

Synodality Synthesis Report

Diocese of Raphoe

This document reports on the process of Synodality that took place in the Diocese of Raphoe between December 2021 and April 2022. The main part of the process was a series of meetings held in a number of parishes as well as three ‘hub’ meetings where parishes came together in either Ards Friary, Letterkenny Pastoral Centre or Rossnowlagh Friary.

Representations were also made via the online portal through the Diocesan website or directly to the email set up for this purpose. Some people wrote directly to the bishop and to the Synodal Team. Finally, the youth of the diocese were invited to contribute through the John Paul II scheme as well as a number of individual contributions. The questions were created within a context where the Diocese was already busy on developing a new Pastoral Plan which has synodality at its core.

The questions were compiled by the Raphoe Diocesan Pastoral Council and grouped into three main headings: Companionship and Celebration; Listening and Speaking Freely and Authority and Discernment. There were two questions under each heading.

Following the early timescale given for the process we scheduled our listening events before Christmas 2021 at a time when epidemic restrictions were only beginning to ease and there was the distinct fear of another lockdown being imposed.

The regional listening events are the main sources for our report. They consisted of representatives from about two thirds of the parishes of the diocese and obviously form only a ‘snapshot’ of perspectives at the time. The people who came along were glad to have the opportunity to speak. They came with a great sense of concern and engaged constructively in the conversation. They wanted to be hopeful while at the same time they spoke honestly about their concerns. While some negative things were said it was from a position of love and commitment to the Church. Some people articulated a great appreciation for the Church’s

tradition and teaching and a concern that the Synodal process would lead to a renewal of capacity for evangelisation rather than a questioning of the faith.

Companionship

Some people spoke of the sense of vibrancy, identity, belonging and friendship they had experienced as part of their parish community. They spoke of a very positive participation within the parish where people were kind and helpful to each other. The experience of COVID lockdowns was still a very vivid memory when we conducted our listening events and people's comments in some instances were directly linked to the pain and the frustration of that reality. There was a recognition that people crave togetherness and they believed for this to continue the faith must be nurtured with the churches remaining open.

Many contributory factors were cited for this feeling of companionship, togetherness, and friendship. For some people it is clear that involvement in parish ministries of itself fosters a spirit of companionship. For others, friendships were made by simply belonging to the parish and being involved in the various groups within it. Comparisons were drawn between the church community and the various groups, clubs and associations in the wider community (e.g. GAA, sports clubs etc) and the sense of community created by them. For many people, however, the experience of faith is itself the unifying factor and they felt that smaller groups of people committed to their faith bring people together much better than larger groups.

The positive opinions referenced above were balanced with more negative comments. Some people spoke of the feeling of togetherness being lost and said that people are grieving. Some spoke about how parish life has changed with less interaction between members, more individualism and a lessening of the sense of community. This in turn was generating a sense of loneliness among the people. It was said newcomers to the church don't feel welcome and many of the disadvantaged in our society had fallen away. Some felt if you are a regular

church goer you would be made to feel welcome in and by the parish but if not then you would be left on your own.

Welcoming

Some people regretted the divisions within parishes and even different areas within the same parish, while others spoke of divisions along denominational lines between Christian communities. These divisions were shown in the way we have lost contact with younger groups and in the way many parishioners do not want to interact with each other. Several factors helped to aggravate the situation including the age profile of parishes, the clannishness of some groups, the lack of structures within the parish to facilitate dialogue and sharing, the scattered nature of some rural parishes and the lack of appropriate facilities in some of them. All of this leads to a breakdown in the sense of companionship.

There was a strong belief the nature of being church needs to change insofar as it must embrace the community rather than looking inwards at itself. There must be a sense of collaboration with the local community. Opportunities must be created where people can meet and support one another. It was stated there needs to be a renewal in the church and that its future structure is of paramount importance. The role of the church must change, and the laity will have to support the priest in this process. Bishops will also have to be more dynamic, and a bridge will have to be built linking the hierarchy and a shared church. The need for a warm and sustained welcome was repeated and stressed. Some felt the welcome should be by the priest while most felt it did not necessarily have to be the priest but could be a welcoming committee. The important thing was to speak to everybody and ensure everyone was included.

Communication

Communication is a key factor – we live in the age of instant communication and yet we have to hear most of the news regarding the faith on the grapevine.

Although a small minority said they were able to take part in parish decisions and put forward their points of view, the greatest reaction was that parish structures provide little or no opportunity for dialogue other than going to the priest and speaking privately. The vast majority said there were no opportunities at all. Whereas most bemoaned the lack of structures to enable a dialogue to take place, others said it would be of little use anyway as the bishop would make his own decision irrespective of what they said, so it really didn't matter what they thought. Many believed the views of ordinary people get 'edited out' at a higher level and there was a cohort of people who ensure the church remains a 'closed shop'. Others felt people wouldn't participate in such a conversation. Some people pointed to the past and said the church does not do this well – many conversations had taken place in the past and there had been no follow-up, it just faded away. It was also felt you could not depend on the structures allowing dialogue as the priest could bestow or deny the privilege as he saw fit.

Speaking out

Most people wanted to see greater opportunities for dialogue. Channels or forums for dialogue had to be created and maintained. These included meetings such as those organised for the Synodality events where open discussions had taken place. They brought people together and there was a sense of belonging. These could be organised on an annual or biannual basis. Meetings could also be on a 'town hall' style where the views of people could be discussed, heard, and acted on. Meetings could be local or regional – there are good reasons for both. Everyone should be able to express their views – young, old, priests, lay people, parishioners and lapsed.

Some people favoured meeting in a more informal setting e.g. a coffee house type setting. A minority thought the face-to-face contact with the local clergy was sufficient. There was general agreement that appropriate facilities were essential to the process.

The primary thing was to listen to each other – how else are we going to know what people think? To listen to the marginalised – how else are we to know why they're marginalised? To listen to those to whom we have been deaf in the past – the LGBT community, the traveller community, the physically or mentally challenged, women in general.

Co-Responsibility

There was a recognition that everyone is responsible for the companionship, togetherness, and friendship within the parish; we are all one church and people must take an active role within the church if things are going to work.

It was felt by many that although more volunteers were needed, people needed to be invited to participate – they will not put themselves forward. There was also the opinion that many people do not get involved in church activities because they either feel it is not their place or they are scared about being talked about by others in the parish.

Looking to the future people spoke of the need to consider and prepare for lay people leading services including funerals and for them to be more involved in programmes to prepare children and parents for sacraments. There was also mention of the need to explore a place for the Permanent Diaconate in the diocese.

There was a call for the development of Parish Pastoral Councils in the diocese.

Whatever the practical difficulties the main fear was with the reaction of the hierarchy. Some said there was no point in having meetings as the bishops would decide what was going to happen anyway and they would 'toe the official line' from Rome. There was a feeling the people couldn't trust the hierarchy because they would protect the institution rather than listening to the people. The lack of openness and poor communications generally were cited as relevant examples where the bishops had let people down as was their inability to implement what came out of the Second Vatican Council. The lack of transparency and the failure of many priests to delegate were also cited as significant obstacles.

Forming ourselves

There was also a call for more training in the parishes. This includes the clergy who, it was said, were trained to lead and not to facilitate groups. There had to be time and space for communication on all sides – this requires a certain expertise and consultation.

Some people felt there needed to be a more direct approach with designated people to identify potential volunteers or open invitations being made directly to people for new volunteers - people like to be invited. There had to be a welcome for all, but everyone had to realise they were also responsible for getting the message out to other people. We, the faithful, must focus on ourselves more than heretofore and this focus has to be intergenerational.

For the voice of the parish to be heard It was generally agreed the parishes need far more facilitation so that people can have confidence in voicing their opinions and that the process would be on-going.

Education at all levels was seen as significant for the diocese. Adult faith education and programmes in Evangelisation need to be increased – there was a hunger for this. The connection with schools was seen to be very important and this link should be defended. The priest making regular visits to the schools was considered to be very important. Faith formation programmes such as those offered during Lent should be extended. This call for increased educational activities was seen as a priority as time is running out and people will need to be better trained and educated in the faith to face the challenges of the church in the future.

Youth

There was a very strong call to address our approach to young people. For many this was the place to start – there must be an outreach programme to them. Their participation

should be actively sought but this can only be done by inviting them to play an active part within the community and by giving them more responsibility.

To many the church was old and staid – it was just for old people. It needed to become more energetic and above all more sincere: “the one thing the youth look for is sincerity”. It needed an outreach programme to attract the youth on the street.

The fact that many young people have been away from the church for almost two years due to Covid doesn't help. However, Covid is not the only reason, many young people have not been to church since they made their Confirmation. Many teenagers are lost, and they need leadership during their rebellious years when peer pressure is so strong.

Many suggestions related to the celebration of the Mass, such as more youth Masses; more music at Mass including Gospel choirs, more involvement in the choir, making the mass shorter and more interactive, more lay involvement, the use of more understandable language, more inclusivity. There was also a call for the church to be more energetic in what it does. Young people wanted a greater sense of joy and occasion like we have at Christmas and Easter. They wanted to see a return to 'night light' services.

The younger members of the community wanted to see the establishment of youth clubs and youth councils in the parish. Others felt that initiatives like youth retreats, Youth 2000 and Net Ministries would be a way to get the young voices heard. There was a need for Youth pilgrimages, bible classes, prayer services outside of the church and outside speakers brought into schools for religion classes.

Many felt the use of social media was the way forward, while several wanted the use of surveys and questionnaires to be extended. Some wanted a place where young people could meet the priest and get answers to any questions they wanted, while others wanted more community events to be organised.

The young people said their experience of sharing was limited to the 'meet and greet' with the priest after mass. The large majority said they had no opportunity to make a contribution. Others felt they had some opportunity but not as much as older people and others felt they had a far greater say when they were younger. Some of them said they didn't get involved because they felt it wasn't their place, others claimed it was because there "are too many rules".

Most felt they simply were out of the loop; they didn't know what the issues were or what decisions were being made. If the church was really interested in their views the priest and the people of the parish should engage with the youth at a different level and allow them to express their views, thoughts, and feelings. Some said their voices were heard through the confessional while others said the priests were very approachable. Several claimed they didn't go to church but felt their voices would be heard if they did. Other respondents felt the older people know the priest better and therefore they would have more say in what happens. They claimed their voices are not heard, that they are never given the opportunity to speak, that their religion was forced on them or that they were told to sit still and be quiet. Perhaps because of this many felt it was pointless to engage and have become indifferent to the process, "I don't voice my opinions", "I don't engage", "There is no point". Interestingly, a few said they were listened to more as a younger person in the Holy Communion or Confirmation classes; there at least they had the classroom as an opportunity to talk and ask questions. As they grew older these opportunities dried up leaving them with nothing.

Conclusion

In our process we heard a clear call for honesty and integrity in the listening process. We believe that the voices that we heard have been represented and this report will be given to the people.

A number of themes jump out. The most telling one is **'Welcome'**. Some people stated clearly that only those who are already on the inside are made to feel welcome in our communities. New comers or people who only come infrequently are likely to be left to their own devices. It is vitally important for the diocese and every parish to investigate this and respond appropriately. There is a challenge for the faith community from recognising the fact that in Ireland many people of faith find that there are more attractive opportunities for community engagement and service in the organisation of leisure activities than in the building up of the faith community. We expect our Christian faith communities to be centres of Joy and Celebration and there is a dawning realisation that this will only grow if everyone makes their contribution. Many people in our communities feel inadequate to step forward and there is an important insight about how to invite them appropriately and encourage them in the best way.

In our diocese there is clearly a call for **'formation'**. This would involve both faith development and training in the kind of facilitation skills that would help communities to become more dialogical, centres of listening and learning.

There is a recognition that the **Youth** are a particular case. They leave the practice of the faith in large numbers soon after they make their Confirmation. In many cases they have never been introduced to regular practice. This does not necessarily mean that they lose the faith or have no faith. However, the Church must seek ways to engage them actively and create a culture that will challenge them, listen to them and create authentic communities where they will feel welcome and supported.

We hear many different voices in this report. For some the person of **the priest** is central; there is an implicit acceptance that he needs to be deferred to, supported and collaborated with. Another voice, calling for a more dialogical approach in the future, asks for training in facilitation for both priests and people. In our church as it now is the priest bears huge responsibility; everything can end up falling upon his shoulders. He is able to make great things happen. He also has the capacity, because of his own tiredness or limitations, to inhibit the emergence of new initiatives. Two quite distinct conclusions could be drawn: On the one hand, priests need and deserve extra support and encouragement in the very demanding role they now fulfil, especially at a time when our priests are getting older and fewer. On the other hand the Church needs to look at renewing the structures that can facilitate a meaningful 'synodality' and sharing of responsibility for the life of the church.

Diocesan Plan: Forward Together, Ar Aghaidh le Chéile

This Listening Process came at a time when our diocese was just about to launch a Diocesan Pastoral Plan. Our Plan includes serious proposals to address issues of adult faith formation; welcome; Pastoral Councils; outreach to Youth. The intention of the Plan is to form people, beginning with Parish Pastoral Councils, in methods of discernment that would intentionally build a culture of synodality across the diocese.

We have heard the people respond with patience and generosity to the questions raised by Pope Francis and we have also heard their vivid fears that nothing might happen as a result. They state clearly that they have been canvassed for their opinions before and nothing happened! This time we have a Diocesan Plan. We believe it is pointing in the right direction and its implementation can be modified to take into account the specific issues raised in this listening process.