

FIRST SYNOD DISCUSSION MEETING

Held on Zoom, 9 January 2022

The meeting was chaired by Anne-Marie McBrien, with technical support on Zoom-related matters from Marc Servais. About 50 people participated.

I Introduction

Anne-Marie described what the Synod was about, and introduced the three key themes of Communion, Participation and Mission, as elaborated by Cardinal Vincent Nichols. She also outlined how the breakout groups might operate, each with a facilitator and a scribe. And she advised on how to deal with some Zoom issues.

Fr Gabriel then spoke about discernment, drawing on his personal experience in dealing with individual vocations and the Douai community's current engagement with identifying its next Abbot. He highlighted a recent book on discernment by Ladislav Orsy SJ, stressing how discernment can be messy in practice and how it often leads to surprising outcomes. The current phase of the synodal process was an exercise in local churches behaving synodally, and that experience was likely to be as significant an agent of change as any formal decisions emerging from the actual Synod in Rome in October 2023. He stressed the importance of continuous adult formation if local churches were to function in a genuinely synodal way.

2 Breakout groups

Participants were assigned to five breakout groups in separate Zoom 'rooms', and were encouraged to look at the three key themes, or at any other related issues they chose. Each group met for 30 minutes, and the scribe then summarised the key points of its discussion after all participants had reassembled together. The five summaries are given below. They record contributions made during the discussions; sometimes contrasting views were offered. A consensus was not sought within each group.

Group 1 report

(a) Communion

Jesus was born in a humble stable, spent 3 years in public ministry and never left the region of Palestine, yet he left a remarkably enduring impact for more than 2,000 years. This is a great strength, as is the fact that the Catholic Church has a presence in all parts of the world including diverse cultures even where persecution has and is taken place. The Church is enduring and universal. This is a humbling but awesome thought.

A weakness is considered to be that Catholicism is not militant enough in the sense that it does not voice its views prominently enough and is therefore considered to be too passive. Sometimes Catholicism gets associated by the non-discerning secular world with aggressive Christianity as exhibited by some U.S. evangelistic groups, through their

communication networks, which is off-putting to many people and works against promoting the Catholic faith.

Admission of being a Catholic invites the reaction of raising the clerical sexual abuse crisis. It is an issue that still needs to be resolved. Abuse has occurred over more than one generation and yet our generation are all bearing the guilt of the abuse, and its cover-up by the hierarchy, in the eyes of the world, even though the majority of Catholics had no part in the criminal activity.

The perceived wealth of the Vatican is often contrasted by critics with extreme poverty in parts of the world and Catholics find it hard to combat this criticism.

Hypocrisy exhibited by these issues is a weight dragging on the Church's mission.

Parents have not been able to keep their children in the practice of the faith especially when they grow up. The question is then asked what is the future of the Church?

(b) Participation

There is a sense of spiritual development, which is important, through regular participation in the Mass. Having and making friends in the faith community, especially for young people, provides mutual support for personal faith and its growth. A social component is important for like-minded people of faith.

The Covid pandemic has created new opportunities for participation through online technology. Such opportunities of engaging in study groups and forms of spirituality go beyond the parish so that people can experience aspects of their faith which ordinarily the parish would not be able to provide.

On the other hand, people who have not had internet access during the pandemic and maybe live alone will have felt isolated and unconnected. They may find it difficult and be reluctant to return to pre-pandemic participation.

Group 2 report

(a) Participation

In the liturgy: felt to be more related to practical action rather than spirituality. The experience of living in an area with a paucity of priests was shared. The laity took on the responsibility of organising services /doing readings etc. This worked well.

A question of any change in our experience of the liturgy due to absence of others during covid was left unanswered.

In the community: We feed each other in our parish life. Much joy experienced by those who had been actively involved either as catechists of various types or in related groups, eg helping young people to enjoy full participation in a Christ-centred life.

(b) Communion

The parish is good at supporting those identified as parishioners, including the elderly and vulnerable who have been unable to attend mass.

However, we may appear to others as a closed/exclusive entity.

We do not reach out to those who are non-attenders. (These were split into those outside the Church and ex/lapsed-Catholics.)

Outside the parish: We are encouraged to support the poor (in *money*): eg with parish charity BUT we could be more active within our local communities. By helping other

local efforts, we would not only support their action but also highlight our own identity as a group.

Ex/lapsed Catholics. We do not do enough to support the poor in *spirit*: Apparently for each Catholic baptised, 10 leave. Much comment/feeling on this, all strongly supportive of us becoming more active in reaching out to those who have left but still want to lead a Christian life. We should assure them of a welcome on their return.

Research published in USA identified the most common reason to leave was a failure of that welcome, not being actively invited to become part of the community. Contrast with the welcome offered by evangelicals. Discussion around cultural reticence in the UK to reach out to strangers. NB Stewards during Covid do welcome attendees but we could do more.

We felt that the church is actively unwelcoming to those who have experienced divorce: this was seen as fact rather than a perception. Surely the Church could be understanding of the situations of different individuals? Some made a mistake. Others may have had to leave an abusive relationship for the safety of the children etc. In any case, are we not a Church of sinners? Several examples given of individuals caused huge pain by being excluded from Communion. Even for those seeking annulment, the process is very long and hard.

This led to a discussion on the need to be more receptive to other developments perhaps more fitted to modern times, including the possibility of female priests and married priests.

(c) Mission

The view of Mission as a personal task was expressed. It is difficult to be a Christian, to always do the things that God wants of us. Mission involves a long hard look at oneself, making changes and becoming a better person. This will in turn have a good effect on the community.

(Brings to mind Catherine of Sienna: if we all did what we should we would set the world on fire.)

We were encouraged to support younger children to take an active part in their faith. They are our future. Rather than teaching them rules to obey, we should explain why we ask youngsters to act in a certain way. They will then better understand their faith and be able to defend and continue to live it when they leave home for independent life.

Group 3 report

(a) Participation

One member of the group found it easy to participate in the activities of the church and wondered why more people did not participate as there were many avenues/activities to participate including activities for children. The number of participants was shrinking and that we need to address the issue.

Another member of the group thought people come to church for different reasons, each wanting something different. Coming to the church could be for personal reasons. Therefore, it was important to understand what each one wants before we rush people into participating. Each got a richer experience coming to church.

Some people found it daunting to participate as they did not know how and in what activity to participate. People were worried about getting things wrong. Some suggested that people in the church would not be critical if someone did something wrong; others suggested that people in the church were quick to criticize and that many of us were not tolerant.

The RC Church was different from the Anglican church in the local community as we were less involved in the community than the Anglicans. If we were more involved in the local community we may be able to bring more people back to the church. On the other hand, we are here because we are involved in the church in some way or the other. But we need more people to be involved in the spiritual as well as the practical side.

It was mentioned that we were all getting older and in our younger days we were involved in many more activities and as years pass the involvement gets less. It was therefore important to get youngsters to be more involved and participating. It was also mentioned that life is overwhelmingly busy and this prevented people from coming to church. Also, extracurricular activities on a Sunday morning prevented children coming to church as parents would want them to take part in football, rugby or other activities on the weekend. Some children would want to come to church but if the parent was not going to come the child too could not attend church.

It was also mentioned that the way the parishioners were geographically located made it difficult to get more people to participate, whereas with the local Anglican church participation is being part of the community.

It was suggested that in the Catholic Church we are more distant and hence less participative and needed to be more closer, like the Anglicans. However, it would be a mistake to say that the Anglican Church was doing everything right, as many churches were closing and that the number of people coming to church was dwindling. The Roman Catholic Church has many things that are done well. We need to talk more of what we do well and harness from it.

People in the UK do not give a priority to the church by attending the Sunday service and as a result are not as involved as the Catholics in South America or India, where churches get a full congregation for each Mass even though they have more Masses each weekend in their churches.

It was also suggested that in the RC Church there was more complexity, where theological knowledge feels like a pre-requisite to participation, whereas the Anglican Church is more accessible.

(b) Mission

It was mentioned by one of the group, that the Pope wants us to take responsibility for our thoughts/actions by asking ourselves what can we do to contribute. Crisis brings about change and more participation, but would the issue be the same in normal time, which it should be. The Pope was asking us to share responsibility, to dream of our church and strive towards living the life of Christ, which could be our mission. That mission could be different from what we were used to, and we needed to find the right way forward.

Group 4 report

(a) Inclusivity

It was felt that the RC church was judgemental and did not welcome those of other faiths, divorced and remarried Catholics, and those in the LGBT community. Many non-Catholic partners contributed hugely to the life of the Parish. Some parishioners felt excluded because of their personal circumstances and felt penalised because their marriages had failed through no fault of their own. There should be more openness, compassion and forgiveness.

Concerns were expressed that societal change had been ignored and the church needs to be more relevant.

(b) Community

Many appreciated being part of a supportive community where the exchange of ideas and information, sharing of values and rituals, and practical and emotional support were valued, and would like to see more emphasis on the community life of the church, promoting more opportunities to be together and share experiences. Meeting for coffee after Mass was seen as very valuable and some expressed sadness that COVID had impacted on this.

(c) Young People

There was huge concern about encouraging and retaining young people within the community. Many expressed sadness that their adult children and grandchildren no longer attended Mass. Young people are the lifeblood and future of the church but it is too easy for it to become irrelevant to them. They have busy and complex lifestyles and the Church needs to speak to them. Young people should be encouraged to become involved. One person suggested that the churches should become cultural centres, embracing spiritual issues and involving the youth of the Parish. This would require positivity, co-operation and a 'can do' attitude. There was some hope expressed that when children had children of their own they might return to the faith.

(d) Perception of the Roman Catholic Church

One person expressed concerns about the erosion of confidence in the Church, caused by the current culture. Freedom of speech is being eroded. Engaging with and challenging the culture should be encouraged. The church may need to promote itself and counter the media view, emphasising the positive aspects of the faith. We should be a church of mission and have the confidence to address these issues and be prepared to voice views that may be unpopular.

Group 5 report

(a) One concern was the lack of warmth and support towards people experiencing difficulties, whether marital, familial, etc. This should not be a matter of gossip, but rather of concern and sympathy. There is a lack of understanding towards people not following a traditional family life. Such lack of inclusivity pushes people away.

(b) The second concern was the lack of young people in the church. We are shrinking as a community. Young people say that church is boring, people have long faces! How

can we meet the needs of the young? By involving them in the liturgy, providing something attractive for them to do after a suitably timed liturgy.

Only about four families with teenagers now attending one church. They seem to come while the child is preparing for Holy Communion, then stop. It should be the concern of the whole community, not just the priest, to think of ways of attracting and keeping the young.

One person commented on how much they loved to see the children go up to the altar after children's liturgy and have a chat to the priest. The children's Christmas liturgy also can be a special occasion for all.

(c) It was suggested that we each think about and write down what it means to be a Catholic in 2022. Is it more to us than just going to church? How do we reach out to others?

3 Questionnaire responses

The final report-back session also received the following summary by Diana Russell of the 14 responses received to the questionnaire by 8 January. Participants were encouraged to complete questionnaires if they had not already done so, and to invite others to do the same.

1 What do you feel are the main shortcomings of the Catholic Church itself that inhibit it from more fully engaging with its baptised members and with present-day society in general?

Many responding expressed deep concern over the handling of child abuse within the Church, which they felt had destroyed trust in it from both within the Church and beyond. Others disagreed with its attitude towards divorcees, who are unable to remarry in Church and may be refused communion. There were expressions of disgust that the Prime Minister had been allowed to marry in church.

Regarding the priesthood, the Church was felt to be too hierarchical, led generally by older men who could not adequately empathise with the experiences of the laity, of parents of questioning teenagers etc. Married priests were a suggested option. The position of women in the Church concerned many respondents, who felt that they should be in positions of leadership, if not part of the priesthood itself. Younger generations also need encouragement and more involvement in the liturgy.

It was felt that generally there was insufficient consultation of the laity within the Church. There was also inadequate ongoing faith formation at parish level outside the sacraments. It was suggested that people need to be taught, in practical ways, different methods of prayer, described as 'the source of all meaningful activity in the Church'. There should also be more focus on acts of charity and involvement in the climate crisis.

2 What do you feel are the greatest strengths of the Catholic Church that help it to engage with its baptised members and with society in general?

God as our centre, the source of love, and the many elderly, saintly people in our midst. Several respondees perceived Pope Francis to be the current Church's greatest asset. Others cited the strength of the praying, welcoming faith community upon whose work

the Church depends. Some valued the Church's Tradition and its apostolic succession and also Christ's message of love and its impact on society, alongside the resulting work in the community. Others mentioned the Church's international and interracial membership and its inter-denominational and inter-faith dialogue. Good priests were also valued.

3 What is your relationship to the Catholic Church, or in other words, why are you taking the time to respond to this questionnaire? (e.g. go to Mass weekly/occasionally/never, no faith but married to a Catholic, baptised but non-practising, etc.)

Many of the respondents were regular church goers, deeming their Mass attendance as central to their lived faith and valuing the occasion to mix socially. However, a few now attend infrequently if at all, even though a couple were heavily involved in the past. The reasons cited were the current direction of the parish, lack of support during the pandemic, and an inadequate parish life.

N.B. Concern was also expressed that the time scale for this synod consultation is too short and that our synodal process needs to be distinguished from the formal Synod approach to governance in the Anglican Church.

4 Future meetings

It was hoped that future meetings would be held in person rather than on Zoom, subject to unforeseen developments with the pandemic. The next meeting will therefore be held – as planned - at St Mary's at 10.15am on Sunday 16 January. The meeting will be open to all who wish to come, irrespective of where they live.

PMDC

11.1.22