

## Synodality – an international perspective

My brief is to bring something of an international perspective which can be summed up in one word: Synodality. Pope Francis is calling the worldwide Church to become a synodal church. Synodality needs mechanisms and processes to happen – National Synods, Plenary Councils, listening exercises for example. But those are what enables it. Synodality itself is actually a way of being Church. To become synodal calls for a conversion of the imagination as well as new ways of doing things.

The word – *sun + odos* literally means being on the road together. There are two parts to note: First, it is a journey. This implies movement, process, progress, change. To transpose that into faith language: synodality recognises that true tradition is the Holy Spirit at work in the Church through time. Tradition has deep roots but is always opening to the newness that God brings into being. Secondly, it is a journey *together*. Vatican II led to a Synod of Bishops advising the Pope instead of the Pope ruling like a monarch. It also recognised the *sensus fidelium* – the unerring sense of the faith in which all the faithful share, but it didn't necessarily bring these two together. Pope Francis is expanding the 'together' part of synodality to include all the faithful. The 'journeying together' is to embrace all the diversity that makes up the universal Church.

That is evident in the roadmap that has been drawn up for the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023 which will meet together to discern matters of relevance for the worldwide church. But before they get there, they have to have listened to everyone. There is supposed to be a synod in every single diocese to allow the local bishop to listen to the voice of God through the people. Then there will be continental Synods where the more regional expressions of the worldwide church can be heard and discerned. It is only after those intervening steps that the Synod of Bishops meets in Rome. So what is heard at the table should be not just the Bishop's voices, but the voices of all God's people.

A synodal pathway is not one where various interest groups jockey for position and try to impose their own vision or values on everyone else, where there are winners and losers. It is a process where we keep walking together in all our differences, holding the tensions, discerning together not what we want but what God's invitation is to the Church. The major challenge and invitation, in the words of St Paul, is to 'keep in step with the Spirit.' (Gal 5:25).

Pope Francis in *Let Us Dream* speaks of 'overflow' as that which happens when those who hold different perspectives keep talking and listening together to God's Spirit until something new opens up, something that is not just a compromise, but a whole new possibility that resolves the impasse in a new and surprising way, a way that each side of the debate could not come to on their own. That breakthrough is evidence that the Spirit of God is at work. Humans can do difference, and they can do uniformity, but unity in diversity – that takes divine creativity. It also requires trust – trust in each other, trust in God and trust in the process. An example of overflow occurred at the Synod on the Family around the issue of remarried persons receiving communion. There were opposing entrenched positions leading to conflict and a stalemate. The overflow came through applying a teaching of Thomas Aquinas that no general rule can apply to every concrete situation which allowed the Synod to agree on the need for case-by-case discernment. This solution calls for accompaniment and for being attentive to the way that grace is at work in the nitty-gritty of people's lives. It is another step in the synodal journey.

Synodal discernment is not just about resolving ideas. It means having the difficult conversations, naming the issues, staying committed to the process and cultivating humility and openness. It requires that we avoid two temptations. One is to break into factions and to take on an us-versus-

them mindset. This is seen at its most stark in what Pope Francis calls the isolated conscience, individuals or groups who become convinced that they alone have the whole truth and so disengage from the messiness of the wider church. That means that the Church is deprived of the unique gifts and insights that they could give. But even more than that, the isolated person or group is themselves diminished because no one part of the body has all the gifts and capacities that God gives to the whole. There is an opposite temptation which comes from a false understanding of peace as just the avoidance of conflict. Peace-makers have to stay engaged in the process, say difficult things, and name what others would like to ignore or deny. I believe that the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform's response to the agenda for the Plenary Council is a good example of exactly that.

Synodality is hard work. We have to live it into existence. My experience of diocesan synods is that the spiritual and prayerful formation of members, the work of listening to their own interior dynamics so that they can hear beyond the noise of their own hopes and fears and become 'effective listening instruments', is indispensable.

Pope Francis, good Jesuit that he is, has introduced 'discernment' to the vocabulary of synodality. Discernment is about paying attention to what is really happening – within us and within the world – so that we can make wise decisions which align with God's action and invitation. He models the see-judge-act methodology, or, to use the terminology in *Let Us Dream* – see, choose, act. Listening processes are about seeing. To see is to pay careful attention to what is really there. And we have not seen it until we have correctly named it. To quote the papal nuncio in his address to the Liverpool Synod: "The problem is that sometimes we are obsessed with theoretical speeches that never touch reality. When we don't know what to say we start with theoretical or moralistic recommendations. This approach of yours seems to me to be extremely practical – you are speaking and calling the problems with their names." (Gugerotti). That was great praise for the listening process in the Liverpool Diocese. The judging or choosing requires that we bring the light of the Gospel to what we have seen. I hope it is the radical, untamed Gospel that is brought to bear at this stage, not a domesticated version that comforts the comfortable. And then of course there needs to be concrete action that puts into action what has been chosen. These actions, if we believe that God is at work in the real world and inviting us alongside, should be God-sized and rooted in reality.

Catholics are not yet very good at synodality, but it is the only way forward. So what I would want to see from the Plenary Council is that all parties stay committed to and engaged in the process, that the real issues are named and faced head-on, that overflow happens, and that God surprises you.