

Listening Exercise Into the Future – 3

Introductory Paper to the Listening meetings

Before I say anything else let me say there are no fixed plans which I am going to roll out. Nothing is decided. In *Into the Future 1&2* I had intentions and something of a schedule, some of which has been carried through, but circumstances have so changed in the last six years I cannot give a definitive plan as to what changes will be made or when, but when those particular circumstances arise there will be a local consultation. Please remember though that everyone can make decisions, but only I can take them. Please remember too that it is now over twenty-five years since Bishop Edwin initiated a process of consultation regarding closures, amalgamations and rationalisation of the parishes in the Diocese and that at a time when there were three times the number of participating lay-faithful in the Diocese.

I began these meetings not initially with prayer, but the very intentional placing of a book of the Gospel before us, a reminder that Jesus our Saviour, the Son of God, the Word made flesh is our inspiration and is present among us. It is in his presence we have prayed and now speak in order that his body the Church in the Diocese of Wrexham may have a fruitful life and live not for itself, but for the evangelisation, the gospeling of the communities and the world of which we are part and live our lives.

The purpose of these meetings for us all is to hear and listen to one another as to how the mission of the Church might bear fruit to the glory of God and the fruitfulness of the vine.

At this point in our conversation, the consideration is of the bigger picture than individual parishes or churches and I mean by that the very way of life and even existence of the Catholic Church in North Wales. I have given the data and I don't intend to rehearse it again; to the best of my knowledge and in all honesty it is correct and tells its own story. It is of course the way that we discern that story that is important. What I am asking of these meetings is that each has the opportunity

within the limitations of six open meetings and the opportunity to make written submissions to consider how best we, the Church here can live the mission of Christ's faithful. Put simply, 'what can I do as part of the Church to enable others to find life in it too?' We cannot be concerned here with one parish or community or another, because the factual circumstances of a community in one part of the Diocese affects the life of all others. There may be the sickness of a priest, a retirement or death in one place that necessitates the transfer of a priest across the Diocese. However good a plan we have, none of us can predict or foretell what is to happen next year, month, week, tomorrow or even tonight. A parish may have a potentially huge repair bill for a church building, and these things come now in 10s of thousands not a couple of hundred pounds. What if that community has no way of raising that money? Much of North Wales has declining population, the Catholic community is not immune to that and so at what point does a parish have to be amalgamated, losing a resident priest, or even be closed? And that may not resolve the problem for the Diocese as if the church is a Listed building we have to maintain it regardless of how much it is used. In all of this no one is being blamed and I don't want to look to the past, perhaps not even to the present, we need to look to the future.

Looking to the future means looking at ourselves as to how we are able to make the Body of Christ live in this place.

A dictionary definition of the verb to discern is to perceive clearly with mind or senses, to make out by thought or by gazing, listening etc., especially to have quick or true insight. (Quick here being used in its archaic sense of, 'living').

It is that bringing together of the material or temporal with the spiritual or eternal that is the stuff of discernment, the discovery of and the meaning of the Creator's will or the Divine intent for creation, or the creature or human, and doing it.

The words addressed to the multitudes by Jesus are as telling to-day as then when he says, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'a shower is coming'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be

scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time." (Lk.12.55) The problem we have is that of knowing how to interpret the present time and more especially to be able to do so speedily.

The allegory of the vine is to be found not only in the Psalm we prayed but in the prophet Isaiah (5:1-7) and on the lips of Jesus in Matthew's (21:33-43) and also John's (15:1-11) gospel as we have heard.

As we know the Church works where the unit for the measurement of time, is the 'generation' rather than decade and certainly not year.

25th January this year marked the sixtieth-fifth anniversary of the first announcement by Saint Pope John XXIII (1959) of his intention to summon a Council. It was to be almost three years before the Church's Twenty-first Ecumenical Council, the first since Vatican I of 1869-70 was convoked. Pope John in his Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis* on 25th December 1961 formerly called the council and nearly another year passed before the Council that became 'Vatican II' opened on 11th October 1962. When he made the announcement in 1959 Pope John had been Pope for just nine days. His style was simple and informal, making unexpected appearances in the churches and streets of Rome, by visits to hospitals and prisons and particularly by his railway journey to Loreto and Assisi. The tone of Pope John's pontificate from the outset was one of pastoral concern, conscious of a world in need of the medicine of mercy. He wanted renewal of the Church, an open approach to the modern world and to other Christian communions; an end to ecclesiastical apartness and triumphalism; a renewal which had at its heart Scripture.

In his opening address [*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*](#) ("Mother Church Rejoices") given before the Council Fathers and representatives of governments and others, he criticized the "prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster" for the church or world. He spoke of the challenge to integrate faith with public life. He said, and I

quote: 'What is needed at the present time is a new enthusiasm, a new joy and serenity of mind in the unreserved acceptance by all of the entire Christian faith ...' It had been sixty-five years since the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) of Pope Leo XIII in which he advocates a greater scholarship, reading, meditation and explaining of the Scriptures. This was a pioneering document that outlined new, broader minded principles by which the Catholic Church should interpret the Bible. This encyclical was commemorated and celebrated fifty years later, in *Divino afflante Spiritu* (Sept. 1943) of Pope Pius XII who urges the use of all modern scientific methods: archaeology, ancient history, the study of ancient literature and its forms to contribute to a better understanding of the Bible; as well as a greater use of the Bible for spiritual profit.

It was in this and other regards of the Church's life in a changing world that Angelo Roncalli (b.1881) had lived and exercised his priesthood and episcopacy. With hindsight therefore his historic decision to call a Council of the Church is perhaps not so surprising. As we know the Second Vatican Council took place over four sessions from October 1962 to September 1965 and was formally closed on 8th December that year.

One of the fruits of the Council was the establishment by Saint Pope Paul VI of a permanent Council of Bishops for the continuance of the ideas, initiatives and ideals of Vatican II. 'Its proper name will be the Synod of Bishops.' (Paul VI Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo*).

Since then there have been twenty-two Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops and a further seven Regional Assemblies. The word 'synod' having its roots in the understanding of journeying together along a way. Pope Francis called for a reawakening of the synodal process in the life of the Church 'inasmuch as the Church is nothing other than the 'journeying together of God's flock along the paths of history towards encounter with Christ the Lord.' The most recently completed Synod of Bishops was that in October 2018 when the focus was on 'Young People, Faith and Discernment'. With the active participation of young people in the Synod, that

characteristic of 'walking together' in the life of the Church was brought to life in a way that was unknown to us in the past.

From the calling for a Council, to the participation of young people, lay people in the discernment processes of the life of the Church has taken sixty years to make the journey. A journey that has demanded, a huge amount of courage and prayer, openness to the Spirit and a renewed awareness of God speaking to his people through the Scriptures and especially by the 'Word made flesh who dwelt among us'; and I hasten to add, by a pope who is not dis-similar to Saint Pope John XXIII in many ways.

Now as we know there is another Synod and of a new model again in progress with the first session having been in October 2023 and the second in October this year. A synod on the very subject of Synodality into which local, national, regional and continental churches have made a contribution.

Additionally Pope Francis has given us clear direction in his Encyclicals: *Lumen Fidei* (The Light of Faith), *Laudato si'* (Care of our common home) and *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity And Social Friendship). Also the Apostolic Exhortations: *Gaudete et exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad) On the call to holiness in today's world; *Amoris lætitia* (On love in the family); *Evangeli Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) On the proclamation of the Gospel in To-day's World and *Laudate Deum*: To all people of good will on the climate crisis. And the Apostolic Letter: *Misericordia Misera* (Mercy with misery) at the close of the Extra-ordinary Jubilee of Mercy. These are the themes of reflection and action that the Church must follow and act upon having to discern the right way. Scripture reading, faith, mercy, the environment, relationships and family life are the topics upon which we are to reflect in our consideration of the future of the Church of Wrexham

In his Apostolic Constitution (2018): *Episcopalis Communio* (On The Synod Of Bishops) P.Francis writes: '... the Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for *listening* to the People of God: "For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening: to listen to God, that with him

we may hear the cry of the people; to listen to the people until breathing in the desire to which God calls us". (N.6)

'During every Synodal Assembly, consultation of the faithful must be followed by discernment on the part of the Bishops chosen for the task, united in the search for a consensus that springs not from worldly logic, but from common obedience to the Spirit of Christ. Attentive to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God – "which they need to distinguish carefully from the changing currents of public opinion" – the members of the Assembly offer their opinion to the Roman Pontiff so that it can help him in his ministry as universal Pastor of the Church. From this perspective, "the fact that the Synod ordinarily has only a consultative role does not diminish its importance. In the Church the purpose of any collegial body, whether consultative or deliberative, is always the search for truth or the good of the Church. (N.7)

That is true of this process too

'The Synod of Bishops meets in various types of gathering. ... Each Assembly, whatever its format, is an important opportunity for collective listening to what the Holy Spirit "is saying to the churches" (*Rev 2:7*). In the course of the synodal deliberations, then, particular importance should be attached to liturgical celebrations and other forms of common prayer, so as to invoke the gifts of discernment and harmony upon the members of the assembly. It is also right and just, following an ancient synodal tradition, that the Book of the Gospels be solemnly enthroned at the start of each day, symbolically reminding all the participants of the need for docility to the divine word, which is the "word of truth" (*Col 1:5*)'. (N.8)

It is that same listening for the Word and discerning that Word that all of the Church must be attuned and upon which we are to reflect in this Diocesan exercise. In a Christmas message last year P.Francis said "... we need to listen to the message of the God who comes to us; we need to discern the signs of his presence and to accept his Word by walking in his footsteps. *Listen, discern, journey*: these three verbs can

describe our faith journey and the service that we offer ..." and "It takes courage to journey, to fare forward. It is a matter of love. It takes courage to love."

"... may we cultivate the hearing of the heart and serve the Lord by learning to accept and *listen* to one another. Let us practise *discernment*, in order to be a Church that strives to interpret the signs of history in the light of the Gospel, one that seeks solutions that communicate the Father's love. And let us always keep *journeying* forward, with humility and wonder, lest we fall into the presumption of thinking we have arrived, lest the desire for God fade from our hearts."

(cf. Christmas Message of P. Francis to the Curia 2023 *Listen, Discern, Journey*

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/december/documents/20231221-curia-romana.html>)

The very real issues we have to face are those of keeping our communities together in prayer and worship. Now in this Year of Prayer before the Jubilee Year next year we have the encouragement and opportunity to explore and develop within our parish communities the Liturgy of the Hours in public as well as in private, prayer for which an ordained minister is not needed, and texts are easily and readily available at little or no cost. It is part of the Church's corpus of Liturgy over and above the treasury of devotions and pious exercises.

Secondly, there must be a better provision and take up of adult formation for the development of our individual faith not least that parents can be the first and best teachers of their children in the ways and knowledge of the faith. To this they commit themselves when asking for baptism for their children. Formation must also be extended to liturgical ministers and I include here a new provision- ministers who will regularly, or as regularly as needs be lead in part or in full the funeral rites of the Church. Recently in an Irish Diocese 40 lay men and women underwent initial formation and training that they can be commissioned to preside over funerals in their parishes, that training will continue over the coming months and throughout

their time of ministry.

(cf. Re. lay-led funerals. <https://clogherdiocese.ie/2023/12/bishop-duffys-pastoral-letter-for-advent-christmas-rejoice-in-the-lord-always/>)

Thus far we have no such formal practise. And would you accept it? With the coming of the new lectionary at Advent this year there is opportunity and need to revitalise the liturgical ministry of reader; also of Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, sacramental catechesis and other ministries too. If there is not first the basic formation and knowledge the particular formation and training has no firm foundation. It must be true lay ministry, not if I may dare say, 'playing at priests' What is obvious in this country and elsewhere is that the Church, the lay faithful can no longer depend on a ministerial 'priesthood to do the pastoral care, administration, property maintenance, planning and parish governance of the diocese or parish' wrote one bishop recently ([Liam Duffy, Clogher 16th Dec. 2023](#)) This call to participation comes first and foremost through the call to holiness and it is that call into which we have to be immersed to the best of our ability, only then can we be intentional disciples, first receiving then contributing, first listening then proclaiming, and proclaiming we must be.

Because of COVID it probably didn't get the coverage it deserved, but in June 2020 the Congregation, [now Dicastery](#) for the Clergy published a document, 'The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community, in the service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church'. A document that could well be the basis of some parish study groups perhaps in the weeks after Easter and leading up to the birthday of the Church at Pentecost. In the Introduction we read, 'Pope Francis, at the beginning of his Petrine ministry, recalled the importance of "creativity", meaning thereby "seeking new ways", that is "seeking how best to proclaim the Gospel...'

'The situations outlined in the ... Instruction, represent a valuable opportunity for pastoral conversion that is essentially missionary. Parish communities will find herein a call to go out of themselves, offering instruments for reform, even structural, in a

spirit of communion and collaboration, of encounter and closeness, of mercy and solicitude for the proclamation of the Gospel.' (N. 1 &2)

But time is short, we don't have the luxury of long drawn out conversations and years of preparation, we are to listen to others and listen too to ourselves. What am I hearing when I speak and what am I saying about myself as others hear me speak?

What must be at the heart of all our listening is a love for the Church; love for the home she represents and a love for the Mother she is.

I look forward to listening now to you, on ways in which we can move forward in the circumstances in which we are and those that are predictably going to change.

Thank you for taking the time to read and reflect upon this paper. You may find additionally the following extract from S.Ignatius of Antioch's Letter to the Ephesians of interest and having resonances to our situation nineteen hundred years later

From St Ignatius of Antioch, Bishop & Martyr (d. c.110) letter to the Ephesians
The harmony of unity

It is right for you to give glory in every way to Jesus Christ who has given glory to you; you must be made holy in all things by being united in perfect obedience, in submission to the bishop and the presbyters.

I am not giving you orders as if I were a person of importance. Even if I am a prisoner for the name of Christ, I am not yet made perfect in Jesus Christ. I am now beginning to be a disciple and I am speaking to you as my fellow-disciples. It is you who should be strengthening me by your faith, your encouragement, your patience, your serenity. But since love will not allow me to be silent about you, I am taking the opportunity to urge you to be united in conformity with the mind of God. For Jesus Christ, our life, without whom we cannot live, is the mind of the Father, just as the bishops, appointed over the whole earth, are in conformity with the mind of Jesus Christ.

It is fitting, therefore, that you should be in agreement with the mind of the bishop as in fact you are. Your excellent presbyters, who are a credit to God, are as suited to the bishop as strings to a harp. So in your harmony of mind and heart the song you sing is Jesus Christ. Every one of you should form a choir, so that, in harmony of sound through harmony of hearts, and in unity taking the note from God, you may sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father. If you do this, he will listen to you and see from your good works that you are members of his Son. It is then an advantage to you to live in perfect unity, so that at all times you may share in God.

If in a short space of time I have become so close a friend of your bishop – in a friendship not based on nature but on spiritual grounds – how much more blessed do I judge you to be, for you are as united with him as the Church is to Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ to the Father, so that all things are in harmony through unity. Let no one make any mistake: unless a person is within the sanctuary, he is deprived of God's bread. For if the prayer of one or two has such power, how much more has the prayer of the bishop and the whole Church.