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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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## The Synodal Pathway in Tallaght

September 2022

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## INTRODUCTION

In all, we were sixteen readers, one for each deanery of the Archdiocese of Dublin. It was a beautiful spring afternoon when we met for the first time. Although unsure of what we were to do exactly, we were all keen to play our part. We were to be given the reports of parishes and other groups gathered during the synodal process to read and synthesize. Or so I thought. In fact, we were invited into something far deeper: to listen prayerfully and discern the common threads across many heartfelt conversations.

Let me share a little of my experience and that of the Deanery of Tallaght.

## THE SYNODAL PATHWAY IN DUBLIN

The phrase “we are all in the one boat” inspired the prayer, symbols and logo of the synodal pathway in Dublin, which launched on Sunday 17th October 2021. The saying is used by Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020). In his almost conversational manner, he uses the phrase twice in quick succession: firstly, to counter the illusion that we don’t really need each other, an attitude that will inevitably lead to cynicism (*FT*, para 30); secondly to acknowledge that challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic do bring to the fore again the sense that ‘one person’s problems are the problems of all’ (*FT*, para 32).

The animators who volunteered to lead local synodal gatherings were provided training in two stages, which were initially held online and supported by a range of digital resources. As observed in the final Diocesan Report, the November session was characterised by confusion, lack of clarity, and worry about how to manage the process and strong emotions. But by the second session they grew in the understanding that the Synodal Pathway was less about moderating a debate than helping everyone to listen in order to

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## THE FURROW

understand. It is, according to the Preparatory Document for the Synod, “the first step, but it requires having an open mind and heart, without prejudices” (para 30).

The final Diocesan Report records that 173 parishes hosted gatherings (199 individual parishes in the Archdiocese of Dublin), coordinated by 325 animators. About 10,500 people participated in all. While the average gathering was between 35 to 40, the largest was made of 280 participants. Approximately, 2,200 took part in other ways, such as questionnaires or focus groups. Further synodal conversations were held with other interest groups. 18 focus groups were held with religious congregations, health care chaplains and providers, universities, teenagers, secondary schools, young adults, LGBT community, ecumenical groups and prison chaplains. The full report is available on the diocesan website.

Four questions were asked at two sessions. The questions were inspired by the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes*, which goes: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” (GS, para 1) The first session asked: ‘When you think about your experience of Church what brings joy?’ And then similarly, for sorrows. The second session turned to hopes and fears. The purpose was to provide a process and space for listening to the experiences of each other, the first and indeed informing step of the synodal way. The animators were asked to note responses as they listened. A final request was asked of participants: from listening to each other, ‘what the Spirit is saying to the churches?’ (Rev. 3:22)

Each parish was asked to complete a report, which was designed with these questions in mind. Listening attentively to the conversations, the animators identified points of convergence, that is, areas of general agreement. They also recorded points of divergence, or contributions that had a smaller voice but considered to be important.

### A CASE STUDY: TALLAGHT

Tallaght is south west of Dublin city centre. Originally the site of a monastic settlement in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Tallaght was a small village of about 2,500 in the 1960s. Suburban development took hold in the 1970s with expansion of Dublin city, creating the largest satellite town of Dublin. In the 2016 census, recorded a population of over 76,000 people. To put this in context: the population of Tallaght is slightly greater than that of Galway city, and the fourth largest area by population in the state.

## THE SYNODAL PATHWAY IN TALLAGHT

I live in Tallaght in a rather typical suburban semi-detached house built across the commuter belts during the so-called Celtic Tiger. During the period of the synodal pathway, I was providing weekend and holiday support in two parishes, Bohernabreena and St Martin de Porres, Tallaght. The former is a long-standing rural parish of over 150 years, that sweeps up into the Dublin Mountains. The second was founded from the suburbs of the 1970s until today. It is at the periphery of the city, at the boundary with the countryside. Since the synod gatherings, I transferred to support the parish team in west Tallaght: the parishes of Springfield, Brookfield and Jobstown. It is at a different kind of periphery, with areas that face very significant socio-economic challenges and subsequent difficulties. Knowing the great efforts being put in locally, I wanted to help when asked by the steering committee.

The Deanery of Tallaght is comprised of ten parishes in all.<sup>1</sup> Seven reports were returned, which covered the whole deanery, as some parishes are clustered. One of the reports was very exhaustive, while another provided scant information. However, most reports were well drafted, giving a good sense of what was shared. At least, 269 participants took part on the first evening (average, 45); and 199 on the second (average, 31). The largest gatherings had 63 participants (one report left out the head-count). The fall-off in numbers for the second session occurred across the diocese. For the most part, the meetings took place in community and GAA halls, to provide a setting different from church property.

### LISTENING

We were requested to approach our task prayerfully, respecting what was actually said. Due to my commitments, I turned to the task in the evening. The sun continued to shine during those weeks. Rather than at the office desk, I read and drafted at the kitchen table. It is better to say that I tried to listen and discern. The reports and task became a real focus of my prayer during those days, in which I experienced gratitude for the animators, steering committee and participants, and asked for the grace to hear faithfully.

A method was shared with us for reading, compromised of four stages, which also structured the feedback document we had to provide to the drafting group of the diocesan steering committee. *Firstly*, we were to read the report to get an initial impression and then re-read the answers looking out for what is interesting,

1 The Deanery of Tallaght is comprised of ten parishes: Bohernabreena, Brookfield, Jobstown, Killinarden, Kilnamanagh-Castleview, Springfield, Tallaght (St. Aengus's), Tallaght (St. Dominic), Tallaght (St. Martin de Porres), Tallaght (St. Mary's).

## THE FURROW

innovative or enlightening and what concerns, difficulties or challenges are raised? *Secondly*, we were to make a note of the recurring themes within each report. *Thirdly*, we were to note how the themes may come together to form a common trend or consensus. *Finally*, we were to identify some key quotes which could encapsulate these trends.

Over those days, I identified *seven* broad themes that I believe captured what was shared.

## SEVEN THEMES

1. The primary and most striking trend was the experience of community and the centrality of the Eucharist and the Sacraments. Consistently in all the inputs, participants highlighted the sense of belonging, the communal support of faith and ritual in the experiences of life – especially the difficult times – and the beauty and space of the local church in the area for prayer. For some this is becoming a multi-cultural experience, giving further sense that ‘we are all people of God’. While, it would be possible to tease apart the themes of community as a social reality from the Sacraments, my sense is that they were interlinked for people. It is a type of community they were pointing to, one that is supportive, prayerful and belonging to them.
2. The reports all recorded a real desire for passing on the faith – as a personal faith and as practices of our tradition – and an evident distress at the lack of the participation of younger generations. On one hand, it is giving rise to fear about the sustainability of the local faith-community, as a parish and/or a church building. On the other, it is consistently named that a recommitment to faith formation, including creative new modes, is urgent. The reports identify sacramental preparation, youth ministry, adult faith-formation, and evangelisation. Although not regularly, some inputs suggest or accept the inevitability of sacramental preparation not being in schools.
3. The shadow of scandal covers many of the gatherings. Many name clearly the pain of the historic child sex abuse, and the need for it to be acknowledged honestly. They reported the significant impact of reputational damage, and its effect on the credibility of the church, particularly in contemporary society. Other forms of scandal were also named: clericalism, materialism, detachment of clergy, hurtful experiences of exclusion. Some of those experiences were recounted in the reports.
4. Leadership, and especially the role and voice of women, was a reoccurring topic. There was a broad position in favour of some creative and real mode of inclusion, particularly of women, in

## THE SYNODAL PATHWAY IN TALLAGHT

the structures of the church. There was regular proposals in favour of women priests, or at least, women deacons. At the same time, some inputs did disagree on the issue of ordination. A number of inputs named the current difficulties in identifying and empowering people to take up roles and responsibilities. Related to this was the concern that any future structures of lay leadership that may be created may not get the required support to succeed.

5. There was a consistent recognition of individuals and groups who feel/are excluded due to church teaching and practices. Divorcees and the LGBT+ persons are particularly named. This issue is often presented as an obstacle to the credibility of church teaching and especially the claims of church or parish to being a true community. At the same time, it is important to note that there were other voices very concerned about the dilution of church teaching.

The last two trends were identifiable across many of the inputs, but we might say were in a ‘minor cord.’

6. Change. Pope Francis was consistently named, primarily because of his witness. Similarly, the synodal pathway itself was named as an important initiative. Both were inevitably named in the context of change. While mostly the change was hopeful, there was often a note of fear. For many, the fear was that change won’t happen or be stifled; for others the fear was too much change.
7. Culture. Some parishes mentioned contemporary culture, either as a challenge or an opportunity. Challenges included secularisation and media hostility and opportunities included technology.

### CONCLUSION

The readers gathered together for a second time as the diocesan report was being drafted. Again the sun shone. All spoke of their positive experience, if at times, it was a challenging process to capture fairly what they heard. After my brief experience, I feel for those who had the even more difficult responsibility to draft and write the final diocesan and national reports, and I have a great sense of appreciation for the hard work involved in putting together the parish reports by the animators.

I tried to put aside my own perspective, in so far as I could. There were aspects that niggled me. In any exercise like this, questions inevitably point the respondent in a specific direction.

## THE FURROW

In this case the questions turned on church rather than personal faith. Consequently, people may focus on the church as a social and structural reality rather than their experience of encounter with the divine within a community. To be fair the questions did not preclude people from sharing personal faith stories, some of which did come through in the reports. More interestingly, some issues did not feature as much as I expected. For instance, social justice – in the sense of jobless, homeless, foreigner – was hardly mentioned.

In this article, I simply share my experience. It is not a theological reflection, which may be for another day. It will be interesting to see how the points raised in Tallaght are reflected in the national report and the proceedings of the universal synod. The steering committee were asked to identify some quotes. I'd like to share some from the Deanery of Tallaght: "People found their sense of belonging in their Faith Community. Great hope now that our faith communities are more multi-cultural." "That the listening experience, although new and difficult, is a worthwhile exercise. It focussed our attention on the giftedness of each person made in the image and likeness of God. Everybody's story mattered. Everybody has something to contribute." And my favourite, "Listen, engage, involve, be open and repeat."

**Prayer.** *Sacred Space* helps us to pray. But what is prayer? It is a cry of the heart and oxygen for the soul; it is a loving encounter with God. Fundamentally, prayer is our response to somebody who has always desired us with an infinite love. *Sacred Space* opens up something of the beauty of this God of infinite love.

– THE IRISH JESUITS, *Sacred Space: the Prayerbook 2023*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2022) p. 7.