the 'all' in communal discernment. On the other hand, clergy often wished to create an environment where parishioners were free to speak their minds and accordingly absented themselves from public meetings.

In some cases, clergy simply chose not to engage. There were calls from both young and older participants for optional celibacy, married priests, female priests, and the return of those who had left the priesthood to marry. Clericalism in all its forms was frequently associated with hurt and abuse of power by participants in the process. Some

declared that the structures of the Church are not inclusive but patriarchal, hierarchical, and feudal.

There was concern expressed that many priests are resistant to change; that they feel they don't have anything further to learn and view the local parish as 'my parish' not 'our parish'. There was a sense that the permanent diaconate has been welcomed but is not always understood.[6] A new model for the selection of bishops was also sought and a number of participants indicated that it ought to include a wider participation of the People of God.

Q: Does the Synodal Process need to listen to priests on their own to allow them to speak freely?

Q: Can the new Papal Nuncio to Ireland look at a new model for selection of bishops and wider consultation?



Synodal Listening Process

LAY MINISTRY

Baptismal calling is at the heart of who we are as Christians. That calling is manifested in a variety of ways, one of which is lay ministry. On the one hand, some respondents see that carrying out the mission of the Church is largely the responsibility of the clergy, while others recognise a call for greater participation of lay people in the life of the Church. Throughout the submissions, we heard similar calls that lay people, should be involved in other more significant leadership and teaching roles ... not just because it will take some burden off the priest, but because it is part

of each person's mission as a baptised Catholic.

However, there are challenges. These include the perceived passivity of the parish community or wider Church when it comes to lay ministry. There was an overarching thread evident throughout the consultation that the gifts of lay people were underutilised by the Church. At the national pre-synodal assembly, it was noted that the Church should support lay people in their role as disciples, while a need was felt by some for lay people to take greater personal responsibility for their role in the Church.

A submission from returned missionaries who

had worked overseas highlighted that much was learned from working with lay colleagues in the various communities in which they served. 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 the actual shortage of ordained ministers that enabled the laity to take their God-given role.

Q: Can we learn from returned Missionaries how to manage a lay-led Church?

While many efforts have been made to enhance the role of lay people in ministry, much remains to be done to encourage, support and provide a training dedicated to enabling lay people in their calling to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in their faith communities. A call for such training was evident in much of the consultation. It was also acknowledged that while we often speak of an aging clergy we also have an aging laity.

Q: How do we respond nationally as a Church to the call for training for laity?



SENSE OF BELONGING

Strong sentiments around the theme of belonging and a desire for the development of a more welcoming and inclusive Church emerged throughout the submissions. Some respondents were happy with the sense of belonging and companionship they felt within the Church but many more articulated the view that the Church was not as welcoming for those who may be on the margins of society or who feel excluded because of their sexual orientation.

One submission stated: Those who feel at home in the Church feel the absence of those who don't. There was unanimous desire for the Church to adopt a more welcoming and inclu-

sive stance towards all, and in doing so reach out especially to those on the margins and those who do not engage regularly.

It was stressed that the Church is at its very best when it is close to people's lives, speaking a language that people understand, and connecting with people amidst their daily struggles. Regarding language itself, some felt that the Irish language and the local customs that surround the language, were not afforded adequate attention in Church circles.

Sadly, the view that nothing happens outside of Mass and that much more could be done to develop a sense of community through regular social events and other liturgical services,

emerged repeatedly. Coupled to this desire for improving fraternal and communal bonds was a sense that better communication methods need to be adopted to assist this process.

One diocesan submission offered a helpful caveat: Technology was very useful, yet the internet is no substitute for human contact. If the Church is to become an inclusive one where all marginalised people feel a sense of belonging, then we must take stock of who is missing and discern how they can be welcomed. As one submission noted: Personal invitation is key.

Q: How do we adopt better communications?

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The role of women in the Church was mentioned in almost every submission received. In those responses there was a call for women to be given equal treatment within the Church structures in terms of leadership and decision making. As one submission states: Women have a special place in the Church but not an equal place.

Q: What practical ways can the Irish Church include women in its leadership and decision making processes?

Many women remarked that they are not prepared to be considered second class citizens anymore and many are leaving the Church. They feel that even though their contribution over the years has been invaluable, it has been taken for granted. Several of the submissions called for the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate and the priesthood.

Their exclusion from the diaconate is regarded as particularly hurtful. Some women felt that yet another layer was added to exclude them. Many young people cannot understand the Church's position on women. Because of the disconnect between the Church's view of women and the role of women in wider society today, the Church is perceived as patriarchal and by some, as misogynistic.

Q: Is the Irish Church objectively patriarchal and misogynistic?

The issue of women and gender-based violence was also raised and a call to challenge systemic gender inequalities to ensure women's voices are heard and that they have the opportunity to be leaders and take part in decision making forums. A call was also issued to reflect together as a Church on the injustice brought upon women by Church and State, and cultural norms in society.

Q: How can the Church reflect on injustice brought upon women by Church and State?



LGBTQI+

There was a clear, overwhelming call for the full inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in the Church, expressed by all ages and particularly by the young and by members of the LGBTQI+ community themselves. This inclusion would in the first instance involve less judgemental language in Church teaching, following the compassionate approach of Pope Francis which has been transformative and is appreciated, again, by young people in particular.

Some called for a change in Church teaching, asking if the Church is sufficiently mindful of developments with regard to human sexuality and the lived

reality of LGBTQI+ couples. Others expressed a concern that a change in the Church's teaching would be simply conforming to secular standards and contemporary culture. Likewise, it was urged that we not treat the LGBTQI+ community in isolation from other marginalised groups.

There were calls from an LGBTQI+ focus group for an apology from the Church. This submission suggested that even though the Church rarely condemns gay people these days, it indirectly creates an atmosphere where physical, psychological and emotional abuse of gay people is tolerated and even encouraged. Indeed, the visceral clarity of this particular focus group gave life to the rather

more tentative and generalised positions on inclusion offered elsewhere, pointing to the value of hearing directly the voices of the excluded or disaffected.

Q: Should the Irish Church apologise to LGBTQI+ for contributing to an unhealthy atmosphere that leads to abuse?

Q: In what practical ways could the Irish Church be more inclusive?



SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

It was evident that sexuality, sexual ethics, and relationship issues informed people's decisions in relation to Mass attendance, reception of the Eucharist and many other aspects of Church life. One submission asserted that the way in which people (both clergy and lay) were formed within the Church in relation to the understanding of sexuality and sexual sin has been a source of great suffering to many.

There were requests for re-examinations of Church teaching and a revision of its understanding of human sexuality in light of recent scientific and sociological research, alongside a recognition of the lived realities of LGBTQI+ and other couples. Similarly, it was asserted that Church teach-

ing could be more compassionate to women's health, wellbeing and the raising of families, considering many circumstances, including financial ones.

Q: Should Church teaching on sexuality be re-examined?

It was suggested that the theology underpinning Church teaching on sexuality is but one strand in a far richer tapestry. For the divorced and remarried, the Church's 'rules and regulations' were seen as draconian. Some divorced and separated people believed they could not receive the Eucharist even though they had not entered second relationships. Others described their exclusion by priests from any active role in the parish because of their status.

It was stated that some priests avoided the strict implementation of the teaching regarding those in second unions receiving the Eucharist, and while this was appreciated it was also seen as turning a blind eye to the reality. Honest, open engagement and accompaniment with those in second unions was called for; to name the issue and to dialogue.

Q: Should the Church in Ireland begin an open dialogue with divorced and remarried Catholics?

Calls to make the process of applying for a declaration of marriage nullity easier and more accessible were also received. Another group who identified as feeling excluded from the life of the Church was

single parents. It was felt that all parents who wish to bring up their children in the Church should experience welcome and support, and that greater creativity in ministry to families is needed. There are other minority, yet strong, voices that believe the Church, rooted in the Catholic Tradition, should not conform to secular standards when it comes to questions regarding gender, sexuality, and relationships. For others, the Church has no credibility in modern society as long as discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexuality exists.

Q: Should the Church listen to the minority voices as well as the majority in any dialogue in this area?

ADULT FAITH FORMATION

The synodal process highlighted the serious weaknesses in Adult Faith Development in Ireland. Many of the submissions reported that people found it hard to engage with the questions, the concepts and the language relating to communion and mission. There is a felt need among many respondents for safe and dynamic spaces where people can come together to talk deeply about their faith and increase their knowledge of it.

Q: How should we create safe and dynamic spaces to talk about faith and develop it?

One submission stated: Our spiritual growth is stunted. As adult members of the Church, we are not sufficiently grounded in our faith, and do not have the confidence in speaking about our love of God. Many submissions stressed that the declining numbers of priests and religious means the Church is heading for a crisis as there will be very few people properly prepared to step into leadership and faith development roles.

The need to provide continuous professional development for Religious Education teachers in Primary and Secondary level was also highlighted. They make a crucial contribution to the communication of the faith today. One submission outlined that there is a crisis in transmission of faith, rather than a crisis of faith and that we are unsure about how to evangelise in the modern world.

This problem can only be addressed with the deployment of significant resources into programmes for those who wish to deepen their own faith, spirituality and understanding of scripture at a personal or academic level. Many of the courses available are very expensive, and therefore inaccessible to those who are on low incomes or social welfare. Some felt that if we invested half as many resources into the training and formation of people as we do into buildings, we could dramatically improve the life of the Church in Ireland today.

Q: Where do we get the resources for a major faith development programme in the national Church?



LITURGY

There is a sense that funerals and special occasions are celebrated extremely well, but there is a need for more creative and engaging liturgies to connect with families and young people. Some feel the Church's liturgies are boring, monotonous, jaded and flat; that they no longer speak to people's lives. There was a desire expressed by respondents for the full participation of the laity throughout the liturgy; and for a wider more diverse group of people, including women, to take part. A minority view seeks a return of the Latin Mass and pre-Vatican II celebrations.

Q: How do we make liturgies less boring and more participative?

It was clear that the Eucharist is highly valued; so much so that, there is a desire for all to be able to receive, including those who are currently excluded. There was concern that the Sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation are seen solely through the lens of the school and a desire that those presenting for the Sacraments would participate in the whole life of the Church.

Homilies were frequently described as being too long, ill prepared, irrelevant, monotonous and not always connected to life. Church language in the Liturgy is seen as archaic, non-inclusive and hard to understand, particularly the language in the Old Testament readings and liturgical prayers. There was a clear call for simpler, user-friendly, inclusive vocabulary.

Q: Can we develop the ministry of Lector allowing trained lay

people to give homilies? Can we make the readings more simple and less archaic?

The power of prayer was very much valued, as well as the presence of music and song. Some participants felt a great sense of love for our devotional practices and others talked about the power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Some participants long for the return of House Masses, Station Masses and particular feasts.

It was requested that *Laudato Si'* and a greater presence of environmental issues be part of our liturgies, particularly at certain times of the year. There were requests to move Mass times, so they did not clash with working hours, family time or sporting occasions. There was also a sense that in the future, people may not be reached through liturgy, so a prior step is required in relation to encountering Jesus on a personal level.



YOUTH

The issue of youth and the question of how the Church might engage with them, emerged universally across the synodal process. Multiple dioceses and organisations noted the absence of young people in parish communities and many submissions articulated a view that other youth organisations provide a home for young people that is more welcoming than that in parishes. There was an openness and honesty in responses from young people.

They identified with faith and with the Gospel message and what we are called to as Church. One response clearly conveyed the sentiments expressed by so many: the one thing we, as young people, look for is sincerity. In many instances it was felt that the Church lacked

this, or indeed pastoral awareness of the significant challenges faced by young people today.

Q: If the Church is seen by young people as insincere, how do we identify this and tackle it?

One notable example given was the mental health crisis faced by many young people. Many young people were critical of the Church regarding the role of women, clerical celibacy and its handling of the abuse crisis. A significant number disagreed with the Church's teaching on sexuality and the Church's position on sex was considered as a barrier to participation by some young people.

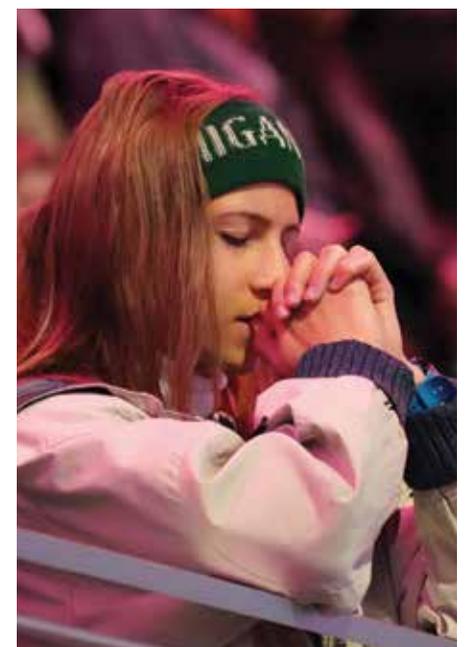
Q: If the Church's position on sex is a barrier to young people, how do we proceed in evangelisation?

On the other hand, some young people said that, for them, the Church's teaching on sexuality is a welcome challenge. One submission commented that the pursuit of authenticity, truth, beauty and the goodness which the Church has to offer is what is most attractive about the faith. It is striking to note that whilst dioceses noted the absence of young people in parishes, particular youth groups were able to offer the kind of faith community young people desired.

Young people feel signifi-

cant pressure from their peers and wider society when they express their faith and engage with Church. It is significant that for young people who have not engaged with or found vibrant communities where they can belong, they become indifferent to their faith. Many young people do wish to engage with Church, yet deficiencies in current pastoral practice have resulted in a marked disconnect between them and the Church. The question of how the Church might accompany them has emerged as an urgent one.

Q: How does the Church accompany and support those young people who do have a faith?



EDUCATION AND CATECHESIS

The topics of religious education, catechesis, faith formation and discernment are mentioned frequently in the submissions. The Sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation were identified as key moments in the life of the family and the Church. There is a wide consensus in the diocesan submissions, which was also confirmed at the national pre-synodal assembly, that a more prayerful, catechetical and scriptural formation is needed at parish level in order to accompany people before, during, and after these important sacramental moments. Parishes

are struggling to accompany young people and their families in their faith development.

Q: We need more formation at parish level but who will do it?

It is acknowledged that the actual faith community will need to educate and lead our children in the faith, which suggests that a strategy, with particular focus on catechetical accompaniment, is required at parish level for young people and their parents.

There is a wide awareness that the traditional cooperative faith-transmission model of the parish-home-school is no longer working. Many submissions

suggest that the Spirit is prompting the Church in Ireland to remove sacramental preparation from schools in favour of parish-based formation programmes. The national pre-synodal assembly recognised the shortcomings of the current model and called for a discernment on how to address this challenge.

Q: Who will lead this discernment? Will it be new wineskins or the same people who are always involved at leadership level?

If children are to encounter Christ in their sacramental

preparation and be formed as intentional disciples, perhaps a more kerygmatic accompaniment at parish level is required. Related to the topic of education and catechesis is an awareness that the skills necessary for discernment, which are crucial for making decisions in a synodal style, are lacking at all levels. When discernment is not prayerful, collaborative and deliberative in a co-responsible way, it can lead to mistrust. Transparency and formation in discernment are therefore needed.

Q: Where is the transparency in the Irish Church?



FAMILY

Many of the submissions place a strong emphasis on the central place of family in all three elements of our synodal process, communion, participation and mission. The Church is seen as a family of families; families are the natural framework within which faith is transmitted, nurtured and practised and from which a Christian identity emerges; and families are the appropriate framework for accompaniment and evangelisation.

The submissions highlighted the importance of a broad and inclusive understanding of family in terms of

the composition and formal status of family units. The Church needs to recognise the changing reality of families over the life cycle, and the challenges and burdens which they face. These burdens are often carried in silence and without external support, particularly in cases where families are coping with members who have a disability, dementia, addiction or other challenges.

Q: In what way can the Irish Church recognise the changing reality of families?

In recognising the diversity and validity of family types, frequent mention was also made of the importance of those who are single and whose needs and capacities are sometimes overlooked in the shaping of pastoral priorities. Accompaniment of families requires a more creative and considered response by the Church. The focus of parish life on the sacraments of initiation is too centred on children and reliant on schools. Parishes should focus more on parents, guardians and grandparents, while a shift away from the celebrations of a single day to an ongoing relationship based on invitation would be more appropriate and likely, more effective.

The central role of family life requires acknowledgement of the importance of the domestic church in its own terms, an importance which was highlighted during the Covid restrictions on communal gatherings. Nurturing the domestic church and empowering and affirming parents will require fresh approaches that are not so reliant on formal liturgical moments.

Q: What fresh approaches can be examined that will nurture the domestic family Church?

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic greatly impacted religion and faith in different ways - gathering and expressing faith in physical places of worship was restricted, especially at parish level. The closure of churches and curtailment of ministry during lockdowns represented a marked shift in the life of the Church during this period. This shift generated deep feelings of isolation, abandonment, pain and hurt, especially amongst the elderly and those on their own as well as palpable sorrow to grieving families, arising from the restrictions on Church liturgies and pastoral care at this time.

Many felt that Covid accelerated an already steep decline in Church practice and general engagement. Others remarked that it prompted a new vision for restructuring and re-thinking what it means to be a Church. It necessitated alternative liturgical and ritual responses as liturgical life moved to digital platforms. Some Catholics engaged fully with this possibility.

Online communication has generated new possibilities for formation and training. Many participants mentioned that during the pandemic they missed "gathering" and "socialising" when going to Mass. Covid placed huge financial pressures on individu-

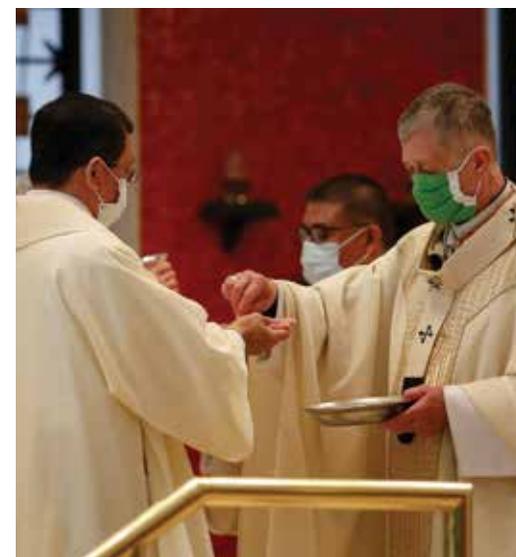
als and the rise in cases related to mental health, domestic violence and addiction reflect the stress placed on families and communities by the pandemic.

There is still a deep sense of grief, loss and pain for people who lost family members during this period or could not visit loved ones in nursing homes or care facilities. Young people felt isolated from their peers and still feel they have lost out. More positively, prayer in the home and appreciation of the family as the domestic church grew. Families slowed down and became more present to each other. A healthier work-life balance emerged as people enjoyed creation and were

more aware of the need to protect the environment.

Q: Should the Church hold a national day of mourning for all those who lost loved ones in the Covid pandemic?

For many, the synodal listening gatherings were the first 'in-person' events people attended after many months of restrictions and even though there was some nervousness, those attending were grateful for the opportunity to reconnect with their faith community.



CULTURE

Dramatic economic and social change was seen to have had a profound impact on the structures and processes of the Church, its place within Irish society, and thus on the perceived capacity for participation and mission. Some of the submissions reflected that contextual changes have been mediated by the two political and legal jurisdictions on the island, by the legacy of conflict and the challenge of sectarianism, and so have not been experienced uniformly.

The pressures of commercialisation and consumerism, the rise of individualism, pressure on time for family and community and a secularist mindset reflected in dominant media, are all heard in the submissions. The Church increasingly finds itself pushed to the margins of popular culture which it struggles to understand or to find language with which to be understood. It was felt that the Church's proclaimed concern to foster communion and participation is overshadowed by the

wider society's focus on inclusion, transparency and accountability.

Q: Is Church language out of step with modern culture? Is our secular culture perceived as more inclusive, transparent and accountable? If so, and if true, what steps does the Irish Church need to take?

The submissions highlight the morale-sapping effect of negative media treatment of the Church, while recognising the invaluable service of independent media in exposing abuse and failures of accountability within the Church.

Despite these pressures, it was felt that there are strong reasons to engage with the wider culture so that Catholics can highlight the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth; a consumer society has failed

to deliver sustainability, equity or life satisfaction.

Q: How can Catholics highlight the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth to the wider culture when these two issues were notable for not being strongly present in the Consultation?

The reality of mutual interdependence was demonstrated by the pandemic experience. Catholic Social Teaching calls the Church to highlight the cries from the margins. Many submissions recognised that this will require a fresh approach to popular culture, including a new relationship with the traditional media and the new communication channels whose power was highlighted during the Covid-19 crisis.

Ireland's Crisis of Faith

Garry O'Sullivan



'Never waste a crisis' said former President Mary Robinson speaking on the *Late Late* show about the Ukrainian/Russia war. The Catholic Church is undergoing a crisis of faith, as the Archbishop of Dublin has said, but is this crisis being wasted?

There is the Synodal Pathway begun by Pope Francis but for forty years the bishops have known what the problems are and still they persist.

“A nun was appointed to a senior position inside the Vatican and they say it's a sign of hope”

Hope comes from the possibility of change. When we speak of Catholicism, where is the hope when the possibility of real change is so remote? We are told that change does happen but be patient. 'It takes one hundred years for a Council to be received' they said after Vatican II, which might need upward revision given we are 60 years on. A nun was appointed to a senior position inside the Vatican and they say it's a sign of hope. A consecrated woman, under vows of obedience to her religious superiors is somehow an opening up to laity and women in particular?

Under the most progressive Pope since Vatican II? After the Amazonian Synod, the Pope changed Canon Law to allow women read at mass. At the Synod on the Family, no laity got to vote, except one lay brother who was

representing his religious congregation. See! Say the groupie fans of Pope Francis, isn't it great. It's like celebrating because Rosa Parks is allowed sit on the bus one day a month.

And the Pope has signed a document from the CDF which says the Church does not have the power to bless gay unions and God cannot bless sin. It's one thing saying what the Church can or cannot do but Church officials cannot limit God to whom Jesus tells us all things are possible.

Hope and energy

Vatican II was a time of hope and energy and those who attended the council whether as clerics or media all attest to this. Catholics (before they were labelled 'liberal') got very excited about the changes and the possibility of change. Yet the church quenched that hope for a whole generation since the 1960s and those coming after them, their children, have witnessed that and floundered or mostly walked away. Their children now are among the 'Nones' and uninterested. Vatican II means little or nothing to them. And the Church tends to come back into focus when they have kids and schooling and the sacraments become real issues. It's cultural Catholicism and evidently doesn't last into adulthood. If you speak to the parents or especially the grandparents

it is a matter of deep regret to them that they have not passed on the Faith. This was reflected in the synodal listening in every diocese.

In his Netflix documentary 'A Life on this Planet' David Attenborough says we need to live in the hope of actually saving ourselves, not saving the planet, the planet will survive, we may not.

"What do we do?" he asks. And you look back at the screen blankly. He answers for you: "It's straightforward. The only way out is to rewild the world."

“It's a packed phrase and can be interpreted in so many ways by differing points of view”

"It's simpler than you might think," he says, "A century from now, our planet can be a wild place again." It's a wonderful thought to think that there is hope, that the future is not decided yet.

We are at a crossroads too, we Christians but especially Roman Catholic Christians. In the West we are in decline and in other less developed parts of the world the faith is thriving. For the Western world at least, the species called 'practicing Catholic' or 'faithful Catholic' is in sharp decline. Birth rates have plummeted, our normal parish habitats are either closing or barely used except maybe at Christmas and Easter when they swell up for a day. Resources have dwindled or have been squandered. Belief has faded.

I don't want to take the environmental analogy too far but perhaps rewilding is a good term to use for



The average age amongst Irish Roman Catholics in 2016 was slightly older than that for the general population at 38.2 compared with 37.4.

what a hopeful vision for our church might incorporate. We need to rewild the scriptures and understand them better. We need to rewild how we do morals, how we do doctrine. Landscaped control needs to give way to herbaceous borders. We need to rewild liturgy. We need to rewild Jesus. We need to rewild ourselves. We need to breathe a little and let the Holy Spirit blow freely.

When Bishop Dermot Farrell became Archbishop of Dublin he spoke about the crisis of faith, something he has spoken about previously as bishop of Ossory. It's a packed phrase and can be interpreted in so many ways by differing points of view. When asked

as Bishop of Ossory about ordaining married men and married deacons he said that was not the answer because when he looked down the Church on Sunday they weren't in the pews.

Crisis

It was a crisis of faith and not vocations that was the issue. The problem in other words is not in the shortage of priests, and Dr Farrell has said there is no shortage, just an over-supply of services and buildings, something he tackled in Ossory. He has repeated similar sentiments as Archbishop of Dublin.

When it comes to rewilding, a well-known monk in Glenstal Abbey who once took a year off to go 'walka-

bout' around the world, knows a thing or two about letting the Spirit flow freely.

The former Abbot of Glenstal Mark Patrick Hederman believes that we have to put our faith in the Spirit working away even as we see institutional decay.

“Why stand here idly beside the empty tomb? He is not here, he is risen and has gone before us deep into 2022”

"No one, not even an Archbishop, has the competence or the authority to declare a crisis of faith.

Of course, such an official is in prime position, and has full authority, to declare bankrupt the religious institution over which he presides.

But, maybe, that is just the signal needed for the true life of faith to awaken

“The Catholic Church is undergoing a crisis of faith, as the Archbishop of Dublin has said, but is this crisis being wasted?”



The arrival of Pope Francis in 2018 was still not enough to encourage non-practicing Irish to return to the Church.

and blossom as we see springtime emerging in every leaf, and bush.

“For the Holy Spirit has secret agents everywhere around us, who are ready to bring good news to the poor, to liberate captives, and to declare that the kingdom of God is always around and within us.

Why stand here idly beside the empty tomb? He is not here, he is risen and has gone before us deep into 2022.”

Writing in *Let Us Dream*, Pope Francis says that we need to be alert to the new things that the Spirit is showing us - “The Spirit shows us new things through what the Church calls “signs of the times”. Discerning the signs of the times allows us to make sense of change.”

Spirit

Yet we can't sit around pondering the movements of the Spirit as has been done for 40 years. As columnist Breda O'Brien has written:

“what is also needed is to take concrete, practical steps to address something which the new archbishop has spoken about again and again - an underlying crisis of faith.

No-one has found a magic bullet to solve this in the Western world. The crisis of faith is particularly acute among young people”.

“Breda O'Brien suggests finding and promoting parishes that are doing it right”

The former Archbishop of Dublin regularly lamented the lack of youth involvement but closed down the Catholic Youth Care agency early on in his ministry. Most clergy are perplexed how to minister to young people and young people, apart from World Youth Day, find there is little for them in their parishes.

Breda O'Brien suggests finding and promoting parishes that are doing it right.

“One approach might be to look at where faith is actually alive and active in the archdiocese, everywhere from small youth groups for teenagers, to online initiatives for young adults, to outreach to the poor, to bustling pastoral centres and to begin to build on what they are doing right. Sometimes, even neighbouring parishes are unaware of successful ventures which could be replicated in their own communities.

While the way ahead remains daunting, the archbishop can take comfort from the fact that even the smallest of steps will be appreciated by a battered Catholic community.”

The theologian Karl Rahner in the book ‘Faith in a Wintry Season’ suggests taking this a step further. When asked about his Church-wide pastoral strategy for the European Church to deal with decline he says that one strategic point, and “particularly important point for me concerns my old question whether the Church is well advised to maintain its system of local parishes, or whether it wouldn't be better, granted the problematic

character of my metaphor, to create flowering oasis even if thereby, from a pastoral and ecclesiological point of view, there would be many areas of desert in between”.

He continues: “The metaphor may be misleading. But it is wiser to use an unavoidably very limited amount of water to produce an oasis somewhere than to sprinkle the limited amount over the whole land”.

For a Church that has very limited financial resources made all the more urgent by Covid, well-resourced parishes may well be a viable strategy while other parishes are allowed wither.

No Shame in Doubting

Pope Francis has said that doubt is important to faith: “The devil puts doubts in us, then life happens along with its tragedies. ‘Why does God allow this?’ But a faith without doubts cannot advance. The thought of being abandoned by God is an experience of faith which many saints have experienced, along with many people today who feel abandoned by God, but do not lose faith. They take care to watch over the gift: ‘Right now I feel nothing, but I guard the gift of faith.

The Christian who has never gone through these states of mind lacks something, because it means that they have settled for less. Crises of faith are not failures against faith. On the contrary, they reveal the need and desire to enter more fully into the depths of the mystery of God. A faith without these trials leads me to doubt that it is true faith”.

“It wasn't helped by a Church obsessed with Sunday Mass attendance above the actual development of the faith in faith communities”

A crisis of faith then is an opportunity to move beyond the honeyed school yard catechism and discover God on a more adult journey. Again and again in the diocesan focus groups people have asked for faith development.

For most, faith formation stopped at their Confirmation and their concept of God is stunted. It wasn't helped by a Church obsessed with Sunday Mass

attendance above the actual development of the faith in faith communities.

What are the solutions? Well they were spelled out in the Synodal listening:

- Community is significant
- New ministries for women
- Ordained ministry for women
- More Inclusivity
- Bring back young people
- Take care of creation
- Go out to people on the margins
- Faith development is urgent
- Need for healing around abuse
- Engage with the vision of Pope Francis
- Synodality is way forward

“We can't wait for the world to change to feel visible”, Michelle Obama once told a hall full of female university graduates. Laity, especially women, can't wait for the Church to change to make them feel visible. This crisis of faith is an opportunity for renewal and reform, we can't waste it.

Scottish Synod stirs strong sentiments

Scotland's Catholics may be few in number, but **Ian Dunn**, Editor of the Scottish Catholic magazine, says the Synodal reports from each diocese show they contain multitudes.

Scotland wasn't bursting out the blocks when it came to the synod. We were still trying to figure out who if anyone was coming back to Church after Coronavirus, still waiting for a new Archbishop of Glasgow after the tragic death of the late Philip Tartaglia. And thanks to the long aftermath of the Cardinal O'Brien affair the hierarchy here is inclined to caution.

When it got going though, it was the main topic of conversation in Church circles through spring into summer. There are those who hate it, those who love it, and the majority in the middle who were happy enough to have their say, but willing to wait and see what comes of it.

“The desire to explain Catholicism and justify why a person is Catholic, particularly online, is strong”

While discussions clearly ranged widely reading through the diocesan reports there were three key themes that were very close to universal.

Firstly the role of women in the Church, and a sense they were not appreciated enough, valued enough, or offered the chance to lead.

Secondly, the lack of young Catholics was a sorrow felt everywhere. People know the average age in the pews is nearly pensionable and wish it wasn't.

Finally, there is a hunger for a better and deeper understanding of the Faith, for all Catholics so they then might communicate it to the world.

The desire to explain Catholicism and justify why a person is Catholic, particularly online, is strong. Confidence that they have the ability and knowledge to do so is near nonexistent.

Archdiocese Of Glasgow

Scotland's biggest city, with a large Catholic population, mostly of Irish descent. Traditionally the largest diocese in the country, but has seen a rapid decline in recent years. The Archdiocese of Glasgow's synod report called for

'discussing the possibilities of further married clergy' and more participation for women in the Church. "The principles which the process of synodality particularly promote and encourage are those of co-responsibility, inclusion, and open-mindedness," the document states. Suggestions for how the Church could be more active include: emphasising inclusivity; more interaction with other religions and denominations; more opportunities for lay contributions; and addressing the decline in church attendance and the rising average age of priests. It also recommends utilising young people's interests in environmentalism to foster a deeper relationship with the Faith.

Archdiocese Of St Andrews And Edinburgh

Whereas its counterpart on the west coast is just the city, this archdiocese stretches from St Andrews on the Fife Coast, down to the Borders. Within the capital itself, there have long been tensions between young traditionalists and older liberals and the synodal report suggested that there is a cultural divide between older Catholics who are more liberal and younger Catholics who are more conservative.

“This diocese covers the North East of Scotland, where Catholics are traditionally few and far between and a key theme here was the difficulty of living Christianity in a secular culture”

The report also suggested that 'those who expressed disagreement or reservations about some of the Church's teachings very often were not engaging with the Church's actual teaching,' instead engaging with 'negative stereotypes or even caricatures of the Church's teaching.'



Scottish Catholics come together.

The document also states that 'the consensus seemed to be that there should be a place for a variety of forms of worship,' and that the Traditional Latin Mass and the Novus Ordo should be celebrated reverently and 'warmly embraced.'

Diocese Of Aberdeen

This diocese covers the North East of Scotland, where Catholics are traditionally few and far between and a key theme here was the difficulty of living Christianity in a secular culture. "It is a common experience for Catholics – old and young, clergy and laity – to meet with hostility in schools, workplaces, and elsewhere, or to be ridiculed for practising their Faith," the report states. In addition, increased emphasis on safeguarding following clergy abuse scandals was 'a move in the right direction, but more must be done to support those who have been abused and to purge this grave evil from the Church'.

Diocese Of Motherwell

Since the pandemic, the diocese of Motherwell has overtaken Glasgow to become the largest diocese by Sunday Mass attendance. In the former mining towns

of Lanarkshire the Church is still bound into these tight-knit communities in a way that's rare elsewhere. Their synod report calls for a Church where 'everyone has an equal place irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, or age.' The report's conclusion states that 'a certain unity of mind and vision for the Church' was evident from the responses. "It is of a welcoming and inclusive Church where everyone has an equal place irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, or age," it states.

“One submission called on the Church to 'listen to what people actually want' instead of telling people 'what we must do'”

The report goes on to say the vision expressed in the synodal process in Motherwell is of a Church where 'clericalism will gradually wither as authority and decision-making are seen to belong to the whole People of God'.

Diocese Of Paisley

Geographically the smallest Scottish diocese, Paisley stretches west from the

southern suburbs of Glasgow out to the Inverclyde coast. Its report calls on the Catholic Church at parish, diocesan, national, and international levels to engage more with society, especially in communicating the work and beliefs of the Church.

It also states the Church should be more open to change, particularly in recognising and enabling fuller participation of the lay faithful at all levels. One submission called on the Church to 'listen to what people actually want' instead of telling people 'what we must do'.

Diocese Of Galloway

Covering the South West of Scotland Galloway is seen as the most liberal diocese but has also faced a steep decline having recently ordained its first priest for 14 years. Its report says that 'overwhelmingly, the opportunity to participate in the Synod was seen as positive'. It says there was a great hunger for Churches to be a place where all are 'safe to speak out without fear of judgement, which they felt would enable them to speak out more confidently and courageously'. It also noted that many in the 'older generation felt that they have been conditioned to be silent, partly due to having been raised not to speak out, and partly

due to cultural sectarianism which has created a "keep your head down" mentality among Catholics'.

Diocese Of Dunkeld

Centred in Dundee and covering the rolling hills of Perthshire and central Scotland one strong theme here was 'a distinct concern about the lack of young people and families attending Church services. Parents spoke of real sadness that their children no longer go to Mass and have walked away from the Church. The report states that some were of the opinion that the Church's attitude to gender equality, and to gay people were examples of how out-of-step it is with the attitudes of young people'.

Diocese Of Argyll And The Isles

This is where the Scottish roots of Celtic Christianity are found, on the isle of Iona and the Catholic parts of the Hebrides. They noted the 'strong bond' of kinship in island communities that goes beyond Faith. Participants praised the community and prayer of those of varying faiths as a 'powerful sign of walking together. However the language of the synod was seen as inaccessible to some participants.

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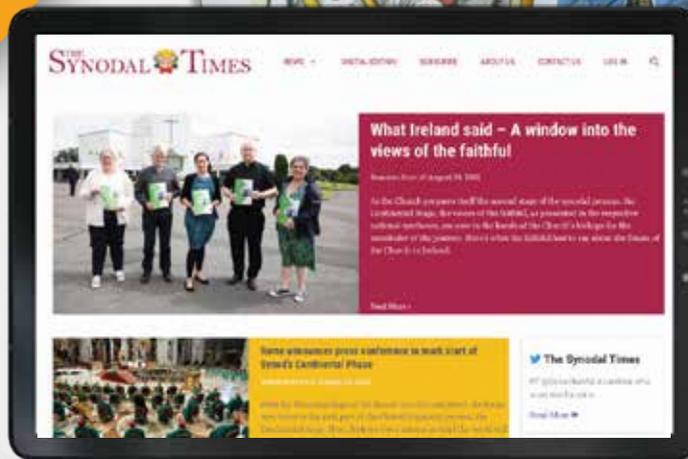
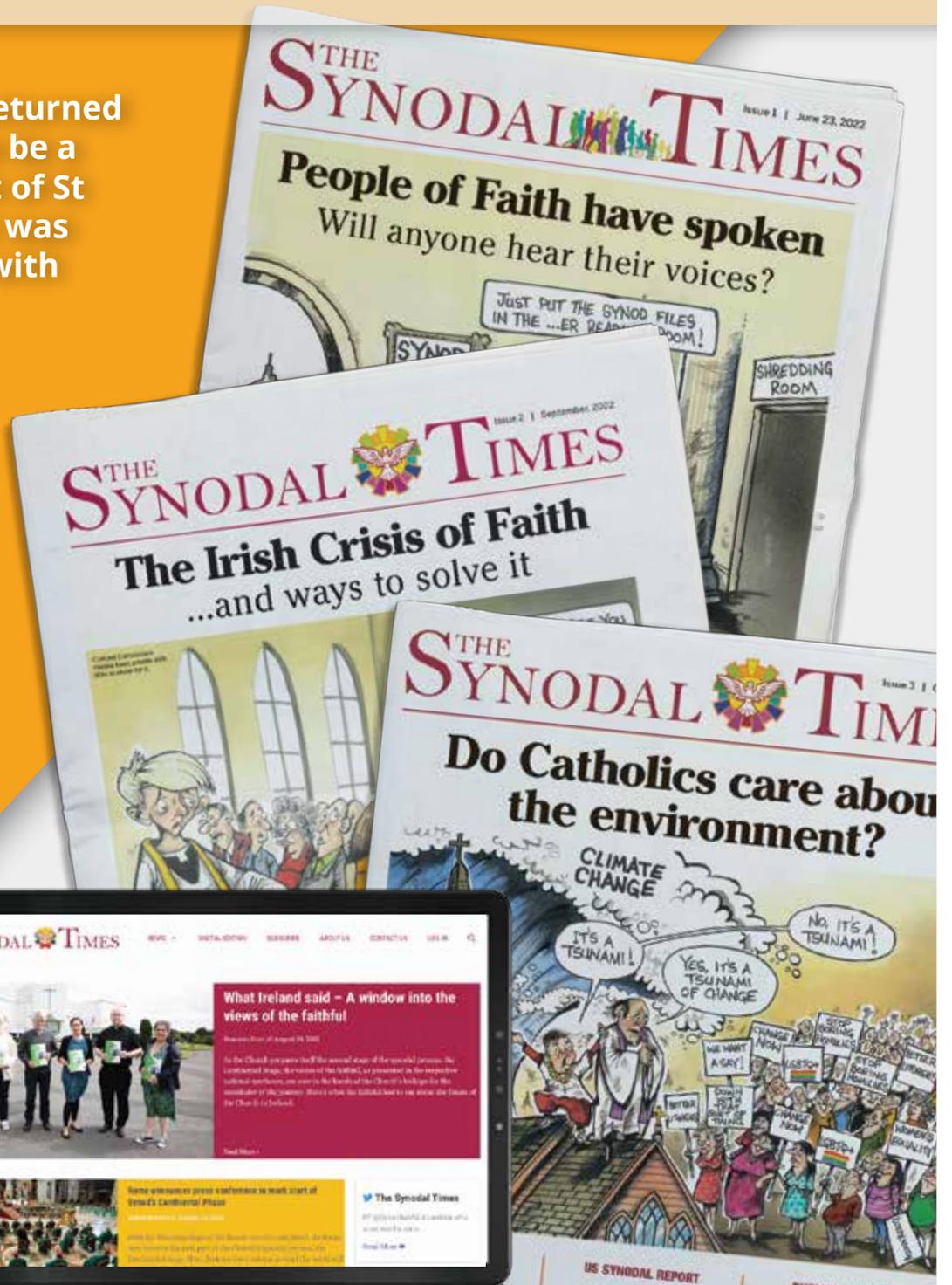
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Accountability and Synodality

Nuala O'Loan



Accountability is about openness, transparency, and being ready and willing to account for stewardship whether as an individual, as a parent, carer or guardian, priest, bishop, or even as the Pope. Accountability, because it requires openness, is key to understanding, and understanding is key to trust. Trust is fundamental to our faith – an act of faith is an act of trust.

We will all be accountable for how we participate – we will have to be both very honest and very aware of our own limitations, of the ‘planks in our eyes’. Fairness and respect must be visible in all our listening exercises, even when it is hard to hear what is being said.

Requirement

There is a requirement too for each of us to recognise not only our individual but also our institutional accountability for our Church. In our parishes, as we contemplate our responsibilities as parish, and listen to the experiences of those who seek to share with us, we must be alert to the gentle powerful working of the Holy Spirit among us. This is a great opportunity for individual and parish growth. These meetings, like the whole process of preparing for the synod, could be occasions of healing or they could result in an experience of exclusion, a feeling of not being listened to. At all levels in our Church, we need to be willing to speak up with courage about our realities, and that ongoing need for change and reform which is necessary in any institution. We cannot just

leave it to others.

What are the major challenges faced by the Church today and will the proper understanding and exercise of true accountability assist in resolving those matters? As we contemplate how we can become a Church in which there is the greatest possible communion and participation, resulting in the most effective living of the mission to which we are all called, how can accountability help?

“There is a requirement too for each of us to recognise not only our individual but also our institutional accountability for our Church”

Sitting and listening in parishes, deaneries and bishops’ conferences can seem like Groundhog Day. We have been there before. This call to communion, participation and mission is core to our faith – we hear every time we leave Mass, ‘Go and proclaim the Gospel’. The issues raised by those to whom we may listen may be familiar: concern about the loss of faith in modern society, the accusations of naivety and superstition when we manifest our faith in the living God, the disdain and, on occasion, contempt for organised religion such as we practice, the loss of some of the traditional ways of being Catholic in liturgy, the difficulty in persuading people to contribute actively to Church, rather than just being passive attenders at Church.

It is true also that the fear of being seen as ‘Gospel greedy’ (as if one could ever have too much knowledge and understanding of sacred scripture) or too assertive can undermine our ability to participate, to walk in hope and to see the light which shines even in the darkness. Essential to any discernment process whether at parish, diocesan, national or synod level will be the existence and full acceptance of a conceptual understanding of who and what we are (children of God) and of why we are on this journey of listening and discernment (because the Pope has discerned that this is what we need to do at this time in the world).

There are many other issues which cause people distress and pain. They include, on occasion, the ways in which parishes function, probably inadvertently. There is always a core group of people in every parish who give without counting the cost, who are always ready to help, but to those who come as outsiders into our midst, parish can seem like a closed shop – a group of those who are in the know, to the exclusion of others who might dream of making what they might perceive as a tiny contribution. However, listened to carefully, given a little space and encouragement, they might contribute far more than the parish or they expect. This synodal pathway is an opportunity to make that space, to provide that encouragement and to wait in anticipation as the Holy Spirit moves among us.

Conduct

Other problems may relate to the way in which some parishioners and clergy conduct themselves as people of influence and control in the parish. It is a very real fact that if we are to have functioning churches, we must be prepared to provide the money to pay for clergy stipends, to meet



The ‘Vatican Trial of the Century’ underway last year.

the cost of heating, lighting and maintaining the church and its associated parish centres and other buildings. These are very real costs, and they will continue to rise. In many parishes there is accountability for how parish money is spent, but not in all. When people can see that there is, as required by Canon Law, a finance committee which reports to them about how much income there is in the parish, and what the outgoings are, they may be persuaded that there is a need to be more generous. If we live as Christians, we must be prepared to be generous, not just with our time and our energy but also with our other resources.

Power

Great power is exercised in our Church especially by those who are ordained, because to them is entrusted the responsibility and task of decision making. It has seemed,

on occasion that there is no accountability for the exercise of that power and no reason for the preservation of that power to the ordained only. Indeed, as we contemplate the tragedies of child abuse, of the way in which unmarried mothers were treated, the financial abuses of power which emerge from time to time, the betrayals of priestly vows by some of those among our clergy and bishops, all the occasions on which terrible wrong has been done, we are faced with the terrible reality that these actions have all contributed to the breakdown in trust in Church and the resultant drift away from the Church and even, where the betrayal has been greatest, to loss of faith.

“Great power is exercised in our Church especially by those who are ordained”

Accounts of experiences of betrayal such as those described above may be very hard to listen to, and it may be asserted that these things happened in the past, but the problem is that the loss, trauma and grief experienced does not stay in the past, rather, all too often, it lurks under the surface of a life, ready

to emerge when least expected and to plunge the sufferer back to that pain. As a Church, we are challenged by this reality and by the need, above all, to care.

Scandals

The scandals of criminal trials such as the current Vatican trial, in which even a cardinal stands trial, the ongoing situations in which lay people, priests and bishops across the world appear charged with financial crime, all these have massive impact whether they result in the acquittal of the defendants or not. There is too the damage wrought by the perception of hard-earned money donated by ordinary people, being spent on causes for which it was not donated. There is even the very common situation in which people donate but are never told what their money is being used for. The effect of these is to reduce trust in the Church’s capacity to manage its earthly affairs with probity. Financial irregularities and fraud, like all criminality, can result in people losing faith in the Church.

Another area which is undoubtedly a cause for concern as we embark on this journey is the fact that current Canon Law does not provide the necessary timely, and effective

“What are the major challenges faced by the Church today and will the proper understanding and exercise of true accountability assist in resolving those matters?”



resolution of problems and issues which can only be resolved through Canon Law. While the process of seeking decrees of nullity of marriage has become much faster in many areas, it can still be very long for some. In addition, there continues to be a whole range of other issues in which the situation may seem uncertain, is far less speedy and in which there is a perception of procedural unfairness – where people do not feel that they are heard and have the right to challenge the evidence against them, and where people do not understand why an individual identified by the Church as having sexually abused a child has not been laicized, for example.

“Financial irregularities and fraud, like all criminality, can result in people losing faith in the Church”

Particular difficulties exist for priests or religious against whom an allegation is made of sexual abuse of a minor or an adult at risk, where there is no evidence to bring any form of criminal prosecution, and the matter is returned to the Church to be dealt with. There are no processes within the Church that are

similar to those applicable in professions such as teaching, nursing and medicine, where although a person will have to stop working pending investigation, the processes move much more swiftly and there is no necessity to move from home, as often happens in

the case of accused clergy. However, if a case moves from the civil law into canonical investigation, the accused and the accuser will know that it will be an even longer time before there is any resolution of the matters. It is unfortunately true that, on occasion, the bur-

“Particular difficulties exist for priests or religious against whom an allegation is made of sexual abuse of a minor or an adult at risk”

den of awaiting resolution of such matters can become so onerous that a person's mental health is affected, and that there have been suicides.

Affected

For the families and friends of all those affected by such matters the Church's handling of the process, and particularly the delays inherent therein, can become a cause for great disillusionment and ultimately for people to become disaffected and even to abandon the Church.

The theology and philosophy of our Church have developed over the millennia as we have grown in knowledge of how we exist and who we are as God's people.

There are those matters, on which some have said there is no possibility of change, such as the ordination of women. There are also issues such as the proposal for the abolition of the celibacy requirement for ordination. Current rules are undoubtedly the product of prayer and discernment over centuries,

yet we cannot rule out the fact that we may be being led into a new dimension in which these things can and should change. Discernment can be a difficult process, particularly when we are called to discern matters which cause us discomfort or unease.

“There are those matters, on which some have said there is no possibility of change, such as the ordination of women”

Bishops and those who are responsible for the ongoing stages of this synodal process will be aware of the need to create the kind of listening situations in which issues such as this can be raised, rather than simply refusing to engage and thereby enabling the current slow drift of people away from the Church, for reasons which are preventable.

We cannot predict what this synodal process may bring. The way in which we

conduct ourselves during the process will be instrumental in our final ability to discern the best possible way forward as Church. We know that as we participate in it, we are accountable for our responses to each other in our Church, and to God. I have come to realise too, that the ways of God are not predictable and that the Holy Spirit will enlighten, warm and hearten us on the process and lift up our eyes to greater understanding, greater selflessness and greater love if we but listen.

Nuala O'Loan DBE is a member of the UK House of Lords. From 2000 – 2007 she was the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and she currently serves as Ireland's Roving Ambassador for Conflict Resolution and Special Envoy to Timor Leste and for UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security.

Baroness O'Loan is a qualified solicitor. She previously held the Jean Monnet Chair in European Law at the University of Ulster and has received honorary degrees from four universities.



Parishes equipped with a loyal core group of volunteers are fortunate. But to parishioners who are not involved in these circles, they can often appear to be 'closed shops'.

Ripples of discontent but synod sprouts

Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis August 2022

In May 2022, Australian dioceses published local reports on their consultation process. Based on those reports, and using content for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia relevant to the Synod, the National Centre for Pastoral Research prepared the Australian synthesis. The synthesis will support the ongoing work of the Synod of Bishops' General Secretariat in the lead-up to the gathering of bishops in Rome in October 2023. Here are the key themes that emerged from the meetings with the laity.

On Synodality

There was great support for synodal practices to be developed in all areas of diocesan life. It was noted that to be successful, this practice required buy-in and commitment from the leadership (lay and ordained alike) and the inclusion of all voices, especially those on the margins.

As one diocese noted, 'We may not always get it right, but we believe this is the way of being Church that the Holy Spirit is leading us to'.

Journeying with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

Indigenous communities are growing, and people in these communities continue to have a great love for the Church despite many negative experiences. There is a continued need to acknowledge, accept and recognise past failings and the intergenerational trauma that exist, and to complement this with a deliberate welcoming into parish communities and practical support for people with health and wellbeing issues. There is also a need to consider new ways of being Christian and new forms of Church life better suited to First Nations cultures.

Fruits of synodality

Some dioceses noted that the fruits of synodality were already being seen, particularly through the Diocesan Pastoral Council and other diocesan assemblies. This brought great hope to people for the Church's mission to spread the good news of Christ. Similarly, some parishes and communities are also growing in this practice through the Parish Pastoral Council and other assemblies.

In other dioceses, where the practice of synodality was still in its early stages, the renewal of the Diocesan Pastoral Council was seen to be particularly important, along with its impact of demonstrating the practice of working together. Other areas



Many Australians have had experience participating on various plenary councils. Here is an image of people participating in July 2022.

for improvement that were identified included a shared responsibility and openness in the management of parish and diocesan resources, an end to clericalism, and greater shared authority.

In a highly fractured society, religious communities demonstrate that it is possible and beneficial to live and minister together harmoniously, despite differences in age, culture and viewpoints.

Synodality needed at all levels in the diocese

The practice of synodality being 'at the centre of everything we seek and do' was reiterated throughout several submissions. Many proposals towards a more synodal Church community were received. Some were simple and practical, e.g. parish picnics, retreats and welcoming each other before Mass. Others

required substantial planning, e.g. a diocesan synod.

Several dioceses indicated that new initiatives towards synodality had been established, for example: By creating an understanding of co-responsibility in mission among the leaders in the parish, Catholic schools, Catholic Care and social service agencies, and chaplaincy. By employing a synodal process to examine structures and practices that enable expressions of our shared Baptism, marked by inclusivity and participation.

Concrete actions must follow synodal processes

There was consensus that synodal consultations needed to be followed by action. A recommendation was made for the key themes that emerged from this formal synodal process to be followed by action. Given that syntheses

documents naturally include divergent positions, it was noted that subsequent actions needed to include explanations of why some suggestions could be implemented, while others were not possible within the faith tradition. It was also noted that the bishops' responses ought to be guided by *Evangelii Gaudium*, n.31 to promote authentic missionary communion in every diocese.

5 Key Themes on Communion

Love for the Church

There was a recognition that many people have a great love for the Church. Many people provided stories of deep connection to the Church and strong relations with priests, religious and other members. They valued past experiences and look back fondly on them. Some yearned for a return to the 'old days', though most rec-

ognised that this was not possible, and therefore they looked forward in hope to the Church of the future.

Deepening community life

People were concerned about community life, especially in parishes, where this has been greatly impacted by COVID-19. There was particular need voiced for a deeper sense of community to be developed, stronger relationships to be built between the parish school and worshipping communities, and for families to be supported so that they, in turn, could reshape their parishes. Many dioceses provided a range of examples of programs, initiatives and activities that helped deepen community.

Although the Catholic community in Australia, especially in urban settings, is increasingly multicultural, in some parishes with multi-ethnic

groups, reaching out to and engaging with migrants in each of these groups was particularly important, as was the need to promote mutual acceptance, ongoing dialogue and integration into the local Church.

There was concern voiced about the difficulty of finding ways to engage with and listen to those who are disconnected and alienated. Many expected 'the Church' to do this but did not recognise that, as baptised members, all are called to be missionary disciples, to reach out to, and be inclusive of those on the margin. Some people had difficulty in accepting people who were different from them, while others were frustrated by what they perceived as the rigidity of Church teachings.

More faith formation and spirituality

There was a desire expressed to grow in the faith more deeply. People voiced their fears about feeling, at times, unequal to the task of communicating their beliefs to others and being vulnerable in the face of criticism and contested values in the public square. Many people felt the need for greater direction in faith formation and spiritual development, especially

“Indigenous communities are growing, and people in these communities continue to have a great love for the Church despite many negative experiences”

hope for Church in Australia



Participants in Australia recognised that “there is a continued need to acknowledge, accept and recognise past failings and the intergenerational trauma that exists for Aboriginal peoples and to complement this with a deliberate welcome into parish communities”.

through training, resources and support for all ages.

One recommendation made was for adult formation to become a priority in the Church, focusing on what the Church believes, why it believes it, and how these beliefs interface with a pluralistic society.

Another need was for catechesis for young people that was vibrant, family-based and relevant to the current society, while acknowledging that this formation needed to primarily take place within the family. Some acknowledged that while young people wrestled with certain aspects of Church teaching and practice, there was a general love for the faith that needed to be supported.

Importance of liturgy to faith

There was widespread acceptance of the importance of liturgy to faith and the need for unity in the community to be fostered through the proclamation of the Gospel in beautiful and meaningful liturgy. It was widely acknowledged that creative, inclusive and welcoming liturgy that highlighted the sense of the sacred and reflected the community's diversity strengthens the communion of the faithful in their mission.

In dioceses with a greater presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a yearning was expressed for greater recognition and use of Indigenous spirituality in liturgy and Church life – both in the diocese and the wider Church in Australia.

Greater listening and speaking

Dioceses recognised that clergy have a key role to play in listening to the laity, especially where they have been engaged in ongoing consultation and have expressed their voices on key concerns. However, in contrast, some Eastern dioceses recognised the need for laity to speak up and be more proactive, especially in matters where they had sufficient knowledge and experience, and the ability to participate actively in the Church.

Many recognised that the voices of the faithful were being disregarded in the passing of parliamentary bills on issues such as abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage, and felt the need for more Christians to get involved in the public sphere to influence policy decisions wherever possible, especially social media.

7 Key Themes on Participation

Welcoming and inclusive

There was a particular sense that synodality is about welcoming and including all, particularly those on the fringes of the Church and on the margins of society. Such groups include Indigenous Australians, migrants and refugees, women, those of different sexual orientations, and the poor and vulnerable. In some instances, the Church was seen as placing barriers of exclusion by its teachings and the application of those

teachings. On the other hand, some called for the Church to be more compassionate while remaining authentic to its teachings.

More inclusiveness was also called for to welcome back to the Eucharistic community those who had left the Church, those who felt discriminated against and those who felt unwelcome because of seemingly restrictive Church teachings.

Leadership, formation and governance

There was strong emphasis that lay and ordained need to be involved in all levels of leadership, and that Gospel-inspired models of servant leadership should be pursued. Leadership should foster synodality by encouraging involvement to ensure a diversity of gifts enriched the Church. Clergy, religious and laity, collectively journeying together in mission, could foster vibrant, life-giving and synodal parishes.

“There was a desire for pathways to pastoral ministry for lay people to be clear, accessible and encouraged”

There was an appetite for forming seminarians and new clergy to work synodally in their parishes, which would contribute to reducing issues of clericalism, widely regarded as a barrier to synodality.

There was a desire for pathways to pastoral minis-

try for lay people to be clear, accessible and encouraged. Spiritual and pastoral formation of lay people was seen as a priority as more and more lay people took up leadership roles.

There was also a desire for ongoing discussion about the ordination of women and a need for greater clarity around the consideration of women for diaconate roles.

There was a call to address the shortage of parish priests, particularly Australian-born priests. Further discussion was sought around ordination, including priestly celibacy, vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life, the recruitment of clergy from overseas and the assistance of priests from other Australian dioceses.

Involvement of diverse groups in decision-making

While the hierarchical model of decision-making in the Catholic Church can be beneficial, it is recognised that it can also have negative implications which can be the antithesis of synodality.

In all areas of the Church, there was a desire for greater confidence that decision-making processes would be inclusive, transparent, responsible and accountable. The actions of those making the decisions needed to reflect synodal values, which would lead to greater synodality. There was a need to ensure all voices were heard and respected in decision-making.

9 Key Themes on Mission

Commitment to social justice and care of the Earth

In many dioceses, there was a call for missional activities at all levels of the Church to include discussion and engagement in social justice, political and environmental initiatives.

People voiced an urgent need for commitments from the Church to care for the environment alongside affirmative action to care for the most vulnerable affected by climate change.

“A significant call was made from many areas for greater involvement and support of young people and families in the life of the Church”

All Catholics were urged to become involved in political action and play a greater role in influencing policymakers at all levels of governments to make appropriate moral decisions.

Accompaniment

There was a strong need for accompaniment of specific groups, such as children, families, young people and immigrants.

A significant call was made from many areas for greater involvement and support of young people and families in the life of the Church.

There was also a need for acknowledgement, encouragement and development of a culture in which all the baptised are called to be missionary disciples.

Welfare, education and those on the edge

There was a need for the Church in Australia to continue to work and support these agencies and schools to bring about a more equitable and compassionate society.

A call was made for more rigorous and effective Catholic education through schools, particularly in the area of religious education, and for more encouragement for Catholics, both within and beyond the parish communities, to engage in service to those on the margins.

Ecumenism and interfaith relations

There was a strong sense that the Catholic Church needed to reach out to those from the other Christian traditions to further their own understanding of synodality.

There needs to be ongoing cooperation with other Chris-

tian churches, particularly those in the same area, to identify opportunities for greater collaboration.

Evangelisation

Evangelisation is the responsibility and call of all the baptised. There was a strong call for a culture of evangelisation to be encouraged in traditional ministries and new and emerging areas of mission. An acknowledgement was made of new ecclesial communities who provide formation for individuals and families in the work of evangelisation.

Religious communities noted that in the current context of a secularised society, without much appreciation for consecrated life, they continued to persist in mission—to pray, love, speak and serve. In synodal terms, they continued to ‘walk the path’ together and to give life to others.

Co-responsibility

It was widely considered that the mission of the Church is the responsibility of all Catholics. There was a need expressed for greater collaboration between all levels of the Church as well as greater opportunities for and empowerment of the laity. This collaboration was seen as a synodal process, one which needed to be inclusive of all the baptised, fostered by parish and diocesan leadership.

Conclusion

The Synod consultation highlighted many ‘lights and shadows’ present in people's experience of the Church today and respondents voiced a strong need for the Church to be a missionary and Eucharistic community, inclusive of all, especially those on the margins. In the aftermath of COVID-19 and being strongly aware of being a ‘Church on the margins’ in Australian society, this new context calls the People of God to grow ‘our Church’ in unprecedented times. Some recommendations for this include communicating the Word of God to future generations in language that they can use in the Australian community, continuing to work for a more just, compassionate and equal world, and being ever welcoming to people of different age-groups and backgrounds who are searching for relevance and inclusion and, in the end, are searching for Christ.

The bishops have decided that each diocese will conduct a diocesan synod within five years of the Plenary Council concluding, and this decision was endorsed by the Plenary Council. What therefore began as a synodal journey of national significance will be enhanced by the fruits of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops and enriched by diocesan synods to be held in the years ahead.

ⓘ This is an edited for space version of the full document but stays true to the original.

On a level playing field? The

Bernd Hagenkord SJ (trans. Eamonn Conway)

Bernd Hagenkord, a German Jesuit priest (1968 – 2021), was appointed as one of two spiritual guides to the Synodaler Weg, the two-year synodal process begun by the German Bishops in association with the laity in 2019. The German Synodal Way was triggered by the findings of a report that looked into sexual abuse within the Church, and seeks to address a wide range of questions on authority, structure and faith.

Prior to 2019, Fr Hagenkord headed the German-language section of Vatican Radio and participated in many of the recent World Synods of Bishops held in Rome. Previously he had spent many years in youth chaplaincy. He died on 23 July 2021 following a long illness.

It all began with us staring into the abyss. After a decade of having to deal with sexual violence in the church, the so-called MHG study was published in 2018 and in response to its findings the Church commissioned a five-year period of investigation into the topic of sexual abuse by priests, deacons and male religious in Germany. A long list of crimes and failures emerged, as well as an insight into the systemic causes that had enabled abuse and cover-up. The bishops and the representatives of the laity in the Church came to the conclusion that the problems of the Church must now be investigated in full.

“The plan was to work for two years, with four plenary assemblies and meetings of working groups in between”

That was the opening shot for what the Church in Germany has been undertaking as the “Synodal Way” since 2019, a very broad debate on many topics without any predetermined outcomes. Of course no one is under the illusion that everything will be fine again afterwards. The debate about abuse in the Church has led to massive formal resignations from the Church faithful as well several expressions of deep-seated frustration. Even the most loyal of the faithful are leaving the Church because they see too many contradictions in it to the message of Jesus.

For the sake of proclaiming the Gospel we must speak about what are at times deeply-rooted problems that stand in the way. In his letter the Pope speaks of a ‘change of epoch’ that

both ‘justifies and necessitates’ engagement with questions both new and ancient. In the original text here by Pope Francis there is a play on words: we are living through not just an epoch of change but a change of epoch. That reflects well the drama of the situation.

What is the “Synodal Way”?

The Synodal Way is a ‘successful model’, as the President of the Central Committee of German Catholics (the official lay committee), Prof. Thomas Sternberg, put it in April 2021. The question arises as to what exactly this model is. For, strictly speaking, there is no canonical form for a ‘Synodal Way’ in the Church.

The synodal assembly is at the centre of the synodal path. Its 230 members include all bishops, as well as representatives of all Church groups: lay people, priests, those in pastoral ministries, religious orders and communities, theologians. The life of the Church is intended to be represented as broadly as possible.

However, the assembly is not a parliament; as with a synod, it is also advisory in nature. The implementation of resolutions lies with the bishops in their dioceses. This ensures compliance with canonical regulations as well as unity with the world Church.

The plan was to work for two years, with four plenary assemblies and meetings of working groups in between. Covid-19 thwarted all of this and so digital meetings not originally provided for in the statutes had to be inserted, and this has led to the whole process being extended by at least a year. The flexible format of the process has proven to be useful here as it enabled new formats and processes



“For the sake of proclaiming the Gospel we must speak about what are at times deeply-rooted problems that stand in the way”

to be tried out. The process lends itself to adaptation.

But as already indicated: canon law does not recognise this way of proceeding, nor, for example, does the ‘Synodal Way’ meet the requirements of a synod in a particular Church. Canonically, the Synodal Way is therefore a *nullum*, that is, has no standing in canon law and does not follow any clear guidelines. The decision to proceed in this

way was consciously taken. The bishops and the laity wanted an approach that was deliberately being kept open-ended. The disadvantage of this was, and is, that every single step has to be negotiated anew. The Synodal Way cannot rely on canonical specifications and when concluded cannot claim canonical validity. That makes the process flexible and adaptable.

A form of synodality

From the beginning, the one great question facing the ‘Synodal Way’ was that of the binding nature of its decisions. The committee works in an advisory capacity, but at the same time when outlining its responsibilities the bishops had set out from the beginning that the decisions arrived at should be ‘binding’. So,

on the one hand, there are complex voting methods and procedures, and, on the other hand, the final decision, as already indicated, remains with the bishops.

“The bishops and the laity wanted an approach that was deliberately being kept open-ended”

What looks from the outside like a contradiction, feels in practice like the emergence of new forms of synodality. The Church is undergoing transformation and requires new forms of authority and unity. Those who lead and those who advise must find a new way of relating to one another. Diversity and unity

German synodal experiment



“By their fruits you shall know them”
- Participants in Germany’s Synodal
Assembly are seen at the Dominican
monastery in Frankfurt.

some cardinals, concerning his doctrinal statements. Ultimately, this was nothing more than a questioning of his authority. The particular ecclesial structure of the Church in Germany, which is characterised by a strong sense of independence when it comes to theology and the role of the laity, leaves the Synodal Way particularly attractive when it comes to fundamental criticism.

“One of the most visible features of the Synodal Way is the sometimes massive criticism that is unleashed against it”

The critics overlook or do not want to recognise that reform of the Church aimed at restoration is no longer possible.

What the critics also overlook or do not want to acknowledge is the fact that there have been very different and contradicting convictions on certain matters in the Church for quite a long time. The Church has long been stretched to breaking point on some issues.

A break-up would mean people saying goodbye to each other and going their own way. The Synodal Way, however, brings together people who invest great passion in the Church, which they love. This cannot be denied of anyone who is participating! Reservations, questions, reproaches and wounds need to be acknowledged so that you can even begin a conversation. We cannot pretend that these deep, contradictory positions and disputes do not exist just because they have too often been hidden or have only covertly entered into conversation on a smaller scale.

The Synodal Way does not create these disputes and contradictory positions; it only renders them visible. And more importantly, these different points of view are put together in one room, so to speak, and get to talk to

one another not about one another.

Understood in this way, the Synodal Way touches a sore point that goes way beyond Germany. The fact that the German form of synodality has also been criticised in Asia and the USA, and that heavy weapons like ‘schism’ and ‘heresy’ have been deployed, show that the problems Germany is facing exist outside Germany as well.

Strengths and weaknesses

There are also problems and weaknesses in the process. It would be negligent not to face up to this.

The greatest weakness results from the structure: precisely because the process is open and flexible, it is not yet possible to foresee what the outcomes will be. Not even the shape of the outcomes is foreseeable, because some matters can certainly only be decided on a global Church level, matters that are clearly urgent and pressing.

This is a risk that the Synodal Way is aware of and recognises as a vulnerability. In addition, there are other concerns, or to put it in the language of the Pope, there are temptations. The first temptation, for example, is to see reform exclusively in structural terms.

The second temptation is [not accepting] the reality that we belong to a worldwide Church which seems to prevent easy local solutions. Here the Pope rightly warns that solutions will never come from relying solely upon one’s own strengths. Synodality always has to do with thinking outside the box; this is a specifically Catholic insight.

What has happened so far

When the Synodal Way began, four subject areas were identified that were to be debated in separate forums. One related to authority and how it is regulated in the Church, another to the role of women, yet another was to address forms of priestly ministry, and the final one, the proclamation of

the Church’s teaching on sexuality.

These topics were not randomly selected. They bring a focus to bear upon debates that have existed for a long time and which address fundamental problems.

How exactly these are approached and what comes out of them cannot be reported here as the debates are ongoing.

A Spiritual Way

From the beginning, the Synodal Way was intended to be what secular, democratic processes for forming opinions are not: a spiritual way.

It is important to deal wisely with problems; statistics, analyses, forecasts and all of that are, of course, important. One can also in this way recognise the signs of the times. The Church should not stand still; however, there is more to being a believer than just this. A synodal approach should not try merely to reform or rescue the status quo, or merely to rescue the dwindling strength and significance of the Church in Germany. What matters is to distinguish spiritually where God wants to lead God’s Church.

One of the first hurdles was to get used to the routine: it was customary to pray before and after meetings and to celebrate Mass together, but something really important happened in between, i.e., the debate and the work on jointly formulated texts.

“A break-up would mean people saying goodbye to each other and going their own way. The Synodal Way, however”

It is not uncommon for the term ‘spiritual process’ to be met with a certain mistrust. It is sometimes wrongfully assumed that to raise matters to a spiritual level is to play them down and render them harmless. However, the opposite is the case: when things get spiritual they become really

serious because now God is in play.

It is and remains difficult to connect this spiritual dimension with the debates and discussions. Yet the spiritual reveals itself in very simple things: in respect and in listening and in basically acknowledging that behind the contributions of others is a fellow believer.

“The spiritual dimension is itself just as important as the other points to be discussed”

Above all else, to differentiate spiritually where God is leading God’s Church is not to fall back on general principles or convictions. Nor is it an exercise in applying general norms, whether human, Christian or ecclesial, to an individual case; it is not about the individual realisation of what is general. God’s presence always stretches well beyond general norms.

It is about personal responsibility for one’s own faith and for the transmission and preaching of faith to others. It is about distinguishing what is needed in terms of care; and prayer, over and over again. It is about nuances and inner freedom, and the action of God in my own life; it is about experiencing and perceiving. This is all the opposite of ambiguity. And so, this can be a source of fear because there are no automatic or quick-fix solutions to problems.

Finally, the spiritual dimension is itself just as important as the other points to be discussed. A spiritual awakening is needed in the Church, on the Synodal Way, and beyond. This awakening must face up to the problems in the Church and learn how to deal with them.

In its conflict and in its prayer, in its debate and spiritual discernment, the Synodal Way is the necessary and urgent first step leading to forms of communication, decision-making and structures for the Church in Germany that are more appropriate to the proclamation of the Gospel.

This article was edited for space. The full text can be found in The Synodal Pathway – When Rhetoric Meets Reality published by Columba Books and reused here with permission.

in the Church have to be recalibrated. These are all formulations that point to a central theme that now preoccupies the Church worldwide and also the Pope: synodality. The Synodal Way sees itself here as an experiment.

Criticism

One of the most visible features of the Synodal Way is the sometimes massive criticism that is unleashed against it. Initially, this has been from within the Church in Germany, but it is now becoming increasingly shrill from outside as well. In media circles that call themselves Catholic, we hear ‘apostasy’ and ‘heresy’ bandied about thoughtlessly and without any proper understanding of what these concepts mean.

The basis for this fundamental criticism is the understanding of authority. Groups that presuppose allegedly never-changing Church teaching and consider the Church’s social form to be characterised above all by hierarchy and obedience also consider their inner-ecclesial dominance to be endangered by synodal processes. The Synodal Way is not the only target for criticism here; Pope Francis also has had to face alleged *dubia*, that is, a formal doubt expressed by

“The critics overlook or do not want to recognise that reform of the Church aimed at restoration is no longer possible”

Germany's Synodal Way - Teetering towards change or falling on its own weight?



Laced with rhetoric defying Church doctrine, the German Synodal Way is causing alarm in the Vatican.

Prof. Eamon Conway



A friend is the parish priest of a large cluster of parishes in Bavaria. He is a natural pastor and community-builder. In his fifties, he is still a young priest by German standards. He heads a pastoral team consisting of one other priest, a permanent deacon, and a few lay pastoral workers. For two reasons his team is about to be decimated. The Archdiocese of München-Freising is facing severe financial cutbacks, and, in addition, working in the Church as a lay person is no longer attractive resulting in a steady decline in the number of pastoral workers. Those who remain are often assigned administrative responsibilities which impact on their availability for front-line pastoral ministry. The parish has a beautiful new Church

completed only a few years ago at a cost of €11 million. It is state of the art and won several architectural awards. The costs were almost entirely covered from central funds with parishioners only having to pay a small fraction. This was because of the *Kirchensteuer*, an arrangement whereby a percentage of income tax is paid to the churches if citizens are registered as members.

Haemorrhaging

The German Catholic Church is haemorrhaging members. Up until a while ago the number of people in my friend's parish cluster formally leaving the Church was on average fifty a year. Now, he says, it has risen to nearly fifty a week. The main reason given is the botched handling of cases of sexual

violence by bishops with a consequent loss of trust in current leadership and in governance structures. The situation with Cardinal Wölki, still Archbishop of Cologne despite adverse findings against his handling of historical cases, is a major concern, as is new allegations of mishandling cases against Pope Benedict XVI dating back to his time as Archbishop of Munich and his recent apparent refusal to acknowledge his mistakes. Though many parishioners and priests still get on with their daily ministry and practice many have succumbed to borderline despair about the state of the Catholic Church as an institution. Even moderate Catholics take the view that something radical has to happen to restore confidence in the Church in Germany as an institution and they see the Synodal Way as a last resort.

Meanwhile, however, the Synodal Way has run into serious roadblocks. As Fr Hagenkord made clear, theirs is no ordinary synodal process. Its origins are in the

abuse crisis and its mishandling. Its assembly's membership was not constituted from the grassroots as in other countries and thus it has been considered unrepresentative and theologically elitist.

“Kasper's views cannot be easily dismissed no matter to which side of the debate one belongs”

Moreover, in recent months the Synodal Way has come up with proposals that have put the Church in Germany on a collision path with Rome the likes

of which has not been seen since the Reformation. Among the synodal demands are the ordination of women to priesthood, an end to mandatory celibacy for priests, the blessing of same-sex relationships and changes to the Church's teaching on gender and sexuality.

Alarm

However, what has caused most alarm outside of Germany and especially in Rome is a demand that the Church in Germany would adopt a permanent synodal governance structure with the request that bishops would voluntarily submit their authority to this body. They cannot be compelled to do so because of Canon

Law. However, some bishops have endorsed this demand, causing Pope Francis to tell the President of the German Episcopal Conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing, that we already have a good German protestant Church and don't need two!

Then there is the critique of Walter Kasper. Kasper, now 89, was a diocesan bishop in Germany until John Paul II appointed him President of the Dicastery on Christian Unity where he worked until he retired. An internationally renowned theologian, he has been close to Pope Francis since he came to office. As a diocesan bishop, Kasper supported an early study

“Up until a while ago the number of people in my friend's parish cluster formally leaving the Church was on average fifty a year”

on ordaining women as deacons. As the Vatican's lead on Christian unity, he paved the way for several ecumenical breakthroughs with sister Churches. Kasper's views cannot be easily dismissed no matter to which side of the debate one belongs. Back in 2003, he wrote that the Church is not a democracy but nor is it characterised exclusively by its hierarchical nature. He said that for the Church to adopt certain democratic principles is not necessarily for it to surrender to the zeitgeist. In fact, he noted that in the past the Church readily adopted feudal and monarchical elements from society and "in the same way it can and must take up some democratic structural elements and procedures today".

“For the Church to adopt certain democratic principles is not necessarily for it to surrender to the zeitgeist”

However, in an explosive lecture a few weeks ago, Kasper stated bluntly that the German Synodal way is in danger of “breaking its own neck”. He expressed concern about a kind of dementia at work which discarded the traditional sources that must be carefully considered in renewing the Church. These include Sacred Scripture, the apostolic tradition, decisions of previous synods, and so on. The insights of natural reason, philosophy and history are also to be considered, but such human criteria must always be subject to the Gospel. “We must not be oblivious to history and think that we can start back at zero”, Kasper remarked. On the proposal of a permanent synodal structure which would abrogate the authority of bishops he pointed out that synods are always intermittent events in the life of the Church and that a synodal supreme council would not be renewal but rather “an outrageous innovation”.

Excoriated

Furthermore, he excoriated his fellow bishops who have gone along with this proposal and who have indicated willingness to voluntarily subject themselves to a synodal supreme council. “This idea of a voluntary commitment is a trick – and, moreover, a lazy trick.” A bishop de facto betrays his office if he does not seek to remain in apostolic unity not only with his contemporaries

but also his predecessors, and clearly any decision along these lines could not possibly be binding on a bishop's successors.

“A bishop de facto betrays his office if he does not seek to remain in apostolic unity not only with his contemporaries”

The desperate situation on the ground has no doubt driven many bishops to align themselves with the demands of those embarked along the Synodal Way. The reality, however, would seem to be that the Synodal Way has, for now, at least, led the Church in Germany up what appears to be a cul-de-sac. That said, Pope Francis is a great believer in the reality that seemingly impossible situations give the Holy Spirit surprising room for manoeuvre which can result in unexpected but transformative breakthroughs. We can pray that some such transformation will result from this particularly challenging moment along the German Synodal Way.



Bishop Georg Bätzing, president of the German bishops' conference, celebrates Mass during the third synodal assembly.



Forced to speak out: German Bishop Peter Kohlgraf of Mainz talks with women protesters during a demonstration at the end of the fall plenary meeting of the German bishops' conference in September 2021.

Living and dying for the Faith

Margaret Ball (Bermingham) Laywoman, died a martyr in Dublin Castle, probably in 1584.



Margaret Ball is the sole woman among the seventeen Irish martyrs, and hers is probably the most extraordinary story of all. She bore twenty children, two of whom became Lord Mayors of Dublin, and it was Walter, the eldest and the most successful, who condemned his own mother to her pitiful, slow death in prison.

Self-preservation, long a characteristic of the rich and influential, in this Ireland of torn loyalties, had never been a respecter of familial ties. Neighbour had betrayed neighbour, cousin had betrayed cousin, brother had betrayed brother, and now a son betrayed a mother, who forgave him to the end.

A cynic might say that any woman who brings twenty children into the world is looking martyrdom in the face most days of the week, but Margaret Ball's pathetic death stands in stark contradiction to her very promising start in life as the well-to-do daughter of a country squire. The precise date of Margaret's birth is not known, but it was probably sometime in 1515 that she was born into the Bermingham family of Corballis, in the Barony of Skyrne, County Meath. Her home was near the legendary Tara, seat of the High Kings of Ireland. It was a

rural area about twenty-five miles from Dublin, but within 74 the 17 Irish Martyrs the Pale.

Gentry

Her parents, Nicholas and Catherine Bermingham, were members of the gentry, so young Margaret enjoyed a sheltered life of comfort and privilege. She appears to have been very well-educated and to have received a strong spiritual formation. The family was a religious one and later, when all such families were forced to choose between Crown and Pope, the Berminghams became synonymous with opposition to the Tudor government's harsh enforcement of state Protestantism. But all that still loomed only vaguely in the future when Margaret danced and played her way through a trouble-free childhood.

She married in 1530 when she was still in her mid-teens, though whether it was a love match or an alliance between a family

with status and a family with money is not known. In any event, it guaranteed her a wealthy life and a prominent place among Dublin's best known and most influential citizenry. Her husband, Bartholomew Ball, was born in Balrothery in north County Dublin but raised in Dublin city from the age of seven. He was one of Dublin's most prominent and prosperous merchants. Given his status at the time of the marriage, it seems likely that he was considerably older than his wife.

“She married in 1530 when she was still in her mid-teens”

On their wedding day in 1530, Margaret and Bartholomew probably knew very little and cared even less about the controversy raging in England over Henry VIII's attempts to extricate himself from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon.

Margaret was no more aware of the fact that she was entering a marriage which would ultimately cause her martyrdom than was Sir Thomas More, who as newly appointed Chancellor only a few months earlier had opened the English Parliament which was to decree his death.

Survived

Margaret and Bartholomew had twenty children, but in those days of high infant mortality only five survived into adulthood, Eleanor, Katherine, Nicholas, Thomas and the notorious Walter. Margaret herself seems to have come through these pregnancies relatively well. To have survived them at all showed a remarkable constitution, and it is sadly ironic that having struggled through a succession of pregnancies and infant deaths to what should have been a very placid old age, Margaret faced the most cruel challenges of her life long after

her family was reared and enjoying success.

“The recusant families struggling to hold on to their Catholic faith were under enormous pressure inside the Pale”

She and her husband shared thirty-eight years of marriage, during which they were respected and powerful citizens of Dublin who took a very active role in the commercial and political life of the city. Bartholomew became both bailiff of Dublin in 1541, and later Mayor of the city in 1553. The political temperature rose steadily during those years and as it did Margaret's own family, the Berminghams, became deeply embroiled in the Pale's growing disenchantment with Tudor rule.

Bartholomew died early in 1568 leaving the new Widow Ball well provided

for. She could easily have faded from view, passing her days happily conforming to the new Protestantism, or at least not openly challenging it. But Margaret came from a family whose adherence to the Catholic Church never wavered. She had a streak of independence and a fearlessness which set her off down the path of recusancy, fully aware that she was pitting herself against the law of the land.

Unshakable faith

Margaret was a talented and energetic woman whose being revolved round an unshakable faith in God and a life filled with prayer. She loved young people and she loved her Faith, and she brought both together in a sincere desire to share her gift of Faith with the young people of the Pale who were being subjected to such mixed messages about Church, state and faith.

Margaret's message was straightforward, the Mass was the centre, the core of her life and the Roman Catholic Faith was her road to God. Whatever the politicians might will or decree, she was determined to use her wealth and her intellectual and spiritual resources to fight them every inch of the way. The recusant families struggling to hold on to their Catholic faith were

“Margaret was a talented and energetic woman whose being revolved round an unshakable faith in God and a life filled with prayer”

“Her good standing in the community was not sufficient to keep her out of jail and she spent a brief uncomfortable time there”

under enormous pressure inside the Pale. The temptation to conform to Protestantism dangled before them, promising security and access to continuing privilege.

Comform

As the screws tightened and the penalties for failing to conform bit deeper and deeper, the faith and courage of the recusants was tested daily. Margaret Ball felt keenly that those who, like herself, were determined to resist the encroachment of force-fed Protestantism needed to support each other in practical ways. She opened a school for the children of Catholic families and it soon became a popular centre of learning, as noted for its high level of scholarship as for the piety of its students. Children travelled long distances to Widow Ball's school drawn by her reputation for instilling virtue, spirituality, and fidelity to the teaching of the Catholic Church.

“Margaret's message was straightforward, the Mass was the centre, the core of her life and the Roman Catholic Faith was her road to God”

Where many of the gentry played down their recusancy, Margaret did not. Her school, which catered to the children of recusant families, operated openly. Priests on the run often used her home as a place of refuge. They were welcomed, given food and shelter, and allowed to celebrate Mass there, despite the grave penalties which such actions could bring down. Margaret's elevated status in the Pale provided virtually no immunity from prosecution and she had several skirmishes with the law, none of which intimidated her in the slightest. Sometime in the late 1570s, while a fugitive priest was saying Mass in her home, the house was raided and Margaret was arrested.

Her good standing in the community was not sufficient to keep her out of jail and she spent a brief uncomfortable time there. Some of her friends among the nobility, by dint of pressure and the judicious application of money to the

right people, managed to have her released. The brief spell in prison did not inhibit Margaret. She continued as before, keeping an open door to priests.

Her biggest disappointment in life was her eldest son, Walter. Most mothers would have been proud to have a son who followed his father into the office of Lord Mayor of Dublin, as Walter did in 1580. However, Walter converted to Protestantism and became a zealot. He was adamant that his mother was wrongheaded in her loyalty to Rome. Margaret was dismayed that her son had turned his back on the faith of his ancestors and embraced the state religion which his family had resisted at great personal cost.

She never missed an opportunity to surround him with committed Catholics in the hope that he would join the recusants, among whom was his own younger brother, Nicholas. Nothing she tried had any effect. Walter remained as staunch a Protestant as she was a Catholic. Both of them were to have their respective faiths sorely tested. It was the year 1580 and the Pale was a hotbed of Reformation and Counter-Reformation intrigue. The Baltinglass uprising had fuelled panic in the administration. There was a morbid fear that the Pale would erupt into a general, widespread rebellion. The atmosphere was combustible.

Walter Ball, Mayor of the capital city and a much respected business man, had taken the momentous step of alienating himself from his family and their faith. He was now a fervent Protestant and a supporter of the Crown. From the moment of his conversion until his death, Walter never wavered in his wholehearted commitment to Protestantism and his seething aversion to Catholicism, which he regarded as little more than superstition. He embraced all the popular Protestant causes, becoming particularly associated with the movement to found a Protestant university in Dublin.

Patrons

When the University of Dublin (Trinity College) was founded in 1592, Walter was listed among its patrons and he received special congratulations from Queen Elizabeth for his contribution to the new university. When the new college opened its

doors, Walter's two sons were among its first alumni. The stoutly Protestant ethos of the college continued well into the twentieth century, and although it lifted its ban on Catholic students, as late as the 1970s, Catholic students still had to ask permission from the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin to attend the “Protestant university.”

Businessman

Walter's younger brother Nicholas was no better. He too was a very well-known businessman in the Pale, yet he sided with his mother. Walter felt that his position was critical. He needed to prove to his newfound colleagues and to himself that he was truly a reformation man. The best way to do that was to make an example of his mother. Walter had been appointed to the court of high commission, which investigated cases of alleged recusancy. It is not known for certain how Margaret fell foul of the authorities, but it is possible that she was asked to appear before the commission to answer charges of harbouring priests or facilitating the celebration of Mass.

“Her biggest disappointment in life was her eldest son, Walter”

Because of her previous entanglement with the law, the court was unlikely to be merciful to her. There was a bitter war going on for hearts and minds and the schism in the Ball family was a potent symbol of what was happening throughout the community. With Walter's firm support behind them, the authorities were now in a powerful position to show just how much they meant business by strictly enforcing the law against one of the Pale's best known dissenters.

Margaret was taken from her home and dragged through the streets strapped to a contraption known as a hurdle, a wooden sled-like frame used to drag convicts to the gallows. She was imprisoned in Dublin Castle where conditions were squalid. This time there was no prospect of release. One can only imagine the internecine feuding which her imprisonment must have provoked between Nicholas and Walter, but the latter grew more resolute in his view that Margaret's fate was



A statue of the Blessed Margaret Ball and of her grandson-in-law, the Blessed Francis Taylor, which stands in front of St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Dublin.

entirely her own fault and that she could easily redeem the situation by abandoning Catholicism. The Widow Ball had never known poverty.

She had never gone hungry or been forced to live without basic home comforts. Now in her late sixties, she was to spend her remaining years in conditions of appalling dirt and neglect. She prayed her way through it and through the squalor-induced illness, which took a heavy toll on her body, though not her spirit. She was not at all concerned about herself or anxious to obtain her freedom. Her sole anxiety was for her son Walter and his bitter opposition to the Catholic Church. She prayed constantly for his conversion. The days and weeks became years, yet Margaret faced each dreary day with the same resilience.

Save

In 1582, her other son Nicholas became Mayor of Dublin, but there was virtually nothing he could do to

save her. The case was too notorious for the authorities to simply change their minds. If Margaret was to be freed, then she would have to change her mind. Margaret knew well that the doors would open and her warm comfortable life of privilege would embrace her again if she would just surrender her Faith, but even as she grew physically weaker, ravaged by disease and hunger, she found strength to say no and to keep on saying it until the end. Worn out by the misery of prison life, she finally died, probably sometime in 1584.

“Because of her previous entanglement with the law, the court was unlikely to be merciful to her”

Shortly after her death Nicholas became a member of Parliament and both he and Walter continued to prosper in their different

spheres. Two wealthy, powerful and influential brothers, not at all the kind of men whose mother would be expected to die from the effects of malnutrition and hardship in a dank, damp prison cell. Hers was a slow tortuous martyrdom, a daily grinding down of the body in the hope that the mind and spirit would collapse too. But mother and son were cut from the same cloth. Neither gave in.

Walter lived for his faith; his mother died for hers. The recusants of the Pale cherished her memory and from the moment of her death she was seen quite simply as a martyr whose deep, boundless love of God and her unflagging forgiveness soared above the hatred and sectarianism of the times, giving strength to those still fighting for the right to believe and worship as they chose.

Extract taken from Mary McAleese's book, *The 17 Irish Martyrs*. Available now at columbabooks.com.

Peril in Poland as synodal report exposes friction between laity and clergy

Brandon Scott



A new report by the Polish bishops, summarising the results of consultations with both the leadership and the rank and file of the Polish church, points to a deep division between clergy and laity and an urgent need to rebuild the relationship between the two groups.

"It not a report about the state of the church," Archbishop Adrian Galbas, coordinator of the synodal process in Poland, told *Crux*, referring to a synthesis of the results of widespread consultations published late last August.

“The synod is not an audit,” said Aleksander Banka, a philosopher at the University of Silesia and Polish delegate for the Synod on Synodality, during the presentation of the synthesis”

"It's a very personal document, giving an image of the church," Galbas said – and that image is often fairly harsh.

In the Archdiocese of Katowice, the faithful wrote that the church, rocked by sex abuse cases, not only "scandalises and hurts her people. It is a church that is hopeless, shocked with changes, and one that is frustrating the faithful".

In the Archdiocese of Gdansk, birthplace of the Solidarity movement, participants commented: "The church is characterised by anonymity, and treats the faithful as a collective of parishioners – it lacks an individual approach to people".

"Yes, it is a difficult read," Galbas said, but he nonetheless found a silver lining.

"What is very hopeful for me is that the people who took part in the synodal

path in Poland are those who are very deeply rooted in the church; they are insiders who care about the church," he said.

"The synod is not an audit," said Aleksander Banka, a philosopher at the University of Silesia and Polish delegate for the Synod on Synodality, during the presentation of the synthesis.

"If what we learn during the Synod is to talk to each other, it will be a success already," Banka said.

"The Synod is, most of all, about listening to the Holy Spirit," said Archbishop Stanisław Gadecki, president of the Polish bishops' conference, during the presentation at Jasna Góra.

"When we do not listen," participants of the presentation agreed, "we exclude, misunderstand and marginalise the people of God".

Some 100,000 faithful filled out synodal surveys in Poland; 39 percent of Poles declared themselves practicing Catholics, representing almost 15 million people. Critics suggest that means only a handful of practicing Catholics participated in the process.

World Youth Day

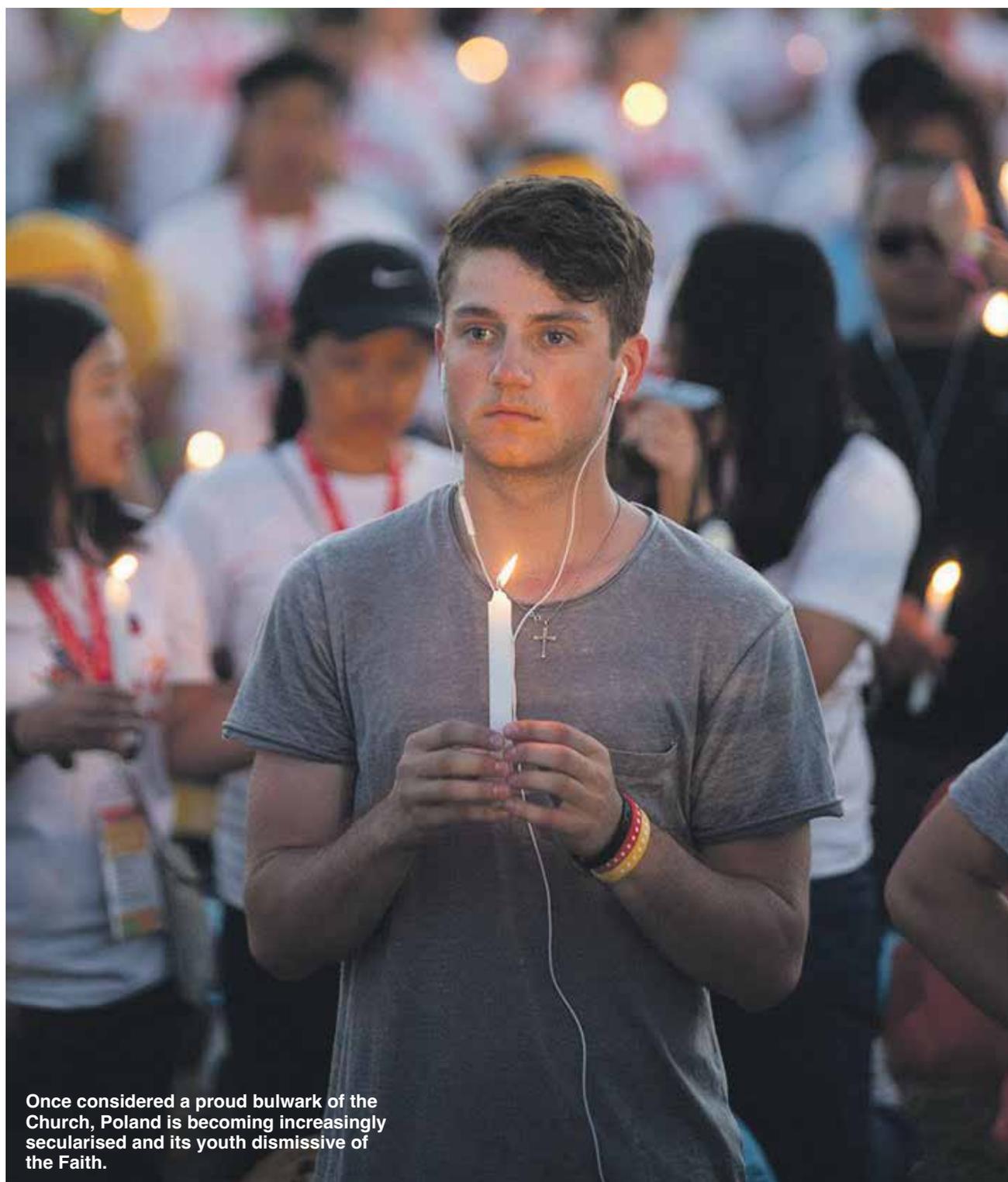
"That only shows how much we still have to do," said Dorota Abdelmoula, former spokesperson of World Youth Day in Krakow, now working in the Vatican's Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life.

"The synod didn't require a lot of resources and time from the faithful. It only required caring about the reality around us," she wrote in the Polish media.

Thirty-five dioceses have officially published their synodal synthesis in Poland. Three dioceses only published press releases, and four did not provide a synthesis to the synodal team in the Polish bishops' conference.

Another complaint that surfaces frequently in comments is that homilies are either told in an abstract church language, or are of very poor quality.

Galbas said that the critique of the faithful, visible on the diocesan level of the Synod in Poland, "is a



Once considered a proud bulwark of the Church, Poland is becoming increasingly secularised and its youth dismissive of the Faith.

“The national coordinator of the synod said the church doesn't have to wait until the synod is over to do something about the results of the diocesan synthesis”

critique of love".

"They don't want to kick the church. On the contrary, the basis of their critique is the love for the church," he said.

Banka added that people who truly participated in the Synod are ready to implement necessary changes.

"The key word for all dioceses is 'relationship'. The potential to change the church is huge – we just need to meet it," he said.

For the last four years, the institutional church in Poland, among the biggest

Catholic communities of Europe, has been experiencing earthquake after earthquake regarding scandals of sexual abuse.

In one recent public opinion poll, the most common reason given for leaving the church in Poland is a critical approach to the church (12 percent) and clergy (10 percent). Seven percent of those who left point to a lack of trust of the Church and priests, and 5 percent cite the sex abuse scandals.

The last point is often mentioned in the synodal

surveys. Faithful in Poland are also being hurt by a "wordly" life lived by clergy, the synthesis says.

"They are attached to material things, they run into activism and forget about spirituality and apostolate," one of the diocesan surveys said.

The faithful also complained that the church in Poland too often plays the political card.

"I would like the priests to read the synthesis carefully," Galbas told *Crux*.

"What we forget," he said, "is that the church is a

missionary church. We dive into the contemporary, daily spinning of the news, and we forget about the fundamental mission of the church to share Christ with each other," he said.

Synthesis

The national coordinator of the synod said the church doesn't have to wait until the synod is over to do something about the results of the diocesan synthesis.

"The time to act is now; we can start right away," he said.

Crisis of Faith in the 21st Century

Diarmuid O Murchu

There is no shortage of explanations for the current crisis of faith, and it is all too easy to lay the blame at the door of our postmodern secular culture. Nor can we rectify the problem by making church-life more attractive, because this is an evolutionary phenomenon larger than church or formal religion.

In human terms we are dealing with a complex landscape. There are those who have abandoned religion, mainly younger people who have simply walked away because they find religion irrelevant. Secondly, we have the faithful remnant, older people by and large, for whom Church-attendance is important to keep things right with God and the hope of eternal salvation in a life hereafter. Above and beyond these two groups, is the third complex movement of our time consisting of people searching for new religious meaning, usually outside and beyond formal church or religion.

Contrary, therefore, to a movement known as the new atheism, we are not living in a faithless world, but witnessing a classical evolutionary transition involving the disintegration of past certainties and securities, and seeking new horizons of transcendent meaning, the nature of which is still vague, amorphous, and even contradictory at times. How, therefore, do we turn the crisis into an opportunity, move beyond a culture of blaming and denouncing, and embrace a realistic hope for a more meaningful spiritual future.

An Evolutionary Perspective

The current religious breakdown is just one of several evolutionary transitions characterising our time. We are living at a time of huge distrust in all major institutions. The culture of mass information is a major contributory factor. Wisdom from the top down is often met with resistance and scepticism. Millions suspect that the wisdom from on high is not really that wise. They believe there are other ways of seeing and understanding and they want to be involved in a dialogue which they suspect will (in time) lead to a deeper and better understanding of truth.



The advent of the 21st century has necessitated the Church's safeguarding of its own future.

Unfortunately, our educational systems have not prepared us for this cultural emergency, and our religions and churches are largely unprepared for what many perceive to be a secular onslaught. But it may not be secular at all; paradoxically it might be exactly how the Holy Spirit of God works, drawing forth creative potential out of a chaotic vacuum (cf. Gen.1:1-2).

“There are those who have abandoned religion, mainly younger people who have simply walked away because they find religion irrelevant”

And if the Spirit of God is calling forth and pioneering something new and dislocating, then where might the Spirit be leading us forth?

1. Religious consciousness is thousands of years old, long before formal religions or churches ever came to be. In this time of evolutionary shift we are being called to reclaim an ancient deep wisdom. This is not regression to some idyllic past, but a process known as recapitulation, whereby we reconnect with the deep past as a resource for the quantum leap forward into which we are all being invited.

2. For indigenous peoples all over our world, our earthiness is the umbilical cord connecting us with the divine. Several contemporary spiritual movements (including Pope Francis's *Laudato Si*) seek to reclaim that sacred legacy and integrate it afresh into our spiritual and religious practices. A major challenge here is to outgrow the dualistic split between the sacred and the secular.

3. Our deep past also reveals a species which creatively used religious ritual long before religious systems

ever evolved. All sacraments are derived from this cultural capacity for ritual-making. This means we must revision sacraments as belonging primarily to people and not the reserve of priests or liturgists.

4. While formal religions tend to institutionalise our faith, organically every faith system grows and flourishes through the development of empowering communities. In the 1970s, we got a glimpse of this is the rise of BEC (Basic Ecclesial Communities) in parts of Latin America.

On a secular level, we witness it in the extensive spread of transformative networks outlined by social historian Paul Hawken in his book, *Blessed Unrest* (2007). In this book, Hawken describes the empowering global impact of environmental networks, based on a five year international study.

5. All the world religions invest future hope in young people to carry forward

inherited religious aspirations. This time round that will be different. As of 2020, we have more people on the planet over age 60 than under 16 for the first time ever. With the rapid gentrification of the human species, it is wise elders rather than invigorated youth who will become crucial for the advancement of civilization, including an empowering spirituality for the future of human and earth alike.

“Our deep past also reveals a species which creatively used religious ritual long before religious systems ever evolved”

6. Our Western world particularly dreads endings, diminishment, and death, all features of the religious world of our time. It is certainly a version of the mys-

tical dark night (of soul and sense), but in the true spirit of mysticism we can bring ourselves to see it as time for purification, realignment, and refounding. It is the classical trajectory of every evolutionary breakthrough.

Offering Realistic Hope

I offer these brief insights, inviting a sense of hope in dark times. The one time president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel (d.2011) offers this definition of hope: Hope is not the guarantee that something will turn out well, but the assurance that things make sense, no matter how they turn out.”

In these turbulent times, what we need above all else is the ability to “make sense” of what is transpiring within and around us. I hope the reflections above contribute to the awakening of such hope, indicating enlarged horizons in which we stand a better chance of discerning the movements and urgings of the Spirit at this time.

“The current religious breakdown is just one of several evolutionary transitions characterising our time”

Diarmuid O'Murchu, a member of the Sacred Heart Missionary Order, and a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin Ireland, is a social psychologist most of whose working life has been in social ministry, predominantly in London, UK.

The Mission of *The Synodal Times*

Ireland has finished its synodal listening process and guess what, Irish people have responded generously and warmly to the national process in their tens of thousands.

What are they saying? Well that's the point of this new monthly publication *The Synodal Times*. We are responding to the call of Pope Francis to help the Church, the clergy and laity discern what the Spirit is saying to our Church today. The Pope wants us to talk and discuss, listen and hear each other; there is an openness now that hasn't been felt before.

For 40 years clergy, religious and lay have been calling for renewal in ministry but it largely hasn't happened? Why is that?

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A faith that reads is a faith that breathes.

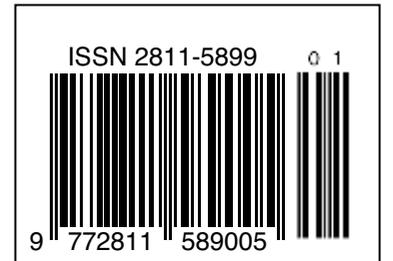
Garry O'Sullivan
Editor-in-chief
The Synodal Times

“A faith that reads is a faith that breathes.”



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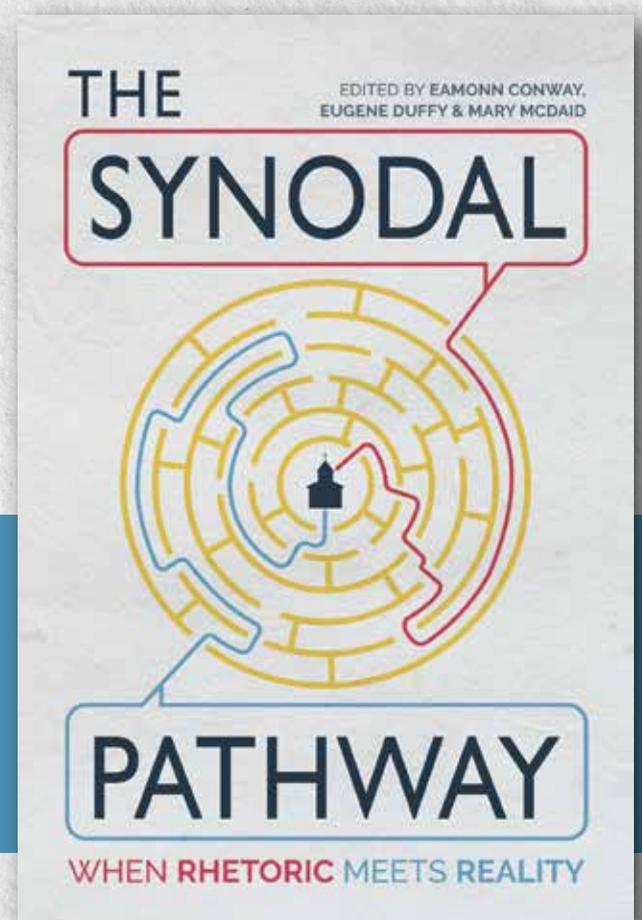
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