

FOURTH SYNOD DISCUSSION MEETING

Held at St Bernadette's, 30 January 2022

The meeting was chaired by Marc Servais. Twenty-eight adults and two babes-in-arms participated.

1 Introduction

Marc Servais opened with the synodal prayer. He explained the process for the morning, and introduced three headline themes:

- Communion: Who walks with us on our journey of faith? In our parish, how do we support one another on the journey?
- Participation: How can we get better at listening to one another? At listening to the Holy Spirit?
- Mission: What inspires you in the life of our parish community to bring the love of Christ into the world? What discourages you?

2 Breakout groups

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

The discussion started with a debate about obstacles to participation in the church community. It was felt that if non-churchgoers attended Mass they would see opportunities to become involved in Parish life. Many people feel excluded for various reasons and it was noted that there were some parents whose partners did not attend Mass or had previously attended but had stopped. Perhaps they could be encouraged to attend? One participant said he had started attending Mass with his partner as he wanted his children to have his support. Now many years later he felt very welcomed and part of the community.

The media has given a poor impression of Catholicism, based on issues in the global church. The local community is considered to be more important, and the church needs to be more vocal, emphasising the positive aspects of the faith, especially at the local level. It was strongly felt that the church was us, the people, and consequently the laity should have more involvement at every level, moving away from the top down model. There was concern that the hierarchy are afraid of losing power and control.

Participation varies from Parish to Parish. It's sometimes easier to integrate into a smaller Parish, where members are able to play a larger part. There should be more effort made to encourage newcomers and involve them in the life of the Parish.

There was a discussion about married priests, and the place of women in the church. Very little has changed over the years, we are not progressing. The secular world has shown more progress and leadership in embracing the modern world. There need to be changes, possibly including doctrinal change and a progressive interpretation of the faith. It was pointed out that there are many people who lead a 'Christian' life who have no faith. Why would they feel the need to join an established church?

Participation of young people: Many have stories of young people who were brought up participating fully in the life of the church, but as adults move away from the faith. It was felt that it was not the local church that alienates them but wider church issues such as unresolved child abuse scandals and the perceived hypocrisy of some clergy. We need to retain young people and others perceived as 'outsiders'. We should cater for all age groups, encouraging them to become more involved and interested. It was pointed out that there were children who might want to attend Mass but had to depend on the participation of their parents. There should be better communication and explanation of the faith. More education within the Parish may increase their understanding and keep them focused. Parents are expected to educate their children in the faith as fewer young people are educated in Catholic schools. It was suggested that there would no longer be a viable church if we do not address the retention of the young and encourage the inclusion of those who currently feel excluded for various reasons. Young people are encouraged to embrace inclusivity and we should learn from them.

We need to move forward. It was felt that the Bishop's visit was for the benefit of the Bishop himself and not for the laity. There was concern that Confirmation had been centralised in Portsmouth, limiting the number of family members that could attend to support the young people. It meant a long journey which has environmental consequences, and took away the intimacy and inclusivity of a local Confirmation celebration. More decisions need to be made locally.

It was felt that there was very little participation in the wider community. Other churches are involved in outreach, caring for the homeless, becoming street pastors etc. We should be a missionary church, but this needs leadership and commitment.

Participation in All Churches Together would foster this. Many of the joint events that used to take place, such as the procession of witness and worship in the willows, no longer happen.

Finally there was some discussion around the sacrament of Reconciliation. Some had not attended one to one confession for many years and felt more comfortable with a parish reconciliation service.

Group 2 report

Massive challenge for us all - clergy may find it difficult to step down from their high ground - they should be more understanding and not lecture us about sin all the time, especially with all the recent abuse scandals across the world.

Catholics in general should be more accepting of people with different lifestyles i.e. gay couples, divorced couples, non-married couples etc. Christ is with us all - we need to be passionate and communicate with everyone.

Maybe as Catholics we should do things a little more evangelically? More accepting of the poor & needy. Example Pastor Mick in Burnley. Other Christians seem to be able to fill their churches especially with young people - they sing more? They are more inclusive?

Are we Catholics really opening the doors to others? Others in poverty - financial poverty or spiritual poverty ?

Everyone should walk on this journey with us, not just those we see at church. We don't live in a 'catholic bubble': we are part of the big wide world. But shouldn't we be spreading the good news? To others, to those in need? How do we find them? Maybe we should just concentrate on those we know in our family, friends & local community. However we should respect choice - many of us have tried to persuade those in Pangbourne that no longer come to Mass to join us again. But we can't force people. Maybe we 'persuade' others by doing good deeds.

We need to build up our community - we need more opportunities to meet locally outside church. Should we combine religious meetings with social events? If we meet more regularly - then the rest will follow.

Some of the group explained to newer members of the parish how it was a few years ago. There were many groups set up, encouraged in particular by Father Peter. Many felt that we had developed spiritually during these times but in the last few years these opportunities seem to have disappeared. And it's not just down to covid.

Obviously pre-Covid there were far more social get-togethers, like quizzes etc. Meeting up face to face helps to break down barriers and build up trust. It also enables ideas to be collected together. There was a suggestion that maybe some of the Douai resources could come out to the parishes as many people can't actually get up to Douai to attend the various offerings there.

We need to engage with ALL.

We need to do more with other Christian communities, after all it's one & same God. Example of Hope UK.

A catholic example was given of Father John in Reading who after the stabbing in Forbury Gardens worked extremely closely with those impacted by the tragedy. This included reaching out to other communities (especially the gay community) in a very caring & non-judgemental way.

The Catholic Church throughout the world should be breaking down barriers, the clergy working with the people to concentrate on what really matters rather than building up the church based on political influence and financial gain.

Discussion around youth. In our parish and across the world, the numbers of young Catholics are falling. What can we do to encourage them to participate in the faith? Pope Francis says ask them what they want and listen to them. A suggestion of a youth suggestion box permanently to be located in each parish church.

On a positive note, some in the group recalled younger family members that have left the faith but in times of trouble still have their fundamental belief. Something of their catholic upbringing stays with them. This hope - that our faith stays with us throughout our lives.

We have hope. We need put our trust in the Holy Spirit.

Group 3 report

The group started with a discussion about the importance of cross-vocational friendships: people following different vocations (married, single, parent, ordained etc) getting to know, understand and value each other. This might happen in the normal course of daily life, but it could also be actively encouraged and fostered. Shared interest groups and social events could provide opportunities. The benefits were evident, in terms of better understanding of the daily challenges that people in different situations from ourselves faced and, for example, access to a richer variety of role models.

Similarly, it was important to get to know people from different faith traditions. It was all part of learning about our companions on the journey, and thus becoming welcoming and tolerant to others.

A discussion of clericalism stressed the importance of clergy being available, not just to fulfil various roles but also simply to share a bit of their lives so that others could understand better how the world looked from their perspective. It was recognised, in this context, that our clergy faced considerable pressures on their time not only from their parochial duties but also from their monastic lives.

It was mentioned that Fr Gabriel would be happy to celebrate Mass in people's homes. These could be excellent opportunities to get to know each other better.

The young congregation at St Bernadette's was much appreciated. It was good to have a wide age range working together. It was important to foster the interest and enthusiasm of our young parishioners, for example by giving them specific roles to play in the various church activities. Indeed, the development of a spectrum of lay ministries was a key element in strengthening the life of the church and developing its mission.

Many people saw the Church as offering a model of perfection: those who could not measure up could feel themselves excluded and, in some instances, were actively excluded. We needed to make a deliberate effort to welcome and include everyone, without reservation.

The Church was, similarly, seen as obsessed with its rules and regulations, which could not easily be questioned and served primarily to condemn and exclude rather than to provide a guide to living a life of love and service. Canon law was experienced as failing to recognise the realities of daily life. Individually and collectively, we needed to become less judgemental, more open to the Spirit, more compassionate.

3 Future meetings

Marc Servais reminded participants that the final meeting in this series would be held at Douai on Sunday 6 February at 3.00pm, and encouraged as many as possible to participate. That meeting would review the main themes that had emerged from our synodal process so far and would consider what our submission to the diocese should say.

PMDC

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