



# Voices of young people in the Synod

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## Abstract

The absence of young people in Catholic churches in many parts of the world, especially in the more economically advanced countries, is a cause for great anxiety within Catholic communities. This is expressed in relevant research literature and the three recent synodal syntheses of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland. This article explores the key concept of synodality, some of the research on the religious affiliation (and disaffiliation) of Catholic young people and the voices and views of Catholic young people in the synodal process in the three syntheses. The views of the young people in the three syntheses are clustered under six themes: (1) absence from Church; (2) accusations of hypocrisy; (3) concerns about teaching on sexuality; (4) Catholic Social Teaching; (5) the importance of parents and (6) the ways in which young people can engage in the Church. Many of the comments of the young people in these three syntheses confirm some of the research findings and, crucially, the young people provide suggestions on the ways ahead in which they can be more active in the Church—‘being’ Church, rather than ‘doing’ Church.

**Keywords** Synodality · Young people · England and Wales · Ireland · Scotland

## 1 Introduction

Contemporary synodality in the Catholic Church offers a refocus on the principles of the Second Vatican Council and the idea of a pilgrim Church. This article examines the voices of young people in the Synod by drawing on the synthesis documents of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland. The article begins with a discussion on synodality and includes some of the critiques of synodality and the synodal process. This is then followed by a short section on the Youth Synod and a longer section on some recent research findings on the religious affiliation (or lack of affiliation) of Catholic young people. The next section draws on the three synthesis documents of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland and explores the role of young people in the Church and their voices under six themes: (1) absence from Church; (2) accusations of hypocrisy; (3) concerns about teaching on sexuality; (4) Catholic Social Teaching; (5) the importance of parents and (6)

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the ways in which young people can engage in the Church. There are some concluding remarks at the end of the article.

## 2 Synodality

Synodality is founded on the idea that the Church is on a journey, a pilgrimage, eager to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church at this moment in time. The Church is called upon to do this in every age: to engage with the world and discern the ways in which the message of Jesus and the good news can be effectively proclaimed (Colberg, 2018). There are various ways to understand the historical foundations and more contemporary development of synodality. The Commission on Spirituality Biblical Sub-Group, Synod of Bishops, for example, draws from the Old and New Testaments to demonstrate that scripture is at the heart of the synodal journey and provides exemplars for a synodal process (The Commission on Spirituality Biblical Sub-Group, 2022). This includes a focus on the Council of Jerusalem, and the role of the Holy Spirit, as portrayed in Acts 15 which, despite some continuing debate on the nature and Conciliar status of this gathering, is perceived to be a pivotal moment in the development of the early Church (Fitzmyer, 1997; Evans, 2008; Pierre, 2021). The great Councils of the Church are recognised as part of the development of the synodal process and this leads into the post Vatican II Synod of Bishops. Pope Francis has commented that the institution of the Synod of Bishops in 1965 by Paul VI ‘is one of the most precious fruits of the Second Vatican Council’ (Pope Francis, 2018). It is interesting to note that there was no explicit reference to synodality in Vatican II but there is a strong link between synodality and with the vision contained in many of the Vatican II texts and, a point that is highly pertinent for the contemporary discussion, a strong link between synodality and the process of the deliberations of the Council (Conway, 2023).

The XVI Synod of Bishops 2021–2024 was convoked by Pope Francis on October 10th, 2021 at a mass in St Peter’s and, from the outset, involved a process of consultation. It was initially designed as a Synod of Bishops but is now a synodal process involving all the faithful. Colberg (2018, p.10) argues that Pope Francis has sought a synodal Church from the beginning of his papacy:

*In essence, the pope is calling for a renewal in the way that the universal church is governed such that the local church - in particular dioceses and bishops’ conferences – play a more dynamic role in the governance of the universal church.*

There are signs that synodality is a new way of thinking about ‘being’ Church and that it will be highly beneficial for the contemporary Catholic Church.

The process of synodality aims to create a more inclusive, welcoming and open Church that invites people to participate, especially those who are on the margins and those who have been estranged. This vision is very attractive and, as has been stated, is consistent with the key teachings and messages of the papacy of Pope Francis. It is also easy to make connections with the teaching of Jesus in the gospels and his call for the inclusion of the poor, the excluded and those who had been marginalised. Luke’s gospel provides many good examples of this call, for example, in the proclamation by Jesus in the synagogue (Luke 4: 16–22), the Beatitudes and curses (6:20–26) and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37) (Bovon, 2002; Green, 1995).

Those who feel marginalised and estranged from the contemporary Church are often identified as those who are divorced, in co-habitation, in same sex relationships or those who identify as LGBTQi. However, this can also refer to those who have been scandalised and hurt by the recent sex abuse scandals and abuse of power in the Catholic Church, or those who have felt that they have no voice in an overly hierarchical and male dominated Church. There is also evidence of large numbers of children and young people who are disaffiliated from the Church and who do not engage in religious practice. If synodality is for all the Church, then, it includes children and young people whether they are engaged with the Church or marginalised. Synodality offers an excellent opportunity for the Church to encounter children and young people, to explore their faith and engagement, and listen to their voices, their hopes and their ambitions, but also their concerns and their criticisms.

Synodality has been received with great enthusiasm in some parts of the Catholic Church and with much less enthusiasm, open criticism and even rejection, in other parts of the Church. Sadly, these different views that are being expressed are consistent with some of the current ideological and ecclesial divisions and the divisiveness that exists within the contemporary Catholic Church (Faggioli, 2023; Wooden, 2023). There is a disheartening trend to weaponize synodality which effectively deepens divisions rather than unites the Church (McCormick, 2023).

There are a number of aspects of synodality that have been critiqued or critically appraised, especially in some of the Catholic media, press and online magazines. One criticism is that there is often a perceived vagueness about the aim and purpose of the inclusive dialogue and the journey or process (O Reachtnin, 2022). It is argued that this can raise false expectations of the potential influence of the local, national and international synods and the possibility of major changes in the twenty-first century Catholic Church, both locally and universally. These are false expectations because the synodal process will not change Church teaching but apply Church teaching more pastorally.

Second, if there is a perceived vagueness about the aim and purpose, then, there is also a vagueness about the projected outcomes of this pastoral application. The details are often very generic and lack due attention to possible limitations, for example, in the *Final Synthesis of the Synodal Process in Scotland*, it is recorded that there is a longing for the eucharist to be more inclusive. While there is a list of those traditionally excluded (divorced people, women who have had abortions and those who have different sexual orientations) and the document states that they are to be welcomed, there is no detail on how the Eucharist will be more inclusive in practical terms. A counter-viewpoint is that these pastoral applications will require a shift in perceptions and theological thinking about the relationship of the Church to the inclusiveness of the Kingdom (Radcliffe, 2007). This will also involve a shared understanding of a way ahead and some planning and time for the implementation of any changes.

Third, synodality has already opened up discussion about some serious pressure points. These pressure points include a desire for a greater role for women beyond vague platitudes. There is a strong feeling in many parts of the Church that women should have greater voice and should have co-responsibility. They should be involved in decision making and even seminary training. Some argue further for women deacons and for women being permitted to preach (Rakoczy, 2020). There are criticisms about how this greater voice will be enacted and how enhanced roles for women will be realised. Similarly, there is a growing lobby for a greater understanding and inclusion of Catholic members of the LGBTQi community.

There is perception that there is a danger that synodality has opened a forum for the articulation of a series of lists for change that may not be realised in the present age and

this has the potential to cause frustration and confirm suspicions that the Church remains a closed and strictly male hierarchical institution and that certain voices carry more weight and authority. This could lead to a cynicism about synodality and the usefulness of such an exercise (White, 2023). There is an uneasy balance to be struck between the process of synodality in relation to Church teaching and the aspirations for a more progressive and inclusive Church.

It is worth noting that the opening up of the Synod to incorporate a wider and more diverse range of voices is a beginning, and not an endpoint, and has initiated, or recovered, a process towards a more inclusive way of thinking about being Church. It is difficult to predict the trajectory of synodality, but if it is to progress effectively it will need to address, at some point, both the aspirations for a more inclusive Church and the critical and obstructive voices.

### 3 Young people and synodality

There is a great emphasis in the contemporary Catholic Church on the disaffiliation and low practice rate of the young people (Lamont, 2023). There are serious anxieties about how this can be dealt with and how Catholic young people can be encouraged to participate in Catholic Christianity. There are some interesting trends in the religious affiliation among young people across the world. Research findings from the Pew Research Center in 2018 indicate that there is a global trend for young adults to be more likely to be religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2018). While this is quite marked in North America, Europe and Latin America, it is not as marked in the Middle East-North Africa region and Sub-Saharan Africa—in these places the majority of people identify as Muslim or Christian. In other words, the research indicates a higher level of religious practice observance in some countries which are less economically stable and where there is more limited access to education.

One of the key developments in the last twenty years in the Catholic Church was the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment (Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 2018). This was a Synod focussed on youth rather than a general Synod similar to 2021–2024. The young people were included in the synodal process through online questionnaires and personal testimonies.

In preparation for the Synod, Pope Francis published a letter to young people (Pope Francis, 2017). He affirmed their role on the Church and in the world and invited them to make their voices heard:

*A better world can be built also as a result of your efforts, your desire to change and your generosity. Do not be afraid to listen to the Spirit who proposes bold choices; do not delay when your conscience asks you to take risks in following the Master. The Church also wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard, let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls.*

The final document uses the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13–35), when Jesus accompanied the two disciples travelling from Jerusalem, as a paradigm or model. The Emmaus story is used as a means to understand the mission of the Church to young people, to accompany them. Becquart (2021) comments that this was, in fact, one of the purposes of the Youth

Synod: to help the Church discern how to ‘better reach and accompany youth...so they could commit themselves to the service of others’.

The Final document of the Synod of Bishops, Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment contains many insights on this reach and accompaniment, though only some of the key points can be highlighted in this article (Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 2018). Some of the sections point out that the young are not always listened to (Section 7) and that there is an insufficient accompaniment (Section 8). There are concerns raised that parishes struggle to appeal to young people (Section 18). The importance of family is acknowledged and the role of the parents in handing on the faith, though the serious challenges facing some families is recognised (Sections 32–33). One of the key insights is that the young want to participate in the life of the Church and are ‘her present and not only her future’ (Section 54).

This call to the young people to make their voices heard in the youth synod was reiterated in the 2021–2024 Synod. Before examining some of the points raised by young people in the synthesis documents of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland, it is instructive to provide a concise overview of some research studies on young people and their religiosity or commitment to faith.

#### **4 Voices of young people in the Catholic Church 1: research into religious affiliation**

There are some interesting research studies that can be used to understand the ways in which young people engage (or do not engage) with the contemporary Catholic Church. This section will draw, firstly, on some of the research evidence on young people in school from studies by Francis et al. (2020), Francis and Casson (2019), Byrne et al. (2019) and Miloš and Glavaš (2021). Secondly, research evidence from North (2018) and Ganiel (2022) on young people at college/university level and beyond this level will also be surveyed. This is not an exhaustive list of the research literature, but more a representative sample to illustrate some key research findings.

There is a body of evidence from research conducted in Australia that Catholic children and young people aged 8 to 14, within a sample of 2131 participants, are *more* likely to attend Church on a frequent basis if both of their parents are regular Church attenders. The level of Church attendance is enhanced by the level of support and encouragement provided in the home. Thus, the children and young people in the sample are *most* likely to attend Church frequently if both parents attend Church and provide religious engagement in the home (Francis et al. (2020).

Two similar research studies were conducted in England, Scotland and Wales and the Republic of Ireland. The study in England, Scotland and Wales drew on a sample of 2146 Catholic young people and the study in the Republic of Ireland drew on a sample of 1942 Catholic young people (Francis & Casson, 2019; Byrne et al., 2019). Both studies concurred with the findings from the Australian study: young Catholics who attend Church regularly are influenced by the attendance of their parents and are *most* likely to maintain attendance if both mother and father attend and if they have discussions about faith with their mother.

A research study from Croatia in 2014, a country which, according to the researchers is characterised by a strong Catholic culture, focused on 1,097 late teenagers (aged 18–19) (Miloš & Glavaš, 2021). The sample was limited to those

who declare themselves to be Catholic from one type of secondary school. The results indicated that the parents remain an important influence of the mass attendance of the young people.

The next two research studies focus on young people at the post-secondary school level. North conducted a study with young Catholics who are confident in their faith. She found that family and peer support were the most important influences on the faith of these young Catholics, followed by adult role mentors (North, 2018). Participation in the parish was deemed to be helpful, but the support of families, peers and mentors was still of high importance. Surprisingly, there were mixed results on the influence of Catholic schools, yet much greater agreement on the strong influence of Catholic chaplaincies and Catholic youth activities such as retreats and pilgrimages. This valuable research has focussed on a particular type of young Catholic—one who feels confident as a Catholic and who has actively participated in Catholic chaplaincies and wider Catholic youth activities. Arguably, the young Catholics who are confident in their faith represent a small percentage of contemporary Catholic young people, but this is an important group, and does provide insights into the factors that are important in the faith development of these young people. These are the Catholic young people who have the potential to participate in Church life in the future and, when appropriate, assume leadership roles.

A study of young people associated with the Catholic chaplaincy of Queen's university, Belfast, in 2022 sought to investigate the beliefs and practices of highly religious young people (Ganiel, 2022). When exploring the influences on their faith, spirituality, religion or God in a survey, the choice in the sample that scored the highest percentage as very important/somewhat important was 'personal experience and reflection' (94%) and 'family' scored the second highest percentage (84%). The influence on family was also stressed in some of the interviews.

While there are nuances in the findings in these research studies on young people, they all point to the importance and influence of parental practice and support. While acknowledging the limitations of all of the research studies, the studies of school children from different demographics provide consistent evidence that parental practice and some form of engagement in the home with one or both parents is influential on the religious practice of Catholic young people of school age. The findings from the two studies that researched young people at College/university level and beyond demonstrate that parents and the family are still important at this stage, though there are other important factors such as 'personal experience and reflection' and the strong influence of Catholic chaplaincies and Catholic youth activities such as retreats and pilgrimages. It is noteworthy that Reilly et al. (2019), in a small-scale study, found that the community experience of pilgrimage for students preparing to teach in Catholic schools 'strengthened' and 'deepened' their faith.

There is, of course, a pressing need to work with children and young people to offer them ways in which they can engage or re-engage. There has also emerged a serious and clearly related issue about how to encourage and support parents in providing this encouragement and support at home. Francis and Casson (2019) comment that:

*... it may be wise to invest in the education and formation of Catholic parents in order to enable them, in turn, to nurture the Christian formation.*

As will be seen, this is a viewpoint that is also emphasised in the three synthesis documents.

## 5 Voices of young people in the Catholic Church 2: young people and synodality

This section examines the views expressed in the three documents that were produced as the syntheses of the consultations in Great Britain and Ireland, that is in (1) England and Wales, (2) Ireland and (3) Scotland. The views expressed by young people in the *Final Synthesis of the Synodal Process in Scotland* (Bishops' Conference of Scotland, 2022) are summarised in Sect. 3.5—*Reaching out to Young People and those on the Margins*. This appears to be a conflation of children and young people and adults who are on the margins though, on close reading, only a few sentences are included concerning those adults who are on the margins. These refer to those who have suffered broken marriage or who are in same sex relationships. The *National Synthesis Document of England and Wales* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2022) devotes a subsection to *Young People* (Section V, iii), and the *Synthesis of the Consultation in Ireland* (2022) devotes a small section to *Youth* (xi).

The discussion in the three documents reveals some quite striking similarities, albeit with differences in inflection, and there are some contrasts. For the purposes of this article, the key similarities are grouped in six themes as follows: (1) absence from Church; (2) accusations of hypocrisy; (3) concerns about teaching on sexuality; (4) Catholic Social Teaching; (5) the importance of parents and (6) the ways in which young people can engage in the Church.

All three documents recorded concerns about the absence of young people in Church, or parish communities (theme 1). Importantly, these comments appear to have been expressed by churches and dioceses, rather than by the young people themselves. The English and Welsh synthesis notes that:

*Present in almost every submission was the pain in the older generation at the absence of young people from the Church.*

These anxieties about the absence of young people resonate with the findings of the Pew Research Center and the concerns that have been expressed about the disaffiliation and low practice rate of the young people above (Lamont, 2023).

A common response to the disaffiliation of young people is a call for more robust catechesis and religious education in Catholic schools, as means to counter the disaffiliation. This was expressed in the Scottish document as follows:

Most dioceses supported greater investment in catechesis and religious education but at parish and school levels.

Further, there is an aspiration to 'strengthen the links between parishes, schools and families'.

The English and Welsh and Scottish syntheses report that many (Scotland) or some (England and Wales) young people view the Church as hypocritical (theme 2). The Irish synthesis does not use the word hypocritical but does note that many young people were critical of the Church in relation to 'the role of women, clerical celibacy and its handling of the abuse crisis'. Pope Francis commented on hypocrisy and where it can be found at the general audience on August 25th, 2021. He referred to hypocrisy in the workplace, politics and the Church:

*Hypocrisy in the Church is particularly detestable; and unfortunately, hypocrisy exists in the Church and there are many hypocritical Christians and ministers. We*



*should never forget the Lord's words: "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Mt 5:37).*

According to the Pope, 'hypocrisy in the Church is particularly detestable' (Pope Francis, 2021). It is a detestable form of behaviour because it describes somebody who condemns the failings of others, often their moral failings, but behaves in an immoral way his or herself (Jordan et al., 2017).

There is no doubt that the sex abuse scandals which have profoundly affected the Catholic Church, and public perception and opinion of the Church, have played a major role in the young people regarding the Church as hypocritical (Gray et al, 2021). The actual crimes of sexual abuse have been seriously compounded by the failure in the Church to deal with the perpetrators with any kind of consistency and, similarly, to respond to the victims with justice and compassion in a consistent way (Formicola, 2020; Grabmeier & Weisner, 2023).

There is some focus on sexuality and sexual morality in the Scottish and Irish syntheses (theme 3). The Scottish synthesis comments that more needs to be done to promote a vision of the human person and married love and family 'to counter the secular agenda of individualism'. The Irish synthesis notes some sharp criticisms:

*A significant number (of young people) disagreed with the Church's teaching on sexuality and the Church's position on sex was considered as a barrier to participation by some young people.*

This is tempered a little by the views of some young people in the Irish synthesis who commented that the 'Church's teaching on sexuality is a welcome challenge'.

The more positive views of the Church are contained in themes (4), (5) and (6). Theme (4) includes a recognition of the value of the contemporary social justice dimension of the Church—this was quite marked in the English and Welsh and Scottish syntheses. In the Scottish synthesis:

*Many young people were impressed with the Church's social teaching, its outreach to the poor, its call for social justice and caring for others and the environment.*

In the English and Welsh synthesis young people are noted as responding when the 'Church gives concrete witness in service of the poor, struggling for social justice, and caring for Creation'. The concern for creation is repeated later in the sub section on *Young People*.

Both the Scottish and Irish syntheses emphasised the importance of connections and parents and families (theme 5). The Irish synthesis comments as follows:

*The Church is seen as a family of families; families are the natural framework within which faith is transmitted, nurtured and practiced and from which a Christian identity emerges; and families are the appropriate framework for accompaniment and evangelisation (section xiii)*

The Irish synthesis notes that this means accompanying families of different types and parishes should focus more on parents, guardians and grandparents. The Scottish synthesis also stresses the support for parents so that they are able to hand the faith onto the children and, as stated above, records that: 'all dioceses wished to strengthen links between parishes, schools and families'.



The last theme (theme 6) is the ways in which young people can engage with the Church. This theme draws some very interesting responses from the young people. The Scottish synthesis remarks that:

*It was suggested that young people need to “be” Church rather than just “doing” Church – i.e. being committed to social action.*

While this suggestion about being Church rather than doing Church is directly associated with social action, it can be surmised that this idea of being Church can be applied in different ways. In the English and Welsh synthesis there is a similar comment that young people do not want faith ‘done to them’. Rather, they want a ‘more encouraging and inviting Church’ that will provide ‘opportunities to explore and discuss faith’. There is an anxiety that the older people do not listen to the young and ‘do not want to share responsibility with them’. One of the telling comments in the Irish synthesis is that young people become indifferent to their faith when they have not engaged with or found ‘vibrant communities’ where they can belong. Youth groups seem to provide valuable faith communities.

## 6 Concluding remarks

None of the views that were expressed about the young people or by young people in the three synthesis documents are particularly surprising. Many of the views expressed resonate with some of the outcomes of the Youth Synod 2018 and some of the research findings outlined in this article. The sets of synodal evidence combined with the research evidence, however, do offer many insights into the reasons for disaffiliation of some young people and the hopes for greater involvement in the Catholic Church.

There are no easy answers, or solutions, to the issues raised in the synodal process by the young people across England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland. There are two groups that appear to require attention. The children and young people in schools and those in the 18–30 age group and this includes those who are in employment, further education or higher education. For the first group, which could be sub divided into primary and secondary level children and young people, one of the suggested approaches is a more inclusive understanding of family and greater levels of guidance for parents and guardians to enable them to support the young people in the development of their faith. Another suggested approach is greater investment in catechesis and religious education in parishes and schools. This appears to be a reasonable approach, though there needs to be a very careful discussion about the approach taken in catechesis and religious education that would prepare children and young people to engage in a synodal Church. This is an approach that would include not just learning and formation, but an invitation to active involvement in the synodal Church. This is an approach that would enable them to articulate their views and seek for their voices to be heard. Further, this approach would prepare them to participate in and transform parish life. Ultimately, this is an approach that would recognise and support the view that children and young people in the Church are ‘her present and not only her future’.

As regards young adults, especially those who have a commitment to their faith, it appears from North’s (2018) research that parish life does not provide the same sense of community that they experienced at university or college. There are different approaches that can be adopted to be more inclusive of these young people. There could be a greater and more concerted effort to create and foster a more vibrant and inclusive community

in parish life. There could also be regular meetings that are dedicated to support the faith development of these young people.

Synodality and the idea of an open and welcoming Church is very attractive and the idea of including the voice of young people in the synodal process is equally attractive. Synodality has initiated an encounter and serious discussion with young people and has encouraged them to be open and honest in expressing their views. This in itself has been a significant advance in that young people have been allowed to express themselves and recount their experience of Church. Their voices have been heard. However, their voices need to be continually heard as the Church continues on this pilgrim journey. Pope Francis advocates a move away from conceiving youth and young people in an abstract sense but as individual young people with life experiences (Pope Francis, 2019, 71). Sala (2020) points out that this is consistent with the Pope's view that 'reality is more important than the idea'. The challenge for the Church going forward is the way in which the life experiences of the young people can be more fully integrated into the life of the Church so that young people can 'be' Church, rather than 'do' Church.

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