

RESPONDING TO THE SYNOD

Notes from Table 10 – Responding to the Synod, Middlesbrough Cathedral: 11 November 2023

Session 1: welcoming, in the life of the diocese/parishes

The first contribution identified those who are the most likely *not* to feel welcomed – the divorced, working class people (single families, those in poverty and struggling, the homeless), and LGBT people who in some cases are explicitly *unwelcome*.

The suggestion was made that all parishes could display a poster at the entrance of the church making clear that *everyone* is welcome. Perhaps we need a *diocesan statement* – a new **covenant with the marginalised** (from the Bishop), stating our commitment as Catholics to reach out to and welcome those on the margins of society and the church.

This idea was welcomed and supported by all others in the conversation: we need *to make public* the sort of church we are (want to be), a mission statement. We must notice those who, even at church, feel unable to engage fully with the sacraments. Every parish should have an **explicit Ministry of welcome**, not just to hand out hymn books but to engage with newcomers and to (sensitively) follow up those who maybe feel anxiety or unwelcome because of some situation in their lives.

This was emphasised in one member's experience of moving to a new parish and finding it very difficult to find a place in the community. But there is hope that Pope Francis' Synod will 'fire us up'!

The group were privileged to hear a moving story of one member's experience of exclusion following a failed marriage and long delays in the annulment process. It illustrated how such marital situations can tragically become a **deterrent** to church going and inclusion in the community.

A positive experience was affirmed by the experience of two parishes' engagement with RCIA, sharing faith stories, as well as the growth in discussion and accompaniment since the start of the Synod process: a new way of knowing fellow parishioners, of coming together. This was also supported by the experience of on-line groups during Covid, paradoxically getting to know more people in the parish. It teaches us that we need to be more explicit now in forming parish groups.

Session 2: mission, sharing gifts and tasks

There was a general sense in the conversation of the problem of Catholic parishioner passivity (leaving it to Father) which still persists. Are parishioners aware of **the ministries** that Cahalan outlines (Prayer and Worship; Teaching and Formation; Evangelisation and Witness; Pastoral Care; Administration; Prophecy and Social outreach; with the addition of Peace Building and Reconciliation)? Are they covered in our parishes? Are we communities of prayer and action (love of God and love of neighbour)?

The laity must be prepared to come forward and get involved, offering their skills and talents. Again, there was the suggestion that we need to be more explicit about ministries in the parish. There was a forceful point made that no meeting at diocesan level should take place without at least one woman present, and that every meeting, at diocesan and parish level, should have a balance of men, women and the young: we need to create that *as an expectation*.

A couple of members of the group raised the problem of how in a parish sometimes a small group of parishioners are too keen to do things and exclude others, reluctant to let go! Perhaps there should

be a practice of time limits set on ministries, to include a period of 'training' and a period of mentoring successors, running new people in.

Session 3: processes and structures for a synodal Church

There was support for the idea that it would be helpful to move away from parish 'councils' to parish 'assemblies', or explicitly 'parish synods' and that laity should be included in deanery meetings and meetings at diocesan level. Spaces need to be created for representation and engagement by all the People of God.

This latter is a key definition of the Second Vatican Council perhaps down-graded by the last two Popes, during which time the Church maintained its top-down structure, but there is hope that through the Synod process, Pope Francis is changing things. We want this to be reflected at parish level, as the pyramid is turned upside down!

One of the group remembered, a little wistfully, 'The Easter People' and hoped that Pope Francis' Synod would not be allowed to go the same way. There was a sad reflection from personal experience on what has happened at St Wilfrid's church in York, where the community do not seem to be open to the Synod. However, the conversation ended on an inspiring note with a plea that in a truly synodal church there will be space for everyone, in which everyone will be affirmed in their Baptism with their unique gifts and charisms.