

Imagining Co-responsibility in the Irish Context: A Synodal Adventure
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Paper given at a conference entitled
Synodality Explored: Facing the Future Together
In association with University of Notre Dame, Australia
Knock Shrine, 19th April 2024

A Phobail Dé, let me begin by expressing my joy at the fact that this conference is being held here in Knock, and my thanks to the University of Notre Dame Australia for collaborating with Knock Shrine for this event. Just before the consultation that took place in Lent 2022 for the diocesan phase of the universal synod on synodality, I was a member of the National Steering Committee for the Synodal Pathway, and the co-ordinator of our diocesan synodal team, and I became very conscious that we were beginning a journey that could be very significant for the Church in Ireland, and I got a bit shaky at the prospects of what was ahead!

So, I thought of how Pope Francis always goes to the shrine of *Mary Salus Populi Romani* in the Basilica of St. Mary Major, before his journeys. So, I decided that I needed to come to Mary, Queen of Ireland, before our journey! I spent a lovely quiet day here entrusting the process to Mary, and I got wonderful encouragement from contemplating the apparition:

- Joseph in prayer and adoration
- Mary interceding for us
- John offering us the Word of God, the Good News
- The Lamb, the altar and the cross calling us to enter into the mystery of our redemption through the Eucharist
- And the heavenly glory, which is the ultimate all-inclusive reality that is promised us.

We have always understood the message of Knock as an expression of how God accompanied the people of Ireland on their journey “in a time of distress” – as we say when we pray here as pilgrims. And Knock invites us to dream of a time when, as we like to sing, “people of all ages” will once again know that they belong to the *Pobal Dé*.

I wish to commend Fr. Richard Gibbons and the team here at Knock Shrine for placing the synodal pathway at the heart of their programmes and events in recent years. And many key moments on our synodal journey have been here:

- The National Synthesis of the diocesan phase of the universal synod was launched here during the annual novena in August 2022.
- When Pope Francis asked that the Church around the world would gather for a Marian Day of Prayer for the Synod on the 31st May 2023, the Feast of the Visitation, we gathered here.

- And only last week, a small writing group gathered here in Knock to prepare Ireland's submission for the next Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October arising from our discernment of the latest consultation.

In fact, that latest consultation provides a convenient springboard for my topic today.

Imagine ... not as easy at it seems!

The document from the General Secretariat of the Synod entitled *Towards October 2024* asked the local churches to reflect on the question: ***How can we enhance the differentiated co-responsibility in the mission of all the members of the People of God?*** The Interim Committee for the Synodal Pathway in Ireland, desiring to make this question as accessible as possible, invited people to *imagine* what the life of the Church in Ireland might look like if people were co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways. We felt it was important for people to be invited to *imagine*!

- Because, first of all, if you haven't experienced it or witnessed it, what else can you do only imagine it! And that is the reality for the vast majority of people and clergy in Ireland – we haven't really experienced or witnessed the co-responsibility that arises from our equal dignity in Baptism. Of course, we can point to some instances, but in general it is not our experience.
- Secondly, we felt it was a response to Pope Francis' words when he opened the Synod of Bishops on Young People back in October 2018 when he said that the purpose of the Synod was *"to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands, and inspire ... a vision of the future filled with the joy of the Gospel"*¹. We felt that the discernment around co-responsibility in the Irish context needed to be imaginative, creative, prophetic, visionary, and open to a future of possibilities that have not yet been tried. We wanted participants in the consultation, as Pope Francis also said in that 2018 address, "to spend time with the future".

However, it emerged that the task of imagining was not as easy as it seems! In the conversations that took place in our diocese, the participants really struggled to imagine what co-responsibility would look like in practice. This struggle found expression in different ways. I'm conscious that I am using the experience of only one diocese, but I think in this case, the particular is indicative of the universal.

1. Participants found it hard to distinguish between collaboration and co-responsibility. At one meeting, a participant suggested that the language of co-responsibility was abstract and inaccessible, and that "collaboration" would be a better word. It's perfectly understandable! Since Vatican II we have been using the language of collaboration. The language of co-responsibility was of course always there in the Church, but there was, I think, a decisive moment back in 2009 when Pope Benedict in an address at the opening

¹ Address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, 3 October 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html

of the pastoral convention of the Diocese of Rome said the following: “[Lay people] must no longer be viewed as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy but truly recognized as ‘co-responsible’, for the Church’s being and action”². Interestingly, the title of that pastoral convention was, “Church Membership and Pastoral Co-responsibility”. It was a moment of clarity with a significant shift: the co-responsibility of the laity is not to be understood solely in respect of the ordained ministry but as an ecclesial responsibility proper to the laity themselves. The recent consultation seems to illustrate that this distinction has yet to find its way into the mindset of the laity and clergy of Ireland.

2. Participants also struggled to imagine co-responsibility without reference to the increasing shortage of priests available for parish ministry. The current reality of the Church in Ireland dominates the thinking. The needs of the Church in Ireland are predominantly perceived in terms of continuity in the provision of pastoral services at parish level. Again, this is understandable, because this is the reality for the vast majority of the participants in the consultation. But the consequence is that co-responsibility is seen as a response of the Church to the shortage of priests, with all the patronising and clericalism that that entails. Cynically, it is seen as a clerical Church saying to the Laity, “there isn’t enough of us anymore so we’re going to allow you to share the burden of responsibility!”
3. Another obstacle to imagining a co-responsible Church arises from the very institutions and structures that are perceived as being co-responsible. Participants readily referenced Parish Pastoral Councils as instruments of co-responsibility, and in many cases called for them to be mandatory, but also highlighted their consultative and collaborative nature. The canonical instruments that give legitimacy, and purpose, and mission to the participatory bodies such as Parish Pastoral Councils, Finance Committees, etc. are informed by an ecclesiology and a particular view of the relationship between the laity and the ordained that is collaborative but not co-responsible. If the structure understands the pastor as being solely responsible, how can the structure function in a co-responsible way? We can probably point to instances where participatory bodies have acted co-responsibly, and where the laity were empowered to put their gifts and charisms at the service of the Church in a co-responsible way, but these instances would have been entirely dependent on the pastor’s desire to work co-responsibly. And in those situations, he would run the risk of taking decisions and actions that could be deemed uncanonical.

The very task of imagining a co-responsible Church in Ireland is therefore challenging. When you add into the mix the breakdown in trust because of the legacy of the abuse crisis, and priests who are the key players at local level but who are often demoralised, over-worked, ageing, and isolated – the challenge can seem overwhelming. But what is also emerging is a desire - a hope! - which despite the difficulties in imagining it, longs for a Church in which the whole People of God exercises co-responsibility for the life and mission of the Church according to their ministries and charisms. It is that image of the Church, that ecclesial image, that is now resonating as one that is attractive, more authentic to its identity, and more fit for mission.

² *Opening of the Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome on the Theme: “Church Membership and Pastoral Co-responsibility, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, 26 May 2009, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090526_convegno-diocesi-rm.html*

Co-responsible ... for what?

It seems to me that the task of imagining a co-responsible Church in Ireland can begin when we ask a simple but fundamental question: co-responsible for what?

When you ask someone to assume responsibility, there has to be clarity around what you are asking them to be responsible for! I believe that this is a priority for the synodal pathway in Ireland: that we discern the purpose – in other words, the mission! – for which we are inviting people to be co-responsible. If we cannot articulate the mission of the Church in Ireland in the 21st century, we will not be able to renew existing structures, or create new structures and processes that will be fit for purpose. And people will become frustrated because their charisms will be frustrated by the Church's confusion around her identity and mission.

In our synodal discussions over the past few years, one of the things that comes forward a lot is the need to move away from the kind of Church that we have known in Ireland. But we shouldn't be too quick to dismiss that form of Church because the Church that re-established itself in Ireland after Emancipation in the early 19th century, which has been our dominant model of Church for almost two centuries, and which formed most of us in this room, had one thing going for it that we should envy: it had a very clear sense of its mission. Its mission was (1) to provide the sacraments in such a way that the lives of the people were sanctified; (2) to catechise; and (3) to provide pastoral care. And everything the Church did was at the service of that mission. And it was so successful, that we were happy to export the same model around the world.

The very landscape of our towns was transformed by that sense of mission. Approach any typical provincial town in Ireland in your car and you'll see the skyline of the town reflecting that mission: the spire symbolising the sacraments, the convent or diocesan school symbolising catechesis, and the former workhouse transformed by religious into a hospital or nursing home. My own town of Navan is a typical example. And while we could not describe that model as co-responsible in the way we understand today, there was a trickling down, or a delegation, of authority and responsibility. The ordained ministry was for the sanctification of the people; catechesis was entrusted to the religious orders, diocesan priests, and lay men and women in the education system; and pastoral care was entrusted to the religious orders and their collaborators in the hospital system. Other structures and institutions also played roles: the confraternities, sodalities, and associations provided adult faith formation; the Society of St. Vincent de Paul worked in the provision of pastoral care.

What I'm trying to articulate here, through the lens of the crumbling ruins of the Church that we all knew, is the necessity for a clear sense of mission if we are to be able to imagine a co-responsible Church. I come back to my fundamental question: co-responsible for what? There is much talk about the need for formation. Again, the fundamental question: formation for what? There is much talk about changing canonical structures. Again, for what?

The change that is needed has to be at the service of the mission that gathers us. During the latest consultation, we did a little scoping exercise at two of the meetings in our diocese. We asked the participants to reflect for a moment and to write down on little pieces of paper which we then gathered, what they thought was the mission of the Church.

There were as many answers as there were people in the room, and they were as varied as the people in the room. In fairness, many of the answers referenced the need to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, to evangelise, to build up the Body of Christ, to serve the Kingdom of God, to lead people to salvation, etc. But there was also a certain poverty in the answers as people struggled to articulate what the Church is about. Some saw the Church purely as a community where people feel a sense of belonging. Others saw it only in terms of morality, e.g. “the mission of the Church is to teach the Ten Commandments”. It’s hard not to feel that our sense of identity and our sense of mission have become confused, and in that context, it is unfair to ask people to be co-responsible because we are burdening them with confusion and causing them to be frustrated.

By asking the fundamental question, “for what?”, I think it obliges us to consider our mission. It obliges us to face the current reality, and to admit that it is wrong to invite people to be co-responsible for structures and processes that are no longer fit for purpose. We have to lift one another out of the need to maintain what is there, out of the clericalism that seeks to fill the gap left by ageing and fewer priests, and out of an ecclesiology that is not mission oriented. We have to have a conversation about who we are and what we are about. And that conversation is what we should now call the synodal pathway. The synodal pathway in Ireland has to discern the Church’s mission in Ireland in the 21st century, and provide the clarity that will allow people to have conviction around their role so that they can give their charisms generously in the service of that mission. It may well turn out that our mission has not changed, that our mission is still to provide the sacraments, to catechise, and to provide pastoral care. And if that is the case, then we can cut our cloth. We can say that the former structures are no longer fit for purpose and that we have to create new structures to allow us to work together co-responsibly in the service of that mission. We may not transform the architectural landscape of our towns but hopefully we will transform the spiritual landscape of our culture.

So, co-responsible for what? I say, co-responsible for mission. On this point, I believe that the intuition of our Bishops was correct when they announced back in 2021 that the Church in Ireland would embark on a synodal pathway to reflect on the question: “What is God asking of the Church in Ireland at this time?” That is another formulation of my fundamental question, “for what?” And it correctly puts God at the centre of the question, because we are not the ones who create mission. It is God who sends us on mission. And it is up to us, under the guidance of the Spirit, to discern together how we can fulfil the mission entrusted to us.

Adventure ... or exodus

I wish to move now to a consideration of the other keyword in the title of my paper: “adventure”.

I could have used the word “journey”, but honestly, I believe that it’s much more than a journey. For me, a journey has a clear destination. When I left Navan yesterday to begin my journey to Knock, I knew where I was going, and I knew how long it would take me to get here. And I’m old enough to know the way and not to have to rely on a Sat-Nav! But our synodal pathway does not have a clear destination. We do not yet know where we are going, and we do not know how long it will take us to get there.

I also thought about using the word “pilgrimage”. A pilgrimage is a prayerful journey, and it is a journey that we make in the conviction that we will encounter God on the journey and that he will speak to us on the journey. Our synodal pathway will certainly be a pilgrimage in that sense. But, again our synodal pathway is much more than a pilgrimage because one of the things about a pilgrimage is that we always return home from a pilgrimage - transformed by our encounter with God, but we always return home. I have a sense that our synodal pathway will lead us to a new home.

“Adventure” implies excitement and exploration of new places. But let’s be clear – we are not on an adventure to find the Holy Grail! We know what the Holy Grail is! It is the *Pobal Dé*, the People of God, living our baptismal calling to the full, being transformed by the Gospel and by a relationship with Christ that is both personal and ecclesial. Neither are we “going where no one has gone before”, because the People of God have always been on this journey. That is who we are! We are a people continually in discernment, continually discerning the voice of the Lord who sends us on mission.

The images for the journey that the synodal pathway will take us on are weak. We need to search elsewhere, and of course, we have to turn to the Word of God. The Scriptures don’t just give us a wealth of images. They give us a paradigm, an image that acts as a hermeneutic for attaching value and meaning to what we do. And so I suggest that our synodal pathway towards a co-responsible Church will be an “exodus”.

God’s Initiative

The journey we are taking must be God’s initiative, as he took the initiative in calling his people out of Egypt. We have to accept that it is God who is calling us to make this journey, and we respond to his call. In that perspective, we have to allow room for God’s Spirit to guide us on this journey. It is not we who will decide the route and the destination – it is God’s Spirit who will guide us there, provided that we discern his voice. Hence the importance of the “Conversation in the Spirit” methodology which is premised on the belief that the Spirit speaks in all the Baptised. Because of the dignity of equality which Baptism bestows, the voice of the Spirit is not confined to one person, one group, or one ministry. Hence also, the importance of discernment. We must create instances where we discern in a truly ecclesial way. Because the journey towards a co-responsible Church is not about what we want, but rather about what God wants. And that must be discerned. And so, our journey cannot be understood as some sort of parliamentary exercise whereby a majority imposes its will. Neither is it a plebiscite to find out the will of the majority. Rather, it is a discernment of God’s will, as it is revealed in the Word of God, and transmitted in our Tradition and Magisterium, and expressed by the voice of the Spirit who speaks in the Baptised. Only in this way can we apply what I like to call the *Gamaliel Principle*: if this enterprise is of human origin it will break up, but if it does in fact come from God, you will not be able to destroy it (Acts 5).

Moreover, the destination of this exodus is not of our making – it is God’s gift to us. As the people of Israel set out on their journey, they did so on the basis of a promise – that they would live in the land that God would give to them and to their descendants. We are embarking on a journey to a Church that will not be of our making, but which will be a gift of the God who is faithful to his promises.

Liberation

Our synodal pathway, if it is to be an exodus, will also be a liberation. Perhaps we have become “enslaved” to structures and processes that are no longer serving our mission. Perhaps we are slaves to an image or model of Church, of priesthood, of ministry that is no longer fit for purpose. Perhaps too, we are imprisoned by the guilt and shame of our failures, and by the burden of the hurt and pain that is at the heart of our Church. The trust that should be at the heart of our relationships as a family has been damaged. But if we are a family, we can begin to be co-responsible for our family when we listen to each other, and hear the pain that we carry. And there is liberation in that.

Identity

If the paradigm of the Exodus can give meaning to our synodal pathway, then we can come to a new awareness of our identity as the People of God. The journey in the desert was a time of growing self-awareness of the relationship that characterised the people of Israel as the People of God: “I will be your God, and you will be my people”. Identity is the answer to the question, “Who am I?” As a Church in Ireland, we now have to ask the question, “Who are we?” In the Ireland of the 21st century, we can no longer define ourselves in terms of nationality or some notion of “Irishness”; we can no longer define ourselves as the people that emerged from the penal era; in the new political reality of the northern part of our country, we can no longer define ourselves as being “not the other”. Our synodal pathway must begin with a passing through the waters of Baptism so that we emerge with a renewed sense of our baptismal identity and with a conviction around what this means for our mission.

New Covenant

In the desert, the people of Israel entered into a new Covenant with the LORD which was built around Law and Worship. A co-responsible Church requires something like a new covenant that defines how we relate to each other in justice (Law) and how we relate together to God (worship).

Dear friends, I suggest that the biblical paradigm of the exodus gives meaning to the journey that we are on. It is God who is leading us on this journey. He is the pillar of fire that shows us the way. On this journey, we can be certain that he will lead us to a new sense of our identity as the people of God, with a new sense of our mission for the Ireland that is our home. I believe that it is in this renewed sense of identity and mission that the co-responsibility of the People of God will become a reality, and no longer merely something that we struggle to imagine.

And as we make this exodus along the synodal pathway, perhaps we might have some adventures along the way!