

Dear Bishop Robert,

Reflections have transcended the earlier concerns about whether people would come back to Mass, and what needed to happen to get them back, to a recognition that there is no going back, as the world has changed and demands a new way of being, not least in how we organize ourselves, worship and witness to our faith.

Crises which include climate change, ecological degradation, pollution, increasing social problems, all caused by human activity, have been thrown into stark focus by the pandemic. It is truly a moment of truth for humanity – who are we? What is our purpose? What are our values? How can we learn to live in harmony with each other and the whole of creation? Yet the pandemic, very difficult though it has been, has enabled us to prioritise and ask “The Holy Spirit” what is really important to and for our Church?”

Many people are looking for a new model of Church and a greater experience of community. Too often, “parish” is taken to mean parishioners who attend Mass. It is time to embrace responsibility for all people in the parish, our community. All people who we come into contact with in our daily lives, regardless of who they are, form the community in which we journey together and is not exclusive to any church or religious belief. As society is changing, we are coming across more and more complex, sometimes harmonious, sometimes dysfunctional, family situations and we need to be sensitive to and understanding of others and their situation. We need to be sympathetic, impartial and treat people with dignity and respect, journeying with them rather than judge them. It is no good just going back to the Church as it was. We need to go in a better direction. It is a once in a lifetime chance to look at what our Church is about and seek a better dialogue for the future.

In responding to the signs of the times, the world of the ‘Church’ is too small. It is exclusive to many, in terms of gender, sexuality, language and marital status. It is time for the Church to seek out how it can best serve all people. What is it they expect of Church? How can we serve their needs better? It cannot be a one size fits all solution. We need to build a Church that serves the diverse needs of all its people.

The Church itself is not without significant challenges as priests and parishioners age and younger people are not attracted to or are alienated by organised religion. There is a perception that still lingers from the old style that some people still carry today: A generation which grew up in a church that was formidable, which still has a fear of the church and of the parish priest. Some disagreed with these aspects and won’t come to church, yet are still very spiritual people. Can they be won back? How do we contrive to listen in humility to their experience(s)? As an expression of Synodality, can we move from “the experience of authority to the authority of experience”.

It is time to become a Church of grown-ups living out and shaping the faith, rather than a Church of children being told what to do. Too much hurt and harm has resulted from the experience of Church authority - with the result that people have left and gone elsewhere. We must listen to their experience. There is a need to move from just maintaining communities to re-educating clergy and people in mission outreach. “Obligation” is pivotal. It is time to examine what draws people to the Eucharist, how to generate a worshipping community that WANTS to be there instead of under threat of mortal sin.

Our young people express interest in spirituality in high school and beyond but this is not translated into parish attendance. They spend a lot of time on the internet. What initiatives could we employ to reach them through social media and other platforms? What are the important issues for them? Why do so many of them see the Church as irrelevant? Although young people coming to church as part of their First Holy Communion journey seem to enjoy the experience, many children and adults don't come because of other, competing 'social commitments'.

Contribution of the laity is vital – it is a great opportunity to expand what they can do: becoming participants rather than receivers. Over the last two years people have found lifegiving ways of praying together. There has been a great deal of creativity and resourcefulness, using technology to access a real breadth of spiritual nourishment. This has enabled people to experience 'Church' in a different way. Many of these new ways of gathering are from the initiative and leadership of lay people. Women are key in keeping things going and a concern is expressed that women's voices will be translated into men's voices in the synodal process.

It is vital to ensure that all people are treated equally and have equal opportunities within the Church (including the major issues of ordination of women priests and allowing priests to marry). With the increasing shortage of Priests, should parish finance committees and pastoral councils not be amalgamated and given the backing of Canon Law? In the process, LISTENING is key. We have to learn to listen to each other, particularly laity/clergy, with open minds, in a genuine spirit of dialogue, working out how clergy and laity can work in tandem more effectively.

There is a need to reinvigorate ecumenical dialogue and build on examples of good practice at parish level. Collaborating with other faith groups and organisations who share common aims would at least signal that the Roman Catholic community sees itself as a partner rather than a self-contained outlier.

We as a Church can seize this vital time for humanity by living out the message of love and care for each other by embracing the principles of Laudato Si' and serving our local communities; reaching out to people on the margins; promoting a fairer, more equal society; promoting a vision of a fair, just and sustainable society based on love as a more fulfilling way of life consistent with God's plan for humanity and creation. There are many initiatives for justice in most communities. The church at a local level needs to become more coherently and explicitly engaged in that work for justice.

You did ask to hear negative/challenging responses: Not all respondents were willing to participate in the collective exercise and preferred to express their views separately. In particular, a strong opinion offered was that you should simply revisit the extensive and often exciting reports from the original Forward Together in Hope exercise. Another group complained of the shortness of time, while being sceptical of episcopal collaboration with the consultation. "The hierarchical structure of the Diocese makes it difficult to confidently voice our opinions" and even then, the Bishops Conference can dilute or ignore what they don't like. . .

Yours in the love of Christ
Michael Quincey,
Chair St. Benet Biscop Partnership