

A Summary of the Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod 2021- 2024

Pope Francis started the Catholic Church on a synodal journey, a listening journey, over twelve months ago. In our parishes of Holy Rood and Our Lady's there was the opportunity to share our faith journeys and these were shared with the diocese. Millions of people, worldwide, have been involved in the synod, listening to each other and sharing their faith. The Working Document for the Continental Stage is where you can find a summary of the "joys, hopes, sufferings and wounds of Christ's disciples" throughout the world.

The following is a summary of these findings. I'm aware of the inadequacy of a five-page summary of a forty-nine-page document but it gives a flavour of what Catholics around the world are feeling about their faith and the Catholic Church.

Listening

- Many reports, from the different countries, emphasised that the synod was the first time that the Church had asked for their opinion and they wish to continue on this journey.

"Our current 'synod' experience has awakened in the lay faithful the idea of, and a desire to, get involved in the life of the Church, in its engagement with the world today, and in its pastoral work on the ground." [Canada]

"People of God remarked on the uniqueness of speaking freely and being heard with the guidance of the Holy Spirit..... after decades of church going, they had been asked to speak for the first time."
[Pakistan]

"Walking together is the way to become a missionary Church." [Japan]

- Some challenged the idea of the synod, not understanding what it was and feeling that the Church as a rigid institution was unwilling to change.
- There were reports of laity not being interested, and a fear from the laity of expressing themselves.
- Many reports accept the difficulty of listening and hearing God speak to us.

“Not listening leads to misunderstanding, exclusion.....lack of trust and fears that destroy the community. When priests do not want to listen..... a sense of sadness arises in the hearts of the lay faithful.” [Poland]

- Many priests do not feel listened to, supported or appreciated. Tensions and differences are reported between the lay people and the leadership in the Church. The tone of the reports was not anti-clerical. Many express appreciation and affection for priests. As we journey together we should expect these differences, pray about them, work with them. *“The presence of the Spirit is necessary and there is no Spirit without prayer.”*
- Even in war torn countries Christians have come together to reflect, to listen. The synod has given the people of Rwanda a better understanding of unity and reconciliation.

The Excluded

- There is an awareness that many Catholics feel excluded from the Church and there are diverse groups who feel a sense of exile, neglected, misunderstood. For many the experience of being seriously listened to is a first step to feeling included. Some felt that their participation in the synod process was not welcome.

“Those who feel at home in the Church, feel the absence of those who don’t.” [Ireland]

“Instead of behaving like gatekeepers, trying to exclude others from the table, we need to do more to make sure that people know that everyone can find a place and a home here.” [USA]

- Many reports say that the listening process provides a vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, all are welcome.
- Almost all reports raise the issue of full and equal participation of women in the Church, for women to feel valued, to be involved in decision making. Many women do not feel that their gifts and abilities are being recognised. However, the reports do not agree on a response to the question of the vocation, and inclusion of women in the Church. Many reports ask for continued discussion and prayer concerning the active role of women in the Church.

- There is a universal concern about the small voice of young people in the synod process and in the life of the Church.

“Since our young people experience a high degree of alienation, we need to make a preferential option for the young” [Antilles]

- There were reports of people wanting a more “welcoming space” in Church, feeling a tension between belonging to the Church and their own loving relationships such as: remarried divorcees, single parents, LGBTQ people, people living in a polygamous marriage etc Reports show how this demand for welcome challenges many local churches.

“People ask that the Church be a refuge for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect. They want the Churchto build real relationships through caring..... not a purpose of superiority.” [USA]

- Despite the cultural differences there are remarkable similarities between the continents, regarding those who are seen as excluded in society and the Christian community such as: the poorest, lonely elderly, indigenous peoples, street children, migrants without any affiliation etc. In many cases their voice has been absent from the synod process.

“As the Bolivian Church, we are saddened that we have not been able to effectively reach out to the poor on the peripheries and in the most remote places.” [Bolivia]

Uganda echoes many countries in saying:

“The rich and the educated are listened to more than others.”

“Many of the underprivileged and marginalised in society felt left out in the Church.” [Philippines]

The Defence of Fragile and Threatened Life

- Numerous reports point to the need for new ways of welcoming the participation of persons with disabilities.
- Equally prominent is the commitment to the defence of fragile and threatened life at all stages. The Ukraine Greek Catholic Church asks that the Church *“study the phenomenon of female migration and offer support and pay special attention to women who decide to have an abortion due to fear of poverty and rejection, to offer support with the aim of protecting the lives of*

unborn children and to care for women with post-abortion syndrome.”

A Missionary Church

- Many reports point to the need for all Christian denominations and all faiths to work more closely together to tackle: social justice, justice and peace in the world and environmental issues, particularly concerning climate change.
- Many reports express a desire to work with other Christian denominations and the need for formation/ education to support this work.
- There is a need for a more meaningful inter-cultural approach.

“We may differ in religion, but we all seek the common good.” [Laos, Cambodia]

- Many countries noted that there was a need from the Church to respond better to: the richness of local cultures, indigenous people and nonbelievers.

Journeying Together

- A synodal Church, a listening Church journeys together. Responsibility for the life of the Church must be shared by all in response to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“When we want to do anything in our parish, we meet together, take the suggestions of everyone in the community, decide together and carry out the decisions together.” [Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands]

- All should be encouraged to be active in the Church. A Church should not be built around *“priests but around all the parishioners with all their talents. It should be all ministerial.”* [Belgium]
- However, there are many expressions of difficulty in actually practising co-responsibility. Many Catholics are reluctant to be actively involved and leadership in the Church does not always encourage laity to get involved.
- The overwhelming majority of reports indicate the need to provide for formation, training in “walking together”, listening to each other, in order to: mature and grow in faith, communicate

with other churches and with society, take up responsibilities within the Church, influence how the church is governed.

Challenges

“There was ongoing reference to the impact of the clergy sexual abuse crisis and the Church’s response.....For many, the aftermath of this is still a powerful, unresolved issue.” [Australia]

- Consumerism. The powerful influence of the secular world.
- Historical links between Church and political power.
- Differences of opinion within the Church on such issues as the ordination of women, married clergy, divorce, contraception etc
- There are divisions regarding the celebration of the liturgy, some wanting to rethink the liturgy. There are tensions around the Eucharist such as the wish by some to share the Eucharist with all.
- A listening Church needs to deal with *“the many tensions that emerge from encountering diversity....it must welcome differences and promote harmony.”*

Louise Mullany