

Westminster Diocesan Report of the Process Towards October 2024

Open Doors, Open Hearts

The first week of March 2024 saw a full Throne Room at Archbishop's House. The Council of (22) Deans had gathered with two laypeople from every Deanery to report back on the Deanery's experience of this 2nd phase of our Synodal Journey.

The guiding question for this interim phase was to be: "How can we be a synodal Church in mission?" We understood this in Westminster to be asking: what is Synodality telling us about the way should organize ourselves for mission? We proposed a number of questions which Parish Gatherings might consider in the light of what the Synthesis says about Coresponsibility and Formation.

We attempt, in what follows, to capture the wide range of responses reported. What was encouraging was the deepening sense of Mission being communicated. This was communicated in a way that seemed to echo the three pillars of the Synod and its Synthesis – namely that the *Communion* we enjoy in our parishes is for *Mission*, that *Mission* being a call to deeper *Participation* of both ourselves and others in the Life which is held out to us in and through the Church.

Such an ethos seemed to be nicely captured by the phrase *Open Doors, Open Hearts* used in one of the reports to suggest what it is that we should aspire to. A large number of Deaneries communicated the conviction that the prime mission of parishes is to make their buildings places that are indeed open and welcoming to all; meanwhile to communicate a similar openness of heart to those with whom we share our lives. Parishes expressed the conviction that, as well as all that is offered in parish life, the witness and loving kindness shown by family and friends is of critical importance in proclaiming our faith; so too the witness given at street level through neighbours' knowing of one's affiliation to the Church, of the witness given in being seen walk

to Mass and in the living out of a Christian life. That having been said, the salutary effect of inviting and encouraging others to join one in worship at church is never to be underestimated either.

A spirituality of *Open Doors, Open Hearts* seemed to be spread right across the responses to each of the three leading questions, viz. How do we proclaim our faith and witness (i) to those who have never met Christ, (ii) to those who have ceased walking with Christ, and (iii) to those who worship with us? A clear majority of responses gathered throughout the morning seemed to be clustered around the three foci of evangelization represented by these three questions.

A large number of responses were captured by the observation that "building trust and relationship are essential in effectively sharing the Christian message with those who have not heard of Christ or have turned away." Many expressed a feeling of powerlessness, a sense of failure indeed, in the transmission of faith, especially to the youth. To the ethos of keeping open the doors of both our churches and our hearts was added a plea to attend as well to the evangelizing power of beauty, both in our buildings and in the liturgy which they house. It was noted here that an important way of celebrating our churches' beauty can be dramatic decoration of their exteriors at times of Christian festival.

Alongside this, there was a significant recognition of the witness given through opening up our facilities for diverse vulnerable groups of people. The witness of charitable social outreach, *Caritas*, was mentioned often – though not perhaps as maximally as it might have been given the outstanding generosity shown by parishes to the poor in recent years. Strongly expressed, though, was the recognition of how opening up parish halls to



be hubs for the distribution of food and other needed goods brought there by members of both other churches and other faiths itself gives powerful witness to who and what we are. Such ecumenical and interreligious outreach could be built upon, it was suggested, by ecumenical and interreligious celebrations in order to foster trust and understanding.

Such reflection led naturally into consideration of the Formation which might assist such an ethos of openness. Formation for Caritas was itself suggested: a plea was made for Catholic Social Teaching to be much better known. There was occasional reference here to the kerygma; and how formation might assist in the expression of how Caritas works out of a conviction that one is meeting Christ in everyone who approaches the Church in need. There were pleas for Formation in how to reach out to those who no longer walk with Christ. There was affirmation for the helpfulness of *Alpha* and other similarly kerygmatic resources in this regard. There were many references to the desirability of a Formation which helps parishioners deepen their own encounter with Christ. The spirit engendered by small groups within a parish – Lent groups, Faith Sharing groups continuing from *At Your Word, Lord*, prayer groups, Scripture Groups, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults - were all affirmed as deeply formative and nurturing of communion.

Involving more people in the liturgical life of the parish found many expressions as well, a number implying the desirability of Formation for this. It was suggested there be a maximising of the catechetical and evangelizing power of the liturgy; and a plea for homilies that speak to the heart. "Homilies should be heart-to-heart, sharing experience." This latter was of a piece with a number of affirmations of parishioners sharing their experience of preparation for key life-moments with others who have lived through similar events: e.g. "someone who has taken part in baptism preparation might be asked to speak on how the experience had changed their lives."

A Formation that embraces the full life-span was recommended. "Authentic Formation and Catechesis are at the heart of the future of the

Church," said one Deanery. "There is a thirst for Formation and Catechesis." There was a plea to make more use of diocesan resources for Formation. The importance of Ongoing Formation was frequently endorsed – Ongoing Formation for clergy and laity together; an Ongoing Formation which goes beyond Catechesis and is for Mission (and, implicitly Participation too). Parishes asked for support for families living out their faith; the encouragement of Formation for adults who have had no Formation since school age. A creativity in engagement – both formational and otherwise – with young people and children was felt to be important. A Formation which equips lay people to dialogue with others on topical issues was also recommended – a Formation which would empower lay people "to be actively synodal in dialogue with contemporary culture."

Coresponsibility was rarely used as a term. However, an ethos of Coresponsibility was clearly present in parishes' consideration of how we might restructure ourselves for Mission. Uppermost and linked to all that was shared about Formation were the many pleas that parishes be places of listening, deep listening. This was expressed in terms of cultivating spaces of listening encounter; spaces where young people especially are listened to; spaces where people can share their stories, share the experience, for example, of being a woman, of marital difficulties, etc. An "invitational culture" was proposed.

An ethos of Coresponsibility found expression also in the suggestion that parishioners be asked what skills they can offer, harness to the parish's Mission. "Bishops should ask the laity what they need": the hierarchy must continue to listen and show boldness in asking challenging questions about the Church's Mission and future. One of our strengths is the ability to bring diverse people together, whether for prayer, social activities or helping others. At our best, we can be "places where charisms, gifts and talents can be discerned, honoured and exercised." The suggestion we "move from volunteers to vocation" seemed to resonate deeply. Discussion of roles evoked the plea for "recognition that the enriching role of women in the Church is essential." There



were also a number of references made, in this context, to shared decision-making by clergy and lay people together. It was suggested there should be more developed Formation for different lay ministries as well as Formation for shared decision-making. The Synod's call for women to share in Coresponsibility at all levels of the Church was also articulated here.

The meeting communicated a deep appreciation on the part of lay people for their priests. There was concern expressed about the unrealistic workload imposed on priests. Two deaneries asked for priests to be allowed to marry. That priests themselves be formed for Synodality was also requested. The question of how priests and lay people discern together the distribution of roles and priorities for pastoral action was implicit in the comments made about Parish Pastoral Councils. This was well captured in the plea for consideration of having Parish Pastoral Councils or other spaces for shared discernment – discernment, for example, as to whether a parish or deanery might benefit from the service of an employed youth worker and/or catechist. There were a number of references to the advisability of the Diocese making canonical changes to parishes in order to enhance the Deanery's Mission.

In all of this, it was felt that communication is key. The vital importance of "coordination, communication and collaboration between groups to build a common Mission" seemed to capture so much of what had been shared. The necessity of developing the use of digital media for this was clearly understood by all.

By way of conclusion it was noted how much of what the Deaneries had shared was shot through with the 2023-24 Synodal vision of *Communion, Mission and Participation*, as well as their having reflected deeply on Formation and Coresponsibility as the means. These three elements of *Communion, Mission and Participation* St John Paul II had identified in 1988 in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici (Christ's Lay Faithful People)* following the Synod on the Laity. There, in the 32nd chapter, he suggested that the Lord's meditation in St John's Gospel on *The Vine and the Branches* is a wonderful image of these three essential facets of the Kingdom: our being grafted to the vine is itself *Communion*; this *Communion* we enjoy not for itself but in order to be fed for *Mission*, to go out into the vineyard to call others to *Participation* in the life held out to us by Christ and His Church. The tools with which the vine is cultivated St John Paul identified very explicitly as Coresponsibility and, implicitly, as Formation.

A further aspect of the vision of the 1987 Synod of Bishops on the Laity was that embracing the mission to bring others to participate in Christ itself deepens one's communion with Christ and His Body, the Church. There was a feeling, as we gathered for this historic Council of Deans, that we were experiencing very tangibly a sense of this reality – that gathering to consider how to organize ourselves better for Mission was deepening of the Communion both between ourselves and with Christ.

