



TOWARDS OCTOBER 2024

Summary of Conversations at a Consultative Gathering of Representatives of the Religious Congregations, Missionary Societies and Lay Mission Committee of AMRI

AMRI is the representative and support organisation for the leaders of the 155 Catholic religious institutes, societies of apostolic life and missionary organisations. Our membership is diverse, from small communities to global missionary congregations, from enclosed contemplatives to active lay missionaries.

AMRI's vision, inspired by the good news of Jesus, is to contribute to the creative living of religious and missionary life in a synodal Church, responding with hope to the signs of the times, to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

AMRI welcomed wholeheartedly the *Letter to the People of God* and the *Synthesis Report from the Synodal Assembly, First Session, October 2023*. Members also read and/or heard with interest several accounts of experience, as well as a wide range of reflections, on the part of those who were present in person in or around the Assembly, whether as advisors, participants, or journalists for print and/or social media.

The invitation to continue to participate in the synodal process was highlighted as we encouraged members to engage in conversations, training, and other events at various levels local, diocesan, and national.

This summary of the conversations which took place on 1 May in Dublin, where a cross section of members of the Religious Congregations, Missionary Societies and Lay Mission Committee of AMRI were represented. It has been finalised through the reflections of an AMRI Synod Working Group and approved by AMRI Executive Council.

'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.' (1 Cor 12:4-6)

In order to focus our contribution, it was agreed to pursue our conversations on three main themes, validated principally by our reading of Chapter 10 of the Synthesis Report. These were:

- ✚ From our experience within our Congregations, Societies and Organisations, what have we been learning about **conditions which facilitate synodal experiences?**
- ✚ From the commitment of members to engage with **present-day ecological crises**, in light of unfolding knowledge of the 'new' sciences, how do we 'read' God's call to be Church-in-world in our time?

- ✚ As members of professedly religious groups, emanating from the variety of charisms in the Church, how do we hear **the voice from the edge** (those excluded, neglected) calling on a Church which desires to be synodal?

The methodology of the event entitled ‘Becoming a Synodal Church’ was worthy of its purpose: designated participants (‘willing collaborators’) shared what we called conversation starters. Our theological consultant for the event offered relevant pointers to theological reflection, after which the characteristic ‘round table conversations’ took place. The outcome of these conversations comprises most of this submission.

It is our earnest hope that the voice of our members – their insights, views, desires, reflections as well as their critique - will be received in the spirit in which they are offered. As fellow missionary disciples we believe we share with all the baptised the *sensus fidei fidelium*.

1.

What we are learning about the necessary conditions for synodal experience, about becoming a synodal church

The centrality of prayer, of opening up to the vision of the gospel message deep within us, lies in ensuring that we are awake to the *kairos* moments in our life and the life of our Church. ‘Getting to know Jesus rather than just hearing about him’ is the basis to all encounters; we know too that we encounter the risen one within our broken world.

The gift of the Spirit to all the baptised is to be welcomed with confidence as we journey into relationship in faith, truth, and mission. Distinguishing between charisms and vocations, including the call to ecclesial leadership, ordination, religious profession does not negate the basic equality of the call of the baptised to service. including the service of leadership in prayer and mission.

The presence and power of God in all creation and all peoples are to be honoured; also, the essential oneness (interconnectedness, interdependence) of creation. We believe the Divine energy pervades all from birth to death.

The call is to be open to the Spirit, personally free and open to how processes can lead to unexpected places, to change, to newness, to the gift of diversity; for this we create open spaces, meeting in person and also using technology creatively. We are not closed to a topic while there is not as yet peace.

‘Listening is key’; listening to the Spirit, to the Word, in tune with living tradition; listening to the other, to diversity, even to diverging views; to the unexpected; attentive, deep listening, honest listening, listening with freedom to hear, listen to ignite! “We need to grow in the dynamic from parliamentary debate to open-minded open-hearted listening”; listen between pauses! Listen for challenge to change; listen with the ear of the heart, at individual and communal level, listen for what is not said! We create spaces that facilitate listening. go beyond safety of church; listen to the prophets, listen to the young

Humility is called for, recognising that God can and does speak through the “least” as well as the greatest. We need to develop a way of working together inclusively with our brothers and sisters; often the smallest contribution can be the most vital – as a single bright speck

on a tapestry. Humility is especially called for in necessary and honest conversations on abuse.

Synodal experiences arise in processes which take time and patience, as well as trust; they require holding and leading; we will not know the outcomes in advance – radically different from parliamentary democracy. Do not fear conflict – process it. Allow the chaos on the way! Learn to recognise experience and processes that are truly synodal, and those that are not; ask who is included and who is excluded? (6)

We desire deeply that all the diverse participants of the Synodal Assembly will continue to have a vote, and that the model will be developed.

ISSUES

Formation for synodality, biblical, theological, and spiritual is essential at every level.

Current structures, and in particular how hierarchy is perceived at the local level, do not express the Vatican II vision of Church, with its ‘sacred nature and organic structure’. We want to engage creative imagination to go beyond buildings and beyond clericalism, and to invite all to the table of synodal conversation.

There was agreement that there would be ‘no peace until the role of women in the church was addressed completely by the people of God.’ This question of the ministry of women, not excluding the questions relating to ordination, remains a concern for the future of the Church.

When current teaching is not universally received, the conversation goes on. It may take longer than expected and the solution may lie beyond current horizons. Meanwhile there are those who leave. As Church we are called to engage with urgency. Becoming synodal is a matter for local as well as global level – if not here where?

We need to diversify creatively, e.g., in our sense of ritual and pilgrimage; accept the other as other; recognise issues of ecology, justice, prophecy, ongoing revelation; allow sacramental practice to evolve. Eucharist will always be central; it is our pathways to Eucharist that need to be explored; honour language to which young and others may resonate; move on from attitudes as well as language which exclude and can alienate.

Questions for ourselves, for synodal conversation: are we prophetic and counter-cultural within communities and in the Church?

We are learning to acknowledge current pastoral situations, changes in context global and local; learning to listen with courage, to leave behind our defensiveness, and to launch out on a new quest to hear what God is saying to us in all our changing circumstances.

2.

The ecological crisis as context of the Synodal Assembly of the Church

The ecological crisis which threatens the whole community of life on our planet is clearly critical among ‘signs of the times’ in our day. How the second session of the Synodal Assembly reads it will be, in our view, a radical test of the authenticity of the process itself. This, because we understand that the Synodal Assembly aims to discern our call to be Church in the world now. Church cannot be Church without hearing and responding to the

cry for justice on earth. ‘There can be no synodal process without a focus on life in all its aspects including the earth itself’, and our responsibility to leave the planet habitable for future generations. In this regard, we are committed to the vision of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region in 2019.

We have embraced the ecological movement, notwithstanding having arrived later than we should have done. In synodal conversations we have looked at issues raised both by the urgent call to stewardship of creation and by the plight of its peoples as all are affected by climate change.

We have listened to stories of how some Congregations and Societies are responding to the challenge of living sustainably, walking lightly on earth, and advocating for justice. These need to be heard, as does the anxiety of young people, and the fear of communities around the globe who are most under threat. ‘Deep listening and expanded awareness are needed to activate how we feel and act in this area’. In this way, paralysis in view of the scale of the task, as well as apathy as an alternative to fear, can both be overcome.

It is essential that Christians and all humanity are challenged by the Synodal Assembly to become motivated, and that effort and action are coordinated at all levels. ‘Our efforts to address the cry of the earth, which is also the cry of the poor, have remained largely piecemeal and uncoordinated.’

This is no longer a niche nor just a middle-class issue, nor the preserve of elites. Much less is it a move to avoid issues of war, hunger, displacement or any other of the social ills affecting populations in our day. ‘The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are intrinsically linked.’

The voices of women and the young must be heard for their deep concern and their wisdom. Through our participation in our synodal processes, we can all discern how to be effective advocates, remembering that the Holy Spirit is the Advocate.

Our vision is that of a community of life and all creation reaching such harmony that ‘all generations will call God blessed.’

CHURCH PRACTICE AND TEACHING

The Church has a long tradition of appreciating the beauty of God’s creation. However, there is a need to reconnect the work of justice, including ecological justice, to the witness of church.

We need programmes and education about celebrating creation. The Church’s mission in education carries huge responsibility in this regard. We will only act decisively to save our planet when we learn to love and enjoy it. Much can be done in simple ways, often related to Church liturgy, which would promote care of the Earth. There is a need to understand our earth as a common home for all. In general, we need to broaden our understanding of our Christianity. With enhanced knowledge and understanding comes the call to work for ecological justice as integral to Christian life.

Laudato Si’ is recognised as a key document in the long tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, but still needs to be brought to the fore, in education as well as local and global

church settings. While *Laudato Si'* and The Letter (the film) have been circulated successfully and well received, Pope Francis's global perspective has yet to be adopted consistently, even by church much less by the leaders of civil societies across the globe.

The sacredness of the planet impacts on our understanding of the Sacraments. Our theological foundations need to be soundly creation based, acknowledging that the Spirit of God breathes in and through all. Church teaching, liturgical practices, biblical understanding, and Sacraments need to integrate emerging ecology, new theological and scientific understandings. All branches of science have made advancements which were unimaginable three or four decades ago.

We need to be humble and admit that we don't know as much as we thought we did. When we probe emerging cosmology, we bring new perspectives to our theological interpretations. Expanding horizons of our knowledge and our vision will both challenge us and enable us to adjust our priorities – what are the core obligations of living our baptism? We are called to love one another, to espouse what contributes on all levels to the well-being of our brothers and sisters as well as mother earth, and to oppose all that brings death and destruction.

It is vital that we listen to the wisdom that has come from indigenous cultures who have been challenging us for centuries regarding our way of understanding our relationship to Earth. It is also worth the effort to value and rediscover the richness of our own traditions.

COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

The magnitude of the challenge of the ecological crisis which faces us as human family calls for a wide environmental conversation. People of all faith traditions and none are impacted at every level by the issues arising and need to continue to find ways to work together.

The Church cannot address the climate crisis on its own. However, it can and must continue to engage in projects and action that sow 'seeds of hope' for humanity and for our planet. It is our hope that the second session of the Synodal Assembly will call strongly for such engagement as not optional if we are to be authentically Christian.

The Church at all levels needs to support and also challenge public representatives and the powerful national and international alliances in making serious decisions. Ultimately it is clear that there is a need to restructure global governance.

The churches are big investors and are becoming more publicly aware of their ethical responsibilities. These movements and actions need to be progressed.

We need to unite with all people of good will in a spirit of mutual challenge and support.

3.

Views from the edge: calls on a church that desires to be synodal

As church we are committed to living and sharing the good news, guided by gospel values, and furthering the reign of God. As church, the basis of the identity and calling of all members, equally, into God's mission is our baptism.

And yet, as church we are implicated in inequality and exclusion both internally among ourselves and also in the community and social contexts where we have been in mission from the beginning. Critical questions must arise in the course of authentic synodal processes. We urge the synodal assembly members to bring a global view to the task of listening for the call of the Spirit in the voices of those marginalised on whatever basis (gender, age, race, capacity, sexual orientation). We realise that synodal processes require ‘prophetic courage as well as patience’.

Any form of elitism is a polar opposite to synodality. But what openness is needed to hear the real experience of those excluded? And what courage is needed in order to recognise and address our own innate tendencies to maintain structures (including mindsets and exclusive language) which oppress? Can we learn to recognise, understand, and move beyond clericalist attitudes and behaviours everywhere they manifest themselves?

Synodal conversations in our context continue to bring up the reality of abuse in its many forms. We recognise good work done to ensure safety of all with whom we are engaged in life and ministries. We also know the challenge of standing beside victims and survivors of abuse in the church.

We echo the recurring calls for the recognition (including at structural levels) of women’s contribution to church life, leadership, and service. The vigour of our life in mission requires the gifts of all.

The energy and fresh perspectives of the young church, too, need to be welcomed.

We recognise the challenges of cultural diversity and the complexity of inculturation, which remains a deep need for us as church. It is vital that as church we do not reflect the divisiveness of our societies. Our foundations and vision lie in the call to unity.

We urge that the Synodal Assembly continue to grapple with the issues of how to maintain unity while facilitating and encouraging decision-making at the level of episcopal conferences, and how to continually hold church teaching in a mutually critical dialogue with expanding knowledge provided by scientific exploration?

Finally, we echo the call for education, formation and training which are essential for equal participation of all in church life and in leadership for mission.