

THE POPE'S LETTER: OVERVIEW OF RESPONSES

The invitation

Through the Council for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development, Cardinal Brady invited countrywide reflection and response to the Pope's Letter. This invitation went out through the constituent groups of the (then) Advisory Group: diocesan contact persons for pastoral renewal and adult faith development, CORI and IMU, lay movements and youth ministry.

Response

Responses were received from the beginning of April until the end of November 2010. Without doubt there were in excess of three thousand people who took the time to attend a diocesan gathering or listening session, to participate in a community or parish response, to attend a meeting organised by an ecclesial movement, or to write an individual response. The endeavour to receive exact numbers from some of the larger gatherings proved difficult. A verifiable figure of 2,609 respondents was used for the purpose of getting the following exact percentages.

	<i>%</i>
Diocesan groups	26.2
Parish group	4.5
Religious communities	37.5
CORI/IMU Assemblies	9.5
Ecclesial Movements and Lay Associations	19.0
Episcopal Conference staff and Advisory group for pastoral renewal and adult faith development	1.0
Individuals	2.3

Among the individual responses (62 in total) were 35 religious sisters, 17 lay people and 10 ordained clergy. There was a notable absence of the voice from youth ministry and/or young people.¹

There were, of course, many conversations at local level, reports of which were not conveyed to the Council. The following summary of all correspondence which was received was presented to the Bishops' Conference at their December meeting.

Principal hopeful aspects of the Pope's Letter

It is not often that the Pope writes to the Catholics of a local Church, but he has written to us as 'brothers and sisters' and written a letter that was 'quite accessible'. The letter recognises the difficulties of our situation against the background of our history, and calls us to renewal, to become a mature Church. Moreover, respondents welcomed the Pope's plea that 'the whole truth' be brought into open, his recognition that it is a time to ask forgiveness and to turn to victims (of abuse) as well as to the Lord with open hearts.

¹ This fact highlights the importance of work on hand by the implementation group for the framework document for youth ministry i.e. the development of structures for communication within the sector.

Main disappointments

There was widespread disappointment among respondents that in the Pope's Letter child sex abuse is not seen as a symptom of shortcomings in structure and function in the Church. In addition, there is no critique of the role of the Vatican. There is little or no acknowledgement of the exclusion of lay people from roles where they can make significant contribution.

Reflections

Practically all respondents found in the letter a recognition that the Church is the community of all the baptised. At the same time, many did not concur with the view that they should repent for the sins of others. It was also noted that renewal is treated mostly in terms of spiritual practice. In this regard, in particular, many respondents thought the letter exposes gaps between the Church and contemporary mind-sets. Insofar as the Pope holds the 'rapid transformation and secularisation of Irish society' mainly responsible for the present crisis, most respondents disagree with this view. Indeed, many are not sure that 'the truth of the past' has yet been established.

Looking ahead

It may be said that all respondents call for the implementation of the Church's guidelines and procedures on safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

Regarding the call to prayer, various practical suggestions were offered. Throughout the correspondence there ran a vision of Church as a Church that follows Jesus and is marked by service, equality, simplicity, truthfulness, humility, inclusion and of compassion for all. There were requests that the use of titles and exclusive language and insignia be examined and lessened, that particular attention should be given to our Celtic spirituality, and that youth ministry be prioritised.

Many placed strong emphasis on education and formation, as foundational to the renewal of Church: 'We need to relight the vision of Vatican II.'

Other observations included: The gifts of theologians and experts in other fields can greatly help the bishops in their duties and also enrich the Church. There should also be more recognition of missionaries who have returned to Ireland and who have much wisdom and experience to share with the Irish Church and its task of evangelisation. Catholic media are needed to foster an adult understanding of the faith, and there is need for ongoing research.

There were multiple calls for renewal, in particular, of liturgical celebrations, enabling the participation envisaged by Vatican II, while also seeking enhanced dignity and formality. Some commentaries, especially on liturgy, emphasised the need for orthodoxy and attention to rubrics.

Respondents wrote of many vitally important topics that, in their view, are calling for honest dialogue: issues relating to sexuality, clerical celibacy, and the exclusion of women (not just from ordination). Respondents pointed to what they see as the need for dialogue - dialogue that faces issues together so that we become a more open, collaborative Church; the need for ordained and lay to outgrow clericalism

(distinguishing between deference and respect). At the same time, respondents wanted to ensure that more independence does not mean disloyalty.

Many called for greater transparency with regard to church law and how the Church functions – suggesting, for example, that consultation preceding the appointment of bishops needs to be ‘meaningful, wide and inclusive’. Assemblies and synodal gatherings were considered vital, as means of dialogue and discernment, involving laity, religious, and clergy including Bishops working together at diocesan and national level. These were envisaged as more than once-off events - rather as processes of ongoing review, reflection and planning.

It was hoped that the celebration of the Eucharistic Congress would reflect our real situation including its sinfulness, and commit us to service and charity as well as to ongoing renewal. A few seriously questioned the wisdom of hosting the Congress, even in 2012.

Finally, a respondent summed up as follows: this is a Kairos moment for the Church, a moment when we need to ask the question posed by Cardinal Suenens at Vatican II: ‘Church of Christ what do you say of yourself?’ Can we claim that title ‘Church of Christ?’