

This reflection is intended first of all to congratulate all who were responsible for this event. I attended as much of it as I could, but I was not able to participate in the whole of it, and so my comments here are subject to that qualification.

I found the input prayerful, informative, challenging and hope-filled. I recognised good process in the way the speakers set the stage with the narratives of decline and resurgence. I would include the witness given by Simon Story and John Adams among the highlights. But apart from input, what registered with me most of all was being in the midst of so many Catholic people from across our nation whose presence spelled out a strong desire for renewal, for themselves and for their parishes. There was something about the people present that already embodied hope rather powerfully.

Did I have any concerns? Yes, but they were not about anything that was said, so much as what was not said, or not said explicitly enough. I shall explain two examples of this: 1) what we mean by “mission” was not presented in its full Catholic sense; 2) I fear some could have taken the impression that “leadership teams” can substitute for the more broadly based bodies we need to consult.

“Mission”

The main focus of the input was on personal conversion and relationship with the risen Christ. Absolutely right!

Every aspect of the Church’s mission to the world must be born of a renewal which comes from contemplation of the face of Christ...” (Pope St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter to the Churches of Oceania, n 19)

But this renewal is for the sake of mission. And mission means much more than personal conversions and building up the Church. Failure to appreciate this results in the harm named by theologian Tomas Halik:

Mission is not to be confused with proselytism, the mere effort to increase the number of church members. Evangelisation is the process of incarnating the Gospel, the Word of God, into a living culture – into the way people live and think. Evangelisation is about inculturation;... Where churches neglect honest dialogue with contemporary culture, this leads to the ex-culturation of faith, and thus to the secularisation of society.

Pope St John Paul II anticipated this problem when he warned against “falling prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion” (Churches of Oceania, n.19). After saying that, he moved on to say how our relationship with Christ needs to unfold, naming specific pastoral strategies, such as “bringing the social teaching of the Church to bear on civic life.” It is in this full sense that we need to understand “mission.” Anything less falls short of Catholic ecclesiology.

The only mission we can have is our participation in the divine missions – the sending of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. There is no holiness of life that does not involve us with what God is doing through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Holiness and mission are two sides of the same coin; Holy Communion illustrates this: being united with the risen Christ, we are united with the One whose body was “given up” and blood (life) “poured out” for others.

Giving hope and healing, restoring dignity to the marginalised, opposing sinful structures... were characteristics of Jesus’ ministry. So, they are integral to discipleship and Christian living:

The human person is the primary route the Church must take in fulfilling its mission: the primary and fundamental way of the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself. (Pope St John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 14)

This understanding of mission needs to be part of all on-going formation because there is a tendency to regard it as something 'added on' to holiness, or something that can be left to those Catholics who have a special interest in it.

So, I ask: would the participants in our summit have gone home with renewed awareness that "building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12), includes, but means more than, personal conversions and building up the Church?

Leadership teams:

The case for "leadership teams" was well put. However, it needed to be said that these are not substitutes for pastoral councils – whether diocesan or parish. (I picked up in conversations that there is a tendency to do that.) Leadership teams are like the three disciples whom Jesus chose for closer support: they support the priest's (or bishop's) ministry. But the mission of the Church is wider than what is assigned to ordained ministry; our call to mission derives from baptism, not ordination. For that reason, church law requires ordained ministers to consult those more widely representative groups which the Final Document of the General Synod 2024 calls "participatory bodies," namely parish and diocesan pastoral councils, parish and diocesan liturgy commissions, diocesan and parish finance committees...

The call given to "the three" (Peter, James and John) did not substitute for the authority given to "the twelve;" and the authority given to "the twelve" did not substitute for the mission given to "the seventy-two." And like the seventy-two who reported to Jesus on their experience after being sent, all today's participants in the Church's mission need to be heard.

The lay faithful's involvement in the Church's mission is primarily their influence within society. But their involvement in the Church's mission is not limited to that: they also share responsibility for shaping the life and pastoral practices of the Church. Or, as Pope Benedict XVI expressed it at the opening of the Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome, 2009:

It is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all members of the People of God is gradually promoted...Co-responsibility requires a change in mentality, particularly with regard to the role of the laity in the Church, who should be considered not as "collaborators " of the clergy, but as persons truly co-responsible for the being and the activity of the Church.

Fifteen years later, the Final Document of the General Assembly on Synodality speaks of the key role of the "participatory bodies":

"A synodal Church is based upon the existence, efficiency and effective vitality of these participatory bodies, not on the merely nominal existence of them..." (104)

"Those in authority are, in several instances, obligated by current law to conduct a consultation before taking a decision. Those with pastoral authority are obliged to listen to those who participate in the consultation, and may not act as if the consultation had not taken place." (91)

"(The) exercise of authority is not without limits: it may not ignore a direction which emerges through proper discernment within a consultative process, especially if this is done by participatory bodies. (92)

"It is also necessary to ensure that members of diocesan and parish pastoral councils are able to propose agenda items in an analogous way to that allowed for in the presbyteral council." (105)

Synodality will further extend the breadth and depth of participation by the baptized. Speakers could have been more explicit about this, to offset any tendency to narrow down consultation to leadership teams:

".. it is essential that we promote the broadest participation possible in the discernment process, particularly involving those who are at the margins of the Christian community and society." (82)

"...as great a participation of all the People of God as possible in the decision-making processes." (87)

"The Fathers of the Church reflect on the communal nature of the mission of the People of God with a triple 'nothing without': 'nothing without the bishop'...'nothing without your advice (presbyters and deacons), and nothing without the consent of the people. (88)

When this logic of 'nothing without' is disregarded, the identity of the Church is obscured, and its mission is hindered." (88) [Underlining mine].

The comfort of being supported by "the three" might have to give way to a certain discomfort in bringing the Church back to being more like what we see in the Acts of the Apostles.

In summary

If I am correct in detecting a tendency to think of mission in a narrowed-down sense ("ecclesial introversion"), and to think of consultation in a narrowed-down sense (leadership teams substituting for the "participatory bodies"), then I would see this as a kind of incompleteness.

Obviously, a single event cannot cover everything, but equally, participants should be made aware that Catholic ecclesiology involves a fuller understanding of mission and a more expansive practice of consultation. Anything less would short-change our people.

Perhaps this highlights the need for another of the "pastoral strategies" which John Paul named for preventing ecclesial introversion: "opportunities for adults to grow in their faith through programmes of study and formation" - and incentivisation for middle of the road Catholics to take up such opportunities.

Whatever about any potential 'incompleteness,' the event was very worthwhile. I know a few people who did not come because they could not afford the cost; perhaps next time it might not need to be so costly, so that we could cater for that range of people.