CLIFTON DIOCESE

Towards Synod 2024
A Synodal Church in Mission

The ongoing work of Clifton Diocese and its response to the Synthesis Report of October 2023

The Work of Synodality from April 2021 to March 2024

The response of the People of God within Clifton Diocese to the invitation from Pope Francis to participate in a synod on synodality has been a fruitful experience for some. It is also true to say that there is a significant number who believe that the Synod work finished following the initial discussions and meetings. Those who have engaged in the months covering the time between the first synthesis and the Synod of Bishops in October 2023, have mainly been members of the laity with some support from clergy.

As a diocese we have sought to develop our understanding of synodality through a variety of ways:

1. Formation for Parishes in the method of Conversations in the Spirit – 'Listening with the Heart' has focused on helping people to understand the process of listening deeply and responding from a place of non-judgement and compassion.
2. Application of this methodology within the context of other formation such as Pastoral Ministry Formation, Catechesis and specifically at our own Diocesan Day the method was used to explore how we work together in Pastoral Areas.
3. How we walk/journey together (synodality) is being developed as a project in accompaniment to enable and support parishes in their work of evangelisation.
4. We are actively encouraging Parish Pastoral Councils to employ the methodology of Conversations in the Spirit and will be seeking to accompany parishes in this work.
5. By encouraging groups to use Lectio as a starting point for meetings and thus encouraging space and silence for the Holy Spirit to be a guiding force is another way that as a Diocese, we have been applying our understanding of the Synodal process.
6. Our challenge is to see how we can be more proactive in encouraging people to reach out to those on the peripheries of the Church and specifically the marginalised.
7. Continuing to engage people in the Synodal Process by a series of webinars with guest speakers from across the country invited to share their wisdom on the working document for the Synod as it took place in Rome in October.
8. Providing formation for parishioners on the Four Consititutions so that they can see how synodality has emerged out of Vatican II.
9. Formation for a reflection on the Rome Synthesis has focused particularly on Dei Verbum and Lumen Gentium.

Responding to the Synthesis Report – A synodal Church in Mission

Preamble

Rather than returning to the same process that the Diocese engaged in at the start of the Synodal process which involved every parish community, it was requested that a small group, representative of people from across the diocese would be invited to participate in a time of reflection on the report and respond from their experience of Parish and School life.

A challenge has been the length of the Synthesis itself. Whilst the three-section approach: Convergences, Matters for Consideration and Proposals is welcomed, criticisms have been

expressed regarding the often, complicated language employed in the document and a more user-friendly break-down of each of the areas might have enabled more people to engage with it.

A criticism or concern of some who participated at the Synod in Rome was that conversations were not situated sufficiently in theology. The danger of this might mean that conversations in the Spirit, so crucial to the process, could remain superficial and 'cosmetic'.

Consequently and prior to meeting, the representative group were asked to participate in some formation on the theology out of which synodality is emerging and how it is rooted in Vatican II. It was important for this to happen so that members of the group could speak from a place of knowledge of Vatican II.

Central to the themes explored in this formation were:

CHURCH IS MISSION
One of the central teachings of Vatican II (found in many of its documents) is that the church is essentially missionary. That means that what we do, what we say, the structures that we set up (no matter how permanent they may seem) are in fact provisional—they can be changed, they need to be changed. To give one example: Archbishop Mark O'Toole said recently that our methods of catechesis in parishes (for Holy Communion, for Confirmation) are outmoded and outdated. We are not reaching the people we should reach. So, part of our work will be—not to start changing structures—but to listen so that we have a deeper understanding of one another, and a deeper appreciation of the challenges we face.

DIGNITY OF EVERY HUMAN PERSON
In the face of the Pro-choice lobby, the Catholic Church unhesitatingly proclaims the sanctity of human life "from the womb to the tomb". This is based on the fact that all human beings are created by God and have a right to life. Life is a gift, which no human has the right to take away from them (not even they themselves). This thought, of the dignity of the person (again, found in many Vatican II documents) must be the basis of all our listening and our pastoral outreach.

LISTENING IN THE SPIRIT
Flowing out from the previous point about dignity, we need to listen more deeply to everyone—and perhaps especially to those who are NOT listened to, or to those whom we do not think are "worthy" of being listened to. This realisation will lead us, at times, to some very challenging and perhaps uncomfortable encounters, which nonetheless must take place. Every person has the Spirit. God's truth is in them, though they, and we, may not be aware of it.

TRUTH OF CHRIST'S TEACHINGS
As Catholics we are not simply free agents discovering the Gospel for ourselves and deciding what it means. We have the Scriptures. We have the two-thousand-year-old Tradition of the church, as taught by the Magisterium (essentially, by the bishops).

The problem is that we mostly feel "at a distance" from the Tradition: it is too complicated for us; it is not accessible (we feel); and it clearly is not being communicated to the people around us. And yet, it contains a message of hope—in fact in contains the only real hope there is in this world of suffering: new and eternal life with God; forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. How can we access this treasure? How can we make it available for the world, or rather, bring the world into dialogue with it?

NOT A DECISION-MAKING BODY BUT A SCHOOL OF LISTENING

Our purpose is not to make decisions (which often turn out to have been made too hastily, without sufficient consideration). Our purpose is to learn to listen to the voice of the Spirit in each one of us, and, by the power of that same Spirit, to come to a realisation of truth. This is far simpler—and far more demanding—than we could ever imagine.[1]

THE PROCESS OF RESPONDING

Communion Participation Mission

As a diocese we have tried to be faithful to the central themes of the Synod – Communion Participation and Mission. Our understanding of this is that Communion has its roots in the love and unity of the Trinity and is expressed in God's covenant with his people. Participation is a call for all the People of God to engage in listening deeply and respectfully to one another, recognising that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist, guiding us as we journey together as a people of mission, willing and able to evangelise.

'*The mission of the Church requires that the People of God, to be on a journey together, with each member playing his or her crucial role, united with each other. A synodal Church walks forward in communion to pursue a common mission through the participation of every one of her members.*'[2]

The Importance of the Spirit

When speaking of Synodality, Pope Francis reminds us, "if the Spirit is not present, there will be no synod." He emphasised the participation of all because participation is a requirement of the faith received in baptism. Each one of us is made for mission – it gives our lives meaning.

Recognising this and with the time constraints of responding, representatives from the Diocese reflected on three specific areas of the Synod Report: Gathered and Sent by the Trinity, the Church is Mission and People in Poverty.

Section 2 Gathered and Sent by the Trinity

Across the board, there was a universal acknowledgement that many people in our parishes are not interested in engaging with the idea of a synodal Church. For some simply getting to Mass is a challenge but for most there is a disinterest on the part of clergy and parishioners. If we are to become an outward looking Church; if we are to be mission, the barriers to participation will need to be dismantled. Such barriers include a fear of replicating an Anglican form of Synod, a belief that it will change or distort doctrine, or a fear that there will be no change, These are but a few of those barriers. Communal discernment cannot succeed if the majority are not engaging or are unwilling to listen. We must hold onto the belief that God is calling us to this, and it is not simply an ego driven idea of the institutional Church or one individual.

---

[1] We are grateful to Fr. Mark Hargreves OSB Prinknash Abbey who guided us in this formation.

[2] For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality, 07.09.2021

The movement from 'I to We' placing us at the service of the world, is unanimously welcomed with a genuine readiness to commit to this movement. However, there is a concern that this concept is not widely understood and there is a lack of appreciation and/or knowledge of the dynamism of communion and mission. Questions arise around how we understand the relationship between Scripture, Tradition and Church defined in the light of synodality. There is a recognition of the need and a desire for further formation.

To move from a place of 'I' to 'We' will require a significant effort on the part of all the baptised so that it becomes the default position. Change is hard, there will be winners and losers which must be acknowledged. There is a need to recognise and discern the gifts of those in the community and of all the baptised. Whilst the role of grace is not easily understood, it is only by being open to grace that we will be able to discern and hear the voice of the Holy Spirit who speaks through us.

Conversations in the Spirit, having experienced the power of them in a variety of settings, are recognised as a positive way to listen and to hear all the voices, especially those who may often fall silent. The desire for us to learn to listen and to grow in our capacity to listen is recognised as intrinsic to being a synodal Church. There is a need to develop Conversations in the Spirit with all parish groups so that we may awaken, encourage and motivate new pathways to our mission. At the same time, it is recognised that while Conversations in the Spirit, rooted in a depth of Spirituality have the capacity to be deeply meaningful, they may not be the only way and there were some who felt that different schools of prayer, such as within for example the Benedictine, Franciscan and Dominican traditions that have their own strengths, could be drawn upon.

The opportunity given to us to understand and appreciate Synodality as walking together in unity, conscious of our diversity, is seen as both exhilarating and challenging. The Church is being invited to address this. It will require us to come to a meaningful understanding of co-responsibility between clergy and laity. It is suggested that a new 'theology of priesthood' could be developed to facilitate and enable the ordained to be better equipped to embrace a model of working together rooted in the baptism of all people.

Recommendations for Clifton Diocese

- Relevant and concrete formation in the theology of Baptism so that all the baptised can embrace their own particular gift/s.
- Ongoing formation in Conversations in the Spirit and developing listening skills.
- Focused groups with clergy to engage them in the Synodal Journey.

Section 8 Church is Mission

Gathered and sent by the Trinity leads easily into a conversation which focuses on Church is mission.

It is agreed that the Sacraments of Initiation "confer on all the disciples of Jesus the responsibility for the mission of the Church" and that all have received different charisms. However, if they are to bear fruit, the primary aim of formation must be to focus on building a relationship with the Lord. Sacramental preparation, particularly with adults, is often experienced as less of a journey of growing in faith and more as the need to overcome obstacles and meet a certain criterion

before being deemed to be ready and acceptable. This has led to experiences of exclusion and alienation, particularly so when someone comes with a desire to become a member of the Church, but their relationship status is perceived to be unacceptable. Sacraments must be a form of grace that leads us into a deeper relationship with Christ, not a reward for goodness or a method of exclusion.

We need the Church to be a place where doubts in faith and self can be explored in confidence and safety. Whilst it is acknowledged that we need to reach out to those who are marginalised we must also be the first to ask why do they feel marginalised? What barriers have we put in place that we need to dismantle in recognition of the inherent dignity in every human person and the sanctity of all human life?

The centrality of the family in every community is recognised. However, concerns about language focusing on the family emerged. The over-riding concern focused on the question – 'What is the starting point of family?'. Whilst the synthesis does not specifically define family, there is a belief that the Church holds a particular blueprint for what this is: Mother, Father, and children. This is not the experience for many. Family, it is believed, is a community of mutual love with a desire for mutual growth. There is a need for the joys, sorrows, and challenges within family life, whatever form it takes, to be recognised and understood. Some also feel that a broader vision is needed when defining what a family is. If we are to walk with others, we must meet them as they are and in whatever situation they find themselves, recognising the dignity of each person and responding with a listening ear of compassion that enables them to move forward, into a deeper relationship with the Lord.

The joy of Christian family life is the most basic and human demonstration of unconditional love, inclusion, and forgiveness. If the Church is mission, then it must replicate this and support communities to do this. A point that warrants mention is the need for the Church to recognise that many people in a growing number of cultural contexts live outside of the vision of a Catholic family; single people who do not have a family and older people who no longer have a family.

The concept of 'Church is Mission' is not widely understood. Consequently, the importance of discerning the charisms and gifts of each member of the Church, can be missed, or not thought about. The Synthesis speaks positively about the role that lay people play in the way that they witness to the world and within their own Christian communities. Whilst there is an increasing number of ways in which lay people can participate in the life of the Church, and it is happening in a variety of settings, there remains the concern that in many parishes this tends to be dependent on the willingness of the clergy to 'allow' such gifts and talents to be used. As noted in the Synthesis the possibility of some laity becoming clericalized or being seen to be elite is not wanted but could happen if attention is not given to Pastoral structures and ways of working. The development of creative pastoral structures is seen as key to recognising, calling forth and animating the charisms of the People of God.

Young people's formation is seen as important to how families develop. Young people and people with disabilities need greater recognition and support so that they can grow in their faith and genuinely experience a welcome in the Church that allows them to know that they belong and why they belong. Schools have much to offer in helping our parishes to understand and appreciate children and young people. There are plenty of examples of school communities striving to walk together not only in school but beyond by engaging in such things as Intergenerational projects which bring the young and old together in practical and meaningful ways.

Recommendations for Clifton Diocese

- Specific formation in an understanding of **Church is Mission** and how we discern gifts and talents in our community.
- A commitment to honouring and supporting family life in all its forms with concrete activities and formation.

Section Four People in Poverty, Protagonists of the Church's Journey

Recognising the dignity of every human being is at the core of recognising and responding to the needs of those in poverty.

The participants for this reflection welcomed the Synthesis report and the breadth of feedback that it presented. There was little divergence from the comments made. In particular, the commitment to moving away from the concept of 'them and us' is welcomed. If we are to journey together it means journeying with all people including the poor and the displaced. There is a call to see all with the eyes of Christ. Many of the participants have had experience of walking alongside the broken and the vulnerable, those lost or abandoned. However, groups open to seeing the poor and engaging with them often appear to be on the periphery of parish life. Many people do not see that each one of us has a responsibility to the poor – be they financially poor, displaced or seeking refuge. Occasionally there are parishes where meeting the needs of the poor lies at the heart of the community, but this is not the norm. There is often not a recognition that someone may be physically poor but spiritually very rich. Again seeing the person not the situation is recognised as necessary. This requires us to consider the language we use, the attitudes we have, the contradictory behaviour we can engage in and the humility we need.

Spiritual and Mental Poverty must be addressed if we are to truly embrace the concept of what it means to be 'We', individuals who do not live in isolation but have an obligation in love to support those in crisis.

Within this section, a dominant theme was a recognition that while people may know of Catholic Social Teaching, (CST) they struggle to articulate what it is and consequently could not say how they live it. Catholic Social Teaching is a gift for the world, but it can only be so if Catholics preach it (it is rooted in the gospel) and witness to it.

Our schools are only just beginning to teach CST but many of the actions and desires of children are driven by a capacity to see the need and want to respond with love and compassion. Again there are many examples of how the school community embraces mission, following the example of Jesus and engaging in very practical activities to respond to local and international projects.

Structures within the education system, however, can make it difficult for schools to embrace an 'option for the poor' and on-going formation is necessary if they are to respond with integrity for the greater good of all.

CST cannot be an added extra in our parishes. It needs to be brought into the heart of our Parishes, preached with integrity and acted upon with humanity. There are many aspects of poverty identified within the synthesis which speak to the greater needs of the world in which we live and how our own witness as Church can reinforce division and conflict.

It was widely agreed and welcomed that a new direction needs to be taken in the formation for the diaconate. Recognising that at the heart of the diaconate is the call to service, a move away from an emphasis on the liturgical role to one that supports and guides others to engage in service to the poor and those in need.

An area of Poverty that needs greater recognition is our relationship with the planet. There is a crisis in our world to which our Catholic communities are struggling to know how to respond in a meaningful way. We recognise we can learn from our ecumenical friends in this regard, specifically the Methodist Church and their work to develop a District Eco policy which permeates down to the local churches. They are working with AROCHA, a specific project that focuses on care for creation. When Churches gain recognition for being environmentally active, they also offer a counter-cultural witness – a prophetic sign for our times.

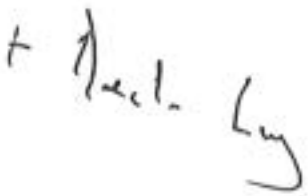
Recommendations for Clifton Diocese

- A formation programme to generate an understanding and passion for CST needs to be developed and implemented across the diocese, in particular 'The Joy of the Gospel', Laudato Si and Fratelli Tutti. Care for our common home is Mission and we need to be able to respond the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.
- Parish coordinators of any ministry to the poor need to be identified and supported to bring their work to the attention of the whole parish so that more may engage and find joy in their encounter with the poor and isolated.
- On-going formation for clergy in homiletics to ensure that their preaching reflects the gospel and in particular our need to respond to the cry of the poor.
- Formation and concrete support and encouragement for Parishes to engage in becoming environmentally active.

Conclusion

The Synthesis from Rome is welcomed and applauded for the hard work that clearly took place during the month of October. People have struggled with the density of the report and would welcome a more accessible document following Rome 2024.

Finally, and importantly, the whole Church must take seriously the need for silence and prayer (such as Lectio) as a given whenever we gather to reflect and discern where the Lord is calling us. A space for the Holy Spirit to be sought, experienced, and acted upon, must be a priority and not an added extra 'if there is time'.



A FUTURE FULL OF HOPE