

**CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE  
OF ENGLAND AND WALES**



**National Synthesis Document**

**22<sup>nd</sup> June 2022**

**Feast of St John Fisher and  
St Thomas More**

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“But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

*Deuteronomy 4:29*

## I INTRODUCTION

1. This synthesis describes the diocesan phase of the synod on synodality between November 2021 and March 2022, seeking to capture the essence of what emerged from the unprecedented participation by the People of God in England and Wales in a world-wide synod process. It is drawn from over 700 pages of reports from the dioceses and other church organisations, associations and movements that were sent to the national synthesis team.
2. We use here the term “People of God” as the Church understands it. Entry into the People of God is by faith and Baptism (CCC 784) which confers on all members the anointing with the Holy Spirit and a participation in the “offices of Christ” as priest, prophet and king. In the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, this includes all the baptised, no matter their state or vocation within the Church. Bishops, priests, deacons, those consecrated to God through vows and all the lay faithful constitute the one People of God called into the living Church, animated by the Holy Spirit, united together in the Body of Christ, with Christ as its head (CCC 788).
3. The Church at the start of the synod was still living with Covid-19 and its effects. This to a large extent conditioned levels of participation and methods chosen, and was in the foreground of the synodal conversations. Our report begins in the story of the pandemic, before going on to describe the experience of the synod itself. The remaining sections of the report – “A Wounded Church called to Conversion”, “Truth, Mercy and Welcome” and “Towards a Synodal Church” – seek to capture what emerged from the synod reports so that what the People of God have voiced may be offered to the wisdom of the universal Church as it embarks on the next, continental, phase of the synod process.
4. We have sought to capture common notes struck across the reports as well as minority or marginal views that occur often enough to be worthy of mention. We have paid attention to surprising or striking elements in the reports, often where views are especially heartfelt; and where possible have used attributed quotes from the reports to capture the “jewels” that the Spirit may be offering our Church through the voice of God’s faithful in these islands. While seeking to synthesise without making theological judgements, we have practised discernment by listening, prayer and reflecting on the diocesan submissions. This process has allowed us to identify, in the final part, the new horizons we see the Spirit opening for our Church through the synod pathway.
5. Despite the many obstacles and resistances which the synod has faced at all levels of the Church, and notwithstanding the low levels of participation, it has been a *kairós*

for the people who have engaged in the process, allowing them to dream of a better future and a renewed understanding of the Church. What emerges is a dream of a loving, merciful, familial and missionary Church in which all are involved, a synodal Church open to the guidance of the Spirit that is better able to build the Kingdom of God in these islands.

## II THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND THE PANDEMIC

6. The paradox of a call to come together at a time of fearful self-isolation is one that the reports highlight, but not always negatively. Although a time of suffering and loss, the pandemic surfaced deeper issues to be faced, enabled a new sense of communion, and created space for deeper reflection.
7. Unable to participate physically in liturgies and sacraments, people valued afresh the physicality of the sacramental life of the Church. Benefitting from the sudden space to reconnect with God, creation and loved ones, people grew closer to Jesus Christ and to each other. "There were new ways to be close to God and others; though we couldn't see others, we found new ways to connect. Mass 'attendance' increased. We prayed more. We had more time in our day. We saw a lot of sharing and much good."<sup>1</sup> Separation from parish life led paradoxically to greater participation in the broader life of the Church, which opened new horizons.
8. People are grateful to the Church and its ministers for sustaining them during that time. There is praise for parishes that found ways to accompany their communities, and for schools that continued to teach and reach out, including to their many non-Catholic student families. As parish life moved online, meetings for prayer, bible study, talks, retreats and spiritual conversation created new bonds of belonging. Social media groups kept people in touch with each other and were used to organise help for the vulnerable and isolated. Many ask that the Church's new online presence not be lost, for example by continuing to livestream Mass for the housebound. The pandemic also revealed distance and dysfunction, loneliness and disconnection. The sense of being alone and abandoned was felt especially by those without access to smartphones and the internet.
8. Shared vulnerability called forth a new consciousness of mutual dependence and belonging, expressed in charity and gratitude. The care and compassion shown by a Church that goes out, attentive to need, was often remarked on in the synodal conversations as the great gift of the pandemic that must not now be squandered. People saw how the Church is called to be: more missionary and merciful, "a Church of bridge builders rather than castle defenders",<sup>2</sup> to have an "impact on our outreach in the parish and society".<sup>3</sup> The experience of deeper communion, "much more evident during the pandemic," left people wanting to 'walk together' more.<sup>4</sup> "The pandemic taught us the importance of others, of their company, compassion and love".<sup>5</sup> The Church must continue to reflect on the experience of Covid in order "not to lose what

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<sup>1</sup> Diocese of Brentwood

<sup>2</sup> Diocese of Menevia

<sup>3</sup> Diocese of Leeds

<sup>4</sup> Archdiocese of Southwark

<sup>5</sup> Archdiocese of Westminster

has been learned.”<sup>6</sup> This was the gift of the synod conversations, which were “a catharsis, a real contribution to the recovery after lockdown”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Diocese of Brentwood.

<sup>7</sup> Archdiocese of Westminster.

### III THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SYNOD

10. To many of those taking part the synod was a revelation. People remarked on the novelty of speaking freely and being heard in organised conversations that were open-ended and attentive to the movements of the Spirit. They spoke of how, after decades of churchgoing, they had been asked to speak for the first time. In listening, people experienced new closeness to others; in being listened to, many discovered they belonged. The synod meetings “opened up deep reflection, longing, and for some a range of complex emotions from anger to hurt.”<sup>8</sup>
11. Some dioceses invested considerable resources of time and people into the synod process, organising trainings and webinars, and creating networks of lay facilitators to guide meetings. Many offered training in the art of spiritual conversation and synodal methods to facilitators and parish delegates, as well as resources to help ensure that the meetings used a synodal process, framed by silence, prayer and the Word of God, in which all had the opportunity to speak while others listened attentively. In other dioceses there was less enthusiasm and sometimes reluctance, and in some quarters, hostility and resistance. In a few instances the experience was impoverished by the methods chosen. Group conversations that included silence, prayer and scripture led to a deeper and richer experience, as well as much better material for discernment, which is reflected in the reports.
12. Some dioceses on the other hand chose to make use of questionnaires or surveys, for people to complete individually in their own time either on paper or via opinion-survey technologies, which were then analysed in data processing software. Where this was the main method deployed, the experience was felt to be considerably poorer than in dioceses where people assembled in groups for spiritual conversation.
13. Levels of participation were not always noted. Dioceses that reported numbers did so often in terms of the percentage of institutions taking part. The highest reported parish engagement was 93 per cent, while the lowest was 34 per cent. At the time the listening process began in Autumn 2021, when public worship was still subject to government restrictions and the nation grappled with a new strain of Coronavirus, the Bishops’ Conference recorded a Mass-going population in England and Wales of just 370,000. Extrapolating from the reports that under 10 per cent of that population took part in some way in the synod, we estimate that around 30,000 people in total took part.
14. Liverpool archdiocese was exceptional in having held a diocesan synod prior to the start of the synod on synodality. The experience of the first, and the further engagement through the second, revealed

*... a hunger amongst the people of the archdiocese to be listened to. It is clear they want their voice heard. No longer is it possible to expect people to be silent. The wide variety of opinions*

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<sup>8</sup> Diocese of Clifton

*on so many diverse issues came from a passionate concern for our Catholic faith and the mission of the Church.*<sup>9</sup>

15. Schools across all of the dioceses took part; their submissions form a strong element in the reports. A number of national organisations also organised their own listening exercises, submitting separate reports. A number of parish and individual submissions were also received; all were taken into account in this synthesis.<sup>10</sup>
16. The language of the questions offered by the Synod Office, the dioceses and the parishes in some cases “hampered engagement”.<sup>11</sup> The synod pathway of discernment and attentive listening was new to most and challenging to some. Synodality, as a concept, “took time to convey and understand, to plan, implement, evaluate and report”.<sup>12</sup> Many expressed scepticism, convinced that only dominant voices would be heard, or cited previous exercises that had changed nothing. “There is a genuine fear that the prophetic voice will be ignored or silenced.”<sup>13</sup>
17. The resistance of a portion of the clergy to the synod process is remarked on in many reports. Special mention is made of the mistrust of some former Anglican priests who cited negative experiences of synodical parliamentary-style governance of the Church of England, with its motions and votes, pressure groups and campaigns, which “are not easily forgotten”.<sup>14</sup> Others expressed fear that the Catholic Church would end up going in this “Anglican” direction, despite the differences between the two synodal traditions. Many who voiced that fear claimed to see an “agenda” to change or undermine settled Church teaching and disciplines, which led them either to avoid the synod or take part primarily in order to voice those fears.
18. Mostly priests were supportive, but many chose not to take part in parish conversations “for fear their presence would influence people’s freedom to speak”.<sup>15</sup> Yet “those who did join groups found that parishioners wanted the priest there to hear what they had to say”.<sup>16</sup> While the synod roles of ordinary faithful and the bishops were clear, that of the clergy was more uncertain. “Clergy would like their own opportunities to come together to talk about their dreams for the Church.”<sup>17</sup>
19. Many dioceses and parishes made efforts to reach beyond the parish, via chaplaincies, to particular groups: prisoners, survivors of abuse, the homeless, as well as Catholics who no longer practised. But these efforts were relatively scarce, and the fruits barely visible in the reports. In most of the diocesan conversations there were attempts to

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<sup>9</sup> Archdiocese of Liverpool

<sup>10</sup> NB Because Religious men and women took part in a dedicated global consultation process (while also joining in local parish synod conversations), their views are not recorded here as a distinct group.

<sup>11</sup> Diocese of Clifton

<sup>12</sup> Syro-Malabar Eparchy

<sup>13</sup> Diocese of Nottingham.

<sup>14</sup> Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham.

<sup>15</sup> Diocese of Middlesbrough

<sup>16</sup> Diocese of Plymouth, Appendix B: Clergy Voice.

<sup>17</sup> Diocese of Plymouth, Appendix B: Clergy Voice.



include people from other Churches, but seldom from other faiths or no faith. The main challenge for this synod was in assembling the faithful rather than going beyond them. Future synodal processes need to enable “listening to those who have left”<sup>18</sup> and get better at listening to those who struggle to be heard. “We have a tendency to dismiss the uneducated and quiet people who can surprise us with their wisdom.”<sup>19</sup>

20. Beyond the impact on particular groups or individuals, the joy of the experience lay in experiencing how the Holy Spirit is poured out on each person and encountered in spiritual conversation. “Listening and speaking to each other under the guidance of the Holy Spirit proved joyful, liberating and encouraging.”<sup>20</sup> “They enjoyed the meetings so much they want us to meet again every few months to have a similar session ‘to talk openly about our faith’.”<sup>21</sup> There was “sadness and disappointment that more people had not engaged” because “the synodal process has drawn us closer together and closer to God.”<sup>22</sup> There were calls for a self-examination to understand why people did not take part, and why they did. The synod experience, in short, was transformative for those who took part, leading them to hope that synodality be shared across the Church and be embedded in its daily life. “Synodality is the real work of the Spirit and what the Church needs.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Diocese of East Anglia

<sup>19</sup> Diocese of Lancaster

<sup>20</sup> Diocese of Middlesbrough

<sup>21</sup> Archdiocese of Birmingham

<sup>22</sup> Archdiocese of Westminster

<sup>23</sup> Diocese of East Anglia

## IV A WOUNDED CHURCH CALLED TO CONVERSION

21. The submissions, “were honest and sincere, and motivated by a deep love for the Church”.<sup>24</sup> The reports show people’s passion for the Church to be what they believe Jesus Christ calls it to be; they are frustrated and critical when it falls well short. They dream of how it could be: a place “of mutual collaboration where everyone can experience God’s love through our hospitality supporting each other and to follow Jesus and to God’s work on earth”.<sup>25</sup> From the reports emerged a powerful message that

*the Church is significantly wounded in its ability to act according to its own mission, to let its goodness shine out, and to live its life in a way that expresses the beauty of the faith. There is a real sense that the Church requires healing and conversion to live out its own nature and purpose to the full.*<sup>26</sup>

22. Pope Francis is cited often in the reports as inspirational, and his synod as bringing new hope and energy to enable the conversion that will allow the parishes to become “environments of living communion and participation” and “completely mission-oriented.”<sup>27</sup>

### (i) A Church that embraces

23. A desire for churches to be places of *closeness* is a striking feature of the reports, expressed in the word *welcome*, along with related words such as *integration* and *inclusiveness*. There is a constant call for the Church to embody God’s unconditional embrace of all, not least the stranger and the marginalised, and criticism that the Church is often unwelcoming either to specific people, or to new ideas and inspirations.
24. In many cases the lack of welcome is attributed to a lack of pastoral sensitivity or inconsistency, as when, for example, a “mixed” (Catholic plus non-Catholic) couple “who had been allowed to receive together for over 30 years were recently refused when a new priest arrived, and the Methodist wife was turned away at the altar on Easter Sunday”.<sup>28</sup> In other cases, it is put down to judgementalism and rigidity, whether on the part of priests or parishioners. “Welcoming would require a less judgemental attitude... The Church needs to be far more inclusive and should formally include everyone regardless of who or what they are.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Diocese of Leeds

<sup>25</sup> Diocese of Northampton

<sup>26</sup> Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle.

<sup>27</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* #20

<sup>28</sup> Association of Interchurch Families

<sup>29</sup> Diocese of Portsmouth

**(ii) Priests who enable**

25. There is great love of parish priests, cherished as “holy men who care deeply for those that they serve”<sup>30</sup>. People are aware of the heavy workload carried by clergy managing more than one parish community, and want them to be relieved of the burden of non-priestly tasks to focus on pastoral and liturgical activity. Many speak of giving parishioners a far greater responsibility for the life of the parish, rather than “rendering the lay people feeling nominal at best, or even hurt or overlooked.”<sup>31</sup>
26. Priests are most often praised when they enable collaboration and co-responsibility. “Our parish priest is very open, collaborative and empowering. He encourages people to get involved in decision-making and leading locally.”<sup>32</sup> Conversely, the harshest criticisms are reserved for priests who are controlling and insensitive, who shield themselves from their parishioners and fail to listen to them, and act as if they alone are responsible for the mission and life of the Church. The term clericalism is constantly invoked in the reports to describe a resistance on the part of priests and some lay people to the exercise of co-responsibility and the missionary discipleship to which all the baptised are called. The reports highlight the need for a change in the way priests and lay people relate in order to see themselves as both responsible for the mission of the Church. This was one of the strongest constant themes in the submissions.
27. There is criticism of “routine celebration, mediocre liturgy and homilies that do not speak to the real world”.<sup>33</sup> Poor homilies are attributed to overworked, distracted or poorly trained clergy. This criticism is often accompanied by a call to allow women to preach. There are many calls for the training of priests to be reformed so that priests understand they serve the parish rather than the other way round. A common complaint is that the community life and culture of the parish are subject to the whims of the incoming priest, who can undo in an instant what has taken years to build. There are critiques not just of management style but cliques that stifle initiative and creativity which can be “unwelcoming to newcomers and unwilling to accept new offers of help”.<sup>34</sup>

**(iii) The Church as ‘other’**

28. Lay faithful feel disempowered: “the laity felt that things were ‘done to them’” rather than with them.<sup>35</sup> Decision-making and initiative are seen as the prerogative of the clergy. Potentially “synodal” bodies – parish and deanery councils – have little or no impact, a point that is repeatedly recognised and regretted. Yet the reports consistently

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<sup>30</sup> Diocese of Leeds

<sup>31</sup> Archdiocese of Westminster

<sup>32</sup> Diocese of Arundel and Brighton.

<sup>33</sup> Archdiocese of Birmingham

<sup>34</sup> Diocese of East Anglia

<sup>35</sup> Archdiocese of Cardiff

call for more of them, and for them to include a broader range of people and to have more impact.

29. For many the Church is “other”, separate and remote from people, who see it as embodied exclusively in the clergy, bishops and “Rome”. This perception means that when people express the need for the Church to change, they do not usually see themselves as included in that call. The stress is almost always on the need “to reimagine current structures in order to foster genuine synodality” in contrast to structures perceived as “hierarchical, paternalistic, and almost exclusively male”.<sup>36</sup>
30. The distance felt by ordinary faithful from the organs of governance of the Church is expressed most vigorously in criticism of the sex abuse crisis, which the reports name and describe as a source of shame and humiliation that continues to anger and disappoint people. The crisis is seen as a dramatic indictment of clericalism, of an institution seen as self-serving rather than serving, concerned with itself and its own reputation.
31. The abuse crisis is cited as a reason for people leaving the Church and as an issue constantly raised by non-Catholics who see it as proof of the failure of the Church “to live up to what Christ has called us to be.”<sup>37</sup> Shame and anger over the crisis also lead many Catholics to keep their faith private. “Students felt that people were now scared to attend Mass & be labelled Catholic because of all the adverse publicity around abuse in the Catholic Church”.<sup>38</sup> The abuse scandal was frequently described as destroying the Church’s credibility, especially in sexual matters.<sup>39</sup>
32. Although the reports acknowledge the progress made by the Church in addressing the issue, they call for the Church to be honest and transparent over its mistakes and to listen better and more often to survivors. “Victims and survivors of abuse believe that listening is a flawed and pointless exercise unless transparent opportunities for dialogue are created, and difficult conversations take place”.<sup>40</sup> One report noted starkly that “the process of assimilating the evil tragedy of what has happened to the Church is only at the beginning.”<sup>41</sup>

**(iv) The art of accompanying**

33. Running through the reports is a clear vision of how the future can be different when all the People of God – lay, Religious, clergy, bishops – act together, in their distinct roles and functions, but all as missionary disciples. A call for greater participation and collaboration is a constant. One person dreams

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<sup>36</sup> Diocese of Plymouth

<sup>37</sup> Archdiocese of Birmingham

<sup>38</sup> Diocese of Nottingham

<sup>39</sup> Diocese of Salford

<sup>40</sup> Diocese of Plymouth

<sup>41</sup> Diocese of Hallam

*“of a Church where the parish is the genuine hub of the community ... vibrant, nurturing, alive with the faith and a desire to share joy with everyone ... of a reduction in clericalism so that the laity may make a larger contribution and not merely do what Father wants, and priests lead by encouraging their flock to be fully active and to take ownership and responsibility, rather than trying to maintain personal control.”<sup>42</sup>*

34. Although the phrase “journeying together” featured little in the synod conversations, the term “accompaniment” received many mentions. One diocese is convinced that “an ethos of accompaniment” was key to a Church that journeys together more deeply, overcoming the subject-object relationship embedded in clericalism.<sup>43</sup> Pope Francis’s highlighting of the “art of accompaniment” points to “a vision for our communities to build trust and understanding of one another’s stories, struggles and walks of faith.”<sup>44</sup>
35. Many reports link a perceived failure of the Church to evangelise with the lack of participation of lay people, especially women, in the life of the Church, suggesting that the Church’s mission to the world cannot be separated from its interior life. A large number of responses call on the Church “to enable greater participation of the laity in the governance of the Church by providing places and situations where their voices can be heard. Lay people “should be part of decision-making in areas that affect them in their life of faith.”<sup>45</sup> Parishes that do this are singled out for praise.
36. Where these are mentioned there is a hope that parish pastoral councils be concerned less with “business” and more with the building up of the community and its pastoral needs, allowing the parish to develop the charisms of the faithful and to “utilise effectively the human capital that exists within the majority of parishes”.<sup>46</sup> This is one of many examples in the reports that reflect a perception of a disjuncture between, on the one hand, the gifts being poured out by the Spirit on the ordinary faithful and, on the other, the way leadership and other ministries are exercised in the Church.
37. A common denominator of the reports is a call by people to be allowed to express faith and commitment to the Church through greater *involvement*, along with a fear that they “do not always feel welcomed, valued or encouraged to do so”.<sup>47</sup> A typical view is that “I feel I could do more but don’t have the permission to fulfil my potential”.<sup>48</sup> Pressures of time and fears of commitment also inhibit participation. While frequent mention was made of sharing responsibility for the Church’s mission, “actually identifying and defining what the mission is was not clearly expressed”.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Diocese of Shrewsbury

<sup>43</sup> Archdiocese of Westminster

<sup>44</sup> Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle

<sup>45</sup> Archdiocese of Westminster

<sup>46</sup> Archdiocese of Cardiff

<sup>47</sup> Archdiocese of Southwark

<sup>48</sup> Archdiocese of Birmingham

<sup>49</sup> Diocese of Portsmouth

**(v) The desire to be formed**

38. For many, the dream of a Church of collaboration and shared mission goes along with a passionate call for “training for lay leaders to encourage the formation of missionary disciples”.<sup>50</sup> The thirst for formation is a striking and constant feature of almost every synod submission, suggesting at least that those who took part in the synod are offering themselves for mission and asking for permission and the means to carry it out.
39. They desire formation in Church teaching, Spirituality and Scripture, as well as practical tools and skills to enable discipleship: missions, retreats, adult catechesis, spiritual formation, and so on. The failure to provide these and to teach well is cited as a principal cause of shrinking parish congregations. Referencing Matthew 7:9, one person spoke of many people who had left because their faith had not been nurtured. “When they asked for bread, they were given lumps of rock. When they asked for fish, they were given a serpent.”<sup>51</sup>
40. Feeling ill-equipped is a main reason for not responding to the call to evangelise, especially in the face of cultural hostility. “Respondents struggle with the fact that the starting point for speaking about faith is often an attack on the Church or her teachings, which limits conversational possibilities”.<sup>52</sup> People are asking for a stronger understanding of the teachings in order to articulate them with confidence.

**(vi) The call to communicate**

41. The lack of co-responsibility was critiqued also in terms of the Church’s communication, which can either be an enabler or a barrier to synodality.<sup>53</sup> Communication within the Church – within and between parishes and schools, within the diocese – involves how information is transmitted, the language that is used, and the culture of accountability and transparency that it reflects.
42. “There are no mechanisms for listening, mutual input or communication between laity and hierarchy. Consultation is virtually non-existent,” is a common complaint.<sup>54</sup> “The laity are simply not informed of what is happening and why.”<sup>55</sup> A top-down, one-way communication (bishops via clergy down to people) was contrasted with the horizontal, sharing nature of the synod, in which all were recognised as subjects and agents, and in which mission flows from listening.
43. This was not seen as an exclusively internal matter but one that touches directly on the Church’s evangelising credibility: a Church that listens is key to a Church that teaches.

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<sup>50</sup> Diocese of Northampton

<sup>51</sup> Diocese of Shrewsbury

<sup>52</sup> Diocese of East Anglia

<sup>53</sup> Diocese of Plymouth

<sup>54</sup> Submission by Senior Catholics at the University of Cambridge

<sup>55</sup> Diocese of Wrexham

“What is needed for the future is a listening Church that hears and responds to the prophetic voice of its people”.<sup>56</sup> “The Church as an institution seems to be geared up for telling rather than listening”.<sup>57</sup>

44. The desire to be *formed* goes hand in hand in the reports with a desire to be *informed* about the life of the parish, the diocese, and the universal Church. Failure to communicate well was seen as another symptom of a remote, clerical Church. Traditional methods of communication – parish newsletters, bishops’ pastoral letters – rely on a small number of gatekeepers who control the flow of information, contradicting a synodal Church in the era of social media, which calls for a more horizontal, two-way, reciprocal flow. There are many calls in the reports to become savvier in the use of communications technologies, and to make use of the pandemic-induced crash-course in digital platforms to increase the involvement of the People of God in the life and decision-making processes of the Church.
45. The question of language arose often. People want the Church to speak plainly without the “barrier” of “clerical jargon”, and to avoid language that is “exclusive, old-fashioned and inaccessible”.<sup>58</sup> This was expressed also as a desire for homilies and other messages that speak plainly to the realities of people’s lives, linking them to concrete challenges in the world and locally.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Diocese of Leeds

<sup>57</sup> Diocese of Plymouth

<sup>58</sup> Diocese of Lancaster, Diocese of Hallam.

<sup>59</sup> Diocese of Lancaster

## V TRUTH, MERCY AND WELCOME

46. The majority voice in the reports focussed on a conversion of the culture, on the need for a transformation in the way of living, acting and operating of the Church at all levels to enable it to be more loving and welcoming, especially to particular groups perceived as alienated or side-lined. If there is a single, overriding melody in the synod symphony, it is in the desire for a more fraternal and sororal Church in which God's overflowing, universal love can be more palpably felt and lived.
47. At the same time, the reports show unhappiness over some church teachings and the way these are enforced. Without seeking to resolve the many "Gordian knots" in the reports over doctrine and its application, this report offers them to the wisdom and discernment of the universal Church.
48. Shining through the reports is a strong desire for a Church that better performs God's mercy in Jesus Christ, who did not make moral conversion a prerequisite of His embrace, but whose love and acceptance triggered that conversion in those who came to Him. The vision of such a Church, one that does not firstly judge and exclude but unconditionally embraces, lies behind strong critiques in the reports of the way the Church teaches, presents itself, and operates.
49. The call is to live better the tension of truth and mercy, as Jesus did, and to bring teaching into dialogue with lived pastoral realities. The dream is of a Church that more fully lives a Christological paradox: boldly proclaiming its authentic teaching while at the same time offering a witness of radical inclusion and acceptance through its pastoral and discerning accompaniment.
50. The synod reports confirm the centrality of the Eucharist in the lives of Catholics, which is often considered in the same breath as "communion" in the broader sense. The love of the Eucharist goes hand in hand with passionate care for the parishes, schools and Catholic institutions, and a felt desire for these to develop stronger bonds of belonging and solidarity – to be authentically Eucharistic communities that witness to the power of the sacraments and the Holy Spirit by their mutual care and concern.
51. There is regular mention of the need to re-examine sacramental disciplines, above all those that restrict access to matrimony, holy orders and the Eucharist. Although, in Christ, there is no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile, restrictions to sacraments seemed to many to deny this equality.<sup>60</sup> More often this is voiced as sadness, as "denying so many individuals the possibility of full companionship on the journey of Catholic faith."<sup>61</sup> There was also a minority voice in the reports opposed to any relaxation of sacramental disciplines and a perception that they were being eroded through laxity.

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<sup>60</sup> Diocese of Hallam

<sup>61</sup> Diocese of Wrexham.



52. There is repeated frustration at perceived inconsistency and hypocrisy in the definition of “practising Catholic” in school admission policies, and at the apparent contradiction of priestly celibacy and former Anglican priests being married, and in the confusion around the whole area of marriage law, especially “when so many are declined sacraments for their marital status.”<sup>62</sup>
53. The model of a welcoming Church was perceived to be particularly compromised by the failure to integrate certain groups or categories of people whom the reports describe as alienated or marginalised. There was an understanding that the Spirit could be at work in such groups. “The marginalised and alienated were now the new Gentiles and it was suggested that they need a champion as Paul had been for the Gentiles at the Council of Jerusalem.”<sup>63</sup>
54. People belonging to such groups or categories articulated that sense of alienation for themselves in the reports, and the main ones are listed below. Particularly in the case of the first three categories – women, LGBTQ+ people, and young people - they were also depicted *by others* as alienated or marginalized, either because of Church teaching or because the Church is perceived to lag behind society’s recognition of particular groups’ equality and value. When such groups are spoken on behalf of, caution and discernment are needed in seeking to understand the nature of the perceived exclusion and its causes. In all the cases listed below, the primary call in the reports is for greater attention to be paid by the People of God to these groups’ lived experience.

### **‘Marginalised’ groups**

#### **(i) Women**

55. The place of women within the Church was the cause of “passionate, repeated and strongly expressed concern” in the synod listening.<sup>64</sup> It was a constant theme, occupying substantial sections of every diocesan report, and should be regarded as one of the headline findings of the synod in England and Wales. The exclusion appears broadly under two categories: the failure to make good use of the contribution of women in the Church, and the issue specifically of women’s formal ministries. In both cases, “the point is that half of the Church is not being engaged at the depth/breadth it could be and therefore the Church is missing something, losing something.”<sup>65</sup>
56. On the whole women were not considered a marginalised minority so much as a silenced, unrecognised majority whose gifts lie unwrapped and ignored in the parish narthex. Despite being the “lifeblood” of the Church, women are seen as excluded from the leadership and ministry roles that correspond to them in ways that are both self-defeating and damaging to the Church’s mission and credibility. The People of God at all levels “ought to recognise and make better use of the gifts that women have,

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<sup>62</sup> Diocese of Nottingham

<sup>63</sup> Archdiocese of Cardiff (re Acts of the Apostles 15).

<sup>64</sup> Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle

<sup>65</sup> Diocese of Middlesbrough

including in decision making and planning.”<sup>66</sup> “By making intelligent use of the talents of women, they will contribute to the developing of the Church for the modern world.”<sup>67</sup>

57. Sadness and frustration that “women’s opinions were not taken seriously or felt judged to be second class”<sup>68</sup> permeate all the reports. The contrast is drawn between the synod meetings – places of sharing and mutual respect, which tended to be made up mostly and sometimes exclusively of women – and the structures of the Church, seen as male-dominated, patriarchal, and exclusive of women. In a comment “echoed by many”, one woman said: “Despite dedicating my life to the Church, I experience a deep-seated misogyny – the priest’s word is always treated as more credible. Women do the heavy lifting but feel marginalised. Many are hurt and angry.”<sup>69</sup> Some reports identify this exclusion as shared by all lay people. A minority contest the idea that women were excluded or not valued.
58. Despite many calls in the reports for women to be ordained as deacons and priests, “most discernment about the valuing of women was not focused on ordination” but on the need “to reflect on the power and gift of women in the Church”.<sup>70</sup> Examples were given of young women being excluded by traditional-minded clergy from acting as altar servers and other roles. There were many calls for women, both lay and Religious, to be able to preach, and for the Church to implement Pope Francis’s opening of the ministries of acolyte and lector to all lay people. The reports call for women to exercise leadership roles, and for the service of authority in the Church better to reflect the charisms of women. Without their service as leaders and in ministries, the witness of the Church is weakened, and its credibility undermined.
59. There were specific complaints about male-exclusive language - “women are tired of being addressed as ‘brothers’ and ‘men’” - and objections to women not being consulted in revisions to the Missal and Lectionary.<sup>71</sup>

**(ii) LGBTQ+**

60. LGBTQ+ groups who organised synodal meetings in Westminster diocese were grateful for a twice-monthly Mass specifically for them but otherwise felt they were “rendered invisible”.<sup>72</sup> A constant voice in the reports laments the exclusion and sidelining of LGBTQ+ Catholics. Stories were shared in which gay people are singled out or made unwelcome, subject to prejudice and hostility. In other cases, church teaching or perceptions of God were seen as inhibiting self-acceptance: “One (gay) person said that she had a breakdown trying to reconcile her faith with her

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<sup>66</sup> Archdiocese of Southwark

<sup>67</sup> Archdiocese of Cardiff

<sup>68</sup> Diocese of Leeds

<sup>69</sup> Catholic Association for Racial Justice

<sup>70</sup> Archdiocese of Westminster

<sup>71</sup> The National Board of Catholic Women

<sup>72</sup> Archdiocese of Westminster

sexuality”.<sup>73</sup> A report described the LGBTQ+ group as “in no way angry with the Church – just hurt.”<sup>74</sup>

61. Church teaching was commonly raised, as well as the language in which that teaching is expressed, notably the expression “intrinsically disordered” that some church documents use to describe the same-sex orientation.. “A widespread view was that people shouldn’t be punished because of who they are attracted to”.<sup>75</sup> There was a strong call “actively to listen to the lived reality of LGBTQ+ people” and to “accompany, care for & offer healing for the past damage done to some of these baptised Catholics”.<sup>76</sup> There were some calls to allow same-sex blessings, while others warned against what they saw as a “drive towards gender and LGBTQ+ ideology.”<sup>77</sup>

### **(iii) Young People**

62. The absence from the Church of young people was another common theme, but often spoken on behalf of rather than for themselves. Present in almost every submission was the pain in the older generation at the absence of young people from the Church, along with a bewilderment that the means of passing on the faith in a previous generation through family and parish had broken down. The question was often voiced: “how can we encourage them to come back?”
63. There were many suggestions made, above all the need to prioritise the encounter with Jesus Christ rather than relying on sacramental preparation. Where the Church gives concrete witness in service to the poor, struggling for social justice, and caring for Creation, young people respond, for these are the areas “where young people wish to be engaged”.<sup>78</sup> Some said young people were more drawn to a Church with a robust critique of modern culture and society, that was conscious of the evangelical challenge of living out faith in a contemporary context.
64. Where young people themselves speak in the reports – whether in separate submissions or via schools and surveys within diocesan reports – a sometimes different picture emerges of young people valuing the Church as a place of welcome, safety and belonging that offers a clear moral compass and opportunities for spiritual development, one that through its sacraments and witness mediates the love of God. “Going to church is helpful when stressed,” says one ten-year-old, who adds: “The Church is a peaceful place and relaxing place that makes me feel safe. Supporting people like my family who struggle because we have little money.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Diocese of Brentwood

<sup>74</sup> Archdiocese of Birmingham

<sup>75</sup> Diocese of Plymouth

<sup>76</sup> Diocese of Nottingham

<sup>77</sup> Diocese of Northampton

<sup>78</sup> Archdiocese of Cardiff

<sup>79</sup> Diocese of Salford

65. However, there are many calls for the presence of young people to be better valued, for their voices to be heard, and for spaces to be created for their involvement in the liturgy and life of the Church. A clear link is perceived between young people's practice of faith and their participation in the life of the Church: they ask the Church "to be more encouraging and inviting", to provide "opportunities to explore and discuss faith rather than simply have faith 'done to them'". There is a complaint that older people "don't listen to the young" and do not want to share responsibility with them. "We need to overcome resistance to change."<sup>80</sup>
66. From Key Stage Two upwards, young people's anxieties turn on their future, above all a concern for creation, and the fear that the planet will become uninhabitable for people and animals. Yet they almost never hear the environment spoken of in homilies.<sup>81</sup> Young people's voices in the reports also place a very high value on equality, and are especially critical that LGBTQ+ people and women are not accorded the place in the Church that their dignity deserves.
67. Some struggle with what they perceive as hypocrisy and inconsistency. Many young people ask for the Church to focus less on "regulating behaviour" and more on "creating a space for everyone to grow together in God's love." But there is also a strong call to stand firm in the face of hostility, to be authentic and faithful. "That's hard and it's unpopular," notes one 25-year-old, "but that doesn't make it less true. Yes, Christ is risen in Glory – but first He was crucified in agony".<sup>82</sup>

**(iv) Divorced and remarried**

68. Those who are divorced and remarried without an annulment were mentioned often as a marginalised group in the Church who "expressed great hurt at their exclusion" from the Eucharist.<sup>83</sup> There was a perception of injustice, "particularly where the innocent party is concerned", along with criticism that rules barring them are "unnecessarily dogmatic and hurtful on the part of the Church".<sup>84</sup> There is a call for "the lived experience of the faithful to be brought into meaningful dialogue with the official teaching of the Church" and for the pastoral discernment approach to the divorced and remarried set out in *Amoris Laetitia* to be better understood and promoted.<sup>85</sup>

**(v) The Traveller Community**

69. A number of submissions mention the Traveller community, helping them to feel welcome and at home, and understanding their needs. One submission talks about the

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<sup>80</sup> Diocese of Salford

<sup>81</sup> Dioceses of Hallam, Middlesbrough, East Anglia, Liverpool and Brentwood; Oxford University Chaplaincy.

<sup>82</sup> Oxford University Chaplaincy, Diocese of Shrewsbury.

<sup>83</sup> Diocese of Hallam

<sup>84</sup> Diocese of Leeds

<sup>85</sup> Dioceses of Menevia, Northampton, Arundel and Brighton.

community wanting to be more involved in parish life and included in parish ministries. “Catholic Traveller families generally expect not be welcomed in parish communities up and down the country”.<sup>86</sup>

**(vi) Those with additional needs**

70. The voices of those suffering degrees of incapacity - whether deafness, blindness, mobility, learning difficulties, etc. – have called in this synod for attention to be given to their needs. They want to participate more in the life of the Church. This might mean introducing or making use of particular facilities and technologies, but the predominant voice asks that the People of God listen to their experience. The testimonies collected in a submission from the Catholic Deaf Association, for example, give a vivid insight into the experience “in the pews” of people battling with loop systems. Overall, people of disability are making the same call as other faithful for co-responsibility and participation in decision-making. “We need to be offered and accept more responsibilities so that we can be more committed”.<sup>87</sup>

**(vii) People of colour**

71. Because the largest concentrations of Catholics in England and Wales are in cities with large diverse communities reflected in parish communities with high numbers of migrants - one-third of Mass goers in the UK are born overseas - the issue of exclusion of people of colour seldom appears in the diocesan reports. The racial and cultural diversity of Catholics is seen as one of the great gifts of the Church in England and Wales. However, this diversity is not reflected in leadership roles in the Church, which are “almost exclusively white”, which produces a sense among some people of colour that “decisions are not made by us, but are instead made for us”.<sup>88</sup>

**(viii) Traditionalists**

72. Although very few in number, a sense of grievance and marginalization is strongly expressed by those who worship using the Missal of 1962. Traditionalists complain of “sadness and anger” at the restrictions they believe were imposed by Pope Francis’s *Traditionis Custodes*, which restored to bishops the regulation of the provision of pre-Second Vatican Council liturgies.<sup>89</sup> Adherents of the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM) complain of the “watering down” of liturgical devotion in eucharistic celebrations following the Council, and fear that the Church has capitulated to “modernistic” ideas.<sup>90</sup> In response to questions about marginalisation and exclusion, both TLM adherents and those committed to “maintaining traditional Catholic teaching against what they interpret as harmful modifications” feel “badly treated by the bishops and

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<sup>86</sup> Catholic Association for Racial Justice

<sup>87</sup> Catholic Deaf Association

<sup>88</sup> Catholic Association for Racial Justice

<sup>89</sup> Diocese of Hallam

<sup>90</sup> Diocese of Shrewsbury

by Pope Francis“ and “saddened by a sense that their views are habitually denigrated and their voices left unheard and unanswered.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Diocese of Wrexham

## VI TOWARDS A SYNODAL CHURCH IN ENGLAND AND WALES

73. The Church exists to announce the Gospel, a mission the People of God fulfils when it witnesses to the mercy it has received gratuitously through words and actions in the service, above all, of those in need. That mission is deeply bound up with making known the communion that has entered history in the Son of God made Man. This life of communion gives the Church “the face of synodality”, that is, a journey of mutual listening in which all listen to each other and all listen to what the Spirit of Truth has to say to the Churches.<sup>92</sup>
74. The purpose of the synodal journey is to enable the Church more fruitfully to fulfil that mission of evangelisation. A synodal Church “walks forward in communion to pursue a common mission through the participation of each and every one of her members”, who have received the Holy Spirit in baptism and confirmation and “are endowed with diverse gifts and charisms for the renewal and building up of the Church, as members of the Body of Christ.”<sup>93</sup>
75. The experience of the synod, while stumbling and uneven, has “begun something momentous” in the People of God of England and Wales.<sup>94</sup> The process and practice of synodality have already opened the Church to the graces of the conversion that through the synod the faithful have called for. There are many testimonies to this: “Many dream of a Church which embraces this way of working as a path by which the Church can more fruitfully fulfil her mission of evangelisation in the world ... We need to walk together well, even when we disagree.”<sup>95</sup> “Through this process we have discovered that synodality is a way of being Church – in fact, it is *the* way of being Church”.<sup>96</sup> “The Holy Spirit is asking us to be more synodal.”<sup>97</sup>
76. There is a felt desire in the reports that the synodal process now be embedded in dioceses and parishes, and that structures and formation be introduced at every level to enable this. There is a consistent call for formation in synodality, including a better understanding of how it was lived in the early Church and developed in the different Christian traditions. Within the Catholic Church in these islands, for example, the Syro-Malabar Christians continue ancient synodal structures and processes born of the early Church.<sup>98</sup> There is a felt need in the UK context of a clear account of Catholic synodality in the past and in Pope Francis’s teaching, one that shows both commonalities but also contrasts with the synodical governance in the Anglican tradition.

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<sup>92</sup> Cf *Praedicate Evangelium*, 1, 2 & 4.

<sup>93</sup> *Synod Vademecum*

<sup>94</sup> Archdiocese of Southwark

<sup>95</sup> Diocese of Plymouth

<sup>96</sup> Diocese of Northampton

<sup>97</sup> Diocese of Salford

<sup>98</sup> Catholic Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Great Britain names these as *Prathinidhiyogam*, *Palliyogam* and *Desayogam*.

77. The path to a synodal Church requires reviewing and removing obstacles to listening and participation. The reports hope for a “new leadership style” that reflects a relationship between priests and lay faithful of collaboration and co-responsibility, and for structures that facilitate dialogue, discernment and participation in decision-making processes, while respecting that decision-taking is the task of designated authority. The common view expressed is that key decisions shaping the life of the Church at all levels need to be rooted in processes of discernment involving as many as possible. There is a strong recognition in the reports that synodality deepens formation for mission.
78. To broaden participation in decision-making processes the reports propose that parish pastoral councils be not just optional but statutory, and to be seen as sources not just of technical expertise but of wisdom and discernment. Parish advisory councils will increasingly be key to sustaining the life of parishes in the absence of resident clergy, not just in rural areas, and need to be invigorated and strengthened as a matter of urgency.<sup>99</sup>
79. This is also the time to establish or consolidate mechanisms for listening and consultation to overcome the distance between church governance and the life of the faithful. The principle dear to the Church of the first millennium, “what affects all should be discussed by all”, needs to inspire new methods of prayerful listening and discussion, as well as formation in synodal practices and methods.<sup>100</sup> There is evidence that synodal conversion is already underway. The reports announce plans for local synods and assemblies, and there are proposals for standing bodies such as pastoral councils that allow the bishop to listen directly to the whole People of God. Such bodies should make special provision for marginalised groups to be heard and to influence diocesan decisions, possibly as an “enduring forum”.<sup>101</sup> Without yet identifying concrete steps, many reports announce diocese-wide conferences over the next year to reflect on the fruits of the synod listening, stressing that such reflection should not need to await the outcome of the synod’s conclusion in Rome in October 2023.
80. Becoming a synodal Church means listening better, sharing information more broadly, and becoming more transparent and accessible. It means making better use of digital platforms and social media to develop a more networked, horizontal style of communication. How dioceses and parishes communicate should be reviewed: are the faithful treated as subjects or objects? Does our language dictate or invite? Who has been included and who excluded?
81. Synodal conversion will be merely or superficially structural without a commitment to facilitate personal conversion, enabling an encounter and relationship with the person of Jesus Christ through prayer, retreats, pilgrimages, eucharistic liturgies,

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<sup>99</sup> Archdiocese of Cardiff

<sup>100</sup> Quoted by Pope Francis in his address on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.

<sup>101</sup> Archdioceses of Birmingham and Cardiff



spiritual accompaniment and faith-sharing in groups. Participation in mission flows from a deepening communion: for the faithful to see themselves as missionary disciples, they need to experience the joy of belonging, which is in turn fruit of participation. An ever deepening synodality will both reflect and enable the journey of faith.

82. Key to deepening the bonds of belonging to Christ and to each other are small groups prayerfully reflecting on Scripture (*lectio divina*) and other kinds of prayer. Most reports mention basic ecclesial-type communities that include both lay people and clergy as key to fostering a synodal culture of humble listening and honest speaking. They enable participation, especially for those on the margins, and are vital for transcending debilitating divisions between Catholics, allowing the Spirit to reconcile diversity and open new horizons while uniting the body.
83. The personal journey of a joy-filled faith spills forth in missionary discipleship, which in turn calls for resources to be directed into formation opportunities for both lay people and priests. There is a profound hunger, at least on the part of those who took part in the synod, to deepen their faith through learning and skills in order to offer themselves for mission and service. Synodality “requires us to be open to the voice of the Holy Spirit and making listening a norm of pastoral ministry.”<sup>102</sup>
84. Shared responsibility for mission calls for courses in spirituality, doctrine, Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council as well as a grounding in social, ethical and moral positions which are at odds with contemporary society but precisely for that reason opportunities for dialogue and evangelisation. Along with the thirst for formation is a dream that the disconnect between Church and world be bridged by ordinary faithful “who know where they stand” (St John Henry Newman) and who can express their convictions in ways that are clear, confident, and joyful. In the same way, the reports ask bishops and others who teach to be bold and prophetic in their defence of the Gospel on issues such as the dignity of migrants, the care for creation, prison reform and concern for the poor.
85. Formation is also called for in the art of discernment of spirits, spiritual conversation, group facilitation and other skills and practices of synodality. A Church in which responsibility for mission is shared requires training in the discernment of charisms. “We’re all leaders with gifts from God through Jesus Christ the Holy Spirit, awaiting recognition and use to bring about healing and change in the world.”<sup>103</sup> “We need to call people into ministries, say to them: ‘I see in you ...’ and person by person discern with them their gifts.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Archdiocese of Birmingham

<sup>103</sup> Archdiocese of Liverpool

<sup>104</sup> Diocese of Arundel and Brighton

86. “A striking feature of the submissions was the widespread desire for mission and outreach.”<sup>105</sup> “‘Let me out!’ the Spirit cries”.<sup>106</sup> An ever-deepening synodality will be reflected in greater attentiveness to the peripheries of suffering and need, both locally and globally, such that parishes and schools become ever more outward-facing, evangelising, and mission-oriented. A synodal Church in which the faithful assemble, listen and discern is more likely to recognise Christ in the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth, and to respond in concrete apostolic actions that make visible God’s compassion for all His creatures.

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<sup>105</sup> Archdiocese of Southwark

<sup>106</sup> Lay Community of St Benedict

## VII CONCLUSION

87. Coming out of the pandemic, the synod has opened a new horizon and direction for the Church in England and Wales, awakening in the faithful a desire for discipleship and the call for a new way of living and thinking that deepens communion, enables participation, and equips all for mission. It is an invitation that must be acted on, lest the hope the Spirit kindled in the hearts of the faithful grow faint.
88. But “it is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People.”<sup>107</sup> This path requires not that “the Church” change, as if the Church were separate from the life of faith of the People of God; the call made, rather, is to all the baptised, prior to any distinction of vocation and state of life, as *Lumen Gentium* makes clear. What is hoped and called for is a shift in culture and mindset that allows the whole People of God to “be the Church,” to “live a life worthy of the calling they have received” (Eph 4:1). While this is an invitation made equally to all, it requires of those in authority a commitment to facilitate and enable it through concrete reforms.
89. If we have heard the Spirit prompt us in this synod, it is here: that responsibility for conversion cannot be delegated to particular groups or authorities, but must be assumed by all in response to the gifts the Spirit has already poured out on all the faithful. The Church is the body of all those who are baptised in Christ and have encountered Him; His mission is ours. Now the synod asks us to make good that truth. The journey calls us out into the deep, into a more active faith stirred by an attentive listening to the Spirit in and through all of the baptised. It asks us to hear and respond without waiting for this or that change or new structure, confident that, in awakening to our co-responsibility, the reforms will follow – indeed, will become the reform itself. This is the new consciousness that the Spirit has awoken in the People of God in these islands which, if embraced, will lead to the growth in holiness both here and across the world. This is the light that has been lit here; with joy we pass it onto the universal Church, and set it above our own path.

“Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!””

*John 21:4-7*

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<sup>107</sup> Pope Francis, “Letter to the People of God”, 20 August 2018