

# Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora

## Universal Synod | Synthesis



## INTRODUCTION

Emboldened by the call of Pope Francis, the Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora embarked on a Synodal Pathway in October 2021. It began a time of reflection, discussion and listening aimed at helping the people of the diocese “*journey together*” as a Church in the years ahead. As Pope Francis expressed it, the purpose of the Synodal Pathway is to “*spend time with the future*”<sup>1</sup>.

The first stage was forming a diocesan synodal team. This group consisted of both laity and clergy, with an equal number of male and female members. The team attended the training sessions both in person and online. This paved the way for the synodal team to launch the diocesan phase and discuss which approaches would be the most effective for this diocese to respond to the ten themes, as set out by the Universal Synod in Rome.

The entire People of God shares a common dignity and vocation through Baptism. All of us are called in virtue of our Baptism to be active participants in the life of the Church. The first phase of the Synodal Process is “*a listening phase in local Churches*” aimed at “*fostering a lived experience of discernment, participation, and co-responsibility.*”

With this vision in mind, the diocesan synodal team decided to reach out to as many people as possible by using different methods; parish meetings and an online survey which also allowed for written submissions. Meanwhile, in parallel with this, a webpage was set up and populated with information and resources. A designated diocesan synodal email was also created to provide a private means for people to freely share their thoughts. The clergy were consulted and encouraged to engage with as many people as they could, both within and outside of their community; as well as publicising the Synodal Pathway.

Ten meetings, encompassing seventeen parishes, across a diocese with thirty-nine parishes took place. In some cases, parishes combined to hold one meeting. These meetings were spread out over the three-month diocesan phase. This offered the opportunity for people to share with their fellow parishioners and people in the neighbouring locality. Parishes and communities were asked to consider some of the ten themes. These gatherings yielded a number of striking statements which appear as quotes throughout the report.

In addition to the parish meetings, the diocesan synodal team decided to conduct a survey on faith in the context of the lived experience. We are all aware of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on church communities over the past two years, and we believed the return to full congregations would be a slow process. Parish meetings would not be, as yet a comfortable setting for all that wished to be involved. Undertaking the survey we hoped, would reach as many as possible, where respondents would be able to contribute to the listening process in the comfort and safety of their own homes.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, 3 Oct 2018

At the end of the diocesan phase, various diagnostics were carried out on the survey, the comment boxes, and minutes of all the in-person meetings. People who attended parish meetings are referred to as contributors or participants in this report. People who completed the survey are referred to as respondents. The syntheses gathered is structured to reflect the journey of faith, starting with the sacraments of initiation, and moving on to aspects of adult formation. Finally, an analysis of the Church and its practices conclude the findings. Within these, the current situation, challenges and hopes for the future are explored.

## FAITH AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE

The sacraments of initiation, Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation are the foundations of faith. Not only can they be seen as landmarks in one's journey of faith, but more importantly they initiate us in the life of grace, without which we cannot grow in holiness or virtue. Pope Francis in *Lumen Fidei* reminds us that in baptism "*children are not capable of accepting the faith by a free act, nor are they yet able to profess that faith on their own*", indeed at baptism their faith is professed for them and safeguarded, primarily, by their parents. This leads to the question what other individuals/entities can encourage, nourish, and support young people as they take these significant steps in their journey of faith? Through the contributions at the various parish meetings and individual comments on the synodal survey many have shared their opinions and thoughts on the current situation and future hopes.

One of the failures identified is that the celebration of Sacraments of Initiation has not led to a sacramental life or a daily life of faith. One survey respondent states these celebrations are "*blessed occasions, but a weakness within the Church is such celebrations are once off occasions*", 'once off' in the sense that families often avail of the sacraments, such as First Communion, as landmark occasions in the life of their child but fail to see them as landmarks in the journey of faith. Another respondent echoed this isolated celebration "*when they do their First Communion and {first} confession it's sometimes their last {time in church} until their confirmation - which is just a money collection day.*"

In many cases Confirmation is viewed as the "*exit point*". This is in contrast to Pope Francis' hope that the sacraments are the "*special means for passing down this fullness, a means capable of engaging the entire person, body and spirit, interior life and relationships with others.*"

Some survey respondents believed the isolation of the sacraments to mere events was a result of poor formation, some commented that little is done to support young people to grow in faith after they receive the sacraments. It was viewed that schools alone were left with the responsibility of faith formation for young people. This over-reliance on schools means that for many young people their only experience of Catholic community is through their school rather than the Church. Schools cannot be left with this responsibility. It was widely accepted and acknowledged, the work that has been done down

through the years by dedicated religious education teachers, both at primary and secondary levels of education. There will be a need in the future to more actively support these in their work.

Faith formation within schools does not guarantee success. As one contributor at a parish meeting stated, *“my children’s and grandchildren’s generation, despite they were all in good Catholic schools, don’t demonstrate much enthusiasm practicing their faith.”* Another participant added *“there are teachers who do not believe and are unable to pass on the true meaning of Faith.”* A contributor via the designated private email noted, *“I’m not sure that the hierarchy generally have a real sense of how indifferent the younger generation are to the Church.”* This lack of awareness has already had grave and lasting consequences.

The need for ongoing faith formation programmes at all levels was a common view expressed. One respondent of the survey highlighted the urgency and importance of faith formation: *“these services need to be given the same priority as the provision of sacraments.”*

Ideas for how the faith formation of the young could be achieved were expressed. Chief among them was the suggestion that it should not rely on the staff of Catholic schools. Instead, priests or a dedicated layperson should visit schools during instruction time. Another participant felt that religion should not be taught in schools at all. A realisation that priests have a heavy workload was also acknowledged, as one respondent put it, *“I know priests are busy, but these children are the future, so they have to be encouraged to receive the sacraments.”*

From a parish level, Sunday schools and children faith groups were seen as a way to provide an opportunity for young people to express their faith and to have it nurtured. In contrast, one contributor felt that the responsibility of faith formation lay at home and not with teachers or priests. No matter which side of the argument; priests, teachers, or families, it is clear that resources need to be set aside for faith formation.

A contributor at a parish meeting gave the stark realisation that this synod has come *“forty years too late”*. Let this not be repeated in another forty years. This fear was echoed by a survey respondent who stated: *“these baptised members of the church {young people} must be heard if everyone is to have their say. If they are forever lost to the church, its future is severely compromised.”* The Church being too late was also echoed in the issues regarding clerical and institutional abuse. As one respondent reflected: *“I believe that radical changes to governance are required to adequately deal with the church’s biggest systemic challenge ... largely attributable to the ongoing legacy of clerical child sexual abuse and institutional abuse in church-run institutions and their systemic cover-up over decades. I believe that the church has yet to demonstrate true remorse for these historical wrongs by adequately meeting the needs of survivors and their families.”*

## FAITH FORMATION INTO ADULTHOOD

The importance of faith and faith formation was stressed time and time again at all the meetings. “*Faith is life*”, someone stated. Faith was also seen as something that gives peace and strength in the rat-race of life. However, the need for a deeper understanding of our Christian faith was seen as being urgent in order to enable us to genuinely witness to what we believe.

A huge concern was the handing on of the faith. People were conscious of the ‘*lost generations*’, most of whom had gone through Catholic schools. Whatever the Synod (Universal and Irish) eventually examines, the whole area of faith formation will need to be looked at. It was stated that the Church needs to market what it has to offer, especially if we are to connect with the marginalised and disenfranchised. Faith formation will have to take on the challenge in a world where social media promotes ‘*fake news*’ and continually sees the Church in a negative light. How will the next generation be taught or educated about their faith?

The questions about faith itself have to be answered in the Church of the future; and there is a huge need to see that faith expressed in action. More and more we are living in a secular society and the Christian faith is being diluted. It was remarked that even on the Irish census form the first box to tick under ‘*What is your religion if any?*’ was ‘*No religion*’.

The Christian message has to be delivered and proclaimed in an “*inviting way*”, especially if we are trying to make sure that no one is excluded. Our message of faith has to be proclaimed and taught in a way that ALL feel they are accepted and part of this community we call Church. In light of this, faith formation will need to be more pro-active. We will have to develop an authentic programme at a diocesan level. For this to happen, real leadership will have to be in place — not just people doing jobs or filling in gaps! We have to make our faith authentic and real.

The importance of the family was seen as being paramount in all of this. The example set in the home spreads out to the wider community. If families are not on board and supported, we are going nowhere. Faith is our life, and it is from the family that vocations come. It was stated that there is a real crisis of faith and belief in our Church. There is a generation out there who just does not feel connected to the Church on any level, faith or otherwise.

As part of any faith formation programme, people will need to be educated in their understanding of the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation. A deeper formation is needed “*to explain the beauty of these sacraments and their importance in our faith journey.*”

The importance of the Sunday homily was also stressed. As an expression of our lived faith, the Sunday Eucharist has to be celebrated in a more engaging manner. The whole area of liturgy needs to be examined, with special attention being given to choirs and liturgical music in general. We need to

make the connection between the Eucharist and the daily life of each and every one of us. This is one of the major ways in which our faith grows.

There was no doubt that faith formation/education is needed for all age groups. Bible courses would help here. Only with a proper and ongoing faith formation will we be able to show, by our lives, the faith we claim to profess. It was noted that we live out our faith by practicing what we believe when we exit our church buildings.

As part of our adult faith formation, we should be made aware of the traditions behind our faith, especially our Jewish heritage. We should not shy away from the vast resources that are available to help us to understand and give witness to our faith. The message of faith has to be delivered in a way that is in touch with real life; it is not just any old message — it is good news!

In the future our churches will probably be smaller community gatherings, and while Eucharist will be paramount, we must find a place for prayer/scripture services and services of the Word with Holy Communion. All of this will be a challenge as to how we live and witness to our faith.

It was said that the desire is there for a genuine reform and renewal of our Church, and that our faith witness is going to be all the more important in the consumerist society in which we live. A lived faith requires that we not be afraid *“to review {the Church’s} ‘man-made’ doctrines, dogmas, and traditions, which evolved over the centuries”*.

At the level of catechesis there seems to be a lack of understanding of what our faith is all about; some even expressed the belief that the Catechism of the Church needs a complete rewrite. If faith formation is to improve, there needs to be a new Evangelisation. This new Evangelisation, under the guidance of the bishop, will be the responsibility of everyone so as to encourage a more distributive model of leadership and Synodal Church.

One of the solutions to the lack of faith formation could be the Alpha Programme in our parishes. Ultimately, we have to ask *“are we capable of thinking creatively in a world where we have to compete with so many other things?”* Another issue is prayer — the opinion was voiced that we are not praying enough.

As far as faith is concerned, we need to examine how we are helping people to have a spiritual dimension in their lives. To help with faith formation, would it not be good to have a Spirit Seminar or an Evangelisation course in every parish? The faith formation of the future will have to focus on *“belief in Jesus and belief that there is something good on offer.”*

What is very apparent from this synodal listening process is the desire and appetite for enriching our lives with the Word of God, and to a certain extent the built-up frustration among the contributors at the parish meetings to the intransigence of the Church over the past decades. This is consistent with

the respondents to the survey, the remote listening process we undertook in anticipation of the ongoing disruption to the normal activities of church communities, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## THE DIOCESAN SURVEY

The diocesan synodal team set out to structure the survey based on our faith as a lived experience. The thought process which guided the creation of the survey centred around questions which included: How is your faith being nourished in your church community? How is your church community represented in society today? How do you see your faith journey progress and how can your church community support you? What role do you want your church community to have in shaping society?

The survey comprised a total of thirty-three statements subdivided under the ten themes provided by the Universal Synod in Rome<sup>2</sup>. For example, under theme six “*Dialogue in Christian Community and Society*”, we selected four direct quotes<sup>3</sup> from the Encyclical Letter “*Laudato Si*” for the survey statements.

Respondents were asked to reflect on these statements in the context of their faith journey. A choice from five responses was available for each statement which ranged from ‘*strongly disagree*’ to ‘*strongly agree*’. Furthermore, the respondents were provided with an open text box at the end of the survey to provide their own feedback. Respondents also had an option to submit further information using a dedicated synodality email address set up for the diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora. The diocesan synodal team took the decision that this survey would be open to anonymous participation.

The universal synod survey for the diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora opened on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2022 and remained open for eight weeks. The survey was available, in both Irish and English languages, online and in paper format in each parish church.

The engagement with the survey exceeded our expectations. There was a total of 377 respondents to this survey, representing about 0.36% of the diocesan church communities in Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora, or an average of 9.7 respondents per parish. The sample size exceeds a confidence level of 90% with a margin of error of 5% and is therefore representative of the diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora. Around two-thirds (68%) of the responses were received through the online survey. What is noteworthy is the consistency in the number of responses with comments (51%) regardless of format - online or paper.

The key findings from the survey are summarised as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Vademecum {Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches: First Phase [October 2021 – April 2022]}

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter “*Laudato Si*” (2015), extracted from Paragraphs 196, 204, & 229



- ❖ The majority (79%) of respondents experience of church is a community in which they attend Mass. For the majority (81%) of those, the celebration of Mass is a reverent, uplifting and sacred experience.
- ❖ Less than half (42%) of respondents believe they are listened to in their church community, while the majority (85%) of respondents feel their church community would benefit greatly if there were more opportunities to share views. Approximately half (51%) of respondents took the opportunity to share their personal views as part of this anonymous survey.
- ❖ The majority (76%) of respondents are of the understanding that their church is a community where no one is excluded. However, less than half (49%) of respondents believe as a Christian community we are open to the opinions and experiences of all in our society.
- ❖ Only one third (32%) of respondents experience both dialogue and participation in the decision-making processes in their church community with over half (53%) of respondents experiencing a lack of transparency in the decision-making process.
- ❖ Less than half (41%) of respondents believe that current services in our church community do not meet today's needs. The majority (79%) of respondents agree however, that the delivery of faith formation programs to enrich our lives is the responsibility of church community leaders.
- ❖ Most (90%) respondents believe we all need to participate in speaking on behalf of our Christian community and less than half (47%) of respondents find it difficult to express Christian values in today's society. Furthermore, the majority (73%) of respondents agree with Pope Francis when he says *“We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty. It is time to acknowledge that light-hearted superficiality has done us no good.”*<sup>4</sup>

The detailed results from the survey, included in the Appendices<sup>5</sup>, provide a rich base from which we will seek much guidance in advancing the synodal process in the diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora over the coming months and years. Being optimistic about the future of our church communities is not unfounded. However, this Synodal journey will be presented with many challenges, many of those highlighted by the respondents; *“I am indebted to a church I love but which has ceased to be relevant in many ways.”* And again, *“In today's Ireland there are several types of families.”* Another respondent aptly captured this when they said: *“The God I know and love is there holding out his hand to all of us and yet so much distraction, blindness and self-centredness seems to be spreading ... all at great speed.”* The *‘Church we dream of’* might well be grounded in the general findings from the survey:

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter “Laudato Si” (2015), Para 229

<sup>5</sup> “Diocese of Galway Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora Universal Synod | Appendices\_220522”.pdf



- ❖ Over 85% of respondents agree that *“we are all individually responsible in the church community to ensure no one is excluded”*.
- ❖ As a person of faith 73% of respondents want to help others to live out their service to society in a missionary way.
- ❖ Almost 84% of respondents agree that their church community should participate in initiatives to strengthen and encourage ecumenical partnerships.
- ❖ The majority (94%) of respondents agree that *“a Christian community must learn ways to be more capable of listening to one another, participating in mission, and engaging in dialogue”*.

Furthermore, as one respondent commented, *“our discipleship must be inclusive and relevant to our times and social norms”*. For change to happen, perhaps the experience of just over half (53%) of respondents that decision-making has not been transparent in their church community needs to be more reflective of inclusiveness in the *‘Church we dream of’*. This is supported by 89% of respondents who agree with the statement *“A Christian community grows stronger in unity when decision making is participatory, and accountability is clearly identified.”*

Throughout the listening process the role of women in the *‘Church we dream of’* has been voiced. One respondent captured that sentiment succinctly when they said *“Women have a bigger role to play in the church. The church has relied on women in parishes for centuries for ‘housekeeping’ tasks. However, the church should now be cognisant of the role that women can play in pastoral care and day to day worship in parishes. Women have nurtured the faith through the ages, have passed it on from generation to generation. With the decline in vocations there is a wider role for them in the Church.”*

In addition, the many issues raised by respondents included, *“... an inconsistency in the Church’s message and what they perceive to be Christ’s inclusive message to the LGBT community... an inconsistency in the Church’s position on family planning and how it proposes to respond to poverty and climate change.”* Yet, the majority (90%) of respondents agree with the statement that *“we all need to participate in speaking on behalf of our Christian community”*.

Respondents highlighted that *“there is a reducing number of priests”*, while another suggested that *“all ministries should be open to celibate and married persons”* and that *“our bishops should be elected by their diocese and not selected by Rome”*.

Notwithstanding the number of parishes this synodal team has already engaged with, there is still much more to do to hear from all voices in our society, which we will address in the next phase. Meanwhile we wish to thank all those who have already joined us on this journey.

In this regard, the synthesis we have undertaken is reflective of the feedback we received as part of this initial Synodal process. It would be impossible to include each unique contribution in such a

condensed document. However, all the feedback received is important to the diocesan synodal team and will form the basis for the next stage on our diocesan synodal journey. The consensus of those involved in this initial listening process is best captured by another respondent when they said, *“I think the Church I grew up with my parents is totally different to one I experience today. It was a pleasure to be asked to have an opportunity to participate in this synodal journey Pope Francis has initiated. I hope and pray this is the beginning of a new Church in the years ahead”*.