

SYNTHESIS OF THE SYNODAL PROCESS IN THE CATHOLIC  
DIOCESES OF THE NORDIC COUNTRIES



DENMARK, SWEDEN, NORWAY, FINLAND AND ICELAND

August 2022

## INTRODUCTION

This is a synthesis of the local synodal process as it unfolded in the dioceses of Copenhagen, Stockholm, Oslo, Helsinki and Reykjavik, and in the prelatures of Trondheim and Tromsø, from September 2021 to July 2022.

Our local Churches cover territory corresponding to  $\frac{1}{9}$  of the territory of Europe. Around 27 million inhabitants live here. Of there, *ca.* 1,5% are Catholics. Ours is a minority Church, spread over a vast territory with a challenging climate, without many resources in one of the world's most secularised regions, where the prevalent Christian reference is Protestant.

The process started in almost all dioceses with the appointment of a group responsible for coordination, informing parishes and communities on how to get going. The same team compiled responses and accounts of experiences among the faithful.

To launch the process, meetings were, in some places, held with people physically present; online surveys on different web platform were also used. It must be remembered that our dioceses have a small number of parishes spread over huge areas. Sometimes the faithful must travel for hundreds of kilometers to get to the nearest church.

Our churches are marked by internationality. More than 100 nationalities are represented in the various communities. Communication is challenging. The process had to take into account the characteristics of different ethnic and linguistic groups.

Synodal work focused on the ten themes of the questionnaire proposed by the secretariat, modified in some dioceses according to local need. This synthesis follows the questions proposed, giving a short account of reactions and responses that emerged in discussions among the faithful, indicating proposals that God's people, gathered in prayer, felt the Holy Spirit was inspiring. A synthesis cannot report everything; some things will be left out. But we shall try to share the most important themes in the local Churches' reports.

## COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

A feeling expressed in nearly all reports was that parish communities lack unity. The Church is felt to be scattered into many groups and orientations. The communitarian dimension of the parish community needs to be strengthened and fostered. A chief challenge is communication: making people feel part of the same Church and community. Differing religious backgrounds must be taken into account. Some of our faithful are converts from other Christian denominations; some are born Catholics; some are from Catholics countries; some come from nations where Christians are a minority. We should strive to build and shape a community where all feel welcomed and can find a place in the community, a way to share their own gifts with the community.

Great concern for the young was voiced. As a Church we must rethink how we approach teenagers and children. How they can be more actively involved in liturgical celebrations? Internet is one instrument that can be used for this purpose. We must also have an outreach to people whose faith is weak. The Church is called to go out in search for companions on the journey who have lost their way.

#### LISTENING

This is one of the most important aspects the faithful expect from their parishes. Many sense that, although there are meetings and occasions to speak, people are not heard. It sometimes seems that the Church is far from the reality of people's lives. This can emerge from the sermons of priests, when these are too abstract, not linking the Word of God to situations people recognize from their family, work, relationships, financial management, studies, sickness, loneliness, sufferings, challenges. The Word calls out to be related to a modern World in a state of constant change, with different new situations and challenges that call for evaluation from the point of view of both ethics and doctrine. We should strive to listen to those who may be at the margins of decision-making process in the Church, children, youth and lay people, especially women.

#### SPEAKING OUT

This aspect is found to be hard by many. Many fear to speak what they really think within the Church, for fear of being judged or of being found to move outside the teaching of the Church. Sometimes difficulty in speaking out springs from a lack of expressive tools, a lack of formation among the laity. It has been pointed that the Church should not be afraid to raise difficult issues, e.g. the scandal of abuse. The faithful feel the need to have a word from the Church on difficult and controversial moral issues, such as transgenderism. Another issue that calls for frank conversation is the celebration of the Extraordinary Form. Some of the faithful expressed longing that the local church would be more courageous in making its word heard in the midst of the society we inhabit.

#### CELEBRATION

The celebration of Mass is at the heart of the life of the Christian community. Liturgy should be prepared well, in an environment that helps people who attend celebrations to truly participate in the mystery celebrated. Church music should be of great concern within the parish community. Active participation is essential for frequent attendance at Mass. There is a call for catechesis to explain liturgical celebrations, to open the mystery of liturgical signs and their meaning. Everyone should be involved in the liturgy, especially youth and children. The celebratory dimension of the Catholic faith is valued especially in our strongly Protestant, secularised environment. Many were drawn to the Church through experiences of celebration. Better use could be made of pilgrimages and retreats as instruments in our

congregations and also on a diocesan level. During the difficult time of the pandemic, digital transmission of liturgical celebrations was a help for many people. The liturgy should unite, not separate the congregation. The liturgical education of priests should be good and sound.

## SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR COMMON MISSION

Each Christian's call to witness to his or her faith is clear to most of the faithful. The simple fact of belonging to a minority is something that permits the faithful to bear witness. Almost all responses stressed that the core of mission is witness through personal lifestyle to the beauty and attractiveness of the Christian faith. We should strive to be active, not only within the parish community: our true missionary task must embrace the world within which the parish lives. Mission needs to form Christians. There is hunger for courses and formation. Children and youth should be involved in mission. Initiatives are needed to strengthen their Catholic identity. Being part of a minority Church, while being at the same time, perhaps, a foreigner, makes it hard for the young readily to witness to their faith. A need is felt to move from a priest-centred view of the missionary task of the parish to one where lay people are main actors of mission, supported by the clergy. What are the best ways to evangelise in our Nordic Countries? Various synthesis suggested that in this environment a too strong and direct missionary action can be counterproductive.

## DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

The Church should be more visible in dialogue with society. Most felt that because we are few in number, we are marginalised, so that the voice of the Church is not heard. Despite this, the Church should engage in a dialogue, siding with the poorest and weakest. Social media should be used wisely for this purpose. We should not be afraid to engage in public debate on difficult issues, e.g. same sex marriage. Within the Church, too, dialogue should be fostered and developed. Parishes are invited to address hard questions or themes with courage. Even if people cannot agree completely on certain issues, the parish priest should be the guarantor of unity, giving the opportunity for clear and sincere dialogue within the parish. The diversity of the Church should be seen as richness. We need to learn to stop being afraid of those who think differently.

## ECUMENISM

There is general agreement that the ecumenical situation in the Nordic countries is among the best in the world. Dialogue with other Christian confessions is good and sincere. This is proved by the various ways in which we help each other. Many liturgical celebrations in the diaspora are held in the churches or buildings belonging to the Lutheran or Orthodox churches. Ecumenism is understood by most as something essential to the nature of the Church. We should underline what unites us. The Bible is a useful starting point for

dialogue. Many times ecumenism is visible especially in common activities such as the work of Caritas, helping the poor and migrants, visiting prisoners etc. To engage in ecumenism well, we need a strong identity. We need to bring the Catholic point of view. This is appreciated by other Christian denominations. Being who we are, displaying what identifies us, does not harm ecumenical dialogue; it helps it to grow. Most families within our congregations embrace mixed marriages. So ecumenism is often lived out within the family in everyday life.

## AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION

The willingness of lay people to be more involved in the decision-making process emerged repeatedly. Many respondents feel clericalism is a danger. Some said that the priest, to act responsibly as defender of the faith, has the responsibility to let lay people enter into decision-making processes. A problem that was pointed out is priest's lack of preparation to handle all aspects of the parish. Many practical problems need special formation. A number of lay people feel they are not taken into account, that they could contribute more to the local Church community. The parish council is a great instrument, but sometimes it is not used, or even ignored. Frequent lack of female representation in leadership was mentioned. However, no one questioned the legitimate authority of the hierarchical Church and ordained ministers.

## DISCERNING AND DECIDING

Decision-making processes in the Church should be more spiritually oriented, submitted to God's guidance. Prayer and meditation are central in such processes, which should be as inclusive as possible. Many people felt they are just consulted for special information without being part of the process to decide in the parish or to make a difference. Transparency and sincerity matter, to ensure that things that concern all are not decided by just a few.

## FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY

To be formed for synodality, we must foster a strong communitarian dimension in local congregations. The more the parish community is a community, the more the synodal aspect of the Church will be evident. Occasions for formation and encounter, locally and at diocesan level, have an important role to play. Smaller, local synodal experiences can be valuable. This formation should start early.

## SOME CONCLUSIONS

### **Solidarity**

We are challenged to nurture among the faithful a sense of belonging, helping them see that they are part of something bigger and wider than their local community, that there is a place

for them. We need spaces and places in which to make this belonging visible. We do not belong to subgroups, but to the parish, the diocese, and finally to the Catholic Church.

### **Listening and Learning**

Spaces are needed in which all can express themselves freely, without fear of exclusion. We must try to reach all the faithful, especially those not active in the Church. The longing for more formations, for understandable teaching on Catholic doctrine, is strong. This will strengthen bonds among the faithful locally and with the universal Church.

### **Participation**

To build a community presupposes participation. Where there is no community, the Church's mission will be shouldered by only a few. The more the faithful participate actively in the life of the Church, the more this will build communion and create a community apt to be the subject of the mission of the Church. Participation, so it has been felt, extends to including the laity in the Church's decision-making process.

The synodal Journey has been experienced positively in the Nordic Countries. Some dioceses have begun local diocesan synods. What matters above all is for all together to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. As it says in the book of Revelation: 'Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Rev. 3:13). The synodal process gave us the opportunity to sense that the Church is alive, willing to listen to what the Lord is saying, to be one in this modern world and witness to his love, wherever we are.