

In October 2021 the Pope asked Catholics to engage with the Synodal Pathway. This was a period of consultation and discussion at Parish level throughout the Church worldwide, the results of which will eventually feed back into the Synod of Bishops due to take place in Rome in 2023. There was a set of questions to be used as a starting point for discussion and here is a short summary of our Parish's response, submitted to the Diocese. For more details and further developments, please see: <http://saintlaurence.org.uk/synod-2023>

Synodal Pathway - St. Laurence Parish, Cambridge - Diocese of East Anglia, UK - March 2022

Preface

The members of the Parish of St. Laurence have engaged for well over seven weeks to share and listen together, and the following are key reflections raised in the synodal process discussions. We want to thank the Pope and fellow pilgrims of the Universal Church for this vital opportunity to work together in this wondrous Synodal process. We very much want to follow up these questions requested by the Diocese on the more general and often local concerns, in the near future, with a more focussed attention to other widespread and pressing issues in the Church that transcend the parish (e.g. ministry, education, women in the Church, married clergy, clericalism).

Responding to the diocese

1) How welcoming is our parish?

At all our discussions, Parishioners said that the parish is generally very welcoming, and particularly mentioned welcomers at Mass, the welcoming approach from the priests, and the tea and coffee afterwards (a Saturday Coffee Hub has been of particular importance during Covid restrictions). The parish can work together to make families with young children feel comfortable and be sensitive to the problems of families where only one parent is a Catholic. However, a persistent theme was that not everyone feels welcome in the Catholic Church because it appears exclusive and judgmental. LGBTQ+ people feel excluded.

2) How good are we at listening?

The parish responses included a number who think this is an area of ministry we could develop. It was noted that there are differences between active or participatory listening versus passive or less engaged listening, in liturgies, prayer, etc. On a particular positive note, the Parish Open Meeting was commended for creating an open and listening atmosphere. We were not asked how good the Church is at listening. Many are sceptical of the whole synod process because they do not believe that the hierarchy will listen with open minds and hearts. If we are to become a listening church at all levels then the bishops need to be open to hearing lay and clergy voices.

3) How good are we at communicating?

At parish level there is much that is good, and gratitude was expressed to our tech [group] and [Office and parish] communications team. A number of practical suggestions were made, including even better use of our parish magazine (The Pilgrim), website, noticeboards (with a particular interest in internal and external electronic noticeboards), mailing lists, and social media. Again, communication and transparency at diocesan level has much room for improvement.

4) **How well does the Church's liturgy inspire a deeper encounter with the Risen Lord?**

Parishioners find our parish liturgies helpful in bringing them closer to the risen Lord; as one person said "I leave ready to live my faith in all I do". Great love for the Mass was expressed. Parishioners recognise that they are fortunate to have varied Sunday Mass liturgies, including regular Children's Liturgy, and a monthly Charismatic 'Ablaze' Mass. Many said that they still find the new translation of the Mass a major impediment to prayer and worship and we agreed to ask the bishops to start the process of revising the translation so that it is no longer full of outdated language and Latinate constructions. What we need is a graceful vernacular, using inclusive language. Concern was raised about the impending further detrimental changes to the lectionary.

5) **How well do we understand and participate in the Mission of the Church?**

The parishioners who took part in our discussions had varied understanding of the mission of the Church, though all understood it as preaching and living the Gospel and sharing the Faith. Some added that the Church has to be a sign of love and hope, at the service of people in need in the name of the Kingdom. It was a surprise to some parishioners that the Mission of the Church involves the salvation of souls and the redemption of the world. There is a perceived dichotomy between how the Church conveys the sense of Mission and how some parishioners understand it. We identified the need for ongoing adult education and formation, to better understand and engage with the Church's Mission.

6) **How well do we engage with the wider world?**

Parishioners explored a number of ways to reach out to the community around us. SVP is there for anyone who asks for help. There is outreach to the wider world through CAFOD. Many parishioners are engaged in community action, environmental action, and the Justice and Peace group, as [well as being] individual members of [non-church] groups which include people of all faiths and none. We hope to find ways to share more activities within the city, region, Deanery, Diocese, and wider country.

7) **How good is our relationship with other Christian traditions?**

There is little institutional ecumenical activity but individuals do have strong ecumenical links. Some parishioners expressed disappointment at the lack of progress towards Christian unity. We would welcome a stronger push and assistance from the Diocese and Bishops' Conference towards shared Christian prayer and action.

8) **How well do we work as a team in the parish?**

This is a parish of many teams rather than one. Teams can report to and through the Parish Forum. Major decisions are discussed though it is recognised that on some questions the Parish priest has the responsibility to take the final decision after consultation. We are grateful to have a parish priest who encourages lay initiative and co-responsibility. Given the decline in the number of priests, this becomes ever more critical. Seminary training should prepare ordinands for collaborative ministry and for lay people to take more active responsibility in maintaining and developing parish life. There is much more transparency in our parish than at other levels of the Church hierarchy.

9) How open are we to the will of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Individuals discussed ways of opening themselves to God's will through prayer and attentive listening, including in taking time to wait on God in silence. Parishioners talked about opening themselves to the will of God during Mass and as they listen to the Word of God, the reflections in the homily, and in receiving Communion. There was a question about whether the Church collectively listens to the Spirit speaking through all of us and in reading the signs of the times. There were concerns that the traditions of ongoing revelation and discernment were not well understood.

In addition, there was concern that there was a lack of understanding that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were flowing through all of us, and therefore greater education about this would be a benefit to all of us. There was also a question about being open to learning from the Spirit through the changes in modern society and relationships, so that we can better understand what is life-giving. These changes include the equal role of women in economy and society, and the developing awareness of the diversity of human relationships.

Some concerns were raised that the LGBTQ+ community feel excluded by the wider Church. There was a call for greater clarity and guidance from the hierarchy on Church teaching about gender ideology and same-sex relationships (both to adults and in schools) and how this is centred on Christ's teaching.

10) How well do we pass on the faith?

This was a recurring theme in our discussions. We identified much that is good at parish level and ways the parish can work to improve what we do and to support parents in the Christian formation of their children. There was great appreciation for the ability of faith schools to nurture the faith of the children. We acknowledged that there is a crisis in passing on the faith. We feel there is a gap in the follow-up to those who have prepared for and received the various Sacraments, which sometimes make them seem like a tick-box exercise.

Many who were brought up in the faith and whose parents have done their best to share faith and nurture their practice, no longer attend Mass or define themselves as Catholics. The Church needs to do some hard work to understand why her message is being rejected. The Church has to recognise the damage done to her authority by the scandals of child abuse and the failure to deal with it.

The Church also needs to understand the impact of the growth in the number of families where only one parent is a Catholic. The Catholic parent can often feel overwhelmed and a lone voice and it makes it harder to bring young children to Mass and to support the wider aspects of parish life. The increasing numbers of working mothers in society generally has also had an impact – most families now have both parents working which means they have less time and inclination to support and attend parish activities.

THE SYNODAL PATHWAY AT ST LAURENCE – Parish Responses and Themes

We welcomed the invitation to take part in the Synod discussions as a way to contribute to the renewal of our parish and the Church. The Synod working group organised several weekly opportunities for parishioners to take part in discussions of the questions from the diocese and to raise matters of concern. We also invited members of the parish to contribute individually to the diocese and in paper and email communication with the group. Helena Judd led some discussions with young people and a group of Year 6 pupils from St Laurence School also met. These discussions are recorded separately to ensure that the voices of our younger parishioners are heard clearly.

After a technology dry run on January 15, the synod group meetings from January 22 took place after the Saturday coffee hub jointly in person and online, Monday evening by Zoom and Wednesday and Thursday after Mass.

The Synod group is grateful to all who contributed and to Fr Simon for his support, encouragement and readiness to listen.

Below is a summary of our discussions. A number of themes arose throughout the weeks and for clarity and to avoid repetition, they have been grouped by the questions as we asked them in the parish.

WELCOME AND WELCOMING

HOW WELCOMING IS OUR PARISH?

Across all the meetings parishioners said that St Laurence's is a welcoming parish. There is an immediate welcome but it is low key and not too pushy. The friendly welcome before Mass was valued by many who have joined the parish in the last five years. A couple of people said the parish has felt less welcoming during COVID because of requests for sanitising and mask wearing. The parish survey has made it very easy for newcomers to get connected. It would be useful to have a form for new parishioners to fill in – a paper version in the porch and on the parish website.

People talked about the value of inviting new people to come to coffee after 11 o'clock Mass and of recognising new people in subsequent weeks.

The four Masses mean there are different styles of celebration so that most people can find a Mass which suits them, but it does mean it could be said that there are four parishes as so many always attend a particular Mass. Opportunities to meet like Coffee after Sunday Mass, the Saturday coffee hub and the Catholic Women's League lunches are valuable and more opportunities would be helpful in bringing the parish together. We could arrange a date for a parish picnic. It may be possible to create a patio outside the parish room and have an awning and/or a marquee to extend our meeting space so that more of us can meet socially.

People talked about the role of the priest in growing our community life and are grateful for their role in making the parish welcoming. We talked about developing the continuing life of the parish; there are many active groups and it's important they are open and that the parish community is and appears open to new members and to new ideas.

Are we aware of the people who have not come back to Mass since Covid? How do we encourage them to come back when it is safe and support them until they do feel ready to come to Mass in person. How do we improve our care and contact for our housebound parishioners? The SVP does much but is there more to do? Can we encourage housebound parishioners to let the parish office know that they are not able to come to Mass and whether they need transport or would like to be visited?

Parish life is different in the far-flung villages. It's much more of a challenge to take children to the parish school. Is there a way to bring Catholics who live in the same village together?

We talked about welcoming families and encouraging families and their children and young people to get involved. The parish is pretty good at sacramental preparation but there needs to be more support for parents and children, between baptism and first Holy Communion and between First Communion and Confirmation. Helena Judd has been doing valuable work on this.

Could the parish employ a parish pastoral worker?

In the past, the mother and toddler group supported young parents but now more mothers return to work after their maternity leave which makes it difficult to sustain such a group. The Children's Liturgy has started again and it is one chance for parents to get to know one another. This is important for parents whose children are not at St Laurence's primary school.

Parishioners suggested various social activities including a Craft Group for new mothers, Film Club, Book club.

Do we welcome confirmed young people into active roles in the liturgy and in groups such as environmental groups? Are they welcomed when they volunteer? Do we make it easy for them? The Ablaze Mass is one opportunity for young people to get involved but children and young people are present at every Mass and can feel left out.

Can we be more supportive to families where only one parent is a Catholic and not speak as if the two parent Catholic family is the norm. The norm is now that families are mixed in Faith and practice. The parish needs to find ways to make the whole family feel part of our community.

Do we welcome new ideas and initiatives? Some said that as a parish we are open to this.

Other Christian traditions seem to have a livelier spiritual fellowship outside worship.

COMMUNICATION

HOW GOOD IS OUR COMMUNICATION?

At all our meetings parishioners felt that our communication is good and expressed their gratitude to the communications team/tech group. It was wonderful that due to their work the parish was already live streaming Mass before the pandemic and this was a way for all to feel they were still connected to the parish. They expressed their appreciation also for the website, Keeping in Touch email and the newsletter.

So the feeling is that the parish does this well. Parishioners talked about how the newsletter and the website might be improved. The website is good clear and user friendly. Could one way to involve young people in parish life be to ask their views on how the website might be enhanced?

An electronic noticeboard outside would improve communication as it can be updated easily.

The website could have a link to the Vatican website and to key documents from Pope Francis.

HOW WELL DOES THE CHURCH'S LITURGY INSPIRE A DEEPER ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN LORD?

People who have taken part in our conversations find the liturgy very helpful. One person said simply that "It draws me in from the beginning and I leave feeling whole." Another person said "However I am when I arrive, I leave strengthened and able to give my best at home and at work."

Many expressed their gratitude for the ministry of the musicians in normal times and during the pandemic. Most people said they feel the music works well. Some would welcome a wider choice of music and suggested that, as the parish rebuilds after Covid, it could be good to have some music workshops and draw more people into the ministry. The cantor system works better at some times than at others. It's very important that the congregation can sing the responses and the parts of the Mass.

Mass is experienced as a community celebration, the homilies are accessible and the congregation sings. The sanctuary is not remote. Mass is not a spectacle but a shared experience. We agreed on the importance of physical presence at Mass to worship as part of the believing community. Mass is experienced by the whole person. Non-verbal signs are important.

It's important to encourage everyone to participate as fully as possible in the liturgy and the life of the parish. Altar serving helps young people. It would be possible for people of limited mobility and wheelchair users to read at Mass using the radio mike.

People approve the way Communion is taken first to the people with limited mobility in the pews before the Communion line forms, because it expresses our concern for them.

Can we think of ways to make Mass more accessible for young children and parents who are not Catholic but come to Mass with their family?

The new (2011) translation remains a problem for many and we want to report that after ten years, the translation remains a difficulty and to ask the bishops to start the process of seeking revision. We can see the value of having a common text throughout the English speaking world but the reality is that spoken English varies considerably. What we have is a text in an English which nobody speaks naturally. One person said that the translation replaces our personal God by a distant God. Latinate structures are awkward. We noted that the familiar Jerusalem translation is to be replaced by another version rather than the New Revised Jerusalem Bible and that lay people were again not consulted about the change. Translation should be appropriate for now, not deliberately archaic and convoluted. We need a language which opens us to God and to God's Word and helps us to pray. Some prefer a special sacred language. No one expressed a preference for the New Translation.

We have a strong sense that wherever we go in the world, the Mass is the Mass.

HOW GOOD ARE WE AT PASSING ON THE FAITH?

The evidence is that the Church has not been effective at passing on the faith and it is critical that this addressed at parish, diocesan and national level. The Church does not make itself accessible. There needs to be more support for young people. Mentoring young people into active discipleship is difficult for priests in the present climate. Catholic families and young people are living in a secular world with many competing activities including on Sunday mornings. For teenagers there needs to be a mix of spiritual and faith formation, invitation to social action (Night Fever, vigils, fasts, environmental action) and fun. Positive example can be an inspiration to faith and deeper practice.

For younger children, the Children's liturgy at 9.30 Mass brings parents and children together and parents are very pleased it has begun again. However, it has not begun again at 11 o'clock Mass and it is only one initiative supporting parents in passing on the Faith. There are children and young people present at other Masses and they need to be included.

Support for fostering faith in children and young people at home takes place in a context in which there is often only one Catholic parent and it is important to be sensitive to this reality and to ensure that parents who are not Catholics feel involved. Some would welcome help in understanding the Mass and the faith formation offered to their children in sacramental preparation.

Working parents usually have little time. How can the parish help them to develop their understanding of the faith and help their children? Parents do meet when their children are having sacramental preparation but there is no support structure for them between Baptism and First Communion preparation and then between First Communion and Confirmation. This is an important action point for the parish.

Young people now choose to practise and the Church has to offer opportunities to grow in knowledge of their faith and the love of God in Christ, to develop in prayer and share the gospel vision of service to others. Do they feel the Church is inclusive?

"I would believe in a redeemer if their followers acted more as if they are redeemed."

In the parish we have about 60 First Communicants but only 15 for Confirmation which raises serious questions.

At another meeting people agreed that passing on the faith is a challenge. There is a real need for better support for parents of young families. Children find it hard to follow the Mass. Children's liturgy is a start but is too short to achieve much. Parents who are not Catholics can find the Mass confusing as well. Is it possible to offer explanation during Mass or to provide materials which can be used for parents and children?

Can the parish find ways to bring families together? Many new parents make friends in NCT groups. Could baptism groups also foster friendships between families? Parents who have had their children baptised could be invited to come to meet together towards the end of the first year of their child's life. There could be social gatherings with some input to help them in fostering faith in their small children. It's essential to improve support for families. Families must always be made welcome.

People talked about the example of our lives and our faith expressed and nurtured by our sacramental life being lived beyond the church building in our care for others.

At later meetings people suggested a Craft Group for new mothers, a Mothers' Prayer Group, Bible study/faith sharing group after one of the weekday Masses, a Film Club and a Book Club where people come to tell others about a favourite book.

HOW WELL DO WE UNDERSTAND AND PARTICIPATE IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH?

Parishioners agreed that the mission of the Church is to preach the gospel, to share the good news and to do so in our life as a parish community and as individuals through our actions as well as words. The quotation attributed to St Francis of Assisi that we should preach the gospel at all times and if necessary use words was mentioned by several people.

Parishioners agreed that the mission is to all, not just to Catholics, but there were different understandings about its purpose, is it to bring people to Christ (the supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls) and membership of the Church or is it also to be the community of faith at the service of peace and justice, and serving all people in need, the vulnerable and people on the margins. One person said that the mission of the Church is to enable us to live good lives and to work with others to enable them to live a good life. At Mass we are given the grace and the guidance to live the Christian life and serve others in our work and family lives.

It was pointed out that if we think we understand the Faith fully, we can become blinkered. We must always be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We tend to have a clerical model of the Church but all of us are Church; the synod process reminds us that we are the people of God with all the responsibility that entails.

Some commented that we are seen as exclusive and judgmental, so we need to try to appear and to be more inclusive. We can appear to be saying to others that we are right and they are wrong. One person said the parish could look like a stuffy golf club.

It was noted again that it is a struggle to help young people to continue to practise their faith. This led to renewed requests for them to be involved in the ministries at Mass and to learn about the faith in sessions which mix faith education and formation with activities and fun, not just when they are preparing for confirmation? Young people between 20 and 40 have busy lives. What opportunities could the parish offer them and all of us? Examples given were imaginative contemplation of Scripture, discussions of major ethical issues, food and faith evenings.

The Church's mission is expressed in the ways members of the parish are actively engaged in the Cambridge Churches homelessness project, in SVP, in the Food Bank and other service in the wider community and in the way parishioners give generous support

To share the gospel is to share our belief in God's love for every person and that God is with them in their whole life.

At one session, it was said that modern society is against absolute truths which makes it hard to stand up for our faith. One person noted the pressure to conform to secular and government agendas. They thought the mission of the Church faced a crisis in our schools. However at another

meeting, people spoke of how well their children were supported in their faith by our Catholic schools.

Several times, people noted that historical anti Catholic prejudice has made some Catholics reluctant to talk about their faith. Yet we are called to be a city on a hill and told not to hide our light under a bushel. However the scandals have made it much more difficult for the Church to speak with authority and be heard. There is a need to learn to proclaim the gospel with humility.

HOW WELL DO WE WORK AS A TEAM IN THE PARISH?

We need to understand that as the number of priests falls, lay people will have to take more responsibility and priests will need to be trained in the seminary to work collaboratively with their parishioners. Priests may move around more so the parish structure will need to be resilient. Perhaps after the consultation there could be teams to work on different areas such as faith formation, support for families and renewing social activities after COVID.

Parishioners agreed that ours is a parish of many teams and that the teams report through the Parish Meeting and that this pattern works pretty well. We noted that some people do a lot and that there are others who are doing all they can getting to Sunday Mass. Some people may want to get involved so it's important to invite people regularly to join groups or one off activities like doing the garden, while being sensitive to the time pressures for many people. We could improve the information available about the groups with an exhibition about the activities available as was done after Fr Simon arrived.

HOW WELL DO WE CONNECT TO THE WIDER WORLD?

HOW GOOD IS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS?

Parishioners tended to discuss the two questions together. There was a feeling we could do better. There is little formal ecumenical activity, although we were hosting Women's World Day of Prayer. Some parishioners have ecumenical links or attend the parish church in their village on occasion. The Weeks of Accompanied Prayer have an ecumenical team. The Good Friday procession was mentioned. Do parishioners know about it?

Ecumenism is about listening to one another and being ready to learn from one another. Institutional progress slowed with the ordination of women in other Christian denominations. The richest ecumenical relationships nowadays come from working together to help people as in the Food Bank, support for the homeless and other projects.

On connecting with the wider world, we noted the diocesan links to Cambodia and to Palestine. The parish engages through CAFOD and locally Food Bank and the Cambridge Churches Homelessness Project but there is a feeling that we are not well connected to the neighbourhood.

We discussed a leaflet drop in the neighbourhood telling people that the Church is open for prayer and they are always welcome to come in to be still or to pray. The Hub in the carpark was mentioned as an important outreach as we came out of the third lockdown. It will be good to offer it again when the weather is warmer though more volunteers will be needed. A Summer fair in the carpark was suggested as another way to make ourselves better known.

It was noted that the first thing people see is the car parking notice; this has to be there so that the car park is available for people coming to Mass, but we do need to think of ways to improve our external messaging, perhaps with a large welcome to St Laurence's notice on the porch.

Many felt that we are too comfortable in ourselves and inward looking – again this could be a legacy from historic anti Catholic prejudice. We need to overcome the fortress Church mentality. We talked about offering times for listening to people who just need to talk – this was done in one diocese during the Year of Mercy.

Many parishioners are involved in charitable and campaigning groups as individuals. Some groups such as letter writing to prisoners of conscience have come to an end as the people involved moved away or became less active.

The SVP noted that they are reaching out to people beyond the parish in the Traveller community and people in need and they are supported by the parish as with the Christmas giving tree and when SVP appeal for particular goods.

Like others SVP noted that there is little contact between the Catholic parishes in Cambridge. Christians from various churches work together in the Cambridge Churches Action Network.

HOW OPEN ARE WE TO THE WILL OF GOD AND TO THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

The gospel guides us. We open ourselves to the Spirit when we listen to the readings, to the homily and receive Holy Communion and in private prayer. We are all different. Some people dive in to a project and then discern that the Spirit was leading them.

The Spirit works through us and blows where it wills. We sing "We are one in the Spirit" - we are to be open to the Spirit as individuals, as parish and as Church. Vatican 2 and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal have made us more aware and attentive to the Holy Spirit. Is the Church listening to the Spirit speaking through ordinary Christians and in the signs of the times? The spirit is working in all people of good will, so listening to others including those with whom we do not agree is important.

The Examen is helpful to many people. Soul Food, the Gift programme, bible study and prayer groups all help us to respond to the Spirit. We can take distractions to God in our prayer. Taize prayer is helpful for many and can have a profound impact on some young people. We need to ask where the Spirit is leading us in the formation of children.

Some young people are attracted to the Tridentine Rite. Is this because it seems to offer certainty?

Many have a damaging image of God as a stern and demanding figure. We need to escape destructive models so that we are free to follow the Spirit.

What is the Spirit telling the Church about the role and ministry of women?

One group thought that the parish is open but can do better, but questioned whether the hierarchy are listening. Is there openness to people of all faiths, nationalities, the downtrodden those who think they will not be welcome because of their sexuality? How may the Spirit be leading the Church in ministry to LBGQTQ+ people? Is the teaching that homosexuality is a disorder the right approach for a Church that teaches the Gospel of love? It is important to be true to the teaching of the Church but

there is a risk of appearing judgmental and hypocritical. Concern was expressed that in our society, people cannot speak freely about sexuality and gender issues and express Church teaching. Gender is a particularly thorny issue and it is important to find ways to have honest respectful conversations. The Church is not always sensitive to how it will be heard. At a different meeting people agreed that the essence of Christianity is love of God and neighbour, not rule-keeping and that, contrary to what others might think, we are not obsessed by sexual teaching the Church has developed over time and it's important to remember this.

Is there freedom to exercise our particular gifts? Could there be more opportunity for lay led activity. Are we too dependent on the parish priest when it comes to communicating and coordinating parish life? Seminary education should reflect the changing realities of parish life. African clergy think there needs to be more teaching on the role of the Holy Spirit.

LISTENING TO ONE ANOTHER AND OUR CONCERNS: BECOMING A LISTENING CHURCH

What are the questions we have not been asked and have not been asking?

Is the hierarchy really listening to the concerns of lay Catholics?

What is God asking of us? We hear and interpret the message differently but the community of faith supports us in belief.

Catholicism is not an exclusive club but a Church of sinners.

The question of inter communion with Anglicans and Lutherans was raised.

Are we internally cliquy? If we appear so, how do we correct this?

We noted the challenge to get the balance of noticing, listening, asking and inviting right.

It will be good to review progress in six months' time.

We noted that structures are necessary but die without the Spirit.

We reminded ourselves that we need to plan social events as we build back after Covid.

The issues of passing on the faith, adult formation, reaching out to those who have not come back after Covid or who have given up on the Church have come up regularly over the weeks.