

Killaloe Diocese

Submission to the National Synodal Coordinating Group March 2024

Introduction

The International Synodal Committee having received the first round of feedback from National Synodal Coordinating Groups from all around the world, have asked that each National Synodal Group would facilitate their local churches to engage the following two questions.

- 1. Give a brief testimony of the work carried out and the experiences life during the synodal process so far, sharing any good practice.**
- 2. How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways?**

In an effort to gather as much feedback as possible in the time allotted, the Diocese of Killaloe held 15 gatherings across the diocese. These gatherings were comprised of Priests, Ministers of Pastoral Care and Catechesis, members of Parish Pastoral Councils and members of Pastoral Area Councils. What follows is the summary report which was compiled on foot of these conversations, and which was submitted by the Diocese of Killaloe to the Irish National Synodal Coordinating Committee.

Question 1: Give a brief testimony of the work carried out and the experiences life during the synodal process so far, sharing any good practice.

An overview of our listening process

The process as engaged by the Diocese of Killaloe was one of invitation. It included Clergy, Ministers of Pastoral Care and Catechesis, Chairs of Parish Pastoral Councils, and members of Pastoral Area Councils. There were 15 meetings held across the diocese over a five-week period which engaged circa 200 people. These meetings were facilitated by the Bishop and the Director for Mission and Ministry. Each meeting was scheduled to last one and a half hours and followed an agreed structure resulting in a consistency of source material.

Prior to the National Synodal Group asking that this process be undertaken our diocese had already committed to undertake a listening process across the diocese. It was advantageous that we were able to dovetail our planned listening process with this project. The process enabled the diocese to provide a space in which people could speak in a manner whereby they experienced being heard by both their peers and by the diocese. In the feedback we received it was evident that people felt that the questions posed by the diocese were clearly articulated and that people understood what they were being asked. This clarity seems to have enabled people to name their reality. There was a real sense that people valued being given this opportunity and that they enjoyed engaging with others who had a vested interest in the mission of their Pastoral Area and the diocese.

The challenge of a restricted timeframe.

There is no doubting that the timeframe in which we were to have this listening completed was a real challenge. To engage such a widespread listening process, for such a critical aspect of church life, in so tight a window of opportunity was a challenge. Despite our relatively large sample, we were left with questions as to how representative the gatherings were and who were the voices that were missing from our conversations?

A Synodal outlook that is changing how we engage as Church.

There is a sense that synodal methodology is incrementally changing the way we work as a diocese. Engaging people of the diocese in generative conversations is more and more the norm. A major development that has borne fruit is that prayer is now included as a core element on the agenda of meetings. This creates a space in which people can be enabled to truly arrive to the meeting. It also enables the participants to be sensitive to inviting the Holy Spirit into the conversation and discussions making process. Having periods of silence during these prayer times attunes the participants to listening for the Holy Spirit before they are called to listen to each other.

It has been noted how certain aspects of diocesan life has been augmented by the synodal process. A clear example of this is how catechetical programmes are now delivered in the diocese. No longer are these programmes merely didactic. Now we attempt to engage people in a conversation and process that enables them to articulate their belief. From there they are invited to discern where they are being

called to deepen their faith in a manner whereby their relationship with God is enriched by encounter.

Synodality gifting us a springboard for renew conversations.

The synodal process has sensitised us to notice who maybe missing from our conversations. This has caused the diocese to adopt a concerted effort toward the involvement of women in key committees and key roles in the diocese. We have also seen the diocese refocus its efforts to reconstitute our Youth Councils in a manner whereby youth ministry will be synodal in its approach. Regarding those perceived to be on the margins of Church life we have collaborated with our neighbouring diocese to explore ministry opportunities to the LGBTI community. The theme of outreach can also be seen in efforts at local level to reach out to ethnic groups, to those from the Ukraine and to migrants.

Learning from the synodal experience in Rome.

A pivotal moment in our developing a synod methodology was an invitation we extended to the Bishop of Limerick to share his experience of Synodality during the Synod in Rome. This seems to have awakened us to the spiritual dimension of Synodality. It gifted us a growing awareness to the role of the Spirit in the life of the Church. It also enables us to create safe listening spaces in which difference is engaged not eliminated. We were re-awoken to the idea of discerning not deciding where God is calling us a diocese.

Necessity as the mother of all innovation.

There is no doubting that necessity seem to be enabling the synodal process in our diocese. While we have noticed movement and development, not all communities are progressing at a similar pace or even in the same direction. Both the lack of a perceived need or the personalities involved can both impede engagement. While challenging, this gifts an opportunity for us to give expression to the patience and tolerance which Synodality enables us to exercise. It is hoped that by planning in a synodal way we will give synodal life to our communities of faith. There is keen awareness that training and ongoing formation is going to be key if the engagement of both lay people and clergy in this new way of being church is to be realised and sustained in the day-to-day life of our Church.

Synodality enabling us to listen to the story of others in an inclusive and non-judgemental way.

Since we began to listen in a synodal manner we have begun to notice areas of church life from which silence is the predominant sound. We have experienced how this silence has drawn us into carefully and respectful listening with members of the LGBTI community. It has also drawn us to hear again the story of those from Ukraine and people seeking International Protection. It has resulted in us being humble enough to realise that we are not the experts and that we can learn from those outside our circles of influence about such matters as the environment and ecology. Synodality has called us to engage with the blurred boundaries of life and ministry and in doing so experiencing the presence of an empowering God who is there before us to remind us that we are all equal and co-responsible. That as a community we can live distinct but united lives mirroring the life of the Trinity the empowers us.

Question 2: How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways?

Allowing the Word of God to inform and shape our conversations.

Situating our conversations in a spirit of prayer where the Word of God both sets the tone and supported the agenda has had a tangible effect on our gatherings. Reading our reality through the lens of scripture served to unite the discussion in the Spirit of God and in the spirit of our rich tradition as a community of faith. Having begun by listening to the Word of God, people were already primed to listen patiently to one another and to the voice of the Spirit as articulated in the People of God attending the meetings. The scripture text orientated us towards an incarnational image of God and as such kept us rooted in the day-to-day reality of our diocese. It is in this reality that we strove to notice where God was already present in our midst and where we needed to create space for us to become more sensitive to this presence. This allowed us to let go of preconceived ideas and concepts and so find God's grace in the most unexpected places and people. In all 15 gatherings it was very evident that by employing the *conversations in the spirit* methodology conversations gave expression to the love of God, love of neighbour and love of the Church as the People of God.

People's engagement as a signpost to the possibility of a co-responsible Church.

The first glimmer of us imagining a Church where all were co-responsible was witnessed in people's willingness and eagerness to engage in the process. There was an energy to the meetings that inspired hope that something new could be imagined and brought forth. While it was quite evident that we live in a Church that is hierarchical in nature, there was signs that hierarchical structures were being modified by a growing acceptance of a more co-responsible outlook amid the People of God.

Our discussions revealed that across the diocese there was evidence of people engaging in different roles, tasks, and ministries in which they were being empowered to take ownership in a more collaborative and involved way. This included projects like Pastoral Area Councils, parishes collaborating together, Pastoral Area Novenas, Youth Ministry Concert, Pastoral Area Choirs, Establishment of Pastoral Area Youth Groups, Pastoral Area Mission, Pastoral Area Penitential Services, Pastoral area Nights of Nourishment for Lay ministry groups, Diocesan Adult Catechesis Group, Funeral Ministry, clergy, and laypeople jointly involve in the mission.

Changing structures enables a change in outlook and gifts new vision.

As a diocese we have adopted Pastoral Areas as our primary organisational structure. This seems to have given space for a new and inventive expression of co-responsibility. There was evidence of parish communities developing a growing sense of their part in being responsible for the welfare of the Pastoral Area as a whole. To see parishes 'extending their tent' to include neighbouring faith communities under the mantle of their concern was a most promising development. It became apparent that the very act of gifting responsibility and empowering believers, in and of itself opens minds and hearts to a very different way of being church.

It became evident during our discussions that this dynamic is supported by developments in our appointment structures. Priests and Ministers of Pastoral Care and Catechesis are for the most part being appointed to Pastoral Areas. Even priests being appointed as Co-PPs opens the imagination to what co-responsibility might

mean in the context of a shared ministry. The appointment of a Vicar Forane (first among equals), again gives tangible expression to what we envision synodal leadership might be. Central to all of this is the fact that the bishop models, facilitates and animates this new way of servant leadership. Even if the fundamental structures of the Church cannot change, these very same structures being held together not by power but by service and love might result in very different outcomes.

Viewing our challenges through the lens of faith.

While there was recognition and acknowledgment of the challenges, there was a sense that these were now being viewed and engaged in a faith context. The Paschal Mystery of life, death, resurrection, and ascension gifted hope. What we perceived as something dying might in fact be the gateway to something new being born.

Humbler Church becoming a more collaborative and inclusive Church.

It was striking how a humbler Church spoke of reading the sign of the times to see where in the milieu of our time we might find evidence of where the Spirit had gone ahead of us. How we might collaborate and dovetail with things already happening within our communities but outside the tent of the church was explored. A similar change in outlook was evident regarding ministry in the Church. Here the conversation centred around the needs of our faith communities and the gifts and charism evident to answer these needs. Blind obedience was being replaced by people walking hand in hand helping each other to rediscover 'The Way'. Discernment was seen to replace dictates. Decisions were discerned from within in the faith community and as such generated greater buy-in and a greater sense of ownership. This was most strikingly evident in the six-month discernment process which formed the initial phase in our training for Minister of Pastoral Care and Catechesis. A process in which the prospective candidates and the diocese mutually discerned individual charisms, what the faith community needs were and how the individual's sense of vocation might be honoured.

Synodality reorientating us to acknowledge and engage that which challenges us as Church.

People struggled with the new language and concepts associated with the synodal pathway. This was in part due to linguistics. It was also impacted by the fact that we are attempting to unfold a way of being church that was unfamiliar to their lived

faith experience. Moving people from passive engagement to one where they were now seen as key and responsible agents was a new reality for people. At times this caused them to feel daunted and if we are honest disorientated.

Other challenges included the recruiting and retention of volunteers. Synodality was perceived to have raised the bar as it moved the conversation away from enlisting volunteers to forming disciple. Forming disciples was a skill set most Pastoral Areas felt they did not possess. Synodality was seen to recalibrate the metrics for what constituted a wholesome community of faith. Now a wholesome Christian community was not one that maintained itself but one that was on mission.

Here again people lacked the confidence needed to leave the ninety-nine to go in search of the one. Within the current Irish Church context parish communities are of an older demographic and as such don't have the energy needed to enable such change. Coupled with this the vestiges of how the Church used power have been questioned and found wanting. There is also our sad history of sexual abuse. Collectively this impacts the community's ability and its confidence to reach out beyond itself. These realities also shape fears around what possible reception one might receive in extending an invitation.

Honouring the call of women take their rightful place as co-responsible disciples.

Within the synodal process women do seem to have found their voice within our diocese. This has been consolidated by the diocese where appropriate, adopting a positive bias in the appointment or recruitment of women to different roles in the diocese. In the appointment of Ministers of Pastoral Care and Catechesis there was a three to one ratio in favour of women in the cohort who completed this programme of formation. Because of decisions made at the Council of Priests, Ministers of Pastoral Care and Catechesis are now represented on the Diocesan Pastoral Council and they are members of the Synodal Implementation Committee. At Pastoral Area level, they meet with the priests of the Pastoral Area once a month and they are invited to relevant clergy in-services. This has the dual effect of including women in the structures of the diocese but also giving them their rightful place at the table where decisions are both discerned and made. In gifting women a voice, they have become heard. In having their voice heard the diocese now strives to acknowledge

and embrace the charisms and gifts they bring which in turn helps to shape differently the operative power and structure dynamics of the diocese.

Not just a change in direction but a change in how travel the new pathway Synodality lays out before us.

Walking the synodal pathway has not just change the direction in which the diocese is now attempting go, it is also changing how we travel this envisaged pathway. For example, the bishop's latest Pastoral Letters was compiled and written in a collaborative and consultative way. The diocesan vision was filtered again and again through the lens of the People of God. All to arrive at the *sensus fidei fidelium*. With justification pragmatic decisions could have been made, but through discerned consultation a decision was made to incrementally bring the people of the diocese on a journey of continued and renewed discernment to discover where God was calling us as a diocese at this time.

This is also evident in how the diocese engages in making decision. The Priest Council and the Diocesan Pastoral Council are now integral parts in the consultative mechanisms of the diocese. To improve communication and collaboration both groups share the minutes of their meetings. Where Pastoral Area Councils are established, they are assuming the role of custodians of the vision and as points of support for Parish Pastoral Councils. The makeup of this new group is itself evidence of a synodal way of working where Vicar Forane, Clergy, Lay Ministers, members of the Parish Pastoral Councils and selected lay individuals come together to discuss and discern matters of mutual interest. As with any new shoots there is a sense that they need to be protected from the harsh winds of cynicism, opposition, and indifference. We are conscious that Synodality is bringing us on a journey which challenges existing and established cultures and structures and as such it will take takes time and patience for us to effect real and lasting change, not least in our efforts to begin that move from maintenance to mission.

The Synodal process creating spaces for welcome and inclusion.

A central theme to the synodal process is that of "enlarging our tent" by adopting a missionary focus. Many of our conversations expressed the pain of seeing empty pews devoid of young people. In the past when addressing this issue, we might have responded by launching new programmes and giving the young people what we believe they needed. When reviewing the current response within the diocese an

interesting development was noticed. In two separate and unconnected youth projects the approach was to gather the young people and explore with them where they believed they were being called to Christian action. Instead of supplying an answer to a question they may never have had, the diocese now engaged with them in their questions, and together they formulated a response. A similar methodology is operative in how many groups are engaging with the St John Paul II awards.

With regard to reaching those on the margins of Church and society there is a sense that we struggle in this regard as a diocese. While there is evidence of a myriad of outreaches there is no clear sense of us embracing this aspect of Church life. In our discussions the question was asked: “What would happen if we were to adopt a value centred approach to our engagement with those on the margins?” Within this framework we were reminded that Catholic Social Teaching might be the greatest treasure we have never truly unlocked. That said, there is evidence of ministry to prisoners, the elderly, and our collaboration with our neighbouring diocese in an outreach to the LGBTI Community.

Synodality as a call to enable all the baptised to take their rightful place as co-responsible members of the ‘People of God’.

Synodality has called the diocese to explore how through moments of outreach and engagement we might ‘extend our tent’. It was acknowledged that we need to explore how by our welcome, our listening and our inclusion do we empower people to live out their baptismal call in a co-responsible and lifegiving manner.