

## **Report on the Synod Consultation Process in St Francis's Parish , Nailsea. AMDG**

Like so many others, our parish of St Francis Nailsea has been considerably affected by the pandemic and our community life has become much quieter and less active in its aftermath. At first our parish priest Fr Tom Dubois steadied our shared ship with an energetic and successful campaign of online ministry, casting his net imaginatively wide and offering interesting and stimulating retreats and courses, which many parishioners appreciated and felt comforted and guided by through those first difficult months. But then in July 2020 it ceased because he suddenly left, called to a contemplative vocation elsewhere. This was difficult for many, a shock during a time that was already frightening. And it must also have been hugely difficult for our new priest, Fr Richard Elson, faced with the challenge of arriving in a strange place during lockdown, ministering in a much emptier church to a mostly invisible and inaccessible congregation, divided between two totally distinct parishes too far away from each other for sharing to be either easy or natural despite lots of goodwill.

As everywhere, the pandemic has wrought many alterations in the way we all live and in our reactions and responses to life. A sea change may have taken place, one which we are all still assessing. Yet Pope Francis has chosen this moment to ask the laity for our contributions to his new Synod: he isn't waiting for later, he is asking now, and as a parish we have been asked to respond. The process was introduced and initiated in our diocese just as the threat of Omicron began swelling in our midst and the pandemic seemed once again to be coming back.

As delegates we decided that the best way forward was to try to meet people as close as possible to where we all are, in this 'new normal' which may still be shaping itself around us. We realised that the Synod is all about Listening and not about Telling, and that Listening requires us to be attentive to each other and respectful and big hearted. The diocese is offering rich resources to back up our parish efforts, but with such a lot of information and such a shortage of time, and an enduring sense of strain from the pandemic, we wanted to simplify the many suggested questions and just try to create a space where people could sit with each other and listen and share with each other about their Catholic faith and what the Church means to them. This, we hope, and are promised, is just the beginning and there will be lots more time for further questions.

Our first meeting was in the evening, and it got the whole enterprise off to a most encouraging start as several parishioners chose to come, and after some minutes of silent prayer we all sat down with each other in a spirit of gentleness and hope. Our facilitator Francesca opened the meeting with an account of what the evening held and what was to be asked of us all as listeners: seated facing each other in small groups, with a short list of suggested questions to address but 'no holds barred' for others, each person speaking in turn without interruption or debate, and each contribution to be followed by a minute or two of silent reflection. In practice, some people felt that restraining the impulse to respond immediately felt unnatural and a bit insensitive to the speaker, but the stipulation did remind us all to treat each other very respectfully and constrained the temptation to debate and argue. The atmosphere was peaceful and several people said how much they enjoyed listening and having the chance to talk in a way that was not just the normal chit chat. It was so unusual, they said. Could we do this a bit more often, could it be something we do as a parish regularly?

A further three meetings were called to take place after Mass on Sunday mornings, a more feasible time for most people to come. All were well attended and went well, though there was occasional tension reported where an attendee did not keep to the boundaries of listening and reflecting and not interrupting. The headcount at the meetings was 51 people, but one or two attended more than once. (Current mass attendance is between 120 and 150)

We asked people to post an anonymous written record of their thoughts and feelings into a locked postbox in the church porch. There were forty responses. Two reported the group conversation as a whole and this was very helpful.

From the outset we called on people to reach out to marginalised parishioners and others, perhaps to disillusioned friends and family, people who have left the church for various reasons, to see if they would be willing to make a contribution. And most importantly we asked ministers who take communion to housebound people to consult those they visit so that everyone's voices could be heard.

The first question was 'What has your faith meant to you these past eighteen months living with COVID?' The answers were overwhelmingly positive: 'my faith was my stronghold, knowing that I was not alone', and 'It has enabled me to open up and reach out. No fear of death.' 'It has helped me cope with loneliness and the difficulties because of it'. One person reported on her group Listening/Sharing conversation: 'all of us found our faith and trust in God invaluable.' And another simply wrote 'my faith has been so much to me because without faith I will be lost.'

A few acknowledged the challenge of maintaining their faith during lockdown: 'I need community and I felt alone and I felt useless.' Another who had struggled, had found comfort in online Mass but had looked forward to getting back to Mass in church and was disappointed on finding 'smaller numbers...it feels different, loss of community? can't put my finger on it'.

Many people mentioned online Mass as being key to their faith in lockdown: 'Streaming has been a Godsend, to be able to get to Mass daily and be part of it' and 'I found the routine of watching live-streaming Mass very uplifting and being a constant which was good for my mental health.' One contributor writes that 'My faith has deepened due to the many talks and courses put online by our parish priest and a deacon. Faith and prayer has become an important part of my everyday life', as does another: 'In ways my faith has got deeper. I have been able to 'attend' mass daily. It has been my rock.' 'I was very grateful I was able to watch mass online. Had this pandemic happened 10 years earlier we would have been completely cut off 'I DO HOPE and PRAY it will continue especially for the housebound and those receiving communion at home as they can feel part of Mass and the parish community.' 'I hope God would like the live-streaming to continue for those who are sick and unable to get to church.'

The second question was 'What do you think of the Catholic Church as it is today?' and inevitably this threw up a wide variety of responses, many in unison. Some addressed the wider universal Church, some our own parish, many both, and included thoughts about the mission and future of the church and suggestions of how we might as a parish journey together in a more fulfilling and evangelising way.

One was simple: 'I love the Catholic Church!' Others were more complex:

'I think that the church is in deep trouble. It does not seem to take on board that it is not speaking to most people, even most baptised people, today ...I point particularly to the Mass which is using out of date language and theology and which is medieval in culture. The language of sacrifice is incomprehensible to most people and has no meaning in today's world. Substitutionary atonement is unacceptable to many who do understand it. So I see no hope for the church unless it is willing to change radically and become inclusive and inspiring. I agree with the Pope's idea of turning the pyramid upside down so that leadership comes from the people, male or female, married or single, who follow the Gospel and can inspire others' This person carries on to make the point that 'the future lies in the small Christian communities that are springing up such as Christian contemplative communities, San Egidio, Focolare, Chemin Neuf and many more.' (A further lay organisation is suggested by someone else, as part of the way forward for the future of the church, the Foyer de Charity).

Another person spoke in a similar vein: 'the church is failing to communicate the gift of following Christ to the world. It fails with those who claim to seek spirituality while not being religious. It fails with its own younger members the majority of whom leave. In the Mass a narrow tradition of many words in outdated language obscures the teaching of the scripture, the presence of God and the sharing of the Eucharist.' Someone else simply wrote 'it's backward' and another 'it's too slow to change'.

One response simply stated 'The church is "one body". LGBTQ+? How can we claim this if our church excludes these children of God?' Two more said: '(The Catholic Church today): very opposite of Body of Christ' and: 'it is an organisation with failings. It is not the Body of Christ - always.' Yet another: 'The church is fixed. It needs to evolve or it will become extinct.'

One response expressed concern with how excluded some must feel either because of the Church's attitude to sexual orientation or because of broken relationships. 'I love Pope Francis's idea of the Church as field hospital. We are all sinners and Jesus loves sinners.'

Several contributors voice a concern about 'dwindling numbers' and the fact that 'in the UK older people predominate with too few young people to rejuvenate congregations and bring new ideas' They expressed concern about the loss of young people in our community and the need to offer them a space in the church and 'to be trustworthy' in their eyes. Someone noted that there is no youth club at the moment. One person feels that instead of 'being a beacon to the local area' the church keeps too much to itself and needs to concentrate on young people and reach out to them.

A number of people allude to the sex abuse scandals. 'The church's leadership has disgraced us by covering up the widespread abuse by clergy'. 'I am ashamed of being a Catholic - ashamed of paedophile priests and the covering up ..we need to be an open church, stop hiding things ' 'We must not appear defensive'. One person wonders why there are never homilies about this? The sense of shame has affected us all deeply because we are appalled by the suffering and that it could happen at all...that it has happened. But it is never mentioned in the pulpit. Another writes: 'The Church has been tragically harmed by the abuse crisis. This to me has been caused by clericalism: "Father could do no wrong". The laity are now highly educated and question everything, this I feel some of our clergy are nervous of. We are all by our baptism children of God and should be working together for our Beloved Church' 'It is disappointing that there is not more transparency or openness in the

church. The scandals that have hit the church are barely mentioned yet they must have turned many people away.'

'Vatican 2' is another subject arousing great concern: 'the brakes have been put on' warns one and another contributor wants 'Vatican 2 to be fully implemented! The laity to be involved in running parishes. We need to let fresh air into the church' and associated with this is a worry that 'seminaries and seminarians have become very conservative with Traditional leanings. Why has this been allowed to happen, what are the Bishops doing about it, are they complicit in these changes?' 'Vatican 2 was a time of change. And that was 60 years ago!'

'The clergy need courage! So they can hear the laity' and others too wonder (as in the paragraph above) if they are afraid or nervous of the laity. 'Is the institution /clerical part of the church fearful of opening up to dialogue with laity?' This person also raised the subject of the Diocesan prayer for the synod, given to us to be used before all meetings and synod gatherings, which contains the words 'Do not let us promote disorder', pointing out that 'if something is unjust, hurtful, then disorder needs to happen to restore order' or as someone else concurs 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs'. A third person mentioned the same thing. Another wrote 'We must pray for Priests/Bishops to be courageous and invite the laity's voice'.

There is concern about the lack of vocations to the priesthood. 'My main concern is the lack of vocations to the priesthood. This impacts on the future of our church in the next 10 to 20 years. We should be looking now at ways to extend the priesthood'. A few mention the possibility of ordaining women. 'We need women to have more say, maybe Priesthood. 'We need married priests, women priests in particular. Cannot understand why we are missing out on this vast resource.' 'It is hard to avoid the conclusion that our leadership is too narrow. That we need to open the priesthood. Throw open the windows through careful formation of women and men, married or unmarried. The good example of many ministers in other denominations should encourage us to see beyond the cultural objections from the past to their ordination, and in time becoming our bishops'.

Some are in favour of ordaining married men, especially given the example of the Ordinariate, or of reinstating laicised priests who had left to marry, or married deacons who may wish it 'enriching the priesthood.' 'The Orthodox Church allows married priests' 'Celibacy could remain an Ideal but if it is acceptable for converts to be married then I can see no reason for it not to apply generally'. 'Something needs to be considered otherwise we will have churches with no priests!' One person was enthusiastic about the idea of worker priests who take the Church out into the community.

One elderly lifelong practising Catholic felt that the priesthood is part of the problem. 'For me the problem with the Catholic Church throughout my life since childhood has been the clergy'. All his life he has kept on searching for God, having been raised in the warmth of faith, albeit with a negative experience of Catholic education, but again and again he has encountered lack of empathy in the priests he has met. He still believes and hopes and trusts in God. But he fears that individuals with less strong faith may easily be driven away when they experience this.

Another contributor expressed it this way: 'some priests are perhaps too traditional and lacking in empathy for some of the horrendous difficulties people can be faced with. If you are struggling with your faith some are not very approachable'. One woman, a cradle

Catholic, who lives on our parish's geographical boundary and used occasionally to come to St Francis, describes how she left the Church for this very reason. 'Why do priests not listen? Why are they more concerned with the Rules?' She describes how she approached her priest about a forthcoming family wedding which was not straightforward in the eyes of the Church. He had known her for years, as a long time parishioner and family friend but he dismissed her question out of hand and would not listen. It was a watershed moment. When she thinks about the Church now she feels 'a kind of grief': 'it was a key part of my formation, my identity, but I've lost all my illusions.'

'Sometimes I feel our priests are more concerned about the liturgy than about pastoral concerns- individual people and supporting them in their difficulties ' writes another, 'Perhaps I am unusual in that all my life since childhood I have known the priest as a friend, someone to turn to in times of difficulty and someone to go to for advice, but the priests today do not seem to have time to fulfil that role. When I read the gospels I see that Jesus spent much of his time in helping individuals in their needs. Rather less time was spent in the Temple'. This contributor suggests that the answer to this is 'more active collaborative laity' (an idea promoted by others ) and asks 'is the main problem that the laity will not respond or that the priest prefers to do things his way, quicker and easier for a busy person?'

One parishioner was grateful for a few marvellous priests she had been lucky enough to encounter and who had been inspirational in times of distress. They had brought comfort and even more importantly hope and enlightenment in time of real need. But she too was aware of the far too many 'deaf, blind, blinkered' priests also met along the way who had put up road blocks to her enthusiasm, and failed to answer her questions. She feels that such priests do not mediate God's mercy and more worryingly, do not seem to have any idea of it. A non Catholic contributor voiced a similar conclusion: 'I have attended many different church settings and ways of worshipping ..around the world and always found people welcoming and friendly even though many times they were shy, they were very happy to offer friendship and accepted me as a seeker of knowledge/faith. .... I have also been to churches where the priest has lacked warmth and a sense of friendliness, too busy, too preoccupied ...To feel welcomed and noticed means a lot when in a strange place or in need of support. If the priest finds this type of social contact outside of his time/capabilities it's up to the congregation to step up and offer a welcome to all. At the beginning of a service and during the service if that person so requires'.

'How are we journeying together as a parish? This was the question that really jumped out at me?' wrote one parishioner. And in addressing the question about what we think about the Catholic church at our own local level, there were many suggestions for how we might improve things and become a more magnetic community.

The word welcome appeared several times. Attracting young families is seen as key to rousing and restoring the energy in our parish: 'The church should be reaching out to younger people, families and children who have so many pressures in their lives. It should be more open, and be part of the wider community.' There were a few suggestions of 'practical fun events, not necessarily on a Sunday or around Mass, to draw in families. When they are comfortable, they will ask questions' and there was a stress on 'the importance of church as community, a place/space to make friends'. 'Families- young families - should define what the church offers - they are the future of the church' One person reported that in her group 'ALL want people- parishioners, returning parishioners, new people to feel welcome' and there was a suggestion that children should act as welcomers before Mass, that there should be homilies for them and that big feasts like Christmas should be especially

child friendly. Children's liturgy should be brought back. This person also suggested that there should be more links with the parish primary school. Another took this further: 'the school is a church community on its own and actually does quite well at reaching children: Mass there is always a joy. It is worth considering whether we should bring the church to the school and not the school to the church.... The school should lead this but could possibly do with a bit of encouragement ..and again not all of it has to be around Mass'.

'Be welcoming practically,' writes one, suggesting 'invite individuals to go for coffee after Mass.' This person offers some feedback: 'individuals see groups go in for coffee, but don't feel encouraged to join'. Would name labels help overcome this reserve and shyness? This was an idea put forward by other people too. Another says 'It makes a difference to feel you are known and belong as part of the community'. 'We want to share the love God has for everyone' and 'how can we do this if we are not welcoming?' 'If people feel adrift from the church, mass- they cannot access the gifts of the sacraments ' and 'how can we make returning Catholics or new parishioners welcome? We need to accept people where they are' 'How can we share the message, can we take/Be the church beyond the building?'

On this subject, one person advised that '11 o'clock mass does not help families' and there were two suggestions that services should be shorter, one adding there should be interactive music and hymns. This would make it more attractive to the younger generation. There were also practical suggestions for helping understand the Mass. 'Non Catholics can feel lost - no words or explanations of when to stand, kneel etc Can we make Mass booklets available with the words?' 'Can we explain why certain moments/words happen?' 'Can we help people understand Mass, why we do what we do...?' This harks back to the two opinions expressed above about the outdated language of the Mass.

'We need a greater understanding of what we are called to do/be' writes one, 'we need to think: 1 what gifts do we have? 2. How can we share our gifts?' An idea that was used in the past in our parish cropped up in a few responses. 'Years ago during Mass we were all given a sheet of paper with questions as to our role in the parish. What were we doing to support the parish? What skills did we have that might be called in? What support did we need? We had to fill it in during Mass which meant everyone did it and left it behind. It was very effective'. Another suggested that this could be a way of welcoming and drawing in new arrivals. Another: 'We could encourage people to do more if they could help our church be a place of safety'. One correspondent remembers the early days of the parish and 'being given a bunch of envelopes of Catholics living in my area. Some were people I had never met before but I was asked to knock on doors and find out if they were still living at that address. I see some of them at Mass even now. But it is worth thinking about don't you think?' This person also pointed out that 'a whole cross section of parishioners have simply disappeared' and this concern tunes in to the suggestion made by a parishioner who worries about current communications simply not reaching 'those who do not come to Mass... who are at home. To reach them we need a group of people dedicated to reaching out to each and every one. So that all parishioners are contacted and made to feel members of the parish'. 'Perhaps it is time to look at the Parish register and update it.'

One response suggests 'I think we need to review our structure for pastoral care. On the list of parish roles which usually can be found on the notice board there is no one with overall responsibility for this'. There were several practical suggestions about pastoral care including the ones made in the paragraph above about Welcome; one concerned a special Mass for the sick people of the parish, followed by anointing, which used to take place every three months until the Pandemic: 'this was a beautiful service and they all enjoyed afternoon

tea in the hall laid on by the Ladies circle afterwards. Perhaps we can get back to doing this again?' (Related to this, but on a more general point, a volunteer from the hospital chaplaincy was concerned that there are now so few priests that it is difficult to be able to count on being anointed when a person is seriously ill and at the end of life. This person also wishes that the Church could see what a 'wonderful evangelising gift' it can offer in the sacrament of the sick. 'Frightened ill people are touched by God through it and their families are given heart' ... Yet it is an almost hidden gift because priests are so few and so busy ' and most people think it is just for the dying'.)

'Can we establish a varied Parish council representing many parts of our Parish?' This was a need a few mentioned. 'We are all responsible for our Church and our parish community. We need to be involved in all decisions. Long gone is the time when we felt "Father will sort that out"'. Another wrote: 'I agree absolutely (that a parish council is necessary). We lack a structure which we will need more and more in future as there are fewer and fewer priests. But even if priests were plentiful it would be good for lay parishioners to take responsibility and not always have to ask the priest...Looking at ideas for a council, one way to start might be to look at the list of people who are performing the roles listed on the notice board sheet. There are over 40 roles. Almost all of them fit readily into a small number of categories such as liturgy, prayer, charity, social etc. Perhaps one person from each category could be invited to act as a representative of all those people who have roles within that category' 'If a council got off the ground it would be good once in a while to have a parish meeting. Our neighbours at Holy Trinity have an annual general meeting'.

One person wrote ' I feel (in our parish) there can be a lack of openness. For example, a working party was involved in choosing new pews (which are great) but who were the working party and how were they chosen?' Someone else made the same point: 'we need total openness in our parish. Decisions made and discussed, people need to be involved in those, decisions should be made known with the body of the parish, as happened with the proposed Blessed Sacrament Chapel but not with alterations to the altar or the benches, no consultation'. Another parishioner points out that there always used to be a joint annual meeting of each group in the parish covering every activity, and open to all. This person feels that it would be very good to bring this back.

Bishop Declan's words to the synod delegates at their first meeting are quoted by one correspondent: 'that above all we need to listen out for the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor'. This contributor makes the stark point that 'Civilisation faces an existential crisis; climate change is already killing poor people. Yet when we gather each week as a church community we seem to ignore these cries. How can we change this? It has somehow to be built into our weekly gathering for the Eucharist because that is the only time we are together. Homilies reflecting on the societal sins which damage the earth and the poor and to which we contribute'.

Another person says 'we hear very little about the church worldwide in our parishes' and a second 'We need to be aware of the UNIVERSALITY of the church'. Someone in the same group said 'We need to think of other countries.' And yet another contributor remembers the time years ago when the laity participated in writing the bidding prayers: yet this no longer happens and they rarely really focus on the world around us except in the most general terms. Yet it is God's world and these are our shared communal prayers just before the consecration. Could we go back to this as a way of involving the laity? And another person made a practical suggestion for priests: 'why don't they use the Pope's homilies? He seems to reach out to everyone especially to the young and inspire them. People outside the faith

love him! Surely this would grab people?’

A need for a sense of the sacred was noted by some. There was a distinct sense that online Mass had given people access to it in the silence of their own homes. But one elderly person regretted the familiar conversation in the church before Mass begins. ‘I sometimes wonder if people really believed in the presence of the Lord, would they chat so much before Mass starts?’ Another offered that in their group discussion ‘we talked about periods of silence during the mass and had concerns that we were losing them particularly before Mass started.’ A housebound parishioner makes a related point : ‘People appreciate being close to the Mass - I have enjoyed house masses in the past- it makes it a special occasion and can bring family and people in a local area together’.

The last two questions were What is my Mission and What is God’s dream for me? Though these are personal questions, the responses overlap with each other and with the suggestions for journeying together as a parish above. Here are a few of them. One person simply said God’s dream for him was to be a ‘Loving son’; he saw his mission in the same family context ‘Husband, Father, Grandfather, Businessman - bring those close to Jesus’. ‘To pass on my beliefs where I can and to support initiatives to help people who have less than I do...that I should use the talents he has bestowed on me to the best of my ability and that should listen to what he is calling me to do.’ .. ‘to support the priest and the people who work for the good of the parish’. ‘I need to hold on to my faith when so many of my loved ones have turned away’. ‘The church is called to evangelise. I am called to do that in many ways, through my work, through my family, even through my love of technology’. ‘To shine the Christ light, to transmute sorrow to joy in all I meet..the Divinity is within each of us, let there be no judgment.’

A final theme emerging from our synod consultation was about finding ways of keeping in touch with each other about our church and what we truly value now we have started. After sharing his thoughts on the synod questions, a housebound parishioner added that he really ‘misses talking about these matters, misses spiritual conversations’ and responses from the group meetings made similar comments ‘Make time beyond Mass to talk about spiritual journeys.’ ‘Shall we keep talking to one another? ...all (in the group) welcomed the beginning of listening and would want it to continue.’ ‘Perhaps a regular forum like this could give us a space to speak up, as we don’t have one at the moment’ ‘Speak up! About what we see as important’ and ‘Have a space to speak, listen, - bring, make change’ And finally, last of all, ‘These are our challenges!’