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Synod LGBT+ Focus Group Feedback

Diocese of Elphin

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Introduction:

On Saturday 9th April, at the invitation of Bishop Kevin Doran, a group of 10 people who identify as LGBT+ met in the Bush Hotel, Carrick-on-Shannon, to contribute to the synodal process.

The ten comprised of four women and six men, all of whom either live in the Diocese of Elphin or have some connection with it.

The focus group began at 10.30am and concluded at 4.30pm. It considered three questions.

Q 1. What is your personal experience of the Catholic Church and to what extent has it been nourishing and life-giving?

Q 2. Christian community needs to be both a place of listening to God's word and a place where people feel heard. Has this been your experience? Have you felt heard and respected by the Catholic Church?

Q 3. What changes in the church do you think are needed to make it a place where LGBTI+ Catholics can feel safe, respected and able to flourish as human persons in the world?

All the participants drew upon their lived experience of the Catholic Church and spoke graciously and with courage in response to the questions posed. There were moments of profound insight as well as tears, anger and laughter.

A synthesis of the feedback received along with a representative selection of direct quotations giving prominence to, and allowing the voices of the participants be heard, is included in this report.

The consistency of the responses that emerged was striking and from an early stage a number of key themes became clear.

Key Themes:

1. **Damage caused by the institutional Catholic Church to LGBT+ people (becoming obvious in adolescence).**
2. **Rejection and hurt caused to LGBT+ people of faith by the institutional Catholic Church.**
3. **Hypocrisy of the institutional Catholic Church on LGBT+ issues.**

“I was listening to the testimonies of others, from different backgrounds and age groups but I was also hearing within them my own story being replayed repeatedly. We all have the same story!” - Focus Group Participant.

Theme 1.

Damage caused by the Institutional Catholic Church to LGBT+ people.

Quotes from testimonies of Focus Group Participants:

- *I’ve seen a lot of people in my 57 years whose mental health has been badly damaged by the church. These are people who are not in the room today because they would not be able for this conversation.*
- ***“I don’t associate the words “nourishing and life-giving” with the Catholic Church.”***
- *“I have known in my lifetime a lot of gay people who have lost their lives because of the church.”*
- ***“They have enabled people to justify treating gay people badly...I know of suicides of young men because they were gay...The Catholic Church has to accept responsibility for that.”***
- *“ My parents were brain-washed by Catholicism and I regret that this has damaged my relationship with them. I am not as close as I would like to be with my parents. When I go home now it reminds me of that homophobic world and I don’t want to expose myself to insults or hurts. It makes me angry.”*

- ***“The damage is at all levels, not only the high rate of suicide and self-harm among LGBT+ people but the damage done to our relationships and the missed opportunities”.***
- *“I went on to have an experience that was loving yet the Catholic Church made me feel ashamed of it. I was lucky to meet my partner and we’ve been together for 30 years now.”*
- ***“My parents were worried about me attending this meeting for fear it might not guarantee total anonymity”.***
- *“The Catholic Church has caused huge damage to my flourishing as a person”*
- ***“I don’t know of any other significant organisation or institution in Ireland that promotes homophobia to the extent the Catholic Church does.”***
- *“The Gospel message is that ‘we may have life and life to the full’ but the church has thwarted that message for gay people.”*
- ***“The church rarely directly condemns gay people these days but by preaching that being gay is wrong it indirectly creates an atmosphere where physical, psychological and emotional abuse of gay people is tolerated and even encouraged. And that is dangerous.”***
- *“I came to see myself as different from the Catholic Church right or wrong and then one day I realised that I was “right” and the Catholic Church “wrong” and I totally rejected the Catholic Church after that. In fact, the “gay-er” I became the more distance I had to make between me and the church if I was to stay alive.”*
- ***How could I be both homosexual and homophobic? While this may require a much more complex answer and one that will need more self-reflection, I do feel that it comes down to the church.***
- *“Most of us who have made it here today are healthy and well but actually there are lots of others (LGBT+) who haven’t made it quite so well. We are the privileged ones.”*

Synthesis of Theme 1:

The damage done to LGBT+ people by the Catholic Church was the first theme to be unanimously identified by the group.

A number of participants described how the teachings of the Catholic Church on homosexuality led them to internalise homophobia during their adolescent years and to hate themselves. Others described how they learned from an early age to “split” themselves off from their sexuality and relate inauthentically with others. Many felt forced to hide their sexuality and lead secret lives. Some knew gay people who had ended their own lives. Unlearning this internalised homophobia was a long process and stole years of loving relationships from their lives. It was damaging emotionally, spiritually and mentally and had robbed them of life, love, and happiness.

Others acknowledged that the Catholic Church had been an important contributor to the development of their sense of morality (“a strong Christian moral compass”) for which they are grateful. When using the word “church” however they differentiated between the Christian community they grew up in (i.e. neighbours, teachers, local people) and the institutional church which appeared distant and separate to them.

“From an early age I learned that there were two churches operating in the world.

There was a church that was full of compassion and love and then there was a “bureaucratic” church.”

As children they said they experienced more love and nourishment from their Christian communities than from the institutional church.

All agreed that the Christian message to “love thy neighbour” is not the lived experience of gay people in their interaction with the institutional Catholic Church. They pointed to the words used in the Catholic Catechism regarding

LGBT+ people - “Intrinsically evil” and “disordered” - as words not of love but of exclusion, of branding someone as “the other”.

One participant described how, in her late teenage years, she began to realise that the Catholic Church was not a welcoming place for certain people.

“I realised that they didn’t include everyone. I heard stories that some people who didn’t conform or fit into society were “put-away”. I learned that to be different or to stand out could be a bad thing, that something might happen to you. I began to see that some people in my community who didn’t fit in were “other-ed”.

The Catholic Church’s influence on the parents of gay people and the dysfunction it created in the parent/child relationship (a dysfunction that is not present in the parent/straight child relationship) also resonated strongly with the group.

Many parents, the group heard, were embarrassed by what the Catholic Church and their neighbours would think about them having a gay child. This resulted in gay children being unable to introduce their partner/husband/wife to their parents and families, and enjoying a wholesome, engaged and fulfilling family life. In some cases it ruined relationships between gay children and their parents.

Theme 2.

Rejection and hurt caused to LGBT+ people of faith (who wish to be involved in their church) by the institutional Catholic Church.

Quotes from testimonies of Focus Group Participants:

- *“It’s amazing. The level of faith in this room is unbelievable ...and yet we’re completely rejected”.*
- ***“I need to feel I belong but I know the church only views me with sympathy or toleration and that isn’t good enough.”***
- *“As a teenager I used to love going to a church and just sitting there - I felt peace, energy and love. It was an escape, a place to unwind, a place where I could come into myself. A place of refuge.”*
- ***“A lot of my friends were Eucharistic Ministers but I thought I couldn’t be one because I was gay.”***
- *“The Catholic Church equipped me with a visualisation of what my Christian God is and gave me a language in which to communicate. My connection to God and the depth of my belief is of my own making. I have to find a new way of talking to God; he no longer exists within the church walls.”*
- ***“Right now I am planning my wedding and I feel angry because for the first time I am confronted with the split (i.e. separating my sexuality from the practise of my faith). I have to face it whereas in the past I could just float and ignore it. I have to face it now because the bureaucratic side of the church says we can’t get married in a Catholic church. I was able to get all the other sacraments but not the grace of marriage. The key thing that wrenches at my heart is that I always saw the church as a sacred place, a place of refuge where I felt close to God and yet for one of the most important days of my life I am not allowed celebrate my love in such a place.”***
- *“My mother was inconsolable when I told her I was gay. “What would the neighbours think?” I felt uncomfortable with the church at this time because of its attitude to LGBT+ people. Then, when my parents died*

the church (and by that I mean the wider community but also the priests too) were incredibly supportive and I felt nourished by my relationship with it.”

- “On the census form I put in “Christian”. I couldn’t tick the Roman Catholic box.”

- “I’d have loved to have a blessing (for our wedding). I used to live in the hope that maybe for our 10th anniversary things might be different and we could have a blessing. I would have loved to have asked our family friend (a priest) to bless our union - after all he celebrated all of my siblings weddings. It was a simple thing to ask but the rejection would be too crushing. And it left me mad, sad and disgusted.

- I paused over the question on the census form about religion and in the end I put down “Roman Catholic” even though I don’t practise and and I don’t go to church (I might go if there was a funeral of someone I knew). I didn’t want to put down “no religion” because my language of faith has been hugely informed by church theology

- “I was terrified of homosexuality - no way was I going to be “one of those people” ...I actually entered a seminary. It took me two years to realise I was running away from myself and then...I fell in love. In the depths of my being I just knew that this love could not be wrong. I remember one night lying on the floor of the oratory crying as I realised I was in the wrong place. I also realised there was no compassion in that place. Jesus would have showed more compassion.”

“We may not have grown up believing ourselves to be beautiful but we are children of God, made in the image of God just like anyone else”.

- “After attending the funeral of a good friend it made me question what would happen when I died? I wanted the ceremony, the prayers and the ritual. I wondered how my partner would be represented (at the funeral) and would our union be acknowledged?”

- “One of the least nourishing moments of Catholicism for me was when Bishop Kevin Doran directed his flock to vote No to Marriage Equality in the 2015 referendum. It still leaves a bad taste in my month and it was certainly not nourishing...I find it deeply ironic that this meeting has been called by a man who caused so much hurt to us.”

Synthesis of Theme 2:

The group noted that some of the deepest expressions of hurt and rejection came from participants who described themselves as ‘people of faith’ and identified as Roman Catholic.

Four of the ten participants described themselves as Roman Catholic; three as ‘Christian’; one as ‘Atheist’; one as ‘Spiritual’ and one as ‘No Religion’. A majority of the participants did not identify as Roman Catholic and most wished to have nothing to do with the institutional Catholic Church. Their motivation for participating in the focus group was to affect change in the global church and by doing so improve the lives of all LGBT+ people around the world.¹

However, it was clear that the participants who identified as Roman Catholic felt excluded from their church at important moments of their lives and that this was a great source of pain for them. They wanted to be fully involved in their church communities and not as second class Catholics.

One couple spoke movingly about the heartbreak they felt when they were told they could not marry in a Catholic Church. They are both men of deep faith who regard the church “as family”. Despite reaching out to priests in several parishes and even to clergy in Protestant churches, the answer they received each time was ‘No’. Then, their family and friends rallied around and helped them to find a church (deconsecrated) and a (former) priest to officiate at their wedding. In that act of love, generosity and solidarity the couple realised that they, their friends, family and neighbours also constituted the ‘church’ in a very real way.

¹ *“While all the baptised are specifically called to take part in the Synodal Process, no one - no matter their religious affiliation - should be excluded from sharing their perspective and experiences, insofar as they want to help the Church on this synodal journey of seeing what is good and true. This is especially true of those who are most vulnerable or marginalised.”*
Vademecum 2:1 (Official Handbook for the Synodal Process)

Nevertheless, the experience with the hierarchical church was a deeply painful one for the couple as one of them revealed:

“It is the first time in my life I have felt physically hurt by the Church. And when I say physically I do mean that; for there is a deep hurt within my heart, feeling excluded by the hierarchy, the bishops and the priests. A deep hurt to be told that the place where I have always felt closest to God, the place where I have always gone to for refuge, is being denied.

Yet despite these negative feelings and deep felt hurt and exclusion I still continue to seek out the quiet space of Church and pray for Jesus’s teachings of love and compassion to find their way into the mind and heart of the ‘institutional Church’.

The man’s partner said he hoped the report from this focus group would highlight their case and bring it to the attention of the Bishop of Rome because he wanted the opportunity to directly ask Pope Francis **before their marriage on the 25th June, 2022**: “How can you say this is right? How can you say this is God’s will?”

Faith was also important for those who were baptised Catholics but now identify as “Christian” as one participant noted, quoting **John 3:8** “*The wind blows where it wishes...*” By this she meant that the Catholic Church does not have a monopoly on, or control over, the Spirit of God. Several in this category (i.e Christians) also expressed sadness that they could not have married in a church.

In response to **Question 2** (asking if participants felt heard and respected by the Catholic Church) the answer was a unanimous ‘No’ on both counts.

Members in the group offered two pieces of evidence to explain why.

1. They pointed to the church's claim that LGBT+ people were to be "treated with respect" as incompatible with the church's use of language about LGBT+ people, such as "intrinsically evil" or "disordered".
2. They pointed to the bishops new curriculum on sexuality in primary schools (i.e Flourish) which largely ignores homosexuality and is written EXCLUSIVELY through the prism of heterosexuality as another example of the church's disrespect to gay people (90% of primary schools and 50% of secondary schools fall under the patronage of the Catholic Church).

When answering **Question 2** some participants made a distinction between the institutional church and their local parish priest. They said they felt listened to and respected by individual priests, and on occasion felt sorry for them having to follow rules and teachings that they had no part in designing.

Others disagreed with this distinction saying that it was not possible to separate the institutional church from individual priests. Their view was that the failure by priests to challenge the teaching and rules of their church on LGBT+ issues meant they were essentially colluding with the homophobic structures and teachings of the church.

They suggested that priests who were sympathetic, supportive and kind in private to LGBT+ people also had the choice to live the Gospel they preached and speak truth to power.² They said they didn't want 'crumbs' of comfort from nice priests, they wanted justice.

² Catholic priests in Germany are already speaking truth to power. In January this year 125 priests, teachers and theologians took part in a mass "coming out" day of religious leaders to demand reform in the church on LGBT+ issues.

In May 2021, Catholic priests in Germany also organised a series of blessings of same-sex unions around the country in protest at the Vatican's statement two months earlier that "God does not and cannot bless sin".

Bishop Kevin Doran.

The comments made by Bishop Doran during the marriage referendum³ in 2015 were raised by a number of participants. His letter to parishes strongly encouraging them to vote against the referendum caused huge hurt to gay people and their families throughout the diocese. A number of other comments he made to media at the time, including the suggestion that the circumstances of a child's rearing could cause their homosexuality, were also hurtful to families across the country.

While acknowledging and commending Bishop Doran for reaching out to LGBT+ people and setting up this focus group, participants believed it would be helpful, from the perspective of continuing the dialogue (between LGBT+ people and the institutional church), for the Bishop to apologise for the nature of his contribution to the marriage referendum.

³ <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2015/03/12/archbishops-correct-irish-bishops-insensitive-remarks-about-lesbian-gay-people/>

Theme 3.

Hypocrisy of the Catholic Church on LGBT+ issues:

Quotes from testimonies of Focus Group Participants:

- ***“I went into a seminary because I had faith and because I couldn’t have a sexual life. It was a convenient hiding place - this only became clear to me over time. After a while I realised there were lots of other gay men there too and some of them were very bitter people.”***
- *“My view on this is that the most homophobic people are people who are gay themselves but are really struggling with their own sexuality and they lash out and demonise homosexuality in general. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that every priest I know is gay and that there’s so many gay people in the church and they’re so intensely homophobic. If they were straight people they wouldn’t be so obsessed about sexuality and homosexuality. They’re calling gay people “intrinsically disordered”? That’s an institution that’s messed up from the inside.”*
- ***“Imagine how damaging it must be to be stuck in an organisation, knowing that that organisation holds the view that your sexuality is objectively disordered and if you fall in love with a member of your sex they regard that as intrinsically evil and it’s your job to represent this view? How twisted is that?”***

Synthesis of Theme 3:

The hypocrisy of the Catholic Church’s position on homosexuality, given it has a significant number of gay priests⁴ in its ranks, was described as “breathtaking” by one participant. It is the lie at the heart of the clerical church and in plain sight. It is also a lie that sustains the architecture of homophobia in society.

⁴ As well as personal testimonies from members in the group, references were made to Frédéric Martel’s book and his estimate that 80% of male clerics in the Vatican are gay. Frédéric Martel, ***In The Closet of the Vatican. Power. Homosexuality. Hypocrisy.*** (Bloomsbury, 2019)

The guilt and hurt the church imposed on gay people was all the more deeply wounding when it became widely known in lay society that the church itself for centuries had been recognised by priests as a sanctuary for homosexual men. This secrecy and hypocrisy is the most damaging aspect of the institutional church's teaching on sexuality, especially in its effect on the minds and hearts of young adolescents. It reinforces shame about homosexuality, encourages inauthentic living and further stigmatises LGBT+ lives.

This contradiction at the core of the church, an institution that purports to be a sign pointing to the truth, has to be addressed if it is to retain any integrity.

It is the view of the focus group that it can only be addressed by an honest reexamination of the church's understanding of human sexuality. The lived reality of peoples lives has revealed that human sexuality is more complex and diverse than the man/woman procreation model favoured by the hierarchical church. Loving relationships cannot be reduced solely to the procreative act of sex.

The focus group believes a review of church teaching is urgently required on human sexuality to reflect modern scientific, psychological and sociological research and the lived experience and relationships of people

Concern for the well-being and mental health of gay clergy and all gay people in religious life (whether in or out of the closet) was also expressed at the meeting.

Proposals for Changes in the Church:

The final section of the focus group's discussion addressed **question three**.

Q 3. What changes in the church do you think are needed to make it a place where LGBTI+ Catholics can feel safe, respected and able to flourish as human persons in the world?

The Group Proposed Ten Actions...

▪ **(1) An Apology.**

That the Catholic hierarchical church apologises (from the top down; Pope, cardinals, bishops and priests) to LGBT+ people and their families for the harm, damage and pain they have caused them. This would go some way to helping LGBT+people feel respected.

● **(2) Access to All Sacraments for LGBT+ people and all women.**

That LGBT+ people be given access to all seven sacraments, including marriage (and including holy orders for all women i.e. LGBTI+ and heterosexual)

● **(3) Change the Church's teaching on homosexuality.**

That the church reviews its teaching on homosexuality to reflect modern scientific, psychological and sociological research and the lived experience and relationships of people.⁵

⁵ See "Christian Objections to Same-Sex Relationships: An Academic Assessment." Wijngaards Institute, May 2021.
https://www.wijngaardsinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/christian_same_sex_relationships__interim_report.pdf

- **(4) Remove Offensive Language.**

That the church abandons the language of “Intrinsically evil” and “objectively disordered” when referring to LGBT+ people and deletes these insulting words from its catechism and all official documents. There are no theologically valid reasons to justify the use of such language or any language that diminishes a person’s humanity, especially when it is so harmful to the mental health of younger LGBT+ people.

- **(5) Address the hypocrisy of the clerical Church on LGBT+ issues**

That the church addresses the hypocrisy of the clerical church on LGBT+ issues as outlined in **Theme 3**.

- **(6) Ordain women as priests and ensure their full equality in the Church.**

That the church moves to end the second class status of Catholic women and commits to affirming their full equality in the church. Misogyny is recognised as a root cause and driver of homophobia. Until the day that women are accorded full and equal status with men in the church, homophobia will remain a toxic force within it.

- **(7) Conduct gender-bias audits throughout the institutional church**

That the church conducts gender-bias audits in dioceses across the world, including the Diocese of Elphin, to see how ecclesial communities compare with best practice and international standards.

- **(8) Establish a Dicastery for Diversity and Inclusion in the Vatican.**

That the Catholic Church becomes a more healing presence in the world by living up to its ‘catholicity’ (i.e. universality/inclusiveness/wholeness) and evolves into a global leader of diversity whose structures, systems and processes are open and respectful to the full spectrum of humanity, in all its glorious multiplicity.

- **(9) Support and endorse the ‘Safeguarding Principles’ ratified by the Global Interfaith Commission on LGBT+Lives in March 2022.**

That the Catholic Church takes immediate action to make itself a safe place for LGBT+ people by endorsing the Global Interfaith Commission’s⁶ ‘Safeguarding Principles’ for LGBT+Lives. **(See appendix)**

- **(10) Draw up a set of “Safeguarding Principles” to protect children of LGBT+ Parents who attend Catholic Schools.**

That the Catholic Church, as the single biggest provider of education in the country, charged with the care of young people from a range of backgrounds, draws up a set of safe-guarding guidelines on sex education that is respectful to children of same-sex unions and also to all children whatever their emerging sexuality.

⁶ <https://globalinterfaith.lgbt/>

Appendix:



Interfaith Commission on LGBT+ Lives

Valuing the sanctity of life with dignity of all

SAFEGUARDING PRINCIPLES March 2022

- 1. EMPOWERMENT** We believe all individuals are made in the image of God (whom many call the Divine) and should be free to express their sexuality and/or gender identity within their faith communities without fear or judgement
- 2. PREVENTION** We believe that we have a duty of care towards our LGBT+ members and so we commit ourselves to listen to the experience of LGBT+ people and to identify and eradicate all harmful practices that inhibit the flourishing of LGBT+ people.
- 3. PROPORTIONALITY** We recognise that for too long the rights of LGBT+ members have often been ignored and side-lined whilst the views of others have been allowed to dominate, and so we commit to ensuring that LGBT+ people are given fair voice.
- 4. PROTECTION** We recognise that many LGBT+ people face significant discrimination and hatred, and so we commit to work to protect all LGBT+ people from harm, whether in religious or secular contexts.
- 5. PARTNERSHIP** We recognise that for too long LGBT+ people have been excluded from decisions that impact LGBT+ people's lives and so we commit to always work in partnership - especially to prevent, detect and report any form of spiritual abuse.

6. ACCOUNTABILITY

We believe that no one is above the law and that there must be transparency in all areas of safeguarding and so commit to regularly monitor and review progress with our LGBT+ members.