

A Synodal Church

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As chair of the synod steering committee my hope for the Church of the future is that it will be one in which synodality is deeply embedded across all areas of Church life. We are still learning about what that might look like in practice. In our synodal journey to date we have seen the transformative power of deep and respectful listening, with positive stories in the media about welcome, hospitality and hope. There have also been disappointments, such as the lack of attention to issues of social justice, both close to home and in the wider world. This article offers some brief reflections on five characteristics of the synodal Church that I hope

we will develop for the future.

An authentic synodal process is Christ-centred. It is about so much more than a good conversation, although this will often be an important part of the experience. Pope Francis has been very clear that a synodal Church is a missional Church — a Church that, rather than being inward-looking and obsessed with its own internal dynamics, is equipping itself to be a field hospital at the service of a wounded society. The invitation to be part of the synodal journey is an invitation to know Christ and experience His healing presence in our lives, while also feeling inspired and supported to

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share that gift with others.

To help us share our faith, we need to better understand the barriers that come between people and the love of Christ, and the role the local parish can play in promoting a culture of welcome and belonging. Already we are seeing that this listening is making our Church more pastorally-sensitive and responsive to the circumstances that are impacting people's lives and wellbeing. During the local listening phase, which took place between October 2021 and April 2022, dioceses took the opportunity to have conversations on the impact of Covid-19, something that was traumatising and isolating for many people. Without the synodal process we may not have been intentional in providing that much-needed space to help us come back together as a community. The winter of 2022 has been dominated by a cost-of-living crisis with a similarly isolating effect which requires great pastoral sensitivity as a community. Synodality provides

us with the tools to open up conversations about these situations and the many others that can leave people feeling marginalised, such as family circumstances, personal relationships, physical or mental health, poverty, unemployment or homelessness. Underlying all of this work is the recognition that we are still coming to terms with the devastating failings in the Church's response to the abuse crisis and the need for focussed attention and training to ensure our local parishes are safe spaces for victims of all violence and abuse.

Ireland's National Synthesis for the Universal Synod notes that the rich resource of the Social Teaching of the Church, did not feature as much as might have been hoped during our synodal conversations of 2021–2022. It is worth reading the global synthesis of the contributions of the over one hundred other bishops' conferences throughout the world, the 'Working Document for the Continental Stage', to be inspired and challenged by the voice of the Church in other parts of the world who speak out of the reality of war, religious persecution, famine and climate breakdown. There is undoubtedly great generosity and service to the poor and most vulnerable in the Irish Church — especially St Vincent de Paul and Trócaire as just two examples — but people are perhaps not being sufficiently supported to connect this work to their spiritual and prayer life and to the work of mission.

Speaking during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2022, Bishop Brian Farrell described the synodal process as an opportunity for every local community to open their doors to 'a new and deeper ecumenical relation



in their area'. Progress on this aspect of the work has been slow to date in Ireland, despite the fact that it promises to greatly enrich our synodal journey through the learning from synodal practices in other denominations, and the hopeful witness of the unity in diversity that is modelled when we come together from our different traditions around our shared faith in Christ.

When I launched Ireland's national synthesis during the Knock novena in August 2022, I shared about an encounter with an Imam who expressed his love for Pope Francis, stating that he considered him 'a unifying figure for peace'. The journalist Gavin Esler was similarly inspired on witnessing the visit of Pope Francis to Bahrain in November 2022. Admitting that he was initially sceptical about what a visit of this nature might achieve, he was deeply moved on seeing the impact of friendships that cross deep divides: 'This was not talk about "diversity". It was diversi-

ty brought alive, with concrete plans to take this message to a wider audience'. By strengthening our sense of our own Christian faith, and equipping us to better share that faith in a multicultural society, the synodal process has the potential to address the fears that can prevent us from offering the hand of friendship to those outside of our faith community.

The guiding question for the national synodal pathway for the Irish Catholic Church is 'What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?' In this article I have outlined some of the responses that arise when I reflect on that question. Everyone reading this will have their own ideas, hopes and priorities. I hope that you have had the opportunity to join the synodal conversation in your parish or diocese, or, if you have not yet, that you will in the near future, because the work of shaping the Church of the future needs your voice and perspective.