

WALKING TOGETHER IN SYNOD

2021 - ??



Lord we pray,

**May our synodal preparations inspire people to dream about the church we are called to be,
to make hopes flourish, to stimulate trust,
to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships,
to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds and
restore strength to our hands for our common mission.**

**We trust in your Spirit who journeys with us
WE ASK THIS THROUGH CHRIST OUR LORD ..AMEN**

BACKGROUND TO THE SYNOD AND ITS PROGRESS TO DATE

Synods were used extensively by the early Church, and then fell into disuse. Moving on, the gathering of Bishops into a Synod at Vatican 1 in the nineteenth century, is remembered particularly for adopting a definition of papal infallibility, while Vatican 2 , nearly a century later, developed the theme of a “People of God”. Synods were used extensively by Saint Pope John Paul 2 and gave Bishops the opportunity to meet together and discuss a specific issue facing the church. On the negative side , they could be seen to be run by the Curia and consist of many pre-prepared speeches rather than genuine interaction.

The **Walking Together in Synod** process started by Pope Francis, which culminates with the next Synod in Rome in October 2023, is a process of journeying together, asking us to : “scrutinise the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.”

The first phase of the process, based in parishes worldwide, took place during Advent 2021, and its purpose was to “ foster a broad consultation process in order to gather a wealth of the experience of lived Synodality, in its different articulations and facets.” The Handbook, issued by the Vatican, describes the fundamental objective as: “to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church.” Listening is the method, and discernment is the aim through: “special care to involve people who may risk being excluded” and ” to hear the voices of other people in our local context”.

Themes were suggested , but it was emphasised that these need not be all covered or restrict free expression as, “participants are encouraged to share with honesty and openness about their real life experiences and to reflect together on what the Holy Spirit might be revealing through what they share with one another.”

In our own Diocese of Plymouth a small team prepared materials which might be helpful for parishes and schools. That team have also pointed out how the process can dovetail with the Bishop Mark’s initiative “A Precious Place of God’s Grace”, which draws out the growing implications and potential pathways for parishes within the context of a diminishing number of ordained priests.

In our parish we used material from various sources, and ran a series of meetings in the church hall, by zoom , and invited people to send in other comments/ideas by using a single sheet of A4, if they were unable , or felt uncomfortable to attend a meeting.

The process was ambitious, requiring all of us to listen respectfully and speak boldly, Pope Francis and his team in the Vatican hoping that the Holy Spirit comes into hearts and minds during this process , so that it will prove fruitful. It is easy to spot potential pitfalls, but the call is for us to walk forward together in faith, hope and charity !

The report by our parish , submitted to the Diocese after our initial exercise, highlighted the joys , concerns and hopes of our parishioners, expressed from the heart, a summary is detailed below..

St Joseph's, Newton Abbot, Synod Submission

“Walking Together” Advent 2021

INTRODUCTION

Following Vatican announcements and Diocesan briefings, a small lay team has guided the parish through this first stage. Adapting advice and resources provided by the Vatican's Vademecum and Plymouth's Diocesan Team we have run two strands of consultation:

- 2 sessions in the parish on ***Listening / Mission*** and **“Celebrating / Dreaming”**. Each session offered in our church hall in the afternoon and evening, and also run by “zoom” in the afternoon and evening. Prior to each session a brief leaflet has been distributed with our weekly parish newsletter at church and by e mail to those not currently attending, giving brief details. The process was also introduced at all weekend masses by our clergy.
- A simple feedback form on which parishioners, family and friends can share their thoughts, if unable to attend any of the meetings. An amended form has also been given out at local Prayer Breakfast, Foodbank and Christians Together meetings. On the form we give brief details of the process, highlight the 4 Diocesan suggested themes, and then ask 3 open-ended questions:

What is there to admire about the Catholic Church and its Membership ?

What is a sadness about the Catholic Church and its Membership ?

What is your hope for the future of the Catholic Church and its Membership ?

Participation has been modest, but interesting and heartfelt things have been shared, and we hope that as the process develops, more will be engaged by it. In total we have noted 23 contributions from parish hall and zoom attendees, and a further 22 further contributions from parishioners on our feedback form.

This brief introduction concludes by attempting to draw out some of the things which were particularly striking to us when listening to and reading through the comments made, either because several contributors made similar comment, or because a particular comment made us stop and think. We then have tried faithfully to record all the different comments received, on the following sheets.

Where very similar comments were expressed by a number of contributors, we have tried to minimise repetition, while retaining the nuances of what has been shared. Also some comments clearly express different viewpoints. All comments have been made in goodwill by local Catholic Christians who care about the Church, its Membership and its future. We are grateful to all participants and for all the contributions made. We believe this submission marks the start of an on-going process for us as individuals, a parish community and a global Church.

Facilitating Team: Susan Barlow, Anita Belli, Peter Farrell, Sylvia Kennedy, Nickola Scagell
Supported by: Deacon Gerard Nosowski, Observer Father Joseph Nwiboko

LISTENING

- * We listen to God in various, varied ways
- * It is hard to reach minority groups, particularly those that feel marginalised and/or criticised, and we need to combat this by developing an atmosphere of welcome and emphasising that Jesus' message is for all, including women

MISSION

- * A responsibility of us all, by a smile, providing an "open door", reaching out with empty hands and open heart
- * My personal mission...to make others feel valued, and to relate to them as a Christian
- * Hard to engage young people
- * Good to link up with others eg ecumenism
- * Poor image of the Catholic Church eg abuse/intolerance hampers mission

CELEBRATE

- * Helpful if our rituals were seen to be more relevant to the world we live in..liturgy, hymns, prayers and homilies
- * Encourage broader participation
- * More public, more innovative and more practical would help

ADMIRE

- * Continuity
- * Pope Francis, and many priests, deacons and lay people
- * Power of the sacraments
- * Charitable works and practical action
- * Support for life
- * Synodal process

SADNESS

- * Scandal of clerical abuse and its cover up
- * Focus on rules not love
- * Perceived lack of care/compassion
- * Stance on LGBT and contraception
- * Pandering to the secular world

- * Celebrant as a male, celibate preserve v new models which might include married, women, part-time
- * Current lack of clear statements on current day issues
- * Not welcoming to all or inclusive

DREAM/HOPES

- * Move away from current structure and authoritarian ways
- * Mission as a job for us all
- * Be outward looking
- * Be a more humble Church, and accept constructive criticism
- * Hope for one, united Church
- * Renewal of social activity
- * Improvement to formation/catechesis
- * Welcome diversity, and be seen as relevant to encourage return of young people
- * Revise Seminarian training model: formation co-ordinated by Diocese, but to take place in families, existing educational institutions and employment situations

Jan 2022

The Diocesan Team, in turn, have reviewed all the synod submissions made by parishes, other groups and individuals, and produced a faithful synthesis which was submitted to the Bishops Conference of England and Wales, along with a foreward by Bishop Mark, in Holy Week 2022. The full text is available via: www.plymouth-diocese.org.uk (follow the links to the Diocesan Synthesis)

A national group of 12 was then appointed by the Bishops' Conference to produce a national synthesis based on those received from Dioceses and elsewhere, and this was submitted to the Bishops for discernment in June, prior to its forward submission by the end of August 2022. The full text of this is available via: www.cbcew.org.uk (follow the links to the National Synthesis) The Continental Phase, from Sept 2022- March 2023, will then be an opportunity for a European perspective to be agreed before the Synod in Rome in Oct 2023.

The submission to the Continental Phase will be available in the autumn.

Our Parish, and each one of us, is asked to move forward with the synodal approach to make ourselves and our church more equipped to reflect Christ's light in the world of today.

One of the things we want to pilot, in response to this process, and the comments received, is to see if the creation of some PARISH CLUSTERS might support individuals and local communities in our parish, to complement and enrich what is being done in the town centre.

Please look out for references to this, and other initiatives, in our parish newsletter and website.