



BECOMING A SYNODAL CHURCH

gathered people from a range of parishes, including Farm Street Jesuit Church, other diocesan groups, and LGBT+ Catholics Westminster, on 15 July 2023. to consider a response to the Instrumentum Laboris (Working Document) and future action:

Paragraph 10: *...The purpose of the IL (Working Document) is not to be a first draft of the Final Document of the Synodal Assembly, only to be corrected or amended. Rather, it outlines an initial understanding of the Synodal dimension of the Church on the basis of which further discernment can be made. The Members of the Synodal Assembly are the primary recipients of the IL, which is also made public not only for reasons of transparency but as a contribution to the implementation of ecclesial initiatives. In particular, it can encourage participation in the synodal dynamic at the local and regional levels, while waiting for the outcome of the October Assembly. This will provide further material on which the local Churches will be called to pray, reflect, act and make their own contribution.* <https://www.synod.va/en/news/instrumentum-laboris-a-document-of-the-whole-church.html>

This Report is a synthesis of the rich contributions and reflections from the day, to be submitted to the October 2023 Synod delegates from England & Wales, as well as to other Synodal Process contacts.

Introduction

We began with a transformative, listening, spiritual conversation reflecting on *The parable of the vineyard workers*: For the realm of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for the vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, the householder sent them into the vineyard. And going out about the third hour, the householder saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, "You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you. So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, the householder did the same. And about the eleventh hour the householder went out and found others standing, and said to them, "Why do you stand here idle all day?" They replied, "Because no one has hired us." The householder said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to the steward, "Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first." And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But the householder replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius. Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last.

(Matthew 20: 1-16)

The following words or phrases from the Gospel reflection were highlighted: Why do you stand there all the day ? - Go ! - No one has hired us ! - The eleventh hour ! - You have made them equal ! - Do you begrudge my generosity ? - Whatever is right, I will give you ! - So they went ! - The last will be first, and the first last !

These words and phrases were held in mind during the ensuing conversations, and in the light of this Gospel reflection, the following Working Document questions were considered:

- Q.1.** How can we be more fully a sign and instrument of God and the unity of all humanity ?
- Q.2.** How can we better share gifts and tasks in the service of the Gospel ?
- Q.3.** What processes, structures and institutions do we need for participation, governance and authority in a missionary, synodal Church?
- Q.4.** How do we change and grow as a synodal Church in our parishes and other communities?

Synthesis of Responses:

- Q.1.** How can we be more fully a sign and instrument of God and the unity of all humanity ?

Let us live out, in practice, the belief that Synodality is a way of being Church together, and hold fast to the conviction that good thrives in spite of sometimes toxic conditions. Before we claim to be a sign of unity before 'all humanity' we need to be a sign of being one Church, giving voice to inclusivity, mercy, and joy. If a commitment to communion, participation, and mission is to be fully realised then all of us who receive the one denarius for the gifts we offer have to overcome all that leads to polarisation and discord. The building up of the faith community must be a sign that all are equal in the sight of God, and so carried out in partnership and shared responsibility, rather than clerical dominance. The lay majority of the Church should be seen to be celebrated rather than tolerated, and their voices, particularly those of women and other marginalised groups, need to be recognised for their role in bringing us together rather than tearing us apart over different views.

If Synodality is journeying and listening together we need ecclesial, structural transparency so that those beyond Church boundaries are able to see how we listen to the voice of God's Spirit and the ideals of faith rather than to specific doctrinal points which are always open to development; how we listen to each other, and to whom do we listen - who are the 'unhired' whose voice is seldom heard ? God does not deal in specific points of doctrine, but in principles and ideals. Our baptismal Spirit empowers us to engage with God through the voice of our conscience as we discern solutions to the dilemmas we face. Egoism of all kinds, particularly the clerical, must be left behind for the sake of the good of all.

Fundamentalisms in doctrine that maintain ideology rather than visionary faith need to be challenged through ongoing formation, not least for those in ordained ministries. We need to move beyond infantilised experiences and victimhood in our faith community experiences. The voices of those who have been refused sacramental reconciliation, those who do not receive Communion, or who only feel safe at the back of the church porch, need to be listened to by those who minister in the name of the Church for the harm that their actions have caused. Remedies for these concerns are not solely the responsibility of the hierarchy but a common task that will be ministerial expressions of the priesthood of all the people of God. Some of these ministries will be best offered, variously, by different members of God's people - married, single, celibate, women, men, younger or older people, those with other abilities, heterosexual and LGBT+ people, all of richly varied ethnicities.

In the bombardment of so much noisy, social media we need to cultivate that deep listening which leads to cultural change in both Church and society. Thus, discerning the Spirit, can lead to a discerning spirit that assesses the true 'signs of the times' - values as well as negativities - and so enable humanity to embrace the common good. At the same time we need to explore all that is valuable in technological and scientific development so as to use them as instruments for fully human evangelisation. We need to be seen as people who hold a critical faith, so that living with creative tension and questioning in open dialogue can be transformative, not just for individuals but for the Church as a whole. We must be seen to live our faith in community rather than in the perceived idleness of those waiting to be hired. As was said of the early Christian communities: 'See how they love one another !'

Q.2. How can we better share gifts and tasks in the service of the Gospel ?

The call to identify our tasks and gifts in the service of the Gospel needs to be seen in the context of our social realities. The Woody Allen quote was used "90% of life is just showing up!" Those who respond to such calls, workers who toiled longer, deserve better treatment so that the sharing of gifts and tasks are rooted in respect for, and the expression of God-given ministries that emerge from baptism. There has to be a conversion of understanding that we are blessed by the gift of equality. Many are impatient about wishing to exercise their individual gifts and talents, embracing the householder's question: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

We need to be more creative in developing a kind of community which is properly relational, where we know people by name, where our tactics are not of manipulation or dependency but aiming to be a loving, welcoming community. We should try to think more about what God's realm requires of all of us, as opposed to the clergy's management of earthly concerns. We should not get caught up with who is getting credit for just 'doing the job,' but at the same time honouring those who commit themselves to 'work in the vineyard.' Practical ways of achieving this could begin with enabling clergy to open up to their being over-worked or stressed - "Would it help if ..?" Too often, we fail to see our call to listen to our own humanity, with all its frailty and vulnerability, as a sign and instrument of God enabling us to be true to our full identities - truthful to one-self and the world.

It would be good for the ordained and those in seminary to experience first-hand the pastoral work of women, including women-clergy, as well as other lay-involvement such as preaching at Mass, leading non-Eucharistic worship such as Morning & Evening Prayer, The Way of the Cross, etc. The gifts given through the Spirit need to be demonstrated/incarnated in our lives and actions since without this the Spirit suffers in and through us - we weaken the Spirit's impulse and breath. The roots of ministry, ordained and lay, are to be found in our baptismal priesthood not in a top-down, gender-exclusive selection process.

Journeying and listening together is not simply a 'follow the leader' game. Too often it appears that the Church's leadership, at all levels, is unable or afraid to 'hire the vineyard-workers. It is not simply that the People of God cry, "No one has hired us!" but a perception that "No one wants to hire us!" In many parishes, there are congregation members who are more qualified and experienced than their clergy in theology and spirituality, who are more skilled in community-building, group facilitation or personal accompaniment. Whether at the local Church experience, diocesan, national, or global levels, there need to be ways in which all the People of God can be enabled to have an equal stake in deciding, a) how we walk together; b) which routes we take; c) what/where the destination might be.

There are institutionalised/systemic problems within the Church that need to be acknowledged, addressed, and resolved whether through the development of magisterial teachings or through more authentic pastoral praxis. Key issues preventing this are those of gender, sexuality, race, and the misuse of ecclesiastical and emotional power. Until we face up to the many levels of hypocrisy involved, superficial changes will have no effect. The Church's leadership needs to remove the beams from its own eyes before trying to take the specks from the eyes of its faithful, or society at large.

Q.3. What processes, structures and institutions do we need for participation, governance and authority in a missionary, synodal Church?

There was a strong view that these two final questions are in the wrong direction - rather, "How do we listen, to whom do we listen, are we truly listening to the Spirit?" There must be a firm foundation in Gospel values, rather than transitory social realities or illusionary shifts of power. Our baptismal Spirit anoints us, just as it did Jesus, "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free." All processes, structures, institutions, governance and authority in the Church must reflect that we are a justice-seeking community and, as a previous Synod stated, "action in the pursuit of justice, and participation in the transformation of the world are constitutive elements in the Church's mission of preaching the Gospel."

The primary motivation for any of the Church's ministries has to be a seeking out of the vulnerable and marginalised, enabling "the coming in and the going out" of all God's people in faithful freedom. So often, careerism, merit and prestige seem to be the hall-marks of ordained ministry. The model of priesthood which we have at present has become a barrier. It can paralyse a sense of worth and mission among those who are not ordained.

A review of the Church's structures, institutions, and ways of doing things, as is currently being pursued by Pope Francis is required at lower levels of the Church. Clericalism and secrecy need to be cleared from local structures, such as Bishops' Conferences, Diocesan Councils, so that "that which affects all, should be decided by all." Proper processes of accountability need to be in place so that decisions, appointments, policies, and strategies can be questioned after discernment rather than decided as faits-accomplis.

Q.4. How do we change and grow as a synodal Church in our parishes and other communities?

Firstly, there must be honest recognition that the Church is in a major crisis - a crisis of honesty, integrity, and lack of courage. Listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches today demands a different stance from that of Apostolic times. That we know so much more about the human person, gender and sexuality, how communities develop and flourish, how power can be used and abused, should be recognised as contemporary ways in which the Spirit works through human intelligence and ingenuity in positively creative ways.

Too often, anthropological, sociological, psychological, and other human scientific advances are seen as threats rather than new ways in which God challenges people to bring good news to the marginalised, new vision to those struggling to see all that lies before them, freedom for those who are oppressed by toxic structures whether of religion or society, self-rejection, or exclusion. These affect not only those beyond the Church, but also many within its own boundaries, including its leaders.

As we try to have one heart and mind so we must recognise that this only happens step by step. We walk by faith, as on the Emmaus Road, not knowing where Emmaus might actually be for us. But when our eyes are opened then we can see that those who recognise Christ in the breaking of the bread can create places of blessing and be instruments of grace. Setting out on the journey involves courage, and being open to receiving new gifts through the full ministry of women, recognising God's created design in those of different sexualities and gender identity, allowing ourselves, personally, and the Church's institutions to be evangelised by the poor, the excluded, those of different cultures and ethnicities. We need to express our pastoral practices and ministries in ways that affirm, rather than problematise people.

A healing culture is required in the Church, which enables growth, delegates responsibility, as well as acknowledging shared authority and expertise. At local diocesan levels, we need patterns of formation which are inclusive so that clergy, religious and people develop awareness and learn together how to become a more Synodal Church. The isolated experience of seminarians in closed college communities, and the 'superior' attitudes that this can engender needs to be seriously reviewed.

A Synodal Church will not depend on priests and bishops but on the engagement of all God's people. Only thus can we be seen to be accountable, truly participatory and understanding of each other's call to service. The ongoing Synodal life of the Church will not see the Church as an end in itself, but will then be able to identify what it needs to do in terms of its mission in, not simply to, the world. It will then see as natural the need to engage with people of other faiths and none, other Christians, secular and political movements, in order to create and maintain a just society that for us will reflect the reign of God, and promote the common good.

Where do we go from here ?

We look forward to the outcomes of the Synodal discernment which will take place in Rome, in October 2023. We offer these reflections to the number of parishes, communities, and groups, represented by those whose commitment to becoming a more Synodal Church continues to be strong, as well as to Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, and his Auxiliary Bishops. We also offer this

synthesis to those who will be delegates to the Synod of the Church, taking place from 4-29 October 2023, and others with whom we are pleased to have contact. We plan to consider the Final Report of the October 2023 Synod, and any response to it by Pope Francis, at a further discernment day, early in 2024, so as to continue to engage with the Synodal journey towards October 2024.

A Synodal Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we continue to hold the Synod in prayer, having the experience of walking together, as brothers and sisters, united and accompanied by you. Convince us that to be Christians is to live Synodality, not as an event, nor as a reflection on a historical moment, but as an expression of the Church that we are, and the one which the Holy Spirit makes us into. Help us to engrave in our hearts that to be Christians is to have a 'Synodal vocation' that grows in a spiritual life. Set in our hearts the desire to live out Synodality in everyday life, as an ecclesial habit, as a way of being and becoming Church. Grant us to live deeply in communion with everyone, make us generous enough to open ourselves to participation and courageous to **be** mission and not just to **do** mission. Mould our heart towards a Synodal spirituality, concrete and authentic in our lives, so that we may witness the presence of God's realm for all peoples, not only in the present time, but for every time, in every place, and with every person. **Amen.**