

A brief guide for today's Church

# Synod, Church, and Spirituality

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*In this article, the bishop of Limerick, Ireland speaks with clarity to the repeated appeals by Pope Francis to the Church – ones that were also delineated in a recent International Theological Commission document – to become a more 'synodal' Church. It is not something that to be considered optional, or a matter of simply choosing different methods or techniques. Rather, it signifies a change of course with deep ecclesiological and spiritual roots. The article is then followed by responses from Anglican and Evangelical theologians.*

Pope Francis has called the Church to reform. And one of the key elements in this reform is the adoption of a synodal approach to Church. The Pope is convinced that, “making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God.”<sup>1</sup>

As the Concluding Message of the 2018 Synod on Young people puts it, what we are dealing with is nothing less than a prophecy of the Second Vatican Council, “which we have yet to absorb in all its profundity and to develop in its daily implications”. Pope Francis says clearly: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning when the Pope first spoke about Synod, there might have been a sense that he meant the structure of holding a synod or synods in our diocese or country. We were thinking more of the structures. But the more he explains his intuition, the more we see it is an all-embracing ecclesial dynamic calling for a collective conversion in the way we view and approach our understanding of Church and for us bishops, of how we live out our episcopal ministry.

In putting this path of synodality before us, the Pope is expressing a prompting of the Holy Spirit calling us both to a personal conversion in terms of our spirituality, and to a pastoral conversion in terms of a spiritual synodal style. To adopt a synodal style of Church means, in short, a conversion in how we relate to God and to one another.

## ▲ Three Images

In order to help us enter into an understanding of the Church as Synod and synodality, Pope Francis has provided us with images.

*Journey.* The word “synodality” contains the image of journey. Quoting Saint John Chrysostom Pope Francis says, that ‘Church and Synod are synonymous’, inasmuch as the

<sup>1</sup> International Theology Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, Address for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015

Church is nothing other than the “journeying together” of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord”.<sup>3</sup> He often returns to this theme. It is walking together that we access Truth, that we understand what to do, that we see what direction to take.

A key biblical image for him is the text on the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24: 13-35). They travel dejected, walking “away” from Jerusalem. Jesus accompanies them, interprets for them and renews them in hope, transforming them in mission.

As an example, from an ecumenical perspective, I participated in an international commission two years ago between Catholic and Anglican bishops (IARCCUM), a pilgrimage to Canterbury and Rome with “pairs” of bishops (one Anglican, one Catholic) from around the world participating together. On that occasion, Pope Francis really underlined the importance of journeying together, doing things together and so understanding together.

A second image is that of the *inverted pyramid*. Often in the past, when speaking of the Church as a structured, ordered society (the “perfect society”), the image used was one of a pyramid with the Pope and Bishops on top and then down through the various “levels” of the Church. In speaking of the inverted pyramid, Pope Francis is telling us that a way of viewing relationships in the world in terms of inferior serving the superior, needs to change. In a synodal process, we see others as greater than ourselves. We all serve one another and so the hierarchical “ministers” see themselves not above but in service. The biblical text here is the great Christological hymn of St. Paul (Phil 2:6-11) that speaks of the self-emptying Christ, the Kenotic Christ. During his trip to Panama, Pope Francis based his talk to the Bishops on this text.

A third image, that is perhaps slightly more abstract is the *polyhedron*. The Pope comments on this in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. He explains the model of pastoral and indeed political activity is not the sphere where every point is equidistant from the centre, and where there are no differences between them:

Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each. There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential. Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked. It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone.... (n. 236).

I don’t think the Pope has indicated a specific Gospel image, but it might be simply that of the Kingdom or reign of God that Jesus proclaimed, with its Trinitarian shape (unity in diversity) summarised in Jesus’ last will and testament: “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (Jn 17:21).

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<sup>3</sup> Francis, Address for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015

## ▲ Fundamental traits of a synodal style

Pope Francis is inviting us to adopt a synodal style of ecclesial life. In reviewing his statements and the text of the International Theological Commission entitled, "*Synodality in Life and Mission of the Church*", we can note some of the key traits of this style:

**Listening.** A key theme in Pope Francis' proposal of a synodal culture is listening. In his address commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, he said, 'A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening "is more than simply hearing"'. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he "says to the Churches" (Rev 2:7)'.<sup>4</sup>

**Processes of communal discernment.** Consistent with Jesuit tradition, it's not surprising the theme of discernment comes up often in Pope Francis' pronouncements. He underlines how the renewal of the Church demands that we initiate processes for consulting the entire People of God. The International Theological Commission document makes an important point: "In a diocese, for example, it is necessary to distinguish between the process of decision-making through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation, and decision-taking, which is within the competence of the Bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity." (n. 69).

All of this is linked to discerning authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium*.<sup>5</sup>

**Participation and Co-responsibility.** Behind the focus on listening and communal discernment as key elements of a synodal style of Church lies the ecclesiology of the People of God characteristic of the Second Vatican Council. It stressed the common dignity and mission of all the baptised, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries. It also underlined the "*sensus fidei*", the instinct for the truth of the Gospel that enables people to recognise authentic Christian doctrine and practice, and to reject what is false.

All the baptized participate in the priesthood of Christ. As the Second Vatican Council put it, "the whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing which comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*)". By virtue of baptism, every member of the People of God is given a share in the authority granted by the Risen Christ to go and teach all nations, having received the "anointing of the Holy Spirit" (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), having been taught by God (cf. Jn 6:45) and having been guided "to the complete truth" (cf. Jn 16:13).

In his first Angelus address, Pope Francis gave a homely example of his conviction around all of this. He quoted the words of a humble, elderly woman he once met: 'If the Lord did not forgive everything, the world would not exist'; and he commented with admiration:

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<sup>4</sup> Francis, Address for the Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015

<sup>5</sup> International Theological Commission document on "*Sensus fidei* in the life of the Church" (2014)

‘that is the wisdom which the Holy Spirit gives’. We could say the woman’s insight was “a striking manifestation of the *sensus fidei*, which, as well as enabling a certain discernment with regard to the things of faith, fosters true wisdom and gives rise, as here, to proclamation of the truth.”<sup>6</sup>

The International Theological Commission document on the *sensus fidei* in the life of the Church affirms:

Banishing the caricature of an active hierarchy and a passive laity, and in particular the notion of a strict separation between the teaching Church (*Ecclesia docens*) and the learning Church (*Ecclesia discens*), the [Second Vatican] Council taught that all the baptised participate in their own proper way in the three offices of Christ as prophet, priest and king. In particular, it taught that Christ fulfills his prophetic office not only by means of the hierarchy but also via the laity. (n.4)

In light of this, all must make their contribution to carrying out the plan of salvation “according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph 4:7). All are called to participate actively in the mission of the Church, in the power of the Spirit. The Church is being called to make the Easter transition of going out “from ‘I’ understood in a self-centered way (expressed perhaps in individual practices of piety) to the ecclesial ‘we’, where every ‘I’, clothed in Christ (cf. Gal 3:27), lives and journeys with his or her brothers and sisters as a responsible and active agent of the one mission of the People of God”.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Benedict had also underlined the theme of co-responsibility. Speaking at a Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome in May 2009, he said:

It is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God.... with respect for vocations and for the respective roles of the consecrated and of lay people. his demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as "collaborators" of the clergy but truly recognized as "co-responsible", for the Church's being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity. This common awareness of being Church of all the baptized in no way diminishes the responsibility of parish priests. It is precisely your task, dear parish priests, to nurture the spiritual and apostolic growth of (others).<sup>8</sup>

**Charisms.** A particular feature of the People of God that has emerged since the Second Vatican Council is the need to rediscover the place and importance of charisms. This is a theme very much linked to synodality. As the International Theological Commission document puts it, “The Church is called, in synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life and to listen to the voice of the Spirit, in order to discern the ways of evangelisation” (n. 53). Indeed, today we talk of “co-essentiality between hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts in the Church” (cf. *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*).

The International Theological Commission reminds us of the need to involve communities of consecrated women or men, the movements and new ecclesial communities:

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<sup>6</sup> International Theological Commission document on “Sensus fidei in the life of the Church” (2014)

<sup>7</sup> International Theological Commission, Synodality in the life and mission of the Church, 2 March 2018, n. 107

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, Opening of the Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome, May 26, 2009.


All of these, many of which have come into being spurred on by charisms given by the Holy Spirit for the renewal of the Church's life and mission, can offer significant experiences of synodal approaches in the life of communion and of the dynamics of communal discernment at the centre of their lives, as well as stimuli to discovering new methods of evangelisation. In some cases, they also offer examples of integrating different ecclesial vocations in the perspective of the ecclesiology of communion (n. 74; cf also *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*).

**Relationships and Dialogue.** Having mentioned here a few traits of the synodal style of Church, perhaps we can conclude by underlining three specific traits that run through all of the others – relationships, encounter and dialogue. In this regard, the document on the Synod on young people affirmed this: It is in relationships – with Christ, with others, in the community – that faith is handed on.

A French philosopher, Nathalie Sarthou-Lajus has recently written a book on the art of transmitting. She refers to how values and heritage become transmitted. It's not through formal structures or places, but primarily through life, through relationships. So often we can be so busy that it can seem we don't have time for relationships. And yet relationships are at the heart of a synodal style of Church. Pope Francis takes up Pope Paul VI's call to dialogue and emphasises how we need to be able to "encounter" people, not just pass by them or treat them in terms of duty or ministry or function.

This relationship-encounter-dialogue is the way of the Church today. Pope Francis underlines the "intergenerational" dimension that is a "must" in the synodal dynamic of the Church. Young and old need to belong to one another, sharing, learning, inspiring each other.

Pope Francis has launched synodality as the heart of reform. But how do we "implement" this project? Synodality requires more than techniques, methods and programmes. It needs, above all, new ways of approaching our spiritual life as members of the Church and not just as individuals. For this reason, new ways of learning the "how" of living out this synodal, communal approach and fostering a robust spirituality of communion are needed.<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>9</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43 (6th January 2001).