

The Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh, Kilfenora and The Diocese of Clonfert

SECTION 1

How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways? (maximum of 4 pages)

In a sense people in Ireland are currently grappling with a swinging pendulum when it comes to the idea of co-responsibility. For quite some time now the dominant operative model has been one where clerics were seen as the ones with sole responsibility for the life of the Church. In fact the Church in Ireland was often conceived solely as a clerical reality with the role of lay people envisaged as one of merely supporting or helping “Father”. Newly emphasised ideas such as synodality and co-responsibility have now set the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction. Of late, we are encouraged to speak of a Church where all the baptised seem to have come of age, where the baptised are now being recognised as constituting a Church where they are co-responsible for the mission. To some this might seem as a rather facile reaction to a situation where a decrease in clergy means that more lay involvement is necessary. To others it may be interpreted as ushering in a new age of the laity where perhaps priesthood may not be necessary. For some priests it may provide a framework to encourage greater lay participation. For others it may be seen as a confusion of identities and a real threat to the very idea of priesthood itself. For others still, it may be that the insights of the Second Vatican Council are only now being brought to the fore and integrated into ecclesial life. As of yet the pendulum is still in a state of swing — it will take some time to steady and settle.

For the most part, like the idea of synodality, the concept of co-responsibility in the mission of the Church is new, or at least newly rediscovered. In fact, most people are not familiar with them and find them difficult concepts to grasp. Given a distinct lacuna when it comes to adult faith formation, many do not have the theological background to grasp such ideas and the associated concepts that underpin them. Much informed explanation and discussion is needed as is catechesis in the basic tenets of the Catholic faith. This context impeded in many ways a fulsome and fruitful discussion of the issue. Many are acutely aware of this and the need for urgent catechetical initiatives around the theological topics on which these concepts are build as well as on the concepts themselves.

While most would agree with the idea of co-responsibility — and laud it as an enlightened insight — many would speak of the difficulties of implementing it in practice. What would a truly co-responsible Church look like? What would a parish where co-responsibility was the norm feel like? How could it be imagined and how could it be modelled? What changes would have to be made to how both clergy and laity conceive of themselves? What were its limits? In the end who is responsible for decision making and decision taking?

In an era of secularity and individualism where voluntary work and involvement is decreasing and proving challenging, how might this model play out? There was a recognition that the crisis of faith is fundamental to the context in which we find ourselves. Within a life of faith, the development and nurturing of the sense of vocation is also required. Who will do this, given the decrease in those practicing and the reduction in those willing to volunteer? Our present geographical parochial structure is challenged; parish life may need to be practiced across many parishes and parish communities.

The idea of being missionary in outlook, while acknowledged as necessary and urgent, continues to meet with a muted reaction – a history of keeping faith to oneself, along with a real sense of not knowing how to be missionary in a way that is not seen as overpowering others, needs to be teased out further. Some would wonder what type of Church we are inviting people to become part of? The idea of welcome, of being a welcoming Church was raised many times. However, what exactly that consists of remains rather illusive.

In the end, the current organs of shared responsibilities in parishes seemed to emerge as the best ones on which to hang some form of Synodality or co-responsibility — these being Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees. Recognising that these often lack a focus and direction, can be clerical or personality dominated, local and solely practical in focus, training and education in this regard was highlighted as both urgent and essential. The canonical status of such bodies as regards decision making and real co-responsibility within our parishes was raised. This needs further discussion and appropriate determination at a worldwide level.

SECTION 2

Please provide a brief testimony of the work carried out and the experiences lived during the synodal process so far, sharing any good practice. (maximum of 2 pages)

The current context is one where volunteers are few and far between and this is coupled with a history or culture of a lack of adult religious education/catechesis. The fact that this adult catechetical formation has been noticeably absent, along with increased demands from other areas of parish and diocesan life, are all very pressing issues. There can be no doubt that building an appropriate and capable infrastructure that adequately supports synodal conversation will take time. It is felt that this process has made many additional demands on local and diocesan communities to produce something without giving them the necessary time and resources to grow key personnel, form them, and engage in the process in a fulsome manner. This results in ad hoc gatherings of people, often the same as have been at previous gatherings, rushed processes and the production of reports for imposed deadlines, rather than an engagement in a real lived process. Against this backdrop, consultation for this submission took place through meetings with priests in one of the dioceses and through discussion with the inter-diocesan synodal committee and various interested parties.

Throughout both dioceses, the synodal committee, conscious of its limitations, is endeavoring as best it can to raise awareness of the idea of synodality and associated topics among clergy and laity. We have introduced some dedicated spaces to the topic on our websites and on our social media platforms. It has been discussed at gatherings of clergy in both dioceses and is a topic on the agenda of both Councils of Priests with the Conversations in the Spirit methodology being introduced as appropriate to such gatherings. The methodology was also used at a recent gathering of the clergy from the Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora. This gathering also included priests from the Diocese of Clonfert along with lay personnel from our two Diocesan offices. While it took some participants time to get used to the “Conversations in the Spirit” methodology, all found it an enriching experience and this bodes well for the future.

In line with the opinion that Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees provide a fertile ground for synodality in practice, across both dioceses new norms have been published for such bodies, new Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees have been formed, and we have embarked on a series of training sessions. These sessions address in

particular the topics of Synodality, Contemporary Ecclesiological Perspectives, Co-responsibility and Missionary Discipleship. It was felt by all who are attending these sessions that a co-responsible Church will, in a very real sense, grow out of the renewal of the Pastoral Parish Councils and Parish Finance Committees. These bodies are certainly seen as agents of change within the parish, within the church, given the right formation of both the clergy and laity involved.

There is a general desire to be a more welcoming Church, however a lack of human resources across the dioceses at the moment is hindering the work of reaching out to young people, those on the margins of Church and others, in order to find ways of creating more welcoming spaces within the tent. The ‘motto’ for our recent gathering in the Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora mentioned above was “Together Towards Tomorrow” — keeping this in mind and in practice at all our gatherings is proving to be a worthwhile endeavour.