

# Synod Meeting for Young People 30<sup>th</sup> January 2022 at St Bernadette's Church

## Report by Lucy Gallagher

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11 young people from all parts of the parish attended, aged 11 – 16.

I opened the meeting with the synodal prayer.

I described synod as journeying together in communion and explained that the Holy Father wants to hear from the whole church community.

How do we journey together?

Are we listening to each other? Is the clergy listening to the people?

I also read the quote from Bishop Philip:

‘What changes need to be made so that the Church reaches more people in a vibrant and effective way?’

Although I read some specific synodal question, about how we are journeying together, welcoming as a parish or as a larger church, we began with the young people having a general discussion about their views on ‘church’. This is summarised below.

### Discussion

Some of the younger ones did not speak in the large group. These views are those of the older or more confident youngsters.

One began with the bold statement ‘Church is boring’, which led to a discussion that some of those present went to church because their parents told them to, and once they were 18, they would not go. It was said that faith keeps adults going to church. Adults have had more time to reflect and see this as a positive thing, more than younger people. Sometimes, although they didn’t feel like going, they enjoyed it and were glad they had been. It was felt that it is social and many enjoy the socialising after Mass and eating the biscuits.

It was confidently stated that they believe church attendance numbers are dwindling in Western society, but that the numbers are still high in the East.

The view that the Catholic church was isolated from its local area was expressed and supported by others. Whereas the Church of England in a village may have a school and be a visible presence in village life, the local Catholic church could be more cut off. They felt that our churches should try to engage more with the local community, to show who we are.

They felt that there are a lot of activities for younger children in our parish, that an effort is made for them and that this is better, said one, than their last parish. However, they said that activities and events for older children and adults were also important and more could be done.

Adults have faith. Young people need the faith translated to them in a way that they can follow. Singing is a good example of what makes the Mass more enjoyable – those for whom singing has not re-started say it is very different (not so good) without it. They know the structure of the Mass must remain, but they would like more variety in their experience of Masses, different styles of music. They agreed unanimously that they preferred shorter homilies. They were not universally critical of the homilies. In fact, they thought the little personal anecdotes told by Fr. Benjamin of his experiences as a boy or a young man in the North, added to the homily and were usually relevant to

the message. They did not like a homily to be repetitive. Sometimes a good point would be made, but then repeated two or three times more and it lost its effectiveness. They said a homily should be relevant, short, not just aimed at the adults, but include stories/ideas that young people would find engaging. Several of the young people definitely felt that some homilies were preached in a way that would suit an audience of monks more than a mixed audience of parishioners.

The view that Christian teaching is outdated and young people would not embrace it was quite strongly expressed by a couple of the youngsters. One felt that the church's views on marriage and other moral issues needed to move with the times, so that more people could feel included.

I then asked them to mark where they felt they were a scale in three areas. They did this in small groups of 3 or 4. I also encouraged them to write anything they felt about that area on a post-it note.

### **Feeling Included**

Marking the scale, all young people were in the upper half towards 'feel included', with some feeling very included, at the top of the scale.

About **feeling included**, they said (in their own words):

After First Holy Communion, I feel they don't include you as much and they need to do more about that and how kids after that are not happy, and feel they are being forced to go to church every week.

I feel half included. I feel like they should do more for kids our age to keep encouraging us, like reading and having friends in the community.

It is important to get the Youth involved more centrally to keep liberality in the heart of the church. The church needs to concentrate on translating its message to all people in an accessible way for all people.

I feel that as a long-time member of the community, whose family takes on several roles, I am very included. However, I can see the difficulty in becoming included due to the structure of the church. Getting involved can be hard. It would be good to become more accessible for new people, so that they can feel welcome and included.

We do include people, but we could do more to help people over ten and eleven and talk about the meanings of the liturgy. After First Holy Communion, you aren't really allowed to go to children's liturgy.

To encourage people to feel more included, you could have more events aimed at young people, like a film night, so they are part of something.

Since I serve and read, I feel quite included. However, although I have been doing both together for many years, some people butt in and questioned the reading and serving. This has left me questioning whether I should volunteer myself again.

I like that after Mass the people really talk and are nice about everything but it's more about the adults. After First Holy Communion, they don't really talk about what happens in the church.

## **Feeling Joyful**

Two of the young people were at the lower end of the scale, so 'not feeling joyful'. The others, however, were all in the top half, so close to 'joyful'.

About **feeling joyful**, they said (in their own words):

I enjoy going to church as I feel I have reached a personal point where I can connect with the church's message and God. I feel that this has happened through my active involvement in reading and serving, giving me a purpose and recognising my faith. However, after being asked to not serve two days before the Bishop came and then being allowed, but then having the reading I was doing taken away less than 24 hours before the service, by a person without the proper authority, has left me confused and demotivated. These actions are what can drive people away from the church.

Church tends to provide more comfort over joy, while charity work and community conversation, like tea and coffee or CAFOD may bring joy. The process of prayer and worship as well as the regularity of Mass brings security and comfort. Joy is not the most important thing to be found in Mass and is probably not what is found most attractive from worship. But though exams and school-life can become stressful, the meditative process of prayer is more important than joy.

The activities the church provides (*bring joy*)

They should do more things for older children after they've done First Holy Communion, like talking about the gospel and readings.

I find it boring and cold.

The people are really nice, but I feel that the priest is talking more to the adults than the kids.

I feel that in our parish we do a lot for kids up to 10 or 11 years old, but after that we don't do much and kids lose encouragement. We do need more for teenagers from 11 to 16.

## **On the church being Mission Focussed or Inward Looking**

The majority of points made on this scale were in the middle at 'I don't know', with a couple at either end.

Their thoughts on the wider church mission (in their own words) were:

The church has an ageing population.

The Catholic Church is losing members, therefore should be more welcoming.

I feel that the church welcomes outsiders but doesn't really listen or talk to them.

At our parish, I feel that we do a lot of charity work. However, I feel that the church can be excluded from the local community.

I feel that in our parish, we do quite a bit of charity work but then feel we should do more for kids. About community. Do more for kids, raising money and doing charity work.

The Church is very inward looking and thinking about its own process, meaning it struggles to communicate its message with other people. However, it is outward looking and mission focussed when helping societies through its message and charity.

We should get more involved with village events so people know who we are and that there is a Catholic church in the area.

We don't just think about ourselves. For instance, we support charities but we don't do enough to encourage other people and support them.

They all felt that the parish did a lot of charity work and I asked them to rank their top three areas from this list.

- Responding to food-poverty
- Supporting the lonely
- Accompanying migrants/refugees
- Accompanying people in financial hardship
- Outreach to young people 'on the margins'
- Homelessness
- Caring for creation in our local community
- Journeying with those who are unemployed

Of the 11 young people, 8 put 'Outreach to young people on the margins' as the number one priority. The other areas that they put high on their list were 'supporting the lonely' and 'responding to food poverty'.

Raising money for charity was also mentioned as an activity in which they feel they could be more involved.

### Summary of main themes

After listening to the group, who were articulate and sometimes passionate about their views, as well as reading and transcribing their post-it notes, I see a few themes emerging.

They tended to be more focussed on our parish rather than the wider Catholic Church.

#### **'Translate' the message to them better**

There was a strong feeling that they were overlooked. The homilies were aimed at adults and were sometimes long and repetitive. They would like to have more teaching about the readings and the gospel in a way that would engage them. They have not really had things explained to them since First Holy Communion. They would like to feel more engaged in the Masses and sometimes to have a bit more variety.

#### **Activities & Events**

They enjoy the social aspect of coffee after Mass and the communal singing. They would like more events and activities for all, but also to feel that they are included. They would like to have events especially for young adults too, like a film. They want things to bring them together and help them to feel part of the community.

**Connection**

They feel that the Church is not connected with modern western society and feel that it is becoming less relevant. They also feel that individual churches are not part of the village community in the way that the Church of England parishes are.

*Lucy Gallagher*

*January 2022*