



# The Synodal Pathway at Ealing Abbey Parish



## Dear Parishioners and all who took part in our series of Listening Events,

We would like to thank the many of you who took part in our Listening Events between November and January. Over 140 people chose to share their experiences of “journeying together” as a Parish and as a Church, coming from many backgrounds: older children to older senior citizens; female and male; varying ethnic backgrounds; varieties of family composition and size; people living single lives; members of religious congregations; lay people with affiliations to various orders and spiritual movements; people embracing innovative means of expressing their faith and those with a more traditional approach to Catholic life and liturgy; some with a more tenuous connection with parish and Catholic life; some closer to the periphery, including those expressing deep disappointment and anger in their experience with the Church.

Below is a brief summary of what was shared that had particular reference to our own Parish (which is consistent with the findings from our Parish questionnaire). A version of it has been sent to the Westminster central team for use in the Diocesan-level synthesis, and eventually from there to the Synod of Bishops in 2023. Here at Ealing Abbey, we are also reflecting prayerfully on what was shared, asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we “journey together” both as a Parish and alongside everyone else who lives, works or passes by in the area.

*Fr. Ambrose, the Parish Team and Pastoral Council*

## What experiences of “journeying together” were shared?

**Christ at the centre.** Many touched on the sense that Jesus Christ is firmly at the centre of their experience in the parish and the Church, often reflected in the peace and spirit experienced within the parish Abbey Church and in the tone and demeanour of members of the monastic community.

**Prayer, Sacraments, liturgy, pastoral support and broader participation.** For many, the monastic community and the associated rhythm of prayer, Sacraments and diverse expressions of liturgy were present at the very heart of Parish life, on Sundays and throughout the week, reinforcing a sense of individual and collective faith. Some expressed the desire for an even wider diversity of liturgical expression, whilst others expressed hurt at the current restrictions to more traditional forms of liturgy and practice (especially the Traditional Latin Mass). Also appreciated were individual members of the monastic community and parish team ready to support those with problems and challenges in their lives. Membership of the many **parish groups**, local schools and other initiatives helped create a sense of belonging and make a contribution to those around them in need in the broader community. There was strong appreciation for the parish’s long-standing emphasis on **catechetical formation**. Recognition was shown of **traditional ways of assembling**, e.g. for coffee and tea after Mass, the parish bar, kinship amongst parents of younger children, particularly in association with children’s liturgy activities.

A number of areas of pain and sadness were expressed as people shared their experiences:

**Lack of community, isolation.** The sheer size and scale of the parish led to a number referring to anonymity and even isolation, a lack of a sense of community or, in some cases, a sense of cliquiness that left some feeling on the edge. Some cited only sporadic attempts at offering greetings and welcome, e.g. before Masses, while others talked of a sense of general aloofness.

**Loss of younger people.** Compared to before, all activities to support and encourage these groupings were more sparsely attended. Older family members expressed pain and disappointment at a lack of support from the Church in their attempts to bring up and encourage offspring in the faith, especially with heightened economic and social pressures on family life. Whilst some hoped that “seeds of faith” and strong formation gave a basis for “leading a good life”, many feared for the future of the Church if younger generations continued to walk away.

**Legacy of historical sexual abuse.** A sadly tragic aspect of the parish had been the coming to terms with cases of clerical sexual abuse. As well as those directly victims of this sexual abuse, the parish as a whole had suffered, e.g. parishioners going to other parishes, a feeling of anger leading to the loss of Catholic practice amongst family members, including offspring, and a sense of distance from the monastic community. Ongoing facilitated work through the COPE (Community Of Practice Ealing) group to engage with victims, involving current members of the monastic community, was praised, though some desired it to become a better known and a more integral part of healing of the parish as a whole.

**Divorced and separated Catholics.** The experiences of some participants included sadness in such instances. Whilst some expressed an understanding and appreciation for the underlying teaching of the Church, a sense of separation and alienation was also expressed.

**Other reasons for sense of alienation.** Some expressed the concern that the parish, traditionally quite English and reserved, might be off-putting to people from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures who were used to naturally friendlier interactions. Some also worried that people who were not so well off might feel out of place in the setting that had quite a middle class feel. Some mentioned the need for more positive engagement with and inclusion of people identifying within groupings collectively known as LGBTQ+.

### **Parish community working together and co-responsibility**

Many noted with sadness the shrinking of the monastic community over the years and expressed concern for new vocations to help sustainability. This also reinforced the importance of increased lay participation within the parish, especially with many noting how hard-working the Parish Priest and wider Parish Team were, which already had strong lay involvement. It was noted that lay members of the Parish Team show strong support to help with or organise new initiatives such as tailored liturgies for Bereavement or for Suicide.

### **“Journeying together” during the pandemic**

Broadly speaking, the lockdown and caution over social distancing had worsened already adverse trends. As well as closure for liturgies, there was major disruption to catechetical programmes and parish groups activities. Some thought the parish had been over-cautious in reopening compared to others, and in other ways slow to respond to needs caused by the lockdown. However, there was a real sense of hurt – even anger – at the sense of isolation parishioners experienced during the first stage of lockdown when the church was closed, there was as yet no live-streaming and a feeling that there was a lack of communication from the Parish. Whilst many could understand that the Parish was operating within the constraints imposed by the secular and ecclesiastical authorities, this was nonetheless a strong feeling expressed by a number of participants.

On the other hand, live streaming of services was seen as a major benefit both during the pandemic and as a future ongoing option for people, such as housebound or otherwise not able to attend in person. A second benefit was the development of stewarding, required to provide a degree of reassurance and oversight in respect of social distancing and hygiene.

### **What experiences were shared about the Church’s priority for mission?**

**Reasons for celebration in living out our mission.** As manifested at the parish level, these included: the presence of the monastic community and their service through the provision and quality of prayer, liturgy and the Sacraments; strong pastoral support in times of need; the many parish groups that reached out to people at the peripheries and encouraged a sense of belonging in the parish; the strength and quality of catechetical programmes.

Building on the good experiences summarised in the previous section, a number of **future priorities for mission** were shared, expressed in different ways by different people, with main themes as follows:

Witnessing to Christ’s love for all people, including greater emphasis on an option for the poor and marginalised

Encouraging a sense of parish community, mutual support and participation

- Engaging younger parishioners better
- Being more attentive and welcoming
- Deepening our knowledge and practice of faith
- Development of partnerships beyond the Church

**Inclusion in setting priorities for mission.** A small number cited structural problems such as “clericalism” and underuse of the talents and inspirations of lay people, particularly when it came to the voices of women. On the other hand, the need was recognised to promote a sense of obligation to contribute to the life of the Parish to take up the many opportunities available. Active participation was considered to promote friendship, commitment and a sense of community, helping to break down feelings of anonymity. In the parish, many noted strong lay involvement in the Parish Team and the many parish groups led by lay people, while others wished to see greater lay involvement overall and better communication of the parish’s mission.

## **What was most significant about the whole experience?**

Amidst the diversity of experiences, these themes stood out most strongly:

Despite various disappointments and anger at aspects of their experience, **there was broad appreciation for and love of the Catholic Church**, for its presence in their lives and for its reflection of God’s people journeying together, however imperfectly.

Expressed in various ways, there was a high degree of **recognition of the fundamental role of faith in Jesus Christ and the active nurturing and practice of that faith** both individually and as a parish community.

In the parish context, **there was strong appreciation for the rhythm of prayer, Sacraments and liturgy placed at the very heart of parish life and a yearning for a deeper sense of connection and community within the parish.**

There was recognition of **the shortfall within the parish and Church as a whole of engagement with younger people’s talents and aspirations, the fostering of faith and answers to the big questions**, such that the parish setting would remain an attractive place for young people as they grow into adulthood.

As a parish in a relatively well-to-do, middle-class area, it was recognised that there was **much more that needed to be done to reach out to and support those at the peripheries.**

There was a **sense of hurt at the long shadow cast by revelations of historical sexual abuse of minors by members of the monastic community.**

Many topics or issues gave rise to diverse points of view. These included: liturgical forms, Church teaching and structures, how to bring new people into the Church, the nature of our welcome, response to the abuse crisis, encouragement of a return to Mass after the pandemic, engagement with young people.

## **Dreams, desires, and aspirations for the Church**

For the Church to continue gathering in His name, to be “Christ-like” in its behaviour and attitudes, to be bolder in society; for Catholics to give a witness of love and care to their neighbours, to nurture their faith so that, in turn, they will be better able to reach out and offer hope to others in the world.

## **What is the Spirit inviting the Church to pay more attention to?**

To the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. The Holy Father launched this process by stating “The Holy Spirit needs us. Listen to it by listening to yourself”. For far too long the Catholic Church has paid lip service to the Holy Spirit, but this Synodal Process has revealed that when we listen in silence the Spirit works wonders.

## **What steps might the parish feel called to take in our journey together?**

By reflecting together on the various themes of our mission (witnessing to Christ’s love for all people; encouraging a sense of parish community, mutual support and participation; engaging younger parishioners better; being more attentive and welcoming; deepening our knowledge and practice of faith), we as a parish desire to continue “journeying together” to embody this mission, seeking the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to make use of all the gifts and talents of the parish community to act truly as the Body of Christ in our community.