



# **'WALKING TOGETHER'**

*Diocese of Plymouth Synodal Synthesis*

April 2022





## **Foreword to Walking Together: Synthesis of the Diocese of Plymouth**

At the two synodal days, we shared the Gospel of the Resurrection appearance of the Lord to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee (John 21: 1-10). In this passage the disciples are surprised by Jesus' presence among them, amid their daily struggle to catch fish, and having realised it is truly Him, they exclaim, "It is the Lord" (John 21:7). It is a reminder to us that what we are about is a miraculous catch, not of fish but of people, and that the Lord surprises us by His presence.

In the synodal journey, the Risen Lord has made Himself known among us, and invites us to continue to reach out to others so that they, too, may know the beauty and challenge of an encounter with Him. This is what being a Christian is all about. We have each already been 'caught' by the Lord and come into His life. We want to help bring others into that life too. That's what being a Synodal Church means.

We are on the road together. But we are not heading nowhere. All of us, indeed all creatures, are in the hand of God. This is why we want to listen to everybody. All the meetings, all the written submissions, all the patient and attentive listening - which must, of course, go on - has at its heart the recognition that faith sees in all things and all people, the action of the Creator. We believe that in Jesus Christ all people live. All are called to life in Him. Jesus is the one who brings life even when there seems to be death.

I want to thank the organising team, ably led by Canon John Deeny VG and Deborah Fisher, Caritas Plymouth Manager, for overseeing our active listening process. Together with some lay men and women, and clergy, who were part of the working group, they have worked faithfully and diligently to produce the Diocesan Synthesis. It has been good to have been involved in a personal way, at different points, through various direct conversations, in various 'listening meetings', and through participation in our two Synodal days.

Fundamentally, this has been an active listening process to God's holy people. I want to thank all those who took part so generously. I recognise that some did so believing that no matter how much they say, nothing will change, whilst others have a deep concern that some aspect of Church teaching would change. I have indicated that I would not exercise an editorial hand in the diocesan synthesis. I believe this is important if we are to honour a deep listening to the voice of the holy people of God. This is what a path of synodality, of *walking together*, requires of us at this 'beginning' stage. The process which took place in our parishes, schools and different communities, as well as through the different media platforms, was focused predominately on this listening to the people of God. Clergy of the diocese, and I, had the opportunity to take part in different ways. Yet the preparatory documents of the Synod make it clear that it is especially important to listen attentively to this voice of God's holy people. (See *Documents of the Synodal Process*, General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops). This is something which is a fruit of our process to date, and which must continue as we move forward together as a diocese.



It does not mean that it is the people of God who determine the path of the Church. In the Catholic Church, our *walking together* is not a parliament or a democratic process. ‘Synod’ and ‘Synodality’ carry a certain history in our English-speaking world given the experience in other Churches. We need to continually purify this in our own discussions and reflection, to discover afresh a fully Catholic understanding. It is true that there were contributions from clergy in our diocese. Yet to this part of the process there must be added “the pastors’ task of discernment” (See *Interview with Cardinal Grech, May 2021*, General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops). From what the people of God say, the pastors must grasp what the Spirit wants to say to the Church. In offering our Diocesan synthesis to the national reflection, and in sending it also back to the Diocese for further reflection, prayer and dialogue, there is a need to continuously allow an interplay between the “voice of the people of God” and “the discernment of the pastors”. I believe we are still only at a very early stage of rediscovering this interaction in the Catholic Church. It requires more patience and attentive listening, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, moving forward. But it is important for us to note, at this point, that it is in listening to the people of God that discernment begins. This has been our experience.

In terms of those involved, we engaged with just over 10% of the Church-going population. Many expressed their gratitude for being able to have their say and to be actively listened to. In responses, there seems to have been more of a focus on “The Church of the Lord”, rather than on “The Lord of the Church”. There is a challenge here for us, for the future - to bring a sense of engagement with those who do not attend Church, and always placing before ourselves and others, the person of Jesus Christ. For, after the Resurrection, Jesus Christ took His disciples by surprise. He showed Himself to them under various disguises, and in the act of making Himself known to them, disappeared from their sight.

This same Jesus, ever living, ever working, still takes us by surprise. We whose faith is weak and wavering, the Risen Jesus takes by surprise. This is what we have experienced in this synodal journey, *walking together*. It is so good to hear of the joy that people experience in coming together, especially perhaps as we gradually emerge from the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. But it is not just that. There is a joy in consciously walking together. And this joy is because we do not walk alone. The Risen Jesus surprises us by His presence in what we experience as we walk together. His Spirit makes us aware of His presence. “There is not a moment in which God does not present Himself under the cover of some pain to be endured, of some consolation to be enjoyed or of some duty to be performed” (Jean-Pierre de Caussade).

All that takes place within us, or through us, or around us, all that we experience with and through one another, contains and conceals Jesus’ divine action. What the Synodal journey teaches us is, that if we are attentive and watchful, God will continually reveal Himself to us. We are invited to see His divine action in everything that happens to us and to rejoice in it. To exclaim, “It is the Lord” (John 21:7).

This is the invitation of being a synodal Church. Even though the diocesan phase which contributes to the national synthesis, is coming to an end, **the journey continues**. In the title



of this synodal process, the Holy Father indicates it is, “*For a Synodal Church...*” So, we continue in our ongoing journey as a *Precious place of God’s Grace*, in which Jesus still makes Himself known among us. At this point we are offering a synthesis, a ‘sounding’, of what we have heard so far, especially from the holy People of God. This will be shared at national level to contribute to that synthesis. But there is a need to send what we have heard back to our own diocese, too. I have asked that resources be in place to facilitate this, so that in these next months there are more opportunities to reflect, to pray and to share together. In preparation for that, and awaiting the resources that will be sent, I would suggest the following for our ongoing reflection:

- To baptised men and women of the diocese, consecrated women and men - thank you to those who have taken part. I am grateful for your honesty. I recognise that some of what has been shared is challenging and even disturbing at points, but I am encouraged, too, by your love for Our Lord, for the faith and for our priests. Does what you see in the synthesis resonate with what you said? What can we take forward at diocesan level?
- To the 85-90% of men and women in the Diocese who seem not to have engaged with our *walking together* process so far, do you find your voice and your life reflected in what is said here? How can we walk more authentically with one another in our desire to encounter the Risen Lord and to share Him with our brothers and sisters?
- To our clergy - thank you to those who engaged, either in collaboration with the parishioners, or with other clergy, or in direct contributions. What will assist you in taking some of these themes forward more fully in the parish and in our schools, with people of all ages?
- To those clergy who have not yet engaged with this *walking together* process, what would you want to contribute? What can assist in giving you the confidence and the energy to be more intentionally part of this journey?
- To brother bishops - I offer this synopsis of the Diocese of Plymouth in the hope that it will help us discover afresh that each of our dioceses is a precious place of God’s Grace. How can we help one another to listen more deeply to God’s holy people in an ongoing manner? What here needs the Spirit’s guidance and inspiration so that we may all - lay faithful, clergy and bishops - enter more fully into the unchanging richness of our Church’s teaching and life? And what here is speaking to us anew and asking us to change? How do we assist with the important interplay between the voice of Gods people and our discernment as pastors? How do we all encourage and challenge one another to be better missionary disciples?

Included within our walking together process is the desire to listen to the voices of those who are not on the road with us, but who are nevertheless our brothers and sisters and who are perhaps silently pleading to us from the side of the road - maybe having fallen into a ditch, maybe having taken a different path, maybe having been left behind, maybe having been deliberately passed by on the other side. We need to strain our bodies, our ears, and our hearts to reach out, to listen deeply to them, not just once, but again and again, so as not to leave anyone on the side of the road. For these, too, are invited to be part of us.



Many of us take inspiration from the earliest apostolic experience. The Church had few formal structures - no buildings - but all the followers of Jesus were disciples *on the way*, a people on mission, a people on the move, filled with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We listen afresh to their experience in the apostolic letters and in the Acts of the Apostles, which we rightly call the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit”. We steep ourselves more fully in that first apostolic witness, recognising that this is not about preserving a safe harbour but about venturing out afresh, sometimes on stormy waters, to fish for others.

It is often said today that Christendom is dead in our societies. We no longer live in a time when most people know what we are talking about when we proclaim a belief in Jesus Christ. Let us not hanker after some ideal past. For we live in a *new apostolic era* in which the Gospel is to be proclaimed in the lives of each one of us. Where men and women of courage are needed even more to witness to the presence and power of the Risen Jesus among us. We have encountered Him. We continue to encounter Him on the road with others. We experience Him especially in the Eucharist, in prayer and in service, in the face and lives of His poor. Again and again, we can acclaim as those earliest Apostles exclaimed, “It is the Lord” (John 21:7).

Let us continue to walk – bishops, priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful – all together. Let us continue to listen to one another, to support one another, to cajole one another, to encourage one another, to challenge one another, to be better, more faithful, missionary disciples. Let us pray that this continued journey may indeed allow the Spirit of the Risen Jesus to be poured out upon us. May there be for us a continued synodal conversion, allowing us to discover more deeply our personal and communal vocations, our sense of purpose, and our mission.

+ Mark O'Toole .

Rt Rev Mark O'Toole  
Bishop of Plymouth







## DIOCESE OF PLYMOUTH WALKING TOGETHER - OUR SYNODAL JOURNEY

### Section I: The Process: What Did Our Journey Look Like?

In 2020, Bishop Mark started a process of engagement about a reform of our Diocesan structures to respond to the challenges of the day, fostering greater co-responsibility and collaboration among all the baptised, in 'A Precious Place of God's Grace'. This Synodal journey builds on that listening process. The Spiritual Conversation model, listening to each other and the Holy Spirit in encounter with others, was an unfamiliar but welcome journey – and for some felt like the first time that the parish has listened to others.

Bishop Mark appointed two Diocesan Co-Contacts – Canon John Deeny VG and Deborah Fisher OBE, Manager of Caritas Plymouth. The co-contacts were joined by a working group of eight other people – clergy and lay, men and women from different backgrounds and parts of the Diocese. The group prepared materials for parishes and schools to use during Advent offering meditation on Scripture, the liturgy, and prayer, with an emphasis on listening to the Word of God before responding (Appendix A). The listening process was set within a spiritual context, supporting openness in sharing as well as hearing. Every session at parish and Diocesan level began with *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* and the prayer was printed and widely shared.

We chose four overarching themes of Listen, Mission, Celebrate and Dream to guide our Advent journey and ensure no subject was off limits. In recognition of the fact that not everyone would not wish to or be able to participate in this four-week Advent programme, we created resources that could be used individually and in small gatherings after Mass or online. The materials were designed to encourage personal growth.

An early positive step in our journey was the support offered by over 130 lay facilitators. They were instrumental in ensuring a genuine listening process across the Diocese. Being invited to listen to each other without responding, to enable active listening of what others are called to share was one of the most challenging but also one of the most rewarding parts of the journey. It showed we are unused to listening in this way and managing disagreement was challenging for some groups.

Leadership and support from Bishop Mark were essential. He launched the journey on 17 October 2021 with a service at Plymouth Cathedral (broadcast live and shared on YouTube) and wrote to all parishes and schools. He set the tone for our discernment *'We are invited to become experts in the art of encounter. We do so, not so much by organising events or theorising about problems or planning strategies for pastoral reorganisation but in taking time to encounter the Lord and one another.'*

Leadership and encouragement from parish priests and facilitators were also key. Where this was not evident, groups were less likely to participate. Engagement could be tokenistic and where clergy merely read out the bishop's letter and referred to a synodal journey once or twice, only a handful of people turned up. Where priests were supportive, there were positive examples of walking together. Some parishes felt that where the initiative came from the laity themselves there was more positive engagement.



Most clergy did not attend the entire parish gatherings to enable people to speak freely, but expressed a desire to have greater opportunity to come together to discuss Synodality.

We tried to get maximum participation by sharing all materials on-line and sending paper copies to parishes and schools. We created new webpages, a dedicated email inbox and held a series of online and face-to-face events which 835 people attended. We created a short form with accessible questions which could be completed on paper and online. 166 responses were submitted. We appointed a staff member to work two days a week to reach out to those on the margins. Our prison chaplains invited prisoners to contribute thoughts and our safeguarding team reached out to victims, survivors and perpetrators of abuse. We held ecumenical events and online events with clergy (Appendix B).

Reaching out beyond already active parishioners was one of the most challenging aspects of our Diocesan journey. Although we tried to engage the widest audience, we were only partly successful. Several organisations declined to engage because of negative perceptions or experiences of the Catholic Church. This particularly related to LGBTQ+ groups. We were able to listen at Diocesan level to those experiencing homelessness, prisoners, LGBTQ+, refugees and migrants, and victims of abuse but this engagement was not mirrored at parish level where people either struggled to reach out or felt that this process did not allow sufficient time for genuine engagement.

67 groups met which included approximately 1000 people – over 10% of our Church-going population. Overall we received over 700 separate pieces of feedback (full breakdown at Appendix C). Whilst positive, we still need to acknowledge the majority who did not participate. The process was felt by many to be rushed. People would have liked a longer time to become familiar with the materials.

On 22 January 2022 we held a day of prayer and reflection. 15 participants read all the feedback submitted at that point and sought to understand and identify emerging themes but without applying judgement about quality or relative importance. The output from that session was a summary of key themes which were expanded as further feedback was received. The themes were shared at two covid-compliant pre-synodal events, replicated to enable participation from each parish, where we heard personal testimonies from people about their experience. Over 100 people attended. Bishop Mark and the working group attended both events to listen to what was being said. There were also four online events with facilitators and clergy. Reflections from all the events and an online facilitator survey fed into the final synthesis. The synthesis has tried where possible to use the words of participants. The detailed timeline of our Synodal Journey is at Appendix C.

The details of those who participated in the working group and the review of feedback are listed at Appendix D.



## Section 2 – Experience

The Synodal journey was a positive experience for most participants. People have strong roots in the love and unity of the Trinity and in particular the Holy Spirit. They are inspired by listening to the Word of God and want to come together in parishes and develop a sense of community and purpose. People embraced the opportunity to talk about faith and the more challenging issues facing the Church and wider society.

The local listening journey showed the value placed on a culture of encounter. Many see the Church as a welcoming/compassionate companion and have a thirst for a deeper encounter with the Word, the Sacraments and liturgy as a vital part of their faith lives. Celebration – liturgical or social – is seen as vital for community and church. People expressed a desire to come together more for worship (including house groups, Celebrate, Gather, Eucharistic Services etc.), social opportunities and social action. There is a strong desire for lifelong learning and greater opportunities for discussion and engagement and for the Catholic Church to offer a range of approaches to suit individual preferences.

Lots of people find huge joy in the Church and cannot imagine life without confession or receiving Holy Communion. Receiving Communion is very strengthening. People want to be fed spiritually and the beauty of liturgy in its various forms is greatly appreciated and valued. The Mass and priests are hugely important in people's lives. They attach huge importance to Jesus and living the Word of God in everyday life and welcome the sense of community that they find in their parish.

For many the impact of this listening journey was personal – it caused people to reflect and share their own experiences, both positive and negative; how they can support people in need, family, the parish community, and the Church; how to serve others as a Christian to build up a better or even a 'new' Catholic Church. Others were inspired by this process of listening and encounter to continue this journey. In some parishes new initiatives and groups have been created and new relationships formed. This may be a return to previous activities following the opening up of society after Covid restrictions, which people found very challenging. However, for many this has offered an opportunity to re-engage with their faith and community in a new and fresh way. We have to acknowledge that the majority of parishioners did not participate and those who did may be the more active members of the parish. There was disappointment among facilitators in places where they found apathy and disinterest among both clergy and parishioners. There was a lack of confidence in the process among those who suggested that when issues are raised, change does not happen. There were concerns that the Diocesan synthesis would be sanitised; not include challenging issues or the feelings of anger that were expressed alongside positive voices, and at worst there was cynicism about the likely outcome of this journey.

The journey showed the importance of communication which can be an enabler or a barrier to synodality – communication within and between parishes, within the Diocese and with those outside the Church. The Church as an institution seems to be geared up for telling rather than listening. The approach to listening adopted in our Diocesan listening journey was new to most people and we are still working towards a situation where all who belong to the People of God – laity, consecrated and ordained – can engage in the exercise of deep and respectful listening to one another. Difficulties were expressed about raising genuine concerns, criticising the hierarchy or disagreeing in a constructive way.





Language can be a barrier to walking together and obscure language excludes. Some words are archaic e.g. “Oblation”, “venerable” producing poor communication which can be difficult to understand. Language influences a relationship and people, the young in particular, may not understand the Mass. Gender-exclusive language in readings and the Creed is also perceived as an obstacle. We could do more to consider accessibility for people with disabilities, using sign language, pictorial resources and creating opportunities for worship for people with learning disabilities.

There is much positive engagement with local communities and through ecumenical outreach, but people felt that we could engage more in a synodal way with the wider community. Most parishes found it difficult to reach out to gather wider views. Views were expressed that we need to get better at hearing someone’s story without judgement, listening to what the ‘vulnerable’ need rather than assuming and not letting the rule book get in the way. We need to meet people where they are and not expect them to come to us. Feedback from the homeless is that churches are not welcoming and only reach out at Christmas. The journey also highlighted divided communities in our own parishes e.g. Polish and Syro Malabar communities often worship separately. Meeting up with different cultures helps us to celebrate together but this doesn’t happen all our parishes. We could explain ourselves better. People find our rituals bizarre, so explanation is welcome both for our own congregations but also for people of no faith attending a wedding or a funeral in a Catholic Church. All our statues are white.

### Section 3 Feedback

There were a range of areas where strong feelings were expressed about the experience of lived synodality in our parishes: how power and authority is exercised; communication; welcome and participation; engaging and retaining young people; the role of the laity, particularly women; attitudes to divorced/separated; feelings of being judged; abuse; parish life and the priesthood; the liturgy. One notable element was the high number who raised attitudes to LGBTQ+ as a major barrier to walking together as a compassionate community.

We understand that there can be a temptation to only see “problems” and that fixating on them could lead us to feel overwhelmed. Equally there were concerns that dissenting voices would be edited out of the final synthesis. Therefore, the section below explores themes which were frequently mentioned, both positive and challenging, as well as those mentioned less but which nonetheless resonated. There was no consensus on any of the themes – for each viewpoint there was often an opposite view expressed and we have tried to reflect this. Appendix E contains a series of quotes which highlight the breadth of views offered.

The way in which **power and authority** are exercised was a major theme. There was a sense that we need to reimagine current structures in order to foster genuine synodality. There was acknowledgement of the journey already made from the most extreme clericalism and the lifetimes work undertaken by our current clergy to achieve this. However, the structure of the Church remains hierarchical, paternalistic and almost exclusively male and seminaries are not perceived to be preparing priests for the realities of parish life. Governance and parish structures could be more professional and foster greater co-responsibility and mutual support reflecting modern society. There were suggestions that wealth enables access to power and influence.



There is strong support for the Church making better **use of the skills of laity** and having a greater outward focus. There are vibrant parishes which create a variety of ways in which people can celebrate and be active in mission, but this is not common to all. Not all clergy or lay leaders promote the active participation of all the faithful in the liturgy and some feel actively excluded. It is perceived that sometimes the institutional Church would rather have no one than a lay person. Catholic women and men by virtue of their Baptism receive the grace to be “Priest, Prophet and King”, but not everyone feels their gifts are fully recognized or developed, restricting their answers to the Holy Spirit’s Call to Serve. The rule disbanding parish structures when a priest moves on was felt to disrespect the skills, charisms and commitment of lay people, but was welcomed by others as an opportunity for change.

There were a significant number of comments about the Catholic Church’s attitudes towards the **LGBTQ+ community**, particularly from young people. A widespread view was that people shouldn’t be punished because of who they are attracted to. Our difficulties in engaging with LGBTQ+ support groups highlighted that their service users felt ostracised by the Catholic faith. They felt talking to us might put people off using their service.

The issue of **gender and lack of roles for women** was raised frequently (by men and women). Current structures have led to women being undervalued and unappreciated for the contribution they make to the Church. As baptised Catholics we are all blessed with the gifts of the spirit. Looking forward, the Church needs to listen to women’s perspectives and women need the opportunity to occupy positions of influence and possibly leadership. This “voice” may be in the form of women having the chance to give homilies thereby communicating their faith and understanding of its practical application in daily life; greater responsibility in parish life supporting parishioners and participating in decision-making. Some stated the latter could be achieved through the ordination of women as deacons or priests. Others are committed to the apostolic tradition of male priests and bishops

A dream expressed by most parishes is to attract **younger families and retain teenagers**. People would like to see greater engagement with youth and encouragement for them to take part in the celebration of Mass. Although we didn’t have significant numbers of younger contributors – particularly older teenagers and young adults - those who contributed shared positive views of the Church and its teaching and felt a strong sense of community, welcome and saw their Church as a place of peace and reflection. Young people want greater engagement in Mass and more joy and fun in their spiritual journey. The young don’t feel they have an opportunity to be listened to, don’t feel they can be true to themselves and although there is a desire to see families at Mass, we are seen as less family orientated than other churches/religions. Ecumenical blended families feel particularly unwelcome. We are not talking the same language as young people. Younger people also have cultural expectations around inclusion and diversity and can find Church attitudes misogynistic and homophobic; minorities can feel unwelcome or unrepresented. Given the importance attached to young people, we have created a separate summary of their actual words. (Appendix F).

**Parish life** depends very much on the **priest**, and this can be both positive and negative. There is a lot of love for priests and appreciation of their work but concerns that the current model of Priesthood and the workload and pressure on priests is unsustainable. Not everyone feels that celibacy should be an essential requirement of ordination to the Priesthood and want married men to be considered as possibly having a vocation to the Priesthood. Clergy might be given a choice as they start to decide whether to be celibate or not. Denying



Catholic priests a spouse when married ex-Anglican clergy are welcomed seems contradictory and hurtful to those forced to leave ministry. However, this view was not universal, and it was felt that such significant changes should not simply be motivated by the current low numbers of vocations to the priesthood but because God was calling a more diverse group of people to serve in these roles.

There is **inconsistency in the attitudes** of priests to sensitive issues. Not all priests give the same advice or the same answer to questions. This sows confusion and resentment. Prayer and liturgical celebrations also vary from parish to parish in the extent to which they inspire and guide our common life and mission and in attitudes towards social action. Not all parishes are welcoming to those from diverse backgrounds or those on the margins and it is too easy to feel lonely at mass. This **lack of welcome** and exclusion extends to both clergy and the lay community.

There are **binary views about how we celebrate Mass and the Sacraments** which present challenges to synodality. A minority perceive a decrease in “devotion characterised by reverence and awe” and would like greater access to the Latin Mass; they are deeply hurt and angered by *Traditionis Custodes*. Others feel the Mass is too traditional and ‘stuffy’ and lacks joy. Some felt that churches should have remained open during covid lockdowns, whilst others valued the opportunity to stream services and access formation from across the world, as part of the Universal Church. Attending mass on Sunday, as opposed to a weekly obligation, is a challenge to modern family life. The **Sacrament of Reconciliation** provokes very differing reactions with those who want more frequent opportunities, whilst others find it challenging and outdated. There are diverse views about the liturgy: whether it is too formal or informal; whether it is too clerical or there is too much lay participation, whether it is a personal experience or communitarian.

A **lack of clarity and consistency about ‘what is the parish?’** is a barrier to walking together. A sense of common faith and community is not universal. A significant proportion of people are not clear about either their own mission or the mission of their parish. Churches are spaces of grace, joy and compassion and seen as the place to celebrate faith in action within the parish and also in the outside world in a sensitive way - firm in teaching but open to all and non-judgemental. The way parish communities look after each other and really care about others is faith in action. However there are parishes where areas of mission such as community support and social action are absent or undervalued. There are those who want to make a bigger difference in the local community and to the poor overseas, expressing solidarity with those around us by what we do as well as what we proclaim. The view was shared that if the Catholic Church disappeared tomorrow there would be little or no impact on their city.

Some would like to work with outside agencies and have a greater presence and dialogue with the ecumenical and other faith communities. Experience in non-Catholic churches can enrich our understanding but there are tensions between those who want their parish to focus outwards, connecting with other denominations and faiths and those who want to focus inward. Living a good life, following Jesus’ example and obeying God’s will is the personal mission of a large number of people. Others want to be disciples proclaiming the Word and see the role of their parish as teaching and formation, reaching out to Catholics and non-Catholics to enable people to know Jesus and become disciples. People want to speak to



those from other religions and no religion with confidence and welcome formation to enable this.

The issue of **abuse** was raised numerous times including child abuse, abuse of women, abuse in orphanages by religious, abuse in hospitals of vulnerable and elderly, moving abusers instead of acknowledging crimes and financial irregularities. Abuse has damaged people as well as the Catholic Church reputation, leadership and credibility. Concerns remain that inappropriate behaviour is not addressed. Priests are protected in a way that victims are not, moved around when there are problems and not dealt with properly. Victims of abuse still don't feel listened to and want a proper dialogue between the Church and survivors of abuse, not a one-way listening service that is anonymous and open to being filtered or disregarded.

Some **value the clarity of Catholic Church moral teaching** and don't want to see this change. However others are concerned that the Church is disconnected from the real world and comes across as **judgemental and lacking compassion**. Church messaging on sensitive issues such as gay marriage and contraception is clear, but we fail to communicate publicly about other important issues such as social justice. There was significant feedback from those excluded from the sacraments including divorced/remarried; people of other Christian denominations married to Catholics and LGBTQ+. Restricting access to the sacraments is felt as an exclusion, a punishment and hypocritical. It is a source of shame to people and a common reason for not attending Mass.

There was a call from some for the Church to reflect again on its moral teaching on a range of issues: sex before marriage; the indissolubility of marriage; marriage being only between a man and a woman for the procreation of children and contraception. Contraception was not mentioned frequently but is seen by some as essential for a manageable family-life and that it is hypocritical to have a 'don't ask don't tell' policy or individual 'cop out' rather than a liveable teaching. 'Taboo' subjects are not addressed transparently such as contraceptives v. the rhythm method. A minority argued that the Catholic Church should loudly proclaim its unique, God-mandated mission, doctrine and moral teaching without pandering to the "woke" agendas. We should be clearer in our Catholic mission and mandate, without watering down our beliefs.

#### **Section 4: Assessment**

Most **welcomed this listening journey** and want it to continue with increased openness, inclusiveness and sharing between clergy and laity. The journey has **raised expectations** and created hope for real change among the People of God in our Diocese who have shared their joys, hopes and fears. Although initially cynical, many were encouraged by the openness of discussion and the sense that we need to be open to the Holy Spirit and continue to discern what God wants of us. Many felt that this was the first time that the Church really wanted to listen to lay Catholics and the wider community. But there needs to be change as a result of this journey if people are not to lose confidence in the process.

There are lots of areas of joy and parishes where there is a **lived experience of synodality**, positive and vibrant parishes which celebrate together and care for each other and the wider community. People value the opportunities to come together for prayer, listening to each other and reaching out to support the vulnerable. Faith offers a sense of stability in difficult times and people spoke of prayer as key to enabling an encounter with God and others.



There is a sense that we have already come a long way in becoming open and ready for dialogue but that **we are still on the journey towards a synodal Church** – bishops, priests and lay people. Progress has been made in recent decades, but more can be done to tackle the hierarchical structures; own up to mistakes concerning abuse and finances and exercise our prophetic role from conception to natural death. The Church needs to respond visibly and transparently to all issues even where they border on the negative.

Many flagged up areas requiring **healing and conversion**. There is a perception that those who have been hurt by the Church or other Catholic institutions are silenced rather than actively listened to. People have had the courage to share their personal faith journeys – both positive and negative and it has been impossible to ignore the pain and anger felt by those who perceived themselves to have been judged or excluded. Many feel the Church is hypocritical. We are all sinners. The Sacraments endow us with God's grace and blessing, thereby enabling those receiving them to be stronger in their efforts to resist sin but we withhold the Sacraments from certain groups. Those unable to receive the sacraments expressed strong feelings of pain and anger and raised the question about why the Church denies access to the sacraments when they, like everyone else, are in need of God's grace.

**Victims and survivors of abuse** believe that listening is a flawed and pointless exercise unless transparent opportunities for dialogue are created, and difficult conversations take place. There is a sense among victims and survivors that a united Church approach needs to be made with each priest and bishop giving the same welcome and information and further concrete actions are needed to acknowledge and where possible mend the very damaged relationships. We need to further strengthen the systems of responsibility and accountability in the Church that already exist in education, to safeguard and nurture people and help them grow and feel valued.

Some attach great value to traditions and structures whilst others see them as outdated. Questions were asked about the need for clarity on whether the traditions are simply custom and practice following the development of the hierarchical Church or the teachings of Jesus and mission in the early Church. **Although the faithful have skills to offer, not many feel able to serve through the gifts received from the Holy Spirit.** The lack of meaningful roles for women is particularly strong, but there are also perceived to be a range of barriers to the whole community being genuinely able to influence and/or participate in pastoral decisions. The voice of the young is less heard. Despite efforts to include those at the margins or who feel excluded, this is an area where we need to do see fresh impetus.

The Holy Spirit plays an important role in people's lives. There is a strong **call for formation and accompaniment** to enable people to deepen their faith. People want to come together for discussion, to gain greater confidence and deeper understanding to talk to others about their faith and Church teaching on sensitive issues.





## Section 5 Future Growth

The focus of our listening journey has been to understand how far the Diocese of Plymouth has travelled along a path of synodality which enables the entire People of God to walk forward together, listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, to participate in the mission of the Church in the communion that Christ establishes between us. We have received over 700 contributions from groups and individuals. Within this short timescale it is not realistic to fully appreciate all the Holy Spirit is telling us and to recommend specific actions. Our next step will be a period of further reflection on the feedback at Diocesan and parish level, inviting groups to reflect on and discuss the synthesis, what it means for our Diocese and how we can build on the positive and address the challenges.

We planned to focus this section on the three dimensions of this Synodal journey: communion, participation, and mission, but many themes come under more than one category. We are therefore highlighting areas where people dream of renewal and where paths are opening up for our local Church which require further dialogue and discernment:

- (i) **This global synodal journey is seen as a wonderful opportunity for the church to journey together.** The process was as important as the content. Many dream of a Church which embraces this way of working as a path by which the Church can more fruitfully fulfil her mission of evangelization in the world. This listening journey encouraged greater participation, for all to be listened to and have a voice about how we can become sustainable worshipping communities. If the issues and concerns raised by the global Christian community are heard and addressed, it will show that Church leaders are responding to our changing context. However, this process has raised questions about how we can accompany people in different circumstances, particularly those who feel hurt, angry or marginalised. Our parishes are very diverse and so are our communities (Appendix G sets out our context). There is not one 'preferred' style or way of being by which the Church lives out her mission in the world, but there is a dream for the Church to move from listening to dialogue and genuine communication. There is a strong desire to continue listening to one another. Technology offers new opportunities which were embraced during the pandemic. Pope Francis is seen as a role model of listening and many welcome increasing transparency and authenticity in the Church and greater awareness of social justice and responding to the cry of the poor. However, not everyone feels this way, and there are concerns that we will lose valued traditions and moral teaching. These different perspectives need to be listened to and valued as part of our continuing journey. **We need to walk together well, even when we disagree.**
  
- (ii) The **parish and priest** are hugely important and much loved. But **there is not a universal sense that clergy and laity are walking together.** It is important to most people that the parish is a welcoming space— we should 'be a field hospital for sinners' offering both material and spiritual support. But not all parishes are welcoming, and some groups feel particularly excluded. Many dream of a Church more tolerant of differences, treating everyone as equal, although there are concerns that we will water down our core beliefs. The perception that the Church holds negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+; divorced/remarried, the homeless and other groups is a significant barrier to synodality. Some feel we need to be more social and more likely to reach out (to the poor, to other Christians, to other agencies). Addressing issues of inequality and injustice could increase a connection to the Church.



- (iii) There is a strong sense that the **laity could take on more responsibility** and the Church should encourage this. Concern about pressures on priests and lack of vocations was a common thread and there was a strong message that people want greater opportunities to use their gifts in the parish. **There is a dream to see the talents of women more utilised and valued.**
- (iv) There was almost universal support for **a greater focus on young people, families and communities.** There is a strong disconnect between what our young people learn in current society about inclusion and diversity and the messages both visual, verbal and subliminal they receive from the Catholic Church. The journeying together starts in the family and continues to take place in the encounter with the Scriptures and the living tradition of the Church. Young people need strengthening for mission, compassion and understanding and an opportunity not just to sit and listen. The Church needs to reflect on how we adapt our welcome to meet the demands of modern family life.
- (v) **Abuse and poor safeguarding practice are a cause of concern** and a barrier to evangelisation. It is a threat to Church credibility and leadership. The abused are part of the solution and not the problem. We need to help people meet the healing Lord of the Church but also to ensure that poor behaviour is dealt with robustly and with support for victims and survivors. We need to move on from listening to victims and survivors to genuine dialogue and consider options like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- (vi) **People want opportunities to learn and develop their experience of faith** and grow in spirituality. The homily is the main way of formation for most parishioners, but homilies don't always address current issues. This creates a lack of confidence among people about talking to others about faith and many seemed unable to articulate with any clarity what the Church's mission actually is. We should seek out opportunities to explain ourselves even when that runs counter to current cultural trends. Both clergy and lay people need formation if we are to be a more synodal Church.

There are so many diverse views that it can be challenging to 'journey together' but there is a strong desire to do this and to find ways to hold disagreement, whilst remaining part of the Catholic family; including the marginalised and those who feel rejected and allowing them to be part of God's dream. How can we be a Church more willing to hold the tension between enough flexibility to be open and warmly inclusive and welcome everyone but structured enough with rules and structures to preserve our integrity?

#### Appendices

- A. Our materials
- B. Clergy Voice
- C. The timeline and key data
- D. Working group members and review participants
- E. Testimonies and quotes
- F. Voices of our young people
- G. Our context.

**Holy Family Parish**

**Walking Together**

Participation Mission Communion

DREAM BELIEVE ACHIEVE

**Diocese of Plymouth**

The word of God summons us to journey together.

Advent: a time to listen.  
Everyone is invited to join the local discussions.  
Let your voice be heard.

**Diocese of Plymouth**  
Walking together

Our Diocese has begun "walking together". Are you signed up and ready?

<https://www.plymouth-diocese.org.uk/synod/>

Diocese of Plymouth contact: [synodfeedback@prcdtr.org.uk](mailto:synodfeedback@prcdtr.org.uk)