

Synodal Conversations Recorder Notes

20, 26,31 January 2022 St Osmund's Salisbury

Fundamental Question

- Reactions varied between feeling the parish is already journeying together, appreciating a distinctive friendliness and warm welcome, to one participant complaining at the lack of provision of the Tridentine mass and feeling excluded , another not recognising 'journeying together' to be part of the 'narrative' of St Osmund's
- A need was recognised for better communication in order to achieve greater participation within the wider community
- Tribute was paid by individual participants to various groups giving them joy(eg Nicodemus, Bible Reading, Rosary, Art)
- Difficulties/obstacles have come from mask-wearing obligations
- To find a group to fit in requires initiative and self-confidence
- Scepticism was expressed: "a noble, interesting idea, but not visible" in practice; a disabled participant felt excluded, contrasting what had been the "optimism of the early 70s" with current alienation
- We need "a push from the Holy Spirit"

Sharing on Listening

- These questions were difficult to answer because of difficulties expressed in listening and contributing to discussion: "having heard, we don't know what to do"; "we can only pray"; "we need to learn to filter so much information and opinion in order to reflect on faith and develop a non-judgemental response"
- There is not sufficient space to listen within the liturgy – for silent reflection on what is 'broadcast' and individual meditation; congregations are 'passive', need more opportunities to meet in small groups for discussion, sharing experiences and needs in their faith journey
- "It is easier to mix with those with whom you have something in common and meet socially." "We are brought together in the Mass, but it is difficult to look outside ourselves." "In the past Catholics were not encouraged to mix with other groups."
- A lack of opportunities to meet and find out about others; "there is little to bring us together", and so hear the "voices we sometimes ignore"; "we feel closed in"; "we feel restrained from moving beyond charitable giving". While "there is plenty of space to engage, it is difficult for others to build trust as they are used to being rejected"
- Concern was expressed for the isolation of those on the peripheries, for retired people without social activity, for the Indian community self-isolating for cultural reasons and having experienced suffering
- Participants spoke of the antagonism towards the Faith and the Church experienced in wider society, or one's immediate family; 'polarisation and tribalism' within the Church; the clamour of "many voices" (eg on the news)
- There is need for compassion, respect for "those we do not agree with" and tact – individuals have different personalities, backgrounds and experiences affecting their feelings and preferences
- Participants spoke of difficulties in accepting other faiths, or the dilemma posed by their all worshipping the same God. The need to address global and inter-faith communication to develop mutual understanding is crucial

- Participants recalled previous initiatives to help the more vulnerable and those lacking in confidence be put in touch with other parishioners, for instance through house groups; an on-line organisation “Parenting for Faith” was recommended, and activities outside the Church such as the soup station for the homeless, where “God is speaking”, “God speaks to the helpers” in conversations with the homeless
- The diversity of our parish churches should be celebrated, and the friendliness, for instance at coffee after Mass. However, “they are friendly if you approach” but more effort needs to be made in welcoming newcomers, for instance before services begin by speaking to neighbours in adjoining pews. “The way you are received is very important”; some potential parishioners have been put off by a perception of “a lack of joy*” Participants spoke of the inhibition of “our national reserve” and the formality of the setting ; and experiences of other congregations, some withdrawn and aloof, others “ready to open out” with “heartening warmth”, “much more open” than here, helping people to want to be at Mass, not from Obligation. However, it was pointed out that more than friendliness is needed to open up discussion : “you open a door: what is behind needs to be pursued”

*this word may have been confused with ‘cheerfulness’, ‘happiness’, ‘warmth’ etc

Sharing on Speaking Out

- Much depends on individual experience, especially in other parishes, or countries, with other priests
- Participants spoke of shyness, of being inarticulate or inhibited in discussion, “not wanting to bother others”; or the fear of speaking out, of being “shot down in flames”, of “saying something that may cause more harm than good”, of “hating argument, so I do not speak up, try to convert others, am not brave enough”, of “entering argument – I don’t know what I should be saying” or “I know what I should be saying but feel a lack of ability to impart my views to others”; a lack of confidence from a lack of knowledge; the fear of “looking a fool”. These attitudes are intensified by the virulence and vilification widespread in social media, and the hindrance of political correctness. One participant felt they had not been and would not be listened to, and referred to disabled parishioners having experienced ‘belittling’ in the past hindering them in speaking up. Another of feeling alone, anxious, excluded by a perceived unwelcoming, ‘cliquey’ congregation.
- The wider culture of our society is ‘egocentric’. “We need to become more outgoing”, “treat one another with more compassion”, “support one another to grow more confident”. We are a *Catholic* body, separated groups must come together and speak out collectively.
- There was criticism of a passive culture from a “dependence relationship on the priest”. Experiences in different parishes vary widely : some priests welcome views being “brought out into the open”, want the laity to be more relaxed, less deferential than in the past; others do not. Tribute was made collectively to our parishes’ priests and deacons, to being able to “talk through and clarify problems”, how meetings are “candid”.
- Participants paid tribute to the value of these Synodal conversations, but one felt them to be unique : “we don’t normally participate in such sessions as this”. Another felt the need of more meetings for formal review and discussion outside of what is prescribed by the hierarchy of the Church (see below)
- There are many opportunities to express views informally within the friendly parish groups, to “speak to those you know”, but it is difficult to reach out to the ‘inactive’ when you don’t know who they are. The terms ‘active’ and ‘inactive’ were not considered helpful as individuals can be ‘inactive’ when attending Mass regularly while those not in church can be more ‘active’ in the home or community.
- It was suggested that some parishioners with experience of responsibility and leadership could take a lead in helping the shy and inactive to be more open and confident.

Communication with the inactive needs to be strengthened, for instance targeted mailings and invitations to social events; parish visiting, for instance to neighbours who are known to be 'lapsed Catholics' to encourage them to return to their spiritual home.

- The importance of close links with schools was emphasised, and the need to work with parents. The First Communion programme is making such an approach to catechesis
- From outside, the Church appears odd, alien, unapproachable. The current structure of the Church is top-down, remote, intimidating, prevents/inhibits initiative and journeying together, hindering communication. It is not sufficiently outgoing; does not consult parishioners' opinions enough [outside the current synodal conversation], causing scepticism about its effectiveness, with memories of previous attempts to engage the laity that had no discernible effect; cynicism about a defensive hierarchy that is even (eg in the USA) antagonistic towards the Pope
- A monastic repositioning was proposed, the parish church serving as a hub encouraging a plethora of small groups to grow in faith and evangelisation. However, another participant referred to a danger in groups becoming 'cliquey', exclusive

Sharing on Sharing Responsibility for our Common Mission and Sharing Authority and Participation

- Participants praised the Salisbury Catholic Churches website, for its range of information and accessibility – 'wonderful', 'extraordinary', 'so much there', 'a shared home' that 'takes the Mission out' into the community, encouraging participation. Tribute was paid to the hard work achieving effective and valued communication together with the newsletters, especially important during recent months of Covid-induced isolation; participants lamented the close social contacts of former years. Outreach can only function on an individual basis, as good neighbours by telephone and knocking doors. However, "much is going on despite Covid", the parishes have "a good, active life".
- Tribute was paid to the willingness and responsiveness of volunteers, particularly the stewards during the Covid restrictions; and to the administrative staff's efficiency and helpfulness. It would be helpful to review and clarify the roles and contributions of volunteers (reading etc) and paid staff as part of a process to encourage wider involvement of the laity
- Many participants agreed that while "there is every opportunity to become involved", "people are not caught up in the Mission", "many see the Church as a service." Criticism was made of a passive acceptance of 'the same people' carrying the burden of essential tasks and using initiative, of apathy, the excuse of being 'too busy'.
- However, it was appreciated that in a rapidly changing society, with married couples working shifts causing problems in managing time, especially in young families (eg in arranging babysitting), there are competing priorities. "The parish is not the centre of the world"; people are actively involved in charitable organisations; there are many clubs, sport and other activities competing for the attention of families. It is necessary to respond to and accommodate such pressures in the organisation of events and social activities. Equally the needs of the lonely and vulnerable continue to be of paramount importance. Suggestions were made for expanding outreach activities, building on the success of door to door leafleting and individual contact with neighbours at Christmas and Easter. The initiative of the Nicodemus group meetings was praised and seen as a model for development of outreach activity.
- The hierarchy of the parishes and diocese were regarded as approachable, informal and helpful. Responsibility for safeguarding at each mass, for health and safety, financial probity, property, Canon Law etc is regularised across the parishes. There is good teamwork and co-responsibility for governance established among the clergy, with 'huge progress' made in

addressing accountability. Regular meetings are to be introduced to facilitate wider involvement in review and decision-making. “The Mission moves as society moves”.

Sharing on Discerning and Deciding

- No participant was aware of any Parish Council members, so could only be involved in the implementation rather than making of decisions. While many baptised members attend church, few are involved in decision-making, regard it happens “higher up the hierarchy”.
- It was therefore not possible to answer how decisions help the community, for instance charitable collections.
- When the Parish Councils are established, it will be important to know the identity of members and how to access them, and for decisions to be published on the website.

Sharing on Celebration

- The group celebrated the centrality of Mass, “keeping the parish flowing through the year”. Participants shared how they go to Mass to help making personal decisions, “helping me to be more patient”, how their faith journey is inspired by the liturgy and the other people they encounter at Mass and in other activities, within a family atmosphere that has “strengthened over Covid” through daily celebration; the provision of Mass in schools and nursing homes was appreciated.
- The live streaming of Masses was also popular, both within and beyond our parishes. It “has brought people to church”. However, one participant, while ‘comfortable’ with the development, did not feel it aided communication with the inactive or marginalised.
- One participant commented on a positive development in her parish of people returning to participate enthusiastically in worship and shared activities (eg each bringing a stone to contribute to building a grotto, making a rose garden), training (eg in dementia awareness), creating safe spaces for children, and regular group reflection and discussion.
- Exposition of the sacrament is valued as providing a sacred space for contemplation “in peace and quiet”. However, “we miss out if we can only come on a Sunday”. All participants agreed that more time for reflection is needed within and around the liturgy.
- The return of music, especially singing together, was welcomed.

Eric Williams 1 February 2022