

SECOND SYNOD DISCUSSION MEETING

Held at St Mary's, 16 January 2022

The meeting was chaired by Minnie Greayer. Seventeen people participated.

I Introduction

Minnie Greayer read the opening synodal prayer, and explained how the meeting would run. She then introduced Tim Wood and GERALYN COLLINS.

Tim Wood drew attention to the material available on the synod page of the parish website. He stressed the Pope's commitment to developing a synodal style of church life, with all members sharing their resources and experiences, journeying together. The current phase of preparation for the October 2023 Synod is an opportunity for everyone to explore and express their insights into the church, candidly and in hopefulness. The Pope is urging everyone, whatever their situation, to get involved. For many participants, however, their experience of the church may not have been one of journeying together, especially in recent months, and this needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Inputs from all perspectives will be valuable.

The Synod is not an intellectual or political exercise: the key is for each participant rather to notice what the Holy Spirit is saying to them. That is not a simple matter! We have to be open, to listen and to reflect.

Geralyn Collins referred to the Pope's two overarching questions about synodality: 'How does this journeying together take place today on different levels, allowing the Church to proclaim the Gospel? And what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?' She also introduced Bishop Philip's additional comment: 'What changes need to be made so that the Church reaches more people *in a vibrant and effective way*?' Building on this and other inputs, she suggested that the breakout groups might wish to engage with one or more of the following three sets of questions:

- How welcoming is our parish? How can we reach out better to those 'in the margins'? Does each of us need to become more welcoming?
- How well do we and our clergy work together? How could we do this better?
- How well are we 'formed' spiritually as adults in our parish, so that our faith continues to develop? What would help us do this better?

Geralyn explained how the breakout groups would function and stressed the importance of confidentiality: nothing said in a breakout group should be attributed outside the group to any named individual.

Tim then read from the First Book of Kings, chapter 19, about how we recognise the Holy Spirit - not in the powerful wind, earthquake or fire, but in the gentle breeze.

2 Breakout groups

Participants were assigned to three breakout groups, which met in separate rooms with a facilitator and scribe. Each group met for 40 minutes, and the scribe then summarised the key points of its discussion after all participants had reassembled together. The three 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

Welcoming – It was considered that, as a whole, the Church is not welcoming, that much of its creed seems irrelevant to people today and that Catholics can come across as arrogant, an elite, following impossibly high moral standards. Many, including former Catholics, feel they cannot follow the strict rules of canon law which have been prescribed by a hierarchy of celibate men. How can people understand that a marriage which has produced children can be annulled\considered not to have been valid? Canon Law should be re-written so that it is relevant to our society.

The child abuse issue was seen to have been inadequately dealt with. The Church, with its authoritarianism and a hierarchy whom it is so difficult to challenge, was seen as a setting ripe for such abuse.

Group 2 report

The meeting began with a discussion about those who felt they were on the 'margins' and what this expression meant. Many of the participants felt they were marginalised for various reasons, including divorce, remarriage, marriage to a non-Catholic, and beliefs that don't accord with the church's teaching. Some felt there were others who were socially excluded, and some felt marginalised by some firmly expressed views in the bulletins last year, and reported that they knew of parishioners who felt excluded and no longer attended Mass because they been made unwelcome.

Marriage annulment was discussed and it was felt that this was a humiliating, outdated and degrading experience. There should be acceptance that mistakes could be made and that blame should not be apportioned. There were concerns that this was alienating those involved and that they should not have to review their circumstances with each change of Parish Priest.

There were concerns that the clergy may feel threatened by the synodal process and that better communication between the clergy and the parishioners would help alleviate some of these concerns. It was suggested that these issues could be addressed during the training of monks and priests. Reinstating the PPC as a means of improving communication would be a step in the right direction.

It was felt by some that Bishops can effectively block communication between the laity and the Pope, and that our Bishop can appear to say one thing and then act differently. There were concerns about the poor communication between the diocese and the

parish about the Synodal process. The Diocese of Liverpool has set an excellent example, having been involved in its Synodal process for the last four years.

Co-responsibility was discussed. It was considered important that we looked at our own formation and explore ways of developing our faith and spirituality.

Concern was expressed that, in parts, the Church was becoming a more conservative institution and was failing to modernise and accommodate changes in society, despite the Pope expressing support for change and embracing inclusion. This in turn has led to the alienation of the young, many of whom perceive the church as irrelevant. There were expressions of regret that young people do not continue in the practice of the faith, despite a Catholic upbringing and education.

There was concern that the structure of the church was disintegrating, leading to moral and spiritual decline.

Many felt that the sense of community and inclusion had been eroded by Covid. There were fewer opportunities to congregate and offer each other emotional and spiritual support. We should nurture a sense of joy and rejuvenation of the heart and spirit of the faith and welcome and nurture everyone - the young, old and those perceived as outsiders, as Christ himself did.

Group 3 report

One participant had found St Mary's to be very welcoming, in terms of helping visitors to feel at home. Visitors themselves needed to take some responsibility for this, at least to the extent of making themselves known to the welcoming team and to existing parishioners. The culture of reticence sometimes associated with 'Britishness' had to be overcome. Coffee after Mass was important in this context and should be reinstated as soon as Covid permitted.

The 11.00am Mass in the Abbey was experienced as a more formal ceremony, with a strong focus on personal spiritual experience and little interaction among the congregation or between them and the celebrants. Some liked it that way, regularly or occasionally, and saw a place for the Latin (ie Tridentine) Mass with the congregation listening more than participating. This was felt to provide a stronger sense of the sacred.

Fundraising campaigns were an important parish activity, both in themselves and as a stimulus to social events that contributed to community building.

The problem of so many individuals cutting their association with the church was mentioned, as was the importance of Christian formation as a life-long activity that needed constant attention.

3 Feedback session

In a short discussion after the feedback from the breakout groups, it was stressed we needed to take care not to polarise the church into mutually hostile camps and that it was important to try to understand the variety of views and experiences represented among church members. Change was always difficult, and called for patience and care as well as passion and conviction.

In our own parish it was noted that a change of parish priest had historically often resulted in stark discontinuities, as if there were no real preparation or handover process. Certainly congregations did not feel consulted about any decisions or changes in direction that directly impacted their whole experience of being church. A genuine commitment to journeying together would look different from that, with major decisions and changes following on from mutual discussion and not simply being imposed.

4 Future meetings

Minnie Greayer reminded participants that the next meeting would be hosted by St Luke's at 6.30pm on Saturday 22 January, and encouraged as many as possible to participate. Geralyn Collins then closed the meeting with a recital of the Grail Prayer from the Liverpool diocese collection of Synod prayers.