

*'Delight yourself in the Lord
and he will give you the desires of your heart.'* Ps 37:4

Seeking Our Hearts' Desire

A Reflection from the Bishops of England and Wales following the compilation of the Synodal National Synthesis Document

With thankful hearts

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as your bishops we were pleased to receive recently the *National Synthesis Document* which collates the fruit of our individual diocesan synodal processes from across the Church in England and Wales. We want to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who took part in sharing, listening and discerning, in response to Pope Francis' call that we become 'experts in the art of encounter.'¹ Our *National Synthesis Document* will now go forward, together with this reflection, to form part of the European continental synodal phase. This will, in turn, then contribute to the Synod of Bishops due to take place in Rome in October 2023.

Having considered carefully the *Synthesis*, we offer here some initial reflections in the light of our shared faith in Christ and our shared belonging to his Church. We do so grateful for the enthusiasm and joy which, as bishops, we see and experience constantly in our parish communities. We thank our laity, clergy, and religious for their commitment and dedication. With you we share a deep desire that the Church be at the heart of our world, radiating to all the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

Signs of the times echoed in our hearts

When Pope St John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council he called the Church to renewed confidence in the Lord Jesus as Saviour. He invited us to discern 'the signs of the times,'² thereby participating in the Church's responsibility to 'scrutinise' what happens in our world through the lens of the Gospel.³

What are the 'joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties' of our world and society today? Among the good wheat, we know there are weeds too which choke the harvest God intends for all people.⁴ For us to reap a good harvest, we know, for example, that we have a duty to defend human life and human rights, to rediscover the central value of marriage and family life, to eliminate injustice and to address the threat of climate catastrophe. We know, too, that the reality of warfare, hostility towards refugees and environmental recklessness are among the destructive forces at work in our world. Similarly, the rising costs of living, food poverty, homelessness and challenges to mental health are just some of the issues which impact the wellbeing of so many.

In the synod responses, among the tensions and tragedies, we have also found so many signs of hope. They give witness that the needs of people today elicit compassionate responses of remarkable generosity. The Church plays her part by putting the Gospel into practical, loving action towards the poorest and the weakest. It is clear that nothing genuinely human – whether it be a cause of rejoicing or sadness - fails to echo in our hearts as the People of God, united in Christ and led by the Holy Spirit in our journey to the Kingdom of the Father.⁵

The bishop's discernment of heart

Called together to be the Body of Christ we are privileged to be 'a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'⁶ The Church has a human reality, but only 'with the eyes of faith' can we see her spiritual reality as the 'bearer of divine life.'⁷ In every diocese, the unity of the Church is guaranteed through the bond of communion with the bishop, joined in apostolic faith with the successor of Peter.

In every diocesan synodal process the bishop is charged with discerning, with a 'shepherd's heart,' the next steps on the pathway of communion, participation and mission. The giftedness of the whole People of God is taught clearly by the Church. In this giftedness, the bishop has a particular role and responsibility: 'those who have charge over the Church should judge the genuineness and proper use of these gifts, through their office ... to test all things and hold fast to what is good.'⁸ Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis affirms it is through 'the Apostolic College, today the Bishops that the Lord reaches souls, instructs, guards and guides them.'⁹ The bishop listens so as to teach and preach at this particular time and in this particular place.

Hearts speaking to hearts

There are communal aspects of our individual diocesan syntheses which are likely to be prominent in our continued synodal conversations. Essential will be trying to engage the ninety percent who attend Sunday Mass but have not yet participated in any process. Having heard what has been said so far, we note that some voices may be absent, not least, the distinctive voice of different ethnic communities who enrich many parishes in the Church in England and Wales.

Noticeable across all responses is the concern to renew the missionary dynamism of the Church at local level, and to provide increased opportunities for lay formation in the faith. Integral to this is greater consideration of how the gifts of all the baptised are recognised and harnessed. This is vital for mission-orientated pastoral planning and practice which values and utilises the gifts of women especially, together with other lay professional competences and experiences.

A synodal ethos will enhance transparent and collaborative decision-making, listening out, in particular, for those who might have a 'small voice.' It seeks to hear the contribution of

everyone, not least the younger and older members of our communities and people with disabilities.

Hearing the broken hearted

Ongoing discernment will need to reflect further on the hurt and pain voiced as part of this first stage of our synodal journey. Some have expressed their concerns about how power is exercised in the Church. Others have spoken of the devastating impact of clerical sexual abuse on survivors and within the wider Church.

The voices of those who feel marginalised or unwelcome because of their marital situation, sexual orientation or gender identity have been raised and heard sincerely. Equally, others who feel excluded from the life of the Church, or identify as being on the peripheries, have not been forgotten in our synodal process of encounter.

In a different sense, the synod responses showed appreciation for our continued dialogue with other Christians and people of different religious traditions, together with a desire for the Church to be more present in, and to, our society and culture.

Reflecting on all these synodal conversations has heightened the sense of our shared need to value everyone who enriches our Church by their presence. Similarly, we understand the need to work for healing and reconciliation, modelled on Christ himself who loves without limit.

The journeying of hearts together

Our faith is born from the powerful truth that God became flesh in Christ and dwelt among us.¹⁰ In his ministry the Lord Jesus witnessed to the importance of a personal encounter with him, the call to conversion, and the necessity of journeying alongside others, 'dwelling' with them as we walk together on the road.¹¹ To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to have an expansive heart, open to loving Christ and our neighbour. Discipleship is never individualistic, but inherently the way of companionship. This is often expressed as the 'spirituality of accompaniment'- travelling with those who share our lives: in our families, our parishes, and our local and global communities.

Accompaniment is especially important for those who experience hurt, pain and a sense of distance or exclusion from the life of the Church. Pope Francis speaks of the 'art of accompaniment,' which 'must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.'¹² Learning to accompany others is a disposition, a skill of the heart, which we wish to develop in our communities in the pastoral service of others.

Forming hearts for Christ

Formation in our Catholic faith is a significant theme identified consistently in diocesan synodal conversations. Within a deepening relationship with the Lord Jesus, and a greater familiarity with Sacred Scripture, we can all understand better what the Church teaches and why. We echo strongly the desire expressed for a schooling in prayer, spirituality and liturgy which draws from the wellsprings of salvation. The formation of all the People of God, in particular parents, catechists and teachers, contributes to 'witnessing to an encounter that keeps the focus on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, incarnate in the history of humanity, in order to bring to fulfilment the revelation of the Father's saving love.'¹³ The more we are formed in the love of Christ the better equipped we are to be the love of Christ to and for others. This is especially so as we look to greater clergy and lay collaboration in serving the Church's missionary mandate.

Important here too are recent developments, aimed at both children and adults, relating to liturgical formation in Catholic schools in our countries. Furthermore, the call to institute formally laymen and laywomen as Catechists, Acolytes and Lectors offers a rich opportunity for new formational ministries.

Missionary hearted discipleship

In making our journey together in Christ, everyone needs a strong and personal sense of being called to holiness. This 'universal call' has to be rooted deeply in conversion of life and apostolic service. An expanding interior spiritual life inspires our mission to proclaim Christ to others. This mission is to be rooted in the heart of every disciple and anchored firmly in the heart of the local Church so that we grow as a community of missionary disciples. Together we will discern what new evangelising priorities need to be undertaken.

Our recent experience of the pandemic has revealed a deep yearning for togetherness and connectivity, in short for human and spiritual communion. One of the blessings during the crisis was the way parishes reached out to those in need, giving eloquent expression to the maxim that 'communion is for mission.' This attitude characterises and unifies the formation which needs to accompany our ongoing synodal journey.

Love at the heart of the Church

St Therese of Lisieux captured something of everyone's missionary discipleship when she spoke of being 'love at the heart of the Church.' Our synodal conversations have increased this desire through an emphasis on welcome, evangelisation and outreach. Every human family is marked by failure and the human family of the Church needs to learn how Christ's love and mercy can be expressed and offered, faithfully and consistently, today. Through our diocesan listening we heard the crucial call for the Church's mission and ministry to pulse with the heartbeat of Christ's merciful love. The loving and merciful nurturing of

families, both human and spiritual, needs always to be uppermost in the Church's mind and heart.

'Christ yesterday and today...' we proclaim at the Easter Vigil, '...all time belongs to him, and all the ages.' We are a people of the Resurrection and therefore of hopefulness and rejoicing. Pope Francis encourages us to 'spend time with the future,' looking forward with a vision 'filled with the joy of the Gospel.'¹⁴ We have begun a synodal process in our dioceses. We have stepped out on a journey. Our hearts have been awakened. We must now keep walking in attentive faith, seeking to recognise Christ more clearly as our way to truth and life. Together, we desire to encounter anew the risen Lord among us, he who sets our hearts ablaze.

¹ Pope Francis, Homily for the Opening of the Synodal Path, 10 October 2021.

² Pope St John XXIII, Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis*, 25 December 1961, 4; cf Mt 16:3.

³ See Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, 4.

⁴ See The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, Mt 13:24ff.

⁵ See GS 1.

⁶ See Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, 4.

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 770.

⁸ See LG 12.

⁹ Pope Francis, Address for the Conclusion of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 18 October 2014.

¹⁰ See Jn 1:14.

¹¹ See Lk 24:13-35.

¹² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 169.

¹³ Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, Directory for Catechesis, 2020, Preface.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment, 3 October 2018.