

The time for reflection has passed – Ireland's Church now needs a national plan



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When Bishop Brendan Leahy's recent letter to the people of Limerick was read at Masses earlier this month, its tone carried a rare and unmistakable urgency. "Many of the features of parish life in our Diocese and in Ireland that so many of us grew up with and have become so familiar with, are of the past," he wrote. He urged his parishes to have the courage and vision to "imagine new ways, new structures, new models suggested to us by the Holy Spirit."

That same urgency – born of realism, not despair – now needs to move from the local to the national stage. As the Irish bishops prepare to gather in Kilkenny on October 18 for the preparatory phase of the National Synod, they risk repeating the very pattern that Bishop Leahy's letter was written to break: more listening, more reflection, but too little decision making.

Ireland has already spent years listening. The National Consultation for the Synod on Synodality, launched in 2021, reached every diocese and parish. Tens of thousands of submissions were gathered, sifted, summarised, and sent to Rome. The result was a portrait of a Church that is generous, hurting, and longing for renewal – but also deeply uncertain about how to act on what it heard.

Reimagine

Bishop Leahy, who is a member of the Irish Bishops' National Synodal Committee, understands better than anyone that listening alone cannot save a Church that is shrinking faster than it can reimagine itself. His own diocese of Limerick has been at the forefront of synodality for nearly a decade. In 2016, it held the first full diocesan synod in Ireland in 80 years, an event that inspired other dioceses and the national process that followed.

Yet now Limerick stands at a crossroads: with parishes under strain, priest numbers falling, and the bishop openly preparing his people for amalgamations and shared ministry. It is a sober sign of where all of Ireland's dioceses are heading – and it shows that the time for national planning, not further reflection, is here.

Fr Eamonn Fitzgibbon, one of the leading figures of the 2016 Limerick Synod, has offered this paper a robust defence of the synodal method. He insists that the Limerick diocese has not been static between 2016 and 2025 but has been evolving steadily: "The first point I would like to make is that there is continuity between the Limerick Diocesan Synod of 2016 and the current consultation that is taking place. In fact it is probably continuous with various processes that have been taking place in Limerick over many years."

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He reminds us that "the diocese ran a Listening Process in the late 1990s and over the years different initiatives and structures have evolved." For him, the present consultation is another chapter in the same story of discernment.

Crucially, he challenges the idea that a synod should deliver instant results. "The way your questions are phrased seem to suggest a Synod is a 'once-for-all' event, as if it is somehow the final word on the life and direction of a diocese. However, as we have been reminded by Pope Francis, synodality is a way of proceeding on the journey and a style that marks how we act."

Those words capture the pastoral patience that has marked Limerick's renewal. But they also reveal the danger facing the Church nationally. A journey without destinations, evaluations, or decisions easily becomes drift. A national Church that keeps listening but never decides risks being overtaken by the demographic collapse already



Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, leads delegates on a prayer walk at a pre-synodal assembly in the sixth-century monastic site of Clonmacnoise in Ireland June 18, 2022. Photo: CNS / Clodagh Kilcoyne, Reuters.

gripping every diocese. Is that fair? Well listen to the bishop: "We are now the people who have to make wise and practical decisions about the future of our parish in terms of buildings, financial arrangements and the pooling of personnel and resources across parishes." One could argue that the Vatican is also trying to push this but on a grander scale by advocating for the amalgamation of dioceses.

Fr Fitzgibbon is correct that many of today's "hard structural realities" – declining vocations, ageing clergy, diminishing congregations – "were clearly visible ten (and even twenty, thirty) years ago." His point, though, is that timing matters: "What may be an appropriate response now would not have been an appropriate response then." That distinction is debatable. Parish councils were advocated after Vatican II but only recently has there been a concerted push nationally to finally make them happen in every parish.

Renewal

In 2016, the Church in Ireland could still afford to talk about renewal. In 2025, it can no longer delay restructuring. Limerick's current consultation acknowledges that many parishes will soon have no resident priest, that teams will need to serve multi-



Bishop Brendan Leahy

ple communities, and that the faithful must take a far greater role in leadership and ministry.

These are not simply pastoral adjustments; they are survival measures. The same structural pressures are evident everywhere – from Cork to Armagh, from Galway to Dublin. The national Church cannot keep responding diocese by diocese. It needs a national plan: coordinated, realistic, and transparent.

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Bishop Leahy's leadership in Limerick shows that he understands both the scale of the challenge and the need for courage. As the

most experienced member of the bishops' national synodal committee, he is uniquely placed to bring that same urgency now to Kilkenny.

The Irish Church has grown comfortable with the language of synodality – of "walking together" and "listening to the Spirit." That language has served it well, helping to heal distrust and rebuild a sense of belonging. Yet while the Spirit may be guiding us, the leadership needs a map.

Synodality, if it is to remain credible, must move from journey to direction and been seen to have practical outcomes. The preparatory synod in Kilkenny cannot be another exercise in reflection and self-description. It must begin to outline a national framework for restructuring – of parishes, of ministry, and of leadership.

The greatest service the Kilkenny assembly could offer is honesty: admitting

that reflection has run its course and that action is overdue. Fr Fitzgibbon is right that "good leadership needs to be adaptive, capable of responding to the particular needs of a given time." That time, as Bishop Leahy himself has warned, is now.

Crisis

The preparatory synod must not settle for describing the crisis; it must propose the architecture for change. The urgency that Bishop Leahy has brought to Limerick – the willingness to face decline, to plan, to restructure – should now shape his contribution to the national synodal process. If Kilkenny ends as another stage of reflection, we will have learned nothing. If it begins the work of restructuring, it will mark the moment the Irish Church finally turned listening into leadership.

The synodal journey has been long. The next step must be forward.

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