



Achonry Diocesan Synthesis

Introduction

The diocese of Achonry encompasses parts of Counties Mayo, Sligo and Roscommon. It has 23 parishes and a total population of approximately 40,000, of whom 90% are Catholic. There are 30 priests in active ministry and approximately 20 religious sisters.

A Diocesan Contact Team of three people, drawn from the Diocesan Pastoral Leadership Team, was established in September 2022 and tasked with working on the processes for the Synodal Pathway to be followed in the diocese. The team members were Ms Maeve Leheny, Mr Bill Carty and Dr Eugene Duffy, Episcopal Vicar for Pastoral Renewal and Development. They worked in close collaboration with the Bishop and the Pastoral Leadership Team.

The Synodal journey was launched by Bishop Paul Dempsey at the Cathedral on October 16, 2022. Each parish priest was then invited to speak about the synodal pathway during the following weeks. A series of ‘reflection questions’, based on the “Main Questions for Consultation” presented in the *Vademecum* (5.3) was prepared by the Contact Team in liaison with the Diocesan Pastoral Leadership Team. These were made available in all of the churches of the diocese during the months of November and December. On each of the four Sundays following their publication a short notice on synodality was included in the all the parish newsletters, with a word of encouragement for people to respond to the questions. The questions were also made available on the diocesan website, where other materials relating to the synodal pathway were also published.

The Questions were:

To what extent do you experience companionship, togetherness and friendship in your parish? How could the parish be more welcoming or create a sense of belonging?

What opportunities are there within the Church for you to speak freely about your experiences, to be listened to and heard?

How do you think more people can be motivated to participate in the life of the parish?

What events in the parish help you to get to know God better and to relate to God in a significant way? What other helps could be provided?

Are you aware of positive interactions between the local Church, other Christians and / or other faiths? How could these relationships be improved?

How are decisions made in the Church? What processes could be helpful for greater participation in decision making?

Feel free to add any other reflections in this space below:

All of the responses were then returned to the diocesan office for collation by the Diocesan Contact Team.

Another simple question was then prepared for younger age groups who may not have been as likely to respond to the reflection questions available in the churches. These were circulated to second level students and members of the GAA clubs. The question they were asked to respond to was: “If you had five minutes with Pope Francis, what would you say to him?” These were circulated to the nine second level schools in the diocese. The question was circulated to all of the GAA clubs in the diocese via Survey Monkey and thirty responses were received.

During the month of May, four meetings were held for the parishes in each of the four clusters in the diocese. A professional facilitator was engaged to design and deliver a reflection process to elicit the views of the participants. Each session began with a prayerful reflection on the gospel narrative of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24: 13-35). Three questions were used for this reflective process:

In the light of the time we find ourselves in today, how are you?

What inspires you in the life of your parish community? What discourages you in the life of the parish community?

How can our Church be more welcoming and inclusive to all?

Each session lasted about two hours and there was a very lively and open sharing of views on each occasion. Approximately 160 people participated, including priests and religious. There was a good representation of age groups, although the older age groups were in the majority. Nevertheless, some younger parents and teenagers made very worthwhile contributions to the reflections. The fruits of these reflections were recorded and have contributed to the final synthesis presented below.

The response to the reflection questions was quite positive. About 150 people responded by returning the reflection papers made available in the churches

and another 30 used the online facility. It was interesting to note that those who used the online facility generally wrote more extensively and often more profoundly than those who answered using the hardcopy format.

Despite the fact that only two secondary schools returned their responses, these were very interesting and noteworthy. One school obviously used the question across all year groups and thus generated a very high level of response. Over 35% would like to ask the Pope: Why cannot women be ordained priests? And about 30% wanted to know why priests cannot marry. They showed a concern about the war in the Ukraine, the plight of homeless people, environmental protection, the situation of homosexual people, the problem of evil, accessible language in the Church's liturgy and the truth of the Bible. They seemed less concerned about the parochial issues that dominated in the older age cohorts.

The Survey Monkey responses were similar to those from all of the other groups. Some were quite brief and it was obvious that the older participants wrote the more extensive responses. Many of the younger respondents were simply curious about the personal life of the Pope and tended to see his position as the culmination of a successful career path.

Synthesis of Responses from the Diocese

The responses have been organised in line with the “main questions for consultation” as set out in the *Vademecum*. This appeared to be a convenient way to organise the material and to do justice to the integrity of the responses received.

Companions on the Journey

Generally, people were satisfied with the level of companionship and support that they experienced in their parishes; 64% of people who responded to the survey were happy with the level of companionship, togetherness, and friendship that they regularly experienced in their parish. Some of these commented on the negative effect which the Covid pandemic had on their overall feeling of family and togetherness. Several people missed the opportunity to greet other people at Mass with the sign of peace and felt that this should be brought back even if it was just a nod to acknowledge a neighbour. Some people also expressed a need for more opportunity to meet with and talk to their neighbours after mass over a cup of tea to enable more of

a mix of the social with the spiritual.

A high number of respondents missed the welcome they got at the church door during Covid times and felt that every church should reinstate their welcoming committee as people miss that personal touch. People felt very strongly that the message needs to be spread that everyone is welcome back to the church. Several comments that technology needs to be used more to spread the Good News.

Among the respondents, 36% were in some way not happy with the level of companionship, togetherness, or friendship that they experienced in their parish. A common theme was that the parish is good at creating a sense of belonging for regulars but is weak at reaching out to those who have drifted away from the Church and often even weaker at drawing in those who appear only on special occasions.

Several people commented that the elderly know each other at Mass, communicate and help to keep the fabric together but this is not the case for the youth. The youth need to be reached out to. Several commented on the need for the Church to go back to her roots and become a missionary church and go out to the community to visit and meet families; follow up with and visit families of children who have recently received the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Confirmation; meet with them and find out what gifts they can bring to the Church and make them truly feel welcome and wanted.

Another 6% of people felt no sense of or very little companionship in their parish and felt abandoned by the church during Covid times. One gay man who lives alone and feels isolated and too shy to speak up, goes to Mass every Sunday but feels he must stay quiet and keep a low key as the Church does not seem openly welcoming to the LGBT community. This is a recurring theme in later sections from the survey. Others said that, “in the parish we feel members of our parish do not openly express their faith in conversations, companionship and friendships”.

Others commented that nothing happens outside of Mass. Ideas put forward to help develop a sense of togetherness and friendship in the parish include - special weekend intention Masses; celebrations for youth coming up to exams; mother's day Mass; local remembrance day; celebrate significant wedding anniversaries as a parish; townland stations; more Church events not directly related to Mass going; parish community get together; prayer/ scripture services with opportunity to discuss readings with food, music and song;

retreats or parish missions; social events for elderly pensioners, mothers and toddler groups etc.; Church to organise local clean-ups; help with refugee crisis; youth Mass regularly organised by the youth; walk to Mass Sunday where people meet 1km from church and walk together to mass.

Listening

Many respondents felt that they were listened to by their local priest and were comfortable sharing their concerns with him. Overall, 53% of respondents said they had good opportunities to speak freely about their experiences, to be listened to and heard. The majority of these said that the main vector for this was through their Parish Priest. Others used the Parish Council to express their views. Several people expressed thanks for the opportunity to express their views through this survey and would like more opportunities like this in the future. Some thought that having a suggestion box in the church would be helpful as people could freely express their views and concerns, even anonymously. It was suggested that there be more regular reports back to parishes with regard to the deliberations of their various councils and committees.

On the other hand, 47% of those who responded stated that they had very few or no opportunities for their views to be heard within the Church. Some people expressed the opinion that the leaders in the Church would not allow them to speak freely of their life experiences if it did not concur with that of the leadership. Others stated that they were afraid to speak out for fear of offending their bishop and priests and that their suggestions might come across as criticism. They too felt however that the Synod was a genuine invitation to frank engagement.

Some commented on the need to train our priests to lead and to facilitate open discussion, to lead meetings, to delegate, to identify gifts and abilities and to equip lay people to serve more actively in their parishes. Priests also need to be helped to appreciate the call of the laity to holiness and their vocation in the Church. Others mentioned the need to have a radically rethink on seminaries.

Fears were expressed that the opinions of the laity will be watered down at the higher levels of the Church in Ireland so as to reflect the views of the hierarchy and the direction in which the bishops wish to take the Church.

Speaking Out

Some people felt confident that they could make their views known to their local priests and others were satisfied that their parish pastoral councils provided forums for airing their concerns. The majority of respondents were critical of the opportunities for articulating their views.

Approximately 36% of respondents said very explicitly that there was no forum for them to speak out in the Church and some of these said that unless you agreed with Church teaching it was not easy to speak freely. Another 30% spoke very positively about being able to speak to their priests whom they always found approachable and understanding. About 10% noted that they could bring their concerns to their parish pastoral councils or other committees in their parishes, while others commented that there was neither a pastoral or finance council in the parish, and in some cases that these had been disbanded. A small number mentioned confession as an opportunity to articulate one's views.

Questions were raised by some regarding the composition of the various parish committees / councils: in some cases it was observed that the same personnel were in place for too long; in others that those consulted were usually teachers or those in authority; that an older age group, often with traditional views, "with a lifelong habit of passivity" are in the majority on these committees; there is a lack of reporting or feedback from these groups. A number of people said that critical views were not entertained or that "I was heard but not listened to". Some observed that these bodies are ineffective because that are often seen as simply implementing the views of the clergy.

A number of suggestions were made with respect to fresh opportunities for speaking out. Among them were: having a suggestion box in the church; having regular open meetings in the parish; ensuring that there is a Parish Pastoral Council in the parish; write to or text a member of the PPC with your views; that members of the PPC actively consult parishioners about the issues to be discussed; personal invitations to be extended to more people to become more actively engaged in parish activities; provide regular feedback from parish meetings; have a theologian speak to the parish and answer questions on contemporary issues; provide an opportunity on the parish or diocesan websites for people to air their views.

Celebration

The issue of liturgical celebrations figured very strongly in most of the respondents' comments. A significant number of people expressed the view that their regular attendance at Mass was a source of nourishment and inspiration for them in living the life of faith. They felt supported by the presence and friendship of others. It was acknowledged that special occasions such as weddings, funerals, First Communions, Confirmations and Graduation Masses in schools can be significant times for people to engage with the liturgical life of the Church and be inspired by the celebrations.

Others focused on popular devotions that have helped them or that they were recommending to be given more prominence in the life of the Church. These included: the rosary, stations of the cross, Eucharistic adoration or holy hours, processions, such as Corpus Christi or May, novenas and first Fridays. Some mentioned that popular publications such as *The Far East*, *Africa*, *St Martin de Porres*, *The Messenger*, etc., were helpful and opened up windows on the worldwide Church, providing encouragement and inspiration. Parish missions or weekend retreats were thought to be important by a sizeable number of respondents.

A very significant number of people spoke of the need to address the issue of the readings used in the liturgy and more broadly the use of archaic language in the liturgy. It was felt that the readings in the lectionary are far too inaccessible to people and that they don't speak to them in any significant way. In some instances these difficulties were mentioned as a reason why young people are alienated from participation in the liturgy and young people themselves mentioned the issue of language in the liturgy as an obstacle to their involvement. Guest speakers or inspirational figures might be invited to address congregations on special occasions to testify to their faith. The possibility of having concerts in the churches might be explored as a way of creating an awareness of the joy of the life of faith.

A number of people suggested that there is need for greater faith formation at all levels. Some noted that the catechesis at primary level was weak and even weaker at second level. It was suggested by several respondents that serious thought should be given for preparation for the sacraments of initiation outside of the school context. Several others spoke of the need for adult faith formation, bible study groups or groups to meet to reflect on the readings at

Mass, such as gospel enquiry groups. The Sunday homily occasioned significant comment: some expressed the need for homilies that speak to the lived experience of people's lives, that the language be clear and direct and that the message be presented succinctly and not that it not be protracted.

Numerous positive suggestions were offered as to how significant liturgical celebrations might be made available in parishes. There was significant emphasis on the availability of popular devotions, as noted above. Concern was expressed about the lack of involvement by young people – teenagers and young parents. In response to this, it was recommended that family Masses be celebrated regularly in parishes; that the family members, especially younger ones, be actively involved in the liturgy as readers, gift bearers, preparation of the sacred spaces, etc. It was thought that by involving children more actively, parents would be encouraged to become more engaged on a regular basis. In this context, too, it was suggested that the choice of music was important, that it be celebratory and speak to a younger generation. Choirs, especially involving younger people, were regarded by many as significant to improving the quality of liturgies, as well as encouraging congregational singing. Many suggested that more people need to be involved in the liturgical action as readers, offering the prayer of the faithful, bearing the gifts to the altar, preparing the liturgical spaces, as part of a welcoming or hospitality group and as ushers. In all of these activities, a personal invitation to involvement was considered vital.

Significant emphasis was given to having a wide variety of special liturgies, e.g., to mark important events in the lives of people – baptismal and wedding anniversaries, healing Masses or public celebrations of the Sacrament of the Sick, Masses or liturgies near examination times, cemetery Sundays, women's prayer days, a grandparents Mass. Pilgrimages were mentioned by some, especially to Knock, Lourdes and local sites such as holy wells, shrines, monastic sites and Mass rocks. The revival of Station Masses or neighbourhood Masses was also mentioned. The blessing of animals was suggested as a way to reach younger children, particularly the blessing of pets.

The importance of the sacrament of reconciliation was noted and many approaches were suggested. Some were quite traditional, recommending regular, individual confessions. Others would like to see more communal celebrations of the sacrament and quite a few wanted the option of general absolution on a reasonably regular basis.

In light of the experiences during the Covid pandemic, several people mentioned the value of the live-streamed Masses and prayer services from the parish. It was suggested that further developments with the use of webcams and other social media platforms be used to reach out to people who may not be regularly attending Church. Within the churches, too, better use could be made of technologies, using screens and interactive technologies, and recording events so as to be available later on podcasts or other outlets. Again, this was considered to be an important dimension of reaching out to and evangelising younger generations.

Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission

It was observed that Ireland is now mission territory since only between 10% and 20% attend Mass weekly. Mission territory therefore demands new tactics. It was suggested that we could learn from other parts of the Church how to evangelise and, in this regard, we might engage more actively with our own missionaries who have worked abroad. They might provide a fresh stimulus and more creative ideas on evangelisation.

Some noted that our people have no sense of mission because “we do not offer a vision, we don’t talk about how all Catholics through baptism have a calling / vocation to be missionary / intentional disciples. Unless Catholics grasp having a personal relationship with Christ, motivation to participate will exist less and less as people think there is nothing left to exist for”.

Laudato Si provided stimulation for a number of respondents to draw attention to the need for the Church to be more proactive in addressing issues pertaining to environmental protection. This was high on the agenda of younger respondents. It was suggested that, apart from teaching the importance of environmental issues in school contexts, more needs to be done at parish and diocesan levels to promote the thinking in the encyclical.

The social outreach of the Church was regarded as important and a number of respondents noted that the life of faith had to find a social expression at local level. Younger respondents were concerned about the plight of refugees from the Ukraine and wondered what the Pope might do to negotiate with world leaders to ameliorate the situation. They also thought it important that there be public prayer for all those involved and suffering as a result of the conflict.

The valuable work of voluntary groups like the St Vincent de Paul Society and

the Legion of Mary who reach out to people who are on the margins or isolated, who visit the elderly and deliver meals on wheels was commented upon favourably.

Concern was expressed that the Church is not sufficiently proactive in reaching out to the LGBT+ community. The testimony of one older gay man highlighted the sense of fear, isolation and loneliness experienced by people in this community bore witness to the reality of their situation in many instances. Younger respondents drew attention to the importance of this agenda and would like to hear the Pope speak about it again.

Some people commented on the wealth of the Church, especially the Vatican, and wondered if some of this could be shared with poorer parts of the world. Others thought that more should be done to compensate those who had been abused by Church personnel in the past, that surplus monies might be allocated for this purpose.

Suggestions were made that cultural and festive events might be organised by parishes to provide a welcome and hospitality for new comers to an area and that such events might also help to build up a community spirit at a local level.

Dialogue in Church and Society

Many of the topics pertinent to this heading have already been addressed above, under the 'Listening' heading.

This observation was registered by one respondent:

It is difficult for the church leadership to get reconnected with the people especially when the church leadership was disconnected during what is known as the scandals and has not subsequently reconnected with the people. This wedge or divide was vigorously pursued by successive governments and particularly by the mainstream media. Everything Catholic was attacked. As a result the church leadership are more inclined to align rather than question government thinking.

Views were expressed that the Church allows its schools to embrace LGBT+ ideologies when proposed by the government and that this should be challenged.

It was suggested that instead of investing heavily in buildings and plant that more should be invested in the formation of the laity, in a way that is

consistent with the vision of Vatican II.

Some people thought that community projects are a good way to involve people in parish life, for example, identifying a charitable cause and inviting people to come up with ideas to involve themselves in worthy causes. As was noted above, there is a notable concern with social issues both nationally and internationally, but very specific suggestions were not made.

Exchanges between the local diocese and one in a developing country was mentioned as a way to broaden horizons for people. The idea of twinning with a diocese in Africa was suggested:

Imagine national school children and second level children in Achonry Diocese sharing, books etc and learning about the lives of their little brothers and sisters in of similar age in Africa. Also imagine the adults in Achonry diocese contributing to development in a diocese in Africa with funds, education etc. Two-way flow of information with modern tech videos etc. Person to person contact trumps putting €10, €20 or €100 in an envelope and not knowing where it went or what use was made of it. Surely a priest from the Achonry diocese can be identified in a suitable rural area in say Africa which could be a match for Achonry diocese.

Ecumenism

Since the diocese of Achonry is predominantly Catholic opportunities for ecumenical exchanges are relatively limited. However, it was recorded that a number of ecumenical events do occur, such as, participation in the Harvest Thanksgiving liturgies and Carol Services during the Christmas Season. In one parish, with a significant Muslim population, visits by the priests to the EROC centre take place and those who were interested were invited to the parish church for visits. Most people, however, did not seem to be aware of the events that do take place, with the exception of official openings and blessings of community buildings or services.

Concrete suggestions were made as to how relationships might be further fostered between the Churches. Among these were: to invite the Church of Ireland bishop to address a diocesan gathering; setting aside a sense of superiority about doctrines would help; to explain better to parishioners the

differences in teachings among the Churches; to stress what we have in common and enable people to feel comfortable engaging with one another; events happening in other Churches could be published in parish newsletters; to work with other Churches to ensure that all of our children have a safe place in which to grow up; to know one's own faith better so as to engage more positively with Christians of other traditions.

Authority and Participation

There was a general impression that decision making and authority were exercised by priests and bishops. While there were positive expressions of support for the work of parish pastoral councils in a number of instances, there seemed to be a significant level of discontent with the processes of decision-making and the exercise of authority at all levels in the Church. A minority considered it the sole responsibility of the magisterium to make decisions for the whole Church and regarded "participation in decision-making as dangerous".

A very significant proportion of the responses articulated the need for women to more seriously involved in decision-making at the highest levels and this included their being admitted to the sacrament of orders. Among second level students, a very high proportion regarded the ordination of women as the most important issue for the consideration by the Pope, followed by allowing for a married clergy.

Others thought that having "family orientated people" involved in the highest level of decision-making would have spared the Church some of the scandals that have deeply wounded it and "brought it to its present diminished state".

As noted earlier, some suggested that priests need to be better trained and equipped to deal with a more participative style of leadership. Parish teams need to be supported in collaborative practices, trust has to be built up among them, they need to be given scope to express their talents and competencies. Parishes can draw on the expertise of parishioners who are familiar with running businesses or public services to assist them in practising collaborative leadership and ministry.

It was proposed by some respondents that parish pastoral councils need to be more active, open to the variety of situations in their parishes, to invite ideas

from parishioners and especially to include younger people in their membership. Parishioners should be invited to submit items for the agenda of the pastoral councils and regular reports of their meetings should be published. The importance of rotating the membership of the councils was recommended; the fact that some people appear to be in place too long keeps others from being interested in participating in the councils. The fact that so much of the activity of the councils appears to be done secretively often contributed to disillusionment about how the Church is administered.

The importance of Finance Councils in parishes was noted and the need for transparency regarding parish and diocesan finances was mentioned on a number of occasions.

Discerning and Deciding

The concept of discernment is relatively new to most people and did not feature as a term in any of the responses. However, in recent meetings of the Diocesan Pastoral Leadership Team, in the group meetings that were held in preparation for this report, as well as by those compiling the synthesis, there was a modest engagement with a process of discernment. All of the meetings were preceded by a prayerful reflection on a scriptural text that allowed those participating to focus on the vision and values of the Kingdom of God and the action of the Holy Spirit among them. It is hoped that these processes will be further refined as an awareness of the value of discernment grows among the people.

Conclusion

It was very obvious from the written responses and from the open meetings during this consultation phase of the synodal pathway process that people were really pleased to have been offered the opportunity to share their views about the life of the Church as they currently experience it. On many occasions, people expressed the hope that similar opportunities would be offered to them again. There is a strong desire, then, for greater openness, transparency and accountability in the way the Church is governed and administered. There was a genuine appreciation for the importance of Church doctrine but an awareness that there is much by way of practice that is in need of radical change. The outcome of the consultations could be summarised in the following list of

recommendations that follow.

There is need for the sacrament of baptism to be better presented so that people have a real sense that they are the Church with responsibilities for its life and mission.

There is need for much better faith formation at all levels – adults and children - with many recommending faith formation be available outside the school setting, especially in the context of sacramental preparation.

Young people have to be involved more actively, by way of invitation, in the life of the parish, for example, as readers, offering the bidding prayers, choir members, Eucharistic ministers, decorating the church building or other activities. Youth Masses might be made available, with appropriate music and hospitality. Other opportunities might be the encouragement of their participation in the John Paul II awards, Youth 2000 or offered retreats by Net Ministries. They could be offered more credible reasons for being engaged with the life of faith and its practices. The importance of establishing and maintaining contact with young parents is an important way of reaching out to younger generations. Involving their children in the liturgy is a way of encouraging their parents to become involved.

Parish churches might become more welcoming and hospitable. This could include: providing a welcome pack for new comers to the parish; having a ministry of welcome or a welcoming committee in each parish; offering a cup of tea / coffee after Mass. The Legion of Mary or other groups might offer a welcome to those who are new comers to a parish.

The place of women in the Church needs serious review: that they might find a more respectful role in the life of the Church; have greater roles in decision-making at the highest levels; and that they be admitted to the diaconate and priesthood.

Conscious of the shortage of ordained priests, it was suggested that more effort be put into fostering vocations to priesthood and religious life. In this context, the removal of the obligation of mandatory celibacy recurred as a theme.

Pastoral Councils need to be much more representative of the people of the parish. Decisions made by the PPC might be better publicised, e.g., through the parish newsletter with a regular report of its activity. It might be helpful to do a survey as to why people have left the Church.

There was a suggestion that there be a fixed term of office for bishops – say, 10

years. Similarly, that there be an option for priests to be ordained to minister for a defined number of years. The hierarchy need to relinquish some of their control and not to operate in a top down fashion. The bishops also need to be more contrite re the scandals of the past. If they showed more empathy for victims, more people would be willing to engage with them and the Church.

The language of the liturgy needs to be more accessible and modernised to speak to contemporary congregations. Some suggested reducing the number of readings at Mass. Occasions such as wedding and funerals can be treated as key moments of evangelisation. Homilies should speak to the ordinary concerns of people in accessible language.

The importance of modern means of communication has to be taken more seriously. The adaptations made during the Covid pandemic demonstrated how effective these can be. These included live-streaming Masses, the use of WhatsApp groups, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, podcasts and other social media.