



Root & Branch Community for Reform

Response to The Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission (October 2023)

The foregoing is the [Root & Branch Community for Reform](#) (hereafter referred to as Root & Branch) response to the Synthesis Report of the XVI ordinary General Assembly of Bishops published by the Vatican in October 2023. Root & Branch acknowledges the bishops' recognition, clearly expressed in the Report, that the laity's role in discernment is an important one. This response is offered in that spirit and in the spirit of Canon Law 212.3, 'the Christian faithful have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters that obtain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known.'

Root & Branch was established in January 2020. With its roots in the UK, it is now an international community of volunteers, working for reform in the Roman Catholic Church. Its first hybrid lay-led public gathering in 2021, focused on renewal, reform and healing in the Catholic Church, and was preceded by a year-long journey of discernment that included public debate through a series of themed workshops and extensive input from scholars and theologians, including religious and clergy, leading to the production of the [Bristol Text to Reform](#). The Bristol Text and this event established Root & Branch as a significant player in the global movement for Catholic Church reform and renewal. (Spanish, French, German and Italian translations of the Bristol Text are available [here](#).)

Root & Branch's highly respected project, [Stolen Lives](#), provides support resource materials for victims of church related, bears powerful witness of the courage of survivors through talks, publications and campaigns which are guided and informed by a team of consultant survivors.

In 2023, Root & Branch partnered with [Spirit Unbounded](#), a global network of Catholic reform and other Christian groups, to mount a lay-led Synodal Assembly, 'Human Rights in the Emerging Catholic Church' which took place during the October Synod on Synodality. In Bristol, UK, Rome and online, it showcased over 115 voices from across the world during a "festival of hope with activists, thinkers, poets, musicians and ordinary Christians".

Root & Branch's public presence includes regular online public talks on a wide range of issues of interest to Catholics, including care for creation; economic justice; honouring the courage of victim-survivors of church-related abuses; shared ministry; prophetic leadership

and striving to become becoming a beatitudinal church. We are grateful to host high profile UK and international speakers, community discussion and prayer space. We run media campaigns and are represented on national and international Catholic reform boards. In August 2024, Root & Branch will hold host its third international hybrid event – an assembly to discern with community members and to hear from leading Catholic and ecumenical voices.

From the outset, Root & Branch has worked hard to foster close working relationships with Catholic and other Christian organisations with which it shares common or complementary objectives, to inform its thinking, campaign strategies and to enlarge its reach. Our aim remains a safe, just, and fully inclusive Catholic Church.

The Synodal Process

Root & Branch's has engaged with the Synodal process. In 2021, it carried out extensive [Content Analysis](#) , mapped against the aforementioned Bristol Text, on each of the 22 England and Wales Diocesan Synodal Reports. In summary, this analysis indicated very high levels of support amongst the laity for:

- An inclusive, holistic vision of the church.
- Accountable and elected leadership.
- Ministry open to women and to married men.
- The dignity and sanctity of everyone, including women and LGBTQ people.
- Safeguarding, reparation, and true penitence for clerical abuse.

Please see below an image of the summary infographic of this analysis. Attached to this report are the complete findings and a description of the Content Analysis Methodology. The methodology was offered more widely as a template for analysing other country reports.

Diocesan Synodal Reports

What We Say

Root & Branch have carried out extensive Content Analysis on each one of our 22 England and Wales Diocesan Synodal Reports.



Not rules, but ways of thinking

95% want holistic vision - inclusivity and equality of all.

What touches all must be discussed and approved by all

95% want accountable, elected leaders and reformed Canon Law.



Ministry open to all, as in the Early Church

77% want married priests, 91% ordination of women.

The dignity and sanctity of all

100% want full equality and inclusion of women and LGBTQ+ people.



Safeguarding, reparation & true penitence

95% want an end to clericalism. 100% see abuse & cover-up as a betrayal of the People of God. We want true penitence, and transparent, collaborative governance and safeguarding.

Root & Branch mapped our countrywide Synod responses against our [Bristol Text](#).

Reform is needed in our Catholic Church!
www.rootandbranchsynod.org/synod-watch



Following the publication of the National Synthesis for England and Wales (June 2022), Root & Branch expressed concerns about the significant discrepancies between the 22 Diocesan Syntheses, from which these Content Analysis findings were drawn, and the National Synthesis. The latter, it was felt, did not adequately reflect the calls for reform reflected in the Diocesan Synodal Reports.

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Continuing its engagement with the Synodal process, members of the Root & Branch community have taken part in organisational and diocesan consultations on the October 2023 Synthesis Report.

The Report invites respondents “to identify the paths we can follow and the tools we might adopt in our different contexts and circumstances in order to enhance the unique

contribution of each baptised person and of each Church in the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel to the world today". Respondents are asked to frame their responses through a consideration of a single overarching question: "How can we be a synodal Church in mission?"

Root & Branch acknowledges the detailed analysis of the Report by many of the organisations with which it is associated and endorses the common call for a holistic vision of a Church which is welcoming, inclusive, just, and safe.

Gender Justice.

Root & Branch affirms calls for gender justice, recognising that the Church's call for equality and justice is undermined when it denies "women equality of opportunity and access" (ICRN, 2024)¹, that "consideration of women only as deacons is in itself inadequate" and supports the repeal of Canon 1024 which excludes women from sacred ordination (CCRI, 2024)².

Despite Pope Francis' call at a meeting of the International Theological Commission (a body with only 5 women among its 28 strong membership) in November 2024 to "demasculinize the church"³, he has now stated that the ten study groups set up in the wake of the 2023 Synod in order to examine 'controversial' topics in detail and enumerated in a letter in March 2024 to Cardinal Mario Grech, the Secretary General of the General Secretariat of the Synod, will not report, beyond "an initial account of their activity", to the second and final part of the Synod in October 2024.⁴ They will not therefore be voted on at this second Synod and will instead complete their mandates in June 2025. The work of the study groups should enable the Synod Assembly "to concentrate more easily in its second session on the general theme that I once assigned to it, and which can now be summarised in the question: How to be a synodal Church that goes out?" as the Pope outlined to Cardinal Grech.⁵ We are disappointed that the study group set up to consider Sections 8 and 9 of the Synthesis Report, which includes a discussion about 'Women in the Life and Mission of the Church' will not now be submitting a full report at the second Synod and that any proposals that emanate from it will not now be voted on.

We know from the Content Analysis referred to above that equal ministry is supported by as much as 91% of laity in the dioceses in England and Wales (and, from our international sister

¹ International Church Reform Network (ICRN), *A Response to the Synthesis Report*, (2024). p.4

² Catholic Church Reform International (CCRI), *Agenda Issues for 2nd Assembly of the Synod on Synodality* (CCRI, 2024), p2.

³ 'Pope Francis wants to demasculinize the church', *America: The Jesuit Review* (2023), Available online: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/12/07/pope-francis-demascualizing-church-women-246661>.

⁴ Holy See Office. *Letter of the Holy Father to His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech, 14.03.2024*, Available online: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/03/14/240314f.html>

⁵ Holy See Office. *Letter of the Holy Father to His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech, 14.03.2024*, Available online: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/03/14/240314f.html>

organisations, by an increasing number of lay Catholics, religious and clergy across the world). It is therefore deeply disappointing that this issue, which lies at the heart of a renewed church, has effectively been kicked into the long grass. The Report concedes that “clericalism, a chauvinist mentality and inappropriate expressions of authority continue to scar the face of the Church” (9f). It goes on to acknowledge a need to “avoid repeating the mistake of talking about women as an issue or a problem. Instead, ... to promote a Church in which men and women dialogue together, to understand more deeply the horizon of God's project, that sees them together as protagonists, without subordination, exclusion and competition” (9h).

Root & Branch is therefore disappointed that the only proposal in this section relating to women’s ministry: “Theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued” (9n) appears to exclude any research or discussion in relation to women’s ordination to the priesthood despite Jesus having considered “women his interlocutors” whom he “welcomed ... as disciples” (9a).

Church related abuse.

Root & Branch acknowledges the many calls amongst reform and survivor organisations for due process of church related sexual abuse issues to be given to civil authorities, prioritizing care of victims (CCRI, 2024)⁶. While Root & Branch acknowledges the statement that the “Church needs to listen with special attention and sensitivity to the voices of victims and survivors of sexual, spiritual, economic, institutional, power and conscience abuse by clergy members or persons with Church appointments” (16f), it is concerned that other references to church related abuse in the Report are very much more general, for example, simple “abuse” or “abuse and hurt” (1e; 10d; 12i; 12j). We very much hope that at the second Synod there will be a strong focus on deep listening to survivors of church-related abuse and trauma and being guided by them regarding the significant strengthening of safeguarding policies and procedures. They are, after all, experts by experience.

Clericalism

Root & Branch supports the view that clericalism is a “social sin rooted in a medieval mindset reinforced by the structure of the Church and male autocracy” and that the concept of a presbyter as “ontologically different is a catalyst for clericalism [and] the antithesis of synodality” (CCRI, 2024). We welcome the clear statement in the Synthesis Report that “One obstacle to ministry and mission is clericalism. Clericalism stems from a misunderstanding of the divine call, viewing it more as a privilege than a service, and manifesting itself in the exercise of power in a worldly manner that refuses to allow itself to be accountable (11c). Root & Branch advocates for lay-led small communities, especially in areas where parishes are no longer able to be served by priests.

⁶ Catholic Church Reform International (CCRI), *Agenda Issues for 2nd Assembly of the Synod on Synodality* (CCRI, 2024), p1.

Lay ministries flourish where they are missional. The Synthesis Report's central question: "How can we be a synodal Church in mission?" may be met when there is a culture of confidence in lay ministries, when the charisms and gifts of the Holy Spirit among the people of God are encouraged and enabled and not suppressed by clericalism, the root of resistance, according to Pope Francis, to true synodality.

Poverty and Environmental Degradation

Root & Branch shares the view that liturgies be rooted in the "signs of the times' especially with regard to the cry of the poor and oppressed, and the cry of the earth" (SLN, 2024, p2)⁷. Root & Branch acknowledges the Synthesis Report's unequivocal statement that "the cry of the earth and the cry of those living in poverty are the same cry" (4e) and hope that the second Synod will follow through the first Synod's proposal that "teaching, liturgy, and practice must more explicitly and carefully integrate the biblical and theological foundations of integral ecology" (4q) and ensures that the Church's social teaching is consistently informed by ecological principles.

Holy Communion for Divorced and Remarried Catholics

In an otherwise extensive section on 'Entering the Community of Faith' and the Eucharist, there is, in the Report, no mention of holy communion for divorced and remarried Catholics.

From the Eucharist, "the source and summit of the Christian life" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1324), "we learn to articulate unity and diversity: unity of the Church and multiplicity of Christian communities; unity of the sacramental mystery and variety of liturgical traditions; unity of celebration and diversity of vocations, charisms, and ministries. Nothing shows more than the Eucharist that the harmony created by the Spirit is not uniformity and that every ecclesial gift is intended for common edification" (3f).

Root & Branch is concerned that this "unity and diversity" appears to exclude divorced and re-married Catholics. The Report in fact does not mention them at all. They have either been ignored or are inferred amongst the "people who feel marginalized or excluded from the Church because of their marriage status, identity or sexuality" (16h). The progress document for the continental stage of the Synod suggested that, for many Catholics, the situation of excluding "remarried divorcees" from all sacraments and sometimes from certain Church services is incomprehensible. Further, Questions for Discernment for the October 2023 Synod included (B12):

"How can we create spaces where those who feel hurt by the Church and unwelcomed by the community feel recognised, received, free to ask questions and not judged? In the light of the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, what concrete steps are needed to welcome those who feel excluded from the Church

⁷ Scottish Laity Network (SLN), *Response to the Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission* (SLN, 2024). p2.

because of their status or sexuality (for example, remarried divorcees, people in polygamous marriages, LGBTQ+ people, etc.)?”

It is therefore surprising and disappointing that the present Synthesis Report does not address the pastoral and spiritual needs of civilly divorced and remarried Catholics. Despite the overwhelming number of Catholics, including, doubtless, many clergy, supporting full Communion for civilly divorced and remarried Catholics, the rules, underscored by Pope St John

-Paul in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, stating that “the Church reaffirms her practice, based upon Sacred Scripture, of not admitting to Eucharistic Communion divorced persons who have remarried” will not, it would appear, be reconsidered at the second Synod.

Root & Branch believes that a fully inclusive, welcoming and loving Church which acknowledges that we do not “come to God by doing it right when the doctrine of the Cross is the inclusion of imperfection” (Fr Richard Rohr), is one worth striving for. The section within the Report entitled ‘On the Road to Christian Unity’, includes the hope that “In theological and institutional dialogue, the patient weaving of mutual understanding continues in an atmosphere of growing trust and openness” (7c) and an articulation of the “need to examine the issue of Eucharistic hospitality (*Communicatio in sacris*) from theological, canonical and pastoral perspectives in light of the link between sacramental and ecclesial communion (7i)”.

We would welcome, in this spirit of ecumenical understanding, a consideration at the second Synod of the Methodist Church Open Table principle that, at the Communion table, all are welcome, without regard to difference and where God’s unconditional hospitality and love are always present.

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