

St Francis Church : A selection of Parishioner's Responses to questions raised about the Church synod 2021-23

As we know Pope Francis has asked the whole Catholic Church worldwide to engage in a process of discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Parish would like to thank all those who attended the meetings and sent their responses to the Questionnaire sent out last year. Many other parishioners have submitted their own independent responses online. The deadline for responses has just passed and here is a summary of some of the responses. All parishes were asked to focus on the areas of Communion, Participation and Mission.

An overall question was: How does 'journeying together' take place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allowing the Church to proclaim the Gospel? And, what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church? (PD 2);

There were many questions and the questionnaire and the meetings attempted to focus on fewer questions to help the process move forward while retaining the spirit of the Synod process.

Two key words emerged from this process and these were Communication and Cohesion. It is interesting to note that parishioners often had conflicting views depending on their own experiences. This is helpful for listening together and finding a way forward with the Guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is important to remember that some responses have, (of course,) been coloured by the recent experience of the pandemic.

Communion:

Focus questions

1. What are the ways in which your parish most successfully brings people together?

Comments focused on the blessing of the parish to have the benefit of so many communities. The youth groups, the Fledgings and the Flame group are involved in very many activities which bring people together, as well as keeping links open during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic activities such as Light Fever and the good Friday walk were other examples. Visiting the sick and prisoned bring food and cleaning materials were also mentioned. Others said the church could be more welcoming and we should greet people in a more responsive way. Others suggested there should be more inclusive language in the parish.

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2. In which areas of parish life are you able to discern the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit?

Some said that some of us may not be able to listen to the Holy Spirit that well. One response said this was really difficult to judge. Listening to the Holy Spirit in a group setting was difficult for some unless it was a retreat. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was held before each meeting in the church. Another said that in order to experience the Holy Spirit it was important to be silent and quiet. It was said that regular Adoration was a huge benefit in the parish. Another said the Holy Spirit was found in the Catechesis, Adoration and Lectio Divina.

3. Christ is present as the Head of the Church. How is this shown in our parish and Community?

4. How is the Holy Eucharist the main focal point in our parish life?

The Holy Eucharist is at the centre of the church, in all our masses and in taking holy communion to the sick in hospital and the sick and housebound at home.

People also responded by saying Christ is present in the Word, the celebration of the Eucharist and in the people participating.

People answered unequivocally that Christ is the centre of their faith and that they see Christ at work in their lives and in friendships and relationships. Some people were supported well by the love and prayers of those close to them which made them aware of Christ's presence at the heart of the parish.

Participation

1. Reflecting on the past 16 months of the pandemic, how has participation in your parish been affected?

Many people found the pandemic an isolating experience which the online mass was a huge help. Deacon dairies were also much appreciated. When the online mass stopped many said they did not feel confident to return and still don't.

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An out of date database and restrictions on personal data meant that Father was not able to contact people if they had not updated their details. Privacy rules caused further distress as parishioners wanted to pray for those who were sick and they felt they were denied this chance. In several cases, it was only discovered that people had been sick when it was announced in the newsletter that they had died. It was pointed out by some that the parish newsletter was very helpful to some parishioners in revealing parish responses to the needy.

2. How do you participate currently in the life of the parish?

A few people answered that they were involved but some said they were not as a result of the last two years. The Flame and Fledglings groups have several very active members.

New people may not be welcomed as they might and there are also groups of parishioners do not mix together for whatever reason. It was not certain how the older people in the community were served especially those who are unable to access the internet for whatever reason.

Mission

1. Are we looking inwards on ourselves in parish life and do we need to look more outwards to the wider community? 2. What do you think are the challenges of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Similar answers as the one above. But some parishioners believe that we should be more welcoming and support our ideas and principles to a wider public. some believe that we should be encouraging study and social groups amongst the lay members generally. This is happening to some extent already. It has been suggested to have discussion groups to develop these.

The challenges for this particular parish is that there is no proper meeting place for people to gather together and this is a distinct disadvantage. Building a mission and community that reaches outward needs a meeting point outside the church as people said that the sanctity and peacefulness of the church should be preserved

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2. Where is the Holy Spirit calling to us to mission and service today?

Replies included "We will be coming out of a place of darkness into a new world. Our church will recognise that we need to understand what has happened in the last two years. So many lives have been affected all over the world. When we as a parish return to worship together there will be some who will not be with us. We should give mourn and celebrate the lives who are no longer with us, those who have played a part in the parish community. We should thank God for our priests and all our key workers and volunteers, all who have enabled our life to continue.

In my humble opinion, the mission of the church should be one of listening, renewal reaching out, remembrance and thanksgiving ... and then moving forward together" This feeling was echoed by others in the parish.

There was a request from staff at Maidstone Hospital to have a Mass in the hospital for all those Catholics who could not attend a mass on a Sunday because of work commitments.

Others suggested said that the uses of new technology showed us new ways of being in church with live-streaming videos, reflections, morning and evening prayer. Another said we need to reach out even more to young people, the church of today as St John Paul II called the in the pews. Perhaps by building even more on the wonderful work done by the young people in the parish already. They said, "We need to teach the young people to be able to talk and listen to God as if he was their Best Friend."

A questionnaire sent out to parishioners focused on similar but slightly different questions although still in the spirit of the Synod. Answers have been incorporated in this response.

There were as many questions raised as there were possible answers and sometimes, both questions and answers overlapped. This is a summary of responses. As one Parishioner said, "As we go forward together we must keep focused on our Love of Christ in the Eucharist and each other" And in the words of St Therese of Lisieux we pray that we may follow Christ in Our "little way "so that we may work together in the Holy Spirit in Christ's Love and Peace.