

SYNOD REPORT

An introduction

“We recall that the purpose of the Synod is not to produce documents, but to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands”

These are the words of Pope Francis quoted in the preparatory documents but that were originally spoken to the bishops gathered for the Synod on Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment in 2018. Here Pope Francis gives us the road map to this Journey... that we are to begin with the “why” rather than becoming task focused.

At Kenelm we have been grappling with this challenge since our extensive listening exercises in 2018 and one key take away from that time was that young people hugely valued being listened to, that they wanted this to happen more regularly and that they wanted to make meaningful contributions to their communities.

We knew then that young people would relish the chance to take part in this Synod too and so we extended a specific opportunity to secondary schools.

The Process

As part of the SYNOD process, KYT offered to facilitate listening session in secondary schools. Having offered a similar exercise to schools for both the Youth SYNOD in 2018 as well as a Post Pandemic return-to-school session, we felt that schools were quickly able to understand and respond to the invitation. In fact, our sessions were all booked up within 90 minutes of the invitation being given.

This demonstrates the emphasis schools are willing to put on student voice and how important they think that their voice is reflected in this process.

Our model was to offer a 90-minute session with an opening reflection on what the Pope's invitation is, a time of prayer, around 60 minutes of conversations in groups of around 6 students with one KYT team listener and we closed with a small talk, sharing the Kerygma and end in prayer.

The schools were invited to nominate 30 students from across all year groups. Some schools opted for a Catholic/Christian group and others gave a representation of the student body.

The main themes that came to light were as follows:

Communion

- There was a deep appreciation for the support network provided by being a part of a Catholic community. For many young people, their only experience of community within the Church is through their school but those of all faiths and none, recognised the nurture and strength found their school community and identified the Catholic ethos as the source of this.

"If my friends from other schools came here, they would know that it was a God school!"

- Young people are often seen as too young to be listened to in a meaningful way. This listening process seems important to them and appreciated but they yearned for this to be impactful and not tokenism.
- Stark differences noted by young people of other denominations between their services and Catholic Masses... they note less joy and involvement in Catholic Mass. Some noted the sadness of not being able to fully participate and weren't sure as to why they could not.

"It has never really been explained to me – if you came to my church you could do everything I could do!"



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- Being Catholic can be seen negatively – e.g., may be labelled homophobic because they are Catholic. Feel unable to defend themselves. Talking about beliefs is often shied away from for fear of bullying.

- Young people enjoyed being able to attend different churches around the world online during lockdown, but it was sporadic attendance and was noted as being more of an issues for grandparents/parents not them

“I didn’t really notice that the schools were closed but it made my nan really sad...”

Participation

- Many young people have had a complete lack of contact with the Church during the pandemic with only a few committed examples of engagement with online Mass and ministry. There is a desire to return to ‘normal’ and move away from restrictions such as social distancing and mask wearing which added to the feeling of isolation and lack of engagement.
- Sunday Mass isn’t central to young Catholics’ lives – even those articulate about their faith and passionate about mission might not make it a priority. Barriers to Sunday Mass attendance can be practical: Sunday morning is when sport, drama (and for sixth formers, part-time jobs) etc. take place. And for the first time we began to hear from multiple young people that their own parents were a barrier as they did not attend and weren’t keen on their child doing so. Many talked of situations where one parent was Catholic, and one wasn’t and so they felt keen not to hurt the feelings of the parent who may have been of another faith or none.
- Those for whom mass was important noted the importance of hospitality. Those who felt welcomed and known, expressed their positive experience of Mass. Altar serving was a keyway in for young people and lots talked about



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how important the music was for them to feel engaged. Those who felt they did not feel represented or welcomed by the community, felt uncomfortable going to Mass.

- There was a far greater commitment to a life of prayer than to the practice of attending Sunday Mass. Many young people commented on a dislike of the repetition of structured prayers and felt they connected more with God in conversation especially through bringing the needs of themselves and others to God during the

pandemic. Prayer is not seen in formal terms – but speaking with God throughout the day and in difficult times is important. Little mention of devotional prayer

“I pray every day. I pray throughout the day actually – it’s like an ongoing conversation with God – I just did this, what do you think of that? I just tell him everything!”

- Sacrament of Reconciliation was spoken of in very positive terms – opportunities in school are valued and have been missed during COVID.

“Yeah, we really missed going to see the priest. Confession is really good, especially when you want to get something off your chest – it was hard not to have it during the pandemic.”

- Music was a keyway in which young people either engaged or struggled to engage in Mass whether within school or the parish. There was a strong desire for a greater sense of joy within the Mass and it was felt that music was a keyway in which this could be achieved.



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- Some noted that they somehow felt being Catholic was not for them because they were not perfect. That at Mass and school there was an emphasis on being perfect and so, as they were not, they felt they could participate. Some noted that homilies could feel like they were being told off rather than how to make what Jesus said relevant to their everyday lives.

“I could just never be perfect – I do way too much wrong... and maybe I don’t even want to stop doing those things. So, in that way I can’t get involved can I?”

Mission

- Where young people had a positive experience of clergy, there was a joy found in these interactions and it was often stated as a reason for attending Mass on a Sunday. Homilies which engaged young people contributed greatly to their desire to attend Mass as well as conversations with their parish priests.

“Our priest in school is great – we really love him!” My priest tells us about his life in the homily and I really like that” “When the priest knows your name – that’s really special”

- Schools encourage practical discipleship (fundraising for Catholic and non-Catholic charities, supporting foodbanks, St. Chad’s sanctuary etc.) and promote justice and peace awareness. There was also lots of comments about environment activism being encouraged across schools.
- Young people of different faiths had incredibly positive experiences of their faith being respected and celebrated within the school community. It was felt that there was a significant difference in being part of a Catholic



community as there were shared values and an understanding of what it means to be a person of faith.

- There is a strong passion within young people for justice and equality. Many, young people referred to a desire for people of any genders or sexual orientation to be viewed and treated equally, have opinions heard and needs met within the Church community. Nearly all conversations mentioned the LGBTQ+ community and young people felt that they church either didn’t like, welcome or respect this group.

“The church needs to move with the times and not exclude anyone – Jesus wouldn’t exclude anyone would he?!”

- Young people felt that family and school were the places where they were taught their faith and for those who were practising, their parents in general were also very faithful.

“My nan taught me all the words to the prayers, and we would still say prayers together when I see her now.”

- Peer pressure is a difficulty when speaking about faith or overtly practising it.
- Older students are often questioned by peers who are curious about what Catholics believe. Young Catholics do not always feel equipped to explain their faith.
- Many young people proposed being confirmed when they were older. They felt that confirmation was the last place where the faith was taught and discussed, and they would appreciate this in their teenage years so that they could understand things better.



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The Dreams of Young People

When asked what they would like to see in the future or how they could be encouraged in the faith, the young people were full of ideas!

- Young people wanted adventure! Lots expressed interest in pilgrimage to Lourdes or WYD. Retreats and days out were also ways that young people acknowledged that their faith would be supported.
- Food and Hospitality was really important! Young people wanted to belong to their communities and not feel like strangers which many of them currently do. Hearing other denominations speak of how central sharing food and having parties at church was really special to them, our Catholic students desired it for their own parishes!
- They wanted access to the sacrament of Reconciliation more! This was a really special way that they encountered Jesus and they wanted this offered more particularly in school.

- They wanted to be heard – they loved the listening experience and want to be able to share their experiences and ideas more regularly. They were keen to make an impact.
- Sport was a keyway that young people suggested they could engage in faith. Interparish football tournaments were mentioned lots.



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Emerging Themes and Next Steps

The Kenelm Youth Trust is committed to reflecting on what we have heard in detail over the summer months. The report will be shared with all trustees, staff and participating school as well as being shared at the diocesan planning session. The emerging themes that we have identified and what to explore more are,

- The prayerful and sacramental focus of young people's faith that is disconnected from parish life and mass attendance.
- The desire for formation and wanting to understand why the church teaches what it does with questions around confirmation age.
- Young people want their voices to be heard and to make an impact in their communities.
- Themes of hospitality, welcome and belonging in faith communities with a particular focus on the LGBTQ+ community.