

# **ARCHDIOCESE OF TUAM**

## **The Synthesis of Contributions to the Synodal Pathway Consultation**

**May 2022**

### **Introduction**

We live in a very secular society now and one that is in a state of constant flux. It almost seems that we have three different generations living in three different worlds, most especially, after the negative impact that Covid-19 has had on our communities. We feel the winds of time and change and “you can’t fence the wind!”

*“A Mé Féin society, is often disinterested in Church matters”.*

For each group, life and the world is understood differently. For many, life is a constant challenge – financial, parenting, work, education, schedules, deadlines, etc. Indeed, many are tired and stressed in our post-Covid world.

It is appropriate that, in this busy world, we have been asked to reflect on our being Church and our relationship with Church, both at a personal level and from the viewpoint of the Church universal vis-a-vis parish community and baptised individuals, and, indeed, the parish community and the baptised individual vis-à-vis the Church. We are heartened that so many people across our Archdiocese took the time to get involved in this Synodal Pathway exercise and to reflect on, and reply to, the issues raised in the briefing documents. The responses are as encouraging as they are varied. Comments and replies were received from individuals, members of the clergy, religious communities and parish groups. They reflect the opinions, attitudes and hopes of a cross-section of the People of God in this particular Church, while at the same time, the voice and opinions of younger generations are not so clearly identifiable in the responses.

This is probably the first time that the faithful have been asked for their views and concerns on all aspects of Church life, and it is obvious in reviewing the responses that they have replied in a sincere way that is nothing less than an expression of love for the Church and for others in their communities. They are delighted to be asked in the first instance, and are also hopeful that they will be heard. Many see this as an open invitation to collaborate in the future of our Church, where building from the “bottom up” will provide a more solid structure for the future. One common thread running through all the comments is the fact that they feel privileged to

belong to the Church and, despite the negative comments in the media, there is a spiritual hunger, indeed a starvation, among the faithful.

The engagement of the people of God in this Synodal Pathway process is welcome and encouraging. The honesty of the replies is quite refreshing, as is the constructive tone throughout. People are sincerely trying to be helpful and they want to belong to a more vibrant Church – our Church. This constructive approach throughout makes it so much easier to receive each opinion with the respect it deserves and to hear it more clearly.

Preaching the Gospel of Christ is a difficult hill-climb in a very secular society and we are delighted that so many have made a sincere attempt to give their honest opinions as to how the Church in Tuam might address this enduring responsibility in the twenty-first century.

Most respondents highlighted the many positives in the life of the Church and also identified, what, in their opinions, are the areas of concern. These replies give hope for the future, and the gaps identified will provide plenty of room for discussion, debate, listening and progress. In articulating what is discouraging, respondents' replies seem to really come from the heart. These include such issues as the absence of young people in the pews, the perceived a-la-carte nature of the acceptance or otherwise of what the Church teaches, and a call for more inspiring and substantial homilies. Respondents express a sense that the Church leadership is silent on many moral issues, e.g. abortion, and there is a sense that decisions are taken at the top and communicated downwards. Cultural Catholicism and its ramifications in terms of regular practice and sacramental preparation is identified as a challenge, as is, of course, the “exodus” from the Church after Confirmation.

It is indicative of the work of the Holy Spirit that a suite of themes can now be identified, and individual responses can, consequently, be grouped together, as follows.

### **Church Structures:**

The hierarchical structure of the church was listed in many of the responses. While there is a glowing admiration for Pope Francis and his style of leadership, wherein he is seen as non-judgemental and willing to listen, there is also a concern that the voices of the faithful are not being heard. Some of the comments and recommendations are:

- Pope Francis is such an inspirational figure, his positive style of leadership will be instrumental in bringing a new sense of hope through participation, communion, discernment and a new approach to mission/ministry.
- The leadership style of the entire church is perceived as reactive rather than creative and innovative.
- The Church is too building centred.
- A sense of disappointment and disillusionment towards the leadership and the opinions of practising Catholics is ignored.
- A sense of sadness that the Church is in decline due to the scandals of recent years.
- The history of abuse needs to be humbly acknowledged but not to stifle progress.
- There is a need to resolve the Tuam Mother and Baby Home situation.
- There is an unwillingness to “call things out”, especially on moral issues, such as abortion, etc. The Church needs to stand up and be counted.
- A Church that allowed its members abuse children can hardly lecture on abortion.
- The Church has lost touch with the grassroots and is too hierarchical for today’s world.
- The view was expressed that this whole process is a window-dressing exercise and that no notice of anything that is said will be taken and those on high will simply view this process as another box ticked.
- We are here to serve and not be served!
- Despite the sadness and challenges facing the Church, our hope is that the Synodal Pathway will be a new dawn for the Church of tomorrow.

### **Sacramental Celebrations:**

One of the essential components of our Christian life is the regular attendance at Mass and receiving Holy Communion. Aware of the decreasing number of priests, the importance of having a regular Mass celebrated in each parish was mentioned in most responses. (If we have no priests, we have no Eucharist. If we have no Eucharist, we have no Church!). Many still see the attendance at Mass as a community responding to the call to prayer. This is more obvious now post-Covid, with many of the faithful content to “attend” Mass online from the comfort of their kitchens or living rooms, and by that fact not being present with and as part of the praying community. These people are missed and their absence is felt. While the use of technology was welcomed during the pandemic restrictions, many of the responses now

suggest that, if this continues, we will lose that sense of community, that sense of belonging, which is an essential element of the parish community's life. The church bell will soon lose its purpose as it will still ring out but how many will turn up at its invitation? Likewise, receiving Holy Communion at Mass was always and is seen as the nourishment for our spiritual lives. Mass attendance, at a distance, will rob the faithful of this life-sustaining sacrament.

- People appreciate when the priest reaches out to those irregular attendees.
- A new hybrid style of worship – virtual and personal is being experienced.
- The importance of properly prepared liturgies at all times; people appreciate these.
- Training should be provided for people willing to lead liturgies in the absence of the priest.
- Re-introduce Neighbourhood or Station Masses as a means of communities coming together in smaller groups and a means of introducing neighbours to each other.
- Organise a Parish Novena or Mission, with high profile/inspirational speakers.
- Training should be provided for choirs, congregational singing and other ministries.
- Provide the opportunity of Mass-goers to meet and chat, perhaps with a cup of tea after Mass, etc.
- Sermons can be too long, failing to relate to the community present. The language used in the 2011 Missal is often archaic (*consubstantial*, etc.).
- The priest should speak in a language the people relate to.
- Other liturgies: the sacraments are not “automatic” and should be explained.
- The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a “gem”, but needs to be “revamped”.
- General Absolution is recommended.
- The responsibility that the sacrament of Baptism places on parents should be explained more clearly to them.

### **Sacramental life:**

For historical reasons, one of the stark challenges facing the Church in Ireland for many years has been the disconnect between Church, home and school. Despite various efforts over the years, little has changed and the preferred option continues to be to allow our schools be the main providers of religious education. Of course, this is an easy way out – and it worked in the past! But, as mentioned earlier, society was a lot simpler, but in reality, how well did it

work? Perhaps a whole generation of young adults has been educated but has no real sense of what a commitment to their Catholic faith means. Some of the replies reflect this in stating, “If we always do what we always did, we will always get what we always got!

The responses listed here highlight not alone the need for training in the various ministries but people’s willingness to be involved, starting with the basics and devoting our energies and time to set up proper adult religious education and faith formation across the archdiocese. This broad catechesis should not just involve the schools but must reach out to parents and families, to teachers and clergy.

- Families and family life should be at the centre of parish life at all times and not just on special occasions.
- Catechesis and Scripture exploration should be provided for all Ministers of the Word and for Eucharistic Ministers.
- Bring in sacramental preparation programmes (Baptism, Communion, Confirmation, Marriage) for all, with proper training for leaders.
- Continue to celebrate Marriage anniversaries – already the practice in this diocese for a number of years – all anniversaries as they are all important.
- Spiritual Directors should be appointed who could advise people on prayer and reflection which might, then, encourage people to return to active participation in the life of the Church.

### **Clergy and Religious:**

With an increasing decrease in vocations and a lesser number of priests, the burden of parish work is falling to too few. Many of the responses show the pride that parishioners and communities have in their parish and, especially, in their priests, highlighting their dedication to their work, most especially during and post-Covid. They refer to their constant availability to the people, especially their pastoral care in times of bereavement and in celebrating the Eucharist and the other sacraments.

- The dedication of our priests, who prepare their liturgies well and their outreach to the sick, housebound and bereaved. People are heartened and impressed by their generous service.

- Although many churches were closed for the public celebration of Mass due to Covid restrictions, people were thankful for the efforts our priest made to provide daily/weekend Masses and funeral Masses online or on a parish-based radio system. “The telephone call to the elderly or those living alone was greatly appreciated.”
- The welcome given by some priests to those who may not be regular Mass goers was admired.
- Concern expressed at the dearth of vocations to the priesthood and religious life.
- The community aspect of the Church was missed during the Covid restrictions and will be hard to rekindle.
- Need to have more deacons trained as they will be an essential part of parish life in the years ahead. The historical background and the role of the Permanent Diaconate needs to be explained.
- An urgent need to discuss and decide on the question of allowing married priests to return to ministry, if they so desire.
- Discuss and debate a married priesthood openly.
- A concern at the training currently being provided to seminarians.
- The role of women needs to be recognised. The giftedness of women is neither recognised or appreciated. Yet, they are the backbone of the church at present. Allow the ordination of women deacons and begin a debate on the ordination of women to full priesthood.
- Priests need to speak the language of the people when preaching.
- Some priests will only allow a limited involvement of lay people.

### **Education:**

The importance of a proper religious education in our primary and second level schools was referenced in many responses. Despite the clamour for points in our secondary schools, the emphasis in all our Catholic Schools should be on:

- Educating the full person: body, mind and spirit.
- Plan for and hold regular reviews of the Catholic ethos of the school.
- Ensure that members of the Boards of Management are aware of the importance of the Catholic ethos.

- Highlight the inclusivity of our Catholic Schools.
- Celebrate the high points in the calendar of our Catholic Schools, e.g. Mass at the start and end of the school year, etc.
- Have regular school liturgies re Feast Day, Graduation ceremony, etc.
- Provide training for such liturgies.
- Monthly School or Class Mass in local Church – involving parents and their children in the readings, the Prayer of the Faithful.
- Involve parents/others in pre-sacramental preparation. Begin with the First Confession and First Holy Communion and endeavour to keep these parents involved in a meaningful way thereafter.
- Some teachers are no longer practising Catholics and we need to plan for that.
- Sunday school for parents and children, especially in places where children do not attend a Catholic school.
- There is a felt and expressed need for catechesis and faith formation and training for ministry at all levels.
- A recommendation that retreats be organised so that people could develop their faith and be guided by trained scripture scholars.

### **Welcoming Community:**

Another common thread running through the responses is the need for our Church to be a welcoming community, to reach out to all baptised members. These include those who are not regular church-goers, those who have lapsed, members of the LGBT community, etc. One comment highlights the fact that, in the Bible, Jesus went after the lost sheep and left the other ninety-nine to take care of themselves until he returned.

- The priest is the “front door of the church” and should be there to welcome all.
- Give a sense of belonging to young fathers and mothers, young families, etc.
- The Church has no credibility in modern society as long as discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexuality exists. Pope Francis is the model as he is non-judgemental.
- The need to reach out to those alienated from Church life needs to be addressed.

- Welcome for / outreach to those separated, those in a second relationship; members of the LGBT community, etc.
- We need to be a listening Church, where everyone feels at home and where we can share the questions and doubts we experience on life's journey.
- A vibrant Church should value people of all persuasions far more, therefore more ecumenical engagement and services.
- Organise a welcome team to meet new families as they arrive into a village, etc.
- A venue where parishioners could meet after Mass / other liturgues and socialise while continuing to reflect on the homily / liturgy.
- Organise a multi-cultural Mass or lay-led liturgy.

### **Young People**

One of the most frequent comments made among churchgoers today is that “we didn’t see too many young people at Mass today”. This is very clear in the Synodal Pathway responses. What have we done wrong? Where can we go from here? The absence of young people at Mass and at other liturgies is a cause for concern for many, but it is also clear that these young people have not abandoned their faith. We see this in their willingness to participate in JP II Awards, and, later, when they decide to marry, and when they bring their child for Baptism. Yet, without the structure, routine and support of liturgy, they will fall by the wayside.

- Get our young people **actively** involved in church matters at a local level.
- Young people are generous to charitable appeals and causes but do not see the value in attending Mass.
- Give young people a voice in the local church
- Get the young boys and girls back as altar servers
- Get the second level students involved in the John Paul II Awards at *parish* level.
- Liaise with the GAA re match schedules as these often clash with Mass times.

### **Elderly**

Just as there were comments on the role of young people, there were similar comments that the same old familiar faces are the only ones involved in our church today.

- Always the same group of people involved: it's time to invite others to help.
- Celebrate life's milestones for this age group.
- The Catholic Grandparents' Association was established in the Archdiocese of Tuam and now has branches across the world. The CGA works closely with the Dicastery for Family and Life, and the designation of a Day for Grandparents and the Elderly owes much to the vision of CGA.
- Introduce/celebrate Grandparents' Day at parish level
- Invite the grandparents and the elderly into our schools, as in Catholic School's Week, to talk about their life's journey.

### **Pastoral Councils**

The urgent need for an active Parish Pastoral Council to be set up in each parish is clear from the responses. Indeed, it is suggested that the role of the PPC needs to be defined /redefined, especially in the light of dwindling number of priests and many priests now covering two or more parishes.

- There is appreciation for the work of Parish Pastoral Councils where they exist.
- Ensure that each parish has a Parish Pastoral Council representative of all sections of the community, i.e. youth, families, education, sport, religious, etc. and not just hand-picked individuals.
- Do not be afraid or reluctant to use the gifts of these PPC members – they may not volunteer but are delighted to help.
- Each PPC should have sub-committees for Liturgy, Prayer, Youth church-based activities, the Family, Outreach, Bereavement, etc.
- Show appreciation for all those who volunteer in parish work.
- The PPC to ensure help is available to the priest with administrative duties, etc.
- The role and work of the PPC should be obvious and not done “behind closed doors”.

### **Care of the Earth**

One of the highlights of Pope Francis's ministry as Pope so far has been his encyclical *Laudato Si*. While this document was mentioned specifically in many of the responses, reference was made throughout for the need for all of us to care for the earth.

## **Popular Piety**

Under this heading is included the local branch of the Legion of Mary, etc. and the work that membership entails. This is mentioned in some of the responses, probably where there is already a branch. Other items mentioned in this category include the call to bring back regular Benediction and the Rosary. Many parishes already have an Adoration, Rosary, a *Lectio Divina* session scheduled each week but these are usually attended by those retired from work, and those who are already actively engaged in the life of the parish.

- Return to basics and core fundamentals: weekly Rosary, Benediction, etc.
- Encourage family prayer.
- Have outdoor celebrations of the Eucharist.
- Bring back the annual *Corpus Christi* procession.

## **Conclusion: Looking to the Future**

In summarising the comments received from such a varied group, as referenced above, we ask ourselves, “What is God asking of the Church in Ireland at this time?” and “How is the Holy Spirit guiding us to be a church more responsive to the needs of our rural and urban communities across the country?”

The engagement of so many people in the process has been encouraging and shows signs of great hope for the future. While there are words of caution and concern throughout the contributions, two pithy comments shine brightly: “Continue to do your best against all the odds” and “You can always return”. These comments actually summarise the numerous expressions of welcome and inclusivity in the responses. Those, who have been involved, evidently want to underline and emphasise a desire to include and welcome everybody. Surely, that is what Synodal Pathway is all about.

Despite the doom and the gloom, Christians are a people of hope. Hope is that spark that brings a smile to our face and a light to others, a feeling that lifts our heads and pulls us forward. Our Christian faith, based on the life of Jesus Christ, and lived in the present, fills us with joyful hope for the future.

*Adsumus Sancte Spiritus.*