

# THE SYNODAL PATHWAY IN IRELAND

## *Presentation to the Meeting of the General Secretaries of the Bishops Conferences of CCEE, Zagreb, 1 July 2022*

*(Brief comment on the two jurisdictions in Ireland covered by the Irish Bishops' Conference)*

### **Introduction**

Since the 2018 Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod Bishops in Rome on the theme of *young people, the faith and vocational discernment* the Irish Bishops had been actively considering calling a National Synodal Assembly for the Church in Ireland. A subgroup of the Episcopal Conference had been established to explore the idea further. This group conducted informal conversations at local, regional and national level. At the Plenary Meeting of the Bishops' Conference in December 2020, the Bishops decided to proceed along a synodal pathway. The Bishops were greatly assisted and encouraged by discussions at a meeting in February 2021 with Cardinal Mario Grech and Sr. Natalie Becquart, of the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops. This led directly to the announcement on 10 March 2021 by the Irish Bishops' Conference of the decision to embark on a Synodal Pathway for the Catholic Church in Ireland. It was envisaged that this process would last five years and would culminate in the holding of a National Synodal Assembly.

### **Background and Context**

The Synodal Pathway in Ireland takes place within the context of a period of rapid social, economic, cultural and demographic change in Ireland. From the late 1980s there was a surge in economic prosperity and in material wellbeing and with it a rapid process of secularisation. The Irish Church experienced a rapid decline in regular religious practice, although the vast majority of people continued to identify, at least culturally, as Catholic. There was a corresponding

decline in the numbers of vocations to priesthood and religious life (*statistic re seminaries and numbers*). These developments mirror what has happened in many western countries over a long period of time, but in the case of Ireland, this process has been telescoped into a matter of a few decades.

In the midst of this, Catholics in Ireland were shocked and distressed by the emergence of harrowing stories of the abuse of children suffered at the hands of priests and religious, as well as the failures of Church leaders to deal openly, effectively and decisively with this issue. Various State inquiries have laid open the extent of the abuse that occurred in parishes, dioceses and Church institutions. In response, the Irish Bishops, along with the Religious Congregations, have now put in place a robust and extensive system for the protection of children, with independent oversight and monitoring. This is currently undergoing a major comprehensive review. It has also established and funded services for the support of victims and survivors of abuse. But, as emerged in the recent listening processes in our dioceses and religious congregations, this remains a deep and open wound in our Church, and one which will take great effort, humility and compassion to heal, as well as a great deal of time.

The rapid change in social and cultural attitudes among Catholics in Ireland is well illustrated by the following example. In 1983, in the Republic of Ireland, the people voted by a majority of 67% to amend the Irish Constitution to include explicit protection for the life of unborn children. 35 years later, in 2018, almost exactly the same percentage voted by referendum to reverse this, and to allow the government to introduce extensive legalisation of abortion. In 2015, a similar referendum result had allowed the redefinition of marriage in the Constitution to allow for the legalisation of same-sex marriages.

It is in this context that the Irish Synodal Pathway is unfolding.

### **Initial Preparations**

In their Statement announcing the Synodal Pathway, the Bishops said “We are mindful of the challenges and opportunities that provide a context for a synodal pathway leading to a National Synod at this pivotal time for the Church. A synodal pathway leading to a National Synod is inviting us to journey together in discernment of what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church in Ireland at this time”. The Bishops identified the following as being among the significant challenges facing a synodal process in Ireland:

Secularisation of Society We are acutely aware of the huge challenges to the faith over the past fifty years from the rapid transformation and secularisation of society in Ireland bringing with it a major decline in practice of the faith and in the number of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life.

Shocking Revelations. Like so many others we are appalled by the findings in published Reports into institutional and clerical abuse; the recent shocking revelations about Mother and Baby homes in Ireland - north and south – have further reminded us of the deep trauma felt by so many in the Body of Christ and the need for inner healing and hope.

The need to promote peace-making and a culture of welcome. One hundred years on from the partition of Ireland we also recognise the need for ongoing peace-making, the building of trust and reconciliation, and for a culture of welcome and integration for migrants and the many newcomers who have arrived to live on this island.

Listening to the Cry for Transparency. We hear a cry for transparency, greater participation and accountability in the Church.

Discovering the Family as “Domestic Church”. We see the tremendous potential for the support and renewal of faith within the family. The restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic prompted a new discovery of the family as the “domestic Church”.

Connecting with Young People. We are alert to the need to connect with the energy and gifts of our young people, forming and enabling them to be missionaries to each other and inviting them to spread the Good News not only in Ireland but around the world that *Christ is Alive!*

Honouring the Contribution of Women. While many women are very engaged in Church life in Ireland, we acknowledge the critical need to honour the contribution of women, to hear their deep concerns, to formally recognise their roles and articulate new models of co-responsibility and leadership involving all lay people - women and men.

Those who feel ignored, excluded or forgotten We are also aware that many people have left the Church behind and in some cases feel ignored, excluded or forgotten – we need to hear their voices also.

## **Timeframe**

The bishops envisaged the Synodal Pathway unfolding in two Phases:

### A. The Initial Phase – Prayer, Listening, Consultation, Discernment

The initial two-year phase of embarking on the synodal pathway and leading, in time, to a National Synod, was seen as coinciding with preparation for the 2023

Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome entitled *For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission*.

It was envisaged that this Phase would be a period of prayer, listening and discernment, involving a nationwide consultative conversation on this theme. This would allow individuals and parishes, religious orders and associations as well as groups, movements and organisations both within the Church and in Irish society at large, to share their insights into the Church in Ireland – past, present and future. It would also include discussion and debate via related information sessions and educational programmes on the meaning and processes of synodality.

#### B. The Planning Phase – Preparation for a National Synodal Assembly

The planning and preparation phase for a National Synodal Assembly will bring together and seek to implement the fruits and recommendations from the Initial Phase. It will, in particular, take account of the conclusions of the General Assembly in Rome in 2023, together with any Apostolic Exhortation by the Holy Father emerging from the General Assembly. The aim of this phase will be to design the particular form of our National Synod and prepare directly at local, regional and national level for the holding of the Synod.

#### **Consultation**

On 6 April 2021 the Bishops launched a preliminary consultation, seeking the initial views of people on the Synodal Pathway, and ways in which the process might be conducted. The Bishops emphasised that the process would be “primarily a prayerful spiritual time of communitarian discernment. It is about finding the best ways for every baptized person to fulfil the Church’s mission of proclaiming to the world God's love and salvation in Jesus Christ”. The Bishops identified three fundamental questions for the Synodal Pathway:

- How are we in communion with one another in Christ, that is, how do we relate to and share with each other in the Church?
- How do we express our participation in the life and mission of the Church?
- What does Church mission look like today?

## **Structures**

In June 2021 the Bishops announced the establishment of a Synodal Steering Committee to direct and oversee the synodal process. The Committee consisted of 22 members, including 4 Bishops, along with Clergy, Religious and Laity. The Chair of the Committee is a laywoman and the Vice-Chairs are a layman and a bishop. A smaller Synodal Task Group made up of one priest and three laywomen was formed to support planning and implementation of the process.

## **Theological Reflection**

A Symposium involving Irish theologians, entitled *Synodality in a Theological Key*, was held in May 2022. At the Symposium theologians reflected on various aspects of Synodality – spiritual, pastoral, ecumenical, scriptural and theological. Papers from the Symposium will be published in pastoral journals over the next months.

## **Participation in the Universal Church Process**

*(see APPENDIX short Report below)*

It was recognised that, providentially, the first phase of the Irish Synodal Pathway would coincide with the Catholic Church's worldwide journey towards the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2023.

### Diocesan Phase

*(see Report below)*

## National Phase

*(see Report below)*

## Emergent Themes

- The crisis of abuse within the Church and the response to it.
- The Church, Culture and Society
- Adult Faith Formation / Evangelisation
- The role of women in the Church
- Lay Ministry
- Family
- Co-responsible Leadership
- Liturgy
- Clergy
- The Impact of Covid-19
- A Sense of Belonging for the Poor and Marginalised
- Young People

- Sexuality and Relationships
- LGBT Issues
- Education and Catechesis

### **Moments of Prayer**

All stages of the Synodal Process so far have been marked by Moments of Prayer – in parishes, dioceses and nationally. The latest of these occurred at the National Pre-Synodal Assembly, which was held in Athlone, in the centre of Ireland, on Saturday 18th June 2022. This day brought together delegates from all the dioceses, the religious congregations and other groups which had made submissions to the process along with the Irish Bishops. It was a day of prayerful reflection on the themes which had emerged from the process, with a view to progressing the task of drafting a National Synthesis. The meeting reflected a sense of dialogue and openness and a willingness to listen respectfully to different views without evoking anger or contention. Everyone found it a positive and very hopeful experience. It concluded with the participants assembling at the ancient monastic site of Clonmacnois for a lay-led Service of Prayer.

### **Looking Forward**

The experience and outcomes of the Universal Church Process so far will provide a starting point for the next phase of the Irish Synodal Pathway. There have been valuable learnings in the process, as well as challenges which have emerged. These include:



- The difficulties involved in engaging with the marginalised and ensuring that their voices are heard
- Overcoming barriers of religious/theological language
- Learning how to grow as a synodal Church, and in the art of discernment
- Recognising that the process involves not only engagement, but also evangelisation
- Managing expectations
- Beginning a process of reconciliation in the wake of crimes of abuse
- Reconnecting with the sources of the faith tradition in Ireland

## **APPENDIX**

### **Meeting of the General Secretaries of the European Bishops' Conferences *"The Church in Europe on the synodal path"* Experience of the Universal Church Synodal Process in Ireland**

#### **1. What are the previous synodal experiences in your Bishops' Conference (BC)?**

Some dioceses in Ireland have conducted initiatives of a synodal nature, e.g. listening processes, consultations focused on specific issues (e.g. on marriage and family in preparation for the XIV Synod of Bishops in 2015), and in the case of one diocese, a full-blown synodal process leading to a full diocesan assembly. In the Bishops' Conference, there have been occasions when extraordinary meetings of the Conference have been arranged which have involved aspects of synodal discernment in relation to specific areas of church life, e.g. vocations and formation.

#### **2. How is the synodal process of your BC organised and what timeframe have you given yourself?**

The synodal process has been incorporated into the planning of the National Synodal Pathway for Ireland, announced in 2021 and which will continue over the next three years.

The deadline for written submissions from dioceses, religious congregations and other ecclesial groups was 29th May 2022.

Delegates from dioceses and other church bodies met virtually on 30th May to reflect on the process to date. Feedback was very positive and delegates found the listening and discernment process very energising and hope-filled. The challenge was to succinctly and faithfully reflect back what was shared during the listening sessions. Many of the lay faithful who participated in the process noted that it was the first time in their lifetime that the Church had asked them for their views. For this they were very grateful.

Individual readers read the 50 or so syntheses received on 29th May over the period 1st to 4th June and then met collectively for three days on 5th, 6th and 7th June to identify common and divergent themes. A period of further discernment followed and delegates, bishops and others are meeting in Athlone for a pre-Synodal day of prayerful reflection on Saturday 18th June with a view to progressing the task of drafting a National Synthesis for submission to the Holy See's Synod Secretariat no later than 15th August next.

### 3. What is the participation of the People of God like in the synod process?

A significant number of people have participated on the processes leading to the creation of the Diocesan, Congregational and National Syntheses. In the Archdiocese of Dublin alone over 10,500 members of the lay faithful took part. Generally, it has been a very positive experience for those who participated. Also, different dioceses, religious leaders and church councils and bodies reached out in various ways when inviting people to participate. While we might have liked to have seen more young people involved, some dioceses made great efforts to engage with our youth, with ecclesial movements and with people who feel excluded and marginalised, for example, our traveller community, people from the LGBT community and people with addictions and mental health issues. Overall the experience was a very positive one and the quality of submissions was excellent.

### 4. Among the 10 themes of the Vademecum for the Synod, which ones have found the greatest resonance among the people of God (please indicate at least 2)

Themes which have emerged strongly in the process (not in order of significance):

- **The crisis of abuse** within the Church and the response to it. Abuse and its concealment were described as an open wound in the church. In the first instance it affected victims/survivors and their families at every level of their being, including the abuse of soul. It generates fear and shame, including in leaders, who need on-going training to respond well. There was gratitude for the generous involvement of survivors in the synodal process.
- **The Church, Culture and Society:** From shaping popular culture, the Church increasingly finds itself pushed to the margins of popular culture which it struggles to understand or to find language with which to be understood. Its proclaimed concern to foster communion is overshadowed by the wider society's focus on inclusion. Respondents highlighted that effective mission requires a capacity to engage creatively and respectfully with the wider society, which has come to reject the teaching authority of the Church and question its legitimacy. There are, however, points of connection with the wider culture on which the Church as 'field hospital' can focus, by highlighting -the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth; -the evident failure of a consumer society, driven by an endless quest for growth, to deliver sustainability, equity or life satisfaction; -the myth of individualism and the reality of interdependence demonstrated by the pandemic experience.
- The importance of **Adult Faith Development** and the challenge of Evangelisation. *"there is a crisis in transmission of faith, rather than crisis of faith"*. This was frequently related to the decline in vocations to priesthood and consecrated life.
- **The role of women in the Church** *"Women have a special place in the Church but not an equal place"*
- Many of the syntheses place a strong emphasis on the central place of **family** in all three elements of our Synodal process, communion, participation and mission. The Church is in reality, a family of families; families are the natural framework within which faith is transmitted, nurtured and practised and from which a Christian identity emerges; and families are the appropriate framework for accompaniment and evangelisation.

- **A sense of belonging:** It was stressed in many ways that the Church is at its very best when it is close to people's lives, speaking a language that people understand, and connecting with people amidst their daily struggles. *"If the Irish Church is to become a welcoming and inclusive one where women, migrants, single parents, those from the LGBT community, the poor, the bereaved, those with disabilities, the elderly, people who are separated or divorced and all other marginalized persons feel a sense of belonging, then the Church must take stock of who is missing and discern how can they be welcomed"*. There was a clear, overwhelming call for the full inclusion of LGBT people in the church, expressed by all ages and particularly by the young, and by members of the LGBT community themselves.
- The challenge to the Church to connect and communicate with **young people**. Many of the young people who responded did so with an openness and generosity of heart, speaking freely about their experience of Church.