

SUMMARY

of the Document for the Continental
Stage of the Universal Synod
2021 - 2024.



"Enlarge the Space of Your Tent"
Is. 54:2



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

Summary of the working document for the Continental Stage of the Synod - ***Enlarge the Space of Your Tent (Is 54:2)***

Introduction

This document is not to be taken, nor interpreted, as an endorsement of any of the positions from any particular area of the globe. In its diversity of voices, the document organises itself around a small number of themes and uses quotations from many reports to express more powerfully a sentiment being expressed. It is not a conclusive document, a magisterial document, nor a sociological survey. The document is not offering goals or objectives, nor is it expressing a theological vision. It is however, *“theological in the sense that it is loaded with the exquisitely theological treasure contained in the experience of listening to the voice of the Spirit enacted by the People of God, allowing its sensus fidei to emerge. But it is also a theological document in the sense that it is orientated to the service of the Church’s mission: to proclaim Christ who died and rose again for the salvation of the world.”* ¹The writers of the document suggest that the document will be understandable and useful *“only if it is read with the eyes of the disciple who recognizes it as a testimony to the path of conversion toward a synodal Church.”*²

Section 1: The Experience of the Synodal Journey

This section offers an insight into the synodal experience of all who participated in the first phase of the Synod and submitted a synthesis to the Secretariat of the Synod in Rome.

1.1 “The fruits, seeds, and weeds of synodality”

- It expresses the joy of those who participated even though their own context may have presented many challenges: wars, famines, political conflicts etc.
- The method of spiritual conversation was widely praised by many and many more emphasised that this was the first time the Church had asked for their opinion.
- There is a desire expressed in many of the reports to continue with this model in the future.
- There were also clear expressions of rejection of the synodal process and fears that the emphasis on synodality could push the Church toward adopting mechanisms and procedures that depend on a democratic-type majority principle.
- Numerous reports mention the fears and resistance on the part of the clergy, but also the passivity of the laity, their fear of expressing themselves freely, and the struggle to understand and articulate the priests’ and bishops’ role within the synodal dynamic.
- Another obstacle that is expressed in the document for walking the path together is the scandal of abuse by members of the clergy or by people holding ecclesial office. It is described as an open wound that continues to inflict pain on victims and survivors, on their families, and on their communities.

1.2 Our common baptismal dignity

- There was a real sense in the reports that it was important for all who have received the blessing of baptism to walk together, sharing and discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit who calls them and that there was experiences of novelty and freshness in the people of God speaking freely and being heard in organised conversations that were open-ended and attentive.

¹ *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*, §8.

² §7.

- **Section 2: Listening to the Scriptures**

The image of the tent in the words from the Prophet Isaiah underpins the whole working document: “Enlarge the space of your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly, lengthen your ropes and make firm your pegs” (Is 54:2). The prophet’s words evoke the experience of the exodus, when they dwelt in tents, and announces the promise of the return to the land, a sign of joy and hope. To prepare, it is necessary to enlarge the tent, acting on the three elements of its structure:

- The first is the tent cloth, which protects from the sun, wind and rain, delineating a space of life and conviviality. They need to be spread out, so that they can also protect those who are still outside this space, but who feel called to enter it.
- The ropes that hold the cloths together are the second structural element of the tent. They must balance the tension needed to keep the tent from drooping with the softness that cushions movement caused by the wind. That is why if the tent expands, the ropes must be stretched to maintain the right tension.
- Finally, the pegs are the third element: they anchor the structure to the ground and ensure its solidity, but remain capable of moving when the tent must be pitched elsewhere.

These words of Isaiah invite us to imagine the Church similarly as a tent, indeed as the tent of meeting, which accompanied the people on their journey through the desert: called to stretch out, therefore, but also to move. At its centre is the presence of the Lord, the Tabernacle. The tent is being held sturdy by its pegs, the fundamentals of faith that do not change but can be moved and planted in ever new ground, so that the tent can accompany the people as they walk through history. Finally, in order not to sag, the structure of the tent must keep in balance the different forces and tensions to which it is subjected: a metaphor that expresses the need for discernment. Enlarging the tent requires welcoming others into it, making room for their diversity.

Section 3: Towards a Missionary Synodal Church

- The dynamic of home and exile, of belonging and exclusion, is felt as a tension in the reports. Ireland’s synthesis was quoted to describe this as “*Those who feel at home in the Church feel the absence of those who don’t.*”
- The reports dream of “*a global and synodal Church that lives unity in diversity [that] God is preparing something new, and we must collaborate*” (USG/UISG).
- It also highlights how the main spiritual temptations facing the Church in responding to diversity, and the tensions it generates, are being avoided:
 - a) remaining trapped in conflict, such that our horizons shrink and we lose our sense of the whole, and fracture into sub-identities.
 - b) becoming spiritually detached and disinterested in the tensions involved, continuing to go our own way without involving ourselves with those close to us on the journey.
- The vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process.
- We are being called to go to every place, especially outside the more familiar territories.

3.1 Listening that Becomes Welcoming

- The reports indicate that churches have realised that the path to greater inclusion – the enlarged tent – is a gradual one.

- It begins with listening and requires a broader and deeper conversion of attitudes and structures, as well as new approaches to pastoral accompaniment.
- It begins in a readiness to recognise that the peripheries can be the place where a call to conversion resounds along with the call to put the Gospel more decisively into practice.
- Listening requires that we recognize others as subjects of their own journey. When we do this, others feel welcomed, not judged, free to share their own spiritual journey.
- The reports also reflect on the difficulty of listening deeply and accepting being transformed by it.
- They highlight the lack of communal processes of listening and discernment, and call for more training in this area.
- They point to the persistence of structural obstacles, including: hierarchical structures that foster autocratic tendencies; a clerical and individualistic culture that isolates individuals and fragments relationships between priests and laity; sociocultural and economic disparities that benefit the wealthy and educated; and the absence of “in-between” spaces that foster encounters between members of mutually separated groups.
- At the same time, the reports are sensitive to the loneliness and isolation of many members of the clergy, who do not feel listened to, supported and appreciated.
- Perhaps one of the least evident voices in the reports is that of priests and bishops, speaking for themselves and of their experience of walking together.

An option for young people, people with disabilities and the defence of life

- There was universal concern regarding the meagre presence of the voice of young people in the synod process, as well as increasingly in the life of the Church.
- A renewed focus on young people, their formation and accompaniment was seen as an urgent need and named as *a preferential option for the young* in one submission.
- Numerous reports point to the lack of appropriate structures and ways of accompanying persons with disabilities, and call for new ways of welcoming their contribution and promoting their participation: in spite of its own teachings, the Church is in danger of imitating the way society casts them aside.
- Equally prominent is the commitment of the People of God to the defence of fragile and threatened life at all its stages.

Listening to those who feel neglected and excluded

- Many communities have already understood synodality as an invitation to listen to those who feel exiled from the Church.
- The groups who feel a sense of exile are diverse, beginning with many women and young people who do not feel their gifts and abilities are recognised. Longing for a home also characterises those who, following the liturgical developments of the Second Vatican Council, do not feel at ease.
- For many, the experience of being seriously listened to is transformative and a first step towards feeling included.
- On the other hand, it was a source of sadness that some felt that their participation in the synod process was unwelcome: this is a feeling that requires understanding and dialogue.
- Among those who ask for a more meaningful dialogue and a more welcoming space we also find those who, for various reasons, feel a tension between belonging to the

Church and their own loving relationships, such as: remarried divorcees, single parents, people living in a polygamous marriage, LGBTQ people, etc.

- Reports show how this demand for welcome challenges many local Churches.
- They also reveal uncertainties about how to respond and express the need for discernment on the part of the universal Church.
- Despite the cultural differences, there are remarkable similarities between the various continents regarding those who are perceived as excluded, in society and also in the Christian community: the poorest, the lonely elderly, indigenous peoples, migrants without any affiliation and who lead a precarious existence, street children, alcoholics and drug addicts, those who have fallen into the plots of criminality and those for whom prostitution seems their only chance of survival, victims of trafficking, survivors of abuse (in the Church and beyond), prisoners, groups who suffer discrimination and violence because of race, ethnicity, gender, culture and sexuality.

3.2 Sisters and brothers for mission

- Highlights the importance of returning to the essence of Christian life, and the need to enter into a process of conversion that leads to a rediscovery of mission.
- This mission is rooted in the Word, sacraments, and caring for the wounded and suffering.
- A Church that is synodal offers witness to the world.
- Reports dream of such a Church immersed in the challenges of the world.

The Church's mission in today's world

- Although there is awareness that synodality calls us to walk with all of humanity, there is a long journey ahead in terms of social, cultural, spiritual and intellectual exchange and collaboration.
- Challenges such as tribalism, sectarianism, racism, poverty and gender inequality exist in the Church as in the world.
- These sinful structures in the Church are also in need of conversion.
- There is a deep desire to respond fully to the cry of the poor and the earth, highlighting the necessity of a renewed ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, especially in vulnerable areas of our world.
- This raises the necessity of the Church that is confident in debate about action for justice and all that is impacted in the public sphere, calling for a dialogue of life and solidarity.
- A more united witness of all Christians and between faith communities is passionately expressed.

Walking together with all Christians

- Ecumenical issues around synod, structures and ministries is not well named. Attending to the question of sharing Eucharist is also highlighted.
- Reports highlight growth in inter-church and inter-faith families who need accompaniment. Formation for dialogue and accompaniment is now more important than ever.
- Specific cultural contexts deeply challenges the Church where deep and rapid change is constant. This shapes mission.

- Sectarianism, tribalism, ethno-nationalisms are named as significantly narrowing the Church's expression of catholicity.
- Abuse crises have impacted trust and credibility.
- Individualism, consumerism and pluralism have increased pressures for families, impacting inter-generational relationships and the transmission of faith.
- In some countries, Christians are witnessing to the point of martyrdom, here witness is prophetic.

Cultures, religions and dialogue

- This is linked to a call for a more meaningful inter-cultural approach. Where Christians are a minority this dialogue is key.
- In this dialogue we come to acceptance and appreciation of the other.
- In some reports there is a call to better recognise, engage, integrate, and respond to the richness of local cultures, many of which have worldviews and styles of action that are synodal. Integrating faith with local culture is key.
- The spirituality, wisdom, and culture of indigenous peoples is highlighted as teaching us about synodal journeying.
- In summary, the practice of synodality needs integration with local cultures and contexts, promoting discernment and generativity.

3.3 Communion, participation, and co-responsibility

- The reports express a deep desire to recognise and reaffirm this common dignity of all the baptised as the basis for the renewal of life and ministries in the Church.
- Affirming the value of all vocations in the Church, and above all, invite us to follow Jesus, returning to his style and way of exercising power and authority as a means of offering healing, reconciliation and liberation.

Beyond clericalism

- There is deep appreciation and affection for faithful and dedicated priests, and concerns about the many demands that they face. There is also a desire for better formed, better accompanied and less isolated priests.
- Responses signal the importance of ridding the Church of clericalism so that all its members, including priests and laity, can fulfil a common mission.
- Clericalism is a spiritual impoverishment, a deprivation of the true goods of ordained ministry, and a culture that isolates clergy and harms the laity. Clericalism applies to both clergy and laity.
- Reports also express a deep and energetic desire for renewed forms of leadership – priestly, episcopal, religious and lay – that are relational and collaborative, and forms of authority capable of generating solidarity and co-responsibility.
- There is a call for an exercise of leadership that enables freedom for this co-responsibility.

Rethinking women's participation

- A critical and urgent area in this regard concerns the role of women and their vocation, rooted in our common baptismal dignity, to participate fully in the life of the Church.
- There is a growing awareness and sensitivity towards this issue all over the world.
- From all continents comes an appeal for Catholic women to be valued first and foremost as baptised and equal members of the People of God.
- There is almost unanimous affirmation that women love the Church deeply, but many feel sadness because their lives are often not well understood, and their contributions and charisms not always valued.
- The Church faces two related challenges: women remain the majority of those who attend liturgy and participate in activities, men a minority; yet most decision-making and governance roles are held by men.
- It is clear that the Church must find ways to attract men to a more active membership in the Church and to enable women to participate more fully at all levels of Church life.
- Women participating in the synodal processes desire both Church and society to be a place of flourishing, active participation and healthy belonging.
- Some reports note that the cultures of their countries have made progress in the inclusion and participation of women, progress that could serve as a model for the Church.
- In different forms, the problem is present across cultural contexts and concerns the participation and recognition of laywomen as well as women religious.
- Many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to a range of specific questions: the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate.
- Much greater diversity of opinion was expressed on the subject of priestly ordination for women, which some reports call for, while others consider a closed issue.
- A key element of this process concerns the recognition of the ways in which women, especially women religious, are already at the forefront of synodal practices in some of the most challenging social situations we face.

Charisms, vocations and Ministries

- Responsibility for the synodal life of the Church cannot be delegated, but must be shared by all in response to the gifts the Spirit bestows on the faithful.
- However, there is no shortage of expressions of difficulty in actually practicing co-responsibility. This needs more thorough and deeper development everywhere.
- This desire for co-responsibility is grounded first of all in the key of service to the common mission, that is, with the language of ministering.
- Co-responsibility is not an end in itself, but an enhancement in the service of mission.
- Many reports refer to practices for the recognition and promotion of ministries, which enable an effective entrustment by the community.
- There is no shortage of questions regarding spaces for the possible exercise of lay ministry.
- In some contexts, there is a need to consider the variety of charisms and ministries that emerge in an organized form within associations, lay movements and new religious communities.

- Attention is needed to their specificities, and also to safeguarding the harmony within each local Church.
- The question of the structures through which the life of the Christian community unfolds is raised.
- A great challenge to synodality that emerged during the first year is the harmonisation of charismatic gifts of the Spirit and hierarchical gifts.

3.4 Synodality takes shape

- The synodal journey has brought out a number of tensions in the Church
- Using a process of constant communal discernment the Church can harness tension as a source of energy to make it possible to continue walking together.
- Developing synodal structures and institutions, particularly regarding governance is important. Canon law will need to be reflected on and accompany any process of structural renewal.
- For the Church to truly function in a synodal way, structures will need to be inhabited by people who are well-formed, in terms of vision and skills.
- Spirituality needs to be at the core of this new vision for it will sustain the practice of synodality, avoiding reducing it to functionality and mere technical-organization.
- Living this synodal vision as a common mission, can only happen through encounter with the Lord and listening to the Spirit. There is no spirit without prayer.

Structures and institutions

- Regarding the relationships of local Diocese with the universal Church – the Continental Stage represents a wholly new development.
- Apart from a few regions characterized by a particular historical dynamic, the Church lacks established synodal practices at the continental level.
- The introduction of a specific Continental Stage in the process relates to the the incarnation of the Gospel in specific contexts and cultures.
- This produces Church communities that exhibit particular features, linked to the traits of each culture.
- In the context of a world that is both globalised and fragmented, each continent, because of its specific context constitutes a unique reality that strengthens links between the Churches, encourages the sharing of experiences and the exchange of gifts, and helps to imagine new options.

The Roman Curia and Episcopal conferences

- Synodality challenges the Roman Curia to collaborate with other Dicasteries and grow synodal practice in line with Predicate Evangelicum (Document by Pope Francis on the Reform of the Roman Curia).
- Episcopal Conferences are questioning what synodality means for them, asking how they can make Episcopal conferences more Synodal.

- The question of how Episcopal conferences can maintain their collegiality and freedom of decision-making without undue pressure whilst including clergy and laity in their debates and meetings was raised.
- During the Continental Stage, Episcopal Conferences will experience a new role, related not only to the promotion of communion within themselves, but also of dialogue between Churches linked by geographical/cultural proximity.
- The Continental phase offers the chance to reflect on ways of exercising episcopal ministry in a fully synodal style.
- The Oriental Catholic Churches offer a wealth of synodal structures, which are called to renewal today. E.g. the Syro-Malabar Church express the synodal nature of the Church at the local, regional and universal levels, and are useful for forming us to synodality.
- Co-responsibility, service of the common mission and an organizational way of allocating roles and powers needs to be engrained at all levels of Church.
- At local level, bodies of participation, for example pastoral councils and finance councils, which already exist at the various levels are called into question and reflected on. These should be places of inclusion, dialogue, transparency, discernment, evaluation and empowerment of all.
- In different parts of the world, transparency is seen as an essential practice for growing a more authentic synodal Church. Transparency and accountability are desired at all levels of Church.
- A style of leadership anchored in a synodal way of proceeding will produce trust and credibility
- In addition, many reports note the need to involve people with adequate professional competence in the management of economic and governance issues.
- All Church institutions, universities and participatory bodies are called to consider how they might integrate the call to synodality into the ways in which they exercise their mission and develop structures and procedures.

Formation

- The majority of reports indicate the need to provide formation in synodality. Structures alone are not enough: there is a need for ongoing formation to support a widespread synodal culture.
- The need for specific formation in listening and dialogue is emphasised. Many reports point to the need to ensure formation for those who will be called to assume leadership roles, especially priests.

Spirituality

- A culture of synodality requires adequate formation, and needs to be nurtured by closeness with the Lord and the capacity to listen to the voice of the Spirit.
- The Church must grow a spirituality that is based on an attention to interiority and conscience.
- A synodal Church needs to deal with the many tensions that emerge from diversity. A synodal spirituality can only be one that welcomes differences, promotes harmony, and draws from the tensions that feed and energize the journey.

- To achieve this, it will have to move from accentuating the individual dimension to the collective dimension: a spirituality of “we,” which enhances the contributions of each person.
- Christian spirituality is expressed in different ways. A synodal Church is built around diversity. The encounter between different spiritual traditions can promote communion and harmony, contributing to overcoming polarizations that many Churches experience.

3.5 Synodal life and liturgy

- The reports emphasise the deep link between synodality and liturgy.
- Eucharist is the ‘source and summit’ of a Synodal Church. “Liturgical celebration and prayer are experienced as a uniting force which mobilizes human and spiritual energies. The prevailing opinion is that prayer fosters joy of life and a purpose of community. It is seen as a point of reference, a place of strength and an oasis of peace.”
- The contributions underscore two things that need to be developed in view of a synodal journey: the unity of the community and the joy of life.
- In diverse countries across the world popular religiosity and popular practice (religion as lived by ordinary people) is an important part of Church life that helps people feel a sense of belonging to the Church.
- We must promote and evangelise popular religiosity, with a view to greater participation and a conscious integration into Christian life.

Managing tensions: renewal and reconciliation

- Many reports strongly encourage the implementation of a synodal style of liturgy that allows for active participation of all the faithful, welcoming all differences, valuing all ministries, and recognising all charisms.
- The synodal listening of the Churches records many issues: from rethinking a liturgy too concentrated on the celebrant, to the active participation of the laity and access of women to ministerial roles.
- The current experience of the Churches records conflicts which need to be addressed in a synodal manner. E.G. discerning the relationship to preconciliar rites (Latin Mass).
- There are problems related to embedding the faith in specific cultural contexts.
- Consideration of inculturation and interreligious dialogue, which affect forms of celebration and prayer is needed.
- Reports point out the shortcomings of liturgical celebration. There was a sense that there is a risk of a passivity of the wider community.
- Poor preaching, the content of the sermons, and their detachment from the lived reality of many were issues raised often. The quality of homilies is unanimously reported as a problem.
- Hurt caused by lack of access to the Eucharist and other Sacraments for a variety of reasons emerged. E.G. those living in remote areas without access to the sacraments, remarried, divorcees, those in polygamous marriages.
- There is a strong demand to find solutions to sacramental deprivation. There is no agreement on how to deal with these situations

A synodal style of celebrating

- The synod process represented an opportunity to experience the diversity in forms of prayer and celebration, increasing the desire to make it more accessible in the ordinary life of communities. Some regions raise the question of the reform of the liturgy.
- Many Churches emphasise the importance of linking liturgical celebration with various forms of dialogical sharing and fraternal gatherings.
- The variety of ritual traditions of liturgical prayer, as well as the symbolic forms with which diverse cultures express themselves, is considered by all to be an asset.
- A renewed love for spirituality, a commitment to care for the beauty and the synodal style of celebration all support the radiance of a missionary Church.

Section 4: The Next Steps

The next steps are divided into two horizons: the long-term horizon in which synodality takes the form of a perennial call to personal conversion and reform of the Church and the short-term, focussing our attention on the Continental Stage.

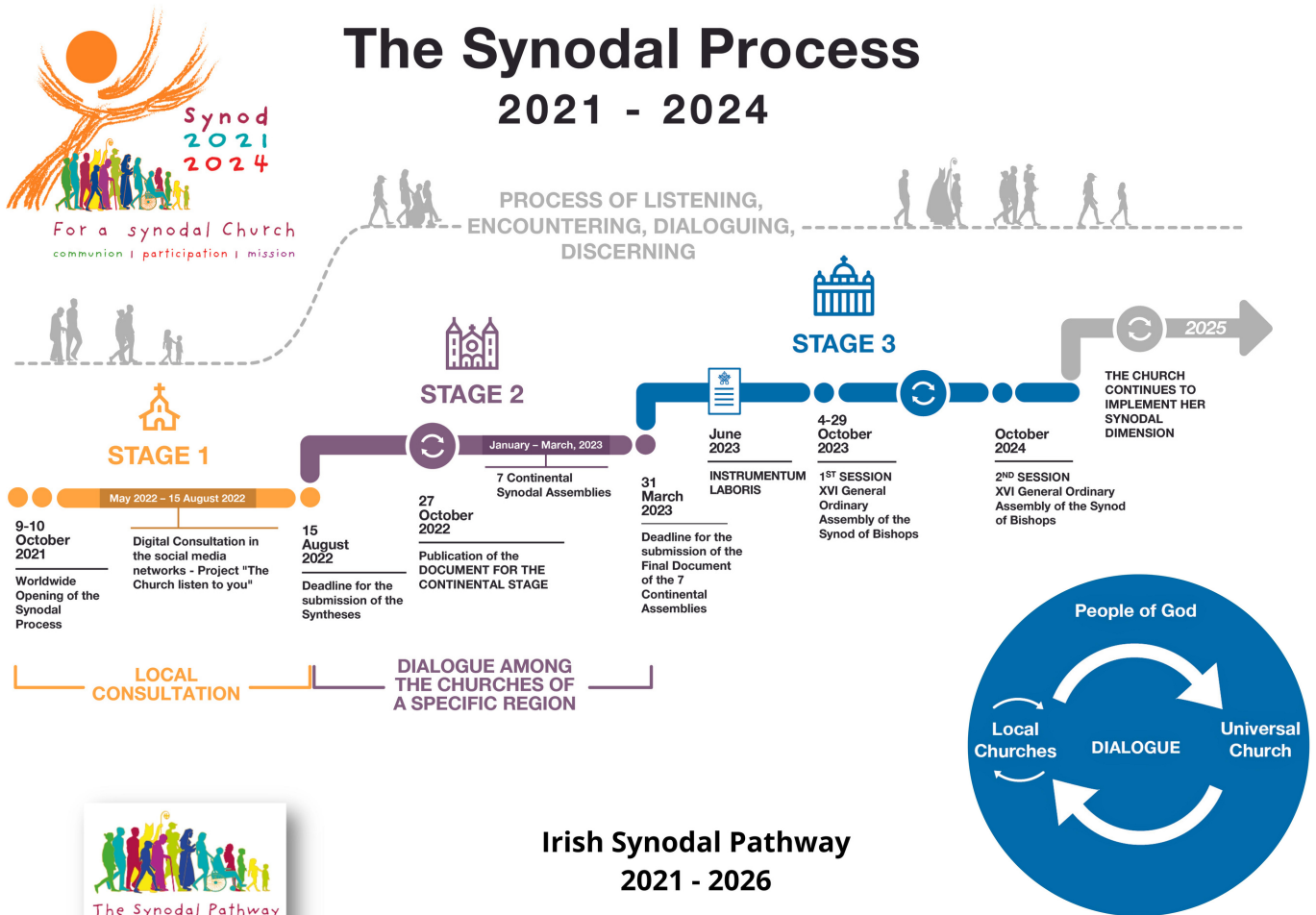
4.1A journey of conversion and reform

- Long-term: the People of God express a desire to be less a Church of maintenance and conservation and more a Church that goes out in mission.
- A connection emerges between deepening communion through synodality on the one hand and strengthening mission on the other: being synodal leads into renewed mission.
- The People of God have found joy in walking together and express the desire to continue doing so.
- We are a learning Church, and to be so we need continuous discernment to help us read the Word of God and the signs of the times together, so as to move forward in the direction the Spirit is pointing us.
- At the same time, walking together as the People of God requires us to recognize the need for continual conversion, individual and communal.
- On the institutional and pastoral level, this conversion translates into an equally continuous reform of the Church, its structures and style.
- The reports do not call for uniformity, but ask that we learn to grow in a sincere harmony that helps the baptised fulfil their mission in the world by creating the bonds necessary to walk together joyfully.
- Section 103 in particular says, *“The message of our synodal way is simple: we are learning to walk together, and sit together to break the one bread, in such a way that each is able to find their place. Everyone is called to take part in this journey, no one is excluded. To this we feel called so that we can credibly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to all people. This is the path we seek to continue on in our next Continental Stage.”*

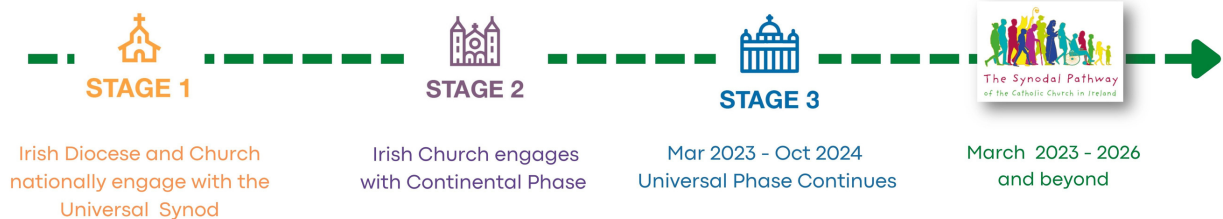
4.2 Methodology for the Continental Stage and Next Steps

- Please note that the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland has adapted the methodology and questions from the working document. You will find them in the workbook that accompanies this summary.

INFOGRAPHIC FOR THE SYNODAL PATHWAY



Irish Synodal Pathway 2021 - 2026



Engagement in the Universal Synod by the Irish Church This Phase is Now Completed in Ireland

Diocese are asked to reflect on the *Document for the Continental Phase*. This reflection represents a deepening of that already held and prepares for Irish Synodal gatherings in 2026. Diocese are also asked to seek practical initiatives they can initiate.

The Irish Church will focus on preparations for Irish Synodal gatherings scheduled for 2026. The Irish Church also continues engagement with the Universal Synodal process.

The Irish Church:

- Identifies areas for consideration in Synodal assembly/assemblies.
- Prepares for assemblies.
- Implements the Synodal Dimension in the life of the Irish Church

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