

# Synod Parish Feedback – Sacred Heart Parish, Exeter

The Synodal Journey listening phase was undertaken in the Parish during Advent 2021 incorporating a full day in-person event and four Zoom sessions. Thank you to all parishioners who took part in these events and thanks to those who submitted their responses either directly to the Diocese or via the Parish.

This document is a summary of the responses we recorded from the sessions run within the Parish. A record of the contributions has been submitted to the Diocese to feed into the diocesan contribution to the Synodal Journey which in turn will be fed into the [English and Welsh](#) response.

It is intended that the fruits of the Synodal Journey garnered in the Parish will help guide the way forward for Sacred Heart in the future as well as [our Diocese and](#) guiding the global Church. This synodal process is intended to be the start of many such periods of listening and discernment within the Parish.

## Session 1: Listening

### 1. How do I listen to God? How do I listen to others?

We listen through prayer, scripture, homilies, Bible podcasts and following Church teaching. [Some of us benefit from formal spiritual direction.](#) We often listen without hearing, it's difficult to listen properly as we often project what we think God or others are saying, or doubts get in the way, or our minds wander and we focus on self. We also have bias and prejudices so to listen properly it helps to put time aside. How do we know God is speaking and how do we interpret what He says to us? We encounter God in others but we can struggle to be confidently open for an encounter. Our sense of reserve makes it hard to listen and our nervousness in case we will be adversely affected.

### 2. How does our Parish listen to God and listen to others?

Our Parish is very special and many feel at home and part of a community. Others thought the Parish was inward-looking and could be more inviting. The International Mass and Night Fever provide good opportunities for us to look outwards. Interesting questions to consider are: does our Parish make a difference to those outside the four walls of our Church? Would we be missed from Exeter if we "disappeared"? We need to share that our faith makes us joyful and happy, despite feeling inadequately prepared for the task, so we can experience personal encounters with God and others. In order to facilitate encounter we need to know more about our faith; there is a need for spiritual accompaniment. We recognise that the school and the sacraments are places of encounter for those on the fringes of our community. There was acknowledgment that a number of individuals are very active in outreach but as a Parish we could do more collectively and become missionary focused, to create a community that welcomes everyone, especially the marginalised. We need to create the right environment to encourage listening but what does that environment look like? Are we listening to the right people or only those who look like us? Too often we listen from a position of comfort or power. We do not do enough to listen to or support our youth, minority groups and those who leave the Church, we should give them a voice. The absence of a Catholic secondary school in Exeter means we lose contact with our young at a key stage in their lives. Within our community we need

to encourage those reluctant to come forward to express an opinion, recognising this may be cultural; they may have expectations of a hierarchical Church.

### **3. How do we as a Church listen to others and listen to those outside the Church?**

We need to be aware of and accept the image we as a Church are projecting to those outside it. We need to be humble and listen. The Church has to find more effective and attractive ways of conveying its message in today's culture, which are compelling and compassionate. The Church is perceived as very rule bound. The messages that God is love and as His children we have a sense of joy, can be delivered through personal example, encounters with other and through prayer. By listening and learning from others we can see how to transform eg a local Anglican Church has attracted many young people. We need to recognise that the Holy Spirit speaks through people to others, including us!

## **Session 2: Mission**

### **1. What is my mission?**

We are here with a purpose: to go make disciples, bearing witness to the Risen Lord and drawing others to Christ, to love God and neighbour unconditionally, to strive to be a saint, to not be afraid to be 'like a child', to be an example to family and friends, to pray for others especially the lost sheep, to trust the Holy Spirit, to share conversations, journeys and outreach, to unashamedly speak the truth in love and stand up and be counted despite our fears, to engage with young people, to access the sacraments, to help in Church/help our Parish Priest, to learn to offer sacrifice for others by fasting and prayer. Some people acknowledged that 'mission' made them uncomfortable.

### **2. What is the mission of our Parish community?**

We are a community of faith and not a building so we need to know each other, rather than be strangers who attend Mass together, in order to encourage each other to grow (and not worry about being perfectionist). Then we can do more outreach to the wider Exeter community, including the marginalised; we can be a field hospital for sinners (**all of us**). We should preach the truth in love, compassionately, and do this by being active in good works, eg ministry of the sick and housebound, enabling us to help improve the lives of others. Individuals in the Parish do lots of good works but we need to do more collectively. We should pray, especially to the Holy Spirit, for the Lord to raise workers for the vineyard and those workers are **us**. We need to be open minded about what the Lord is calling us to do in the Parish and rise to the challenge without fear. For some the Parish is a place of grace and others thought the Church can appear inward-looking and its good works are often not known. A framework to identify our Parish goals and objectives and a process to achieve them is needed; some did not know the Parish mission. Parishioners need to rediscover the truth and beauty of the Church's doctrine and share it positively. Engagement by the young people of the Parish is sorely needed; a starting point could be to involve them in social action and educate them in the Church's social teaching.

### **3. What is the mission of the whole Church?**

We in the Church are called to share the joy and hope of the Good News of Jesus Christ in order to encourage and attract people to God and to care for the poor. The Church's mission is accomplished

by individuals - **you and me. Christ has no hands but yours and mine**, and nor does the Church. We must look to ourselves, not to others! To those outside the Church it can seem a little lacking in cohesion; we need to promote and live a sense of unity, despite differences.

### **Session 3: Celebrate**

#### **1. How do I celebrate the presence of God in His Word and in the Sacraments?**

People expressed a love of the Mass and of being part of this Parish, the Mass gave them great strength. Some shared with their children the sense of amazement and wonder at Jesus' real presence at Mass and tried to ensure they behaved with reverence to reflect this reality; it is easy to forget. Through the Eucharist, Jesus literally becomes part of us, so we must be careful how we live. Share the knowledge of this gift of the sacraments with others. We can celebrate God by immersing ourselves in the mystery of Jesus as 'The Word' and living out His words in everyday life. God is celebrated at Mass by us actively participating, learning to listen more to the liturgy - the prayers as well as the readings. The Great Amen at Mass should be shouted out as a real celebration. People come to Mass as they are and leave different people, having surrendered their weakness and been strengthened, aware of their neighbour and the invitation at the end of Mass to 'go and make disciples'. By offering our hearts to Jesus we can share our faith with others. Celebration of God's presence also happens in prayer: praying during the day and offering the day to the Lord, Adoration is a silent conversation with the Lord. Small conversations in life can be active moments of listening. Do we try to listen to or read encyclicals etc. to understand Church teaching and grow in faith?

#### **2. How does our parish celebrate the Word and the Sacraments?**

We have a very welcoming Parish which offers communal worship and witness in many ways as well as through the Mass e.g. ecumenical Easter Way of the Cross, Walk for Refugees, Night Fever and the International Mass. The music groups add an extra dimension to worship which was much missed during the pandemic. That said, there were many suggestions for improvement, development and growth. In Mass we do not always reflect the joy of what we are doing, more enthusiastic congregational singing and participation is needed. Greater involvement of children and young people at Mass could be achieved through readings and bidding prayers and showing what they have done during children's liturgy. We should also be prepared to engage with the young and parents at school. There is a need for homilies which help with understanding the Scriptures, especially difficult sections of the Old Testament. Basic catechesis is missing for many adult Catholics; this and Scripture studies would help build up knowledge, along with teaching/sharing Catholic social teaching. It was suggested that Mass can be a 'barrier' to casual enquirers who are not yet ready to commit to RCIA or ALPHA. Would services with Praise and Worship or Scripture provide an easier entree for us to welcome and embrace others and invite them in? Others thought we should celebrate the liturgy as the Church requires it and not popularise it. Celebrations need to be heartfelt and not feel staged, they are an encounter not a performance. Scripture is dramatic, could more use of drama be made eg during Mass to present Scripture? As the Liturgy is generally priest-led, many in the congregation are not active and greater involvement of the laity would be welcomed, especially with the potential shortage of clergy. A reticence of many in the congregation to be involved was noted, but it is part of our service to the Church, so how are we going to change this and encourage more and a greater diversity of involvement in ministries? The Divine Renovation process would strengthen our faith and community. Offering both 'big' and 'small' Masses, such as house Masses for more intimate sharing, could have a big impact on young people and grow community. With three separate weekend Masses and Polish Masses, there is a need to bring the whole community together sometimes, or at least more of it. We focus most on the liturgy but other areas (eg catechesis, formation, social action) need to be developed or we are 'lopsided'. There is a

need to reawaken a broader desire for the sacrament of Reconciliation. Benediction is rare and more opportunities for Adoration would be appreciated, even 15 mins after Mass. RCIA should be reestablished after the two year hiatus due to Covid. Consideration should be given to the role of women in the Church, married priests, LGBT issues and we should listen without judgement. How do we actively show LGBT people are welcome in our Parish?

### **3. How does the wider Church celebrate journeying together?**

The Church celebrates journeying together through its richness and the way God speaks to us. Sharing World Youth Day enables us to walk alongside young people. There is a lot of hurt in the Church and outside it, from child abuse, abuse of vulnerable adults and ex-clergy who feel very damaged; the Church needs to reach out and welcome them. The whole Church should do a public act of penance for this abuse; we cannot fulfil our mission whilst this sin hangs over all of us (we are all 'the Church'). The issues of roles for women in the wider Church, women priests and married priests were again raised.

## **Session 4: Dream**

### **1. What is God's dream for me?**

Although some struggled to know God's plan for them, others said we are called to be saints and put love into everything we do. All men and women are tasked with crafting their lives to become a work of art, a masterpiece. We are called to know, love, serve Him and be with Him. We should serve everyone unreservedly, especially those who do not 'look like me' or are hard to like, and we should see Christ in all. God made the universe and 'me' therefore we must share resources and respect the environment, become more aware and less judgmental, lose labels and work together, listening and deepening faith including through the gifts of faith tradition. God calls us to pray, sometimes without knowing the outcome, to be a conduit for the Holy Spirit and to continue to learn. Prayer is key as it leads to action. God opens doors in insignificant ways allowing me to serve my neighbour and therefore to bear witness to Christ. By working with young people we can understand their struggles and ask ourselves 'What can I do?'. God has a plan for each of us and we need to listen to God's plan, not ours. The 'dream' is still working even when we cannot see it. We need to learn what miracles and healing look like today and know that they can happen to us and not only to someone else.

### **2. What is God's dream for our Parish?**

God calls us to have a bold, shared vision as a Parish, to be missionary (with training for this) and have a shared leadership model which encourages initiative and is not solely dependent on the clergy. We have to develop a sense of mission and pass it on, allocating resources and expenditure which matches our pastoral priorities. His dream for us is to be an authentic, Christ-centred, faith-filled community, witnessing to God's love. Filled with the Spirit we nourish our parishioners and are outward-looking. Clergy and laity work closer together with prayer at the centre and all else radiating out from there: effective catechesis for Catholics, welcoming people at Mass, public witness (eg Corpus Christi procession), ecumenical services (eg with Anglicans and Baptists; invite them to preach, learn from and share with them), live out Catholic social teaching (by for example helping the homeless, alcoholics, the poor etc., providing Christmas lunch for the needy of the city in the Parish rooms), more Adoration, offer quiet, spiritual support (the Sisters used to do this, so we need to train people to do it). To do any of these listed above, more parishioners need to get involved (the passive 85%), of all ages, including the young and the elderly. Letting children's voices be heard more at Mass will be a start in reaching out to young people. We need to give them something they want to be part of such as evangelisation and street ministry. We should look at

other churches/denominations to see how God is working there, as they draw younger generations in. We could reintroduce youth groups. We can learn from international communities who are culturally Catholic and have a very deep love of God. We could use a synodal style process to facilitate unity in the Parish. Embracing technology in facilitating worship, such as the successful online masses, can be extended in many ways eg development of retreats, meditation, Adoration to reach locally and globally. There is likely to be less frequent Mass provision in future, so we must appreciate it for what it really is.

### **3. What is God's dream for the wider Church / world?**

His dream is that the Church is a beacon of hope for all and all are one in Him. The Church should reach out to the marginalised and champion all, conveying the Gospel truths and focusing on the love of God and not the rules. The Church should start with me, family and friends, Parish, Diocese etc., spreading upwards and outwards; it should then feed back down this same chain with good leadership and role models. Creating a genuine partnership of lay leadership working alongside the clergy will enable adaptation of pastoral provision in the light of reducing clergy numbers and greater age. To avoid burnout of our priests, focus should be on the quality of what they do, not quantity. There are some difficulties with consideration of married priests but the idea is worth exploring; this would add a different dimension through life and family experiences. Some felt that the Church should not ignore half the population, and consider women priests. Others felt Church teaching does not undermine women; Mary is a role model. Others again dreamt that gay priests be allowed to express who they really are and celebrate their gift of celibacy. The language of the Church need to adapt to speak better to people in today's world. Within the Church, unity is needed, having patience with one another but not losing our ideals. Looking outward, the Church continues to work towards Christian unity.