



The Synod for a synodal Church A Parish Responds

“The whole Church is convoked in synod” – with these simple but dramatic words, Pope Francis issued his historic invitation to all Catholics to participate in the most extensive consultation the Church has ever seen. Each and every person in our parish, and every parish and community worldwide, has been personally invited by Pope Francis to participate in the synod.

The word **synod** means ‘journeying together’. We are a pilgrim people, always on life’s journey towards our God, just like the People of God led by Moses through the desert to the Promised Land. And, just like the Israelites, we sometimes take wrong turns and get lost, or are fed up with our lot, or prefer other gods and other priorities. But God’s guiding Spirit is always faithful and patiently awaits our return to the right path. The synod called by Pope Francis is a one of those opportunities to return to our vocation – the call of God’s Spirit to build the Kingdom of God on earth, to be leaven and light for the world.

methodology – or how we did our synod

At all Masses on a Sunday in January 2022, the preaching was about the synod. In the following week, parishioners were invited to one of four synod meetings. 106 people came (just over half of the Sunday Mass attendance at the time) and others contributed their reflections in writing.

In the days before the synod meetings, we were asked to reflect prayerfully on our experience of the Church, both the joyful and the painful, and to discern where the Holy Spirit has been at work in our lives. Out of this exercise of prayer and discernment, we were asked to share our hopes and dreams for the future of the Church. What is the Spirit saying to the church through each of us?

The synod meetings heard moving testimony of the action of God, and the experience of Church in our lives, from people with a wide variety of backgrounds and of all ages. We heard the hopes, and sometimes fears, people had for the Church. The responses were overwhelmingly positive and hope-filled. Many expressed their deep gratitude for this opportunity to speak and share their experience and hopes, and for moments of grace in hearing others speak on these matters of great importance.

As Pope Francis has said, the synod meetings are not about producing a document (although this document records the outcomes of our synod meetings and will be shared with our bishop and, combined with others in the local churches, sent on to the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome in October 2023) – it is about developing a way of proceeding, a way of listening to each other and moving forward together into the future, which is characterized by communion, participation and mission. The aim of the synod is to encourage the church to be more synodal in its everyday way of doing things – a ‘way of being church’ that is both ancient and contemporary – this is the hope for the worldwide church and for the church in our corner of the globe.

our report for the synod

All the comments and reflections from the synod meetings, and those received in writing, were recorded on cards and displayed for a month at the back of the church. This in itself produced further contributions and reflections.

This document now pulls together everything that has been said into what, we hope, is an easily readable report, accurately recording the hopes you expressed. We have grouped the responses according to the broad themes that emerged. The greatest number of comments were about community, faith and inclusion. There was a clear desire to see the Church, both local and universal, grow as a confident, outward-looking, and inclusive community of faith.

Some comments were about the very local church, others applied more to the universal church as a whole. Some were about the experience of the Catholic church in Scotland or in our own diocese, while some had an international context. So, these comments need to be read at a variety of levels – the parish, the local church in Scotland, the church in diverse places around the world and the universal church. We begin with the theme of *community* . . .

community

The biggest response came from people speaking about their experience of the church as a community – the importance of getting to know each other well and finding ways of doing this; of acknowledging and celebrating our great diversity involving all ages, both those who live in families and those living outside of the traditional family. The words *inclusive, transparency, contemporary, and equality* were all used repeatedly to describe the characteristics of the church we hoped for.

Great store was placed on the importance of creating a welcome, especially as people return after Covid. The parish ‘welcome teams’ were regarded as something important that emerged from Covid and which should be retained and developed as a permanent feature of our hospitality.

The social dimension of parish life was seen to be important in building up community and sustaining it. We should do things as a community. The church should “feel like a family” and from this comes its unity.

Some responses noted that others often see our strength of identity and community better than we do ourselves and that we should celebrate the good of what we actually have and be careful of being over-critical. Others noted that there is always a danger of our practice of the faith becoming a private and individualistic thing, rather than something we do in community.

Several people spoke about making sure young adults have opportunities to take on leadership roles and that these roles are not only taken by longstanding members of the congregation.



“Our welcome as a parish is key to helping it grow – people should feel important and looked after.”

*“There are many different and differing voices in the church
– how do we ensure the synod process
doesn’t smooth these out?”*

*“The church is a place to meet, pray, worship, talk, share,
and pass on God’s love.”*

“The church can sometimes feel like a club.”

inclusion

Many people spoke about the importance of inclusion – expressing a strong desire that the church be a place for everyone, accepting of all, open, welcoming, hospitable, and more inclusive than we are now. As one person put it, expressing the essence of the synodal way of doing things, “We need to find ways of walking together – nobody should be excluded.” The responses asked for particular attention to be paid to the inclusion of:

- those in same-sex relationships and those who identify as LGBTQ+;
- families with children – “We need to be child-friendly and supportive of families”;
- and of young adults who should feel welcomed and involved but not isolated from rest of the parish community.

There was a plea not to divide the parish into ‘regulars’ and ‘others’ – all should find a home here in the ways that best serve their needs at whatever particular stage of life they are at. A church in the city centre will attract a wide range of people for a wide range of reasons. All should be welcomed.

It was felt to be important that we find ways to invite people in – passers-by, tourists, curious locals, the lapsed. At a very practical level, we need good facilities for those with disability, those with challenges to mobility, the elderly, those with small children, those with irregular shift-work or limited availability. We should welcome people whose marriages have failed through no fault of their own.

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*“We need a good pastoral approach to people
on the margins of the church – the divorced,
those in same-sex partnerships, etc.”*

*“How are the voices of those who have not returned
after Covid included in the synod?”*

“I have a young family and don’t know where I fit in.”

support

The synod responses gave frequent and strong testimony to the many and often unseen ways in which the community of the church gives strength and support to many people. Again, the importance of belonging was mentioned. People hoped that this sense of belonging and being supported would continue in the future and especially for the 'less visible' people such as the elderly, those in nursing homes, the housebound, those with mental illness, and the lonely.



“For me the church is a place of safety.”

“The church helps me grow and nurtures me.”

“The church supported me in time of bereavement.”

“Welcome is important but sometimes I come to Mass to be alone.”

lay involvement

Many people spoke about the enormous part lay people have to play in the church. Sixty years ago, a full ecumenical council of the whole church called on lay people to take up their proper active role. But the church remains stubbornly clericalized and the skills of lay people are, by and large, a resource that is not effectively tapped. People need to know how and why to contribute; teams need to be established to tackle different areas of church life; communication needs to be improved so everyone knows what is being done and what is needed. Above all, the laity need to be trusted.



*“The church should listen to the laity
rather than dismiss them,
developing trust in each other.”*

*“A direct personal request to an individual
is more effective than a general plea for help.”*

*“We need to consider what a priest needs to do
and the laity need to take responsibility for the rest.”*

*“I have been attending Sacred Heart for 8 years
and not participated – now I would like to participate.”*

women

The role and position of women in the church was frequently mentioned in responses. The church was experienced to be too patriarchal and the voices of women are not heard. The church needs to trust women and give them leadership roles.



“The church has hurt women by its portrayal of God as masculine.”

“I would like to see Pope Francis appoint a woman as a cardinal.”

“The church cannot be ‘unblocked’ if synodality doesn’t include women as equal partners.”

leadership

Leadership in the church was generally perceived to be weak; the hierarchy out of touch, paralysed, and not leading well. Trust has been lost due to the scandals and resulting cover-ups. A common plea was for greater openness and transparency; for a listening church; a church that celebrates the positives as well as learning from and properly resolving the negatives.



“The church should lead gently not autocratically.”

“The church needs sensitive, compassionate, discerning men and women in leadership roles.”

priests

Several responses proposed that women should be ordained and that there should be married clergy.



“The time has now come seriously to consider married priests.”

“Let the diocesan clergy get married as in the Orthodox Church.”

communication

A number of people expressed the view that the church needed to be much more visible in the media, embracing technology and social media. The church needs to be much better at using media to communicate and to challenge the many misperceptions about the Catholic Church.



“Let’s remember and celebrate our Catholic identity and history.”

faith

Along with community, the theme of faith received the largest number of responses in our synod consultation. We wanted our faith to be the faith of missionary disciples – a community that supports one other to grow in faith; knowing the gospel well and living it; and helping people to develop and deepen a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

There were pleas not to think and talk as though the church and our faith were constantly under attack; to be more secure in our own beliefs and not daunted by opposition. And there were pleas not to reduce our faith to a series of do’s and don’ts, guilt, negativity and rules. Rather we should live the Jesus’ new commandment to love one another.

Several people observed that Catholic Social Thought is a hidden jewel of church teaching which offers a framework for personal life and professional values. People spoke about the importance of the sacraments, frequently and well celebrated.



“Our parish church should be a hub where we are fed and enabled to reach out to others.”

“The church should be able to show God to the world.”

“In the parish community, I found a group of people living with joy and presenting Christ as an answer to my human needs.”

“The word of God is alive and active – we need to make it a lived reality.”

prayer

Prayer was seen as a central element of the practice of our faith – both personal prayer and the public worship of the church (the liturgy). The spiritual lives of Catholics need support and development with opportunities to learn how to pray, to make retreats, and to understand spirituality much better. Liturgy should be of high quality, with good preaching, a variety of good



music, involvement in ministries, a place for praise and adoration, good children's liturgy, and the more visible celebration of sacraments as well as the Mass. One person noted a particular need for healing services – physical, mental, and spiritual – as we emerge from Covid.

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“We all need to pray more to begin with!”

*“Deep prayer is a springboard
for all our work.”*

“I love the liturgy at the Sacred Heart Church.”

service

Responses hoped for a church that would guard against being isolated and closed off from wider society. The church, at all levels, should be visible, present and playing an active role in society – supporting those in need, protecting the earth, initiating and engaging in dialogue with other faiths And sharing what we have in common with other denominations.

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*“The Christian community needs to get out
and share its experience of the gospel.”*

*“We must increase dialogue with other Christian
denominations – focusing on our similarities rather than our
differences and recognizing that others sometimes do things
better than we do.”*

“The church should engage with other God-loving people.”

formation

Alongside the discussion on the importance of our faith, there were many responses about the need for formation in the faith. People desired a wide variety of ways to develop faith at all stages of their lives. There were requests to go back to basics – to establish small groups to read the gospel and discuss it. There was thought to be a significant lack of knowledge about the faith amongst Catholics generally and therefore an urgent need for more and better adult faith formation. Opportunities for conversations about our faith need to be offered regularly and people be invited into those conversations. Catholics need clear teaching and opportunities to explore how our Catholic faith fits into life and informs everything. Responses highlighted the need for more on Catholic Social Thought; more on how to pray; and opportunities for spiritual direction. The high standard of preaching at Sacred Heart Church was appreciated.



*“The church needs to proclaim
the good news!”*

“The church is not providing enough spiritual direction.”

*“The church is only as good
as how well informed its members are.”*

next steps on the synod journey

“The purpose of the Synod,
and of this consultation,
is not to produce documents,
but to plant dreams,
draw forth prophecies
and visions,
allow hope to flourish,
inspire trust,
bind up wounds,
weave together relationships,
awaken a dawn of hope,
learn from one another
and create a bright resourcefulness
that will enlighten minds,
warm hearts,
give strength to our hands.”

Pope Francis

Our parish meetings and this report are only the first steps of the synod journey on which Pope Francis has invited us to set out. We need to continue our prayerful reflection and sharing of experience and to embed this way of doing things into our diocesan and parish life. In this way, and with God’s grace, we will become more a community of faith, hope and love which proclaims the gospel and builds up the Kingdom of God on earth.

In the coming months, there will be opportunities to take the next steps on this journey – ‘to enlighten our minds and give strength to our hands.’

What St Paul wrote to the first Christians in the town of Philippi, applies to us and our synodal journey also:

“My prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception so that you can always recognise what is best. This will help you to become pure and blameless, and prepare you for the Day of Christ, when you will reach the perfect goodness which Jesus Christ produces in us for the glory and praise of God.”

Philippians 1:9-11

Synod 2021 – 2023
for a synodal church
communion – participation – mission



Edinburgh Jesuit Church
The Church of the Sacred Heart