

## FEEDBACK SHEET FROM THE MALVERN AND SEVERN VALLEY CLUSTER

(Parishes of St Joseph Malvern, St Joseph Upton, St Wulstan Little Malvern, Our Lady and St. Alphonsus Blackmore Park)

*Describe what happened in your parish, how you went about the Synodal process?*

### **Our Synodal Journey So Far**

- We attended the four online sessions organised by the Diocese
- The Malvern and Severn Valley Cluster arranged three preparatory sessions on Sunday afternoons devoted to prayer, *lectio divina* and discussion
- A general address was given to the Parish outlining the purpose and process of the synodal journey
- A questionnaire was devised and made available to the Parish to help people assess where they were on their own synodal journey
- A report was prepared and issued on the outcome of the questionnaire exercise
- A report on progress so far was given to the PAC and the Thursday Group
- Discussions were held within the Angelus Group (and other groups) on synodal questions
- A general meeting of the Malvern and Severn Valley Cluster was held, which broke into small groups to discuss synodal questions
- A report was prepared on the outcomes of the meeting and distributed
- A Zoom meeting was held for those unable to attend the General Meeting
- Questionnaires have been prepared and distributed for staff and parents at St Joseph's School and for the ministerial priests in the Cluster parishes; these questionnaires have now been returned (12.2).
- The synodal process has been accompanied by meetings and discussions within the Evangelisation Group.

*Approximately how many people were involved in your parish, including those who have stopped coming to church or who never come.*

A total of over 100 people from the cluster have been involved: those who attended the various meetings, and returned the questionnaires, including staff and parents from St Joseph's School in Malvern. Conversations were also had with some who no longer attend services in the Catholic Church.

*What was your experience of listening and discerning? How did this feel? Did you have a feeling of participation in this journey?*

For many it was a new experience to be reflecting on their journey and to be sharing their experiences with fellow-Catholics and engaging with other people's experiences. People valued being asked about their experiences, and welcomed the opportunity to voice some heartfelt views on the state of the Church

*How did it feel to be a part of this process? What were the joys? What did you find enriching? Explain how you felt the Holy Spirit was at work in your parish during this time.*

After long periods of lockdown and isolation, the process was liberating, and provided a way for people to reconnect with their fellows and to make new contacts. It will hopefully lead to a greater solidarity and empowerment of the lay members of the Church.

*What was particularly significant, surprising, or unexpected about this process? What new perspectives emerged from the process?*

That it took place at all. Common interests were articulated. It was encouraging to find a commonality of views and experiences, but also to be more aware of the breadth of views which people held.

*In the box below outline which of the questions your parish discussed/dialogued about, the responses made, and issues raised.*

## **Summary Report on the Synodal General Meeting held on 23 January 2022**

The main points which emerged are summarised below:

### **1. *Participation in the life of the Church***

A recurring theme here was the need to involve young people more (ironically, there was hardly anybody under the age of 50 participating in the meeting).

Over and above this, a need was expressed to increase general levels of involvement, firstly by making people feel that their involvement was welcomed and appreciated and secondly by personalising invitations to participation rather than issuing general appeals. It was felt that particular attention needed to be paid to welcoming newcomers to the Parish and encouraging them to become involved in Parish activities.

It was suggested that smaller groups ('cell groups' or 'house groups') could be set up as a means of enhancing social interaction and deepening faith.

A desire was expressed for more opportunities and events for deepening faith and for a more active social programme (including outings and excursions).

Particularly if young people are to be motivated more, the liturgy needs to be made more attractive and alternative forms of worship explored.

Opportunities must be offered for people to discern and develop their particular gifts and talents and to explore ways of offering these gifts and talents to the Parish community.

### **2. *Co-responsibility***

There is a need for greater transparency in decision-making processes at parish, deanery and diocesan levels. It needs to be made clear to all what decisions are made at the different levels, and how the laity can participate in these decisions. How are the decisions and the reasons for them disseminated? It was felt that the role of the 'hierarchy' should be to encourage rather than to prescribe.

As a general principle, decisions should not be made without the involvement of those affected by the decisions.

How are specific groups (e.g. women, young people) to be encouraged and empowered to take responsibility?

To what extent does the ministerial priesthood welcome and encourage greater lay involvement?

It was pointed out by one group that many responsibilities are governed by Canon Law, and that Canon Law can be changed, so maybe it's time to look at Canon Law again!

### **3. *Social Outreach***

This should not be seen as an optional extra; it is central to the mission of the Church as stated by its Founder.

There is a need to increase the awareness of the opportunities for social outreach at all levels and in all contexts - not necessarily specifically Catholic ones. Examples cited included the Lyttelton Well, the Food Bank, the One World Group, CAFOD, Christian Aid.

There was regret that the SVP at St. Joseph's in Malvern has apparently become moribund.

Social outreach is a fruitful area for ecumenical co-operation; mention was made here of the Salvation Army and its support for the homeless and rough sleepers at the Citadel in Newtown Road.

In this context, there is a need to engage with neighbouring parishes and explore possible joint enterprises.

In an ageing community with increased levels of loneliness, there is great scope at parish level for befriending those on the margins of society.

Encouragement to be involved in social outreach should be an ongoing priority; it can be linked to the audit of gifts and talents and form a focus for personal invitations to involvement.

In their responses to a questionnaire

- Most people (13) felt at home in the Catholic Church, though a number (5) felt more at home in the Parish than in the Church at large. Nobody felt not at home in the Church in any way.
- Few people (6) felt that their voice was heard in the Church at large, whereas 17 were either ambivalent (8) or felt unheard (7). At Parish level, a sizeable majority (14) felt heard, while 3 were ambivalent and 3 felt they were not listened to.
- When it came to the importance of reading Scripture regularly, 17 found it important, 3 were ambivalent and 3 unconvinced.
- For an overwhelming majority (19) practising their faith required more than 'just' going to Mass on Sunday.
- In response to the somewhat provocative statement "Sometimes I sit in Church and wonder what I'm doing there" 11 disagreed, 7 agreed and 3 were ambivalent.
- 15 people belonged to (one or more) Parish groups, 21 support Catholic charities, 3 do not.
- 9 respondents have children or grandchildren at our Parish School.

When it came to expressing who Jesus is for us (multiple responses were allowed), 9 expressed a personal relationship with Jesus ("my best friend"), 2 saw Him as the Son of God but less than the Father, 1 saw Him as a rebel, for 2 He is a mystery, 16 saw Him as fully human and 18 as fully divine, 2 saw Him as half man and half God, and 12 believed that He existed before being born of Mary. Nobody saw Him as being merely an historic figure or one prophet among many.

The questions requiring free responses elicited some lovely insights into people's thinking and beliefs.

For Question 1 there was a strong consensus that the most important things about being a Catholic are firstly the Sacraments (especially the Eucharist) and secondly the sense of being part of a faith community. Several respondents also felt that the tradition of the Church and its universality were important for them.

When it came to expressing what gives meaning to our lives (Q2), most people cited God's love for us and mirroring this in the love and service we show to others by helping and supporting them. A strong sense of the importance of the family was also expressed.

Unfortunately, the numbering of the questions went haywire after Q9. What should have been numbered Q10 "How would you respond to a question about the Holy Spirit" produced some quite inspiring answers - and some very honest ones such as "I don't know" and "With great difficulty". The responses can perhaps be well summed up in the words of the person who wrote that the Holy Spirit "provides me with gifts, clothes me with love and moves me in the right direction", or another who responded with "The Holy Spirit brings His Gifts in order that I may carry out God's mission for me in my life for the service of others". Some people spoke of the Holy Spirit as the love that passes from the Father to the Son and guides us. The Holy Spirit is also seen as the giver of power and courage and of joy, who gives us a more solid feeling of being in the right place and going in the right direction.

As was probably to be expected, there were some quite passionate responses to Question 11 “As a Catholic, I have problems with the Church’s teaching on the following:” The responses can probably be grouped under 9 main headings:

Sex (birth control & abortion); Priestly celibacy; Clericalism; Divorce; The role of women (and their ordination); Exclusion from the Eucharist; Gay rights; The canonisation process; Purgatory; Assisted dying.

### **Salient points from a follow-up zoom meeting following the General Meeting:**

#### *Evangelisation and mobilisation*

We live our Christianity in the world outside (this is the role of the laity as defined by Vatican II) and we are called to bear witness and change the world - and to feel that we are changing the world by our daily actions in a life based on Gospel principles.

Christian Action should never be activism for its own sake, but must come from a deep life of prayer and reflection.

There is a need for us to deepen our faith and to understand what it is we believe and why we believe it. It was suggested that Sunday homilies could concentrate more on unpacking Church teaching through Scripture and that external teaching and motivational programmes (such as the online Bible course run before Christmas) should also be offered.

There is a need for greater involvement with Church teaching and to develop positive critiques. There is a measure of unease with aspects of official doctrine, and this unease needs to be well formulated and articulated.

The focus of evangelisation needs to be on what we **do** and how we engage with the world; ‘actions speak louder than words’.

*Social and communal life:* although we are not called to be an inward-looking community, there is a need for active community-building; suggestions included social events at both parish and small-group level (‘drinking tea together’, weekly lunches, e.g. during Lent). After Covid there is a need to re-form community and increase the number of active parishioners who ‘make things happen’.

In summary, the focus of evangelisation is “Get out and change the world”, which leads on to:

#### *Social justice/outreach*

Criticism was levelled at the supine position on social issues of the hierarchy in England and Wales. There is a need for a greater level of awareness of the Church’s Social Teaching and its application to our individual actions and local issues. Social teaching is outward-looking and concerned with how people are living, not with abstruse theological questions. There is a need for greater involvement in social issues and actions: “Get out and change the world”. There is a need here for greater collaboration with neighbouring parishes and groups, which leads on to:

#### *Ecumenical issues*

Here the question is posed of whether we are Catholics or *Christian* Catholics; if the latter, we are called to reach out to our fellow-Christians and to explore ways in which we can pray and act together.

### *General issues*

As well as the Synodal process being to see where the spiritual path is leading us in the parish, we also consider it important that the voice of the Holy Spirit be heard through the people's concerns for the church as a whole. That this be taken all the way to Rome, heard and discerned in the light of the Spirit through prayer by the Synodal Bishops.

We consider that the Bishops, being a body of men with usually little experience of the world outside, need the guidance of competent lay people in the different matters being discussed at their meetings. If the bishops are serious about co-responsibility and participation in the decision-making process, these lay advisors would need to be involved throughout the process.

*If you were asked to "dare to dream" about how you see the Church in the third millennium, what might your dream be?*

The dream might be for a Church cast in the mould of Vatican II, i.e. a Church of equals engaging positively with the world, a Church of people with an informed deep faith engaging actively with spiritual, theological and liturgical issues, a Church based on vibrant small groups served by a broader-based ministerial priesthood drawn from all the constituencies within the Church, a Church that shows Jesus the Christ to the world by its life of prayer and commitment.