



## National synthesis of the synodal process in the Church in Belgium

July 6, 2022



### I. Introduction

#### 1.1 History

The launching of the synodal process in the dioceses has aroused great enthusiasm. It is envisaged as a spiritual exercise of listening to the Holy Spirit in order to discern what the Church must undertake to give shape to its mission today, in accordance with God's intention. This listening is therefore a task for all. And the first one to be listened to by all is the Spirit of God.

We can already see the work of the Spirit in the Church in Belgium where some dioceses have already undertaken a synod or begun a journey towards more synodality. We feel that something is happening, that a new balance is being sought.

The number of participants in the diocesan synodal process varies in each diocese between 2000 and 4000. Responses have come from territorial groups, diocesan services and movements, the health care sector with nurses and doctors, foreign communities, prisoners and their chaplains, nursing home residents and their visitors, migrants, the poor, youth groups, schools. Dioceses have also tried to involve Christians of other denominations and believers of other religions. One diocese focused its synodal process primarily on youth and surveyed 10,000 young people.

Some people have also been very negative about the synod, but the fact that they have answering questions is appreciated.

## 1.2 Method, tools for the synodal process, steps, ecumenism

Method: Each bishop has mandated a diocesan synod team to motivate as many people as possible to enter into this consultation. Some dioceses have planned training sessions on synodality and common discernment for the members of the synodal team. Each team met face-to-face on several occasions and some teams report that synodality was already present within them: high quality, fraternal and respectful listening, beneficial and fulfilling openness of mind.

Tools for the consultation: a synod tab has been provided on the websites of the Catholic Church in Belgium and diocesan magazines have invited participation.

Most dioceses also favored the support of an explanatory booklet or flyer with questions and the synod prayer. These tools were a help and were widely appreciated. Adapted methods were proposed for young people. Several dioceses provided videos and even a game (a game of the goose, inspired by the diocese of Palencia) for children. One diocese also placed a work of art that referred to the Synod and invited dialogue in various places. Another original formula was to include a time of sharing in the Sunday celebrations.

Several people emphasize personal experiences of rich ecumenical and interdenominational exchanges, whether during private meetings or public celebrations and festivals. The expectations are those of a Church that allows itself to be challenged by other confessions and religions. The synodal process was the occasion for a collegial meeting between the Bishops and the national representatives of the other Churches and ecclesial communities of Belgium.

## II. The Church today

### 2.1 Challenges

The Church is perceived by many believers as having clerical and overly hierarchical structures. It is seen as moralistic, formalistic, distant from people's lives and intrusive. Some see it as too timid and not assertive enough.

The image of the Church is quite negative and this is further accentuated by the media.

Added to this is the fact that secularization is growing in the West and that Christianity is no longer familiar to most of our contemporaries, even when they ask for services from the Church. Even regular churchgoers show a relative lack of understanding of what the Church is and judge it harshly after the injuries inflicted on some of its members.

The syntheses echo several concrete concerns: 1/ the decrease in the number of the faithful and their aging, 2/ insufficient number of volunteers; 3/ absence of young people, which raises the question of the transmission of the faith to the next generations; 4/ withdrawal of communities that function in a small and habitual circle, spending their energies organizing a parish life rather than helping people to live a loving relationship with the Lord; 5/ and - for many Catholics on the periphery - reduction of the Church to the distribution of the Sacraments.

However, these various concerns do not prevent people from expressing their sincere love for the Church. *There is beauty in the Church.*

It is a place of peace and hope, a place of welcome. Many people talk about the joy of meeting together, among believers, to pray. They have the feeling of being part of the Church with a capital 'E'.

Religious communities are often the bearers of a synodality lived out thanks to their structures which guarantee the listening and participation of all.

## **2.2 The Church in the world: diakonia**

The synodal consultation coincided with many crises for the Church and the world. Christians are aware of the problems of the world. They would like to witness to the Gospel but convictional subjects are often 'taboo' in our secularized society.

The Church is seen by many as alien to the world: its position on ethical issues and gender equality is regularly raised. Many point out the ambivalence of a Church that speaks of a loving God, proclaims the Gospel and on the other hand excludes people on the basis of their orientation, because of certain life choices.

There are those who believe that the church must remain critical of today's (individualistic) society and culture, but the demand for openness and respect prevails.

Poverty in all its forms challenges and responds to the important call of a Church on the move.

## **2.3 The announcement of the Good News, testimonies and training**

The transmission of faith between generations in families is no longer evident. Believers do not have the understanding, language, training or faith to enter into dialogue with others.

In schools, the announcement is also difficult, the desire for neutrality can stifle initiatives.

In the parish context, we do not know how to address people outside our own circle, especially the younger generation.

Many feel that the Church's message does not correspond to the lives of people in our society today. Its language is perceived as outdated.

## **2.4 The liturgy**

Liturgy is a recurring theme with many different experiences: positive, but also negative. Although some church places are lively and dynamic, in other places the liturgy is 'disembodied and formalized', it does not attract.

However, the need for rituals at important moments in life, such as baptism and marriage, is present and should be honored, emphasizing the family aspect of sacramental celebrations, without imposing too many conditions.

The language is perceived as out of step with what people are experiencing. This can also apply to homilies.

Many families point out that they don't understand the mass and are bored with it. The need for clarification of liturgical gestures is important. Families don't always feel welcome in communities and would like to see their children have a place in order to be truly participatory.

## 2.5 Departments and Responsibility

While there is recognition of the need for leadership to move things forward and to ensure community unity, many complain about the abuse of power. This disease of clericalism is dangerous because it is infantilizing. It is a counter-witness to a church that preaches brotherly love.

For some, the role of the priest is modified: he becomes more a 'liturgical officiant' than a pastor. Sometimes a certain rigidity can be observed among young priests.

The permanent deacons note a lack of openness and understanding of their mission. The same is true for consecrated persons, especially apostolic ones.

The Church's position on mandatory celibacy for priests is often contested.

The questioning of the place of women in the Catholic Church comes up repeatedly. The current discipline of the Church is not understood. The contribution of women is not valued.

## 2.6 Church governance and other issues

Even though many parishes are run by teams rather than by the priest alone, the formal structures of the Church are still considered too clerical, **as is the** training of priests. The Church is anchored in routine, two generations behind.

The concentration of power in the church is a cause of skepticism about the synodal process. According to some, the much-needed cultural change - encounter, dialogue, witness - may be hindered by the composition of the church leadership.

<h3>III. To grow in synodality</h3> <h4>3.1 Being Church</h4>
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We all want a Church that is open, humble, fraternal, inclusive, joyful and merciful. A Church that sends out on mission in the world.

A Church that goes out to meet people in their daily lives. This attention to proximity also emerges from the demand for a warm and personalized welcome for those who come to the Church. This requires human resources.

Many people turn to the Church for rites of passage. These are moments of human contact par excellence, where no judgment is made and where the encounter is privileged. The parish secretariats, catechists and companions

of the catechumens play a key role here. It is important to train people for this service and to teach them to receive the newcomers with care and attention.

We work to transform church buildings into places of life and celebration that are welcoming to all.

All initiatives that aim at more fraternity are important: meetings of proximity, moments of conviviality.

Special efforts must be made to be present in the places where young people are, to approach them with respect and accept them as they are, leaving room for open dialogue.

### **3.2 The Church in the world: diakonia**

There is a desire on the part of various parishes and non-parochial faith communities to grow in faith in the Church. The request to let the Spirit speak during the synodal process is taken to heart. This does not allow for isolation from the global church and the world. The daily newspaper should be next to the Bible.

Even if we are in the minority, we can express ourselves, be a church that listens, is humble and joyful,  
that announces the joy of the presence of Jesus Christ at our side.

We must restore confidence in the Church, review its way of communicating, and make it plausible within our cultures.

We are becoming aware that we have something to say as a Church, thinking of today's and tomorrow's generations. For some, integral ecology is a missionary path for the future and should take more space.

A vision and expectation common to all participants: solidarity.

To make the social impact of the Gospel and the social teaching of the Church visible in preaching, in the media and in training courses, in terms of personal conversion, associative commitment and involvement in political life.

### **3.3 The announcement of the Good News, testimonies and training**

The desire is to be a Church that is open to the breath of the Holy Spirit, that questions itself, that takes new forms, that takes unusual initiatives, that goes out to meet people where they live.

The urgent need to use renewed and contemporary language - abandoning guilt-ridden and moralistic expressions - is overwhelmingly evoked.

Also the call to be present on social networks.

There is also a need to find new places, outside of parishes, to live experiences of faith and to dare to build bridges between different paths of interiority, to go towards Christian prayer.

Proclamation requires ongoing formation for priests, but also for all the faithful. We need to know and understand our faith better, but we also need to be trained in listening, in human resources management, and in communicating the faith to today's world.

During the synodal process, much attention has been given to the link between church and education. From the contacts, discussions and questioning in the field of education, it is clear that this link is no longer self-evident.

Synodality requires good catechesis and accompaniment. How can we create opportunities for people to (re)discover the mystery and beauty of our faith in Jesus Christ in their lives.

### **3.4 The liturgy**

There is a real desire for liturgies that are adapted, lively, welcoming, better prepared, and better presided over, where everyone finds their place and feels involved... especially young people and families. It is not only a question of the Eucharistic liturgy, but we must dare to be open to different forms of celebrations and moments in community.

During the Eucharist, the homily should be carefully prepared to strengthen the faith, be understandable for the congregation (both in form - diction, sound - and in content), and not too long.

Ensure that the entire congregation can sing songs that are meaningful to them (at interdiocesan level, propose a repertoire of songs).

These celebrations should begin or continue with times of conviviality open to all.

To develop the proclamation of the faith through manifestations of popular religiosity: devotions to the saints, processions, rosary, blessings of houses, offices, fields, horses, carriages...

### **3.5 Departments and Responsibility**

The Catholic Church should place even greater emphasis on diversity in its teaching. Catholic believers can fully represent Christ in different states of life (male/female). As in the Eastern Catholic Churches, marriage should be possible for priests in the Roman Catholic Church. With great respect for those Christian Churches which, after careful deliberation, have decided to open the ordained ministry to women, we wish that further reflection be undertaken so that the Catholic Church may recognize in the future the vocation of women to the priesthood. To exclude certain topics from the theological agenda goes against a synodal culture in our Church.

It is important to rediscover the roles and missions of priests and laity. The responses require more openness to new ideas. Many groups would like to see greater participation of the laity, but it is not clear what concrete tasks the laity can perform and how the responsibility of the baptized should be seen in relation to that of the parish priest.

On the other hand, there are people who have questions about the priests in mission in Belgium. They recognize the richness of the contacts with other cultures and appreciate their willingness to leave their country, but they regret that some priests do not master the language well.

The Church could not fulfill its mission without the help of countless volunteers: catechists, fabricators, choir members, visitors, members of a mutual aid service, volunteers to lend a hand, etc. There is a growing need for volunteer leadership that helps people find a task, guides them and helps them to do it in an enjoyable way.

### **3.6 Church governance and other issues**

With regard to the governance of the Church, we wish to promote the diversity of charisms within a synodal Church. Recognizing and encouraging this diversity is not an end in itself, but is valued in the service of the mission: diverse actors, equal in dignity, complementary in order to make a sign, to make credible a Church, sacrament of the Kingdom.

In several groups, proposals were made to involve all the baptized in the decisions of the Church.

Synodal dialogue will always be important, also at the local level.

For cohabiting couples, for homosexual couples and for divorced and remarried persons, it is asked that the Church respond to their request for recognition (ritual and social) from an interpretation of relationships and sexuality more in line with the commandment of love.

## **IV. By way of conclusion**

### **4.1. The Ministry**

The most important call concerns the conditions of ministry. Calls are coming from all sides to open the ordained ministry to women and married persons. The arguments are diverse: the shortage of ministers of religion, the quality of pastoral care, the sharing of responsibilities, the happiness of the ministers and the fundamental credibility of the institution. The demand for the ordination of married men (*called viri probati*) requires a positive approach in the short term.

A sense of injustice is also noted regarding the place of women in the church. The reasons for not admitting women to the ministry are insufficient for many believers, and even more than that: they seem far from reality. Many older believers take offense at this. In the younger generations, it is even worse: the unequal treatment of women is for many the main reason for ignoring the Church. Resentment then turns into indifference.

### **4.2. Proclaiming the Gospel**

#### **4.2.1 A Church present with a missionary attitude.**

The young people ask us to continue to come to them and to listen to them with respect. These meetings offer many opportunities to walk together, to accompany them

They want the Church to be contemporary, to offer them a meaningful liturgy in which they can participate. They want the Church to be contemporary, to offer them an understandable liturgy in which they can participate. They also want us to move to (digital) communication and offer them real witnesses of the faith to better know the Christian story. Finally, the youth want a place to meet with people who help them in their search. All this will allow us to approach them in a missionary way and to approach them in a warm and welcoming way. The dialogues with the young people during the synodal process revealed their great openness to the faith and the Church.

4.2.2 There is also a widespread sense that the Church's message does not correspond to the lives of people in our society today. We fail to give people who do not share the Christian faith an inspiring witness to what animates us. For those who seek to come closer, we always fall back on proclamation and catechesis that do not speak loudly enough and therefore do not help to bring them closer. For those who come to participate in the Eucharist, we use a liturgical language that seems out of place. We must strive to translate and interpret the Good News in the concrete context of our society.

### **4.3. Credibility**

The church as an organization is seen as old-fashioned, rigid and alien to the world. Yet, people call upon local pastoral offerings to celebrate the important moments of life. This shows how important the desire for a credible church is. The challenge is to connect these two worlds. How do we bring the power of the Good News into the institutional structure?

Many people have difficulty with the structure and institution of the church because they feel a great distance from the community of believers. Some encounter obstacles in communication. Very often people refer to the ethical discourse on relationship and family. There is a demand for open dialogue and flexibility.

The issue of sexual abuse and its management is not over. This problem has deeply affected the credibility of the Church and its leaders. People of faith and ministers of religion are asking for a transparent policy and consistent decisions.

## **V. Afterword**

Many noted the positive contribution of these meetings and the fact that synodality is both an individual and a common responsibility. On the whole, the mutual exchange was experienced as happy, especially when there was room for the Word of God. The interest and usefulness of the process was also widely emphasized. We are walking the path together with the Spirit as our guide. The follow-up is eagerly awaited.