

## S Y N O D A L I T Y

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### PRELIMINARY NOTE

Following a two-year process involving Catholics and others from all around the world, a General Assembly in Rome in 2024 issued its Final Document (FD) titled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,” which Pope Francis adopted and made his own. In an Accompanying Note he asked “the Churches from now on to make choices consistent with what is stated in it.” Pope Leo has affirmed his commitment to predecessor’s programme.

The Final Document runs to 65 pages, so I have selected those quotations that focus more directly on the nature and dynamics of synodality. And as background I have provided some core teachings on the nature of the Church.

### INTRODUCTION

Synodality is for the sake of the Church’s mission. It gives greater scope for the participation of all the baptised, and greater depth to the ways in which they are already meant to be involved.

Ways in which the Catholic people are already meant to be involved include what the Final Document calls “participatory bodies” - such as diocesan and parish councils, diocesan and parish finance committees, diocesan and parish liturgy committees, etc, which are required by Church law. Synodality means much more than what we usually mean by “consultation,” as I shall explain later, but it involves especially those bodies which there is an obligation to consult. Given the role the Final Document attributes to these participatory bodies, a diocese or a parish where these bodies do not exist, or properly function, is not even at the starting gates for the journey into synodality.

Renewal movements also have an important place in the life of the Church. Since the Second Vatican Council, there have been many of them, and I have supported them. Each has made a distinctive contribution to the life of parishes and dioceses; each has been a buzz-word in its time; and each has eventually faded away. This is normal for movements that depend on the charisms of individuals. But that does not diminish their value; in a sense they live on in the fruits they bear. “Participatory bodies,” on the other hand, have an institutionalised form that ensures they survive the coming and going of charisms.

Synodality can be understood only in the light of what the Church is meant to be and meant to do. But this involves a journey, including both failure and reform. And so it will be helpful to trace the Church’s journey, in four stages:

- PART 1: The Divine Missions
- PART 2: A Harmful distortion
- PART 3: Getting Back to God’s Plan
- PART 4: Synodality as in the Final Document.

## PART 1: The Divine Missions

Through the practice of synodality we become more aware of what the Church is meant to be and to do. That in turn depends on the Church's nature. So, what is it? It is

"... the mystery of God's purpose, the hidden Plan God so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end: that he would bring everything together under Christ as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth." (Eph. 1:9,10)

"...in our own time, the last days, God has spoken to us through his Son... He is the radiant light of God's glory...(Heb. 1:1-3)

The revelation of this "hidden Plan" continues, especially in the community of Christ's disciples:

"I became the servant of the church when God made me responsible for delivering God's message to you, the message which was a mystery hidden from generations and centuries and has now been revealed in his saints... The mystery is Christ among you..." (Col. 1:25-27).

"I who am less than the least of all the saints, have been entrusted with this special grace, not only of proclaiming to the pagans the infinite treasures of Christ, but also of explaining how the mystery is to be dispensed. Through all the ages, this has been kept hidden in God, the creator of everything. Why? So that the Sovereignities and Powers should learn only now, through the Church, how comprehensive God's wisdom really is, exactly according to the plan which God had from all eternity in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Eph. 3: 8-11)

The mission of the Holy Spirit brings this about:

"I did not tell you this from the outset, because I was with you; but now I am going to the One who sent me... you are sad at heart because I have told you this. Still, I must tell you the truth: it is for your own good that I am going because unless I go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I do go, I will send him to you." (Jn 16:4-7)

"These are the very things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God... Instead of the spirit of the world, we have received the Spirit that come from God, to teach us to understand the gifts that God has given us." (cf Cor. 2:7,10-12)

In a word: through the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit we are being gathered into God's life. It is not in isolation from one another but as a people that all this happens:

"... for through Your Son Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
by the power and working of the Holy Spirit,  
you give life to all things and make them holy,  
and you never cease to gather a people to yourself... (2<sup>nd</sup> Eucharistic Prayer)

The Church is an on-going event: it is the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit continuing, and we have been made active participants in their mission.

The Church's mission cannot be other than God's mission – the fulness of life for which the Son and the Holy Spirit were sent: human life as God means it to be, in our present lives, and forever. "The human person is the primary route the Church must travel in fulfilling its mission: the primary and fundamental way of the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself." (Pope St John Paul II, The Redeemer of the Human Race, 14).

## PART 2: A Harmful Distortion

Why did Pope Francis speak so strongly against clericalism? Is it 'harmless enough' or is it really a harmful distortion?

Clericalism affects our understanding of the Church and our participation in its life. There is no higher calling than our "life in Christ," which comes about through Baptism and Eucharist. From the beginning, these pivotal sacraments constituted our dignity and equality as the community of Jesus' disciples. Roles within this community are all secondary to that.

But after a while, something lop-sided came about for a combination of reasons. Social scientists speak of "group bias," i.e. the tendency of any specialised group within an organisation to equate its specialised interests with the needs of the organisation as a whole. Within the Church, the role of those in ordained ministry made them the "specialised group within the organisation" that came to identified with "the organisation as a whole." Joining the ministry was often referred to as "joining the Church"!

What social bias brings about can happen subconsciously. Within any culture, habits can be formed or inherited that we take for granted – until something happens to bring about change – as happened to society's, and the Church's, acceptance of slavery, patriarchy, paternalism...

During the Middle Ages, efforts to protect the Church from domination by the State and other vested interests led eventually to Church leaders believing they were not accountable to the laity, nor the Church accountable to society. On top of those developments, an exaggerated understanding of ordination led to an apartness that sometimes inhibited priests' ability to carry out some of their key responsibilities. The Second Vatican Council gave examples of activities which it called "extremely necessary for the life of the Church," saying that "laws and customs of the Latin Church make it difficult in many places to fulfil these functions." (Constitution on the Church, 29).

The Council made those comments in the context of re-introducing of the permanent diaconate. (Note: the NZCBC decided not to act of this option because it meant introducing another ordained ministry, which did not seem to us what was most needed. When the Diocese of Palmerston North did ordain a permanent deacon, it was specifically as an aspect of the Māori Apostolate.)

The problem of clericalism is wider than the difficulties named by the Council in LG 29. Our fundamental dignity and equality as disciples of Christ was distorted by harmful false impressions; e.g. the impression

- that holiness of life was more for priests and Religious and those in "states of perfection," and not to be expected of others;
- that particular callings gave a higher dignity than that already given by Baptism;
- that the ordained participated in the celebration of Eucharist more fully than others;
- that responsibility for the Church's mission belonged to the ordained, and lay involvement in the apostolate was an extension of the ministry of the ordained;
- that the main reason for lay involvement was the shortage of priests rather than a need and right resulting from Baptism.
- That it is the priest who "celebrates" Mass; the laity "attend".
- That Church leaders are not accountable to the laity, nor the Church to society.

The very nature of the Church required that these distortions be corrected. To do so is not "just pastoral"! it is pastoral because it puts Church doctrine into practice.

### PART 3: Getting back to God's Plan

Several documents issued by the Second Vatican Council addressed the issues named above. But it is mainly its Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) that corrects our understanding of the Church. This was not without drama, because the draft document on the Church presented for discussion had simply taken for granted the prevailing assumptions of clericalism, with an opening chapter on the Church's hierarchical structure. This was tossed out, and the Council's Constitution on the Church starts with a chapter on the Mystery of the Church ("the mystery which is Christ among you, ..." (see above) followed by a chapter on the whole People of God's call to holiness, and only after that the Church's hierarchical structure.

In this way, the Council was restoring the primacy of Baptism: "There is nothing higher than this baptismal dignity, equally bestowed on each person..." (FD 21)

The Church has its origins in the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, (the divine missions) which continues in and through the people being "gathered," made holy, and sent.

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he claims for his own to proclaim the glorious works of the One who called you from darkness into his wonderful light ..." (1 Pet. 9; trans NAB 1970)

Because the Church's reason for being is mission, its own ways of being and acting are subordinate to the requirements of that mission:

"... (The) Church will suffer the loss of its shape as it undergoes a death, and all the more so the more purely it lives from its source and is consequently less concerned with preserving its shape. In fact, it will not concern itself with affirming its shape but with promoting the world's salvation; as for the shape in which God will raise it from its death to serve the world, it will entrust that to the Holy Spirit." (Hans Urs von Balthasar)

In his Apostolic Letter *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spells it out:

"I dream of a "missionary option," that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation... As John Paul once said to the Bishops of Oceania: 'All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion.'" (27)

Upholding the primacy of Baptism and how it affects the Church's ways of being and acting, makes it necessary to correct a misunderstanding regarding the sacrament of Holy Orders. It derives from "a mythic theology of the priesthood which places it on a higher level of being than the rest of the faithful...(and) is responsible for barring the way to many reforms at the present time" (P. Fransen, *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 4, p324a).

The "higher level of being" was attributed to the so-called "character" resulting from ordination. But the most ancient understanding of "character" is the function expressed in the ordination rite itself, which incorporates one into the order of deacons or presbyters or bishops. Ordination puts him there - characterises him as belonging to that order for its particular way of serving the Church's mission. It is his relationship with the community of the Church that is now 'ontologically' different, not his person.

This is also the meaning of his being “set apart” – *for* his mission, not *from* his people. (cf. Second Vatican Council, Pres. Ord. n 3). Saint Pope St John Paul II emphasised that what one becomes through ordination “*is in the realm of function, not of dignity or holiness.*” (Christi Fideles Laici, n 51).

These corrected understandings make it easier to appreciate Pope Benedict XVI’s teaching on “co-responsibility.”

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...*

In this regard, the Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium describes the nature of the relationships between laity and pastors with the adjective “familiar”.... Dear friends, it is important to deepen and to live out this spirit of profound communion in the Church, which characterized the early Christian community, as the book of the Acts of the Apostles attests: ‘Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul’ (4:32).

The very nature of mission in the world requires this co-responsibility:

“With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire people of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to a greater advantage. (Second Vatican Council; the Church in the World Today, (30)

In similar vein, in his Letter On Promoting Theology, Pope Francis emphasised the need for theology to “engage reality” be “challenged” by it, and “addressed to the open wounds of humanity and creation.”

For all these and similar reasons, pastoral formation and pastoral planning need to be done by laity and ordained together.

Synodality presupposes all the ways we are “co-responsible for the being and activity for the Church.” But it gives us a specifically spiritual way of doing it – of tuning into “the mystery which is Christ among you,” together.

#### PART 4: SYNODALITY

A key word throughout the Final Document is “listening”:

It is tempting for busy people in leadership to consult only those who are already familiar with the issues, who know the Church’s norms, and have expertise. Taking the time to convene and listen to a wider representation of the faithful can seem an unnecessary waste of time. But synodality involves more than we normally mean by “consultation,” even though consultation is involved, and in the case of “participatory bodies,” is required by law.

Discernment involves “something more than intelligence and common sense;” it “includes the insights we draw from the human sciences, but also transcends them;” it “includes reason and prudence but goes beyond them;” and “nor are the Church’s sound norms sufficient.” (Gaudete et Exultate (166; 170).

“Synodality is primarily a spiritual disposition. It. ... flows from the action of the Holy Spirit and requires listening to the Word of God, contemplation, silence and conversion of heart.” (43)

“Listening is a fundamental element of the path to healing, repentance, justice and reconciliation.” (55).

It also affects what we see:

“Every new step in the life of the Church is a return to the source. It is a renewed experience of the disciples’ encounter with the Risen One in the Upper room on Easter evening ..... (1)

“Looking upon the Lord does not distance us from the tragedies of history. Instead, it opens our eyes to the suffering of those around us, and we are pierced: the faces of war-stricken terrorised children, weeping mothers, the shattered dreams of so many young people, refugees who face terrible journeys, the victims of climate change and social injustice....” ( 2)

Synodality responds to deep human needs and is counter-cultural:

“The practice of synodality is a challenge to the growing isolation of people and to cultural individualism, which the Church has also often absorbed, and it calls us to mutual care, interdependence and co-responsibility for the common good.” (48)

What’s involved?:

“...ecclesial discernment, care for decision-making processes, commitment to accountability, and the evaluation of decisions are practices through which we respond to the Word that shows us the paths to mission.” (79)

Greater commitment to mission requires “ecclesial discernment”:

“Ecclesial discernment is not an organisational technique but rather a spiritual practice... Each person, speaking according to their conscience, is called to open themselves to others who share according to their conscience. In this sharing they seek to recognise together “what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev 2:7) (82)

“.. 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)

Note: I participated in several General Synods and I notice how much more open to future developments the Final Document is compared with the statements that were issued by previous Synods. This is surely due to the much wider representation of Church members at the recent synod.

“This Assembly asks for full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in canon law with regard to the role of women...” (60)

“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 the consent of the People'... When this logic of 'nothing without' is disregarded, the identity of the Church is obscured, and its mission is hindered." (88)

Church law already requires genuine consultation especially of "participatory bodies", i.e. parish and diocesan pastoral councils, parish and diocesan finance councils; parish and diocesan liturgy committees, etc. (These are different from groups chosen to assist a priest's or bishop's ministry; they represent the wider Church's responsibility for the Church's mission.)

"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)

There is an authority proper to bishops et al. by reason of divine institution, but "Such an 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. It is not appropriate to set the consultative and deliberative elements involved in reaching a decision in opposition to each other..." (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)

#### Discernment is followed by accountability and evaluation:

"Decision-making does not conclude the discernment process. It must be accompanied and followed by practices of accountability and evaluation undertaken in a spirit of transparency inspired by evangelical criteria. Accountability to the community for one's ministry belongs to our oldest tradition: to the Apostolic Church itself..." (95)

"In particular, it has been requested that greater light be shed on the meaning of transparency. The synodal process has been connected to words such as truth, loyalty, clarity, honesty, integrity, consistency, rejection of obscurity, hypocrisy, ambiguity, and absence of ulterior motives." (96)

"Clericalism is based on the implicit assumption that those who have authority in the Church are not to be held to account for their actions and decisions as if they were isolated from or above the rest of the People of God." (98)

"While accountability to one's superiors has been practised over the centuries, the dimension of authority's being accountable to the community is in need of restoration." (99)

"The way in which accountability and evaluation processes are implemented at the local level should be included in the report presented during the visits *ad limina*. (101)

Note: the Church's public credibility also comes into this because of society's expectations: on his retirement, Ombudsman Peter Boshier highlighted the need for greater accountability for people in authority, people's right to participate; fairness, and people's need to be listened to.

There is need to make the synodal nature of the Church more visible in the celebration of liturgy.

“There is a close link between *synaxis* and *synodos*, between Eucharistic assembly and the synodal assembly.” Both liturgy and synodality involve “a listening to the Word of God.” (27)

“Deepening the link between liturgy and synodality will help all Christian communities... to adopt celebratory styles that make visible the face of a synodal Church.” (27)

“We call for the establishment of a specific Study Group which would be entrusted with reflection on how to make liturgical celebrations more an expression of synodality.” (27)

Note: The design of new churches, and re-formatting of the interior of older churches over recent years has already acted on this need for liturgical celebrations to better reflect the synodal face of the Church. For example, an older style, especially gothic, matched the idea that it was the priest who “celebrated” the Mass while the people “attended” (and resorted to various private devotions).

To offset such misunderstandings, in many churches the altar and the pews have been repositioned to better reflect the fact that it is the whole congregation that celebrates Eucharist ((Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1140). The interior layout of the cathedral of the Holy Spirit, Palmerston North, is one example of this, and this re-formatting is named in its listing as a category one Heritage building. In some parish churches the lectern has been re-positioned to better reflect the fact that the whole congregation, including the priest, listens to God’s word together.

“Participation” is key to both synodality and liturgy. E.g. “The Church does not exclude any type of sacred music provided it does not hinder the required active participation of the people.” (Sacram Musicam 1967). (Pope St Pius X had ruled against choirs taking over parts that belong to the congregation.)

The practice of synodality requires formation:

“The holy People of God require proper formation so that they can witness to the joy of the Gospel and grow in the practice of synodality.” ... What synodality involves “cannot come about (unless accompanied by focussed formation processes.” 141)

“There was a marked insistence throughout the synodal process upon the need for a common and shared formation, in which men and women, laity, consecrated persons, ordained ministers and candidates to ordained ministry participate together....” (143)