New Blackfriars

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Beyond the Parochial: Parish Realities and a Synodal Church

Martin Pendergast

Abstract

This article is a personal reflection on the twelve-year experience of being a parish without a resident priest. The article offers a socio-historical picture of St. Joseph's Parish, Bunhill Row, London EC1. It considers how some Church documents refer to 'parish', including the Code of Canon Law; the 1980 National Pastoral Congress; and Pope Francis' vision of 'parish' in 'The Joy of the Gospel' and some other addresses. It concludes with some personal reflections.

Keywords

Parish, Collaborative Ministry, Co-Responsibility, Clericalism, Pastoral Council

Socio-Historical Context[1]

There has been an institutional Roman Catholic presence in and on the edge of the square-mile City of London since the 1680s, although the area has a rich history of recusant ministry, as well as being the birthplace of such significant figures as St. Thomas More and Blessed John Henry Newman.

St. Joseph's Bunhill Row, as the parish is formally identified, has enjoyed a chequered history both as a chapel-of-ease to St. Mary Moorfields Church, the erstwhile pro-cathedral of the Westminster Diocese, and, as an independent parish, currently the southernmost in the Islington Deanery. The site was bought in 1815 by the Associated Catholic Charities, who established an orphanage and schools. The present church space dates from 1901, being the successor of a school-chapel from around 1850 when it seems to have been formally established as a parish.

[1] Adapted from http://taking-stock.org.uk/Home/Dioceses/Archdiocese-of-Westminster/Bunhill-Row-St-Joseph.

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The present Bunhill area includes the nearby Bunhill Fields burial ground, renowned both as the resting place of eighteenth-century religious and social dissenters, and the preaching grounds of John and Charles Wesley and early Methodism. It also contains the site of one of the early Meeting Houses of the Society of Friends.[2]

St. Joseph's Parish straddles public housing and Peabody Trust properties with generally indigenous working-class communities, and the Barbican area of the City of London with an upwardly mobile and relatively wealthy, middle-class population, as well as a diverse and transient student population. The parish now embraces people from some 33 national backgrounds.

The invasion of new-technology companies has renamed the Old Street, EC1 neighbourhood as 'Silicon Roundabout' or 'Tech City,'[3] bringing new and expensive housing developments and a thriving night-time culture. We would wish that it had also brought more employment potential, but here we have fallen victim to the internal decisions of some multi-national companies in not offering jobs to local people. The area also has one of the highest crime-rates in the country, mostly street-robbery and burglary, but in recent years has occasionally been affected by spill-overs from inter-gang conflicts in neighbouring districts.

The parish has experienced some ups-and-downs following one incumbent's conservative style of priestly ministry and concomitant influence of a small clique of traditionalist outsiders who gathered round him. Subsequent to that parish priest's transfer, a Westminster Auxiliary-Bishop took up residence but his episcopal duties prevented him from promoting much in the way of local community renewal. A new priest-in-charge, very much a Second Vatican Council enthusiast, was appointed in 2002. Four years later he was given permission to explore a hermit vocation, having built up the parish to a Sunday-Mass attendance of around 160, even if his radicalism had alienated some parishioners who were challenged by changes that he brought about.

It is rumoured that a couple of years previously Westminster Diocese had been offered £8 million for the church's valuable site, based as it was in a nineteenth-century school building. In the then financial climate, the Diocese exercised caution and retained the building, leasing upper parts as office-space to the Catholic Herald newspaper, the Apostleship of the Sea, and subsequently to the National Association of People Abused in Childhood.

Before he embarked on life as a hermit, the outgoing priest-in-charge ensured that a parish Pastoral Council and Finance Committee

[2] http://www.bunhillquakers.org/.

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_London_Tech_City.

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were firmly established, inviting a variety of active members of the congregation to become members. He had also developed a strong ecumenical partnership, which endures to this day, and the Associate Minister of Wesley's Chapel[4] was included in the Pastoral Council's membership, perhaps the only Catholic parish in the UK to include a Methodist woman-minister.

On his departure, the Archdiocese of Westminster decided that no new resident priest would be appointed and that, although remaining independent as an Islington Deanery parish, St. Joseph's would be administered from St. Mary Moorfields in the City of London & Westminster Deanery. The Pastoral Council was concerned that the Diocese was seeking to run down the parish, not least by enabling only Wednesday lunchtime and Sunday morning Masses. The hidden agenda appeared to be that the Diocese would let the parish die, that parishioners could relocate to neighbouring parishes, and the site could then eventually be redeveloped.

The Pastoral Council sprang into action, seeking a series of meetings with the Area Bishop for Central and East London. We gained a commitment from the Bishop that the Diocese would not close the parish as long as we were viable as a worshipping community, committed to the values that marked St. Joseph's, not least as a Catholic presence 'at-prayer-in-the-City', and also financially healthy. The newly-appointed priest-administrator was, as Parish Priest of a busy, Monday-Friday, typical City of London church, limited in what he could offer, saying that he 'could only be very part-time - it's up to all of you to keep the show on the road!'

We are now in our twelfth year without a resident priest, enjoying the support of our second priest-administrator, but I want to say that we are not a "priest-less parish". There are members of St. Joseph's who are ordained but no longer in active ministry for a variety of reasons. When an active presbyter is not available, in consultation with the priest-administrator or at his request, we invite in others from outside or, if necessary, we celebrate a weekday Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion.

What Is A Parish?

The peculiar word 'parish' comes from a Greek word which is loosely translated as 'colony', 'the place of the clan', and an Old English word, 'priest-shire'.[5] In Greek ecclesiastical terminology it was often synonymous with the word for a diocese. When it comes to the Code

[4] https://www.wesleyschapel.org.uk/about-us/introduction/.
[5] https://www.etymonline.com/word/parish.

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of Canon Law, very little is said about the parish, per se.[6] Canon 515 describes it this way:

> A parish is a certain community of Christ's faithful stably established within a particular Church, whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan Bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor. The diocesan Bishop alone can establish, suppress or alter parishes. He is not to establish, suppress or notably alter them unless he has consulted the council of priests. A lawfully established parish has juridical personality by virtue of the law itself.

Canons 516–552 then focus more generally on how a parish is organised and governed, and the roles and functions of the parish priest and assisting clergy. As is well known, there is no strict mandate for any lay involvement, such as in a Pastoral Council, except in the establishment of a Finance Committee (Canon 537).[7]

Overall, I venture to suggest that the existing canonical picture of the parish reflects that Old English-language notion of the parish being the 'property' of the parish priest - the '*priest-shire*' - acting as a delegate of the Bishop. Following the Council of Trent, the purpose of presbyteral ordination moved beyond that of being solely 'Massing priests' to include 'the care of souls' and this required the taking up of a 'benefice', thus perpetuating medieval systems.

This proprietorial sense still dominates in too many parishes, so that the interaction between the priest and the faith community may often be one of power and control, rather than service and animation of people as 'missionary disciples'. The Catechism of the Catholic Church broadens the picture slightly, incorporating Canon 515, and going on to say:

> It is the place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The parish initiates the Christian people into the ordinary expression of liturgical life: it gathers them together in this celebration; it teaches Christ's saving doctrine; it practices the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love (2179).[8]

In the years leading up to and beyond the Second Vatican Council, a number of initiatives were developed in other parts of Europe and Latin America, often inspired by and based on the pastoral processes of organisations such as the Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Students, or the Better World Movement. These sought to promote a greater collaboration and co-responsibility between laity and clergy in the formation of more personally interactive ecclesial communities within broader parish structures.

[6] *The Code of Canon Law*, Collins, London 1983, Chapter VI, pp. 492-552.
[7] Ibid, p. 97.
[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1994, p. 471.

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Although the Second Vatican Council produced a rich ecclesiology in the Dogmatic Constitution, Lumen Gentium, and, in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, elaborated a greater apostolic participation by lay people, very little can be found about the parish itself in these or other Conciliar documents.[9] Here in Britain, pastoral theologians such as Michael Winter[10] began to promote the thinking of European colleagues like Yves Congar OP, Karl Rahner SJ and others, particularly from Latin America, who had reflected on how Church structures are reformed, develop and alter, not least with the involvement of an active laity, moving from 'maintenance' to 'mission'.[11]

'The Parish' became a lively topic for debate in the preparations for the 1980 National Pastoral Congress. The Congress Sector Report, *The People of God - Co-responsibility & Relationship,* began its treatment of 'Parish' in this way:

> In order to become such a loving, caring, worshipping community, we overwhelmingly recommend that parishes should become a communion of Christian communities, incorporating small, neighbourhood, area, and special interest groups including all, the lapsed and the practising. They should meet for prayer, social events and occasionally the Eucharist, supporting one another in times of stress, sorrow and joy. Such small groups, house groups and neighbourhood groups, for prayer, study of scripture, and celebration of the Eucharist, especially for the sick, the housebound and the handicapped must be seen as necessary for the building up of the parish community and as an aid to celebration. Liturgical groups should be established in parishes to work with the clergy, and as a consequence of our common participation by baptism in the priesthood of Christ, the maximum involvement and ministry of the laity, both men and women, without discrimination, should be encouraged in the preparation and celebration of the liturgy.[12]

In the East London Episcopal Area of Westminster Diocese, we embarked upon an in-depth programme of pastoral planning in almost every parish. Its principles found their way, as an Appendix, into

[9] Austin Flannery OP ed., *Vatican II: The Church Constitution,* Scepter Books, Dublin 1966.

[10] Michael Winter, *Mission or Maintenance - a study in new pastoral structures,* Darton Longman & Todd, London 1973; *Mission Resumed?*, Darton Longman & Todd, London 1979; *Recovering Catholicism – an overdue review of the Catholic Church,* Morgan House Publications 2014.

[11] Yves Congar OP, *True and False Reform in the Church,* The Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2011; Karl Rahner SJ, *The Shape of the Church to Come,* SPCK, London 1974; Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism & Power – Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church,* SCM Press, London 1981.

[12] *Liverpool 1980 - Official Report of the National Pastoral Congress*, St. Paul Publications 1981, p. 130.

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The Easter People, the response of the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales to the Congress Official Report.[13] Some of us who are now active in St. Joseph's Pastoral Council worked closely with the late Bishop Victor Guazzelli as members of his wider Area Pastoral Team. The particular pastoral planning process that we used owed much to approaches which had been used to develop basic ecclesial communities in urban areas in Brazil. This acts, therefore, as a backdrop to where we now find ourselves, even though contexts develop, demographics change, and different faith-related and social priorities emerge.

The Parish in a Synodal Church

How do these emerging parish patterns relate to the synodal vision of Church with which Pope Francis challenges us? There are many of us in the Eastern Area of Westminster who are overjoyed that the shape of Church that we sought (even if in many respects we were not able to fulfil the dream) is at the heart of what Pope Francis extols in Evangelii Gaudium -The Joy of the Gospel. He states:

> The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be "the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters". This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented (EG 28).[14]

[13] op.cit.

[14] Although not published until after the delivery of this paper, the Apostolic Constitution, *Episcopalis Communio* (15 September 2018), has the aim of more directly involving the People of God in the synodal experience of the Church: https://www.acall-toaction.org.uk/news/639-episcopalis-communio-machine-translation-of-the-italian-no-english-text.

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The Francis parish might have these principles: know that the Lord has taken the first step in the evangelisation process; be a supportive action-oriented community that patiently responds to people's real needs, bearing fruit; be marked by deep joy and rejoicing; be flexible and in frequent contact with its members, recognising that they are part of many overlapping systems of communities in families, neighbourhoods, faith-communities and related groups, work and leisure environments, language and ethnic groups; foster a Spirit-filled environment where members are trained to be evangelizers; recognise that it shares values and commitments with people of all faiths and none; be bold and creative in assessing how it operates and conducts itself.

St. Joseph's Ongoing Journey

So where are we at in St. Joseph's Parish journey? Not having a resident priest on hand in the heart of the City means that we are faced with various innovative possibilities as well as a number of limitations. The former parish-house is now a Centre for Pregnancy Counselling & Psychotherapy, offering a valuable non-clinical setting for women to come to when faced with decisions about pregnancy and fertility, including work with couples and teen-age parents. Urban security issues mean that the church is not open seven days a week, not least because the building in which the church space is situated is shared with other entities. The former parish-house car-park has become a Quiet Garden memorial to Cardinal Basil Hume, enabling local office-workers and other visitors a green space to which they can escape from the proliferating concrete jungle around us.

Having a limited availability of presbyteral ministry means that we only gather to celebrate Mass on Sunday mornings and Wednesday lunchtimes, except for the occasional weekday Holyday. Our experience here might be a challenge to much recent correspondence in the Catholic press about the lack of daily Mass provision when priests are moved or parishes merge. The phrase beloved of so many Catholics in Britain and Ireland that 'It's the Mass that matters' can, if we are not careful, become little more than a tribal slogan. Without denying in any way that 'the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life', I would want to say that it is the gathered community that makes the Mass matter. The community does not collapse because there is no Mass, but the Mass without the community fails to be all that its renewal following Vatican II envisaged.

I wonder how many of us, even now, still celebrate the Eucharist as an individualistic action, albeit carried out alongside others in surrounding pews, but with little sense that in this action of breaking the Word and the Bread, and sharing the Cup, we are becoming evermore the Church, the little flock, the People of God in a given

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place. Doing this in memory of Him takes us way beyond ritual behaviour and into a new space and time which is Eucharistic. At St. Joseph's we are often reminded by visiting presiders at a Sunday Mass, be they bishops or priests, that in this community we have something special and we are urged not to lose it. For those of us closely involved or committed to the parish community, this is something of which we might not always be fully conscious. Of course the Mass matters, but this more intangible quality of what it is to be a Eucharistic community can easily pass us by.

To those who seek to limit or perhaps abolish the celebration of Services of the Word and Communion, I would say: 'You do so not only at your own peril as shepherds of the flock, but you jeopardise the Eucharistic faith of those who are nourished by such worthily prepared and celebrated liturgies'.

We are fortunate that from time to time one of our celebrants, during the homily time, will invite the congregation to share their reflections on the Word of God with each other and to offer these to the whole congregation. St. Joseph's Sunday Masses are also the occasion, once or twice a year, to engage the parish community in a Listening Exercise, whether about the social realities in which we live and work, or about the pastoral and spiritual needs that should be prioritised. These use the familiar methodology of See-Judge-Act, which was fundamental in our earlier pastoral planning programmes. But they also borrow from some of the methods used in Community Organising, given that we are an active member-institution of Citizens UK.[15]

A few parish members have now undertaken Citizens UK training in either a 2-day or a 6-day residential course. We have found that our Citizens involvement has built on the pastoral planning of earlier years but has now taken it to a new level. This has enabled us to engage in inter-generational work on community safety between some older members of the congregation and students from a local state school, creating over thirty local neighbourhood 'safe-havens', refuges for anyone threatened by street-violence. We have been active in local London Living Wage campaigns, succeeding in enlisting the City of London Corporation, the Barbican Centre, and Islington Council to become Living Wage Employers.[16] More recent priorities have been around housing and homelessness, and, together with a nearby parish, we are currently engaged in outreach to over 80 people who are street-homeless in the local neighbourhoods.

A key element in our parish journey has been regular meetings of the Pastoral Council which has fifteen members, including

[15] http://www.citizensuk.org/north_london.

[16] https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/business/tenders-and-procurement/Documents/final-external-living-wage-policy-statement.pdf.

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ecumenical representation, and is chaired by our priest-administrator. We have a monthly Carmelite Spirituality Group that includes Lay Carmelite Third Order members, as well as others interested in the Carmelite tradition. Through Carmel-in-the-City we have a link with the Carmelite Parish of Calle Real in San Salvador where Saint Oscar Romero celebrated his final Mass the night before his martyrdom. CitC's membership is also ecumenical. Our inter-Church commitment includes twice-yearly programmes of reflection and discussion involving members of local Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Welsh Presbyterian congregations, and our fourth ecumenical pilgrimage took place in October 2018, led by Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy, this time to Spain, in the footsteps of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

Parish, Power and Relationality

A popular slogan currently floating around Christian circles tells the community of believers that 'We are called to be fishers of people, and not caretakers of an aquarium.'[17] The slogan is a great rallying cry for the parish community and reflects the renewal hoped for by Pope Francis. As such, the parish is expected to be a colony of God's reign and its life should reflect God's love, acceptance, mercy, peace and justice.

The vision of the slogan is inspiring, but its provocative thrust has to be understood within a real context. Someone has to care for the aquarium and that is not easy. Aquarium care involves changing the water, keeping things clean, making sure the fish are fed and get along, etc. To the degree that parish communities hear the call to be fishers of people and are willing not only to care for the aquarium but to move outside, the real work of outreach and service will happen in the local parish and by extension in the universal Church.

Put in another way: can the parish community be more than just a maintenance shop or will it become a mission centre? This is the challenge we continue to face. In order to have the energy and strength to be a mission centre, the parish needs members who are intentional in their discipleship, a delegation of ministries, prophetic vision within the pastoral leadership, and a communally-shared understanding and acceptance of the parish's mission. Labouring to achieve these conditions should be the real work in the trenches of Catholic parish life.

What has the Spirit been doing with us during these past twelve years? The Spirit has enabled us to see that truly positive power is

[17] https://cruxnow.com/commentary/2016/08/21/realize-popes-vision-comes-parish/.

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relational, just as the power of God is relational in the loving unity of Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Relational power is identified when there is a coming together in mutual trust, abandonment of infantile dependency on the part of grassroots church members and clericalist paternalism on the part of clergy. We have seen the relief of so many of the priests who serve us that they do not have to take total responsibility for everything, that they can rely on the fact that from Sunday to Sunday, there will be a well-prepared and resourced liturgy.

The balance of power then becomes not a struggle for control but something which is shared by the whole community of faith in Christ. The priest's role is not diminished but valued for what it is: to affirm the community in its faith and belief, to support and care for the sheep, even when the smell of the flock is in danger of becoming a bit more than even the best of shepherds can stand!

Organisationally, there is the challenge of succession-planning and bringing in younger generations to engage in Pastoral Council ministry. There is also the issue of clergy formation, particularly among some of the more junior-ordained, and this is not simply a matter of their age. While so many seem to be schooled in all the details of the rubrics of rituals, they often appear to have little broader liturgical sense. While they might be proficient in their seminary courses, they seem to have had little preparation for how to engage with a laity and, may I say, with resigned-priests, who are often more academically and professionally qualified, even in the areas of theology and pastoral formation. Likewise, they appear to have had little training in the realities of working with established Parish Pastoral Councils.

Relationality is at the heart of 'walking together' which is how Pope Francis described synodality when he addressed the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops during the Marriage and Family Synod in October 2015: 'walking together - laity, pastors, the bishop of Rome - is an easy concept to express in words, but is not so easy to put into practice.'[18] Pope Francis outlined his vision for a Church that is 'synodal' at every level, with everyone listening to each other, learning from each other and taking responsibility for proclaiming the gospel. He continued:

> A synodal Church is a listening Church, aware that listening is more than hearing. It is a reciprocal listening in which each one has something to learn. The 'sensus fidei' (sense of faith) makes it impossible to rigidly separate the 'ecclesia docens' (teaching Church) and the 'ecclesia discens' (learning Church) because even the flock has a 'nose' for discerning the new paths that the Lord is opening up to the Church.

[18] http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html; https://zenit.org/articles/text-of-popes-letter-to-pontifical-commission-for-latin-america/.

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He has reiterated this understanding in subsequent addresses and documents, including Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love).[19]

Finally, I hope we are trying to be the kind of parish envisioned in the following injunctions:[20]

1. **Don't be like a Customs Office**: Pope Francis is pretty clear in this: Jesus instituted seven sacraments, it is not the place of the parish to institute an eighth sacrament – 'the sacrament of the pastoral customs office.' In other words, the parish should not close its doors to people unnecessarily. Attitudes like this attempt to 'control faith rather than facilitating it.' Instead, Pope Francis prays that 'all who approach the Church find doors open to encounter Jesus' love'.
2. **Don't be Tarantulas**: Pope Francis says that when people go to their parish, they should feel like they are entering their mother's home. He says that 'Being parish secretary means opening the front door of the mother's home, not closing it! And one can close the door in many ways. In Buenos Aires there was a famous parish secretary: they called her the "tarantula"... I'll say no more! To know how to open the door in the moment: welcome and tenderness.'
3. **Do put those who are 'Distant' first**: Sometimes there is grumbling about families who only come to a parish for baptisms, weddings and funerals. These people are often treated as a very low priority, but Pope Francis urges us to put those distant from the Church *first*. Why? Because we want these people to become regulars. He says, 'It is about assuming missionary dynamism in order to reach everyone, putting first those who feel distant and the most vulnerable and forgotten people. It means opening the doors and letting Jesus go forth. Many times we keep Jesus closed inside the parishes with us, and we do not go out and we do not let Him leave! Open the doors so He can go out, at least Him! It is about a Church which "goes forth": a Church which always goes forth.'
4. **Do get the Laity involved**: Pope Francis is pretty clear on this: the laity need to be involved in their parishes. Parishes do not belong to priests, they belong to everyone. This is why parishes need laity on councils, advising and helping in the running of everyday matters. In fact, Pope Francis very sternly has said that 'a parish that does not have a Pastoral Council and a Finance Committee, is not a good parish: it lacks life.'
5. **Don't Gossip or Cause Division**: If only our parishes were exempt from ordinary, human behaviour. Alas, they are not. There is often the cry, 'That's not how it was in the old days,' creating

[19] Ormond Rush, *Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church,* Theological Studies, Vol. 78, Issue 2, 2017.

[20] Theresa Noble, *5 Tips for Parishes from Pope Francis*, http://www.ignitumtoday.com/tag/welcoming/.

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divisions between the past, the present and future. But we can examine our part in making a parish a place of unity and communion or creating division. Pope Francis urges us: 'Let each one ask him- or herself today: do I increase harmony in my family, in my parish, in my community or am I a gossip. Am I a cause of division or embarrassment? Gossip does harm! Gossip wounds. Before Christians open their mouths to gossip, they should bite their tongue! To bite one's tongue: this does us good because the tongue swells and can no longer speak, cannot gossip. Am I humble enough to patiently stitch up, through sacrifice, the open wounds in communion?'

Going beyond the parochial and becoming a synodal parish in a synodal church requires trust and commitment, collaboration and a sense of interdependent relationality between all members of the People of God. Our experience is that this is no nicely packaged enterprise but rather has all the hallmarks of the kind of bold vision of a 'messy church' with which Pope Francis has challenged not only young Catholics but also the Roman Curia, Cardinals and Episcopal Conferences, as well as the so-called 'New Movements'.[21] Our pilgrim journey continues!

Martin Pendergast
Secretary, St. Joseph's Pastoral Council
57 Lyme Grove
London E9 6PX

martinjpendergast@gmail.com

[21] https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-to-youth-shake-things-up-bring-church-to-the-streets; Pope Francis, *Letter to the People of God*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html, 20 August 2018.

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