

Submission from: *Diocese of Meath*

SECTION 1

*How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways? **(maximum of 4 pages)***

Charisms for the building up of the Church

The reading from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:1-16), which was a central part of the meetings held in the Diocese of Meath in response to *Towards October 2024*, informed much of the discussion. The language of rights and entitlement around the issue of co-responsibility was absent, and participants were very comfortable with the language of charism, gift, and grace. This scriptural paradigm allowed the participants to see co-responsibility in the life of the Church as the work of grace rather than a competition of roles. This in turn led to a desire to see the charisms of the members of the Church "unleashed" so as to contribute to the building up of the Church. The institutional dimension of the Church was recognised as essential for the preservation of the kerygma of faith and for the provision of ministries. However, it was also recognised that the institutional dimension needs to be balanced by the charismatic dimension, and that the building up of the Church and its mission cannot be achieved without that balance. Co-responsibility for the life and mission of the Church requires, therefore, a discernment of charisms. And while canonical changes and adjustments are necessary to create a space for a co-responsible articulation of the Church's institutional and charismatic dimensions, the Church's understanding of co-responsibility must be rooted in a theology of charisms. In other words, co-responsibility must be the fruit of a healthy relationship between charisms and ministries, rather than something which is imposed for the purpose of limiting one or the other.

It should be noted that participants expressed sadness at the general lack of awareness of charisms among the faithful. One comment suggested a "gap between Confirmation and Marriage" to express how the gifts of the Spirit receive little or no encouragement in the aftermath of the Sacrament that confers the gifts of the Spirit, and that these gifts which are intended for the building up of the Church have become dormant by the time a person is entering Marriage, therefore depriving the Church – and the world! – of a vibrant Spirit-filled domestic church.

Imagining co-responsibility

At its most basic level, co-responsibility requires the kind of dialogue that the synodal process has made possible. St. Paul wrote about the importance of “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15) and certainly the methodology of the *conversation in the Spirit* has made it possible for us to speak the truth in love during this synodal process. This is seen as a pre-requisite for all forms of co-responsibility, and there is a desire to see the method of *conversation in the Spirit* become embedded in the life of the Church. As a method, it establishes that each person participating in the discussion is valued, and that the Spirit can speak through the experience of each person, as well as ensuring that we are guided by the Spirit in the decisions we take. Valuing the experience of the individual in the life of the Church and submitting to the promptings of the Spirit, are pre-requisites for co-responsibility.

Arising from this desire for on-going dialogue in the Spirit, participants suggested various forms of meetings where the faithful would have opportunities to interact with one another, to share experiences, to hear testimony, to raise questions, and to make suggestions. Another suggestion identified the need for groups with different pastoral and apostolic outreaches or responsibilities within a parish to meet to discuss their shared hopes for the life and mission of the Church in their parish. It was also suggested that smaller groups or communities were better suited to co-responsibility, but that these groups could help to enhance a co-responsible culture in the life of the Church.

Unsurprisingly, Parish Pastoral Councils (called “Parish Pastoral Assemblies” in the Diocese of Meath) emerged as a necessary form of co-responsibility. Other parish groups with responsibility for liturgy, finance, maintenance, etc., were also seen as means by which those in ministry can act co-responsibly with others and where charisms have the potential to flourish for the benefit of the life and mission of the Church. However, as was noted more than once, these are consultative bodies, and while they certainly promote co-responsibility around decision-making and action, ultimate responsibility rests solely with the ordained minister. Clergy in particular noted that “consultative” could ultimately be meaningless and fall short of the genuine collaboration it aspires to.

In fact, it was the voices of the clergy that most clearly articulated the need for and the challenges associated with co-responsibility. Certainly, there is a burden of administration associated with parish ministry that is experienced as increasingly onerous for clergy. Deploying parish resources to employ suitable and qualified staff to assist with administration

is of course helpful, but this is not a form of co-responsibility arising from the discernment of charisms. Feedback from our gatherings would suggest that while there is a willingness and a desire to engage in a more co-responsible model in the life of the Church, there is a lack of formation for those involved in parish ministry, which means that those who have potential for leadership and for working co-responsibly with the pastor, are not sufficiently formed in ecclesiology and mission to develop the ministry. While conflict can occur under any circumstances, co-responsibility in a parish setting has potential for significant conflict, especially where a pastor and long-term parishioners do not share a common vision or where a pastor feels unsupported in addressing particular pastoral needs. Spiritual discernment is of course essential in dealing with conflict in a pastoral context, but perhaps this potential for conflict needs to be addressed with more honesty and understanding. It was also noted by clergy that some forms of co-responsibility amount to forms of clericalisation which is an abuse of the vocation of the laity who are called to put their charisms at the service of the Church precisely as lay people.

Whatever forms of co-responsibility are envisaged or might emerge, it is essential that those who hold responsibility either by virtue of their ordination/ministry or of their charism are supported in doing so. A person who steps forward to assume responsibility – even when shared – will at times feel isolated, vulnerable, and afraid. It is essential to offer forms of support to those who accept responsibility for the life and mission of the Church. Clergy noted certain instances of support at parish, diocesan, and even national level that provide good support around specific areas of responsibility (e.g. finance, property, safeguarding, school management, etc.).

Significantly, the specific role of women did not feature in the feedback from discussions around co-responsibility. It is possible that the text of Ephesians 4 focused the discussions on individual charisms to such an extent that the rights of women to enter ministries heretofore reserved only to men simply did not fit the paradigm. There was a definite sense of “we are all in this together” without reference to distinctions of gender or other differences of state or function. Comments such as, “we are all part of the jigsaw” and “co-responsibility will release the talents of all” are representative of the views of the participants.

The voice of young people who participated in a meeting in response to *Towards October 2024* seems to speak of a need for effective catechesis and faith-filled accompaniment if they are to aspire to being joyful and courageous co-responsible members of the Church. Their sense of mission comes across strongly, and they share with the Church a desire for the Gospel of Jesus

Christ to reach their contemporaries: “Many think it’s just for priests and religious; we need to realise that we are part of the mission as well”!

Ultimately, co-responsibility requires a personal faith on the part of the individual. It is through a personal encounter with Christ, and a conscientious choice to be his disciple, that one experiences the desire to serve and to put one’s charisms at the service of the Church with courage and joy. A Church that seeks to encourage co-responsibility must therefore also create spaces for the baptised to develop the personal faith that seeks to serve.

Looking ahead in the Irish context

While the discussions were very open, engaging, and enthusiastic, it is noticeable that participants found it difficult to imagine co-responsibility in the Irish context. There was excitement around the idea of individual charisms being empowered to serve the Church co-responsibly, and at one meeting there was a call for this to be addressed by the Irish Synodal Pathway, but participants struggled to imagine what it might look like in reality. As in so many other aspects of the life of the Church, it appears that it falls back to the ordained ministry to call forth charisms and to empower them.

It is possible that the lack of imagination is due to the fact that hidden behind the question about forms of co-responsibility is the question, “co-responsible for what?” For what is the Church inviting its members to be co-responsible? The question for discernment specified “for the life and mission of the Church”, but do we know what the mission of the Church is? Has the mission of the Church changed in line with the cultural changes that have occurred in Ireland within the last generation or is it still the same mission? The evident lack of clarity – not to mention confidence! – around the mission of the Church in Ireland today makes it difficult to imagine the kind of co-responsibility that is necessary for mission.

The synodal process so far has made it obvious that the mission of the Church in Ireland is no longer something that can be defined by any one group but must be the object of a discernment process that includes reflection on history and culture, ecclesiology, and the Word of God. We must understand why what we did in the past is no longer adequate for mission, and we must discern together *what it is that God is asking of us at this time*. This is the question posed initially by the Irish Synodal Pathway and which the *Pobal Dé* is called to discern. The urgency of this question, and the hope that the synodal pathway offers, are discernable in the discussions held in the Diocese of Meath *towards October 2024*.

SECTION 2

Please provide a brief testimony of the work carried out and the experiences lived during the synodal process so far, sharing any good practice. (maximum of 2 pages)

In response to *Towards October 2024*, the Synodal Team of the Diocese of Meath organised four meetings across the diocese in March 2024. Clergy and members of Parish Councils (called “Parish Pastoral Assemblies” in the Diocese of Meath) were personally invited, but the meetings were open to any interested person. In addition, two meetings of clergy discussed the question given for discernment, and a parish-based youth group also devoted an evening to the question. Participants of the meetings appreciated very much the feedback on the universal and national synodal processes, responded very well to the reading of Eph 4:1-16, and engaged meaningfully in the conversations in the Spirit. Written feedback from all the discussion groups at each meeting was gathered and a writing group met to discern what was expressed.

The universal and national synodal processes have certainly given extra impetus to the establishment of Parish Pastoral Assemblies (PPAs) across the Diocese of Meath. This new model of Parish Pastoral Council benefitted from the experience of the diocesan phase of the universal synod and promotes a *modus operandi* based on prayer and spiritual discernment. Each parish was encouraged to form its new PPA in a synodal manner by explaining what was involved, hosting meetings to discuss pastoral priorities, and to choose members according to their gifts. The formation of the new members of the PPAs placed a significant emphasis on mission and evangelisation.

In one parish in the diocese, a series of public meetings for parishioners was held during Lent 2023 to discern the pastoral priorities for the in-coming PPA. The national synthesis from the diocesan phase of the universal synod was used and over the course of the meetings, the parishioners discerned from the national synthesis four pastoral priorities for the in-coming PPA, as well as the qualities necessary in those who would become members of the PPA.

Conversation in the Spirit is gradually becoming familiar to those who participate in meetings concerning the synodal process. The gatherings for the diocesan and continental phases of the universal synod, together with the recent gatherings in response to *Towards October 2024*,

have all availed of the methodology of *conversation in the Spirit* to guide discernment on the questions proposed. A team of priests in a large parish in the diocese now conduct their annual “team day” by using *conversation in the Spirit* to discern how they can enhance their living and working together for the sake of their mission. There is some evidence of PPAs using the method for discernment around important decisions and tasks. However, we are a long way off the point where we can say that *conversation in the Spirit* has become embedded in the life of the diocese. At a recent meeting of clergy to respond to *Towards October 2024* it was remarked that while the method certainly had potential for genuine spiritual discernment, nonetheless the method felt “stilted”.

There is a growing awareness in the diocese that questions concerning the future of parishes as places of ministry and pastoral care cannot be addressed in isolation by the Bishop and/or the clergy alone, but must be discerned by all stakeholders. The PPAs are therefore considered important instances of synodal collaboration in addressing questions about the future needs of the diocese rather than being purely focused on matters within the territory of their own parishes. Deaneries have begun to gather the PPAs of the constituent parishes in plenary style meetings to explore possibilities for closer collaboration.

While clergy in particular feel that they are continually “accompanying” people on the margins of the life of the Church through funeral ministry, preparation for the sacraments, school and hospital chaplaincy, etc., there is a sense that this kind of accompaniment in the Irish context is lacking an effective missionary outreach. Those who are accompanied are grateful for the Church’s “service” but do not feel the need to respond to the call of the Gospel. This disconnect is a source of weariness and frustration for many involved in ministry in Ireland. In this context, therefore, it is not possible to describe initiatives in the diocese of Meath to “hear the voice” of those who feel that they do not belong “in the tent” or new forms of accompaniment for those on the margins of the life of the Church. It is to be hoped that the Irish Synodal Pathway will offer the opportunity for an authentic discernment of the missionary dynamic necessary for pastoral accompaniment.