

WEBINAR ON SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

ACCCR Convocation, February 16th 2022, by Vincent Long OFMConv

I would like to pay my respects and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather respectively. Here in Harris Park, it is the land of the Darug people. I acknowledge their physical and spiritual connections to their land, their stories, traditions and living cultures. I also pay respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

I acknowledge, too, that when we gather as Catholic Christians, there are many whose voices are not heard and those who have experienced a betrayal of trust. May the Spirit guide us in our effort to build a better Church.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you briefly and encourage you to respond to Pope Francis' invitation to have your voices heard. He has asked dioceses, religious orders and other Catholic groups to embark on listening sessions, so ordinary Catholics can talk about their needs and hopes for the Church. It is billed as a largest consultation exercise ever taken by any organization in history.

But is it worth our effort to contribute to the Synod process given the way the Church operates and makes its decisions? One seasoned feminist theologian has lamented the lack of ecclesial framework in which meaningful synodal discernment and decision-making processes can take place. Until the cleric-centred framework is changed to accommodate non-cleric participants as equals, she likens the exercise to the "structural impossibility of squaring the kyriarchal circle". Perhaps, the desire for a new ecclesial framework was the reason why the German Church opted for a different route to the "textbook" method the Australian Bishops had chosen.

Many would say that such reservations are not without justification. The idea of synodality and co-responsibility means that all members should be given equal voice and opportunity as we walk together. But modern synodality is grafted onto the old clerical and hierarchical Church where power and authority are vested in the ordained. The process of "walking together" can be fraught with challenges when it comes to decision making and good outcomes. Our experience thus far of the Plenary Council has illustrated these challenges. Many feel that at crucial points, the process is controlled by those with power. As the synodal Church evolves, we need to address the issue of equity in ecclesial structures in order to promote the culture of discernment, consensus and decision making.

While some of us might be frustrated at the pace of institutional reform, it is indisputable that we have the most reform-oriented papacy in modern history. Against the prevailing clerical culture and mindset, Pope Francis has sought to expand the influence of lay people and especially women. His appointment of a religious sister as under-secretary of the Synod is significant. Also groups previously viewed as heretical by the Vatican such as Women's Ordination Conference and New Ways Ministry are included on the website of the Synod. One hopes that this unprecedented gesture is a proof that all voices are listened to in the spirit of boldness, freedom and “parrhesia”.

As far as Australia is concerned, our participation in this phase of consultation has been lacklustre. Unlike the Plenary Council whereupon 17,500 group and individual submissions were made, only 250 responses were collected as of February 2nd for the Roman Synod. I am pleased to say that Parramatta is the leader of the pack by a long shot. Perhaps, Australian Catholics are consultation-fatigued. But as John Lennon used to sing "Give peace a chance", I would plead with you to give Pope Francis' Synod on Synodality a chance. We have till February 27th to make our submissions. I believe we have the opportunity to co-create the synodal Church that Pope Francis has envisaged. Our unique experience of the post-Royal Commission Church with its momentum for deep reform can help determine the future of ecclesial synodality. The insights gained from the peripheries, I believe, are critical to the discernment of what the Spirit is saying to the Church in the Synod Hall.

Pope Francis has envisioned a church where the lay faithful flock will sometimes ‘strike out on new paths,’ and lead the Church forward. He affirms that ‘this path of synodality’ is precisely what “God expects of the Church of the third millennium.” He gives new impetus to the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, stating that the path of synodality represents an indispensable prerequisite for infusing the Church with a renewed missionary impulse: all the members of the Church are called to be active subjects of evangelisation and “missionary disciples”.

The Synod on the synodal Church is not merely an event but a process and a template for a new way of being Church going forward. I hope and pray that embracing an ecclesiology of the People of God that nurtures a more dialogical and ecumenical, interfaith, ecological and indeed cosmological reimagination, we can rise to become a more fit for purpose Church and vehicle of the Gospel for humanity and all creation.