

PARISH AND SHRINE OF ST ETHELDREDA, ELY

SYNODAL PATH 2023 – PARISH SUBMISSION

This is the collective contribution from Ely Parish to the Diocese of East Anglia's reflection in preparation for the 2023 Synod of Bishops. Individual parishioners have been encouraged to respond directly to the online survey. These notes reflect three meetings held in February and March 2022.

The meetings were led by lay parishioners and each was attended by between 14 and 19 people, which is around a tenth of our current weekly Mass attendance (attendance is still recovering from pandemic lows). The group was representative of the parish in terms of diversity, although it recognised with regret a number of times during its discussions that younger people were underrepresented. The Parish Priest, Father David Finegan, opened and closed the meetings with prayer and listened in on almost all of the discussions.

Overall

The Synod meetings and the questions which have framed them have provided a grace-filled and timely opportunity to take stock of our feelings and hopes about the Catholic community in Ely. Overall, the parishioners who attended the meetings were energetic and keen to seize the post-pandemic opportunity. We felt that as a parish we are ambitious about our prayer life and study of Scripture. We also felt that we have an important role to play in the wider community, and that we may underestimate the extent to which we do that already through individuals' active witness to Catholic social teaching. This is a moment of grace and we should not let it go.

The discussions identified a wish to go beyond simply recovering how things were before the pandemic, and to relaunch powerfully with the Holy Spirit filling our sails.

In addition to the points below which we feel are relevant to the Diocese's Synod document, the discussions identified twenty-nine specific points for potential action at parish level which we will be considering for follow-up over the coming weeks.

Question 1: welcome

The group included a number of relatively recent arrivals in the parish. Only one reported an uncomfortable experience of welcome. Pandemic measures such as the introduction of Mass stewards and booking places had led to some very positive experiences, resulting in more people knowing each other's names and a more definite welcome at the church door. We wanted to make that permanent. The importance of greeting people in a friendly manner was celebrated. The non-contact informal Sign of Peace during the Pandemic has been shared more widely than just with those nearest to us. Yet more could be done to help people to get to know each other.

Question 2: listening

The group considered whether we tended to come to Mass simply in order to relate to God, or whether we made it an occasion for speaking and listening to others, too. At the same time, the daily flow of news and business meant that prayer was an important way of making space

for what we were really here for. The Mass is an opportunity to hand the noise over to God and listen to Him. We should be praying for the intentions that the other people at Mass had brought with them.

Considering whether we felt listened to, the group considered whether English reticence was an obstacle to open exchanges. Was it obvious who among us was available to listen? Ways of making it easier to approach others were identified.

Question 3: communicating

The group agreed that communication required trust and familiarity. This was something we needed to make time for; it couldn't be done without feeling closer to each other. Prayer groups provide a forum for that increased knowledge of each other and we want to do more on that front.

It was also noted that many parishioners were members of Ely's rich infrastructure of groups carrying out social action in the wider community which were not organised under the auspices of the parish.

In considering social media, there was a consensus that social media culture was not positive and members of the group were reluctant to participate. Other cultures – our twinned parish in Cambodia was mentioned – used social media in a different a much more positive way to express solidarity. Social media did offer an opportunity to witness, for example by sharing content such as the Pope's regular messages.

Question 4: Liturgy

The group agreed that the central element of the question was to understand what we took from the Liturgy into the wider world. One participant said that was something we tended only to realise in retrospect. There was agreement about how much the group valued the Liturgy. Nothing about it particularly needed changing. Support was expressed for the current translations of the Mass and Lectionary. Music was an important enrichment of people's experience of the liturgy.

There was a discussion about children at Mass. They should be welcome. There was support for the view that parents should not be made to feel awkward or unwelcome because they had a fidgety child.

Question 5: participating in the mission of the church

Some past activities were still awaiting a restart after the pandemic, which left a feeling that one wasn't pulling one's weight. At the same time, it isn't someone else's job to get involved: it is mine. Everyone had something to give and all were of value. Whatever we did, we were never going to do as much as we should do. Raising the profile of different groups and activities would make it easier for more people to access them.

Since everyone had skills and talents, what could we do to involve more people? One participant said that getting on and doing something was more attractive than social events, especially if like him you were not brilliant at small talk. Everything witnesses in small ways: we often don't know the consequences of some action we have taken.

Confidence was important, as was attending one's own spiritual needs and growth— what you don't have you can't give. Fitting prayer and Bible reading into a busy life required self-discipline. We should be willing to share our spiritual experiences with others.

Young people were the future of the Church. Some of our young people were going to another parish for the sake of its youth group. We need to give lots more thought to supporting young people, building on the very encouraging numbers coming forward for First Communion.

Question 6. Engagement with the wider world

It is worth focussing on the different meanings of “the Church”. To the extent it means authority, rather than community, that could put people off. There were good examples locally of parishioners being a good witness, especially by participating in the life of the town. We shouldn't be ashamed of being identified as Catholic as we did that. It was worth taking stock of the scope of what parishioners did in local social action, and look for further opportunities to find things that needed to be done in the community.

People want God and actions can preach. We shouldn't keep the Faith to ourselves; where there is a need we are the eyes of God. Church groups should be open to others, and we should pray for people in the wider community. Some people simply needed someone to talk to. The Faith isn't rules and regulations but ‘something alive and active’ (Hebrews 4;12).

Question 7. Our relationship with other Christian traditions

If we concentrate on differences, we can forget just how much we have in common with other Christians, and be afraid of what we don't know. Ely has a reputation as a very ecumenical city. We should emphasise that and build on it. Examples included the recent Catholic Mass at the Cathedral; ecumenical services, Christians Together in Ely, shared Stations of the Cross with other Churches in Lent; and joint social action such as the Food Bank.

The issue of intercommunion was a “little dampener”. Non-eucharistic liturgies that created opportunities for ecumenical participation were available. It was agreed that the Parish should find ways to be inclusive within the limits of what is possible.

Question 8: How well do we work as a team in parish?

Our parish is diverse, with people from the City of Ely, small towns and villages, a great variety of nationalities, language backgrounds and customs. There was a wish to get to know each other better and learn from each other.

We recognised the work of groups and individuals, working outside of the parish, in the community. Examples given included the SVP; the Ely Foodbank, chaplaincy volunteering at Addenbrookes Hospital, visiting care homes. Some of these activities had not happened in the pandemic and needed to be restarted.

There was a general sense that more people would probably like the chance to exercise their gifts, including as readers and servers, or in new parish-based prayer and Bible study groups.

There was consensus that we had a great opportunity as a parish, carefully and thoughtfully, to build on the foundation of existing and past team work, shake off the last two years and

have a sense of newness. As well as renewing existing teams, there was an opportunity to start new groups or revive groups that had ended. There was a sense that, as the laity, this was our responsibility, we should not be relying on Father David to take the initiative or make us take the initiative. We should actively try to involve more people.

Question 9: How open are we to the will of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

In general, the group thought the Holy Spirit did lead us, through prayer, listening and being open to unexpected opportunities. In the Philippines, it was recognised that people needed to be active to seek the will of God. The Synodal prayer to the Holy Spirit encouraged us to be careful and listen well. A personal enthusiasm could be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Some people strongly felt there was little accountability and transparency in national or local public life and it was hard to know what to do about a political culture which had apparently low regard for truth. But as Christians, we had to work out how we fitted into our society and how we could make political leaders aware, when we could not get near to them. A First Communion child had asked if it was necessary to forgive people who do bad things and are not sorry for them. The answer being, yes we have to try.

The following ideas came forward:

- The early Christians were an example of following a good and holy life, despite living in a hostile society
- We should continue to pray every week for national and civic leaders
- We should listen to what God wanted us to do, love each other.
- We can set a personal example, by speaking the truth and rejected the idea that truth does not matter, and saying 'no'.

At first it was felt by some that opportunities by which we could help support priests and bishops were not immediately obvious, but all agreed that the Synodal process was a valuable step in the right direction. A priest was a source of both leadership and support for the initiative that lay people could take in their Parish.

Question 10: How well do we hand on the faith?

This question discussion reflected a concern about support for young people which was reflected in discussion on other questions. While the liturgy for younger children (pre-covid) and the First Communion Classes were well attended, there was nothing for children after their First Communion, apart from Confirmation Preparation. There were few opportunities, therefore, for young people to exercise their gifts and talents. A young person agreed it would be nice to be involved in a group of young people again.

A number of obstacles were identified, including the lack of a Catholic school, which would naturally help build a sense of community in other ways. There was also a specific issue of local geography, where the dispersed Fen villages made it harder to bring people together.