

Diocese of Westminster

The Diocesan Discernment Group's Response to the DCS

As we came together, at the invitation of our Diocesan Bishops, to discern a response to the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (DCS), the resonances were felt, from the outset, to be deep. The group recognised straightaway a depth of resonance with their own experience of the Synodal Journey – a sense that deepened over the weeks of meeting through December 2022. The deepest resonance we found in the image of the Synodal Journey is one of enlarging the space of the tent.[i] It spoke to us of a Church which is open and vulnerable – open to be touched in the way Jesus allows a woman to touch the hem of his cloak and so is healed.[ii] This “power going out of him” resonated with the “coup of gift”[iii] to which DCS refers and which we had experienced ourselves as we walked the Synodal Journey; and of the joy acknowledged by us and so many others.[iv]

DCS and Diocesan Synthesis alike make strikingly little direct reference to Christ. This absence is balanced, however, by the very frequent references in the DCS to baptism into Christ as the root of the Church's mission.[v] This, and the oft-heard suggestion across the DCS that that mission is indeed realised through Synodality, we had to acknowledge to have found much less expression in our own Diocesan Synthesis.

Many elements which the DCS claimed to have received universal acknowledgement [vi] did resonate with us as having featured significantly in our Diocesan Synthesis. For example, resonance about the need to discern more fully the role of women in the life of the Church [vii] was strong. The concomitant observation that women's ordination was much less frequently mentioned had been our experience too. The fact that many priests did not engage in a major way with the Synodal process we also recognised. But we also acknowledged the frequently expressed appreciation of and respect for priests, along with concern that too much is asked of them.

Concern about the need to engage young people more fully in the life of the Church resonated similarly even if the DCS's characterisation as “meagre ... the voice of young people in the synod process”[viii] did not correspond to our experience. The inclusion of LGBT+ people in the life of the Church was also recognised as a frequently occurring theme in our Synodal journey. Concern for remarried divorcees and their admission to the sacraments was similarly acknowledged. There was concern that not more was said about the inclusion of people with a disability in the life of the Church.[ix]

Discussion of lay people's role in the governance of the Church we also noted as a concern frequently articulated. Tensions acknowledged by the DCS around the liturgical expression of our faith we found to be part of our Synodal experience too. The stress on

the importance of listening we readily concurred with – listening not only in the area of Liturgy but also in Formation and Accompaniment.

We recognised the criticism of clericalism.[x] We were surprised to find scant reference to clerical sexual abuse; and would affirm the DCS’s powerful reference to it being “an obstacle of particular relevance on the path of walking together.”[xi] The need for continuing support and encouragement of the clergy in their role we felt to be reflected in the widespread concern about homilies,[xii] which had found voice in our own Diocesan discernment as well. We recognised, too, the difficulty of fulfilling the imperative of the Church needing boldly to “(proclaim) its authentic teaching while at the same time offering a witness of radical inclusion and acceptance.”[xiii]

Re-reading our own Synodal Journey in the light of the DCS, we recognised that, while in our own Synthesis we had adverted little to faith lived in places where there is martyrdom, economic hardship and persecution, nor does DCS make as much reference to these realities as it should. We noted that we had been one, in our Synthesis, with the DCS in making – to our shame – scant reference to environmental concerns. We were similarly surprised to find just one reference in DCS to the pandemic when we had given it major consideration.

We did note a number of creative tensions and divergences as we continued in our discernment of the DCS. Foremost among these was to do with the role of women. It occurred to us that much of what was said about laywomen could also be said of laymen. #61 asserts that “most decision-making and governance roles are held by men.” The reality is that few laymen exercise more governance roles than women. We experienced a difference of view as to whether women feel excluded or not. It was suggested that national syntheses had not listened sufficiently to the voice of women and of men who do feel included in the life of the Church: not all felt the “prophetic voice” (*ibid.*) which the DCS ascribes to women necessarily to be a relegation.[xiv]

Regarding LGBT+ people, we recognised the tension identified in #39 that they live “between belonging to the Church and their own loving relationships.” The DCS identifies the same tension to be present often among remarried divorcees: this tension we recognised, as does the DCS in #30, as “the tension of truth and mercy”. We noted that our Diocesan Synthesis showed many to share the concern expressed in #94 at the pain experienced by married divorcees at being denied access to Holy Communion. We recognised, at the same time, the tension between those who “expressed the view that the Church should be more flexible (while) others felt this practice should be upheld.”[xv]

It was felt that DCS does not fully capture the issues around young people’s non-engagement with the Church. We experienced a tension between, on the one hand, the

desire to use Synodality to “turn up the volume” (our phrase) of young people’s voices and, on the other hand, the need for those same young people to be guided in their understanding of what it means to be Church. We recognised the tension between young people who seek to adhere to the 1962 Missal and those “trying to have their own space in liturgy and songs”.^[xvi] We noted that pilgrimage and piety referred to in #95 had featured very little in our Diocesan Synthesis.

The dominant call for action was for formation. It was felt there is a need to provide formation to give resonance, on the one hand, to the voice of those who feel themselves to be on the margins of the Church and, on the other, to the voice of Tradition. Formation in truth and mercy is what we felt was being called for: formation that holds in tension the authority of Scripture, Tradition, the Magisterium and personal experience; formation in the faith; formation in Synodality – especially of the clergy; formation in listening; formation in accompaniment.

Such accompaniment is mentioned some four times in the DCS but without ever explaining itself. Yet, accompaniment was rather dominant in our Synthesis.^[xvii] We remain convinced of the need to promote an ethos of accompaniment at all stages of life, whatever people’s circumstances.

There was a call also for a deeper discernment of laywomen and laymen’s particular charisms. Such discernment should serve to draw forth from the laity more of the professional competence that the DCS notes many to have suggested is needed to further the Church’s mission.^[xviii] These charisms could be channelled, for instance, towards those pastoral councils judged indispensable by DCS #78 and which many of our number wished to see required by Canon Law.

We would affirm DCS #67, in calling for a development of “the ‘baptismal theology’ promoted by the Second Vatican Council” among Christ’s lay faithful towards a deeper understanding of this as “the basis of co-responsibility in mission.” Such a theology should serve to underline the complementarity between “the charismatic gifts freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit, which help ‘rejuvenate the Church, (and) ... are inseparable from the hierarchical gifts which are linked to the Sacraments of Orders in its various degrees.”^[xix]

Further possible calls to action were expressed to a greater or lesser degree: development of an intergenerational Synodal pathway; the need to take the “Digital Synod” seriously; formation for ecumenical encounter and interreligious dialogue: we noted the DCS’s view that there can be “no complete Synodality without unity among Christians;”^[xx] We noted the suggestion of “the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings”^[xxi] or a group of women having voting rights at the Synod: it was felt

these latter two would help redress, at least in part, concerns about a male-female imbalance in the Church.

We ended with the thought that what unites us is a yearning for a Synodal spirituality. Such a spirituality we envisaged as a tent held up by four essential poles: the poles of encounter, journeying, formation, and accompaniment. We agreed that enlarging the space of one's tent, as this Synodal Journey challenges the Church to do, engenders feelings of both hope and fear – and also the expectation that what has begun will continue. We were clear that at the centre of the tent must stand Christ – much more emphatically than he does in the vision of the DCS.

[i] *cf.* Is 54, 2

[ii] *cf.* Lk 8, 40-48

[iii] DCS #42

[iv] *ibid.* #16

[v] *ibid.* #57 *et passim*

[vi] *ibid.* #35 *et passim*

[vii] *ibid.* #61

[viii] *ibid.* #35

[ix] *cf. ibid.* #36

[x] *ibid.* #58

[xi] *ibid.* #20

[xii] *ibid.* #93

[xiii] *ibid.* #30

[xiv] *cf. ibid.*, “women ... relegated to a prophetic edge,” #36

[xv] *ibid.* #94

[xvi] *ibid.* #91

[xvii] *cf.* <https://rcdow.org.uk/synod/westminster-diocese-bishops-synod-report/>, *Accompaniment in Mission*

[xviii] *cf.* DCS #79

[xix] *ibid.* #70

[xx] *ibid.* #48

[xxi] *ibid.* #64