



Communion, Participation and Mission in the Diocese of Down and Connor

SYNODAL PATHWAY: *Make Your Mark*

Ballymena (Kirkinriola) Parish Response

Ballymena Parish used an amended set of questions for its Ash Wednesday *Make your Mark* Synodal listening exercise. Twenty-eight [28] written responses were submitted. A collated summary of these responses is attached, together with the questions used by Ballymena Parish. The responses are grouped under the following four themes:

- Communion;
- Participation;
- Mission; and,
- What steps the Holy Spirit is calling us to take at this time.

Key themes emerging in the responses include the presence and support provided by the Church at times of trouble and challenge in our lives, the support, guidance, and encouragement offered by the clergy, and the love and support of the Church and Parish community.

There is deep concern at falling attendance levels at Mass and a perceived disconnect with the young. Greater outreach to bring the Faith to the young and to those who have drifted away from the Church emerged as a key priority.

Service in the Church was seen as a privilege and honour and the high level of volunteering in the Parish was recognised and attributed to the leadership and encouragement of our clergy. There was a recognition of the role that the laity could and should play in leadership roles but calls for greater transparency in decision making.



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The changes that are and will impact on the Church were recognised, as was the local and immediate impact of the declining numbers in the clergy. Greater numbers of deacons and lay helpers were seen as a way to manage the impact of this while awaiting prayers for an increase in vocations to be answered. The need to communicate with parishioners on the changes that will be necessary was stressed.

The personal and individual responsibility of the baptised to spread God's message in their daily lives was recognised, as was the transformative power of the Gospel. Some individual responses on the call of the Holy Spirit have been recorded in the summary but the key messages emerging are a call to prayer, especially at this time of world conflict, and for the gifts of discernment and the courage to do God's will. A call to service, to grow the Faith and to care for others came through strongly.

Where social issues such as divorce, co-habitation, and LGBT issues were raised by respondents, strongly conflicting views were presented. Some respondents called for strict adherence to established Church teaching and expressed concern that the Synod will be influenced by secular values. While not questioning Church teaching, others called for greater inclusion within the Church and were supportive of wider reforms such as women clergy and married priests.

Ballymena (Kirkinriola) Parish
March 2022



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Ballymena (Kirkinriola) Parish

Make Your Mark - Collated Responses (March 2022)

Communion

The love of God is for everyone. How has the Church been with you in your times of joy and sorrow?

Many respondents spoke of the Church and clergy as always being there for them in the Mass, sacraments and at times of trouble, bereavement, and illness, and to guide them in their faith. Others spoke of finding peace, joy, comfort and compassion in the church community, and the importance of the prayers offered by other parishioners. For some, their relationship with God was a very personal and private relationship.

There was a feeling of sadness when churches were closed and the sacraments were not available due to Covid restrictions. Falling Mass attendance levels has also been a cause for sadness and regret.

The importance of practising the Faith and supporting each other as a synodal community was stressed. A desire to open the church to other denominations was also expressed.

On wider social issues impacting on the Church, some spoke of their sorrow at abuse within the Church and called for the Church to apologise to all victims. Sharply conflicting views were expressed regarding co-habiting and



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divorced people attending Mass and being able to receive the Eucharist. Some respondents felt a general confession should be offered at Masses.

Participation

Every baptised person is called to participate in the mission of the Church. What has been your personal experience of being involved in service and decision making in the life of the Parish and Diocese?

Parishioners spoke of feeling blessed, privileged, and honoured to have been involved with parish activities. A wide range of Parish roles and groups were mentioned such as Eucharistic Ministers, readers, SVP, Bethany Bereavement group and the visitation of the housebound. One person said that they received more than they had given and recommended being involved in service in the Church to everyone. Others described their participation in terms of their wider service to the community in caring roles such as nursing, grief counselling or the Beginning group for widowed, divorced, and separated people. Others spoke of their participation in terms of their attendance at Mass and receiving the sacraments.

Some parishioners saw a role for the laity in decision making roles in the church, bringing their professional skills to the role, and working alongside the clergy. Others felt that they have not been given an opportunity to be involved in decision making and called for greater transparency in matters concerning church finances such as sales of properties and land. There was a call for an elected Parish Council. Some felt that decisions were presented to parishioners as a *fait accompli* and that the Bishop felt like a very distant figure. In contrast, others did not feel there was a need for the laity to be involved in leadership roles in the Church.



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Greater outreach activities with the Youth Club and Boxing Club were recommended, with the suggestion that young people from both clubs should be invited to participate in special events in the Parish. The use of a minibus to provide transport for the elderly to Mass and visitation teams to reach out to those who do not attend Mass were also suggested.

Mission

We are called to mission; to put our faith into action. What has been your personal experience of hearing and sharing the Gospel's life-giving vision?

Parishioners spoke of hearing the Gospel's vision and the love of God through reading the Bible, reciting the rosary, being members of prayer groups, hearing homilies at Mass, and Parish talks and events, and spoke of how the priests encourage us to put our faith into action. The role of small prayer groups and Lectio Divina in sharing God's Word and Mission was highlighted.

One person commented that the high level of volunteering within the Parish was as a consequence of the encouragement of our priests and their call to service in the Church. Another described how hearing the Gospel had changed their life and how they try to share it with their family and their grandchildren. There was a suggestion that the Pope's recommendation that homilies should be no more than 7 minutes should be adopted!

One person spoke of the impact of the Charismatic Movement on their lives, and how this encouraged them to share the Word of God with others. Others spoke of sharing God's vision through prayer groups and how they lived their



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lives. Contributing financially to the Missions and to SVP was seen as a way of putting our faith into action.

One person commented that a parent's first mission is to pass the faith on to their children and described the mission that a teacher has to share God's message and teaching with the children in their care and in their preparation for the sacraments. The importance of good catholic education was stressed, as was the duty of the baptised to take God's message with them to the workplace.

A concern was expressed that there is a void between the older and younger generations in terms of practising the Faith and that services had to be made more appealing to younger people with music and activity. It was recommended that younger people are trained, with the support of the local schools, for leadership roles in areas such as Bible study classes, youth encounter and youth choirs. There was also a suggestion that the GAA and Scouts should be involved in a monthly Mass.

Some concern was expressed that the spiritual content of Parish services needs refreshed with different perspectives brought to bear. Encouraging young people to embrace their faith and put it into action was seen as a challenge.



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The Holy Spirit guiding our Church

What steps is the Holy Spirit calling all of us to take at this time?

One parishioner said that our God is a God of surprises so we cannot presume what He will call us to be or to do through this Synod. There was recognition that this is a time of change for the Church overall and locally within our parishes as the number of clergy declines. Greater numbers of Deacons and lay helpers was seen as necessary while we await our prayers for more vocations to be answered. Communication with the faithful to prepare them for the changes that are coming was also considered necessary.

A parishioner said that in these times of world troubles that the Holy Spirit is calling us to pray, pray, pray, and another specifically felt a call to pray and make sacrifices for the Ukraine and world peace. A parishioner prayed to the Holy Spirit for strength, inspiration, and discernment, and for an increase in the Faith and good practice, and another asked for courage to do right in Jesus' name. A parishioner spoke of the Holy Spirit guiding them to longer periods of prayer and stillness with God.

Parishioners felt that the Holy Spirit is always leading us to Jesus and calls us stay faithful, to try to live good lives by caring for each other and our families, by doing some good in the wider community, and to use Parish and Diocesan communication mechanisms to redress the ignorance of our Faith. The Holy Spirit is calling us to ensure that the Faith is always growing, to reach out to all in need, and to share our time and resources.



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One parishioner said that “to come alive to the Spirit is to be an active, warm, welcoming people who throw the doors open, let the light and fresh air in, and let the love of joy and God out”. Another felt that the Holy Spirit was calling them to step out of their comfort zone, to be more present to the people around them and to move closer to God.

A parishioner said that the Holy Spirit is calling us to fast, abstain and give alms during Lent, to keep the faith forever and keep the Holy Sabbath day. A parishioner expressed a desire for nuns to come back to the Parish.

Again, there were sharply contrasting views on social issues impacting on the Church. A concern was expressed that the Synodal process would be influenced by and/or bend to the wishes of secular society. There was a call for the Pope to make the true teaching of the Church clear, and a request for Latin Mass to be retained. In contrast, another response stated that the Holy Spirit was calling the church to allow women priests, for priests to be allowed to marry, and for married couples to be allowed to use contraception.