

For a Synodal Church:

Communion, Participation
and Mission

Bishops' Report

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Synodal Pathway 2021-23



Diocese of Westminster

To Spend Time with the Future

Westminster Cathedral is familiar with historic events. But on 19 February 2022 the Cathedral witnessed something unique. Clergy and laypeople came together from across the Diocese to hear two Parishioners present the fruits of the Westminster Synodal Journey.

It was the climax of a long Journey upon which the whole Diocese had embarked last autumn.



“To ‘spend time with the future’ⁱ” was how Pope Francis had described what we should be about; “ ... to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, and give strength to our hands.”ⁱⁱ

His words capture the experience of a great many who have walked this Journey together in Westminster – like the Parishioner quoted in one Parish Synthesis as saying,



“The Holy Spirit says we may be people who dream.”

As Bishops of Westminster Diocese, we wish to express our deep gratitude to all who have contributed to this our Synodal Process. Particular thanks are due to the Agency for Evangelisation for resourcing the whole Process handsomely; and conscientiously gathering the fruits. The Education Service too deserves a special mention for enabling so many Synodal Conversations in the Schools community.

What has already been achieved is an unprecedented sharing of perspectives. This has revealed a deep affection for the Church. The experience of many, as they listened to those who had come alongside them, was of “hearts burning”ⁱⁱⁱ with enthusiasm and concern for the Church’s mission. The plea from those who spoke at the end of the Cathedral Gathering was for continued discernment and action.

We are embarked on a path which will now proceed in two directions — one *ad extra*, the other *ad intra*. *Ad extra*: we Bishops will submit this Synthesis to the English & Welsh Bishops’ Conference Secretariat as our Diocesan contribution to a National Report; this National Report will in turn form part of a European Continental submission to the Synod taking place in Rome next year. Meanwhile, *ad intra*: we commit ourselves to continue this process which has been launched - towards discernment of new Priorities for Mission.



Accompaniment in Mission

We recognise what a powerful experience it has been to listen to one another in Synodal Conversation. The thousands who have engaged with the process discovered how energising it is to accompany one another in a deep and conscientious Listening. We believe it is significant how much more the term *Accompaniment* arose in our Synodal Conversation than *Journeying Together*. We had been faithful in all our resources and Synodal Conversations to the Synod Office's request that we consider our experience of *Journeying Together* as Church; but the phrase *Journeying Together* itself featured very little in any of the Listening Events or Syntheses. Interestingly, a word which comes close to *Journeying Together* and which did arise much more often was *Accompaniment*.

Indeed there seemed to emerge from our Diocesan Conversation a significant vision of *Accompaniment* — a vision of *Accompaniment* in a number of different veins: *Accompanying* those with whom we share our lives most closely; *Accompanying* as a Parish community; *Accompanying* the Parish community; *Accompanying* those who are perceived or perceive themselves as distanced from the Parish community; *Accompanying* members of other ecclesial communities and faiths; *Accompanying* those who are in need, through social outreach; *Accompanying* those on the peripheries. We do believe that, developing such an ethos of *Accompaniment* might offer something of a key to realising in the future the core aspiration of Pope Francis that the whole Synodal Process lead us to *Journey Together* more deeply as Church in the Diocese of Westminster. We hope continued Synodal Conversation towards such a reappraisal of Evangelising priorities will serve both to deepen the communion of Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Religious, men, women and children in the Diocese; and to renew in our hearts the desire to be Missionary Disciples.



"Put out into the deep,"^{iv} urged Pope St John Paul II at the start of the millennium.

We are proud, as Bishops, to see the depth of reflection on which we are embarked as a Diocese. Foundations have been laid upon which we are confident an even greater quality of Listening and discernment can be built — towards a deeper realisation of our Mission to be the *Body of Christ* in Westminster.

Lay Facilitation

We were clear from the outset that the whole process should be lay-led. We engaged accordingly the services of a professional Facilitator — a lay man who is a parishioner of this Diocese — who would be fully remunerated for his work. A Steering Group was assembled under his leadership: an equal number of women and men — some fourteen members of the Diocese, including one Bishop, two Priests, a Deacon and two Religious.

The Synodal Process was launched with a call, some five months prior to the Diocesan Gathering, for parishes to appoint one or two Synodal Representatives; and for these to attend the Liturgical Opening of the Diocesan Synodal Pathway in mid-October. This was accompanied by an urgent appeal for prayer, assisted by the wide dissemination of the Synodal *Adsumus* Prayer.

Process: Methodology and Question

The Liturgical Opening marked the launch of six weeks' intensive preparation: Step 1 — *the Preparation Phase*. This would be followed by six weeks' intensive listening: Step 2 — *the Listening Phase*. As part of this preparation, Information Events were offered online and in person. These were followed by a programme of Training Events which were also offered online and in person — the focus being *Training to Lead* and *Training for Listening*.

A significant body of Resources was disseminated which were faithful to the Preparatory Document — inviting Parishes, Schools, communities and individuals to reflect on their experience of 'Journeying Together as Church'. These reflected the 'Main Question' posed by the Synod Preparatory Document, which was as follows:



'A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together." How is this "journeying together" happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"?'^v

Parishes and communities were asked to consider which length of process they might wish to engage in; and to begin to prepare themselves accordingly. These gatherings were envisaged as local: they were typically three-session processes and/or Parish Days; with the provision for individual reflection too.

Synodal Conversations

Meanwhile, and in parallel with this, a programme of Area Listening Events was prepared across the Diocese – mostly in person, with some online. These included Events with the Area Bishop in each of the five sections of the Diocese; the Cardinal meeting with Young People; Events with School Headteachers, with Ethnic Chaplaincies, and with the Social Justice & Peace Forum. This programme of local and Area gatherings lasted the duration of the six-week Listening Phase.

All Parishes, Schools and communities which had held Synodal Conversations were asked to submit a Synthesis. These were processed by the Steering Group and Agency for Evangelisation and contributed to the Feedback Presentation which



would be given by the Facilitator at the Diocesan Gathering in the Cathedral. At that Gathering, participants were asked to share their thoughts on this Feedback and to note these on cards.

What was encouraged across every Listening process was Synodal Conversation. The training impressed on leaders that the aim of every gathering should be Conversation, not debate. This approach was judged to be consistent with the advice of Pope Francis that



“(a) temptation that so often confuses people is treating the Synod as a kind of parliament ... This goes against the spirit of the Synod as a protected space of discernment.”^{vi}

Three Stages

Essentially the same questions were given to the participants in every group – from Area Listening Events to post-Mass meetings in the Parish – and everything in between. The questions were designed to enable a Conversation in three stages; and could be summarised as follows:

Stage 1) RECALLING OUR EXPERIENCES:

- What has been your experience of ‘journeying together’ these last eighteen months?
- How effectively has your Parish ‘journeyed’ with:
 - the poor?
 - the churchgoing?
 - those who are no longer churchgoing?
 - those who have never met Christ or his Church?

Stage 2) RE-READING THOSE EXPERIENCES IN GREATER DEPTH:

- *Communion*: What has the experience of ‘journeying together’ taught us about what it means to be Church? “When we say ‘our Church’, who is part of it?”^{vii}
- *Participation*: How does the Church ensure you are part of the ‘journey’? Whom do we need to listen to?^{viii}
- *Mission*: How do we choose priorities for mission? In what ways is our partnership with people beyond the Church developing?

Stage 3) GATHERING THE FRUITS TO SHARE:

- “Where, in these experiences, does the voice of the Spirit resound?”^{ix} What might the Spirit be saying to us through our reflection on these experiences?

- “What paths are opening up for our particular Church?”^x What steps might the Spirit be inviting us to take in order to make our communities more welcoming, inclusive and missionary?
- What “customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures”^{xi} may the Spirit be calling us to change?

The Syntheses gathered from every Parish, School or other community which engaged in such a Synodal Conversation yielded a number of striking statements which appear as quotes throughout the foregoing text.^{xii}

Experience: Joys and Challenges

Parishes were encouraged to engage with as many people as they could both within and outside of their community; to reach to the peripheries — to those of other ecclesial communities, to those of other faiths, to the poor, the marginalised. Area Listening Events included members of the Deaf community. There was a similar engagement with St Joseph’s Centre for Young People with Learning Disabilities. The Seminary and the University Chaplaincy both held Listening Events. LGBTQ+ members held Events in a central London Parish.

The response of Schools was impressive, engaging some 20,000 School students, parents and staff in Synodal Conversation: one School observed that



“Children loved their voices being heard; they felt passionate about having their say in the future of the Church.”

Some 7,000 Parishioners had engaged in the Synodal Conversations recorded in Syntheses received from 124 Parishes. Some 200 individuals took part in the Synodal Conversations for groups such as Ethnic Chaplaincies or the Social Justice & Peace Forum. However, the voice of other faiths and of other ecclesial communities was scarce — even though one parish did have an Ecumenical Listening Event.

Dominant among emotions at the close of the Listening Phase were relief and gratitude: relief that the experience of Synodal Conversations had been so much more fruitful than expected; and gratitude for a rich experience of sharing. What seemed to strike participants most forcibly was the quality of Listening experienced. This sense was heightened by the reports of people’s joy at being listened to:





"I'm 77 and no one has ever asked me about this," wrote one;

"Listening to others has had a positive and humbling effect on me and has strengthened my faith as a result" wrote another;

"a wonderful experience" and "heart-warming" was how others described it.

High Points and Low Points

The Listening Events had set out to be just that: true experiences of Listening. The use of a listening-piece served well as an aid to true Synodal Conversation. Particularly powerful was the quality of Listening at the Diocesan Gathering in the Cathedral. This Gathering was certainly a high-point in the whole process.

Experienced also as high-points were the two Saturdays when the Steering-Group came together to process the Syntheses received from across the Diocese. A significant moment — and one which was felt to be important ecclesially too — was when the Steering Group welcomed the Cardinal, as Bishop of the Diocese, to come and hear their reading of the picture that was emerging from the processing of the Syntheses.

But positive reactions captured by the Syntheses were matched by a degree of sadness and disappointment too — sadness and disappointment that more people had not engaged with the process. There was also doubt expressed in a number of Syntheses that the process would achieve anything.

Positively, it was noted that many thousands of adults and young people in Parishes, communities and Schools did engage. People came together in person as well as sharing in writing. For many this experience was said to be having an impact on their community life already. One parish shared that



"This synodal process has drawn us closer together and closer to God. Spiritual conversations are continuing regularly after Mass. More opportunities to pray together are being established."

Feedback: Surprising or Unexpected

Notable across the Syntheses was the impact of the pandemic. Beginning our Synodal Conversation with reflection on eighteen months' experience of pandemic yielded a great deal about the experience of Journeying Together as Church. Many had experienced the time of pandemic as a time of a renewed engagement with spirituality; it had been an experience of the Church entering people's homes and families through online Masses. People spoke of a sense of unity with the whole family of the Church, a feeling of being part of something bigger. There was the

discovering, rediscovering, of other aspects of faith too: in shared family prayer time, saying grace before meals, in the support of an online prayer group, WhatsApp groups, the rosary, reading and praying with Scripture. People shared that,



“My faith grew by being able to regularly attend Mass via livestream”;
““Visiting” churches online for Mass and hearing other homilies stirred up a desire for more understanding of scriptures.’

The Syntheses reported the rediscovering of how important service is to discipleship. Outreach to those in need was clearly a central focus for many parishes: recognising the isolation and needs of others, and responding. This found expression in Schools as much as Parishes: thousands of young people identified the significance of service in the Synodal Conversations they had in School. As one School expressed it,



“The pandemic has taught us the importance of others, of their company, compassion and love.”

It is significant to note what aspects of the Church’s Journeying Together were markedly less present in Syntheses received. There was little mention of Christ — surprising given the centrality of Gospel reflection encouraged by the Resources disseminated:



“Where was Christ in the Syntheses?” asked one of the Group Facilitators at the Cathedral event.

The comments collected on cards after the Feedback Presentation noted there had been no mention of migrants:



“refugees, yes; but not migrants”.

There was scarce mention of issues around the beginning and end of Life. There was little reference made to vocation, still less vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life.



The Pandemic — positive and negative impressions of the Church

Synodal Conversations were important for enabling people to express as well the challenges they had experienced in the time of pandemic. Some parishes remained well-connected to parishioners and people felt supported. Others felt their parish had effectively closed; it seemed that the priest withdrew and no support was offered. And there was sadness shared for and about those people who felt isolated, cut off from their community through 'oversight', digital disadvantage, age, or worry about returning during the early easing of restrictions. Some of the voices shared were heart-wrenchingly honest:



"I have no access to anything via TV or computer. I used to say the rosary to go to sleep," wrote one.

A significant number expressed disappointment that the churches were closed as required by law; and laid the blame on our leadership. They communicated the profound sense of loss they experienced at being separated from the Eucharist. By contrast, others experienced the lack of Sunday obligation as an opportunity to reflect:



"Is this an opportunity to reflect on how we live our faith more actively in the world?" one wondered.

Some of the sadness and pain encountered during the height of the pandemic remains. Some people have not returned. And there is a deep desire from others to see them come back, some people even blaming themselves:



"I took it personally that people didn't come back. What am I not doing well?" wrote one;

"There's a deep longing for social activities in the parish to resume and for opportunities to pray and to do good together", wrote another.

There was a strong call made to recognise the traumatic experience that many people went through, losing family members and being prohibited from being with dying family members. Some people recorded feeling very acutely the 'absence' of God in their lives; others that reconnecting with these people may be a great challenge. And yet, on the other hand, reflection on the pandemic clearly also inspired a greater positivity on the part of many:



"Before the pandemic I'd just come to Mass, not talk to anyone and leave quickly. Now I talk to everyone," wrote one;

"We still care. We want to be connected. We want the Church to thrive," wrote another.

Role of Priests

Reflection on the pandemic yielded a number of comments about how Priests had journeyed with them then — and since. People shared frustrations, even pain caused by Priests. But this was tempered by a sadness born from concern for their Priests, knowing they are often alone, perhaps without any support. It is clear that there is a deep love for Priests (and Deacons and Religious) of the Diocese. Yet expression was also given to the sadness and disbelief at the revelations of sexual abuse on the part of Church leaders; and the cover-ups which ensued. The pain, disappointment and blame were often expressed in terms such as that



“Church image became more important than integrity”;

“I have lost trust”;

“For me the hardest thing to fathom is how anyone called to live a religious life could ever justify the cruelty that took place.”

The woundedness of the people in Parishes and communities impacted by the knowledge that Priests have abused was clear. But deeper still was the plea for the Church to listen to survivors of abuse and to respond.

The love for Priests and the desire to have more connection with them was shared by Schools as well as Parishes. School leaders noted that Priests are often less visible, less connected, now than in years past.



Previously it ‘felt that the Priest cared to be in school, but now (one is) asking, “Why don’t the Priests come in anymore?””

There were a number of expressions of concern for Priests’ wellbeing:



“I honestly think that Priests are in a position where too much is demanded of them. Like any caring profession — dealing with the community is time-consuming and mentally and physically demanding.”

Unsurprisingly, there was also some reflection on the possibility of allowing married Priests; this seemed to arise from seeing Priests as overburdened and lonely. The suggestion that Priests should be allowed to marry was frequently noted.



Transparency and Inclusion

Linked to the sense of disappointment in Church leaders were expressions of a lack of authenticity and transparency at local level, captured in statements like:



“Church leaders are like untouchables. They are cut off from the laity”;

“We are excluded from decision making. Many good lay initiatives come to nothing”;

“I’m afraid our Parish feels fake most of the time. I’m sorry to say this but it’s been like this for thirty years plus”;

“Our Priest is constricted by Church leadership”; “There is a lack of transparency in the finances of the Church.”

Reflection on who was still missing after the pandemic led many Synodal Conversations to consider how they feel about those who were missing before — especially those who experience themselves as undervalued or unwelcome. Whilst diversity may exist in our communities, people shared that not everyone is properly included and valued. A significant area of concern shared here was the experience of the role and place of women in the Church. This was expressed by women and men, young and old, from both within and beyond the Catholic community.

Role of Women

People shared how women do a huge amount of work in and for the Church but go unrecognised. School students across all ages shared sadness, disappointment and even anger about the Church’s attitude to women, saying



“women are suffering in the Church”.

It was poignant to hear women and girls say how they do not feel included:



“I have a tension in me, as a faithful Catholic, every time I go to Church, as I don’t feel included”;

“Our children were brought up Catholic but now do not practise, because of the attitude of the Church towards women”;

“Why is it that women are still so unimportant, yet make up the vast majority of your congregation?”;

‘A girl in Year 7 shared that she had to move parishes as her Priest does not allow female altar servers’.

Whilst there was sharing about the consideration of women priests, and perhaps more so about women deacons, most discernment about the valuing of women was not focused on ordination.



"We dream that women may be more trusted, and their charisms used";

"We need to reflect on the power and gifts of women in the Church better"

... is the manner in which this aspiration of women's place being recognised was expressed for the most part.

The Syntheses give the impression there was little disagreement about the Church's attitude to women in the Synodal Conversations that took place. However, the Diocesan Gathering in the Cathedral did register some voices expressive of an alternative stance. Cards gathered up with reflections on the Feedback Presentation included the comments:



"We don't understand why people keep saying women are not valued";

"About women not valued in the Church — I personally do not agree, women are really valued."

Teaching the Catholic Faith

Comments gathered up in the cards at the Cathedral Gathering also made a plea for more teaching about the Faith:



"What needs more attention is Catholic teaching," said one;

"What strikes me is the need for formation. We're on the third or fourth generation of not very well catechised Catholics: what they don't have they can't pass on. There is a need for people to know not only what the Church teaches but why she teaches it," said another;

"(the) Church is the Body of Christ ... It has rules and regulations, set by Christ. We need to adhere to these. This has to be lovingly communicated," said a third.

The Syntheses too captured the tension between, on the one hand, a longing for the Church to be pure and not dilute its teaching, and, on the other hand, a sadness that the Church appears not to move with the times. It was noted:





“The Church is the mother of all her children and children should respect and obey their mother”;

“The pressures of ‘commercialism’ and ‘received wisdom’ from social media channels need to be counteracted with a stronger reiteration of Christian values.”

Here we touch on a significant question which was likely to arise as the Synodal process got under way — namely whether Synodal Conversations were supposed to treat of doctrinal matters.



“What is under discussion at Synodal gatherings are not traditional truths of Christian doctrine,” Pope Francis had said.”^{xiii}

And yet a Synodal process which asked what has been one’s experience of Journeying Together as Church was almost bound to include some consideration of what has been one’s experience of Journeying with Catholic Teaching.

Welcome Towards LGBTQ+, Divorced and Remarried People

This found particularly powerful expression in what was communicated from the many Synodal Conversations which touched on the Church’s welcome/perceived welcome towards LGBTQ+ people and those in different types of relationships, including people who are divorced and remarried, and single parents. Some of the strength of comment was captured in the following observations:



“The Church’s stance on sex and sexuality is alienating, is given disproportionate weight, and does not reflect core Gospel values of love, forgiveness, compassion, mercy and care for the poor and sick, and social justice”;

‘Every single student [in one school] mentioned LGBTQ+, women, divorced, single parents’;

‘Some young people spoke of family members who are part of the LGBTQ+ community and who(m) they worried would not be loved by God or accepted by the Church.’

For their part, those sharing as part of the LGBTQ+ Catholics ministry in the diocese noted that they appreciated being embedded in Diocesan and Parish communities and recognised the welcome that is given at the start of their twice-monthly Mass; but, beyond this, they said, it can still feel that they ‘are rendered invisible’.

Joys and Challenges Experienced as Church

A sense of belonging or otherwise was, understandably, a common and unifying factor as well in both reflection on the pandemic and also in the broader reflection on the experience of Journeying Together as Church. It was affirmed that there are Parishes and communities where there is experienced a deep sense of belonging, with opportunities for people to participate and engage in living their faith within the wider community. Key moments were often mentioned — both the times of joy, like Baptisms and weddings; and also times of sadness, funerals in particular — core moments when faith nurtures us, bringing strength and love.

The Syntheses did communicate a great love of worship and music - from right across the Church's tradition:



'Great joy from heartfelt worship of God with all the beauty our frail humanity can muster';

"Attending the Traditional Latin Mass means I have never been more engaged with my faith"; "The Praise Group we founded is uplifting, joy obviously present, as people spontaneously lift their arms."

But, by the same token, there was also heartache and disappointment shared about aspects of participation in worship; in particular, sadness at the lack of a real effort to ensure children and young people can participate in the Mass. There were people who were deeply saddened in their experience of being restricted from the celebration of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass; and those who shared experiences of tension between preferences for traditional versus more contemporary worship.

It was striking to hear from those who stated that they do not feel welcome or at home. One Parish Synthesis shared how the Church can feel like a 'closed shop' to many. This was reflected elsewhere:



"I feel very disconnected from the Church, but I still go every week to pray";

"As new arrivals, we went to the more 'local' church and were told that if we lived in our postal area we needed to go to another church";

"I didn't feel included. I came from another faith and got baptised, but only three or four people welcomed me. I thought I wasn't welcome, or that I had done something wrong."



A sadness about such a perceived lack of welcome was expressed frequently. Many felt that we have seemingly reduced our participation in the Church community to going to Sunday Mass and home again. As one parishioner reflected, perhaps it is in fact us, the ones who are going to Mass, who are missing from the wider life of the Church. However, there was also much shared about the Church as a force for good in the world. There were many examples given of the Church reaching out to the homeless, those in food poverty, and to the world in need overseas; and stories of Parishes, Schools and communities reaching out to their own:



“Our parish community is well served: the sick, the housebound, when someone is in crisis”;

‘There was one lady who was repeatedly mentioned by the students at St Joseph’s (Pastoral Centre for Young Adults with Learning Disabilities). The students shared memories of praying with her at the Saturday clubs and doing jigsaw puzzles, meeting friends, singing songs’.

For many, faith provides a foundation of guidance, of steadfastness, a moral compass. There is joy discovered in times of sharing faith and building relationships with others, including through ecumenical friendships. People expressed joy in the diversity seen across our Parishes and Schools, with different nationalities, cultures and different ways of celebrating faith and living Church. The experience of being able to attend Mass in their own native language, or feeling welcome as an immigrant into our churches was appreciated. Many communicated a feeling of oneness, of unity and community, of belonging. But many others do not see themselves valued or represented in their churches. For some, that is because the leadership seems disconnected from them, or the liturgy is not inclusive, or the art, architecture and culture is unreflective of them: the Steering Group were struck by the Year 6 pupil who shared that



“Whenever I go to church no one looks like me, and the images on the walls and windows — there’s no one who looks like me.”

Joys and Challenges Experienced in the Synodal Process

Synodal Conversation has itself been a revelation for a great number across the Diocese. Many have experienced it as the discovery of a new way of communicating with one another. The Area Listening Events were experienced by many as unique conversations; the Diocesan Gathering in the Cathedral as a totally unique Conversation. One priest was particularly affirming of the Cathedral event, saying,



"I have found the listening exercises so appropriate for the moment and people are now anticipating more to come. A lot was said about parish councils but, for us at this moment, this is a better way forward."

Synodal Conversations have also thrown up the marvellous diversity of the Church's make-up in Westminster. There is a sense that they have shown us ourselves in starker relief. The process feels as if it has deepened the bond between the Cardinal, the Bishops and the people. Synodal Conversations have been, many say, one of the deepest experiences they have had of Journeying Together as Church. It is as if the Synodal logo has come to life: we are learning to Journey Together; and realising we quite like it!

There is a sense that it has been quite healing too. The context for the launching of the Synodal Process was, of course, coming out of the pandemic. It has indeed been healing to come together and listen to one another about how we lived that time and how it made us realise what the Church means to us. Some spoke in their Syntheses of the Synodal Process as like a catharsis, a real contribution to the recovery needed after lockdown:



'Sharing experiences of pandemic in the synodal sessions was very moving and heart breaking. Tears were shed but talking about experiences brought a measure of healing.'

A good number have said how they have experienced this time of Listening as a time of heightened awareness of the gift of faith indeed, the gift of the Church community, and particularly of the gift of the Eucharist, as well as the richness of our worship and prayer. Of returning,



'One person shared that it was like preparing for First Holy Communion again: a rejuvenated faith.'

There was a sense that things had been stripped back by this process of Listening – stripped helpfully — back to the essentials: to spirituality, simplicity and service of others.

Sharing perspectives on sexuality and gender was experienced by many as emotional; and many found it to be both healing and sad. Similarly, it was felt to be both helpful and sad to hear in so many Synodal Conversations the cry for our youth to belong and be included and reached out to. Young people shared their own sadness. Some of them said they felt 'forgotten about' by their parishes during lockdown:





"I was very, very alone as an only child when my school and church were closed";

'Some students have still not returned to regular Church attendance and mentioned how they miss this sense of community.'

Assessment: Impact on Particular Church

It was also experienced as both helpful and sad to hear it said – and said often – that anyone who is different, with different life experiences, mental health issues, disabilities, may not feel included in the Church — the way our churches are not accessible to those who are deaf, those with intellectual disabilities, and perhaps even those who experience financial poverty; that we are not seen as a Church of the poor, but rather as a Church of material wealth.

Yet, it was experienced as both helpful and encouraging to hear of diverse communities across the Diocese reaching out to those who were isolated — like St Joseph's Centre working with those with learning disabilities:



'We endeavoured to keep in touch with all students throughout the lockdown and take into account each individual's likes/dislikes and hobbies ... some beautiful work was created. Some partnerships beyond the Church were developed with 'technology charities' in order to keep those vital links open with students.'

Our Schools were really quite prophetic about those who are missing from our communities, in their reflection on how sinners may not be being made to feel welcome. Almost every School shared this. One School put it this way:



'"Lost Sheep", criminals or people who have sinned and avoided Church may not feel comfortable if others know what they are like.'

In a similar vein, one of the most powerful submissions came from the Cardinal's Synodal Conversation with inmates of Wormwood Scrubs Prison, where



'the prisoners asked that the wider Church does not forget them'; and 'one inmate spoke of the regular letters he had received, throughout his nine-year sentence, from a parishioner of his home parish. He was much strengthened by a card he had received at this time, signed by forty parishioners, most of whom he did not know, assuring him of a welcome back.'

We heard many times from those who feel saddened that individuals from other ecclesial communities feel unwelcome, as they are not able to participate in Holy Communion at a Catholic Mass. Some people find this divisive, as one person shared:



“I don’t feel the Catholic Church is very welcoming to outsiders. I get the impression you would only visit the church if you were a Catholic. As a Christian I would like to feel more welcome.”

Participation and Decision-Making

Disappointment also surfaced when considering people’s experience of participating, or not, in how the Church makes decisions. Although some told of efforts in collaboration, they said they found this not to be embedded, and sometimes likely to be ineffective. Weak Parish Pastoral Councils were cited as examples of how we have not achieved meaningful co-responsibility yet — Priests acting outside of Parish Pastoral Council structures, rendering the lay people feeling nominal at best, or even hurt and overlooked:



‘There is a sense of conservatism within the Church which resists any change’;

‘There is too often a sense of comfort in familiar settings that can lead to a disregard for those on the margins who are truly in need.’

Reflecting on participation also led to a recognition that so much is undertaken by so few. There is usually a small group of people doing most things in our communities. It was felt that the commitment of volunteers is sometimes taken for granted or they are undervalued by the leaders. And yet there was a deep recognition that Priests and Deacons are burdened greatly.

Future Growth: Revised Priorities for Mission

In terms of how the Spirit is inviting the local Church to grow in Synodality, the overriding impression is that this first experience of Synodality has impacted deeply on a great number of those who took part. That we must act on what has been heard was the dominant response from the Small Group Facilitators at the end of the Cathedral Gathering:



‘Spiritual listening needs to be followed by spiritual action’;

“What do we do with our listening?”;

‘Listening is only part of the Synodal exercise; we need a response as well’.



Comments gathered up in cards included the statement:



'Discernment should become decisions, actions, implementation.' (sic)

The power of Synodal Conversation itself would seem to have registered significantly; and will likely engender a yearning for more such Conversation — particularly in the Parish. The healing experience of Listening itself is also evident: Listening to what the Church has meant and means to others may encourage communities to continue to reflect systematically on what the Parish is for and how to maximise its potential. Meanwhile, the sharing of pain — the pain around the place of women, the sense of place or a lack of place in the Church for the divorced and remarried, LGBTQ+ people, deaf people, young people, criminals, people of other faiths and denominations, and the feeling of many that they are not felt to belong in the Church as fully as they should, will likely spur deeper sharing and consideration of these realities at the local level. And discussion of how decisions are made and responsibility shared in the Parish will likely encourage a deeper Listening to one another, in some communities at least, about how responsibility for the Parish might be better distributed.

As regards next steps, we announced at the Diocesan Gathering that we would be carrying on the process on which we are embarked into a Diocesan Conference in 2023. Its aim will be to identify revised Priorities for Mission in the light of our experience of walking this Synodal Path. One important lesson we shall take from the process of these last several months is that the process towards such a Conference needs itself to be Synodal and above all an experience of Listening; another, that to be Synodal means to foster a true ethos of Accompaniment.

All to be Found in Christ

The Cardinal affirmed this latter in the address with which he closed the Cathedral gathering — that all that has been achieved thus far needs now to be borne forward into the “wider horizon of continuing renewal in the life of our Diocese.” He highlighted four points in particular to have emerged from the Synodal Path: firstly, the deep love for the Church to which it had yielded expression; secondly, the sensitivity shown towards those who are 'missing', who feel left out or distanced; thirdly, the need to listen to voices outside of ourselves; and fourthly - and this was his major point — that all is found in Christ alone.



“(Christ’s) presence is crucial,” he concluded. “His presence always remains. Without him, we are lost. We have talked about everyone being accepted. Our sense of being accepted as we are begins with him. He accepts us. Because he accepts us, then we can live. We have talked about being non-judgmental and offering forgiveness. Our experience and sense of being forgiven for what we have done is

rooted in him. He, the Christ, is the source of forgiveness. We find forgiveness in him. We have spoken of our dreams for the Church. Our sense of being encouraged in what we dream starts with the words of Jesus when he issues his invitations, 'Come follow me' or 'Come and see' ... All is to be found in him alone ... We can pray together that the Lord will bless us, sustain us and keep us close to him always," as we embrace the next steps along this Synodal Journey towards becoming the Church Christ yearns for us to be.

ⁱ Pope Francis, *Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People*, 3 Oct 2018

ⁱⁱ Preparatory Document, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*, #32

ⁱⁱⁱ c.f. Luke 24, 32

^{iv} *Novo Millennio Ineunte* #1

^v Preparatory Document, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*, #26

^{vi} *Let us Dream* 86

^{vii} Preparatory Document *ibid.*

^{viii} c.f. *ibid.*

^{ix} *ibid.*

^x *ibid.*

^{xi} *Evangelii Gaudium* #27

^{xii} Double inverted commas signify a direct quotation; single inverted commas signify a quoted statement

^{xiii} *Let us Dream* 84-85

