

Wrexham Diocese began to prepare for the 2023 Synod on Synodality at the annual “St Richard Gwyn Mass” on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 in St Mary’s Cathedral, Wrexham, when Bishop Brignall opened our diocesan consultation. Shortly after, the diocesan lead person gave an introductory talk across the Diocese which attempted to outline the meaning and principal dimensions of synodality as described in *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church* (International Theological Commission, 2018), and in the 2021 Preparatory Document *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission* together with its accompanying *Vademecum* (Handbook).

In particular the “positive attitudes” and contrary “negative attitudes” or “pitfalls” listed in the *Vademecum* were advanced as key principles to constitute the diocesan consultation as itself an exercise in synodality. Following these introductory sessions the consultation took place largely at parish level and among other interested Catholic groups and organisations, including ecumenical groups, with some individuals offering their personal perspectives.

**Highlights, positive elements and surprises.** At the end of the Consultation members of the diocesan synod team were able to report that after almost two years of Covid restrictions, which had drastically curtailed our liturgical, pastoral and evangelical activities, many church members embraced the opportunity to come together to discuss fundamental issues of Christian faith and to look to the future. Some used this opportunity to speak with lapsed family members and Protestant Christian friends to add their insights to the process. In other words the consultation process itself was experienced by most participants as a welcome and beneficial exercise.

Meetings were for the most part open, frank, friendly and good-humoured, characterised, in short, by a distinctively Christian love of neighbour. In some instances divided parishes were able to come together and achieve prayerful listening to one another. Discussions were wide-ranging and fostered the hope that synodality will provide, in the near future, a new *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* for our diocese, with its particular social, economic and cultural features and missionary challenges. In many places the consultation generated an enthusiastic belief that a more synodal attitude, and a greater degree of synodal working-together, will serve to strengthen our shared faith and the bond of communion that unites us as fellow-Christians.

A lingering Covid “stay-at-home” habit coupled with widespread indifference or a lack of understanding as to the meaning of synodality might have led to a negligible response. Instead, the level of interest and participation was surprising and heartening.

**Negative elements and difficulties.** It should be admitted, however, that, measured against the total numbers of Catholics in the diocese, only a minority actually took part in the process. Some people were indeed reluctant to come to public meetings while coronavirus variants were still circulating. Several parishes overcame this difficulty by inviting written contributions from those unable to attend meetings and by using Zoom gatherings as an alternative to in-person meetings. On top of this there were other difficulties. Participants tended often to focus on issues relevant only to their own parish or group rarely looking beyond the diocesan or national borders at the universal Church of which we are a small part. There were a few - thankfully only a few - instances of acrimonious dispute which failed to achieve the ideal of prayerful, charitable synodal sharing. Another difficulty lay in grasping the elaborate, puzzling language of the ten thematic questions as formulated in the preparatory materials. Some groups chose to set these aside and participate using other approaches, such as Pope Francis’ “Communion, Participation, Mission, Hope” framework, or their own summary of the questions asked.

At yet another level many participants feared that the hierarchy will dismiss their ideas and proposals, asking, with some weariness, “after all the talk will anything change?”. Others, fewer in number, worried that synodality will create a climate of endless discussion, debate, argument and division, which in turn will

undermine definitive Catholic doctrines and moral principles and risk causing the disintegration of the faith.

So a wide variety of positive and negative elements, reflections, ideas, concerns, hopes and fears all contributed to the communal spiritual discernment which took place by way of our diocesan consultation. The following synthesis of responses from our local church - our diocese - illustrate this reality.

A number of topics re-occur and appear in many of the Ten Nuclei themes. This is recorded and reported but not wanted to be a distraction from other less frequently mentioned issues.

## 1. COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

The first thematic question embodies the motif which participants were asked to keep in mind throughout the entire Consultation, which is also the essence of synodality: Christian faith and life is a *journey*, a journey made *with others*, who are our *companions* in faith within the communion of the Church. Christians by definition do not journey alone.

For most participants the space where this journeying together is realised is the parish community, with the Eucharist playing a key role as, among other things, a signifier of full belonging (see below). Many participants noted that in the various dimensions of parish life (spiritual, liturgical, pastoral, evangelical and administrative) there are *degrees* of companionship with each other, *different levels* of belonging and participation. As one group put it: we all journey together, but *at different speeds*.

A high degree of belonging, participation and companionship exists among those who have an added active involvement, and - to a lesser degree - those who come together every week for Sunday Mass. A genuine Christian *companionship* develops naturally from regular contact with each other and sharing or co-operating in these activities.

One common factor today which prevents a closer *walking together* is that, when a parish comprises different civic or geographical communities, cultural and linguistic communities, and the some who chose to walk alone or only with their chosen companions. There are, it was noted, many sick, housebound and otherwise lonely individuals whose situation keeps them apart from the rest of the community.

In many localities Catholics walk together with other Christians, in shared prayer groups or philanthropic endeavours, for example. But there was a widespread perception that the Church's leadership generally gives a low priority to ecumenical fellowship and projects.

*Growth in companionship*, many participants observed, requires active measures at parish level to create an inclusive, welcoming, accepting environment, and concrete steps to reach out to those whose circumstances – what so ever they may be - prevent them from participating in the spiritual communion of the parish as fully as they might wish.

Participants overwhelmingly acknowledged that there are groups of people who are, or who at least feel, in different ways, *marginalised* and *excluded* from the Church community, principally: non-practicing Catholics; teenagers and young people; divorced men and women who have re-married without an annulment; members of the LGBTQIA+ community, individuals suffering cognitive decline. Some commented that it isn't always evident who the marginalised are within and without the Church – they may not identify themselves and may prefer to remain peripheral. Three of the Church's sacraments, (Matrimony, Holy Orders and Eucharist) at least as with the traditional disciplines, understanding and celebration, were regarded by many as a cause of marginalisation, denying some individuals the possibility

of full companionship on the journey of Catholic faith. Even to the point of causing of revulsion against Catholicism on the part of those who are not Church members.

So a cluster of related issues revealed a substantial level of dissatisfaction with the tradition of Catholic sexual ethics and sacramental discipline, on the grounds that it unjustly excludes certain individuals from full participation in the life of the Church and as such can't be companions on the journey. These issues arose at the start, and at nearly every subsequent stage, of the Consultation.

Some participants of course were concerned to defend the tradition. They claimed that their commitment to traditional Catholic tenets causes *them* to be side-lined within the present-day Church. Their contributions advanced the argument: the Church necessarily has conditions of membership, credal and moral, established by Christ; a sweeping affirmation of modern secular ideas and permissive sexual values is irreconcilable with a life of authentic Christian faith.

## 2. LISTENING

A helpful way to illustrate participants' understanding of the second thematic question is to distinguish two aspects of *listening* within the Christian community: *horizontal* and *vertical*. The horizontal aspect acknowledges the value and the need to listen to each other, and indeed to other voices outside the Church, in wider society and culture. The vertical aspect refers to God's revelation of himself, his communication of his will to us in past salvation history, which continues into the present. The two dimensions are closely inter-related because God has always chosen, and continues to choose, to reveal his will to us by way of the actions of his Holy Spirit within the Church and through other channels - events and movements in the world in which we all live. Listening to each other and hearing God's communication accurately (and rejecting inaccurate interpretations of revelation) requires a constant shared spiritual discernment.

It would be fair to state (1) that this understanding of the two dimensions of listening was often implicit rather than explicit in participants' contributions, and (2) that sometimes there was a tendency to drift towards considering the horizontal aspect alone, to consider listening as a valuable practice in managing church discussions and debates, losing sight somewhat of the need to be always seeking to listen and discern what God, ultimately, may be saying to us.

Broadly speaking, and importantly, participants articulated the following views:

Listening, which is an essential component of the synodal path, is a natural human skill, acquitted by personal effort *and* a gift of supernatural grace, a kind of infused virtue. Listening entails entering into dialogue with others in humility, patience, open-mindedness, considering and reflecting carefully on the views expressed, and seeking to understand and empathise with the life-experience which has led to their conclusions. It entails a quality of spiritual sensitivity which recognises that, through another person or group, God himself may be speaking. Synodal listening is a facet of the theological virtue of love. Hence, some participants highlighted certain contrary vices which prevent Christians from truly listening to each other, for example: impatience, intolerance, unwillingness to acknowledge that others entertain valuable ideas, as we ourselves do.

Moving into particulars, participants observed that the Church is deficient in listening in many ways at the horizontal level. There was a widespread perception that certain groups - women, young people and ethnic minorities, for instance – and even the laity as a whole had voices which are frequently ignored.

Some secondary school pupils who took part in the Consultation offered the view that the younger generation is often “not listened to” within the Church but added that young people should take responsibility themselves for raising their voices. It should be noted that in response to the subsidiary questions about marginalisation and exclusion, those participants who are committed to maintaining traditional Catholic teaching against what they interpret as harmful modifications, and especially those who are attached to the Traditional Latin Mass, said that they felt particularly badly treated by the hierarchy, and by Pope Francis himself. They are saddened by a sense that their views are habitually denigrated, and their voices left unheard and unanswered.

Many participants referred to the vertical aspect of listening. They believe firmly that God speaks to us today and guides the Church community in our prayer, personal and liturgical, and in the Scriptures, especially as proclaimed during Mass, and even in the priest’s homily at Mass. The teen-aged participants observed that Catholics have a responsibility to form themselves spiritually by reading the Gospels. Many participants issued a plea that the Church recognise the various ways in which God is speaking to us through the “signs of the times” - movements and changes in broader society which indicate a clear direction of reform for Catholicism as already referred to above. Here there was a clear sense that church leaders are failing to listen to God, who is trying to tell them what direction he wants his Church to move in. Others maintained that God the Holy Spirit continues to speak and to guide the Church through the Church’s Tradition.

### **3. SPEAKING OUT**

Participants saw the key factors which enable or hinder Speaking as: personal courage or conviction, communication skills, knowledge of faith, opportunities to do so, facilities in which to hold meetings, reluctance of an institutionalised laity to contemplate change, fear of having one’s views and suggestions dismissed, and, increasingly, the use of accessible technology.

Speaking out and Listening are inextricably linked; they are two sides of the same coin. You can’t have the two proceeding at the same time, any more than you can see two sides of the same coin at the same time.

These days public debate, within and without the Church often seems to be characterised by discourteous speaking and little generous listening.

Reluctance to voice a view within the Church can arise from the feeling or past experience that one’s views will be dismissed or not even heard. Conversely, there were some very positive examples of parish open debate. Pope Francis’ papacy is, with this Synodal Process, recognised as itself being a significant contribution.

The Synodal Process will raise expectations that views, held by large numbers of Catholic laity, and becoming a populist norm, will either be listened to, or dismissed. There are fears that Catholicism will change in undesirable ways, and other fears that it will stay very much as it is.

In many parishes the structures for consultation and discussion didn’t exist and in others an attitude of deference to the parish priest as arbiter of decision making could restrict open and frank discussion.

This is not to say that there aren’t good examples of parishes and ample opportunities for an exchange of information on all matters. Poor communication within parishes is pointed to as a great deficiency, The view was expressed that at Deanery and Diocese level the laity are not involved significantly in discussions.

Digital technology has made communication much more accessible. This may not be so good for the older demographic but creates better opportunities for our youth for whom it is now second-nature and the norm.

Our relationships outside the church in the wider society are seen as either very low-profile or non-existent with respect to the local media. There is an understanding and an expectation that it's the Bishop, or other appointed officials (DCO, for instance) who have responsibility to speak on Church matters to the media.

There was recognition that clergy abuse scandals have been a terrible setback to the Church's ability to raise its voice in society, which the church has not recovered from. Catholics, laity and clergy, feel alienated by association and it has had a negative impact on the role, authority and relevance of the Church in societal and world affairs. There is a feeling that Catholics now keep their collective head down for fear of dismissal and accusations of irrelevance in a secular world. We no longer live in a world that values freedom of speech. Catholics are not seen as being very pro-active in promoting true Christian/Catholic values and only interact with the press in reaction to something, usually bad.

Besides the bishops, participants had difficulty recognising other spokespersons for the Catholic Community. The exercise of baptismal prophetic role by individuals in this area was not apparent.

#### **4. CELEBRATION**

One summary of parish responses stated: "If we listen, if we think, if we become still, if we take our time and if we open our hearts to what it is we seek then...prayer and liturgical celebration in our community are the source and summit of our Christian life. We are inspired by God's Word and fed by the Body and Blood of Jesus in receiving the Eucharist together. We are bound together and uplifted when we join together in community in our Church for Mass, finding comfort on our shared journey and a common life and purpose. There was a shared view that listening to Scripture and taking the Word of God into our hearts through the Holy Spirit is a source of great strength which affirms our faith and transforms our lives. It helps us to develop a deep and personal relationship with the God who loves us. It prepares us to receive Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, ready to go out with Jesus on our mission into the wider community and the world. It was felt that simply being at Mass and finding a quiet space, an oasis from the busyness of life is of great value to people. There was a feeling that it is comforting to be with others on the same road and that there was a sense of being bound together as a parish community through the Mass, prayer groups and liturgical celebrations."

"Whilst we all have different approaches to prayer and the liturgy, there was a shared view that our own personal preparation in reading and praying with Scripture prior to Mass and then having it read for us, helps us to understand the Word of God more deeply. Our inspiration comes from Scripture and, as Jesus tells us frequently to love God and our neighbour, love must be at the centre of all our decision making. We need time to absorb the Word that we have heard, to allow the Holy Spirit to help us to understand it. Listening then to a Homily which speaks to us in the reality of our lives, in a way that we can relate to today, is crucially important and gives us inspiration and hope. It helps us to discern how we can live our lives as Jesus did and hear His call to share in his mission by living them in love for God and each other."

The above quotation encapsulates many people's experience of Church. It implies that effort is to be made by each of us in absorbing and understanding the messages presented to us in Scripture. We all need to work at it.

Opinions were expressed in support of the polar positions of the traditional Latin Mass and a contemporary invigorating liturgy. Others are inspired more by individuals than formal worship.

Our spiritual life, individually and collectively should extend beyond Sunday and weekday Mass and in many parishes it does through particularly pious, formation and study groups. The place and importance of lay liturgical ministers as well as that other necessary involvement in maintaining the church as building and as community. Some called for inclusive language that is contemporary and meaningful.

Some groups spoke of much hurt and lack of understanding (through lack of explanation) at the cessation of lay-led Services of Word and Communion. They believed that there is much that this service can contribute to individual prayer and the life of the parish community in the absence of a parish priest.

This section became something of a repository for many issues covered more specifically in other sections, but which reflects how much of church and faith life is brought to the liturgy.

## **5. SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR COMMON MISSION**

Most participants recognised the importance of participating in the Church's mission in ways that are appropriate for them, although some found themselves able to participate in only a limited way, mainly by attendance at Mass. Nearly all respondents felt called to continue Christ's mission by taking Gospel values into their homes and workplaces and to offer their unique gifts in different ways. For some this means being actively involved in lay ministries. For others it meant engaging in various kinds of volunteer work, reaching out in different ways to help and inspire those around them, teaching Christian values to their children, being good examples of Christian values to their friends and acquaintances, or simply the gentle evangelisation of love. Many people long to contribute to the Church's mission but either do not know how or find insufficient opportunities.

Participants mentioned that their desire to proclaim the Gospel is hindered by pressures which make it difficult to talk openly with others about faith. The Church is portrayed negatively in the media. Scandals and the failure to address them adequately have caused harm. The Church and its leaders are seen as out of step with the rest of society. Materialism and secularism work against Gospel values. Others felt that we as a Church do not do enough to communicate our values and message to the wider public.

Respondents argued that for all the faithful to be able to participate fully in the Church's mission, able and well-prepared workers are needed. Many supported the ordination of married men to the priesthood, the training of lay people to celebrate Services of the Word and Communion and deliver homilies; increasing the number of deacons and the ordination of women deacons and priests: this would make the clergy more representative of the population, although a few strongly advocated retaining a male-only priesthood. It was widely recognised that laypeople will be called more and more to take some of the burden from overworked priests.

One obstacle to lay mission is lack of training, knowledge and spiritual formation. This lack makes them feel ill-equipped to talk about it with others. Some mentioned limited opportunities for children to attend a Catholic school, while others, including some children, mentioned a desire to know the Bible and the Catechism better through study groups and classes. Some believed that the bishops should educate their flocks in the traditional tenets of the faith. The Lay Ministry of Catechist established by Pope Francis was seen as a way for lay people and clergy to collaborate in the Church's teaching role.

The more specific issues raised were:

Again exclusion was now cited as an obstacle to lay missionary work and as a cause of sorrow and concern. Adding now there not being enough provision for Welsh speakers.

There was an almost universal perception that the Church lacks appeal to young people and does not do enough to cater to their needs or interests. The concerns of mission to, for, among and by young people was spoken of by many.

Numerous respondents stressed the importance of building a sense of parish community, if people are to be able to participate in mission, particularly after the ravages of Covid. Some churches are perceived as Mass centres and not much else. Parishioners often do not know each other well and cannot meet each other's needs or help each other identify gifts.

It was often felt that parishes need to be more welcoming and inclusive, to help heal rifts and divisions and to reassure those who feel marginalised to know that they are valued. The need to find and encourage

those who had stopped attending, for whatever reason, was frequently stressed. Parish Councils and other leadership groups were seen as important for building community.

Clericalism is widely seen as a factor that prevents people from fully participating in mission. The hierarchy was judged by many to be non-representative and out of touch. Laypeople often defer responsibility to the clergy. Effective mission requires clergy and laity to stand and walk together.

It was sometimes perceived that our Diocesan church does not speak out often enough publicly on social justice, political and environmental issues. Many people, including young respondents, have a passionate interest in these areas and long to be of help. The Church's social teaching is not well understood and that we are not paying enough attention to announcing the message of Pope Francis, and Gospel values in general, to the wider public. There was seen to be a place here for greater ecumenical working as well as with local and national elected politicians. A better use of the digital media was advocated.

Many participants observed that the Church supports its members who serve society through charities and other organisations by making parishioners aware of their work, by raising funds and supporting to recruitment schemes.

*'How is discernment about missionary choices made and by whom?'* was largely not considered.

## **6. DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

The vast majority of respondents suggested that there was relatively little dialogue within their parishes. They observed that the curtailing of social activities and gatherings after Sunday Mass, caused by Covid restrictions, meant that there have been no opportunities for dialogue and keeping in touch with others within the parish. The implication is that beyond social and after-Mass gatherings there are generally no recognised means of dialogue. Parish councils were referenced in only one of the responses to this question, suggesting perhaps that where these do exist, promoting dialogue is not seen as their purpose. There were occasional references to one-to-one dialogue with individual parish priests being fruitful, but there were further descriptions of experience in which dialogue, debate or questioning were not welcomed by clergy.

A few responses noted that the conversations sparked by the Synod exercise were a very welcome and much needed development, both for the Church as a whole and for their own parishes. A number expressed concern that if nothing comes from the conversations, parishioners could become disillusioned. They mentioned previous exercises which had generally not delivered change in the way people had hoped or anticipated, causing some scepticism about the current Synodal process.

Parish responses did not refer to collaboration with neighbouring Catholic dioceses, which is perhaps not surprising given the geography of our Diocese. A few mentioned that they had little or no engagement with neighbouring Catholic parishes. There were references to the decline of religious communities and mention of the roles which nuns had formerly undertaken in parishes. A number of responses cited parish or parishioner links with the St Beuno's and Loreto Spirituality Centres. CAFOD was mentioned in several responses, along with very occasional references to other Catholic organisations such as the Knights of St Columba. Only a small number of responses referred to collaboration with neighbouring Church in Wales Dioceses, and these suggested relatively little was known about the extent or nature of the relationships.

The few responses which addressed the issue of *divergence, conflicts and difficulties* reflected the belief that these elements of church life are generally not addressed within the Church, either locally or on a Diocesan and national level. Many referred to the complete absence of forums in which to debate, and also to the belief that our Church has a reputation of silencing, rather than encouraging, discussion. A number of participants felt sadness and regret that the outcome of any debates which do arise often leads to people leaving our Church.

The issues in both Church and in wider society which were regarded as needing greater attention were many those which have previously been identified.

It was clear from many responses that across our Diocese there are very many positive examples of local collaboration with other non-Catholic believers, and with those of no faith, through activities such as foodbanks, provision of meals, homeless centres and the work of groups such as the SVP. Most responses referred to *Cytun (Churches Together in Wales)*, with only a few noting that there was no current involvement. Many respondents saw joint Cytun activities as being very important in their local communities. For parishes engaged with other *faiths* through Cytun there was an emphasis on the importance of celebrating shared beliefs rather than focusing on differences.

Several responses expressed the belief that more dialogue with outside bodies would have a positive impact on the Church, and also on how the Church was perceived, as it was frequently mentioned that our Church is negatively viewed by many non-Catholics, particularly as a consequence of sexual abuse scandals.

## **7. ECUMENISM**

Parishes reported generally good relationships with members of other Christian churches, although many also highlighted the need for closer and more regular working with other denominations. As one submission recorded *"We are all followers of Christ: what we have in common is far more than that which divides us"*. Many reported having built and continuing to share friendship and joy in our common Christian faith, describing it as a respectful journeying together that focuses more on what unites us and less on what might divide. Some felt that Catholics could be more welcoming and have greater openness to other Christians; others that fellow Christians had gifts to offer us. The role of CYTUN (Churches Together in Wales) in local ecumenical activities was highlighted as important by many, either celebrating the continued sharing with other churches that is already happening or stating an urgent wish that membership of the local CYTUN by the parish be revived or initiated. As one parish reported *"More cooperation is required if our evangelism is to extend community wide"*.

Parishes and individuals reported sharing of prayer and practical activities and initiatives in social care of one sort or another, also set piece witness, ie. Good Friday walks, etc. Less so was faith discussion or joint Bible study mentioned.

A number of difficulties were noted and the presence of mutual suspicion between Catholics and those of other denominations; there is a need for prayer and a willingness to overcome these difficulties.

For the future, there is a desire to build on positive ecumenical foundations, actively looking for opportunities to deepen our relationships and for ways to walk together. This involves continued prayer and conversion of heart by us all, as well as practical steps. Some buildings are already shared; exploring this option elsewhere might make funds available for people rather than buildings. As Christians, we experience many of the same joys and difficulties so increased dialogue and joint mission to the world could be fruitful, both locally and for wider church. *"We should use our collective Christian voice to speak up in society and the world"*. *"There is only one God and all the rest is detail"*.

## **8. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION**

This section attracted a very large number of responses. Much of the desire expressed for leadership from our bishop and for a more synodal church focussed on this question. It was impossible to do justice to the responses on one page.

Lay people are aware that the Pope and the Vatican try to set priorities for the church. There was little awareness of how any such priority setting happens at a diocesan level although hope was expressed that a more synodal church might change this. With some exceptions, parishes that have a parish council use these

mainly for practical matters rather than mission; some parishes have no council. Many pointed out that there is no clear mechanism for lay people to be involved in the setting of priorities and that important information is often not shared with lay people, for example, *“information about the current state of diocesan finances, yet the diocese depends on its parishioners.”* The issue of discernment was raised as important, that is, listening to God as well as to each other. *“We need to discern our way forward and to know who needs to be involved, using everyone’s skills, including the laity”*. This discernment is seen as a prerequisite in order to navigate openness to change and to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, while keeping to the truths of our faith and tradition. Many said that the next steps were to enable greater participation of the laity in the governance of the church by providing places and situations where their voices can be heard and where lay people can be part of decision making in areas that affect them in their life of faith.

Authority is exercised in the local and wider church in several ways, with strong voices raised requesting changes in the style of leadership, and the exercise of authority and governance, so as to promote a more synodal church.

Authority as inspirational leadership was seen as vital to the future of the church, particularly for a greater sense of mission and evangelism. The prophetic nature of Pope Francis’ interactions with poor and marginalised people are seen as a sign of hope. His encyclicals provide new and important ways for Catholic Christians to join with and share a common purpose with all people of good will. *“Evangelii Gaudium is a gloriously joyful, inspirational read that makes us want to leap into action”* *“Laudato Si – care of our common home - helps us engage with our young people and with those in our secular society whose concern for the environment and our world is strong”*.

Authority is needed to guard and teach the truths of the faith; this role of the bishops was seen as most important in the life of the church. A few spoke of *“misguided compassion”* and *“secular values”* that need correction by those in authority.

Authority was frequently cited as the use of power and the current style of leadership and governance in this area widely perceived as no longer helpful, citing clericalism. Mention was made of the concept of *“cultural humility”*, meaning that those with power in an organisation recognise that their viewpoint and mission will be enhanced by embracing the insights of others in subordinate positions - in this process, those of the laity. There was reference to the lack of involvement of lay people in church governance and the lack of transparency in how appointments and dismissals of any that are involved are made

Authority was seen as the ability to take decisions, but there was uncertainty about how governance or accountability were ensured. Many submissions said the use of this form of authority without adequate listening to those affected was problematic in several areas.

*“We feel that teamwork is often reactive to situations, not proactive to inspire”*. Authority is always vested in the priest by Canon Law and the diocese, so teamwork and co-responsibility can only happen when there is an openness by the priest to work in this way and members of the laity are willing to take on responsibility.

It is unclear to many how those in authority in the church are held accountable, at parish, diocesan or national level. Governance appears largely mediated through the church authorities so one would assume evaluations are conducted in the same way

Fruitful experiences of synodality at the local level: Most people felt that sharing at the Synod meetings and the ability to contribute in writing were a positive development in their faith experience. *“When we can speak about our faith as adults, sharing is fruitful”*. Some expressed the view that, whatever happens at national and international levels, the synodal process should continue in the parishes and diocese because it would be beneficial to our communities. There was great hope that the fruits of synodality would be a vibrant church with more participation by the laity. Many expressed this as *“the voice of the Holy Spirit animating the church”*.

The function of synodal bodies at the level of the local church was widely seen as inadequate for the challenges facing our church and its mission, and the need for meetings where lay people and clerics share with a view to responding to those challenges was seen to be important in most submissions.

*“We all want to enrich the life of Church and the Diocese for the greater glory of God.”*

Most of the submissions looked forward to new synodal pathways opening up to enhance leadership, authority and participation. *“We hope that the Church will embrace new governance models which allow both Clergy and Laity to serve the Church in a spirit of openness and co-operation.”* Others said *“We dream that the church will come to represent fully all of society. Without this it will not, today, achieve its full mission”*. Some of the developments asked for by the lay people of this diocese require consideration and discernment by the whole church, but as one report stated, *“with synodal, holy listening and discernment led by the Holy Spirit, I pray that a new energy within the Church will be unleashed as a result of the Pope’s call for worldwide participation in the Synod Process, thereby creating a new millennial future for Catholicism.”*

## **9. DISCERNING AND DECIDING**

In a synodal style we make decisions through discernment of what the Holy Spirit is saying through our whole community

*A What methods and processes do we use in decision-making? How can they be improved?*

Responses did not often address the generality of this question. There were some responses which simply stated that people had no idea what methods are used in decision making. Others stated that decisions were made by the hierarchy: priests, bishops and the Vatican “even in things that are properly the lived experience of lay people”, without considering the actual process. A tiny minority of responses showed awareness of previous synodal decisions and the documented arguments contained in papal letters or encyclicals and that they understood the thinking behind them. One view was that the criteria for reaching decisions must be wholly justifiable. There was some concern that previous Synods e.g. on the Family and Young People have never been adequately communicated to the People of God. The main suggestion of ways to improve the process would be to improve on listening and collaboration with the laity.

*B How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchical structures?* This was an aim supported by the overwhelming majority. “The need for collaborative processes to be established which would involve envisioning and empowering people to be part of a consultative, collaborative community. This would involve delegating power to enable discernment of the Body to discover the mind of Christ together, rather than cascaded down from on high”. There were many calls for the Church to become more democratic, while others were concerned by the flouting of the parameters of the synodal process.

Two levels were discussed in the main, parish level (see C, below) and Diocesan. Many lamented the lack of Diocesan communication and discussion for, deanery councils. Some felt that the bishop could be contacted directly, others that the lack of formal structure makes inaccessible. With a proposal for a Bishop’s Council involving clergy, religious and lay members. Video conferencing would alleviate travel

*C Do our decision-making methods help us to listen to the whole People of God?* There was an almost universal call that the whole people of God be listened to. This was seen as a fulfilment of Vatican II by some. “If the laity are better informed about decision making and more involved in it, they may be more prepared to get involved in Church activities.” It has been noted that this Synod is unique in the experience of our laity. Most understood that the input from the People of God should start at parish level – although there are possibilities at the diocesan level, as discussed in B, above. There was discussion concerning the as to the right way to involve laity and hear their voices. It was widely felt that parish councils are an absolute necessity and should not be convened or abolished at the whim of the parish priest.

It was noted that quite often inclusion relies on the relationship between parishioner and priest. Some priests find it difficult to relate to women, consequently those voices are not taken seriously. Some felt that “in general, there is no listening to the people of God”, but most seemed to think this was due to lack of any mechanism rather than by intent.

*D What is the relationship between consultation and decision-making, how do we put these into practice?* Again, there was an almost universal consensus that there is little consultation and that, on the very rare occasions this happens, it does not contribute to decision making.

*E What tools and procedures do we use to promote transparency and accountability?* The most frequently raised issue impeding transparency was poor communication. Submissions stated that the laity are simply not informed of what is happening or why. The particular issues raised in this context were parish and diocesan finance, parochial matters and safeguarding.

On issues such as dogma and doctrinal, explanations and reasoning given was often in language and concepts not readily understandable by the majority of the People of God. This was also said of the Synod questionnaire itself.

*F How can we grow in communal spiritual discernment?* Through the power of the Spirit in prayer in all its forms, scriptural study and the Synodal process itself. “Pray and expect an inspiration.” This was tempered by doubts that the Church will really hear the voice of the Spirit in the People of God. A need for greater understanding of the Gospel and Catholic doctrine was expressed, explicitly or implicitly. Some felt that Church teaching is non-negotiable, but most submissions thought that certain teachings should be reconsidered for the modern world.

There is not universal agreement on whether the Spirit has been listened to in the past. There are individual voices which doubt the validity of this Synodal process. This either because there are dangers of a lack of discernment in the uninformed laity rather than from the Bishop himself or because the Church is ceasing to be relevant/losing touch with the modern world.

## **10. FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY**

A large majority of participants viewed the idea of synodality favourably while acknowledging that it is a novel concept and the precise details of a synodal *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* are not yet fully developed – it is a “work in progress”. There is currently no formation in synodal attitudes, among the laity and in priestly training, so this must now begin. Some argued that bishops have the main responsibility for forming their dioceses in synodality.

Many participants stated that synodal working in practice will require an end to the “top-down” model of church leadership and greater involvement in decision-making by the laity, through regular parish, deanery and diocesan councils. Lay pastoral, liturgical, catechetical and evangelical ministries should be promoted. This would draw all parts of a diocese together more closely as a Christian family.

Some parish groups valued the Consultation as an exercise in synodal working-together (especially after the negative impact of Covid restrictions on parish life and worship) and now aim to continue in a synodal spirit within their own parishes. Many believed that synodality will encourage Catholics to collaborate with members of other churches, and with other non-church groups. Some thought that, handled correctly, synodal working will help manage necessary change in the life of the Church and unify Catholics of “traditionalist” and “modernising” viewpoints, which often oppose one another. Synodality has the

potential to create and deepen a real sense of togetherness and communion based on our shared faith in our parishes and in other Catholic groups.

In response to this question a significant number of participants spoke of the need for faith formation, adult catechesis, liturgical and spiritual formation. There was a hunger to deepen faith by way of talks, lectures, possibly on-line courses, explaining Catholic doctrine, morality, spirituality. As some remarked, Christian faith and life involves lifelong learning, and the focus should be “the main message of Christ” and the practice of discipleship in our contemporary context.

Some believed that the essence of synodality is a new leadership style by the Church’s pastors and a new, more equal and co-operative relationship between clergy and laity – it doesn’t involve creating a new religion. While some looked forward to a more democratic climate within the Catholic Church, others highlighted the limitations and imperfections of democracy as a political system: majorities are not always right, and those who are most skilled in lobbying tactics and the art of persuasion can influence the whole community in their own desired direction. Finally, throughout the Consultation it was frequently recalled that, above all, synodality means communal Christian spiritual discernment in order to submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But this is not always easy to identify and therefore requires constant prayer, humility, openness of mind and heart and the distinctive Christian love which is imparted to us by God’s grace.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Diocesan Synod Team would like to thank, very sincerely, everyone who dedicated time and effort to participating in the Diocesan Consultation. The Consultation yielded a rich variety of sincerely held views demonstrating how precious the Catholic faith is to them and how important it is in guiding their daily lives.

We note that the majority of Catholics living within our Diocese, practising and non-practising, did not participate in the Diocesan Consultation. It is not possible to speculate on the motivations for this non-participation, which are doubtless many and varied, but it means that many voices have not yet been heard and it is important to foster conditions that encourage them to speak out in the future. We are also conscious that the limited period of time given for the Consultation hampered efforts to include the voices of non-Catholic Christians and voices from the wider community. Again, it is important that they should be invited to contribute to all future exercises in nurturing a more synodal Church.

As Synod Team our understanding of the Consultation is that it was the beginning, not the end, of a process of synodal working, co-operating, listening, speaking out, prayer & spiritual discernment in our Diocese. The Consultation has been a first initiation into synodality as a way of becoming more sensitive and responsive to God’s continuing communication to us.

Hence, having completed our work, we recommend that a synod be held in the Diocese of Wrexham, to further air, explore and illuminate the issues that arose, to strive to heal the divisions which exist, and to create a climate in which synodality becomes constitutive of the local church, in keeping with Pope Francis’ objectives and the objectives of the 2023 Synod.

*I add my thanks to that of the Synod Team for the participation in the consultation and for the many submissions, and to the Synod Team for their enthusiasm and work to engage and support parishes in the process and then to collate the response of which the above is a sample which I hope is representative of the many views and diverse views expressed.*

*✠ Peter M. Brignall, Bishop of Wrexham*