

# Synod 2021-23: For a Synodal Church

## Million Minutes & Columban Missionaries

### Young Adult Synodal Conversation



# Introduction

The Synod 2021-23 journey proposes a wonderful opportunity to recognise individuals within our Church community. Million Minutes is dedicated to advocating for the voice of young people across England and Wales. The Columbans are committed to dialogue, justice, and peace. The synodal process is a good opportunity for us to listen to and amplify the voices of young adults. In particular, we are keen to capture the voices of young people who might not have had the opportunity or felt able, to feed into the synod process via other means, because, for example, of feeling ‘in between’ dioceses or having some level of discomfort with participating in local conversations.

This report is a collation of responses from the small group that was gathered together on Zoom on Monday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2022. This group represents a diverse range of young Catholics from different backgrounds and cultures, aged 17 to 25 years old, and from six dioceses (East Anglia, Westminster, Birmingham, Southwark, Leeds, and Portsmouth). The group was convened by both Million Minutes and the Columban Missionaries, and breakout groups were facilitated by James Trewby, Beth Warren, and Daisy Srblin.



***A word cloud from the evening highlighting various identities of the young adults who attended***

Participants comprised of young adults who had previously been engaged with Million Minutes’ work or the work of the Columbans, including individuals who had been recognised through the Celebrating Young People Awards, people attached to a ‘Beacon Parish’, recipients of a youth social action grant, climate activists, and an asylum seeker.

The young adults we listened to came from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, and some had been born outside the UK. They also came from a diverse range of Catholic traditions. It happened that most of the young adults were women - this was accidental but does seem to reflect the gender balance of young adult engagement in Catholic spaces.

The group was kept intentionally small, so all those who wanted to contribute could do so.

After a prayer, the call went into facilitated breakout groups to explore the synod questions. After each breakout group, a plenary discussion was facilitated, to allow groups to share their reflections. The evening concluded after 90 minutes with a prayer.

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A summary of those questions can be found below:

#### Reflection One – Experience of the Pandemic

- What has been my experience of the last eighteen months? What strengths did I find in my faith and faith community?
- Were there times I was disappointed or sorrowful? In what ways did the grace of God most clearly touch and uplift me?
- Did I have a sense of the Church journeying with me and others in this time?

#### Reflection Two – Communion, Participation, Mission

- Thinking about my experience of the pandemic or more broadly, do I have a sense of belonging to communion of the Church, that she is a home for me?
- Do I feel like my gifts, talents and faith are recognised by the Church and can be of service to her?
- What aspects of the Church's mission could I make a greater contribution to and what aspects of her mission should the Church focus on more?

#### Reflection Three – Discerning

- What are the common threads or consistencies that are emerging in the group following the first two reflections?
- What sort of things could I or my faith community do more of or do better to help the Church live her mission more faithfully?
- What does 'synodality' or 'journeying together' mean to me? How could the Church better practise it and what would it add to her life?



# REFLECTION 1: Experiences of the Pandemic

The first set of questions explored the experiences of young adults during the pandemic and the extent to which participants felt the Church was journeying with them.

A range of themes emerged, including mental health and isolation, impacts on life chances and education, and effects on professional options.

The young adults we listened to were thoughtful about how so much they took for granted in the world around them had changed as a result of the pandemic, including working

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patterns, and the balance between work and life. Some described the pandemic as oddly ‘restorative’, allowing time and space to question the status quo, which (pre-pandemic) seemed to prioritise a culture of overworking and consumption.

The ways in which the Catholic Church responded to the pandemic seemed to vary from participant to participant. Some felt that

they had seen the very best of their Catholic communities during the pandemic, ministering as a ‘field hospital’, at the very front lines of the needs of the local community, whether to address food poverty or organise digital provision. For some young people, the suspension of the weekly obligation allowed them the chance to find community beyond the usual confines of parish walls. One young person talked of the pandemic ‘turning faith upside down’ and challenged all practising Catholics to examine what exactly their faith is about. Some talked of their faith being “stronger than ever” as a result of the pandemic, allowing them to engage with a much more “creative” understanding of Church: one where online community, online engagement, and personal reflection was just as important as weekly attendance.

The pandemic caused some young people to start seeing their faith and the Church building as separate things, rather than faith relying on an individual being physically present in the Church building. It was noted that, for some, this transition was forced, due to their local parish not making efforts to journey online or into other spheres to remain connected with the community. One young adult talked about her pre-pandemic struggle to identify with the Church, especially after leaving home for university and moving around parishes: but during and post-pandemic she felt able to “find God in nature and in conversation”. This sense of stability, despite a shifting external context, seemed palpable.



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Given the widespread vaccine rollout, facilitators asked participants to consider what ‘returning’ to parish Churches has felt like. Some young adults talked of a feeling of “disconnection” and “disappointment”. There was a sense in the discussion that participants were worried about losing those senses of connection with God and with one another they had developed during the pandemic. Amongst some participants there seemed to be a genuine fear of losing the gains made in lockdown, finding a voice of their own, developing a community of friends, and being in a space of communal youth-led prayer.

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Strength of feeling varied as to the extent to which the Church had ministered with young people in mind. One participant said the “Church has locked its doors to us”, and felt strongly that he did not have a role in parish life, and would continue to seek community elsewhere. Others suggested that the Sunday obligation was the only connection keeping them connected with parish life. That being said, the desire for participants to find community (in-person locally as well as online) seemed very strong.

## REFLECTION 2: Belonging in the Church

A consistent theme in the discussion was that the young adults we listened to were not representative of their peers. Participants spoke openly about the fact that many of their friends and students from school had left the faith or become lapsed or disengaged; to paraphrase one participant, “people our age just don’t believe in God”. Some young adults also spoke of perceptions of the Catholic Church as being a space of disharmony, which

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would understandably mean young adults would turn away. There was a sense among participants that if more young people understood that faith was richer than just the weekly obligation, fewer young people would turn away from the Church.

The theme of intergenerational tension was also shared. The young adults undisputedly had a huge amount of respect for members of the older generation but did not always feel that respect was reciprocated. Themes of the “adult knowing best” in parish spaces seemed to abound, leaving participants questioning what role they had, if any, in Catholic spaces. Some spoke of older people feeling threatened by them as if their presence challenged their understanding of faith. One young adult shared that they found it difficult to call Church



“home” due to feeling like an intruder or an unwelcome guest. These feelings were shared by others who had experiences of feeling pushed out or brushed to the side, especially by comments such as, “you’re sitting in my seat” and “we’ve always done it this way”.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, some of the young adults we spoke to did not always feel a sense of belonging in physical Church spaces. At best, it seemed like the feeling of ‘belonging’ is a “postcode lottery”, dependent on the local characteristics of the Church and those who participated. Some participants felt that older Catholics were not always open to new ideas or opinion. One young adult expressed, “The Church doesn’t seek me, I must seek it”. On

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the other hand, one said that her local Church had encouraged her to grow, developing confidence in her skills and in leadership positions, which was really encouraging.

As with experiences of parish life, young people’s experiences of clergy and Religious varied greatly. Some young adults had great memories and experiences with priests and members of Religious Orders attached to parishes or schools, where they felt able to thrive and explore their faith. Others found their experiences discouraging, citing “grumpy” and overworked parish priests. In general, those young people who explored a faith that was “about more than just standing up and kneeling” seemed more likely to stick around and more likely to identify and participate in their local Catholic communities.

Some young adults spoke of having to be the sorts of Catholics they wished they saw around them: community-serving, outward-looking, inclusive, and unconditionally loving.

## REFLECTION 3: Discerning

The theme of discernment elicited some of the most passionate debates among participants we listened to.

Some felt angry. One participant said “the Church just expects us to be there, and to stick around”, despite feeling “no one will care if I’m here, no one wants to hear your problems”. Many participants felt that the Church ought to be a ‘field hospital’ as outlined by Pope Francis, going out into communities, rather than waiting for people who are hurting to stroll in.

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People were passionate in describing the concept of synodality in practice: being poor for the poor, never being complacent, and emulating the actions of Jesus, pursuing justice and social action above all else.



Some participants also expressed frustration that the Vatican (used as shorthand for the institutional Church) felt like “it’s full of the same older people... no people you can point to that you can relate to”. Participants drew comparisons to national politics, likewise feeling

**“If Jesus went to Mass on a Sunday, he would probably turn over the tables”**

those in political positions of power were not representative of their experiences and diversity.

One participant expressed poignantly: “I often find myself wondering, where does Jesus fit into the institutional Church? If Jesus went to Mass on a Sunday, he would probably turn over the tables”. This sense of frustration seemed widely felt, as young adults expressed feeling like their connection with the Church was weakening and being lost, and they increasingly sought spiritual connection elsewhere.

Despite their diverse experiences, the group were united in their agreement of the need for renewal in the Church. At their most optimistic, they felt that conversations such as the one we hosted were part of drawing a line in the sand, and making a stand to define what they believed the Synod should be.

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Some participants contrasted this engagement with the engagement they felt they saw around them, whereas others who were engaging with Synod conversations “aren’t being honest”, and were saying what the priests wanted to hear, as part of a ‘political exercise’ of being seen to be listening. The young adults we spoke to suggested the proof of whether such an exercise was tokenistic or not would be found in the results, in the extent to which it leads to change.

So, what sort of change did they want to see? Despite the anger and sadness some participants felt, all were united in the belief that society and life were better with a renewed faith and Church. Participants stated they wanted to see a commitment to

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renewal, constant listening, changing with the times, staying relevant, and not leaving anyone behind. Indeed, the theme of genuine inclusion, even when it seemed ‘challenging’ was a key feature within the discussion. There did not seem to be an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality amongst the young people we listened to.

Some participants talked of the “hierarchical Church” needing to reform “old ways of worship”, and creating more “accepting and inclusive” forms of worship. Generally, participants seemed to feel that this would make it easier to get involved.



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The young people we listened to were almost unanimously committed to social action. They wanted to see their communities coming together to address issues of hardship locally. Participants, of different Catholic traditions, felt this was an excellent means of expressing faith, and would also trigger more young adults to get involved.

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**They felt this was the expression of faith.**

Young people themselves clearly understood the post-communion drop-off. Except for a select few, young adults saw their post-communion / post-school faith engagement as a no man's land, until they were needed or until they needed the Church once again (for instance in parenthood). The young adults we spoke to spoke of their faith engagement via charities and groups such as the Columbans, Million Minutes, and others, but said that there was a gap in the institutional Church performing such a function.

## Reflecting on the Synodal Process

Participants overall did not enjoy working with the questions of the Synod. Some felt that they had been written without young people in mind, and seemed almost deliberately framed or difficult to understand. They were also deemed repetitive.

Participants said they appreciated a space where they could unpack the questions together and interrogate their meaning collectively. They also found it comforting to know they weren't the only ones who felt confused by the questions and the processes.



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