

Final Synthesis of the Synodal Process in Scotland



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

submitted by
Bishops' Conference of Scotland



1. INTRODUCTION: SETTING OUT ON THE SYNODAL JOURNEY

In response to the *Vademecum* sent to Churches in June 2021, each diocese in Scotland was invited to nominate a priest and layperson as the primary coordinators for their diocese. It was suggested that the lay person should be female and that there should be a core working group for each diocese. In the small dioceses, it was sufficient to have only two representatives. Training workshops, in which participants had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the proposed methodology for the process, were offered to the priests of some dioceses and to the parish contacts. Although a face-to-face participation at this early stage was desirable, due to the Pandemic it was not always possible. Much of the initial work in dioceses was carried out online due to the advent of the Omicron variant in Scotland in December of 2021. In this sense there was a real delay in what could be achieved before February 2022 when restrictions began to be lifted on indoor gatherings. Although the innovation and use of online technology was embraced throughout the process, it could not replace the need to gather together for personal encounter and prayer. Following the lifting of restrictions in March 2022, most dioceses endeavoured to bring the electronic findings to the table at parish and thereafter diocesan meetings. We were very grateful therefore for the extension in the Synodal process from April to August 2022 to enable these deliberations.

In order to assist the dioceses in their initial deliberations, the Conference organised an online colloquium with the participation of speakers from Scotland, Italy, England and the USA in February 2022. Cardinal Grech gave the keynote address. This event gave a good introduction and foundation to the hopes and aspirations of the synodal process for the local and universal Churches. The General Secretariat of the Conference held a meeting with the representatives of the dioceses in February to assess how each diocese was progressing and to share ideas. It would be fair to say that some dioceses embraced the Synodal Process at a much quicker pace than others and so this meeting gave an opportunity for diocese to share resources. One particular resource that was used widely was a questionnaire from the Diocese of Galloway summarising the main points of the *Vademecum* and highlighting the need for the responses to be expressed in a spirit of Communion, Participation and Mission. In other words, the Synodal Process should not just be a list of complaints or negative criticism

but rather a way of “doing Church” that shares a common vision prompted by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

As a Church, only one of our dioceses has carried out a Synod in recent years, that being the Diocese of Paisley. This concluded in 2017 and focused on the theme of the “New Evangelisation and the role of the Laity”. That process began with spiritual, catechetical and formational preparation. This is reflected in the current Synodal process and indeed every diocese in Scotland emphasised the need for each parish to gather in prayer, usually before the Blessed Sacrament and/or with *Lectio Divina*, before any discussions took place in a parish setting.

In addition to the more formal meetings of the faithful in parishes, each diocese encouraged outreach to those who have become estranged from the Church. This was conducted mainly by online questionnaires inviting everyone to share their experience of the Church and also the background to their distancing from the Church, whether it be for personal or more institutional reasons. Efforts were made to engage pastorally with the various dimensions of Church life in Scotland beyond diocesan and parish boundaries. Our head Prison Chaplain organised a series of small meetings in prisons. Our Scottish Catholic Education Service promoted the synodal process in all our schools amongst teachers and pupils and we have received many responses from schools. Catholic associations were also invited to make submissions. SCIAF, which is the main overseas development agency in Scotland, also made a response. Furthermore, we have received input from other Christian Churches and faith groups including members of the Jewish faith and friends from the Bahai, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh faiths.

It appeared to many initially that embarking upon the Synodal Process during a Pandemic was not the most favourable time to embrace such a milestone in the life of the Church. However, the diocesan syntheses of this stage of the Synodal Process could see in the Pandemic experience the first shoots of new ecclesial life. Many parishes and communities, unable to celebrate Mass and the Sacraments together in person, have discovered new ways of being parish, whether in online celebrations, reaching out to the most vulnerable members of their communities, providing foodbanks etc. Moreover, for the first-time new volunteers have become involved in the daily parish life. A new ministry of welcome was instituted in many parishes. Parish life, although diminished by the absence of Liturgical and

Sacramental celebrations, had provided an alternative way of 'being' and 'doing' Church. This would provide a firm foundation for the Synodal Process, an opportunity rather than an insurmountable challenge.

2. DOING SYNODALITY: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION AND MISSION

The *Vademecum* suggested that the three principal elements to shape the Synodal Process be Communion, Participation and Mission. Hence, the final synthesis of the Catholic Church in Scotland presents its findings according to these three dimensions of ecclesial life. Communion will express the major themes identified by each diocese- common concerns. Participation will focus on the particular contribution of a diocese or association or person that stands out for its inspiration and originality or critical thinking. Mission will outline the various proposals of each diocese to build upon the foundations of the Synodal process.

3. COMMUNION

3.1 General Comments on the Suggestions of the Synodal Office

Above all, the Synodal process was treasured for its humble and reflective methodology. Not merely listening but hearing the voices of all. Learning from the voices of our forebears and also anticipating the voices of the future. Often, in the past, the Church has not been good at listening to society or its own members. At times the Synodal language was not clear nor helpful. There was some concern that "inclusiveness" should not be defined by a secular narrative. We as a Church have our own narrative and tradition that provide us with a rich resource for understanding and engaging with contemporary language and its presuppositions. What was evident in the consultations was an over-riding love for the Church despite its weaknesses. The Abuse Crisis still pains all the faithful, especially survivors of abuse and their families. However, whilst continuing to strive for greater accountability and

transparency, there was an acknowledgement across the dioceses that the Church in Scotland has begun to hear the cries of injustice and hurt and is making efforts to bandage the wounds and, more importantly, to move forward in healing.

3.2 Celebrating the Holy Eucharist, the Word of God and the Sacraments

The People of God needs to be fed. At the centre of our Catholic faith we celebrate the sacraments, above all the Holy Eucharist. There was a desire from all the dioceses for a welcome ministry, quality liturgy, good preaching, liturgical music and lay participation in liturgical roles. Whilst stressing the uniqueness of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the celebration of Holy Mass in English, all but one diocese was open to celebrating Holy Mass in other rites if it is possible and practical. The request for such celebrations came from a minority of voices. In order for all to have a greater appreciation of the Mass, liturgical formation is required for both laity and clergy as the liturgy does not belong to the clergy but to the whole People of God.

There was a longing for the Eucharist to be more inclusive of those traditionally deemed excluded, for it to be seen as a remedy rather than a reward, so that the Eucharist becomes an ongoing experience in their journey of faith and maturing spirituality. As a Church, we wish to welcome those who are divorced, those who have had abortions; those of different sexual orientations, those who lack the inner conviction of realising that they have faith. None is to be ignored. The Church reaches out to everyone.

3.3 Appreciating the Clergy and Laity

Overall, members of the lay faithful are deeply appreciative and supportive of the clergy. It was felt that the clergy should be freed from the administrative burden of parish life to concentrate on sacramental and pastoral care. It was acknowledged that the character and leadership of the parish priest is paramount in how a parish grows in faith. Seminary training should assist priests in being leaders “with the smell of the sheep”. It was suggested by some that, as there is a need for more priests, therefore married priests and the ordination of women should be considered. This aspiration was considered by others as a quick fix and not addressing adequately the deep crisis of vocation in our

society nor reflecting the complementary gifts and talents of women and men. Equality does not mean doing the same thing. A clericalizing of the laity was a real fear expressed by some voices.

There was a unanimous view from all dioceses that the laity should be given far greater responsibility at all levels of the Church. This was expressed as co-responsibility, sharing the governance of the Church. A structure which is neither male-dominated nor authoritarian. The priestly, prophetic and kingly character of every member of the Church must be encouraged. This requires formation similar to the four dimensions of seminary formation, namely, spiritual/liturgical, pastoral, intellectual and human formation. It was recognised that significant investment would be required for this project.

3.4 Recognising the Role of Women

While every diocese acknowledged and celebrated the contribution of women in the Church there was common agreement that women must be given a greater voice in the Church. Although a small number of women religious continue to provide invaluable service in some dioceses, overall, given the decline in numbers of female religious, laywomen must also now take their place sharing co-responsibility for the Church, involved in decision making and even in seminary training. Some dioceses have already embarked upon this process of equitable partnership. The culture of decision making must change. This should be reflected in every parish by making the establishment of a parish/pastoral council with women and men, mandatory. The laity must be empowered.

3.5 Reaching out to Young People and those on the Margins

A real concern was raised about the absence of young people in many parishes. Despite the great efforts of our Catholic schools and their participation in the Synodal Process, it was clear that many young people, influenced to some extent by our secular society, regard the Church as hypocritical. Many young people were impressed with the Church's social teaching, its outreach to the poor, its call for social justice and caring for others and the environment. In the area of sexuality and sexual morality more needs to be done to present a vision of the human person and relationships to counter the secular agenda of individualism, to express the beauty of married love and family, of motherhood and

fatherhood, without condemnation of those who feel they are struggling to live up to the ideal, whether it be those who have suffered from broken marriages or those who live in same sex relationships. The Church must be seen to welcome all her children, especially those on the margins, to listen and accompany them. Nobody is excluded from the love and mercy of God. Most dioceses supported greater investment in catechesis and religious education both at parish and school levels. All dioceses wished to strengthen the links between parishes, schools and families. This includes support for parents so that they can hand on the faith to their children. It was suggested that young people need to “be” Church rather than just “doing” Church -i.e., being committed to social action. We need to involve young people in the liturgy, in prayer, in retreats, to share with them a religious experience. This is especially true in parts of the country where there are no Catholic schools.

3.6 Communicating the Message

Every diocesan submission criticised the lack of an effective communications strategy for the Church at local and national levels. The negative perception of the Church encouraged by the secular media is not being addressed because of our own failure to communicate the Good News effectively. There are many faith-inspired initiatives already happening in parishes and dioceses and at the national level which are not being reported or publicised. Social media must be embraced. Many Catholics lack confidence to speak out in our society because of lack of formation, lack of identity and negative criticism of the Church. The Church needs to instil confidence in all the faithful and give them a voice inside and outside the Church. Today much pressure is put on families to conform to the demands of modern life and this results in a lack of time available to participate in the life of the Church. Through good communication and social media, the Church can do more to reach these families and to invite them to participate more fully in the life of the Church.

The importance of Communication was also highlighted in relation to parishes sharing resources. One of the fruits of the Synodal process has been greater cooperation between dioceses, and between parishes at deanery level. More shared ministry would be welcome.

3.7 Fostering Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations

Without exception, every diocese is already engaged in ecumenical activities, although this can be variable at the local parish level. There was an openness to pursuing greater understanding with other Churches and other faiths, recognising the powerful witness of Churches being united as one voice and also of mutual relations with other faith communities. In terms of sharing communion, concern was expressed that the theology for limiting a sharing of Holy Communion was not being expressed clearly. It was proposed that other inter-denominational celebrations should be explored.

4. PARTICIPATION

Diocesan Proposals

Whilst the dioceses of the Church in Scotland were of one mind and voice in many aspects of the Synodal Process, they also made proposals which reflect the particularity of each diocese and its present situation. The following list represents the specific suggestions of individual dioceses that offer a different perspective on the Synodal Process.

4.1 The Archdiocese of Glasgow asked about the timing of when Sacraments should be received, especially in relation to the perceived absence of a Sacrament for young adults. Moreover, consideration needs to be given to the value of the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a better understanding of its value to the individual and to society.

4.2 The Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh highlighted the gap between the post Second Vatican Council Catholics and young Catholics today.

4.3 The Diocese of Galloway highlighted the different needs of the Church in rural and urban settings. In terms of reaching out to young people, it envisaged a mentoring relationship between senior and younger parishioners within parishes.

4.4 The Diocese of Motherwell wants a Church that can rise from being fearful to fearless in proclaiming the message of the Gospel - investing in young people, religious education, investing in the laity and communications. A new way of living and working as Church must flow from this.

4.5 The Diocese of Argyll and the Isles would like more faith-changing events - religious experiences. More transparency was requested in dealing with the Abuse Crisis. Like all the other dioceses the abuse scandal was mentioned. However, greater transparency was seen as helpful and a Truth and Reconciliation process one suggestion.

4.6 The Diocese of Paisley proposed a rethink about the sacramental practice of Confession. Regular assessment of pastoral practice should be exercised in parishes. Laity could be included in the selection of bishops. A communications strategy for both inside the Church and in the world should be planned.

4.7 The Diocese of Aberdeen was keen to build relationships within parish communities and particularly to find ways to reach out to families. They also hope to explore ways for parishes to collaborate in youth ministry to better meet the needs of the young people in the diocese and suggested a youth synod.

4.8 The Diocese of Dunkeld requested more gender inclusive language in the liturgy, greater accountability for finances and a deeper catechesis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

5. MISSION

5.1 Building upon the Synodal Experience

The final aspect of the Synodal Process is Mission. Where do we go from here? Whilst awaiting the next step of the Synodal Process - the Continental Stage - all dioceses made suggestions for how they can build-upon the first stage of Synodality in parishes and dioceses. Above all, dioceses and parishes want to promote a welcoming Church to those who consider themselves to be on the margins or

rejected by the Church. Most dioceses were made aware of the depth of talent already available in their parishes. It is necessary to encourage these charisms. A more coordinated approach is needed to include young people in the local Church and to give them a voice. Investment is required for training and forming the laity and encouraging them to use their gifts in the service of the Church. Regular listening sessions akin to the Synodal Process should be rooted in pastoral practice especially through parish structures. Religious education and the link between parishes and schools should be strengthened. There is a recognition that not one plan fits all parishes. A greater awareness of the Cry of the Poor and the Cry of the Earth was welcomed. Engaging with society is a two-way relationship. Supporting the poor, especially at this time of inflation and increasing prices, through parishes, SVP and foodbanks should be a priority. One diocese estimates that a quarter of all Catholics in the diocese responded to the Synodal call and this gives great hope for the future.

6. Conclusion

The Church in Scotland must be renewed *intra ecclesia*, within itself, but always aware of its outreach to the world and to civil society, even when core Christian values are rejected. In the dialogue between Church and society, there is at times uncertainty regarding what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church through changes in society and what the Church has to offer the world. The Abuse Crisis and hostile reporting of the Church have exacerbated people's lack of confidence in talking on matters of faith and damaged trust in the hierarchy. We must find new ways to express our faith without fear but with compassion and mercy. The Synodal Process has planted seeds of hope in the hearts of the faithful and in the Church in Scotland. We pray for its growth and fulfilment as we enter the next phase of the Synodal Process so that the Church can continue to grow as a caring mother, and a community of hope.

7. APPENDIX: Submissions made directly to the Bishops' Conference of Scotland

The Bishops' Conference received five submissions which are mentioned below. These express particular approaches to the Synodal Process and are signs of invaluable participation in the life of the Church in Scotland.

7.1 Scottish Prison Service The Lead Catholic Chaplain of the Scottish Prison Service underlined the inclusiveness of Catholic chaplaincy in the penal system. Synodality, similar to the opportunity to dialogue with people in prison, leads to encounter and often a religious experience. Restorative justice and seeking forgiveness is inspired by faith sharing. Working with other Church representatives and those of other faiths is expressed through friendship and mutual appreciation. The Church could be more involved in the release and rehabilitation of persons in the community.

7.2 Scottish Laity Network Although not an official group within the Church in Scotland, the Scottish Laity Network was in harmony with the deliberations of the dioceses, above all in exhorting the Church to continue synodal discussions and to carry out continual assessment of the Synodal Process. The setting-up of Parish Councils was also asked to be implemented in every parish following a pastoral plan which is not dependent solely on the mind of the parish priest. The Network's understanding of ministry and inclusiveness differed somewhat from the diocesan conclusions. The idea of a "Year of Forgiveness and Welcome" was a valuable insight and contribution to the Synodal Process. Equally the concern for a vision of *Laudato si* to hear the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor is at one with the national synodal process. Other concerns about the celebration and reception of the Holy Eucharist, the Abuse Crisis and working with other Churches and faith groups mirror the conclusions of the national Synodal Process.

7.3 Inter-Religious Dialogue Synod conversations were held by the *Committee for Inter-Religious Dialogue* with representatives from the Jewish, Muslim, Bahai, Hindu and Sikh faiths. There

was a real appreciation for the work carried out by the secretary Sr Isabel Smyth and the initiatives taken by the Catholic Church over the past twenty years. Moreover, the participants were grateful to Pope Francis for his love of humanity and his witness to inter-religious dialogue. At a local level, more participation was desired from parish priests and parishes to acknowledge the shared concerns of all the religious groups especially for young people. Greater knowledge and understanding of other faiths should be encouraged and also a willingness to confront together the pressing moral questions of our day. Similarly, a myopic view of faith amongst young members of all faiths, as a reaction to secular society, needs to be challenged. It would be worthwhile inviting more young people to become part of the inter-religious conversations and to celebrate together more often the feasts of each respective faith group.

7.4 Infertility A submission was received by a woman representing the plight of infertile couples and the promotion of the *NaPro* approach to infertility. She made a very strong point about the Church, priests and laity being more supportive of those who are unable to have children. Many other comments were made, reflective of the diocesan concerns of the National Synodal Process.

7.5 Christian Network Against Caste Discrimination The CNACD have a base at a Jesuit parish in Glasgow. The submission mirrored the sentiment of appreciation for the Church in the world and in the local community as stated in the diocesan submissions. It reflected on the positive experiences of the Pandemic in terms of bringing people together in solidarity to help those in need but also online exchanges and how faith was lived in the home during the lockdown. A grave concern was expressed for the failure of the Church in India to confront caste discrimination and also for the reticence of the Church in the UK to raise awareness about the issue. Catholics of South Asian and Eastern European origin deserve greater attention from the Church in the UK. The submission was indicative of the need for the Church to reach out to those who feel marginalised.