



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

**Synodality Review: Parish, Diocese,
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.**

Parish of Our Lady St Mary of Glastonbury

11th October 2022

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Background

On being elected, in 2013 Pope Francis said, “Now let us begin this journey ... brotherhood love and trust among us.” The word Synod derives from the Greek *Synodus* and indicates the path that members of the People of God walk together. Synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal.

October 2021 – October 2023 is the time frame for the Synodal process with the theme: “For a Synodal church, Communion, Participation, Mission.” Our Parish Listening Sessions Report was submitted to the Diocese in October 2021 and 80% of the parishes in the Diocese took part in the process together with 65% of the Catholic schools and two prisons. The Diocesan Report, “Listening with the Heart” was submitted to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in April 2022 and in June 2022 the National Synthesis Document (here referred to as the National Report), was forwarded to the Vatican.

This paper aims to summarise the correlation between the three Reports, renewing our interest and enthusiasm in this “synodal experience” (Prayer for the Synod). The headings used are adopted from the National Report.

The Pandemic

In all the Reports the impact of Covid restrictions is documented as influential in parish life. These highlighted the need for improved methods of communication, and the centrality of the Eucharist to the lives of parishioners and parishes. Those parishes that “responded creatively to the situation were able to maintain their community using technology”. A common feeling of frustration at the decision to close church buildings was echoed. The “opportunities to listen” were lost with Covid restrictions on gatherings such as teas and coffees after Mass, Healing Teams, and other events and “mutual dependence and shared responsibility expressed in charity and gratitude” was remarked in all reports “and must not be squandered” (National Report).

The Experience of the Synod

The opportunity “to listen to each other and be listened to” was universally a very positive force, and in the National Report the experience of the Synod was described as a “revelation” “speaking freely and being heard”. The Diocese offered guidance on how to facilitate the listening sessions. The language of the questions posed was queried in the National Report and some parishioners in St. Mary's were baffled by the wording of the questions. The parish listening sessions exposed the negative impressions gained by newcomers to the parish and resonate with the comment in the National Report about the opportunity presented to us “to become a Church of bridge builders rather than castle defenders”. The Holy Spirit working among us was consistently acknowledged.

A Wounded Church called to Conversion

The National Report records “the harshest criticisms are reserved for priests who are controlling and insensitive” and “act as if they alone are responsible for the mission and life of the Church”, resonating with comments made in our Parish Report relating to the inability to respond to the Core Question 2 “Speaking out”. The “clericalism” of Fr. Dominic’s immediate predecessors at St. Mary’s is perceived as having inhibited “Speaking Out” and the Parish Report stated, “the pervading atmosphere provided little space for the voice of the people”. “The top-down mentality which stifles initiative and growth” was recorded in the Diocesan Report. Equally the affection and respect evidently felt for parish priests who demonstrably care deeply for those they serve “and who have a very heavy workload” was referenced and not least with respect to past parish priests at St Mary’s. The “top down” approach was linked to “clericalism”, engendering an ethos which in extreme cases perhaps permits actions recorded in the abuse scandals. “The Church as an Institution seems to be geared up for telling rather than listening” (The National Report).

Truth, Mercy and Welcome

The need for change is acknowledged in all the Reports. The subject of celibacy and married priests is mentioned, with The Diocesan Report recording the unwillingness of the hierarchy to look at other options such as voluntary celibacy, and married priests and the National Report giving voice to the apparent contradiction of priestly celibacy and former Anglican priests. Our Parish Listening sessions recorded sadness that divorced people are not allowed to partake in the sacrament of the Eucharist. “The need to re-examine sacramental disciplines, above all those that restrict access to matrimony, holy orders and the Eucharist” (The National Report), re-iterates the concern. A need for greater inclusiveness of marginalised groups was acknowledged throughout, and from our parish the comments “that in the past we have not been permitted to support charities allowing members of the LGBT community to adopt orphaned children, and that an Anglican female Bishop was not allowed to preach during a week celebrating Christian Unity” confirm this. “Shining through the Reports is a strong desire for a Church that better performs God’s mercy in Jesus Christ, who did not make moral conversion a prerequisite of His embrace” (The National Report). There is also a universal recognition that more needs to be done to encourage young people to attend Mass and to become more involved in parish life. Their concern for the environment and for all of creation, was identified as a potential tool for involvement as this is an integral part of their education at Key Stage 2. In the Parish Report mention was made of a possible flexibility in Mass times to make attendance easier for working mothers. Compassion was also recorded for the Traditionalists who feel a sense of grievance and within the Listening Sessions at St Mary’s this subject was voiced and received sympathetically.

Conclusion

From the National Report:

“The experience of the Synod, while stumbling and uneven, has begun something momentous in the People of God of England and Wales.”

“It (the Synodality process) asks us to hear and respond without waiting for this or that change ... confident that in awakening to our co-responsibility, the reforms will follow, indeed will become the reform itself.”

“This is the new consciousness that the Spirit has awoken in the People of God ... this is the light that has been lit here, with joy we pass it on to the universal Church and set it above our own path.”

From Pope Francis:

“It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include active participation of all the members of God’s People” Letter to the People of God, 20 August 2018

“God makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and start anew.” (The Joy of the Gospel)

From a parishioner at St Mary’s:

“With the Synodal process we have been given the opportunity to listen to each other and to be listened to.”

References:

St Mary’s Parish Listening Sessions Synod Summary Report, copies available at the back of the church.

Listening with the Heart – Clifton Diocese Synodal Response. Department of Education and Evangelisation, Clifton Diocese. cliftondiocese.com.

Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. National Synthesis Document, 22nd June 2022, Feast of St John Fisher and St Thomas More.

