



## ARCHDIOCESE OF CARDIFF

SYNOD 2021-23

PARISH REPORT

**The Parish of St Mary's in Monmouth**

**submitted on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2022**

**to the Archdiocese of Cardiff**

## **Introduction – Special Characteristics of the Parish**

### **Location**

Our parish of St Mary's is a largely rural parish with its church and hub in the market town of Monmouth, located in the north east corner of Monmouthshire. The parish borders two English counties with Gloucestershire to its east and Herefordshire to the north and west.

### **Sister Parish**

Our Parish Priest is equally responsible for our sister parish, St Frances of Rome, in Ross-on-Wye. There is a mutual and reciprocal relationship between both parishes, most evidently so when Mass was broadcast from Ross for all on the web during COVID lockdown. Both towns are a comparable size of 11,000+.

### **Parish Size**

There are 140 – 150 households in the parish supplemented and supported by regular fellow parishioners living in Ross-on-Wye who have proved a positive asset to the parish. Similarly, Monmouth parishioners go to Ross as an alternative particularly during Holy Week or when convenient to attend Mass.

### **History**

Historically Monmouth is the birthplace of the archetypal English monarch, Henry V, while nearby Courtfield, where he was brought up, was also the boyhood home of Cardinal Herbert Vaughan.

The annual pilgrimage to pray at the grave of St John Kemble, just over the border in nearby Welsh Newton, starts after Mass and finishes with Benediction in the historic building of St Mary's church.

### **Ecumenism**

The Catholic Church in Monmouth has positive ecumenical relations with the local Protestant churches through Churches Together, the local food bank, shared Stations of the Cross during Lent and enactment of the Passion from church to church during Holy Week. Annually, and typically during Holy Week, a local member of the Jewish community presides over a Seder Supper for parishioners.

### **Education**

Educationally, it is home to three primary (Osbaston, Overmonnow, and Wyesham) and three secondary schools (Monmouth Comprehensive School, Monmouth Haberdashers School for Girls and Monmouth School) attracting pupils locally and from the Forest of Dean, as well as nationally and internationally. There are no Catholic Schools in the Parish so children have to be prepared for their First Communion and Confirmation outside the school system by dedicated parishioners typically with a teaching background.

### **Health**

In addition to doctors' and dentists' surgeries, Monnow Vale is a relatively small cottage hospital adjacent to Bridges Community Centre, which offers day facilities for elderly or disabled people in the vicinity.

### **Age Profile**

After their schooling in Monmouth and further education elsewhere in the country, employment for school leavers and graduates is scant, obliging them in many instances to leave and seek opportunities further afield. Meanwhile, and inevitably, those who remain are typically aging with some offset thanks to younger families and welcome newcomers to the parish.

## Synod Journey Milestones

Date	Event	Comment
<b>4Q</b>	<b>2021</b>	
30.10.21	Fr Nicholas James, Parish Priest (PP) nominated Sean Dunne (SD) as Monmouth Synod Delegate and Therese Warwick (TW) as the parish adviser	APPOINTMENT
17.11.21	SD and TW attended first Archdiocesan training session	TRAINING
18.11.21	Parish Secretary, Anne May (AM), notified parishioners via email that SD would be the Parish Synod Delegate and attached a statement "Towards a Synodal Church" to respond to the Pope's request for his Synodal Journey	HOLY FATHER
20.11.21	AM set up dedicated parish email address: monmouthsynod@gmail.com	COMMUNICATIONS
24.11.22	SD & TW attended second Archdiocesan training event	TRAINING
25.11.21	PP & SD agreed the synodal process should allow people to share insights and concerns without constraint	METHODOLOGY
01.12.21	SD sent emails inviting input for first communication re parish strengths and weaknesses	COMMUNICATION
02.12.21	AM sent parishioners an introduction to <b>SYNOD PROCESS</b> prepared by SD with Archbishop's Advent Letter	ARCHBISHOP
03.12.12	Placed dedicated basket marked SYNOD at the end of the church for all non-email (anonymous) written comments	COMMUNICATIONS
04/05.12.21	SD addressed both weekend Masses to announce the start of our own parish Synodal Journey	COMMUNICATIONS
09.12.21	<b>(SYNOD 1) "OUR SYNOD PREPARATIONS: MONMOUTH PARISH COMMUNITY PROFILE"</b> issued for comment	1
16.12.21	Issued <b>(SYNOD 2) "ST MARY'S PREPARATIONS: OVERVIEW"</b> for a perspective on our synodal journey	2
<b>January</b>	<b>2022</b>	
08.01.22	AM distributed <b>SYNOD 3 "SYNOD PREPARATIONS: THE NEXT STEP"</b> including "Vade Mecum" and <b>SYNOD 4-1 "NEXT STEPS IN OUR SYNODAL JOURNEY"</b>	3
	<b>SYNOD 4-2 "OUR CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY"</b>	4
20.01.22	PP issued message "The Synod and the Holy Spirit"	

	SD advised parishioners about <b>SYNOD 5 “YOUR CHURCH AND YOU – AN INVITATION FROM POPE FRANCIS”</b> outlining the Challenges facing the Church with focus on Communion, Participation & Mission Options to comment at meetings, email, letter etc. with Ten Questions to Contemplate, Listen, Discern, Reply	5
28.01.22	Published <b>SYNOD 6 “CHALLENGES FACING THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH”</b> Purpose of Consultation / Vocations / Church Attendance / Environment & Agriculture / Morality / Bishops Highlighted dates of parish meetings on 3 / 8 /16 Feb	6
<b>February</b>		
03.02.22	PP, SD & TW held <b>first parish synod meeting</b> in the Parish Rooms with 12 participants.	MEETING 1
03.02.22	TW set up boards in Parish Rooms with a facility to comment on Communion, Participation & Mission	COMMUNICATION
04.02.22	AM distributed <b>SYNOD 7: FAITH &amp; DOUBT</b> to parishioners and stated options for meetings and commenting	7
06.02.22	TW issued notes from the first parish meeting to attendees	COMMUNIICATION
08.02.22	AM distributed <b>SYNOD 8: PARISHIONERS’ VIEWS</b>	8
08.02.22	PP, SD & TW held <b>second parish synod meeting</b> in the Parish Rooms for 12 attendees.	MEETING 2
14.02.22	TW issued notes from the second parish meeting	COMMUNICATIONS
15.02.22	AM distributed <b>SYNOD 9: CALLS FOR CHANGE</b>	9
16.02.22	AM distributed <b>SYNOD 10: A VIEW FROM ROSS</b> and a leaflet invitation to those who do not go to Mass to give their views about the Church.	10
16.02.22	SD & TW held <b>third and final parish synod meeting</b> by ZOOM for 11 attendees	MEETING 3
22.02.22	TW issued notes for the <b>third parish synod meeting</b>	COMMUNICATIONS
28.02.22	AM distributed <b>SYNOD 11: PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHURCH</b> and notification that the consultative stage of the synodal journey would be concluded in early March in order to submit a report to the Archdiocese during March.	11

<b>March</b>		
01.03.22	Archdiocese confirmed 21 March as the parish reporting date and supplied new reporting formats including those for any societies within the parish like SVP and Catenians	REPORT
02.03.22	The Catenians declined the offer to file a report to the Archdiocese purely on account of their 19 members being associated with 8 parishes	REPORT
06.03.22	Likewise, the SVP chose not to file an independent Synod report, consistent with its stance from the outset.	REPORT
07.03.12	AM issued <b>SYNOD 12: RIGHT OF REPLY</b>	12
14.03.22	Draft Report sent to parish for comment by 18.03.22	REPORT
21.03.22.	Parish Synodal Report sent to the Archdiocese on time	REPORT

This Event Analysis charting the Synod Journey Milestones describes our parish methodology for gathering and publishing parishioners’ views in response to the Holy Father, as highlighted by Archbishop George Stack, seeking our input on Communion, Participation and the Church’s Mission.

Essentially, our journey started at home with a measure of our own strengths and weaknesses as a parish. It then looked at the work of the parish in the local community before considering the Universal Church and the ways it could potentially re-energize itself to provide a stronger voice and presence in bringing Christ to a modern world that patently needs His authentic reassuring influence more than ever.

Parishioners and others accepted the invitation to have their say and, importantly, to listen to others with understanding and tolerance -- only they know with what prayer and discernment they did so. They articulated their views person to person, in small groups, by telephone, charting on boards, anonymously via a designated SYNOD receptacle in the church but most of all by attending meetings and by emailing their comments and concerns. As the record shows we captured their comments in minutes from the parish meetings and in communications back to them in the form of 12 synodal steps on our parish journey. If that represented our strongest response, probably we were weakest in eliciting views from those who no longer practice their faith or receive the sacraments, although we did reach out beyond the parish and were richly rewarded with other pertinent comments which will be discussed later.

We conducted these consultations at a time of COVID and then during a time when we witnessed the horrors of war in the Ukraine. While COVID forced us into isolation and deprived us of attending Mass in person for a time and war shook us by its savagery these were also times when we were reminded how fragile life can be and how important it is to safeguard our national freedom and security. Like Lent, it obliged us to re-evaluate our way of life and ask what is of value. In many instances it emphasized the importance of family, friends & neighbours as well as the comfort and consolation our faith can bring us.

The Church, like every institution, faces the challenges of change and competition in so many forms. One stimulates the other. As a consequence, the Church needs to address some serious issues as it always has done throughout its long history. The concern among many is that they are already finding themselves as the last practicing Catholic in the family.

## **Communion / Participation / Mission**

Parishioners have been or are typically active in the following fashion:

### **Agency For Overseas Development (CAFOD)**

With strong parish support for raising funds for this global charity throughout the year and most recently during Lent in support of the victims of war in the Ukraine

### **Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP)**

By visiting the elderly & the sick and raising funds to help others in a spirit of charity / justice.

### **Survive-miva**

With talks in different parishes, one parishioner raises funds for missionary transport in challenging terrains.

### **Catenians**

Our local Circle is committed to strengthening family life through friendship and faith. It supports the clergy, vocations and charities like CAFOD, and invites wives, children and parishioners to its many activities.

### **Historic Churches**

By Providing planning expertise to a diocesan team for granting faculties for alterations to historic churches like St Mary's, thus enabling them to comply with planning regulations.

By regular participation in the European Heritage Day (Open Doors in Monmouth) giving access to the public to share and explain our churches' historical treasures.

### **Churches Together**

Catholic membership fosters good relations with fellow Christians. Locally there is the annual Passion enactment, Stations of the Cross in different Monmouth churches, and Food Bank provision and distribution for people in need.

### **Parish & Social Events** such as:

Preparation of candidates for First Holy Communion and Confirmation as well as actively involving youngsters in the basics of faith during the early stages of Mass.

Supporting parishioners and visitors at the annual St John Kemble pilgrimage with refreshments, organizing the annual Autumn Fair and parish social events by the Social & Fund-Raising Committee. By coffee mornings and raffles inside and outside the parish with the proceeds going to charities. With bi-monthly Come And Meet Each Other (CAMEO) meetings, featuring speakers of interest, especially for new members of our church community.

### **Local Community Involvement** thanks to:

Town councillors & planners and working for Local Authorities

School Governors, Headteachers, teachers, support and administration staff, and pupils in local schools. School Advisers and Inspectors at Archdiocesan, Diocesan and Regional level.

In the medical profession as surgeons, doctors, nurses, ophthalmologists and dentists

Law & Order as members of the Police Authority, magistracy, including their selection & supervision

Prisoner care by saying Mass and arranging tea in Usk Prison weekly

Caring professions such as support for the elderly in Bridges Community Centre & elsewhere.

Fund Raising for good causes such as Llamau for the young homeless and vulnerable women.

## Commentary

### Introduction

Like most, if not all parishes, we in Monmouth have exchanged varied views about the mission of the Church and how it can most effectively present the message of Christ to Catholics and the world today.

In simple terms, judging by the active participants in the Synodal process, there is a small traditional wing of the Church and a larger more liberally inclined group while the majority have not, for their own good reasons, expressed a view. It does not follow that the majority sit in the middle. They too could be spread across the spectrum. All we can do, therefore, is to present the views that have been expressed. It follows that any reference to “most”, “majority” “many”, “few”, “minority” “small” etc is based on those who have voiced a view to date. In that sense such references may not be statistically significant, but hopefully they are indicative of the parish’s view as a whole and, in any event, they are all we have to guide us.

### Traditional View

What characterises many traditionalists is a great love of the Latin Mass, 1950s devotions and expressions of piety like kneeling to take the Eucharist on the tongue. Interestingly, people who do not seek such practices for themselves still acknowledge that the traditionalists should not be prevented or restricted but allowed to practise their faith as they prefer and so gain fulfilment in Christ in those churches which retain the Latin rite. Others would admit to having a certain nostalgia for the Gloria, Credo or hymns in Latin of their youth while fully accepting the changes introduced by Vatican 2.

The biggest discrepancy is with those who maintain that the whole Synodal Journey is ill founded and should not have been initiated. The response to date to the Pope’s appeal for us to join him on a Synodal Journey would suggest that the bishops, priests and people are prepared to do so and welcome this opportunity to discuss their faith in a way they have never done before in their adult lives. Again, most would accept the traditionalist right to reject the process without in any way agreeing with it.

Happily, amidst such exchanges there is an underlying appreciation of the interdependency on each other as we all come together in the same church on a regular basis with the recognition we all play our respective parts making up the Body of Christ, each with our own personal gifts from the Holy Spirit.

Having acknowledged the views and great contributions of the more traditionally inclined we can now turn to what appears to be the main stream view with a more liberal tendency consistent with the inclinations of modern Western society in general.

### Key Comments & Concerns

Here are some of the “big ticket” items pre-occupying most Catholics today as raised by local parishioners and others who have chosen to express their views on our Synodal Journey.

### Leadership

As a generalization, our Bishops have not served us well.

In particular their worldwide handling of paedophile priests has brought shame on the Church, priests, people and upon the Bishops themselves and they need to know this in clear terms. Typically, they have repeatedly and seriously failed children and their families while historically protecting the Church and offenders and thus allowing them to repeat grievous offences against more children.

While they have readily recognised sin, repentance, penance and forgiveness they ignored the fact that the same paedophile act is also a crime, in need of public trial in a court of law, sentence and punishment.

Independent national investigations have revealed the sheer scale of abuse across the globe and even in the UK, Archbishops have been publicly censured for their gross mishandling of cases with excessive secrecy designed to protect the offending priest and the Church but patently failing to protect child victims. As a direct consequence the Church and its Bishops have lost their great moral authority as well as, in some cases, their personal credibility as pastors.

The other side of that same coin is their failure to show national leadership across a wide range of issues of interest and concern to Catholics and people more generally. Nor have they stood up in public as champions of the majority of their own good, faithful priests. According to Professor John Loughlin, fellow of Blackfriars Hall, Oxford, "A comprehensive survey of sexual abuse by priests in the US by John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York found that about 4% were accused (but not all found guilty). That means 96% had no accusations against them. This is comparable with many other organisations and churches." It is a matter of great concern to the faithful that our greatly valued, innocent priests are not defended properly in public. The leadership role of the Bishops must be to find high profile spokespeople capable of putting a Catholic perspective and highlighting the important work of the Church in society, 9.6% of which are baptised Catholics in the UK and just over 16% worldwide.

The standing of priests in society and growing secularisation are also in part responsible for fewer vocations and the wholesale closure of seminaries in the Western world. Most parishioners recognise the need for greater latitude in ordaining priests and advocate, or at least accept, married priests and, in our age of equality, the right of women to be ordained priests and deacons.

The train of events is well known. With the dwindling number of priests, forecast to be some 50% less in the Cardiff diocese in the next ten years, and with the subsequent removal of clergy from parishes then key local leadership and pastoral care are lost. The congregation shrinks, its work in the community declines and donations fall resulting in church closures.

For this fundamental reason, as opposed to arguments for equality or in favour of married clergy, the Bishops in Synod will be obliged to address the problem that has been evident for years. It is a key factor forcing the Church to come to terms with its mission in the modern world, just as their predecessors have repeatedly done throughout the ages in response to the challenges they faced.

In the culture we live in, image, nudge factors, behavioural units are commonly understood buzzwords and the related psychology could effectively be used by the Church - not in terms of watering down the message - but by making it more urgently attractive, more subtly attractive. In other words, it should use the media more effectively employing lucid, charismatic and thoughtful spokespeople - not necessarily priests, inserting them in discussion programmes of various levels - but avoiding superficiality or talking down which is detected immediately.

There are many other issues urgently in need of consideration and correction to make the Church more credible as a messenger of Christ to the world:

### **The New Gentiles**

Who are the New Gentiles? They are all people on the periphery of the Church or more specifically divorcees, gays and lesbians, and cohabittees who the Church has regarded as sinful for one reason or another. It also brings into question the stance of the Church on other moral issues like contraception and whether the Church should stay out of the bedroom. We all say, "Lord, I am not worthy" when receiving the Eucharist but some are deemed more unworthy than others. Just as regular communicants make a decision in accordance with their conscience whether to receive communion so there is a case for allowing those currently marginalised by the Church to do likewise when they are most in need of the solace of Christ and his Church. Once again recognising that conscience is our inner voice of Christ



and is supreme would release priests from acting as gatekeepers to the Church and its sacraments. The Bishop of Salford takes the view that it is un-Christian to bar Catholics who are not “practicing” since admitting them may lead them back to the faith.

There can hardly be a more serious sin than causing the Son of God to be put to death, and yet Jesus does not seem to have excluded Judas when He offered the apostles His Body and Blood. Can the Church therefore justify excluding people from Holy Communion when they have done something less serious?

Space does not permit debate about this whole area of Church’s moral teaching which has driven it into a more and more outmoded direction even dictating the selection of Bishops, if, and only if, they are supportive of *Humanae Vitae*, regardless of the practices of the people who make up the flock of which they are pastors. Arguably, there is almost a complete mismatch between conservative and restrictive pastors and educated and responsible people on this key point.

Just as St Paul, with his acumen, energy and enthusiasm, championed the case for opening up the Church to the Gentiles by leading the debate with Peter, James and John in the so-called Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem so we need another Paul or Paula, Francis or Frances, George or Georgia to do likewise for the “New Gentiles” in our own times.

### **Social Teaching of the Church**

Here is another area that needs to be thought through and better presented with impact for Catholics and the public alike. It includes the duty of Catholics towards the poor, child poverty and benefit assistance that disadvantages a family of 3 or more children, food kitchens, refugees, the homeless, modern slavery, the sick and dying, nuclear disarmaments as well as support for the missions. Love is also the recurring theme in Christ's teachings in the Gospels. Should we take love as our primary mission and allow it to inform our actions and decisions, both in the Church and in our own lives? We might be less likely to go wrong, and we could all then be missionaries in our own lives in leading by example.

One of the strongest voices we heard from outside the parish was from someone dedicated to helping the homeless in hard practical terms with clothing, bedding and facilities to clean and freshen up. Often the homeless have attendant drug or mental health issues. The litany is long and the need great with no prospect of it ending regardless of developments in modern society. Admittedly, the state has a prime duty of care with such social issues but the Church can and should lend a helping hand and clearly does so via CAFOD, SVP, Churches Together etc but a national champion, influencer, spokesperson would help give the Church a positive reputation as well as giving practical help to those desperately in need.

### **Education**

This is a key issue for the viability of the Church in the future. Catholic schools have a well-deserved reputation for good standards and a positive ethos. Sadly, after attending school their Catholic education ceases whereas in others it does not even start for want of a Catholic school. This leads in turn to recognizing the importance of local links between pupils and their Catholic teachers, with parent support, to encourage them to attend the church regularly to further their understanding of, and involvement in, the faith. Competition for their attention is persistent and comes in many forms in their teenage years hence the need for the right role models to inspire them and to direct their tremendous energy.

One of the benefits emerging from our Synodal Journey has been the opportunity to discuss our faith for the first time as adults thus highlighting the need for forums to discuss topical and ethical issues from a Catholic perspective in the hope that such learning will have benefits in the wider community as well as for future generations of the Church.

## **Our Environment**

Pope Francis has spoken out about the need for us to live more simply and sustainably and care for the planet - our common home - and everything on it. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'* he reminds us that as consumers we hold considerable power in our hands, and he suggests various ways in which we can take action, including boycotting shops, farms and businesses which are unethical.

## **Communications**

Communications are crucial in the work of the Church yet most Church documents give the impression that they have been written by theologians for theologians, rather than for the laity or the general public. They are often full of archaic words and phrases - the background information for this consultation is a classic example. The inclination is to use a hundred words where ten will do. In an age of emoticons and abbreviations such as LOL, the response to words such as "synodality", "vade mecum" and "parrhesia" is likely to be snappy but not very flattering. How can we expect people (particularly young people) to be interested in an organisation which speaks to them in what sounds like (and sometimes is) a foreign language? There are two possible explanations for it. Either the people who prepared this consultation are really so out of touch with the real world that they did not realise what they were doing, or it is done deliberately to deter people from taking part, thus retaining the "status quo" while paying lip service to consultation. If the Church wants to get its message across in the modern world, it needs to speak simply, clearly and concisely or face continuing losses.

## **MOVING ON**

We, the people, who ARE the church (not the buildings or hierarchy) have been tasked by Pope Francis to provide input and a steer towards the future. If the Catholic church - or any Christian denomination - is to maintain relevance and dynamism it must lead and be seen to be leading in judiciously changing and adapting to appeal to younger generations.

There will always be debate how far and how fast the Church should introduce change.

Some will advocate a radical approach: To achieve this there is no point in tinkering around the edges by changing a few words in established prayers or relaxing one or two arcane rules. The change that is needed is radical. Jesus was a disrupter - an itinerant Jewish preacher, teacher and healer who has inspired the world for more than two thousand years. In today's contemporary parlance of social media, he would be regarded as the greatest 'influencer' of them all.

Others would proceed more selectively: The young are the future of the Church so deserve special attention. Some non-Catholic churches have found that by holding services on YouTube they have attracted more young people, including those who don't go to church. It would be worth trying some YouTube services in the Archdiocese, perhaps inviting students from Catholic secondary schools, colleges and universities to choose the format of the service, prayers, readings and music.

The Church of today is still largely shaped by the Second Vatican Council, but that took place 60 years ago. The world has changed out of all recognition since then, while the Church seems to have let itself get left behind and often seems remote from everyday life in 2022. If it wants to remain relevant, it needs to find ways of moving on when the world moves on. The Church has the challenge of defining how it can be more responsive to changing circumstances and more able to adapt and adjust itself as necessary. In theory that is where periodically the Synod of Bishops (or indeed a body more representative of the entire Church) comes in to define and encourage the changes necessary in conjunction with the Pope.

The challenges our Bishops face are real, immense and immediate. Where we have been critical it is out of love and concern for the Church. We have also offered potential solutions in the hope of strengthening its ability to preach and practise the Gospel.

The ultimate test is what would Jesus Christ have to say to his Church. We recognise the Bishops need our prayers but most of all the help of the Holy Spirit to discern the right path(s) to take for the future on our Synodal Journey.

We complete our report to the Archdiocese with the words of  
Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General to the Synod of Bishops:  
*“Let the pastors not be afraid to listen to the flock entrusted to them”.*

### **Sign Off**

This Report is submitted to the Diocesan Synodal Team on behalf of the Parish community of:

St Mary’s --- Monmouth

It is an honest reflection of the work undertaken over the last six months and has been reviewed by Parishioners

Signed:                      Rev Canon Nicholas James                      Parish Priest

Signed:                      Sean Dunne                      Parish Synod Delegate