



# SYNODAL TREES

SOME 2024 PARISHWIDE ACTIVITIES FOR CONSENSUS TO CULTIVATE

*"The synodal process is organic and ecological rather than competitive. It is more like planting a tree than winning a battle."*  
At the Synod in Rome October 2023 Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP offers a spiritual reflection on 'The seed germinates.'



**W**hat does doing synodality involve? *"Reciprocal listening, dialogue, community discernment, and creation of consensus"*, according to the Synthesis Report approved by the delegates in Rome. Out in parishes, working together has long been a form of Applied Synodology.

Synodalitrees is a nod to the Synod not so much for its discernments and proposals but the spirit of consensus on display. If its 364 delegates can arrange to vote on something, why not a whole parish en masse? Getting a collective OK is good. After all, *"Transparency and a culture of accountability are of crucial importance for us to move forward in building a synodal Church."* And all-parish approvals of action and change also help counterbalance Cliqueralism (*"Unfortunately, clericalism is a disposition that can manifest itself not only among ministers but also among the laity..."*).

So the suggestions here may tickle imaginations because they're different, likeable, practical, fun with its sleeves rolled up. The "trees" might be planted and initially tended by an enthusiastic individual, group or committee. But as with the Synod, they'd be activities for asking the parish as a whole to approve, perhaps with a simple show of hands en masse at Mass (with altar servers as tellers).

Of course, many parishes may already have Synodalitrees in some form. For any parish – or diocese, for that matter - open to innovation, they're worth thinking about, as they aim to:

- ✓ offer opportunities to join in – parishioners, newcomers, clergy, schools, families
- ✓ provide practical, different and enjoyable activities
- ✓ offer chances for people feel better about themselves, their parish and The Church
- ✓ be attractive to share with other faith communities, and local and social media

Synodalitrees has sprung in part from my OpenBooks Project which looked at the websites of 1600+ UK parishes and dioceses, mostly in the UK but ranging far and wide. And helped by some listening, dialogue, community discernment and creativity - as a plain-parishioner synod, you might say. Any feedback, suggestions or advice will be welcome.



With all best wishes for planting!  
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Synodalitrees Suggestions by Hugh Gibbons as part of [www.just1.org.uk/openbooksproject](http://www.just1.org.uk/openbooksproject)



# #1 Acclaim your Unofficial Saints

a parishwide activity to cultivate by 14th October\*

*"We need more creativity in establishing ministries according to the needs of local churches, with the particular involvement of the young."*  
Seen in A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report on the Synod October 2023

**F**or parishes wanting to be creative in the involvement of young people, a likeable idea is to invite them to create an Alphabet of Unofficial Saints - for everyone at Mass to appreciate and applaud en masse.

**It's very simple, and fun.** First, ask the parish if it's a good idea to compile a list like the "Saints Next Door", as Pope Francis put it during the pandemic. They're individuals or groups or communities who inspire, encourage, uplift, or serve – who deserve thanks for the help they bring to other people's lives. Ask and harvest suggestions.

**For example?** Schools might produce in their A-Z Alphabet of Unofficial Saints: A for Ambulance Crews; B for Beekeepers; C for CAFOD Volunteers... you then have a list to share with all the parish. How? Website is one obvious place – or a paper display.

**Here's a creative way.** What might appeal is collective appreciation – a round of applause for Unofficial Saints of the Month, announced at the end of Mass. *"Today we're going to send a collective thank-you to all Lifeboat Crews, who've been selected as Unofficial Saints by Year6 pupils at the school. We're going to give them a round of applause, and write to the RNLI to let them know that hundreds of people in this parish appreciate them".* And perhaps invite an unofficial saint in to hear the applause at first hand? That'll make a story to feed to press and social media.

- NB1 Unofficial Saints needn't be human, alive, in English.
- NB2 It's an idea to suggest to other local faith communities. Many will have their versions of everyday saints or uplifters or inspirers to air and share.
- NB3 Bishops could be invited to choose their favourite unofficial saint from a parish's Alphabet!



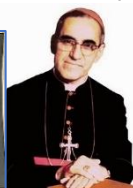
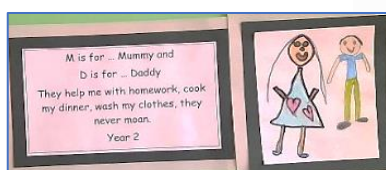
**"THE NEXT-DOOR SAINTS"**

"I'm thinking at this time of the saints who live next door. They are heroes – doctors, volunteers, religious sisters, priests, shop workers – all performing their duty so that society can continue functioning. How many doctors and nurses have died? How many religious sisters have died? All serving ... If we become aware of this miracle of the next-door saints, if we can follow their tracks, the miracle will end well, for the good of all."

Pope Francis interviewed by Austin Ivereigh for The Tablet 8 April 2020



**Oscar Romero becoming an official saint on 14 October 2018 was the origin of this idea.** To mark this occasion, Hugh Gibbons built the unique 8' high Adelantegallery of Unofficial Saints (left). It's been seen by thousands in churches and primary schools (below) and secondary school chaplaincies. The 2023 PDF Guide includes



Hugh's A-Z Alphabet of Unofficial Saints at [www.just1.org.uk/adelantegallery](http://www.just1.org.uk/adelantegallery)

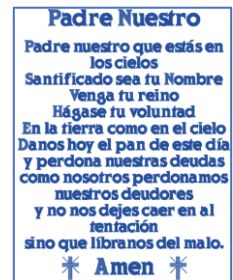




## #2 Celebrate your language family a parishwide activity to plant by Pentecost, perhaps!

*"In a Church that is living synodally, different cultures, languages, rites, ways of thinking, and realities can engage together and fruitfully in a sincere search for the Spirit's guidance."*  
Seen in A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report October 2023

**F**or parishes wanting more ways to engage together fruitfully, there's a simple resource ready to be used. It's the many languages found among parishioners, families, friends. They have a text in common: The Lord's Prayer.



So you too can be a version of The Church of the Paternoster on the Mount of Olives, that sort of mother church of Our Fathers. Home-produced ones are fun to gather up, show your parish diversity, and engage lots of massgoers and their families here or elsewhere. And it doesn't cost.

**How to sow and grow?** The idea might be PPC-led. Invite congregations to send in the Lord's Prayer in their first language. Collate them into a simple document. Find a bit of space on your website. Or make a printed display in some space as a Paternoster Gallery.

**And maybe some Sundays – Pentecost, say** – all the congregation could use their own version?

**Share the idea** with other parishes around, the diocese, local Christian churches, a parish of a similar name overseas

**NB There are other words worth translating:** Peace Be With You; Hello, so you can do more than just nod to people along the pew; Many thanks; Well done!

### Where did the idea come from?

Hugh Gibbons' Paternoster Gallery which has 20+ examples of translations made into plaques for schools and churches to enjoy and put to use. Some were provided from parishioners and families, parish priests in the UK and overseas, and a school in New Zealand.

More information is at [www.just1.org.uk/paternostergallery](http://www.just1.org.uk/paternostergallery)



Visiting All Souls CofE church in South Ascot around Pentecost 2023, some of the Paternoster language plaques were displayed on the pillars in the nave – a good accompaniment to the funeral of a parishioner who'd spent many years as a doctor in Africa and on Mercy Ships.





## #3 Cherish your people's yearly story

a parishwide activity to plant and grow 2024-2124...

*"In this Synthesis Report we have collected the main elements that emerged in the dialogue, prayer and discussion that characterised these days. Our personal stories will enrich this synthesis with the tenor of lived experience..."*  
Seen in the Introduction to the Synod Synthesis Report October 2023

**In the UK, Catholic parish websites are surprisingly light on history – recent or distant.** Yet all parishes have a lot of lived experiences during their year worth collecting and setting down in a synthesis. Annual reports are valuable for the information and enjoyment of parishioners, visitors, incoming clergy and parishioners. (Websites are ideal for archives - not transient or squeezed like newsletters and social media.) The history may be small: we got a new tea urn. Or big: our lessons from the pandemic for parishioners down the century facing the next...

**Parish Year Reports celebrate highlights and happenings,** a recap of some things that make people feel good about their parish, the Church and - importantly - themselves. They let others near and far see and share their good ideas. They're an opportunity to appreciate and thank individuals and groups, and to publicise their values and activities. And they're helpful for new parishioners and clergy – and when mergers are aired..



Exemplary October 2023 report for St Joseph's parish in Chalfont St Peter with *"our parish finances by the Chairman of the Finance Committee, a Financial Statement for the year ended 31 March 2023 prepared by our Treasurer and reports from our parish representatives for Health & Safety and Safeguarding. It also includes updates on parish ministries, groups, organisations and activities, as parish life gradually resumes and evolves in the aftermath of the pandemic."*  
[www.stjosephs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Annual%20Report%202023.pdf](http://www.stjosephs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Annual%20Report%202023.pdf)

**How?** Compile a record into a PDF file. Put it on the website, and make an archive. If appropriate, include information from or link with other documents – eg the priest's annual financial report to the faithful. Done once, it could just need updating.

### Examples of good content are the reports on the right.

Events for the parish, groups, individuals, clergy, and outreach are appreciated and applauded. Worth looking at also are your local churches, chapels, mosques, synagogues where a handful of Trustees manage to provide a detailed annual account and accounts - seen on the websites of the charity regulator.

### Parishes have statistics to share for an annual report

- Numbers and names sent to the dioceses eg Baptisms, Marriages, Confirmation, First Holy Communion, Deaths, Mass counts. (And how about including obituaries?)
- Maybe find some unusual statistics – such as hectares of floor cleaned; emails handled by the office; parishioners visited at home.
- And Moments of the Year! Heart-stopping, hilarious, surprising.



has an example of a record by the parish priest with finances and photos!  
[Annual-Parish-Report-2021-22.pdf](http://www.catholicwinchester.org.uk/Annual-Parish-Report-2021-22.pdf)  
([catholicwinchester.org.uk](http://catholicwinchester.org.uk))



**NB Priest's Eye View personal reports.** How about at one volunteered after a year into a new parish? Or on leaving? One word written a week should do it... There's an example of one ten years on at [www.just1.org.uk/openbooksproject](http://www.just1.org.uk/openbooksproject).





## #4 Join in the worldwide reach-out

### an all-parish activity to plant by a fortnight in autumn 2024

*"The Church's social doctrine is a too little-known resource. This needs to be addressed. Local churches are invited not only to make its contents better known but to foster its reception through practices that put its inspiration into action... There can be no synodality without an ecumenical dimension."*  
In A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report October 2023.

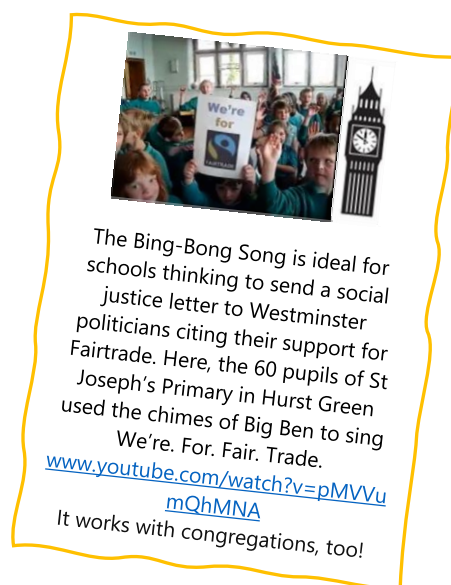
**Inspiration into action was what drove CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Traidcraft, the World Development Movement and the National Federation of Women's Institutes to found the UK Fairtrade movement in 1992.**

**In autumn 2024, there'll be a special 30 years celebration** since the first products were certified - Green & Black's Maya Gold Chocolate, followed by Cafédirect and Percol coffee, and Clipper tea. So 2024 is an ideal time for parishes wanting to emulate thousands of towns, schools, universities and businesses with an instant sign of social justice solidarity.

**The Places of Worship Award is ecumenical:** *"Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other places of worship across the UK have been at the heart of the success of Fairtrade – putting faith into action by using and promoting Fairtrade products and leading public conversation about justice for the farmers and workers we rely on."* Surprisingly, few UK Catholic parish websites show the familiar sign. Yet the Award is not a tough financial or administrative call. Parishes just commit to:

1. Use Fairtrade products wherever possible (at least tea, coffee and sugar) and share information about FairTrade products with the wider congregation.
2. Integrate Fairtrade into the life of your place of worship, at Fairtrade Fortnight or other times of the year.

**Fairtrade products now include** coffee, cocoa, sugar, tea, cold drinks and juice, honey, cotton, wine, clothing, chocolate, flowers, beauty and wellness, spices, gold - and bananas. You can buy over 6000 products with the Fairtrade mark in all sorts and sizes of retail outlets. And its appeal continues to grow strongly despite pressure on family budgets. In the 2022 Fairtrade Report, sales were up 14%, and 65% of people in the UK say they choose Fairtrade. Demand is also translating into sales, with the Co-op's 'Ethical Markets Report in 2021' noting that the UK 'green pound' has reached record levels.



**Signing up for the Places of Worship Award might be sown by a PPC**, and grown by approval en masse by the parish at Mass – with an annual renewal by a show of hands. Flag it on the website and newsletter. And after Mass? "FairTrade refreshments are being served in the hall."



**NB If you're looking for a present for a priest or deacon**, how about a Fairtrade clerical shirt or other gift from the specialist [www.fairtradeclergyshirts.co.uk](http://www.fairtradeclergyshirts.co.uk). (For anyone with an eye on Synodal developments, they have women's shirts too...)





## #5 Grow your own transparency policy

A parishwide activity to think of planting a.s.a.p.

*"Participatory bodies represent the first instance in which to experience the accountability of those who exercise responsibility. While we warmly welcome and support their commitment, in turn, they are invited to practice the culture of accountability to the community of which they are an expression."*

Seen in A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report October 2023.

**C**oncerns about financial and other transparency in parishes surfaced in many parish synodal reports, diocesan and national syntheses. The Synod's view? *"Transparency and a culture of accountability are of crucial importance for us to move forward in building a synodal Church."*

**Transparency has to be seen to be done**, not just assumed or claimed. It matters, because being open about things is a key element of trust and integrity. It's a sign of courtesy and appreciation. It's also common sense: people give more if they're more informed. And Canon Law has long had a synodal-like obligation on the side of financial transparency in parishes.

**Good accountability practice** means that in each diocese just one person is down to be the steward of observance of the Code. Canon Law 392 §1 says: *"...a bishop is bound to promote the common discipline of the whole Church and therefore to urge the observance of all ecclesiastical laws."* In the spirit of Vatican II, the November 1983 Code introduced a new, groundbreaking obligation for the parish priest - and a right of the faithful. Painstaking debate and worldwide consensus produced Canon 1287 §2: *"Administrators [parish priests] are to render an account to the faithful concerning the goods offered by the faithful to the Church"*, according to the norms set by a diocese. Parish financial operating procedures should show these norms, but only 4 of the 34 UK diocesan websites make these public on-line.

### Simple but exemplary on Canon 1287 §2

*"It is my intention to publish each year a Financial Report of the incomings and outgoings for Holy Ghost and St Bede's Parish. Our finances are a matter of public record. All our parishioners are entitled to know what monies are received and where it all goes.*

*What follows is a report for the year ended 31st August 2022."*

Parish Priest in Basingstoke mid-2023

[Finance-letter-to-the-Parish-2023.pdf](https://stbedesbasingstoke.org.uk/Finance-letter-to-the-Parish-2023.pdf)  
([stbedesbasingstoke.org.uk](https://stbedesbasingstoke.org.uk))

### Most UK parish websites show little transparency– §2 financial or otherwise

- Most have detailed information on financial giving – especially on-line, and claiming Gift Aid.
- In any diocese, fewer than 5% show any parish financial report – current or earlier. Some show none. Of the 34 UK cathedral parishes, in mid-2023 only 4 posted a recent set of accounts.
- Minutes of the priest's Finance Committee are rarer, even though these are good practice and the key source of information on decisions, assumptions, rationale, actions, legal correctness and people involved - for parishioners, incoming clergy and committee members.
- Minutes and current membership of PPCs or other leadership teams, or AGM notes, are also rare.

**Urging the observance of Canon 1287 §2 seems to be a blind spot for UK bishops.** For some, publishing the annual diocesan accounts is felt to be sufficient. Some dioceses say that parish finance committees or, bizarrely, the parish itself should render an account, or Trustees ensure observance. Dioceses *might* set a synodal-like financial transparency policy – but it's unlikely.

**So a home-grown transparency policy** that a parish develops and approves en masse might suit some. It might be on these lines – stored on a website and well-publicised (eg in newsletters).

- Our Finance Committee must advise the parish priest to publish an annual financial report – and place this as a PDF on the website. This report must include information on all donations, including all second collections and any diocesan schemes. The Committee must publish on the website Minutes of their meetings, and any key documents – and publicise these.
- Our PPC or similar leadership group must publish current members' names and Minutes or notes of their meetings. Where possible, meetings should be open to anyone – well-advertised in advance.





## PS Let a sense of consensus rule

Some quotes germinating for the Synod in October 2024...

*"We propose establishment of a ministry of listening and accompaniment in order to give greater prominence to this service... The way this ministry is conferred should promote the involvement of the community."*  
In A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report October 2023

**"A** former colleague's wife, on arrival at her husband's new parish church, deigned to move a flower-stand from its accustomed place. The woman 'In charge of flowers' came straight over and punched her." This is Anglican Manchester Fr Alec Mitchell in the Guardian's Letters for 17 December 2017, with an example of Cliqueralism.

**"C**OLLABORATION - when you can't do something, ask for help from someone who knows what they are doing. Many hands make light work, so long as they each know what the other is doing." That's No 26 in St Benedict's Rules for the Conduct of Life - updated by Canon David Parrott of St Lawrence Jewry Church - a booklet given to all new Freemen of the City of London. Laborare est orare - to work is to pray - is a key canon of the Benedictines. But collaborare est orare too when it comes to giving synodality the nod.

**"I** always find statistics are hard to swallow and impossible to digest. The only one I can remember is that if all the people who go to sleep in church were laid end to end they would be a lot more comfortable." Mrs Martha Taft, quoted in Dumb Wit by Rosemary Jarski.

**"f**or three weeks in the newsletter last month, and on the outdoor sign, and I made an announcement for the last three weeks at the start of worship, but I'm sorry you missed it". US Methodist Pastor shares patience, gets 80+ Likes at Unvirtuous Abbey's Facebook page.

**"A** glad heart is excellent medicine, a depressed spirit wastes the bones away."  
[The Proverbs - Chapter 17 - Bible - Catholic Online](#)

*"The synodal process is organic and ecological rather than competitive. It is more like planting a tree than winning a battle."*  
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