

## Synodal Reflection Feedback to the Diocese Feb 28<sup>th</sup> 2022

### **1. How is this journeying together happening in your local church?**

- We journey together with God and are joined by some of our family and friends, our parish community and ecumenical community. Family and friends journey together but the existence of a local Catholic community and a physical church is also important. Attachment to the building itself was expressed, particularly by those who had worked hard to fund the new building. In this parish, our future is uncertain, but we have to have faith in the Holy Spirit to be with us on the journey. We cannot predict the future; we have to deal with what is happening now.
- Mass is the bedrock of faith and life and is central to the practice of our faith. This question generated a lot of emotional responses. People explained how central the mass was to their faith. Some quotes: "It gives me spiritual strength for the week ahead"; "The Mass is the solid bedrock of our faith "; "Weekly Mass is my touchstone"; "I get something out of going to Mass". There is no wish to change the Mass in any radical way.
- We don't make enough time and silence to really listen to the Holy Spirit, either at Mass or outside of Mass.
- On- line Mass is good but does not offer the same connection to people past, present, and future. Physically attending Mass provides continuity and strength to live out our faith. It was something to look forward to, being able to come back to Mass. Doing things as a group is warming and relaxing. Folk need to be encouraged to take part more so they can get more out of the parish.
- Several said they journeyed alone because they had non- Catholic partners. Whilst the partners (husbands) might be supportive of their wives' faith, they rarely attended church, except perhaps on holiday. How are we welcoming and including these people?
- We need to bring younger people back to the church. A common concern was for our adult children and young grandchildren who although baptised and brought up as Catholics, no longer attend church except on special occasions such as Christmas. People seem to have very full and busy lives and church is not part of those lives. Because there are so few young people in church, those who do attend feel isolated. Catholic churches are full of women, but the women have no leadership roles – these two facts are disincentives for both young men and young women. There are too few positive role models.
- There are many reasons why people do not come to Mass every Sunday. They may be caring for others at home or in the community. A celibate priest may not readily understand the pressures of modern family life. A strict requirement to attend mass every week may seem hollow after its suspension for COVID and in light of a future in which we are unlikely to hear a Mass prayed in our parish every Sunday.

- There was a real sense of loss and sadness for what has gone: a church filled with young families, priests who related well to children, visited homes and schools, were a familiar presence to everyone, and shared enterprises in the parish (e.g., fundraising). But recognition that the world has changed very considerably in the last 50 years. The church has some way to go to respond in an appropriate way to these changes. This is one of many reasons why active participation in the church has dwindled and only a minority of people in the UK now identify themselves as Christian.
  - The synodal process has proved to be a powerful way of communicating with other parishioners. Communication has not recently been strong in the parish and has deteriorated further with COVID restrictions. There are very limited opportunities to listen to fellow parishioners and, consequently, little knowledge of the experience and beliefs of other Catholics around us. Perhaps we need more discussion groups where we can share and talk about issues related to our faith. The Jehovah's Witnesses have a good model around parish family meetings. Nevertheless, and even in the last couple of years, ours is a hospitable church with active practice in place to welcome regular parishioners, visitors, and newcomers.
  - Notwithstanding the number of women who serve as readers and Eucharistic Ministers, it was noted that women often occupy gender-stereotyped domestic roles within the church: cleaning, organising resources, flower arranging, catering etc. There should be active efforts to break away from this model.
  - The concept of mission is important but there is insufficient modern interpretation of what it means. The idea of mission has changed; it used to be about support for the church in Africa. As Catholics, we expect to be missionary disciples, but we need to reflect on what that really means nowadays. God shines out from good Christians in the way that we act: a smile, an interest in others, a helping hand, a listening ear, anywhere – on transport, in supermarket, in neighbourhood. This too is mission but is insufficiently recognised. To share our faith we must start small, with our individual efforts and being a missionary now can often simply mean admitting that you're a Catholic so that your actions are seen in that light.
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## **2. What conversation has the Spirit inspired in your sharing?**

### **Issues for the Global Church**

- Too many people are excluded from this journey. We need to put Christ back at the centre of our faith. Love was at the core of Christ's teaching, loving God and loving our neighbours. The church has created too many rules and regulations that have nothing to do with what Jesus Christ said.

- Many divorced people feel uncomfortable receiving communion. Those divorced people who are remarried are excluded from the Eucharist. There is confusion and bewilderment amongst the laity as to who can receive the sacrament.
- A loving church would surely not refuse divorced people communion - it is appalling to deny believers the Eucharist. These exclusions cause deep pain and bitterness, even when it falls short of alienation from the church.
- Also marginalised are many who identify themselves as Christians but are turned away by the rules and formalities of an organised church. There is a need to inform people that things have changed. This may include those who are lapsed Catholics or not regular church attenders. The frail and elderly can also be marginalised, especially those who don't receive visitors from the parish.
- Many of our own adult children still have faith and live their lives according to Christian values. They may rarely go to church, they may be living together, they may be doing all sorts of other things of which the church does not approve, BUT they are good people, they care about others, and they care about the planet, and that's what Christ was about. They can also turn to the church at key points in their lives, for their marriage, or to baptise their children, or at times of need. These moments can re-ignite a connection with the church and their spiritual journey, but too often they can be turned away if they are not regular communicants. Too many rules that cannot be seen as being essential to Christ's teaching serve to alienate.
- Attitudes in society towards sexuality have changed very radically and many young people, in particular, cannot accept the effective exclusion of gay and bisexual people. The church needs to be more forgiving and hospitable, welcoming anyone who shares the love of Christ.
- Pope Francis emphasises the servant priesthood, listening and responding to the people. But there is no forum for people to be heard. The parish priest always has the final say. With clergy, there comes a point when they close down – maybe through fear of losing control or that the laity will get carried away with unorthodox ideas. It seems very often that the priest does not want to enter into discussion about various issues and learn from the laity's point of view. Really, the priest should be one member of the parish, and we should all have the opportunity to use our charisms with decisions taken together.
- There is real concern about the shortage of priests, the lack of vocations and our local situation when our priest retires; he will not be replaced.
- Priests are under increased pressure, so that they no longer have time for home visits or visits to residential homes. It is not enough to hope and pray for vocations to the priesthood.
- The celebration of Mass depends on a priest. In the UK, there is an ever-decreasing number of priests and a tiny number of new vocations to the priesthood. An all-celibate male clergy is a problem. Suitable young men enter seminaries but leave because they cannot accept celibacy. What is the Christian justification for this? Is it consistent with a faith that has love at its centre? There was a real contradiction in our readiness to

accept married Anglican priests into the Catholic Church without accepting our own married priests. Priests must be allowed to marry.

- The position of women in society has changed very considerably. The church has not sufficiently reflected these changes. Men and women are equal before God, so we need to think very carefully about any reasons why we would continue to exclude women from the priesthood. While a few expressed their belief that there is something very special about the sanctity of an ordained celibate priest, most agreed that the priesthood should also be open to women. Some disagreement about whether it might be right to accept female deacons as a step in the journey; some thought we should move straight to women's ordination as priests.
  - The Church needs to address the future by considering creative alternatives such as establishing new orders of married priests or orders of women priests.
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### **3. What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our journeying together?**

#### **3a – In Our Local Parish and Diocese**

- The lives of young people are busier than ever and a weekly obligation to come to a liturgy that does not respond to their own faith is likely to alienate rather than engage. There seems to be much greater youth involvement in the evangelical churches. In contrast, the Mass is not participative and there is very little opportunity for young people to contribute or lead. Perhaps we need to give young people a more active role in the church. What other roles could they take on?
- Church should also involve a social dimension for younger people: youth groups, football teams, walking groups, there used to be a music group. Such activities may offer interdenominational possibilities. Needs people to lead, lack of younger priests is problematic. There may be safe-guarding issues that would need to be resolved.
- We are talking about young people, but they are not here for us to listen to. We need to ask them their views about Church. They have no forum. Could synod-type groups be organised for certain age groups (13 – 18?), through the schools?
- However, many people, especially younger people, also want a more participative and less solemn liturgy. We should develop a greater range of complementary liturgies which respond to the cultural values of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There needs to be different types of masses and services for children and their parents, Youth Masses, quiet Masses and Masses with music for those who prefer a less traditional style.
- When our parish priest was unable to say Mass, Eucharistic Ministers stepped in to lead Eucharistic services.

- Many parishioners still came to church for these alternative liturgies, which were often more participatory, and it was a very positive experience. We should draw confidence from that. But these forms of worship seem to be disapproved of by the diocese. How can we be, and grow, as a Catholic community without a parish priest if we are all travelling to different churches for Mass? Surely it is the bishop's role to educate people who object to this way of supporting our spiritual lives. It was pointed out that the words of the rite for Eucharistic services make absolutely clear the difference between Mass and what is being offered in this service.
- There is nothing in the liturgy of the Mass for children, and separate children's liturgies may serve to distance children from the Mass rather than engage them in it. The Mass itself needs to be more participative and consciously do more to involve children. Even for adults, the Mass is quite passive – "being done to". Could there be a children's liturgy one Sunday per month at which children read and compose "bidding prayers"?
- As Pope Francis says in *Fratelli Tutti*, we need to journey alongside the poor and marginalised. Our own parish has had a long-standing commitment to people in poor countries but does not do enough to respond to the needs of poor and lonely people in our own community. Too often, we neglect those who are alienated from the church, the homeless, struggling families, bereaved, carers.
- There are links between Christian denominations in our area with Churches Together, but stronger communication is needed to encourage more parishioners to support. There are good memories of sharing through Churches Together, but in the past. Parish events in the past have been opened to the local community and other churches: Christmas Fair, Summer BBQ, Fair Trade events. Our church hall could be a great resource for inter-denominational events if these activities were to be restored.
- There needs to be greater investment in adult formation, which will often be appropriate in secular settings. Mention made of parish-based Neighbourhood Groups of lay people in other parishes which meet in each other's houses and could more easily discuss faith and local issues. This might also be tackled in homilies, which should not just be Scripture based. Should the Further in Faith group re-start? (Numbers had dwindled.) Some would welcome talks about faith issues so that we are more informed and ready to speak to others outside the Church. It was felt that we don't know enough about other faiths and people recalled that the invitation to the Jewish rabbi and the Muslim Imam organised by a group in the parish was appreciated and the events were well attended.
- Our own experience as a parish is dominating our thoughts, prayers, and discussions at the moment. When our parish priest retires, he will not be replaced. The church is viewed by many as being very hierarchical and, in common with many parishes, we have been very clerically led. Most of us have grown up used to being told what to do by a parish priest. A future in which our parish does not have a parish priest could provide an opportunity to find our own way as people of God with much more involvement of the laity.

- Quotes from parishioners

*"I have adream of an accessible Church which listens without prejudice or judgement"*

*"We need to acknowledge the importance of youth. Our young people are the life blood of the Church of the future"*

"We need to excite the world about God"

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### **3b – In the Wider Church**

- There is also a need for improved communication in the wider church in England: between parishes, to and from the bishops, with a greater focus on listening and learning.
- We have to be an open church. With peripatetic priests (like the apostles), we will have to draw more on our own resources, and this may make us stronger Christian communities. We will continue to need priests, particularly for those sacraments that require a priest, but fewer priests may lead to the church's renewal through the Holy Spirit.
- Some of the language of the liturgy and prayers is sexist in that it only refers to men. It was noted that our parish priest does use "sisters and brothers" in Scripture readings where possible, and those attending Morning Prayer before Mass try to change prayers to be inclusive. However, the efforts to change language of some hymns has led to some awkward phrasing, etc. The Church needs to update the language of the liturgy to be more inclusive.
- Christians of all denominations share essentially the same faith, and our focus should be on what unites us rather than on what divides us. Different denominations could have much to learn from each other with different liturgies and different forms of mission. The Methodists, for example, seem to offer more for their young people? Can we imagine a future time in which there was just one pastor for all Christian denominations?
- Catholics can seem to be too stand-offish in ecumenical initiatives, appearing to think their own church superior. Need for better understanding of receptive ecumenism as opposed to old view of Catholic church with fullness of truth.
- In a similar way, in an increasingly secular world, people of faith should have much to learn from each other and could achieve much by working together where their faiths lead to similar action. This can be challenging, but both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have emphasised the value of inter-faith dialogue and action.
- The Catholic church has always been led from the top, both globally and in every parish. This can sometimes give rise to inspirational priests leading inspired parishes. However,

the history of the church in England has tended to over-emphasise obedience to authority. Without compromising our central beliefs and values, we need to turn this model on its head, making the church more participative, open to change and diversity in practice. The church needs to adopt a much flatter structure, learning from good management practice in secular organisations.

- We are supposed to be a global church but there is insufficient consistency between countries, churches and priests in the interpretation and application of rules. There is also no uniformity in the congregation who often want and value different things from their church. There is not enough distinction between universal truths and rules that appear quite arbitrary. It cannot be a “free for all” but parishes need both to examine and eliminate arbitrary rules and to encourage diverse forms of worship and participation.
  - This synod is an enormous opportunity – huge and quite radical. The church is not currently drawing on the enormous potential of the laity, indeed, there is not even enough participation by the laity.
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#### **4. Additional Points**

- The evidence of historical and current abuse of children and vulnerable young people is destroying the church. It has gone on too long without any effective action to stop it and punish it. The church hierarchy has to take responsibility and insist that there is proper accountability for these terrible sins.
- Our priests are well respected. However, it was noted that historical abuse within the church is not openly discussed, and the feeling is of it being “swept under the carpet”, instead of the leadership speaking out and taking responsibility. In this context, the Church has a very bad press in the UK.

#### **Comments on the Synodal Process**

- Most felt happy to have had this sharing experience. Some uncertainty expressed about how the process would work and what we could expect from it.
- Initially there was some reticence and confusion about the process itself. People felt unsure what was expected of them. The language of the questions in themselves acted as a challenge to understanding. The task set before us with the 10 Questions was too big. We needed more time for different sessions.
- People initially felt confused about the Synodal process and wondered what they were supposed to “say or do”. We acknowledged that it was a privilege to be asked by Pope

Francis to participate in this global process. Despite some initial reticence people engaged in the process of Spiritual Reflection and actively listened to each other. There were heartfelt and emotional moments during our listening and responding. People said they had actively enjoyed the opportunity to engage with each other and talk openly about living a life of faith in the modern world.

- It has been difficult to talk about both the local situation and the much wider issues for the whole Church.
- **Concern was expressed that at the end of this process the voice of the laity would not be listened to by the hierarchy of the church. This makes it essential that the next steps in the process are also transparent. Feedback from our bishop and from our nations should be made public and the bishop expected to explain why any points raised by many parishes had not been included in the final submission.**