

# SYNTHESIS

of the Consultation in Ireland for  
the Diocesan Stage of the  
Universal Synod  
2021 - 2023.



Presented To



The General Secretariat of  
the Synod





For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission



# SAINT PATRICK'S BREASTPLATE



Christ with me,  
Christ before me,  
Christ behind me, Christ within me,  
Christ below me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand,  
Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my waking,  
Christ in the heart of all who think of me,  
Christ in the mouth of all who speak to me,  
Christ in every eye that looks at me,  
Christ in every ear  
that listens to me.



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## **1. Introduction**

Synodality and the convening of synods has rich foundations in the Catholic Church and can be traced back to the Council of Jerusalem as described in Acts 15. Pope Francis has placed a renewed emphasis on synodality insisting that ‘the path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church in the third millennium’.<sup>[1]</sup> In March 2021, the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference announced a Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland extending over five years. In October of the same year, Pope Francis launched a global process of participation and consultation leading to the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops dedicated to the theme of synodality itself. The invitation to participate in the Universal Synod was extended to the People of God across the island of Ireland. At the core of this journey was listening to God by listening to one another.

The National Steering Committee and the Task Group for the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland, which were appointed by the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, supported dioceses and groups during this phase. Each diocese held an opening liturgy to launch the process locally. Steering committees were appointed with a balanced representation of clergy, religious, lay men and lay women working together. Prayerful, spiritual conversations, listening, and discernment processes were held; some in person and others online. On the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2022, all 26 dioceses submitted syntheses and a further 29 submissions were received from other groups (religious congregations, associations of lay faithful, ecclesial movements, Church agencies, etc). Submissions were also received from some individuals.<sup>[2]</sup> A sub-group of the Steering Committee reviewed the submissions in a spirit of prayer and discernment over the weekend of Pentecost (June 2022). They presented emerging themes to representatives of dioceses and groups at a national pre-synodal assembly on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2022 in Athlone. This event concluded with a liturgical synodal prayer walk at the 6<sup>th</sup> century monastic site of Clonmacnoise. The site was chosen as it connects the contemporary Church in Ireland with its ancient

heritage when this monastery was a great seat of learning and prayer, with students from all over Europe.

During the diocesan phase of the synodal process, a deliberate effort was made to reach as wide a spectrum of people as possible within the timeframe available. Facilitators listened to people in urban and rural areas, as well as people who are church-goers and people who are not. They listened to those who are working, unemployed, caring for someone at home, families, people who live alone, the young and the elderly. Special care was taken “to involve those persons who may risk being excluded”<sup>[3]</sup>, for example women, members of the LGBTQI+ community, Travellers/Mincéirs, migrants and refugees. A facilitated listening process was intentionally held with those who have been most hurt by the Church – survivors of abuse perpetrated by Church personnel. These individuals were honest and courageous in the way they shared how abuse, in all its forms, left an open wound in their lives, an open wound which remains at the heart of the Church.

Participants expressed some fears about the process and concerns about limitations. There was a lack of understanding of terms such as synodality, communion, and mission. Participating in a discernment process was also very new for many people. There was much fatigue experienced in local churches where parishioners were still recovering from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst many parishes tried to consult with young people, this proved difficult and the absence of their voice was felt during the consultation process. Some young people did participate but it was notable that they mostly engaged through online questionnaires, digital means, or in school settings. Most dioceses struggled to engage with the marginalised, finding them difficult to reach.<sup>[4]</sup> Some participants expressed an anxiety that this process would just be more listening without any action. Others feared that the essential teaching and practice of the Church would be undermined. It was noted that in contexts where priests themselves could not or did not want to engage with the synod, the process seemed to be less fruitful. Participants also expressed the fear that “gatekeepers” would filter proposals or that certain topics would be vetoed, or the final document censored.

More positively, the process was seen as a period of grace and an opportunity for faith development. The facilitators sought to provide safe, patient, listening environments that supported honesty and transparency. The quality of the response to the consultation process would suggest that at least in some cases, they were successful. A number of participants expressed a genuine appreciation that they were consulted, heard, listened to - many for the first time. There was an authentic goodwill from those who participated. This was particularly admirable coming from those who have suffered exclusion or hurt in their experience of Church. The 'God of Surprises' was present at the national pre-synodal assembly. During this gathering, the integrity of the submissions was honoured and respected. The emerging themes presented by the Steering Committee resonated with local experiences at parish and diocesan level and gave those responsible for drafting the report increased confidence in the authenticity and integrity of the process. The spirit of synodality was practised and witnessed in the diversity of voices that gathered and respectfully listened to each other. The Holy Spirit was truly present. All in all, the synodal experience gave hope to those involved for the future of the Church in Ireland. As participants wholeheartedly embraced this initial phase of the synodal pathway, they expressed a desire that similar opportunities would be offered again, and that in learning to be synodal, they discovered that a new way of being Church is now emerging in Ireland.

Throughout the process those who participated in the consultation reflected a deep commitment to their faith; their conviction about the importance of the Good News and person of Jesus Christ; their sadness and even grief that so many no longer share in the community of faith, or have been alienated or driven away from it; and their commitment to finding new ways of expressing and serving the mission of the Church.

## 2. Themes

The following is a compilation of the main themes identified from the listening and consultation. This section aims to be faithful to the voices of those who contributed, presenting faithfully that which has been communicated.

### (i) Abuse as Part of the Story of the Church

Physical, sexual and emotional abuse and its concealment by the Church in Ireland was described as an ‘open wound’. This experience affects victims/survivors and their families at every level of their being, including their soul. The submissions relate and link this abuse to so many other areas – our understanding of sexuality and of power; the absence of women in decision making roles; transparency and accountability in governance; clericalism. The Church is invited to interrogate how its own structures and *modus operandi* contributed to this crisis. In this sense it is a lens through which all else needs to be viewed.

The scale of abuse within the Church has created a huge sense of loss which infused the responses in our consultation. This sense of loss coupled with continuing anger was expressed by survivors themselves and their families, lay faithful who have become estranged from the Church because of it, and many good priests and religious who also feel betrayed. Alongside the enormous amount of good work on safeguarding, we need to continue our efforts to provide times and spaces for lamentation, to grieve this shared loss. The contributions about abuse, therefore, represent a call for penance and for atonement at a national level. One submission noted: *In our view nothing adequate has yet emerged from the Church nationally in terms of atonement or reparation:*<sup>[5]</sup> while another remarked; *Words that are carefully chosen and spoken with humility and sincerity help, but they are not enough.* At the national pre-synodal assembly, gratitude was expressed for the willingness of survivors to engage with the process and it was agreed that their searing words be included in an appendix to the submission to Rome.

Institutional abuse in contexts such as Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and orphanages is inherent to the deep hurt of this wound. Strategies of concealment of institutional abuse by the Church have further wounded survivors. Surprisingly, while abuse has contributed very significantly to the loss of trust in the Church in Ireland, there were some submissions which placed relatively low emphasis on the abuse crisis.

In summary, enormous gratitude to survivors for their engagement was expressed by many involved in the consultation process for the synod. There was a palpable sense that despite many efforts by the Church, a ‘reckoning’ had not yet taken place, and the synodal process generated a clear imperative to place this issue at the heart of any Church renewal and reform. A submission noted: *We welcome, indeed rejoice in, the synodal path as one of dialogue and journeying with others.* Another submission specifically linked this insight to the legacy of abuse: *We must pledge ourselves to journey with survivors, to meet with them, preferably in small groups where dialogue is possible and opens us to the presence of the Spirit.*

## (ii) Co-Responsible Leadership

Accountability, transparency, participation, sharing, good governance - these are all key words used to express the hopes of participants for the future of the Church in Ireland when it comes to leadership. These words named what was absent in the lived experience of the Church for many of those responding to the synodal consultation. Many people feel that decision-making and authority are exercised solely by priests and bishops. This power structure provokes discontent in them, frustration and anger with the processes of decision-making and exercise of authority at all levels in the Church. It was asserted that Canon Law itself places obstacles to co-responsible leadership and there is obvious exclusion of laity, in particular, women and youth, in these processes and in leadership roles more generally within the Church.



A reading of the submissions reveals a lack of clarity around leadership roles and responsibility. Parish Pastoral Councils, Finance Committees and other consultative councils should be balanced in their representation of the communities they are called to represent and not be elitist or groups that simply *talk about doing*. Instead, Parish Pastoral Councils and other representative councils are called to be cultivated as praying and discerning communities of faith whose actions arise from that discernment.

Adult faith development, resources for lay ministries and collaborative decision-making was flagged as poor or non-existent. Clergy acknowledged that in many contexts they are too tired and weary to engage in these developments. However, they are aware that with education and formation, laity could and should be more involved in co-responsible leadership. Such approaches must be faith-based and focus on a model of servant-leadership to avoid becoming purely managerial or administrative.

Some still feel that the laity should not have a voice in the decision making of the Church/parish; that this is primarily the ‘priest’s role’. They are happy to be ‘volunteers’ and just help where needed rather than be actively involved in leadership. Others, however, are more than ready to be involved in charting the way forward, especially through the synodal process.

### (iii) Clergy

Participants expressed much appreciation for our priests. Their dedication, hard work, presence and pastoral care was frequently acknowledged during the consultation process. Many of those responding to the synod recognised that they are over-worked and often feel burdened by the weight of governance and administration. In the submissions, there is a lot of concern expressed for our ageing clergy. The role of the priest is valued and will continue to play an essential part in communities of faith. Some participants were concerned that some younger priests are very traditional and rigid in their thinking and may not have the requisite skills for co-responsible leadership. There were calls for better training for our clergy. Priests

need to be formed in the skills required to minister and lead in a synodal Church. Some priests themselves said they would need this assistance. Others are reluctant to let go of long-held roles. Others are feeling “edged out” with diminishing power and relevancy.

At the national pre-synodal assembly, concern was raised that the voice of clergy was not as prominent as it might have been in the process. Practices varied in terms of whether listening sessions for clergy alone were organised as part of the synodal process. However, the invitation to participate as members of the wider ‘priesthood of the faithful’ was not always accepted, which may speak to the mindset that priests did not see themselves as part of the ‘all’ in communal discernment. On the other hand, clergy often wished to create an environment where parishioners were free to speak their minds and accordingly absented themselves from public meetings. In some cases, clergy simply chose not to engage.

There were calls from both young and older participants for optional celibacy, married priests, female priests, and the return of those who had left the priesthood to marry. Clericalism in all its forms was frequently associated with hurt and abuse of power by participants in the process. Some declared that the structures of the Church are not inclusive but patriarchal, hierarchical, and feudal. There was concern expressed that many priests are resistant to change; that they feel they don’t have anything further to learn and view the local parish as ‘my parish’ not ‘our parish’.

There was a sense that the permanent diaconate has been welcomed but is not always understood.<sup>[6]</sup> A new model for the selection of bishops was also sought and a number of participants indicated that it ought to include a wider participation of the People of God.

#### (iv) Lay Ministry

Baptismal calling is at the heart of who we are as Christians. That calling is manifested in a variety of ways, one of which is lay ministry. On the one hand, some respondents see that carrying out the mission of the Church is largely the responsibility of the clergy, while others

recognise a call for greater participation of lay people in the life of the Church. Throughout the submissions, we heard similar calls that lay people, *should be involved in other more significant leadership and teaching roles ... not just because it will take some burden off the priest, but because it is part of each person's mission as a baptised Catholic.*

However, there are challenges. These include the perceived passivity of the parish community or wider Church when it comes to lay ministry. There was an overarching thread evident throughout the consultation that the gifts of lay people were under-utilised by the Church. At the national pre-synodal assembly, it was noted that the Church should support lay people in their role as disciples, while a need was felt by some for lay people to take greater personal responsibility for their role in the Church.

A submission from returned missionaries who had worked overseas highlighted that much was learned from working with lay colleagues in the various communities in which they served. *We had no option but to trust and train lay leaders who gladly undertook the various ministries. In retrospect, it is clear that it was the actual shortage of ordained ministers that enabled the laity to take their God-given role.*

While many efforts have been made to enhance the role of lay people in ministry, much remains to be done to encourage, support and provide a training dedicated to enabling lay people in their calling to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in their faith communities. A call for such training was evident in much of the consultation. It was also acknowledged that while we often speak of an aging clergy we also have an aging laity.

#### (v) Sense of Belonging

Strong sentiments around the theme of belonging and a desire for the development of a more welcoming and inclusive Church emerged throughout the submissions. Some respondents were happy with the sense of belonging and companionship they felt within the Church but many more articulated the view that the Church was not as

welcoming for those who may be on the margins of society or who feel excluded because of their sexual orientation.

One submission stated: *Those who feel at home in the Church feel the absence of those who don't.* There was unanimous desire for the Church to adopt a more welcoming and inclusive stance towards all, and in doing so reach out especially to those on the margins and those who do not engage regularly.

It was stressed that the Church is at its very best when it is close to people's lives, speaking a language that people understand, and connecting with people amidst their daily struggles. Regarding language itself, some felt that the Irish language and the local customs that surround the language, were not afforded adequate attention in Church circles. Sadly, the view that nothing happens outside of Mass and that much more could be done to develop a sense of community through regular social events and other liturgical services, emerged repeatedly.

Coupled to this desire for improving fraternal and communal bonds was a sense that better communication methods need to be adopted to assist this process. One diocesan submission offered a helpful caveat: *Technology was very useful, yet the internet is no substitute for human contact.*

If the Church is to become an inclusive one where all marginalised people feel a sense of belonging, then we must take stock of who is missing and discern how they can be welcomed. As one submission noted: *Personal invitation is key.*

#### (vi) The Role of Women in the Church

The role of women in the Church was mentioned in almost every submission received. In those responses there was a call for women to be given equal treatment within the Church structures in terms of leadership and decision making. As one submission states: *Women have a special place in the Church but not an equal place.* Many women remarked that they are not prepared to be considered second class citizens anymore and many are leaving the Church. They feel that even

though their contribution over the years has been invaluable, it has been taken for granted.

Several of the submissions called for the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate and the priesthood. Their exclusion from the diaconate is regarded as particularly hurtful. Some women felt that *yet another layer was added to exclude them*. Many young people cannot understand the Church's position on women. Because of the disconnect between the Church's view of women and the role of women in wider society today, the Church is perceived as patriarchal and by some, as misogynistic.

The issue of women and gender-based violence was also raised and a call to *challenge systemic gender inequalities to ensure women's voices are heard and that they have the opportunity to be leaders and take part in decision making forums*. A call was also issued to reflect together as a Church on *the injustice brought upon women by Church and State, and cultural norms in society*.

#### (vii) LGBTQI+

There was a clear, overwhelming call for the full inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in the Church, expressed by all ages and particularly by the young and by members of the LGBTQI+ community themselves.

This inclusion would in the first instance involve less judgemental language in Church teaching, following the compassionate approach of Pope Francis which has been transformative and is appreciated, again, by young people in particular.

Some called for a change in Church teaching, asking if the Church is sufficiently mindful of developments with regard to human sexuality and the lived reality of LGBTQI+ couples. Others expressed a concern that a change in the Church's teaching would be simply conforming to secular standards and contemporary culture. Likewise, it was urged that we not treat the LGBTQI+ community in isolation from other marginalised groups.

There were calls from an LGBTQI+ focus group for an apology from the Church. This submission suggested that even though the Church rarely condemns gay people these days, it indirectly creates an atmosphere where physical, psychological and emotional abuse of gay people is tolerated and even encouraged. Indeed, the visceral clarity of this particular focus group gave life to the rather more tentative and generalised positions on inclusion offered elsewhere, pointing to the value of hearing directly the voices of the excluded or disaffected.

#### (viii) Sexuality and Relationships

It was evident that sexuality, sexual ethics, and relationship issues informed people's decisions in relation to Mass attendance, reception of the Eucharist and many other aspects of Church life. One submission asserted that the way in which people (both clergy and lay) were formed within the Church in relation to the understanding of sexuality and sexual sin has been a source of great suffering to many.

There were requests for re-examinations of Church teaching and a revision of its understanding of human sexuality in light of recent scientific and sociological research, alongside a recognition of the lived realities of LGBTQI+ and other couples. Similarly, it was asserted that Church teaching could be more compassionate to women's health, wellbeing and the raising of families, considering many circumstances, including financial ones. It was suggested that the theology underpinning Church teaching on sexuality is but one strand in a far richer tapestry.

For the divorced and remarried, the Church's 'rules and regulations' were seen as draconian. Some divorced and separated people believed they could not receive the Eucharist even though they had not entered second relationships. Others described their exclusion by priests from any active role in the parish because of their status. It was stated that some priests avoided the strict implementation of the teaching regarding those in second unions receiving the Eucharist, and while this was appreciated it was also seen as *turning a blind eye to the reality*. Honest, open engagement and accompaniment with those in second unions was called for; to name the issue and to dialogue. Calls to make

the process of applying for a declaration of marriage nullity easier and more accessible were also received.

Another group who identified as feeling excluded from the life of the Church was single parents. It was felt that all parents who wish to bring up their children in the Church should experience welcome and support, and that greater creativity in ministry to families is needed. There are other minority, yet strong, voices that believe the Church, rooted in the Catholic Tradition, should not conform to secular standards when it comes to questions regarding gender, sexuality, and relationships. For others, *the Church has no credibility in modern society as long as discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexuality exists.*

#### (ix) Adult Faith Formation

The synodal process highlighted the serious weaknesses in Adult Faith Development in Ireland. Many of the submissions reported that people found it hard to engage with the questions, the concepts and the language relating to communion and mission. There is a felt need among many respondents for safe and dynamic spaces where people can come together to talk deeply about their faith and increase their knowledge of it. One submission stated: *Our spiritual growth is stunted. As adult members of the Church, we are not sufficiently grounded in our faith, and do not have the confidence in speaking about our love of God.*

Many submissions stressed that the declining numbers of priests and religious means the Church is heading for a crisis as there will be very few people properly prepared to step into leadership and faith development roles. The need to provide continuous professional development for Religious Education teachers in Primary and Secondary level was also highlighted. They make a crucial contribution to the communication of the faith today.

One submission outlined that *there is a crisis in transmission of faith, rather than a crisis of faith* and that we are unsure about how to evangelise in the modern world. This problem can only be addressed with the deployment of significant resources into programmes for those who wish to deepen their own faith, spirituality and understanding of

scripture at a personal or academic level. Many of the courses available are very expensive, and therefore inaccessible to those who are on low incomes or social welfare. Some felt that if we invested half as many resources into the training and formation of people as we do into buildings, we could dramatically improve the life of the Church in Ireland today.

#### (x) Liturgy

There is a sense that funerals and special occasions are celebrated extremely well, but there is a need for more creative and engaging liturgies to connect with families and young people. Some feel the Church's liturgies are boring, monotonous, jaded and flat; that they no longer speak to people's lives. There was a desire expressed by respondents for the full participation of the laity throughout the liturgy; and for a wider more diverse group of people, including women, to take part. A minority view seeks a return of the Latin Mass and pre-Vatican II celebrations.

It was clear that the Eucharist is highly valued; so much so that, there is a desire for all to be able to receive, including those who are currently excluded. There was concern that the Sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation are seen solely through the lens of the school and a desire that those presenting for the Sacraments would participate in the whole life of the Church.

Homilies were frequently described as being too long, ill prepared, irrelevant, monotonous and not always connected to life. Church language in the Liturgy is seen as archaic, non-inclusive and hard to understand, particularly the language in the Old Testament readings and liturgical prayers. There was a clear call for simpler, user-friendly, inclusive vocabulary.

The power of prayer was very much valued, as well as the presence of music and song. Some participants felt a great sense of love for our devotional practices and others talked about the power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Some participants long for the return of House Masses, Station Masses and particular feasts. It was requested



that *Laudato Si'* and a greater presence of environmental issues be part of our liturgies, particularly at certain times of the year.

There were requests to move Mass times, so they did not clash with working hours, family time or sporting occasions. There was also a sense that in the future, people may not be reached through liturgy, *so a prior step is required in relation to encountering Jesus on a personal level.*

#### (xi) Youth

The issue of youth and the question of how the Church might engage with them, emerged universally across the synodal process. Multiple dioceses and organisations noted *the absence of young people in parish communities* and many submissions articulated a view that other youth organisations provide a home for young people that is more welcoming than that in parishes.

There was an openness and honesty in responses from young people. They identified with faith and with the Gospel message and what we are called to as Church. One response clearly conveyed the sentiments expressed by so many: *the one thing we, as young people, look for is sincerity.* In many instances it was felt that the Church lacked this, or indeed pastoral awareness of the significant challenges faced by young people today. One notable example given was the mental health crisis faced by many young people.

Many young people were critical of the Church regarding the role of women, clerical celibacy and its handling of the abuse crisis. A significant number disagreed with the Church's teaching on sexuality and the Church's position on sex was considered as a barrier to participation by some young people. On the other hand, some young people said that, for them, the Church's teaching on sexuality is a welcome challenge.

One submission commented that the pursuit of authenticity, truth, beauty and the goodness which the Church has to offer is what is most attractive about the faith. It is striking to note that whilst dioceses noted the absence of young people in parishes, particular youth

groups were able to offer the kind of faith community young people desired.

Young people feel significant pressure from their peers and wider society when they express their faith and engage with Church. It is significant that for young people who have not engaged with or found vibrant communities where they can belong, they become indifferent to their faith.

Many young people do wish to engage with Church, yet deficiencies in current pastoral practice have resulted in a marked disconnect between them and the Church. The question of how the Church might accompany them has emerged as an urgent one.

#### (xii) Education and Catechesis

The topics of religious education, catechesis, faith formation and discernment are mentioned frequently in the submissions.

The Sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation were identified as key moments in the life of the family and the Church. There is a wide consensus in the diocesan submissions, which was also confirmed at the national pre-synodal assembly, that a more prayerful, catechetical and scriptural formation is needed at parish level in order to accompany people before, during, and after these important sacramental moments. Parishes are struggling to accompany young people and their families in their faith development. It is acknowledged that *the actual faith community will need to educate and lead our children in the faith*, which suggests that a strategy, with particular focus on catechetical accompaniment, is required at parish level for young people and their parents.

There is a wide awareness that the traditional cooperative faith-transmission model of the parish-home-school is no longer working. Many submissions suggest that the Spirit is prompting the Church in Ireland to remove sacramental preparation from schools in favour of parish-based formation programmes. The national pre-synodal assembly recognised the shortcomings of the current model and called

for a discernment on how to address this challenge. If children are to encounter Christ in their sacramental preparation and be formed as intentional disciples, perhaps a more kerygmatic<sup>[7]</sup> accompaniment at parish level is required.

Related to the topic of education and catechesis is an awareness that the skills necessary for discernment, *which are crucial for making decisions in a synodal style*, are lacking at all levels. When discernment is not prayerful, collaborative and deliberative in a co-responsible way, it can lead to mistrust. Transparency and formation in discernment are therefore needed.

### (xiii) Family

Many of the submissions place a strong emphasis on the central place of family in all three elements of our synodal process, communion, participation and mission. The Church is seen as a family of families; families are the natural framework within which faith is transmitted, nurtured and practised and from which a Christian identity emerges; and families are the appropriate framework for accompaniment and evangelisation.

The submissions highlighted the importance of a broad and inclusive understanding of family in terms of the composition and formal status of family units. The Church needs to recognise the changing reality of families over the life cycle, and the challenges and burdens which they face. These burdens are often carried in silence and without external support, particularly in cases where families are coping with members who have a disability, dementia, addiction or other challenges.

In recognising the diversity and validity of family types, frequent mention was also made of the importance of those who are single and whose needs and capacities are sometimes overlooked in the shaping of pastoral priorities.

Accompaniment of families requires a more creative and considered response by the Church. The focus of parish life on the sacraments of

initiation is too centred on children and reliant on schools. Parishes should focus more on parents, guardians and grandparents, while a shift away from the celebrations of a single day to an ongoing relationship based on invitation would be more appropriate and likely, more effective.

The central role of family life requires acknowledgement of the importance of the domestic church<sup>[8]</sup> in its own terms, an importance which was highlighted during the Covid restrictions on communal gatherings. Nurturing the domestic church and empowering and affirming parents will require fresh approaches that are not so reliant on formal liturgical moments.

#### (xiv) Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic greatly impacted religion and faith in different ways - gathering and expressing faith in physical places of worship was restricted, especially at parish level. The closure of churches and curtailment of ministry during lockdowns<sup>[9]</sup> represented a marked shift in the life of the Church during this period. This shift generated deep feelings of isolation, abandonment, pain and hurt, especially amongst the elderly and those on their own as well as palpable sorrow to grieving families, arising from the restrictions on Church liturgies and pastoral care at this time.

Many felt that Covid accelerated an already steep decline in Church practice and general engagement. Others remarked that it prompted a new vision for restructuring and re-thinking what it means to be a Church. It necessitated alternative liturgical and ritual responses as liturgical life moved to digital platforms. Some Catholics engaged fully with this possibility. Online communication has generated new possibilities for formation and training. Many participants mentioned that during the pandemic they missed “gathering” and “socialising” when going to Mass.

Covid placed huge financial pressures on individuals and the rise in cases related to mental health, domestic violence and addiction reflect the stress placed on families and communities by the pandemic. There

is still a deep sense of grief, loss and pain for people who lost family members during this period or could not visit loved ones in nursing homes or care facilities. Young people felt isolated from their peers and still feel they have lost out.

More positively, prayer in the home and appreciation of the family as the domestic church grew. Families slowed down and became more present to each other. A healthier work-life balance emerged as people enjoyed creation and were more aware of the need to protect the environment. For many, the synodal listening gatherings were the first ‘in-person’ events people attended after many months of restrictions and even though there was some nervousness, those attending were grateful for the opportunity to reconnect with their faith community.

#### (xv) Culture

Dramatic economic and social change was seen to have had a profound impact on the structures and processes of the Church, its place within Irish society, and thus on the perceived capacity for participation and mission. Some of the submissions reflected that contextual changes have been mediated by the two political and legal jurisdictions on the island, by the legacy of conflict and the challenge of sectarianism, and so have not been experienced uniformly.

The pressures of commercialisation and consumerism, the rise of individualism, pressure on time for family and community and a secularist mindset reflected in dominant media, are all heard in the submissions. The Church increasingly finds itself pushed to the margins of popular culture which it struggles to understand or to find language with which to be understood. It was felt that the Church’s proclaimed concern to foster communion and participation is overshadowed by the wider society’s focus on inclusion, transparency and accountability.

The submissions highlight the morale-sapping effect of negative media treatment of the Church, while recognising the invaluable service of independent media in exposing abuse and failures of accountability within the Church.

Despite these pressures, it was felt that there are strong reasons to engage with the wider culture so that Catholics can highlight the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth; a consumer society has failed to deliver sustainability, equity or life satisfaction. The reality of mutual interdependence was demonstrated by the pandemic experience. Catholic Social Teaching calls the Church to highlight the cries from the margins. Many submissions recognised that this will require a fresh approach to popular culture, including a new relationship with the traditional media and the new communication channels whose power was highlighted during the Covid-19 crisis.

### **3. Notable Issues That Were Not Strongly Present from the Consultation**

Conscious that the Holy Spirit also speaks in silence and absence, it is important that we consider what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through the silence around significant issues and the absence of certain people and groups from the process. The fact that some issues did not surface in a significant way also says something about the Church in Ireland. In the assessment of the feedback from the diocesan and group consultations, examined at the national pre-synodal meeting, it was noted that following issues did not emerge in a significant way:

*The wider Ecumenical and Inter-Faith Context:* The deepening of ecumenical relationships in recent years on the island of Ireland has been a source of great hope to many in the Christian community, as a contribution to overcoming the legacy of our divided past. Similarly, the development of spaces for interfaith dialogue and cooperation has helped protect the place of religious faith in an increasingly secular and multicultural Ireland. A discussion on synodality and ecumenism took place in the Irish Inter-Church Meeting as part of this process. Leaders of other Christian denominations expressed a desire to support and participate in the synodal pathway of the Catholic Church and to explore opportunities for formal engagement from Ireland's national ecumenical instruments. Consultation also took place with representatives of other faiths, reflecting on their

experiences to date and hopes for the future. It was notable, however, that there were few references to ecumenism and inter-faith relations in the submissions from dioceses and other groups, suggesting a need for investment in this area to ensure that the very positive experience at national leadership level is replicated in the local context.

*Environment:* Despite the Church's concern for the care of our common home, the main submission regarding environmental issues came from the *Laudato Si'* Working Group with only nominal mention across the diocesan syntheses.

*Social Justice:* It was recognised that the Church has a life-giving vision for the world in its social teaching and that the Church has the potential to be a force for the common good in our society while acknowledging the impact of organisations such as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and Trócaire. It is noteworthy that although Irish society is preoccupied with issues surrounding social justice, for example, homelessness, immigration, poverty, housing etc., the synodal conversations only occasionally drew out reflection and comment on these issues. When spoken of, there was a sense that the Church needed to re-orientate itself to the genuine hardships that people face and to be attentive to the social difficulties that exist in Northern Ireland as a result of the legacy of the troubles.

*The Sacramental Life of the Church:* Whilst there was a strong focus on participation in and renewal of the celebration of the Eucharist there was little mention of the other sacraments and their importance for Christian discipleship and a personal and communal relationship with Jesus Christ. In reading the various syntheses and submissions it seems that faith is often more implied than expressed explicitly. However, it may be that in Ireland faith is often mediated institutionally and thus, there can be a focus on structures rather than relationship. The question also emerges whether many Irish Catholics are 'sacramentalised but not evangelised'.

*Missionary Outreach of the Catholic Church in Ireland:* Over the past two centuries the Catholic Church in Ireland has played a significant part in the modern missionary movement of the universal church. Today,

there is still a strong cohort of Irish missionaries working on mission. Equally, there are laity networks throughout the country supporting today's missionary activity – individually and through organisations. Aid agencies such as Trócaire and the Irish Church's outreach for development, are also very well supported. In the submissions there is little reference to the Irish Church's participation in the universal mission of the church.

Socio-economic and cultural factors may have contributed to the silence and to the absence of those who could speak meaningfully on some of these issues. This points to the Church's difficulty in engaging with all sectors of society. Is it possible that many people see these important issues as separate from their faith?

#### **4. Conclusion**

This National Synthesis offers reflections on the Irish context that are helpful in the global task of reading the signs of the times, as well, of course, as informing further stages of the Irish synodal process.

The significance of the Irish contribution to the Universal Synod arguably lies in the radical demographic, economic and social transformation of Ireland which has framed and been paralleled by dramatic changes in the Church. Within this story, the nature, scale and consequences of clerical abuse, and the complicity of Church bodies in the institutionalisation of women and children in Ireland, have profound significance in their own right. The Church in Ireland, ministering in two political jurisdictions, has also lived with the reality of sectarian conflict and religious divisions which, despite political, social and religious progress, continue to be the focus of international attention and concern. The telescoping of such change into a few decades enables some processes to be seen clearly, while others have yet to be properly unpacked.

Approaching the 200th anniversary of Catholic Emancipation, the dismantling of the institutions of Ireland's Catholic superstructure in our cities and towns reflects a profound change in modern Irish



identity. This change is being experienced, from a national identity overly dependent on Catholic culture, to one suspicious and often intolerant of its Catholic inheritance.

An encounter with the dominant culture requires the Church to be open to considering what is of value in society's new norms and what is valid in its critique of the Church. That discernment requires us to be alert to the risk of assimilation and to ensure that the fruits of dialogue are shaped by the Spirit in careful and prayerful reflection on the Gospel.

Accompaniment requires the building of bridges to connect with the people of our time in all their joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties.<sup>[10]</sup> It is an open question to what extent a secular liberal mindset is open to receiving the values it needs from engagement by the Church, or whether it possesses its own belief system that has little room for dissension. Ireland offers a particular moment in this encounter, with a modern society whose culture is still capable of a Christian sensibility and of affording space for the transcendent, but which has roundly rejected the model of Church which shaped its past.

Those engaged in the synodal process called for unity in diversity, which does not entail a bland uniformity or avoidance of conflict but an ability to 'endure conflict'.<sup>[11]</sup> Such unity needs to find expression by a national co-ordination across dioceses - the Church in Ireland is being called to act together. It was noted in the spiritual conversations at the national pre-synodal assembly that *schisms happen because people stop talking. Let us keep talking and the Holy Spirit will reveal the path.* There is a challenge to sustain the encounter and the participative nature of synodality, grounded in respectful listening, for long enough to arrive at the point where specific decisions are discerned to be necessary, given the risk that such decision points are inevitably difficult for those of a contrary disposition.

Throughout the process there has been a broad welcome for and affirmation of synodality itself – a desire to grow as a synodal Church. Parishes that have a praying and discerning ethos will surely embrace the pastoral care and missionary needs of the people. In saying this,

there is a broad recognition that ongoing formation in synodality is required, in particular around skills for discernment, both personal and communal.

We need to learn from the past. There is recognition that we are a Church in need of healing at every level and, as a survivor of abuse who engaged in the process remarked, we need to *find a forum in which we can all heal together*. In our process there has been a call to *go deeper* and a recognition that the crisis in the Catholic Church in Ireland is, in many ways, a crisis of faith. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has said: ‘Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea but an encounter with an event, a person’.<sup>[12]</sup>

The General Secretariat for the Synod encouraged each synthesis to conclude by indicating ‘the steps to be taken in response to that which was recognised as the call of the Holy Spirit, highlighting in particular those points regarding which it is considered important to solicit the further discernment of the Church’.<sup>[13]</sup> In answer to this we point to the fact that across the various submissions and syntheses many issues emerge consistently, including a strong desire for women’s involvement in leadership and ministries – ordained and non-ordained - and additionally, a concern around the Church’s approach to the LGBTQI+ community and to the hurt experienced by its members. There is also a call for greater lay involvement and participation. Some obstacles in Canon Law which limit the full realisation of this could be revisited.

Simultaneously, the Church in Ireland can explore ways in which the call of the Holy Spirit, as articulated in the Diocesan Phase, can be advanced. Co-responsible leadership needs to be embedded at every level through Parish Pastoral Councils, Diocesan Pastoral Councils and other structures that enable this. At local level we need to ensure the voice of women will be truly integral in our decision-making. We must secure effective participation by the poor and excluded, and other marginalised groups. The recommendations of the document *Christus Vivit* need to be attended to.<sup>[14]</sup> Pastoral care of members of the LGBTQI+ community can be enriched. In accordance with *Amoris Laetitia*, we can engage in a ‘dynamic discernment’ in making a

‘what for now is the most generous response which can be given’ to those in non-sacramental unions, remaining ‘ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions’.<sup>[15]</sup> Throughout the various syntheses and submissions, and again, at the pre-synodal assembly, there emerged a strong call for further work on adult faith formation.

There is a recognition that a synodal process is not easy – it so often entails the Way of the Cross. It will require humility and conversion of heart, a call which Pope Francis has issued to the Church in initiating this Synodal Pathway. The Church in Ireland is heartened by the enthusiasm, energy and expectation generated by the Diocesan Phase of the Universal Synod. In Ireland we have begun a National Synodal Pathway and the Diocesan Phase of the Universal Synod has whetted our appetite for what lies ahead. We look forward to taking further steps along this pathway.

## Notes

[1] Vatican City, 19 October 2015 (VIS) – On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, the Holy Father addressed the Synod Fathers in the Vatican’s Paul VI Hall.

[2] Individual submissions were received through online opportunities for engagement and written correspondence.

[3] *Vademecum* 2.1

[4] Those who are marginalised from the Church often proved reluctant to engage with this process.

[5] Throughout this synthesis we have included direct quotations from the submissions received – these direct quotations, where they appear, have been italicised.

[6] In 2000 the Irish Episcopal Conference sought the approval of Rome for the ordination of permanent deacons. In 2001 this approval was granted.

[7] The descriptive term “kerygmatic” comes from the Greek word kerygma, meaning to preach or proclaim.

[8] ‘*The family, is so to speak, the domestic church*’, Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no.11

[9] Many priests had to ‘cocoon’ because of their age, access to hospitals and nursing homes was restricted, opportunities to visit the housebound, sick and elderly were not available.

[10] See *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

[11] Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, (Simon and Schuster: London, 2020) p.80

[12] *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

[13] The General Secretariat for the Synod, *Suggestions for Dioceses and Episcopal Conferences on the preparation of the synthesis*, 2.3.

[14] *Christus Vivit: Post-Synodal Exhortation to Young People and to the entire People of God*, March 2019.

[15] *Amoris Laetitia*, 303.

