



Towards October 2024

Diocese of Derry Report
25 March 2024

*“The objective of these new reflections is to identify **the paths we can follow and the tools we might adopt** in our different contexts and circumstances in order to enhance the unique contribution of each baptised person and of each Church in the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel to the world today.*”

Each local Church is invited to focus on those aspects that enable it to make a contribution in the light of its own situation, character and experience, sharing good practices that represent visible and concrete signs of synodality.”

*- From the document Towards October 2024
issued by the General Secretariat of the Synod*

Synod 2021-2024

The Synodal Process

Phase 1: The Consultation of the People of God

Stage 1: The Diocesan and the National level – May 2022

Stage 2: The Continental level – February 2023

Phase 2: The Discernment of the Pastors

1st Session: XVI Assembly – 4-29 October 2023

Time between sessions – October 2023 - October 2024

2nd Session: XVI Assembly – October 2024

In March 2024, we continue the journey initiated by the Holy Father in 9 October 2021: For a Synodal Church. Communion, participation, mission.

Between the XVI Assembly of October 2023 and the XVI Assembly planned for October 2024, the local Churches and the groupings of Churches are invited to contribute by deepening aspects of the Synthesis Report that are fundamental to the Synod's theme.

In Ireland, each diocese is asked to provide a response to the following question:

How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways?

Response from the Diocese of Derry:

The Diocese of Derry held two regional Synodal Listening Days with the invitation being extended to the clergy and parishes via email, suggesting that three - five representatives from parish communities participate.

Guided by a skilled facilitator in the method of 'Conversation in the Spirit' and centred around hearing the Word of God, those gathered recalled the Diocesan Synthesis Report of 2022, reviewed a summary of the October 2023 Synthesis Report from Rome, and then engaged in a process of 'Conversation in the Spirit'. Overall, the participants expressed their gratitude for a 'new' way of conversation in terms of Church and faith. Aware that the voice of young people was somewhat absent from these gatherings, two further events were organised by the Diocesan Youth Ministry team. On review of the submissions received at the end of the

listening sessions, the following is a synthesis of comments, considerations, concerns and possibilities.

It is interesting to note that it was in the conversations with our young people that they identified that the primary incentive for the Church's presence in Ireland of the twenty-first century is because of Jesus Christ. At one of the gatherings, they noted that we had spoken little about Jesus. Yet, if faith and life are grounded in Him, especially through the Word of God and the Sacraments, then His presence will guide and determine ways of co-responsibility within the Church.

In terms of co-responsibility and its forms, nothing specific emerged from the conversations held in the diocese. There was an acknowledgement and appreciation of the role of clergy, however there was also an articulation of the need for change to occur, especially in how decisions are made at parish and diocesan levels. Concerns were raised about the canonical situation of pastoral councils, in the sense that with the transfer of parish priests, the work undertaken by a pastoral council in a particular place may either thrive or perish on the appointment of a new pastor. If co-responsibility is to be fully embraced by clergy and laity, then some attention must be given to how pastoral councils, leadership groups and core groups fulfil their functions.

The imagination of the participants was vivid and exciting when they talked about the role that young people could have in the Church of today and tomorrow. They spoke about the joy that is available for those who are members of the Christian community. A joy that is both invigorating, and rejuvenating. They imagined a time when all Christians could work together as one in an ecumenical spirit of reconciliation. They also imagined a Church that was more inclusive and merciful, regardless of people's mistakes in the past or irregular unions - a Church that did not judge anyone but that recognises everyone's capacity for holiness. Baptism is an important moment in the life of all believers and was seen as the sacrament that empowers all of us to participate fully in the life of the Church. Holiness should be an inclusive experience rather than something which is the preserve of the few. Personal conversion was highlighted as an important experience engendering renewal, rather than tinkering with

Church structures. What is required is a real relationship with Christ out of which grows a real passion to build up the kingdom of God. The Church could be less hierarchical and more democratic in structure, taking into consideration the fact that every individual member of the Church has a unique set of gifts and charisms to be put at the service of the Church in the modern world. Women, youth, and those on the margins, were identified as groups that we need to develop a preferential option with.

Although the gathering did not touch specifically on missionary dynamism, areas were identified as needing change perhaps suggest where co-responsibility may be difficult. These include the need to move from hierarchical understanding and expression of leadership to circular model so that all baptised can be more actively involved. The laity are as responsible for the Church as priests, with a reorientation from competition towards working together at all levels, making use of everyone's gifts. The identity of the priest needs to be reflected on, with concerns regarding clericalism in terms of the priest's understanding of his role and, likewise, the people's view of his role. The challenge remains regarding how women's voices are heard at higher levels, as well as the need to reach out to all aspects of society in order to be inclusive. This will require an intentional effort to reconnect with schools in order to reconnect with young people, especially because youth need to be involved in the process of change. There was a question around the obligation of celibacy for priests. More generally, in the conversations in the diocese, little reference was made to the Irish context other than brief comment on wrongs, hurts and abuse.

In terms of the conversations, it was acknowledged in some groups that efforts must be made to assist women in finding their voice in the decision-making aspects of ecclesial life with the concern that "if women's voices are not heard at higher levels, nothing will change." In terms of co-responsibility and the participation of lay people generally, and women more specifically, groups pointed towards the experience of lay missionary movements and what can be learned from them. There is an appreciation that mission in the Church, locally and universally, is the call of the baptised, and that the lay faithful are co-responsible for the life of the Church alongside clergy, however how this is concretised is not easily or clearly articulated. It is to be noted that at a time when there is an

increasing number of lay pastoral workers being employed in parishes, the majority of these are women.

During this process, there was an appreciation of this experience being different from other moments when people have been invited to gather for conversations. Participants evaluated that the invitation to listen to each other was a particular challenge but was experienced as being positive and fruitful. It was suggested that the model of 'Conversation in the Spirit' be utilised by other gatherings and meetings, with the request that some formation be offered for facilitators.

After consultation with some young people of our Diocese, it was stated from the young people that it was very difficult to have co-responsibility as there are no roles in the church for young people. They feel after they have made their sacraments that they do not have a place within the church that empowers them to engage with 'Co-Responsibility'. As we move forward they would like to see more formation in schools that can help them with not only their personal relationship with Jesus, but with the wider faith community. Young people themselves identified that at times they do not feel that the Church is a place of welcome and engagement, whereas the experience could be different if people took responsibility in a way that is intergenerational in its expression. While it is acknowledged that people in all generations are called to be missionaries, there is a special role wherein young people evangelise other young people. For this to happen, there is a need to invest in faith formation and ministry preparation for those young people who desire to participate in the leadership roles in the Church. There is a need to provide leaders who will help in the catechetical formation of young parents who are the first teachers of their children in faith and yet find themselves often alone.

Participants in the various gatherings highlighted that the 'marginalised' are close to us, among our families and friends who no longer attend Mass or get involved perhaps because they are divorced. There is also the challenge and invitation to actively address how people who are experiencing marginalisation because of marriage status, identity or sexuality are welcomed, heard and accompanied. It was felt that we need to be a more proactively welcoming Church. It is interesting that the

gatherings of young people identified the strength of the older generations in their commitment to the life of the Church, especially at parish level – but there is the challenge of how do young people be empowered in this present moment to take up that mantle for their time, and in a manner that will help them entrust these roles to the generations that come after. The role of young people in parishes should be seen as the same as others as age and gender should not matter. Our diocesan conversations, especially with young people, strongly expressed that young people are not merely the “future” of the Church, they are the “today and now” of the Church.

In terms of how co-responsibility is expressed, there is a strong awareness of the universal nature of the Church, but there is also the need to acknowledge and discover anew the gifts of local and particular Churches. Communication is also key to co-responsibility and mission, which often is lacking, either at universal or local level. This highlights the importance of digital communication and social media and how these platforms can positively play a role in the Church’s life and mission.

The greatest challenge regarding co-responsibility is engendering and tapping into the dynamism of people. Events over the past decades have challenged this – the Troubles in the North, the uncovering of abuse in parish communities, the experiences around Covid-19 to name but a few. And yet, in many of our parishes, faith is alive and expressed positively by many people in the high moments of life, but also in the ordinary daily experiences. This is a fertile ground on which to challenge the move to dynamic intentional missionary evangelisation that has co-responsibility as a core part. We noted that in some responses, people were quite passive, describing co-responsibility but for others. A shift is needed here by giving permission to ‘become co-responsible’ and using straightforward language to describe what that means. Some participants gave examples of specific programmes as being what was good in the Church as opposed to what we do as part of day-to-day life in parishes. We need to embed real conversations in the spirit moving forward, making this part of the routine of parish life and decision-making.

The Diocesan Pastoral Council has begun to have conversations in the spirit, as have some pastoral councils and groups in parishes. This is a

group that has formed over several years and the conversations seemed deeper. It was highlighted that people are at sea in our complex world and come to Church as a haven to find simplicity and security in their lives: this haven is the role of a Church in mission. The importance of listening and accompaniment was highlighted, as well as training people to be able to do this. The invitation of Christ is to meet people where they are in their relationship with God – the challenge is how do we, as the Body of Christ, live and do this. It was felt that movement of the heart as opposed to the head is what synodality is about.