

A concrete and wide-ranging response to the diocesan synodal consultation and the Synthesis Report of the Synod has been the establishment by Bishop Toal of a programme for parish renewal called “Project Wellspring.” He has specified three areas of engagement: creating a common vision, prioritising five key areas of mission, and engaging parish renewal. These three areas reflect very well both our diocesan conversations and the Synodal Report. For instance, the common vision is biblically rooted and encourages an outward looking and inclusive Church. The five mission areas all were discussed widely both at the diocesan and Synodal level: the celebration of the liturgy, adult and youth formation, poverty relief, and education. Together, these areas are to promote both the missionary and the synodal nature of the Church. Parish renewal has the aim of fostering thriving communities “from the soil up,” requiring the close cooperation of all. It is a task of co-responsibility.

Very few parishes responded to the Synthesis Report, perhaps reflecting the powerlessness experienced among clergy and laity, as one parish report suggested. However, the Diocesan Synodal Team have been meeting together frequently and regularly with Bishop Toal whose support has been deeply appreciated. These meetings will continue and hopefully succeed in keeping the vision of a Synodal Church foremost in our life as a diocese.

In all the parish reports, a common theme was the need to recognise what is already there in parish life but to organise it in a new, synodal way, recognising the gifts and charisms among the laity, especially women. A clarity of purpose of what it is to be Church was called for. Special emphasis was placed on the opportunities there are with our Catholic schools (**youth and education missions**). It was noted that our synodal discussions already have encouraged “respectful listening” between clergy and laity even if certain tensions remain. These tensions, it was suggested, are due more to human resistance than to any theological issue between clergy and laity. Indeed, one parish report observed that a synodal Church will only enhance the authority of the ordained. Outreach to the disaffiliated and those on the margins (**poverty relief mission**) remains high on the agenda, a clear manifestation of the desire to be an outward looking and inclusive Church, embracing people where they are at rather than only once they come to church. There were questions regarding the ministry of the permanent diaconate and its relationship to the poor.

Continual formation of both clergy and laity in how we worship (**formation, liturgy missions**), nurture community, and evangelise – in short, how we become ever-more a missionary and synodal church – was called for.

Recognising the charisms of all the faithful would help create an “inspirational”

Church more able to draw others to the Gospel. Well-formed lay catechists would be especially helpful.

There was a deeper understanding of synodality as a spiritual process, rooted in prayer, listening, and discernment, and guided by the Holy Spirit. The method of Conversation in the Spirit was deeply appreciated by all who experienced it. It was widely recognised as an invaluable way to foster the spirit of co-responsibility in the mission and governance of the Church. Nonetheless, there is still widespread hesitation, especially among the clergy, about this method of communal discernment. More reflection is needed to get to the bottom of why this is. A greater appreciation of the equal dignity of all the baptised and the value of all their voices being heard would be a starting point. Also, more simple, accessible language in Vatican documents would be extremely helpful.

There remains a gap between clergy and laity in how Synodality is being received. The laity who have participated are overwhelmingly positive about the vision for a synodal Church, the clergy less so. It is a matter of urgency that this gap be reduced. There seems to be a general recognition that this new way of living and working as Church demands a profound culture change, a spiritual, intellectual, and ecclesial conversion. Serious support for the transition to this synodal Church must be offered to all who are struggling with the challenge. In this regard, it was noted that formation in synodality should be done with clergy and laity together and that priestly formation should not be isolated in a seminary but rooted in the community of the faithful.

The overwhelming welcome the laity has given to this vision of a Synodal Church already is a sign of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the process. There is much to build on but already the foundations are being laid.