

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



**Towards a Synodal Church in Mission**  
*Submission for the Second Plenary Assembly of Bishops*  
*October 2024*

**14th May 2024**

**Feast of St Matthias**

# Introduction

*From the President of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Cardinal Vincent Nichols*

I express my thanks for all who have contributed to this reflection on the ongoing theme of Synodality in the Church. Responses to the work of the 2023 October Synod of Bishops have been received from twenty-two dioceses and from other sources too.

In order to fashion our contribution to the forthcoming 2024 Plenary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, members of the staff of the Bishops' Conference worked systematically to produce a synthetic reflection on all the material that had been received. I thank them for this work, carried out with diligence and great care.

As the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, we have twice discussed these matters. A first draft was presented to us for our discussion on 16<sup>th</sup> January.

Comments from bishops, and the overall perspective we wished to fashion on these themes, were then worked into a second draft.

This was discussed at our Spring Meeting on 12-13<sup>th</sup> April and a final document prepared, which you now receive with a few final amendments having been included.

At our meeting no resolution was taken giving this document formal status. However, it certainly reflects the views of the members of the Bishops' Conference and clearly expresses the contribution we wish to make to the work of the Synod in October 2024. It will now be forwarded to the Office for the Synod along with similar contributions from Bishops' Conferences from around the world. Of course, our delegates at the October Synod will also make contributions to the ongoing discernment in the course of the meeting itself. Our delegates are Archbishop John Wilson and Bishop Marcus Stock, together with Bishop Nicholas Hudson as a papal invitee and Fr Jan Nowotnik as an elected and voting member.

The challenge set for us by the initiative of Pope Francis in this whole theme of synodality is to enable the Church, at every level, to be more conscious of, and focused on, the mission given to us by Christ. We are called to continue the mission of Christ, to be the living presence of Christ's love, mercy and compassion in our world, proclaiming the truths about our humanity and our world as established by the Creator and fully expressed in Christ. This can only be achieved through a profound communion of life in Christ and by a release of the gifts and talents given by the Lord to all the baptised for this very purpose.

In this reflection, then, you will find these themes of mission, communion and participation more fully developed. I hope that you will find encouragement here for our life in the Church, in every parish, community and diocese, for the enriching of our mission, for the glory of God.

+Vincent Nichols  
14<sup>th</sup> May 2024

# Towards a Synodal Church in Mission

*Reflections from England and Wales for the 2024 Plenary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.*

‘Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit’ (Gal 5: 25). Our life in Christ is inspired by the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit and it is with this in mind this reflection summarises the responses received from the dioceses of England and Wales in preparation for the forthcoming Plenary Assembly of the Synod. It is hoped that this gives a deeper appreciation of how the Spirit is already working within our diocesan families and how the Church is being drawn to become more synodal in life and mission. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to call God our Father and it is the Holy Spirit who assists us in our ongoing and personal conversion to become more like Christ.

This summary of the consultation process, which took place within each diocese of England and Wales in the past few months, is offered in seeking to know how to become an increasingly more synodal Church. Each diocese responded within its context of the joys and challenges that are faced by for Christians in the contemporary world, and this reflection offers a synthesis of how the dioceses of England and Wales are responding to the call to develop mission and structures along the synodal pathway.

For some dioceses the response came from the opportunity to reflect more fully on their ongoing pastoral plan and how a diocesan family is attempting to inculcate a more synodal way of being. Pastoral plans are at different stages, but all are similar in seeking ever-fresh ways to respond to the call of the Lord to evangelise and to baptise in his name. Many of these pastoral plans are balancing increasing lay collaboration within a diocesan family and the needs of parish life with the reality of fewer active priests and the necessary response to a lack of vocations to the priesthood. This summary also reflects a deepening of some of the themes which came to the fore in the first consultation almost two years ago.

What follows is an attempt to highlight the most important joys and challenges of becoming a synodal Church in mission in England and Wales. It offers a framework of how to continue to deepen and develop these themes. The ordering of themes does not indicate their significance, nor does it always suggest answers to the pastoral challenges to be faced, but rather offers an outline of how to be a more synodal Church in mission, acknowledging and responding to the pattern of the life of the Church in contemporary England and Wales.

## **The role of the lay faithful**

‘Incorporation into Christ through faith and Baptism is the source of being a Christian in the mystery of the Church. This mystery constitutes the Christian’s most basic “features” and serves as the basis for all vocations and dynamism of the Christian life of the lay faithful...Therefore, only through accepting the richness in mystery that God gives to the Christian in Baptism is it possible to come to a basic description of the lay faithful.’ (*Christifideles laici* 9).

All vocations in the Church find their root and meaning in baptism and it is this definition from *Christifideles laici*, on the role of the lay faithful in the Church, that highlights the dignity of baptism and the priesthood of all the baptised, the gateway to ministry and life in the Church. A renewed emphasis on the dignity received as the children of God in baptism is the only way to truly

understand the distinction and relationship between the call to be members of the priesthood of all the faithful and the role and significance of the ministerial priesthood.

The ministerial priesthood, or ordained ministry, is one way in which God calls men to serve him and his people within the life of the Church. Rooted in their baptismal vocation ordained priests are at the service of the Gospel with the Lord's insistence that he has come to serve and not be served. Lay men and women are called to take a share in the ministerial charism especially through the lay ministries which have gained a new significance through the pontificate of Pope Francis.

*Lumen Gentium* expresses it in this way 'Through their rebirth and the Holy Spirit's anointing the baptised receive consecration as a spiritual house, a holy priesthood. It is their task, in every employment, to offer the spiritual sacrifices of a Christian person; theirs to declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light. As a consequence, all Christ's disciples must devote themselves to prayer, must praise God, must present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; must carry out their witness of Christ all over the world; must make a defence to anyone who calls them to account for the hope of eternal life in them.' (LG 10)

Here is the heart of our synodal journey thus far, a call to the co-responsibility of the priesthood of all the faithful with the ministerial priesthood, supporting each other in the work of the mission of the Church. Growing in communion with each other in a common baptismal faith leads to a desire to participate more fully in the Church's life and ministry. This, in turn gives a heart for mission, not as something to be done, but with a realisation that the Church is mission. This was highlighted in the synodal synthesis offered after the gathering in Rome last year:

'Rather than saying that the Church has a mission, we affirm that the Church "is" mission. "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21), the Church receives from Christ, the One who is sent by the Father, Her own mission. Supported and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church announces and witnesses to the Gospel to those who do not know it or welcome it, they do this with that preferential option for the poor that is rooted in the mission of Jesus. In this way the Church co-operates in the coming of the Reign of God, of which she is the seed (cf. LG 5).' (Synod Synthesis Report, October 2023, paragraph 8.a)

The way in which we engage ourselves in Christ's mission must be based in good pastoral and spiritual formation rooted in an ever-faithful reading of the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. Ways need to be found in which the gifts and talents of all can be used for the good of Christ's mission. An appreciation of the relatedness of the ordained and the lay ministries can enhance all who bring life to the Church in England and Wales.

In this reflection gratitude and esteem are offered to all the faithful women and men across the country who give of their time and talents to support the life of the Church; for the witness of our young people and those who work in our schools. Here too is acknowledgement of those who feel on the margins and those who struggle at times to feel fully members of the Church. A real challenge is to find ways in which all can be invited to come and play their distinct part within the Church, seeking to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

## **Pastoral plan**

Many dioceses have integrated the synodal response as part of their pastoral plan and as such have highlighted the main synodal themes of communion, participation, and mission. There is a recognition that a refocussing on some of our current structures will be helpful to creating a more synodal Church, and so some of the dioceses are seeking ways to enhance their structures, such as the Deanery Pastoral Council, alongside parish pastoral councils. The remit of the Council of Priests is another area in which synodality can be better expressed with a valuable dialogue between the diocesan bishops and the priests, his co-workers, of the diocese.

Co-responsibility in mission sums up this process, but there is an acknowledgement that the practice of co-responsibility is to be enhanced at all levels. Discernment between the bishop, priests and people needs to determine how, in these newly developed structures, the co-responsibility of decision making will be expressed and bear fruit. This should not be seen in conflict with the role of decision taking which often falls to the bishop or priest. At the diocesan, deanery or parish level, a prayerful discernment of pastoral priorities should see a coherence of both decision making and decision taking. This was summed up in the 2023 October Synodal synthesis:

‘Pastoral structures need to be re-organised so they can readily recognise, call forth and animate lay charism and ministries inserting them into the missionary dynamism of the synodal Church. Under the guidance of the pastors, the communities will be able to send people as well as sustain those they have sent on mission.’ In these ways ‘the structures will be primarily at the service of the mission that the faithful carry out within society, in the family, and in work life, rather than focussing exclusively on internal matters or organisational concerns.’ (Synod Synthesis Report, October 2023, paragraph 8.1)

## **Mission**

It is evident in every diocese that the liturgical life of each parish and the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is at the heart and indeed the core of the Church’s mission lived out in prayer and worship. It is recognised that the Church is most herself when we celebrate the Eucharist. When the Church is gathered we see the true place of the bishop/priest celebrating with the whole community.

Lay faithful are hungry to be formed for mission, and the formation for all the People of God, including the clergy and seminarians, is of great importance. Existing models of formation can be changed creatively to develop new models of formation that help all within the Church to become “missionary disciples.”

Deeper formation leads to more fruitful participation in the life of the parish/diocese and so it is readily acknowledged that ways to do this need to be further developed, so that all feel able to give an account of the faith that they have in the Lord and his Church.

Formation equips all for mission, and mission leads to participation within the diocese and in the parishes. Parishes can become places which truly recognise the gifts and talents of all their members. Parishes can become better places of welcome of all those seeking to deepen their relationship with Christ. The new commissioned lay ministries (lector, acolyte and catechist) will be helpful in promoting a re-emphasis on the importance of formation at all levels of the Church.

Christians need to be prophetic voices in the world. This applies especially to the bishops and priests who have the responsibility to discern the needs of a diocese/parish. Too easily, at times, the members of the Church conform to worldly structures rather than seek a unity of faith rooted in a call to holiness presenting Christ to the world.

Mission also leads to work with other Christian denominations to build up the Body of Christ and seek to influence civil society. Catholics can speak up more clearly for their faith and work more readily with those of other Christian denominations to give a Gospel witness to the world.

## **Priests**

There has been limited participation in this process among diocesan clergy, although many have indeed been creatively engaged. Aware of this, Pope Francis invited a large group of parish priest, from around the world, to a recent synodal meeting in Rome. Two of our parish priests were able to attend this meeting and the knowledge and experience gained from this meeting of priests will be valuable for the continuing work on this synodal journey.

Pastoral plans cannot just be about coping when the number of active clergy is reduced at the diocesan level but must be seen in the greater context of involving all the baptised in the Church's mission whilst respecting the charism of the ordained ministry. In some dioceses the role of the Dean is to be emphasised as the link between the clergy to empower the work of parishes in each deanery. Many dioceses also speak of the sometimes-unrealistic workloads placed upon priests and that structures must reflect this reality, in a way that seeks the involvement of all the baptised.

Religious have a particular charism within the Church's life which must not be forgotten. Indeed, some call for more emphasis to be made of religious and their particular charism within the diocesan family.

## **Parishes**

Parishes are called increasingly to be places of welcome and openness to all, including those on the margins and those seeking contact with the Lord. At times parishes are experienced as only for those "on the inside". More can be done to welcome those who are new, and those who want to join parishes in their journey of faith.

Many state that increasingly our parishes are places that reach out to those in need, to other Christians and the community at large, working ecumenically and interreligiously to support the wider community. This has increased since the covid pandemic.

As has already been mentioned, parishes must be places of community and formation, encouraging communion and the sharing of gifts and talents. Many parishes rely on an elderly constituent "to do" the parish tasks and it is recognised that families and younger people can be invited and encouraged to share in this part of parish life. Also, there is a clear variation in the experience of parish life, some more open to synodal renewal and others not so. Many suggest that the bishop is to ensure that all parishes have an opportunity to be involved in this synodal development of parish life and, more importantly, the desire for the mission of the Church which must flow from it.

## **Family life**

The Church is called to continue to support the vocation of marriage and the importance of the family as the domestic church, to promote the importance of prayer in the family and the way in which parents are the first teachers in the ways of faith. In this way the parish can become the place in which to highlight and celebrate the joy of family life.

There is no doubt that in our current society there is a threat to the dignity of human life and the Church is obliged to counter this trend by solid teaching on the importance of human dignity from conception to natural death. Once again, formation in these issues, so central in the Church's teaching, is needed so that it penetrates the minds and hearts of all believers.

## **Prayer**

As already has been stated the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist in the life of the parish is the key that unlocks the mission of each individual parish and the life of the whole diocese. This is a good time to rediscover or initiate a renewal in traditional Catholic devotions that have sustained Catholic Christians throughout the ages. A desire for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is a good focus for the preparatory year of prayer for the Jubilee in 2025. The *Adoremus* festival at Oscott College this September will be a moment for the Church in our countries to reawaken our eucharistic devotion, the wellspring of our life in Christ.

The method of "conversations in the Spirit" has been an increasingly helpful way to 'hear all the voices' and has become a new way of conducting parish meetings in some places. Listening, in prayer, to the Holy Spirit and to each other, especially when using the method of 'conversation in the Spirit', leads to a real understanding of what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. This entire response, therefore, comes from a quest for a deeper understanding of what the Lord is saying to the Church. This, in turn, gives energy and direction for the Church's mission. Listening leads to renewal.

## **Young people**

Young people are both the present and future of the Church and as such merit clear support. It is all too easy to think that young people are only to be formed to contribute later on "when they are older". To do so is to the detriment of what they have to offer now.

In some places, youth synods/forums have been helpful and have been a natural way to involve the young people already part of the Church. Attendance at World Youth Day or Lourdes pilgrimages are also powerful expressions of the life of the Church for young people.

As with all states of life and members of the Church it is important to form young people so that they mature in their faith and have the confidence to live the faith in all its fullness.

## **A call to a synodal Church in mission**

This reflection on the life of the Catholic Church in England and Wales is offered as part of the ongoing synodal process and in preparation for the meeting of the Synod of Bishops in Rome this coming October. The national synthesis drawn up for the 2023 Synod, spoke of how hearts had been awakened and the desire to 'keep walking in attentive faith, seeking to recognise Christ more clearly as our way to truth and life.' This remains so as we encounter the risen Lord among us, setting our hearts ablaze, and giving fresh impetus to all in proclaiming his message of goodness and Truth.

At this precious time in the liturgical year, let us pray for a fresh outpouring of Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost, so that we will be ready to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and bring life to the face of the earth.

*Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful  
and enkindle in them the power of your love.  
Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created  
and you shall renew the face of the earth*

Ancient prayer to the Holy Spirit