

Report back from the SYNOD listening groups and one-on-one listening conversations held in St Joseph's parish, PORTISHEAD – February 2022

Part One : Believing

Q1 : On your own journey of faith, what special joys and challenges have you met along the road?

Q2: In what ways has the Church encouraged you and helped you to grow in faith?

Q3: As you look towards the road ahead, do you have any specific concerns or worries?

For the vast majority of participants, faith is very important. Much gratitude to God was expressed.

Many mentioned being **rooted** in Scripture, Tradition, the sacraments, liturgy, prayer ...

A main **motivation for coming to church** was to receive the sacraments, followed closely by the desire to meet together.

During the **pandemic** many felt detached because they couldn't physically come to church. Live-streaming of the Mass was much appreciated. Many reported that their faith had been broadened and deepened by on-line Masses (and other religious input) from all over the world as well as what was put on by Fr Tom. When Mass returned to church, singing was much missed; besides being uplifting, singing is seen to join us together in the Body of Christ.

Special Joys which encourage faith (in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned)

- Eucharistic Adoration (10)
- Courses about the faith (6)
- Fellowship groups (5)
- Witness of a specific individual, especially at a key moment in my life (4)
- Being in a mixed marriage with a supportive partner (4)
- Retreats (4)
- Religious communities (3)
- Pilgrimages (3)
- Joyful witness of other believers (3)
- Memorable homilies (3)
- Scripture study (2)
- Uplifting liturgy (2)
- Good believing role models giving a desire to emulate them (2)
- RCIA programme
- Joy of being forgiven in the Sacrament of reconciliation
- Organisations such as Scouts/Girl Guides
- Going to a good Catholic school
- World Youth Days
- Marriage preparation

Challenges to faith (in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned)

- Scandals in the Church (especially paedophilia) (5)
- Lack of certainty about exactly what the Church believes (5)
- Our children's lack of faith (3)
- Mixed marriage with an unbelieving/critical partner (2)
- Dwindling parishes and general lukewarmness (2)
- Loss of a loved one
- Divorce
- Society undermining our faith
- Disagreement with what the Church teaches – dogma can be seen very negatively.
- Gossip
- Thoughtless and hurtful words from a priest
- Pressures of modern life/ lack of time/constant rushing

Many found helpful the concept of faith being a journey (9) On this journey doubts can give way to belief in the long term, challenges can make one grow in faith and in humanity, progress in holiness is possible...

The importance of the **Parish Community** in building faith, giving support at times of struggle or crisis and generally being a strength on the journey was mentioned 14 times.

Several participants mentioned that their faith had grown through having a **ministry or contribution to make** to the life of the parish community or wider Church eg music ministry, evangelisation team, HCPT pilgrimage to Lourdes. Others saw this as merely being on a rota.

Concerns/worries/challenges

- Tension between my **personal beliefs and secular attitudes** – When should I speak out or challenge? When should I hold back? (4)
- **Trend noticed:** Tension between the **official Teaching of the Church and my conscience** in interpreting the Teaching of the Church. The trend is to appraise one's personal situation and decide in conscience – eg. marital situation +communion, contraception... Pope Francis quoted: "Who am I to judge?"
- In order to understand better and be better able to defend the Teaching of the Church, could the Diocesan Church bring **topical issues** out into the open more, for information and discussion? Eg sexual abuse, birth control, euthanasia, homosexuality, gender issues, married priests, women priests... Otherwise we only hear the point of view of the media.
- **Sadness:** "I remember the coming of Vatican II. It caused a great sense of energy, empowerment, enthusiasm, optimism... an increased role of the laity, reduced clericalism. It was a joyful time. Now this seems to have faded or been clamped down. Not progressed over the last 10 years or so"
- **Trend:** "Some Catholics identify as Catholic but openly reject some Teachings of the Church, or see them as being irrelevant. This seems to be a growing trend."
- "I would value **help with how to pray**"
- "We are not confident of our Faith. There is confusion about what we actually believe and the core of our Faith. There is even a **crisis of faith**, especially in those who have received only scant instruction, and who seem to lack any personal engagement."
- **Observation:** "When people come to faith, it is often from a place of loneliness, shame, guilt, brokenness... we need to exercise less judgement and more compassion, sensitivity and gentleness"
- "I see a real need to clearly preach Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and relevant in our world"
- "When Christ returns, will he find faith on earth?"

Emerging: Being a strong vibrant community is necessary to support our faith moving forward in its minority situation. Deep down we are all looking for this and hoping for it.

Emerging: The modern age is informal, spontaneous, not hierarchical, not committed. Catholic worship appears alien, intimidating, too demanding to some. We need to develop other informal ways to meet and pray together that complement the Mass and lead towards it.

Part Two: Belonging

Q1: The Church sees itself as a family of believers; do you feel that you have a place in that family? What does your membership of the parish mean to you?

Q2: What trends are emerging in the way the Faith is practised in our day? In what ways do I experience this?

Q3: How could we support each other more on our common faith journey?

“ **The Body of Christ, the Church and society have become fragmented.** The damage has been precipitated by the Covid pandemic, but it was already happening. Isolationism and individualisation are leading to fault lines between people and much cynicism”

Whereas on-line connection during the **pandemic** gave a greater sense of belonging to a world-wide faith community, there is a danger that, with time, it can become both a **casual** and a **passive** way of ‘belonging’. Post pandemic there is a great desire to re-connect in person. It is a good time to re-set the way things are done in the parish.

Factors favouring a feeling of belonging in the parish community:

- Having a role/having something to contribute/an active engagement (8)
- Feeling loved, cared about, needed, wanted, important, trusted... (7)
- Being recognised (3)
- Good communication
- Feeling welcome
- A safe place to be
- A comfortable place to be

Factors working against a sense of belonging in the parish community:

- Lack of welcome
- Isolation
- Personal differences
- Shyness
- Being single (especially older single men) or not having children – not finding a group to belong in
- Re-marriage (for some)
- Sexual identity
- Feeling uncomfortable with what is expected, having no way to opt out.

The **parish priest** can have a positive influence in drawing people into the Body. It was felt important that he be more visible (ie out of a Catholic context). Home visits by the parish priest are appreciated. Several people mentioned the importance of the priest having invited them or called them to a ministry or role in the church eg altar serving, joining a committee...

Those on the margins: Some Catholics identify as Catholic with very little participation. This does not necessarily mean they are not Christian. Others have a very dormant connection, akin to “Club membership” Some people prefer to be anonymous at Mass – we need to respect that. The parishioners who are the most missed are the families with young children and school age children. Do they feel welcome and welcomed? Are we not welcoming them as well as we could?

There is no standard way of participating in the life of the parish; there should be many different ways. A **balance** is needed between the formal and the informal, the spiritual and the social. Some people are put off by too much “spiritual”. Need for more “informal stuff”, more accessible to the more marginal families. Similarly, with the music at Mass there needs to be a balance between modern and more traditional music. Achieving these balances is not easy and they will need to be constantly re-adjusted.

Danger of becoming too inward looking. The purpose of the Church is to go outwards, helping others in need, bringing them the Good News, being the Good Samaritan to them.

Emerging: A need for deeper relationships, for meaningful fellowship where one can share personal and spiritual experiences and problems, be vulnerable and open, share needs, learn from each other, pray together informally (15) Perhaps home-groups or parish cells?

Part Three: Mission

Q1: How does our parish engage with those in need? What needs can you see? Can you think of ways in which we could respond to them better?

Q2: How could our family be more outgoing in its witness to Christ and the gospel?

Several ways in which our parish already engages with those in need were identified:

- Foodbank (with other churches)
- Taking Holy Communion to the sick or housebound
- Parish charities
- Christians against poverty Debt Centre (with other churches)
- Bridge Community (formerly Faith & Light)
- Visiting the sick, lonely or housebound
- Community Fridge project (with other people)
- Seafarers
- CAFOD

Pandemic: Did our parish keep in contact with people during lockdown? Some people say no-one contacted them and bitterness was expressed. (It is possible that some people were inadvertently left out of the 'telephone buddies' scheme put in place with parish volunteers at the beginning of the first lockdown)

Needs identified include: loneliness, isolation, disconnect, indifference, lack of relevance, lethargy (problems of a disintegrating society)... The most obvious need seems to be **loneliness**. We should try to identify those who are lonely (including couples) and offer weekly visits in a consistent, regular and dependable way. It is important that help is not patronizing – real friendship is the aim.(4)

How do we establish who is in need? How can we approach them if they are not asking for help? When we do approach them, how do we do so respectfully? (7)

MAJOR NEED: YOUTH and CHILDREN. They seem very fragile. How can we help them? Very few are coming to Mass. Numbers are very small. "Society indoctrinates our children." The world is testing their faith and drawing them away." "They are not sufficiently formed. What Catholic teaching is there after Primary School?" Catholic youth and children are often all alone. They have few Catholic friends. "My children and grandchildren are anti-faith!" Faith development and encouragement are needed. An experience of Church that is positive and uplifting. They need support from outside the nuclear family. The families need support too. Camps, activities, groups, music groups... Above all not to lose contact with the Christian community and Christian values.

School-Parish links need to be re-established. They weakened after the school moved from West Hill (near the church) but Covid has almost destroyed them. Suggestion of a joint Social Committee (with members from both church and school) to put on social events involving both school and parish, eg show, dance, drama. "Non-threatening" activities.

Bereavement support: A need to acknowledge bereavement more than we do.(7) “When I lost my husband, a phone call from the priest a little while after a funeral just to ask if I was okay and say he was praying for me would have been appreciated”

Negative impact of government legislation on volunteering: eg health and safety, safeguarding, GDPR, rules concerning all kinds of discrimination... (5)

Mental health issues: What happened to the mental health training programme? More awareness and training is needed in the area of mental health issues. This is a growing problem, especially since the pandemic. (3)

Spiritual needs: We should discern what they are first, and then tailor our offer to meet the need, rather than put on courses we like the look of which only attract the ‘usual suspects’.

Social occasions: A growing desire for social occasions (outside of church events and Mass, and not specifically religious) to bring people together. When people feel more comfortable they will likely be more open to the gospel. This may be gradual. Some of our offers are too heavy for some.

Emerging: A need to become a joyful welcoming community which will attract others. Be altogether less judgemental and superior, more tolerant, open, accepting. Give people time: take more time to sit with people, listen to them, pray with them if necessary. Build real friendships, not superficial ones. (7)

Emerging: A desire for more ecumenical co-operation (8) Could we pull together more, especially in the area of older children and youth? Perhaps a joint Youth Club with Gordano Valley Church?

POINTS BROUGHT UP THAT CONCERN THE WIDER CHURCH

- Need to free up priests from Diocesan burdens so that they can concentrate on sacraments and evangelisation.
- Need to have clear pathways in place to help and support priests who develop mental health issues.
- Concern about the abuse of power of priests who arrive in their new parish and proceed to sweep away the painstaking work of their predecessor. This can be very destructive and hurtful and cause much damage.
- Need for Diocesan formation for lay people
- Need for better and clearer teaching on divorce, annulment and re-marriage. There is much misinformation and confusion.
- Should full-time Permanent Deacons get a stipend?
- Conviction (of some but not all) that RC priests should be allowed to marry, and confusion caused by other denominational persons joining the priesthood who are already married.
- Catholic schools no longer having a majority of Catholic teachers, and the ratio of non-Catholic children admitted to Catholic schools having increased to high levels. (at St Joseph’s school Portishead the ratio is Catholic 55%, non-Catholic 45%)
- Chatty newsletter idea could be used worldwide!