



“Synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium” – Pope Francis

## US BISHOPS: “SYNODALITY: THERE IS NO GOING BACK”

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## SYNOD ORGANISERS SAY PROCESS SHOULD LEAD TO GREATER LOCAL CONTROL

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## ‘You can put synodal reforms into practice now’ Irish Church told by Vatican - Historical opportunity for Irish bishops to act with vision

The Church in Ireland and all the local churches of the world have been told by the Office of the Synod in Rome that they can put reforms suggested in the synodal listening process into practice now. They don't have to wait on the rest of the universal Church to discern the way forward in a Synod of Bishops in October, nor do they have to wait on the Pope, if those reforms do not require the Pope or a Synod to get involved.

This echoes the growing consensus among organisers of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October that more deference and freedom be given to local Church authorities.

“The call to recover the centrality of the ecclesiology of local churches is perhaps one of the most important contributions of the current phase in the reception of the Council,” writes Prof. Rafael Luciani in this issue.

The focus now then, is not on Rome except for the so-called ‘hot

button’ issues and is in fact back on the national and diocesan Church here in Ireland. Therefore, the President of the Bishops’ Conference in Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin should now focus on driving that vision that will lead to action on the concerns of the Irish Catholic faithful so clearly outlined in the synodal listening process. There is no need to be concerned about, as he was in the recent Synodal conference in Prague, “prevailing question-marks over how to correctly apply this new approach [synodality]”.

The legalistics of Synodality which concern the Archbishop Martin are for lawyers and canonists; the call now led by the Vatican is for bishops as pastors to start implementing reform in their own local churches. As Primate of All-Ireland and Chairman of the Episcopal Conference, the ball is now firmly in Archbishop Eamon Martin's court. Will he act? The future of the Church in Ireland may depend on it.



Archbishop Eamon Martin

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# Think global, act local

## Garry O'Sullivan

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‘Conservative’ Catholics love to moan about synodality. “We weren’t consulted” they complained, but they didn’t show up to the consultations opting to boycott and therefore hopefully scuttle the process. When that didn’t work they ran around like Chicken Licken screaming that the doctrinal firmament was about to fall in; ‘we’ll all soon be Anglicans singing Evensong’ they warned ‘and have to endure being preached to -God forbid - by an ordained woman’.

### Synodal consultations

Now that the synodal consultations are over and turnout for those focus groups was less than 10% in most dioceses, we can

hear the snickers and calls from the same people to scrap the synodal process because it’s not, they say, representational of the broader Catholic community.

“Those who turn up for meetings in a Synodal Church will be asked to train for a Synodal Church, to be lectors, catechists and acolytes and deacons”

This is a straw man argument because as they constantly have reminded us, the Church is not a democracy. Synodality doesn’t need a democratic mandate of 51%. Also who

are the broader Catholic community?

The percentage of the populace that identifies as Catholic culturally, and is non participating or actually hostile, is far from anything that could be defined as a cohesive community. So measuring the views of “real” Catholics is basically measuring the views of those who bother to show up. ‘Fewer but truer’, a conservative catchphrase from the papacy of Pope Benedict works nicely for these synodal times.

So we can agree on this: conservatives are right about one thing, the Church of the future will be fewer but truer. Those who turn up for meetings in a Synodal Church will be asked to train for a Synodal Church, to be lectors, catechists, and deacons. They will be formally appointed ministers with Canon Law’s backing and will be tasked with specific ministries on behalf of the Christian community in their parishes.

### Parish council

Others will sit on the parish council, or they will be on the finance committee, or the pastoral committee and the liturgical committee and so on. In the parishes where there is life, participation and a sense of belonging, those parishes will be filled with ministers appointed to ministries on behalf of the parish community and it won’t all fall on the shoulders of the one minister, the priest, as it currently does, if there is one. It won’t because it can’t, time and demographics stand as proof (see Prof. Gladys Ganiel’s research in Queen’s University Belfast).

Those parishes that don’t get on board – or perhaps a better analogy is those that stay on board the sinking ship and ignore the lifeboats as Prof Michael A. Conway of Maynooth has written in *the Furrow*, or think an act of God will save their ship, those parishes will further fade and die or be amalgamated – it’s already



Pilgrims participate in a Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington DC, marking the 25th anniversary of the Our Mother of Africa Chapel.

happening in Ireland and elsewhere.

Jesse Grose, writing in the *New York Times*, tells us that in the USA between 6,000 and 10,000 churches close down every year. A 2023 survey carried out by the *Wall Street Journal* and the University of Chicago found that only 39 percent of adults said religion is very important to them, down from 62 percent in 1988.

“The communities founded by St Paul, the first local churches are thought to have been no larger than 70 or 80 people”

However belief is still high in God - atheists are only 7% of the population. So it seems that the reality is complicated; people might identify as Catholic but not practice yet their kids might go to Catholic schools, receive the sacraments. The parents might still believe in God and pray. Religious observance is a rough barometer.

Whatever way sociologists and religious writers examine the entrails of polls and questionnaires, the Church of the near future is going to be small

and committed. The communities founded by St Paul, the first local churches are thought to have been no larger than 70 or 80 people.

### Human community

Theologian Thomas O’Loughlin has written that 150 is about the maximum community size we can engage with properly, where everyone knows everyone. He refers to the small village synagogues archaeologists uncover in the Holy Land; human community, he says, is not scalable hence the 150 limit. These communities would move us away from “sacramental individualism” and “individualised sense of sin”.

Furthermore he says that if we are to have a life of discipleship we must be within an actual community of faith and be supported through common endeavour in that community. In other words, everyone has a role. It’s not ‘sit back and let father do it’ anymore.

Even in the early Church (in Corinth) the gathering of all disciples as equals was under pressure because of social status. Later the ministry of the priest was made distinctive and the assembly was segregated to divide clergy and laity. O’Loughlin says the solution is to create a space free of pews in our huge churches for the smaller assembly of people (about 75) for

the experience of a more involved liturgy.

One starting point already available in Canon Law is for every diocese to sponsor the training of acolytes and lectors, equipping men and women to be formally appointed as ministers to act in the liturgy. This is a small step but a necessary one on the road to a Synodal Church, he writes.

“A discernment process would be used to find out who are the best people to take on different tasks and ministries”

What he envisages is a small group of people, a traditionally small parish, where all know each other and come together to stand with the priest to share the eucharist of real bread and wine. A discernment process would be used to find out who are the best people to take on different tasks and ministries – this immediately stops the problem of the same person doing everything and the complaints even found in the Synodal reports of the ‘busy bodies’ found in the Church who put others off. Those with ability and talent are chosen and trained.

## Inside this issue

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- **Full US Continental Stage report**
- **Rome’s resistance of Germany’s Synodal Path**
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- **The relationship between synodality and ordinary Catholics**

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## Why Archbishop Eamon Martin needs to step up on synodality

### EDITORIAL CONTINUED:

One year on from the Church in Ireland's listening process, what has changed for lay men and women? Just to pick one of the concerns that came up in the synthesis report sent by the Irish bishops to Rome:

*"Accountability, transparency, participation, sharing, good governance - these are all key words used to express the hopes of participants for the future of the Church in Ireland when it comes to leadership. These words named what was absent in the lived experience of the Church for many of those responding to the synodal consultation. Many people feel that decision-making and authority are exercised solely by priests and bishops.*

*This power structure provokes discontent in them, frustration and anger with the processes of decision-making and exercise of authority at all levels in the Church.*

*Adult faith development, resources for lay ministries and collaborative decision-making was flagged as poor or non-existent. Clergy acknowledged that in many contexts they are too tired and weary to engage in these developments."*

**“How many men or women have been appointed to oversee the financial trusts of dioceses in Ireland?”**

What has been done to remedy this? Little it seems but there are some areas where effort is being made by a bishop or two and his priests, but they are the minority. Yet it's a start.

Lay men and women are being invited to sit and vote in the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October. The Bishops' Conference of Ireland has no lay women or men invited to it, let alone voting at it. It could be done by Archbishop Eamon Martin with the stroke of his pen. Will he?

How many men

or women have been appointed to oversee the financial trusts of dioceses in Ireland? Surely suitably qualified laity would give professional good governance to such things than unqualified clerics? Again it could be changed in the morning. Will it?

Even basic communication promoting the idea of Synodality is very poor; 50% of Mass going Catholics haven't even heard of it, very senior people on the Synodal steering committee have to ask permission to speak to a journalist, the chair of the committee – a lay woman – has been renamed as a Co-Chair – with a priest appointed as the other Co-Chair, why? General calls and emails from journalists on Synodality go unanswered for weeks. “Don't ask because we won't tell” seems to be the dominant theme.

### National Synod

Among those appointed to run the National Synod there seem to be fear and suspicion, not of those outside but those inside. The bishops' own conference is divided – the Bishop of Waterford and Lismore Phonsie Cullinan let the cat out of the bag by walking back on the synodal process even though he signed off on the document the bishops sent to Rome! Who else feels that way?

Is it any wonder their own staff are not sure footed, afraid to speak lest they offend a bishop, or damage themselves in the eyes of influential bishops. So we have to ask, is this the right way to run a synodal process? Are the best people involved or just the most convenient?

As Chair of the Bishops' Conference and Primate of All Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin has to step up and take responsibility for this process. Turning up in Prague for a Synodal conference is not enough, he needs to get the house in order at home. That means getting the reluctant bishops at the conference to turn up and switch on to synodality; to get bishops to get their reluctant priests to turn up and switch on,

marshal financial and human resources, fundraise, get the laity involved more, give the Synod office its own communications people free from that of the Bishops' Conference.

The Synthesis Report is clear, the people are calling for ACTION. It's 40 years overdue! Appoint change managers with serious qualifications and expertise in organisational change. Let's have new blood, new wine in new wine skins. One German bishop has said recently that synodal change could involve some of the greatest changes in the Church in 1000 years, since the reforms of Gregory in the 11th century.

**“The Irish lay Church is watching, the synodal world is watching and Rome is watching”**

If Archbishop Eamon Martin and the Bishops' Conference collectively don't step up, this synodal process in Ireland which is the last hope of so many Mass going Catholics will fail miserably, and the blame will be laid at his door and not at the new younger bishops who have embraced synodality but don't have the power and influence that he has. The Irish lay Church is watching, the synodal world is watching and Rome is watching. Ireland needs to show some leadership and act with conviction.

As the Indian Jesuit Myron J. Pereira, has written in this paper, “Does a synodal Church have a future? If this means sharing in the responsibilities of governance and service, if this means an outreach in dialogue to those on the margins, if this means a template of peace and mercy for a violent and fractious world – why then, yes, a synodal Church is meant to become what its Lord and Master always wanted it to be – “a light to the world, a city on a hilltop” (Matt 5.14ff).”

**“This power structure provokes discontent in them, frustration and anger with the processes of decision-making and exercise of authority at all levels in the Church”**

## Committee begins writing Synod on Synodality working document behind closed doors – so what next for synodality?

### Courtney Mares



Anna Rowlands, professor of Catholic social thought and practice at Durham University in Durham, England and member of the writing process of the working document of the Synod.

A committee of 22 people kicked off the writing process for the Synod on Synodality's working document that will be the blueprint for discussions during the meeting of bishops in October.

According to a statement from the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops on April 12, a “group of experts from five continents” met at the Vatican until April 19 “with the aim of starting the reflection that will lead at a later stage to the drafting of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the working document for the first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops”.

The *Instrumentum Laboris*, Latin for “working document”, frames the discussions of the Synod of Bishops. During a synod, bishops make comments and observations on the working document and meet in small discussion groups to propose changes to the text or to suggest new texts and additional areas for consideration.

To begin drafting the working document, the group of experts will meet behind closed doors to discuss the Continental Stage of the Synod on Synodality as a whole and analyse the seven final documents submitted by each of the regional assemblies. The committee's analysis will “highlight tensions and priorities to be studied in depth during the October assembly”.

### Who is working on the working document?

The Vatican published the names of the 22 people who will contribute to the first

stage of the writing process of this document. Only four of the listed participants are the same “experts” who helped to write the working document to guide the Continental Stage of the Synod last fall: Australian Archbishop Timothy Costelloe; Italian Monsignor Piero Coda; Australian Professor Susan Pascoe; and Mauricio Lopez, head of pastoral action for the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM).

**“Jesuit Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, the relator general of the Synod on Synodality, is also participating in the group's meetings along with Synod Secretary General Cardinal Mario Grech”**

Among the people working on the new Synod document are US Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas; Sister Nathalie Becquart; and Father Giacomo Costa, SJ, who served as the communications secretary for the Amazon Synod. The two other bishops contributing to the writing process are Bishop Luis Marín de San Martín, the Synod's undersecretary, and Bishop Lucio Muandula of Xai-Xai, Mozambique.

In addition to Becquart and Pascoe, four other

women are taking part in the drafting meeting. Anna Rowlands, a professor of Catholic social thought at Durham University in the UK, and Myriam Wijlens, a professor of canon law at the University of Erfurt in Germany, are participating, as are Sister Shizue Hirota, a Mercedarian Missionary from Japan, and Franciscan Sister Marie-Kolbe Zamora from Texas.

Laymen working on the document include Italian Paolo Foglizzo, an editor for the Jesuit monthly journal *Aggiornamenti Sociali*, and Thierry Bonaventura, the communication manager for the General Secretariat of the Synod of the Bishops.

The other committee members are Italian theologian Monsignor Pierangelo Sequeri and Polish priest Monsignor Tomasz Trafny, as well as three theology professors who teach at the Pontifical Gregorian University: Father Dario Vitali, Father Giuseppe Bonfrate, and Father Pasquale Bua.

Jesuit Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, the relator general of the Synod on Synodality, is also participating in the group's meetings along with Synod Secretary General Cardinal Mario Grech.

### What comes next for the Synod on Synodality?

At the end of the weeklong meeting to begin drafting the Synod working document, the the Vatican hosted a press conference on April 20. Once the *Instrumentum Laboris* is published, bishops will have months to review the document before the first assembly from October 4-29. The working documents for recent Synods of Bishops were published in June.

The Catholic Church's Synod on Synodality has been underway since October 2021. It will include two nearly month-long Vatican assemblies in October 2023 and October 2024. The Continental Phase, which followed a diocesan phase, concluded on March 31. The two sessions of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will bring together bishops from across the world to discuss and prepare a final document to counsel the Pope.

*Originally reported by Catholic News Agency.*

# US Conference of Bishops issues five urgent priorities directed to the October 2023 gathering of the Synod in Rome

Inspired by the fruits of synodality, the US Conference of Bishops issued five imperative priorities it hopes will be raised this coming October at the Synod of Bishops, ranging from extending the welcome to the peripheries and a greater recognition of the local Church.

**T**he Church in North America has experienced a significant moment of joy and hope in the journey along the synodal path. Gathered in a spirit of prayerful listening, local communities in our dioceses have expressed their joys and their anxieties.

The path led initially to shared spiritual conversations in each of our countries, and then to similar, mutual conversations by delegates from the United States and Canada. During the Continental Assembly, many resonances and tensions were expressed, all of which were spoken out of a great love for Christ Jesus and his Church.

**“Much work remains to be done to integrate the synodal style of consultation at the level of the local Churches”**

The North American Synod Team laboured to give a synthetic account of the richness of the conversations. The Synod Team has gathered the principal themes that emerged from our Continental Assembly and now propose them for further consideration at the Synodal Assembly to be held

**“Many who chose not to participate conceive of it as a competitive model, opposing laity to clergy. Others see it as insufficiently clear in its methodology, ecclesiology, and aims”**

in Rome in October 2023.

1. Integration of synodal consultation in the local Churches. This would include formation both in synodality and in the spirituality of discernment. Although the synodal way was experienced with such joy on our continent by those who participated, we acknowledge that it is just the beginning.

Much work remains to be done to integrate the synodal style of consultation at the level of the local Churches, as well as at the national and continental levels, to increase participation and reach many in our communities who have not yet even heard of synodality. This includes particular attention to the spiritual formation necessary for personal and communal discernment.

## Formation

We also urge that formation in the synodal style be encouraged and guided, so that it may be properly understood. Many who chose not to participate conceive of it as a competitive model, opposing laity to clergy. Others see it as insufficiently clear in its methodology, ecclesiology, and aims. Nevertheless, there is the practical matter of rethinking our diocesan and national ecclesial practices and/or structures in a way that truly prioritizes the synodal style.

2. The challenge of

welcoming those who feel excluded from participation in the life of the Church in a manner that is authentic and faithful to the Gospel and the Catholic faith weighs heavily on the hearts of our people. This tension in individuals and in communities was spoken of often.

Our people perceive that welcoming and serving the wounded and isolated in the world and in the Church is an essential aspect of the mission given to us by the Lord Jesus; yet they also observe that the new complexity of issues before us requires discernment, because it implies both new pastoral initiatives and fidelity to the *kerygma* that we are to announce publicly.

**“The theme of co-responsibility also touches the frequently raised issue of shared decision-making”**

Hence, many asked what is meant by “radical inclusion,” and what are its pastoral and even doctrinal implications? The

term itself elicited widely divergent reactions during our consultations. There also is a need for formation in how to be more welcoming of one another.

3. Co-responsibility. A plea for renewed consideration of the mission of all the baptised, with specific attention given to particular vocations, was frequently mentioned. The discernment of how baptismal co-responsibility for the Church’s mission should be appreciated and achieved demands a better understanding of the roles of the laity in general, and of women and young people in particular.

## Co-responsibility

The theme of co-responsibility also touches the frequently raised issue of shared decision-making and the desire for more transparency in Church governance. Discerning a practical way forward on these issues will require a consideration of current canonical norms and ecclesial structures. Intimately connected to this theme is the need for more integral formation for the whole of

Christian life.

4. Addressing the unity and communion of the Church in the midst of various kinds of polarization and division. Some polarizations arise within the Church, whereas others originate in the wider society and are transposed into the Church.

**“On our continent there is always a danger of forgetfulness of, and indifference to, those who are poor and ostracized”**

Discernment is needed so that local Churches are better able to promote the ecclesiology of communion, rooted in baptism and nourished by the Eucharistic sacrifice. These must be seen as primary sources of our identity and unity as the People of God, and prior to any racial, ethnic, social, economic, political, or ideological differences. This is a challenge for our immediate future.

5. A Church that goes

out to the peripheries.

Much of the conversation in the Continental Assembly concerned the internal workings of the Church, but we also are called to be outward looking. Our people speak often of having heard the call of Pope Francis to go out credibly to the margins. On our continent there is always a danger of forgetfulness of, and indifference to, those who are poor and ostracized.

The North American Synod Team heard through the synodal consultations that our people are asking for more robust formation in this kind of missionary activity. It is vital that the local Churches hear the call to assist the needs of the poor and marginalized churches around the world. This is a concern of the whole Church and should be articulated with greater urgency on the level of the Universal Church.

**i** To read the full report of the USCCB’s final Continental Stage report, see pages 16-19.



Pope Francis meets with the leadership of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican April 17, 2023. From the left are: Fr Michael JK Fuller, USCCB general secretary; Archbishop William E Lori of Baltimore, vice president; Archbishop Timothy P Broglio of head of the US Archdiocese for the Military Services, president; and Fr Paul BR Hartmann, associate general secretary.

# Synod organisers say process should lead to greater local control in Catholic Church

Christopher White

Organisers of Pope Francis' ongoing consultation with Catholics around the world said that, following recent discussion assemblies on each continent, there is a growing consensus that the process for the ongoing Synod of Bishops should result in the Vatican giving more deference to local Church authorities.

**“The findings from the initial listening sessions were enumerated in a 45-page document released last October”**

“There is, in fact, more than one way of being the Church,” said Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth, Australia, who said that a significant feature of synodality is the understanding that unity does not call for uniformity within the Catholic Church.

Costelloe's remarks came during a Vatican press conference on April 20 to mark the conclusion of the continental phase of the three-year Synod process.

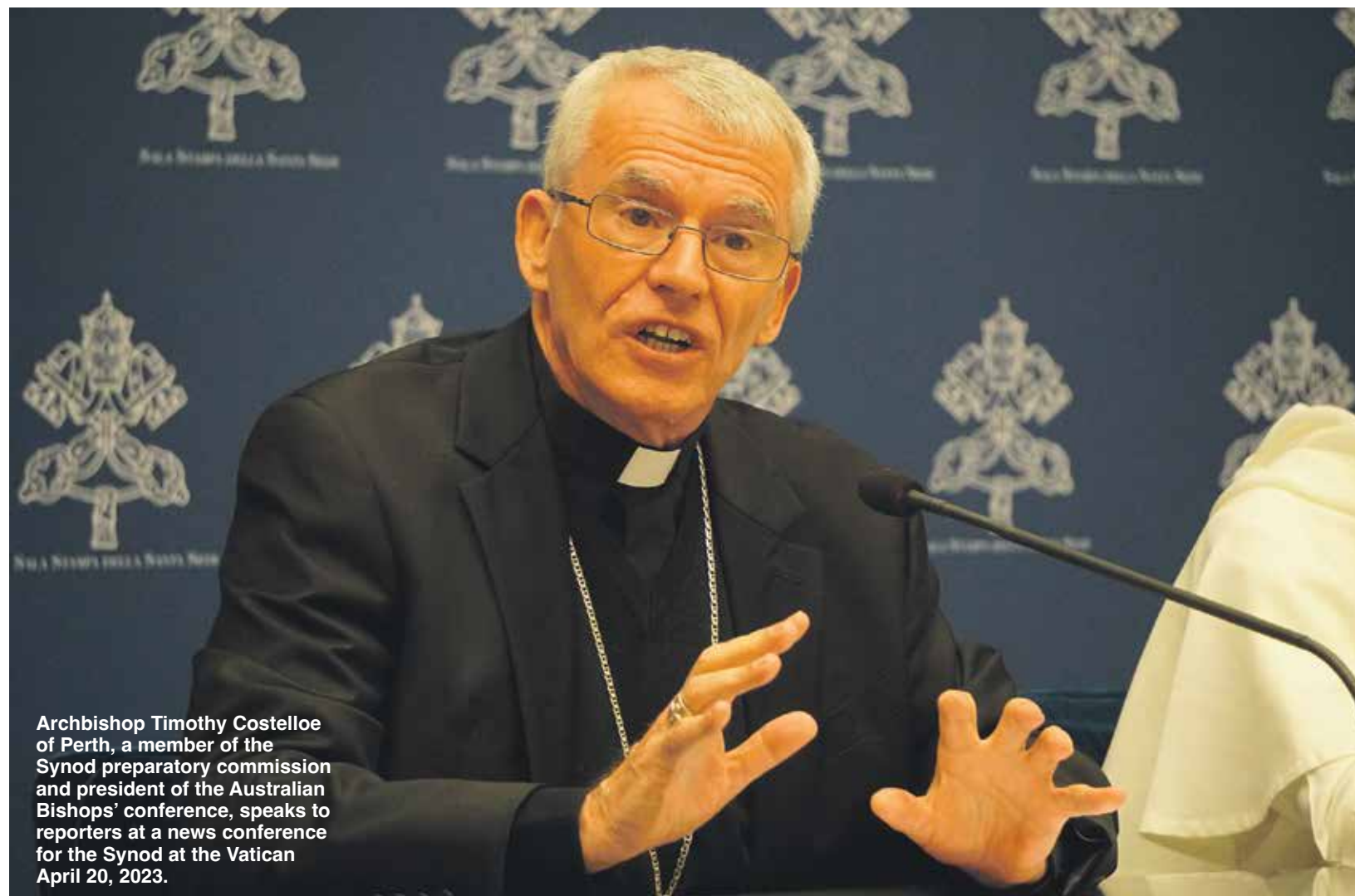
During February and March, seven continental meetings took place in order to reflect on themes that emerged during the first phase of the Synod process, which included tens of thousands of listening sessions with Catholics around the world. After the second phase of those gatherings, the third phase will include two month-long assemblies in Rome in October 2023 and October 2024.

## Listening sessions

The findings from the initial listening sessions were enumerated in a 45-page document released last October. The document, “Enlarge the space of your tent”, addressed a number of themes often considered taboo in the Catholic Church, including LGBTQ relationships, women's ordination, liturgical inculturation and clergy sex abuse.

That report formed the basis of the continental meetings that, according to Costelloe, evidenced widespread enthusiasm for this new era of openness and dialogue.

“There's almost universal appreciation of the process



Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth, a member of the Synod preparatory commission and president of the Australian Bishops' conference, speaks to reporters at a news conference for the Synod at the Vatican April 20, 2023.

and a desire that we not go backwards, that we've found something precious in the life of the Church, which has great potential for the future and that we need to continue down this pathway to the future, to be more fully the Church that we're supposed to be,” said Costelloe.

**“Both Becquart and Costelloe emphasized the importance of synodality as a lived experience, rather than something that can be reduced to particular issues or documents”**

Yet Costelloe, who is the president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference and a member of the seven-person team that will organize the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome

this October, cautioned that the Synod cannot be reduced to just one issue or a handful of concerns.

“It's really a Synod on how the Church, as it grows in its understanding of being a synodal Church, can find more productive or more fruitful ways of beginning to grapple with all of these issues,” he said.

Xaviere Missionary Sr. Nathalie Becquart, who is the undersecretary of the Vatican's Synod office, said that two of the major questions that are being reckoned with through the Synod process are what should be decided at each level of the Church and how to maintain the Church's unity, with room for flexibility and local adaptations.

Becquart, who attended four of the seven continental assemblies, said that “each local Church has something to share with others,” observing that there are both seeds of

synodality in every culture, but also obstacles.

Both Becquart and Costelloe emphasized the importance of synodality as a lived experience, rather than something that can be reduced to particular issues or documents.

**“Dominican Fr. Hyacinthe Destivelle, an official at the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, highlighted the ecumenical element of the synod process”**

Costelloe also acknowledged that there are many in the Church who either do not understand synodality or are even antagonistic towards it, but he invited them to take part rather than sitting on the sidelines.

“The only way, really, to understand the synodal journey is to engage in the synodal journey and the experience of doing it teaches us what it is,” he said.

Beyond the confines of the institutional Church, speakers at the press conference highlighted that the process has sought to engage those outside of Catholicism and those coming from other Christian traditions.

Msgr. Lucio Ruiz, secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Communications, said that an online “digital Synod” process collected 150,000 questionnaires from 115 countries, mainly from participants who are 18-40 years old. Thirty percent of those participants, he noted, were non-believers.

Dominican Fr. Hyacinthe Destivelle, an official at the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, highlighted the ecumenical element of the Synod process. Prior to the official start of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October, there will be an ecumenical prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square on Sept. 30.

“Synodality and ecumenism are in fact two paths that have a common goal: a

better witness of Christians today, ‘so that the world believes,’” said Destivelle, quoting from the Gospel of John.

## Conclusion

As the conclusion of the Continental Stage of the Synod is now complete, the process now moves forward to the October 2023 meeting, expected to draw over 300 Catholic leaders and ecumenical observers to Rome for a month of discussions.

From April 12-19, a team of some 20 bishops, priests, pastoral workers and theologians from five continents met in Rome to review final synthesis reports from the seven continental gatherings and to begin drafting the Synod's working document, known as the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which will serve as the basis for discussions in Rome this October.

Becquart told reporters that the goal is to publish the document by the end of May and said the aim was to bring together global expertise and to develop a document not from the writers' own ideas, but “in a spirit of discernment.”

**i** Originally published by the National Catholic Reporter.

**“Costelloe's remarks came during a Vatican press conference on April 20 to mark the conclusion of the continental phase of the three-year Synod process”**

# German Synodal Path reform rejected by Vatican



Pope Francis and the bishops of Germany pose for a photo after a meeting in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace November 17, 2022, as part of the bishops' "ad limina" visits to the Vatican.

## New friction between Vatican and German Church reformers

There are signs of a renewed tension between Rome and the majority of German bishops over reforms demanded by the German Synodal Path initiative. In a letter that surfaced, the Vatican Dicastery for Divine Worship and Sacraments rejected calls for non-ordained people to be allowed to lead baptismal celebrations and preach at Holy Mass in the future.

The letter is signed by the head of the Dicastery for Divine Worship, Cardinal Arthur Roche, and addressed to the president of the German Bishops' Conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing. It states that women and men not ordained to the priesthood would still not be allowed to preach in services with Eucharistic celebrations.

Permission for lay people to preach is one of the central demands of the German Catholic reform project Synodal Path, but the latter is not mentioned explicitly in the text. The delegates adopted a paper calling for this reform at their last plenary assembly in Frankfurt. The Synodal Path initiative, which was

launched by the German bishops and the Central Committee of German Catholics, came to an end earlier this month.

## “The initiative ‘We are Church’ accused Cardinal Roche of acting irresponsibly”

The Synodal Path's plenary assembly had also opted for the regular administration of the sacrament of baptism by lay people. Cardinal Roche's letter states that this is only possible in exceptional cases, such as when an ordained minister cannot be reached within a month. These circumstances “do not seem to exist in any diocese in the area of the German Bishops' Conference”, the letter says.

Lay theologians have been allowed by the bishop to baptise in the diocese of

Rottenburg-Stuttgart since November 2022. In the diocese of Essen, too, parish and pastoral assistants are allowed to administer the sacrament. Bishop Franz-Josef Overbeck cited structural change and a shortage of priests as reasons for the extraordinary administration of baptism in his diocese. Out of pastoral necessity in times of crisis, he said, he was using the possibilities of Church law.

The press spokesman of the German Bishops' Conference, Matthias Kopp, told *katholisch.de*: “We notice that in the letter the dicastery presents the current situation regarding the topics discussed. At the end, there is an invitation for further dialogue, which we gladly accept”.

The Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) expressed a similar view. “Talks in Rome are overdue and are in the heartfelt inter-

est of Catholic civil society in this country,” spokeswoman Britta Baas told Germany's *Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur (KNA)*. The letter from the Vatican once again makes clear the current Church teaching, she added. But practice has long since moved on, she said, and in just a few years no one would be able to seriously oppose lay preaching and baptisms by lay people “if the Church still wants to have meaning for local people”.

The initiative “We are Church” accused Cardinal Roche of acting irresponsibly. “The Vatican's constant attempts to patronise local churches confuse unity with uniformity,” it said in a statement published on Thursday evening. But the Church will not get anywhere with prohibitions, it said. What is needed instead are results-oriented dialogues and responsible experimentation.

“The debates must and will continue,” the group said. It called on the Vatican to “finally understand the Synodal Path as an important service to the universal Church”.

## Reform group Maria 2.0 says Catholic Church in Germany may have to ‘go its own way’

The Catholic reform group Maria 2.0 has called for greater independence for the Catholic Church in Germany in the light of Roman objections to Church reforms.

The group said committed people had wrangled for several years at the request of the German Bishops' Conference to find a common way out of the crisis and to agree Church reforms in a process triggered by the abuse scandal. “But now, before the smallest possible step can be taken, Rome is vetoing it,” Maria 2.0 said in

Essen on Sunday.

In a letter made public on Thursday, the Vatican had rejected calls for non-ordained people to be allowed to lead baptismal celebrations and preach at Holy Mass in the future. Permission for laypeople to preach is one of the central demands of the Synodal Path, the reform project in Germany that the letter did not mention. At the final Synodal Assembly in Frankfurt, delegates had adopted a resolution to this effect.

## “A Church in which unity did not mean uniformity and that instead enabled unity in diversity would not stand in the way of reforms”

It was now necessary to think about alternatives, Maria 2.0 said. “Perhaps one will then come to the conclusion that the Catholic Church in Germany must go its own way.” For the vast majority of Catholics, there would not be a return to the “the way it was”.

When asked to elaborate,

“In a letter made public on Thursday, the Vatican had rejected calls for non-ordained people to be allowed to lead baptismal celebrations and preach at Holy Mass in the future”

the group said: “We as Maria 2.0 do not see ourselves as those who are founding a new Church”. It merely wanted to point out contradictions that stood in the way of renewal. “This includes that we no longer want to submit to the guidelines from Rome, but demand a theology that does justice to all people: equal dignity, equal rights.”

## “The Maria 2.0 initiative has been campaigning for far-reaching reforms in the Catholic Church since 2019”

On this basis, the Catholic Church in Germany should confidently implement reforms and stop “asking Rome if it is permissible to ask questions”. A Church in which unity did not mean uniformity and that instead enabled unity in diversity would not stand in the way of reforms. In addition, real changes were essential “if the Church in Germany still wants to have a future”.

The Maria 2.0 initiative has been campaigning for far-reaching reforms in the Catholic Church since 2019. Its demands include more rights for women and a more liberal sexual morality.

## Synodal Committee to begin work despite sharp warning from Rome

The Synodal Committee set up by Catholic bishops and lay representatives in Germany is to begin its work in November despite opposition from Rome.

The constituent meeting will take place from November 10 to 11 in Essen, the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) announced in Bonn and Berlin on Tuesday.

The decision to form the committee was taken at the final plenary assembly of the Synodal Path reform consultations of the Catholic Church in Germany one month ago.

Its aim is to prepare a “Synodal Council” as a permanent body for joint consultation and decision-taking by bishops and laypeople in Germany. In a letter sent in January that was expressly approved by Pope Francis, the Vatican had rejected the creation of such a council on the grounds that it could interfere or be regarded as interfering with the bishops' authority.

The committee is to be made up of 27 diocesan bishops, 27 representatives of the ZdK and another 20 members elected by the Synodal Assembly.

ZdK President Irme Stetter-Karp and the president of the German Bishops' Conference, Bishop Georg Baetzing, are to head the Synodal Committee.

It is uncertain whether the conservative minority among the 27 diocesan bishops will participate.

## Cardinal Marx says priests and bishops are not above Catholic laity

Munich's Cardinal Reinhard Marx has said he believes priests and bishops are not above the laity of the Church. They are not superior to them, but assigned to them, he said at the Chrism Mass in Munich's Liebfrauentempel (Cathedral of Our Dear Lady).

The cardinal said that the “revolution of Christianity” consists in the fact that all the baptised and confirmed are partakers of the kingly office, the priestly office and the prophetic office of Christ.

This message had sometimes been suppressed in the history of the Church, but it represented an “incredible liberation”, Cardinal Marx added. At the same time, he called for a “more lively Sunday service” in which everyone had a part. People must also be more enthusiastic about the sacraments as “sources of strength of Christian life”, he said.

It should not be a matter of “only managing the decline and thinking that everything is getting worse and worse”, the Cardinal pointed out. People must feel that “the door opens, come to us, and we want to discover together the great adventure of faith, the love of God that drives us, that gives us a source of strength, that gives us hope”.

## Vatican rejects another core demand of the German Synodal Path – no lay participation in the election of bishops

The Vatican has rejected the lay participation in the election of bishops. The papal nuncio in Berlin informed the cathedral chapter of the Archdiocese of Paderborn that it may not involve lay people in its forthcoming election of a new archbishop. This means that there must be no deviation from the election procedure laid down in an international treaty between the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and the Holy See, in which only the clergy of the cathedral chapter are allowed to participate. Previously, the Catholic archdiocese, which represents almost 1.5 million Church members, wanted to implement a core demand of the German reform project Synodal Path by also involving lay people in the process.

According to the dean of the cathedral, Joachim Goebel, the cathedral chapter proposed to the nuncio that the so-called papal secrecy code be extended to the circle of 14 lay delegates. By extending this

secrecy, which is supposed to guarantee confidentiality in personnel selection, the body wanted to jointly discuss with the delegates a list of three Vatican approved candidates.

## Germany's most wealthy diocese has been vacant since Archbishop Hans-Josef Becker resigned on 1 October last year”

But the election procedure laid down in the concordat stipulates that only the cathedral chapter should receive a list of three proposed candidates from the Vatican and elect the archbishop from that list. “In order to preserve the legitimacy of the election, we therefore have no possibility to continue to involve you in the process of electing the bishop,” Goebel informed the 14 selected laymen in a letter. A corresponding “clear answer from Rome” had been sent via the Pope's nuncio.

After consideration it had now been decided that a

further participation of persons beyond the members of the cathedral chapter was not possible. Previously, the group of persons had already been involved in the preparation of a list with three proposed candidates, which was submitted to the Holy See. This was intended to make the search for suitable bishop candidates as transparent as possible.

Dean Goebel expressed regret at the “no” from Rome. The request for greater participation of lay people in the search for and election of suitable bishops had been presented and explained to the Holy See from very different quarters and at different levels, he said.

Germany's most wealthy diocese has been vacant since Archbishop Hans-Josef Becker resigned on 1 October last year. The election and appointment of a new archbishop is expected by the end of the summer.

## Study finds income of Germany's churches will fall drastically

Both major churches in Germany are regarded as rich,

and they collected a record-breaking 12.7 billion euro in church taxes in 2021. But the golden years may now be coming to an end.

## “Experts expect a nominal increase to 14.4 billion euro by 2027, but the actual value will be 11.3 billion euro when inflation is factored in”

The two large churches in Germany may have to tighten their belts, according to a new study. Calculations presented at Easter by the Cologne Institute for Economic Research suggest that church tax revenues will fall by eleven per cent by 2027 compared to 2019.

Church tax amounts to between eight and nine per cent of income tax in Germany. The amount is dependent on the level of employment. Ultimately, only just under half of Germany's Catholics and Protestants pay

church tax, with church members paying an average of 320 euro each last year, according to the Institute.

Church tax is collected by the state tax office and passed on to the churches. The state receives about three per cent of the tax income for this.

Experts expect a nominal increase to 14.4 billion euro by 2027, but the actual value will be 11.3 billion euro when inflation is factored in. There will also be an ageing population and a progressive loss of Church members.

Before the pandemic, it was possible to compensate for the loss of church tax revenue by increasing the amount paid by the remaining members. However, this will not be viable in the future.

In 2021, the Catholic dioceses collected about 6.7 billion euro from church taxes. The protestant regional churches came to 6 billion euro. In the future, the two large churches will have to cut their out-goings, according to tax expert Tobias Hentze. He advised against an increase in church tax, which he said would “make even more people leave”.



Irme Stetter-Karp, president of the Central Committee of German Catholics and co-chair of the Synodal Path.

# Is there a future for a more democratic Church and more importantly does a synodal Church have a future?

**Fr Myron J Pereira**



**T**here's a difference between democracy and synodality — and it is crucial. Most of us have heard the comment, usually given cynically to clinch a losing argument, "After all, the Church is not a democracy!" Of course, the Church wasn't a democracy in the days before Pope Francis and even more; it wasn't so for centuries either.

In fact around the turn of the 19th century, some popes had even condemned democracy as a "modern American fad", and prided themselves on "being infallible". The Church was a monarchy, or a celibate oligarchy, if you will, in which the "rule of the fathers" (patriarchy) was dominant, iron-clad and irrefutable.

## How Francis changed the image of the Church

But much, very much has changed since that "man from a far country" came to Rome in 2013, and took the name of Francis, after the poor man of Assisi and the patron of ecological concern.

Over the last ten years, Pope Francis has changed very little of Catholic doctrine. He is stubbornly, irritatingly orthodox.

But he has changed everything with regard to how the Church is perceived. By continuous and courageous action, he has exemplified mercy, forgiveness and understanding. He "smells of the sheep" (in that inimitable phrase of his), has gone out to the margins, and has promoted the inclusivity and dignity of women in a Church which had always treated them condescendingly as unpaid labour. And most of all, he has encouraged diversity of opinion and welcomed dissent.

## What democracy gave us?

We are all — or most of us, anyway — citizens of democratic states. And so popular is this form of government that even iron-fisted dictatorships like to pretend that they are "People's Democratic Republics" in name, if not in reality.

Practically speaking, this means we vote for our governments every four or five years; we voice our opinions publicly and freely; we can move about within or outside the country; and we like to think we have equal access to education, jobs, and livelihood. Do we have the same

freedom within the Church? Frankly, until very recently, no.

The Reformation (1521- 1648) was the watershed event that changed the Christian Church into the Roman Catholic Church. Henceforward loyalty and obedience to Rome — orthodoxy — became the watchword for future generations of Catholics. And in the vanguard were the Jesuits, who through their writings, their schools, their missions and the superior quality of their lives, influenced four centuries of Catholic life across the world.

## Confronting global change

But the world as we've known it was changing. The advent of industrialization across Europe and America created vast displacement of peoples, and migration, until then a small domestic problem, assumed global proportions. It contributed to the extinction of several indigenous populations, to indentured labour in several colonies, and to the festering slums in almost every major city.

Truly did Pope Leo XIII bemoan, "The tragedy of the 19th century was the Church's loss of the working classes". There were other losses. Until the political emancipation of the colonies of Asia and Africa, first begun with India (1947), the Catholic Church in these countries was largely a Roman template. It would take more than half a century after Vatican II (1962-65) to change the feudal mentality that obedience to Rome entailed.

For the Catholic Church in the global South — unlike its Protestant peers — has still to shake off the shackles of home-grown feudalism, as seen for decades in its treatment of Dalits, tribals and women.

If the past is any guide Catholic Indians would prefer to keep their "social distance" from other Catholics not of the same skin colour or social class.

## How synodality shapes the Church

This is why the mantra of Pope Francis — synodality — is both innovative and challenging. What form and shape will it take in determining the future of the Church in this country? Firstly, synodality will not be led by priests and bishops, but by the hierarchy together with the laity: women, Dalits, and tribal



A student at St. Francis Xavier Vocational Secondary School near Thanjavur, India, trims a piece of wood in one of the school workshops March 4, 2023.

people. These three groups have been explicitly mentioned because though the Church is largely composed of them, they are absent from most areas of decision-making. Discrimination against women and Dalits is rife. In a synodal Church, this must change.

Next, if "dialogue is the new way of being Church," as Pope Paul VI said long ago, a synodal Church must be as inclusive as possible. Hitherto, Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox have been indifferent to each other, and all three have looked down on the Pentecostals. A change of attitude is overdue.

The recent Pew survey on religious attitudes in India (2021) revealed the hostility of the major religions to any change of faith. This is typical of static and fundamentalist religion, and this in fact is what religions in this country have become — rigid and superstitious, and obsessed only about what not to eat, drink and wear.

A synodal approach will welcome "the dialogue of life and work," where Catholics join others in educating and agitating for matters of justice and human rights. But care-

ful! The synodal path may become a slippery slope uphill.

Finally, to have any relevance in the world of today, synodality must embrace the most pressing issue of our times — climate change and environmental disaster.

If communion and participation are the working methods for this new Church, then its most urgent mission is saving our earth from the few whose rapacious greed will destroy the planet.

## Democracy versus synodality

Is a synodal Church the same as a democratic Church? There are similarities, obviously. The emphasis on participation for one. Both democratic governments and the Church of yesteryear believe in select representatives, though neither can control the corruption of members of parliament or the sexual scandals of the hierarchy. Whence today, the insistence on the participation of all.

And then again, all democracies lobby for power, whereas governance in the Church — no matter how unsavoury its past may have

been — is a matter of service, service guided by the Spirit.

When arrogance replaces humble service, corruption begins. Thus it was in the past: the Church clamped down on freedom because it was intoxicated with religious power and intolerant of other views.

Does a more democratic Church have a future, we asked at the start of this essay. Perhaps the question should be rephrased: does a synodal Church have a future? If this means sharing in the responsibilities of governance and service, if this means an outreach in dialogue to those on the margins if this means a template of peace and mercy for a violent and fractious world — why then, yes, a synodal Church is meant to become what its Lord and Master always wanted it to be — "a light to the world, a city on a hilltop" (Matt 5.14ff).

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# Synodality and ordinary Catholics



The Begijnhofkerk has been re-arranged so that all can stand around the Lord's table (Photos by Frank Bruggeman).

## Thomas O'Loughlin



If synodality is about renewal in the Holy Spirit, a renewal of liturgy is one of the forms it must take by **Thomas O'Loughlin**

**W**hen I ask "ordinary Catholics" what they think of all the discussions about synodality and Pope Francis' call for us to become a synodal Church, I usually get blank stares. Some assume that I am one of those academic types that enjoys asking irrelevant questions, others simply say that they haven't got a clue what I am talking about.

**“How will their experience of being disciples be touched and enhanced by our turn towards synodality?”**

We had better face an awkward truth: while theologians and clergy are agog about synodality – some eager, some disdainful – for a very large proportion of the People of God, it is just some complicated new idea that makes little sense.

I had better clarify what I mean by "ordinary Catholic". I mean someone who is not a cleric, nor a member of some special group

within the Church (such as a prayer group, or the choir, or the parish council), and who probably does not subscribe to any special religious news service whether it is *La Croix* or *The Tablet* – and who probably just passes by the various leaflets, magazines, and diocesan papers that are at the back of church buildings.

So, the question arises: what will reach this large group of sisters and brothers? How will their experience of being disciples be touched and enhanced by our turn towards synodality?

### Experiencing synodality

If this whole movement is to be more than just words, it must give disciples a richer liturgical experience. This is because it is at the liturgy that most ordinary Catholics have their experience of what it means to be Church.

That experience must, somehow, to do three things:

It must engage them as individuals within a community.

It must, to be true to the fundamental insight of synodality, involve a deeper listening to the word of God and to one another.

It must lead to a greater sense



A photo taken at a celebration of the Eucharist in the University Parish in Leuven, Belgium.

of their own dignity as brothers and sisters in baptism who are called as a people to offer praise and thanksgiving to the Father.

If synodality is about renewal in the Spirit, a renewal of liturgy is one of the forms it must take.

### What will it look like?

In the above picture, the Word of God is being shared among the gathering. The assembly is arranged so that it is a community-event of listening. They are not consuming a message being dispensed from the front of a lecture hall. We are the people of memory. Only when we recall "the mighty acts of God" can we recognise our identity as disciples of the Christ.

Listening is not just hearing words; it is giving the words a chance to seep into us. Yet most ordinary Catholics are arranged in row after row like children in an old-fashioned classroom. We now know that the lecture hall only works as a communication venue for those who are already highly

involved, but (60 years after the reform of the liturgy) this much better format is strange to most Catholics.

**“We are all celebrants. But how does the ordinary Catholic get an experience of this?”**

It is worth noting that in this church-building they did no elaborate re-building work – they just put the chairs in a rough circle because this allows people to feel they are a community and it helps focus people in their listening.

### We are all celebrants

The great shift in liturgy at Vatican II was a move from the notion of a presbyter who celebrates on behalf of the baptized to the recognition that we, as God's sons and daughters, are all celebrating God's goodness. We are all celebrants. But how does the ordinary Catho-

lic get an experience of this? Look at the first photograph.

We are not consumers at the Eucharist. We are guests. This photograph allows us to recall the words of the First Eucharistic Prayer: Remember, Lord, your men-servants (*famuli*) and your women-servants (*famulae*), indeed all who are standing around (*omnes circumstantes*).

We are a celebrating community. If synodality is to take root, it will require an experience of solidarity in discipleship. In an arrangement like this, that solidarity can become a weekly experience.

**i** Thomas O'Loughlin is a presbyter of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton and professor-emeritus of historical theology at the University of Nottingham (UK). His latest book is *Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians* (Liturgical Press, 2019).

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# The response of the local Church to synodality in Ireland: A case of few but firm ... So far

It's been a year since every diocese engaged in a listening process as part of the Synodal Pathway. Many parishes have responded to the issues raised by the people of God and in turn have begun new initiatives, reforms, etc.

*The Synodal Times* contacted all of Ireland's 26 dioceses to ascertain what types of synodal-inspired initiatives have taken place in parishes since the culmination of the listening sessions. Four dioceses submitted reports in response.

## Achonry Responding to the Synodal Process

Achonry is a predominantly rural diocese, encompassing mainly parts of East Mayo, South Sligo and one parish in Roscommon, with a population of approximately 40,000 people. There are twenty-three parishes, now served by twenty-two parish priests and supported by a number who are retired.

**“The question remains, what inhibits us as Church leaders or as Church members from becoming more proactive in addressing the pastoral issues that have been long identified as needing attention?”**

During the autumn of 2021 and the spring of 2022 various consultation exercises were conducted in the diocese in preparation for the Universal Synod 2021-2024. The collated responses from the diocese show a very close correspondence to the national synthesis, insofar as the issues identified were almost identical. Indeed, when one looks at the syntheses from various countries around the world there is a remarkable similarity.

It is also interesting to note that there is very little in these syntheses that call for major doctrinal changes, apart from the issue of women's ordination and some LGBT+ issues. In other words, most of what has been identified as needing attention or action is within

the remit of each diocese. The question remains, what inhibits us as Church leaders or as Church members from becoming more proactive in addressing the pastoral issues that have been long identified as needing attention?

As a first step in responding to what emerged from the Synodal process, Bishop Dempsey together with the Diocesan Pastoral Leadership Team, agreed that each parish establish or renew its Parish Pastoral Council (PPC). Each parish was provided with fresh guidelines for nominating and appointing members to the PPCs. In response to the synodal consultations, emphasis was placed on recruiting new members and representatives of the younger population. This was generally successful insofar as each parish now has a properly constituted PPC and a significant portion of the membership are first-time members of a PPC.

On February 17th 2023 the Bishop commissioned all of the PPCs at a Mass in the Cathedral. Over the following two months, training was provided for them at seven venues across the diocese. The training programme involved attendance on two evenings for about two hours and a follow-up day to be held in June. The programme was entitled, “A Church Structured for Mission”.

The programme content



Delegates participate at the National Pre-Synodal Assembly in Athlone.

stressed the participative nature of Church membership, the responsibility that each member has for the life and wellbeing of the parish, the priority of people over territory in the life of the Church, as well as basic guidelines in running good meetings.

**“An evaluation process provides insight as to what is positive in a project and can also identify where there are weaknesses”**

In light of the importance given to communications in the feedback from the synodal process, this was stressed during the training sessions. It was recommended that PPC members listen to what people in the parish are saying about the life of their local Church, to elicit their views as to what needs attention, to publish,

via the parish newsletter and website the issues being considered by the PPC and to alert people to the decisions that are taken.

The training sessions also devoted some time to how a discernment process underpins good decision making in a pastoral context. This had been identified in the consultative process as an unfamiliar methodology, one which has been mentioned regularly by Pope Francis in his various addresses.

It was also suggested during these training sessions that the issues highlighted by the synodal process could be put on the agendas of the PPCs. Some of these could be prioritised and worked on methodically over a period of time.

A further suggestion was that each PPC carry out a regular evaluation of its work. This was regarded as important because very often projects are not sustained or fail without any assessment of what hap-

pened. An evaluation process provides insight as to what is positive in a project and can also identify where there are weaknesses.

Without this information, especially where there are failures, enthusiasm and energy are sapped and any attempt to try the same or similar projects in the future will meet with cynicism.

**“The agenda created by the Synodal process is very comprehensive and can only be addressed over a long period of time”**

While the Diocesan Pastoral Leadership Team prioritised the establishment of PPCs in each of the parishes, it has also encouraged various diocesan commissions to pick up on other items in the Diocesan Synthesis. The Diocesan Youth Commission is supporting training for youth leaders in the diocese, as well

as developing initiatives such as the John Paul II Awards, a Diocesan Youth Day and youth pilgrimages.

The Diocesan Liturgy Commission, too, has been addressing some of the concerns noted in the synodal process. Training has been put in place for those involved in the Ministry of Reader and Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist and several workshops have been offered for parish choirs.

## Chrism Mass

Diocesan events such as the Chrism Mass and the Commissioning of the PPCs have been used to model good liturgical practices, involving a better representation of ministries, age groups and ethnic groups.

The agenda created by the Synodal process is very comprehensive and can only be addressed over a long period of time. Nevertheless, a start has been made and certain items have been prioritised.

Even these very modest beginnings have generated a sense of enthusiasm and energy across the parishes. In the end of the day, the Synod is simply a catalyst for the local Churches to engage more proactively with some of the longstanding and urgent pastoral needs of our parishes. We continue to pray that the good work begun can be brought to completion.

**“As a first step in responding to what emerged from the Synodal process, Bishop Dempsey together with the Diocesan Pastoral Leadership Team, agreed that each parish establish or renew its Parish Pastoral Council (PPC)”**

## Synodality in the Archdiocese of Armagh: April 2022 – April 2023

Since the end of the local consultation sessions last April, and the publication of the National Synthesis in August, there have been significant steps taken to establish synodality in the Archdiocese of Armagh. A Diocesan Synodal Moment with priests and people from every parish in the archdiocese was organised for 10th May to review the raw data from the diocesan consultation, foster further discussion, and extract the key issues. The feedback was then synthesized by the Diocesan Synodal Core Group for the 29th of May, in preparation for the National Synodal Moment held in Athlone on the 18th of June.

### “The following are the issues that were highlighted by the participants as achievable priorities in the coming years”

In addition to serving on the Diocesan Synodal Core Group, Auxiliary Bishop Michael Router and the youth coordinator, Janet Forbes, also serve on the National Steering Committee. In the months of June and July, they, with others from the national team, helped to prepare the materials for the National Synodal Moment and to compile the National Synthesis. The synthesis was completed and released on August 16th in Knock and the Diocesan Synodal Core Group distributed it to the priests and parishes

of the Archdiocese for local discussion.

On 1st December, another Diocesan Synodal Moment was held with over one hundred people present to see what could be learned from the Armagh Diocesan Synthesis. The participants also reviewed the National Synthesis and provided feedback for the delegation who were representing the Irish Church at the European Synodal Gathering in Prague in February.

As part of the diocesan effort to keep the synodal momentum alive the parish representatives and priests present at the December meeting were asked to prioritize what could be done in the diocese over the next two years without waiting for the approval of the universal Church or the outcome of the last session of the Synod on Synodality in October 2024. The following are the issues that were highlighted by the participants as achievable priorities in the coming years. The issues raised, which are summarised below, will provide an interim pastoral plan for the diocese until the proposed Diocesan Assembly in 2025.

1. Evangelization and the transmission of Faith:

The question of how we share the Gospel message and connect it to everyday life is a concern. Enhancing liturgical celebrations, focusing on the quality of homilies, and making language more accessible, coupled with a review of communication structures/practices across the Archdiocese of Armagh, is a priority. There is a strong call to reach out beyond traditional boundaries and include the LGBTQI+ community, those experiencing poverty, ethnic groups

etc, living in the Archdiocese of Armagh.

2. Formation in Faith and Synodal Practice:

Providing services to cater to the sacramental needs of the baptised often takes up most of our energy, rather than reaching out to the uncatechised, marginalised, or disaffected. The task of being a missionary disciple, which we are all called to at baptism, is often seen as a task for others, especially the ordained and commissioned few. Formation in faith and synodal practices of discernment are a priority for the Archdiocese of Armagh.

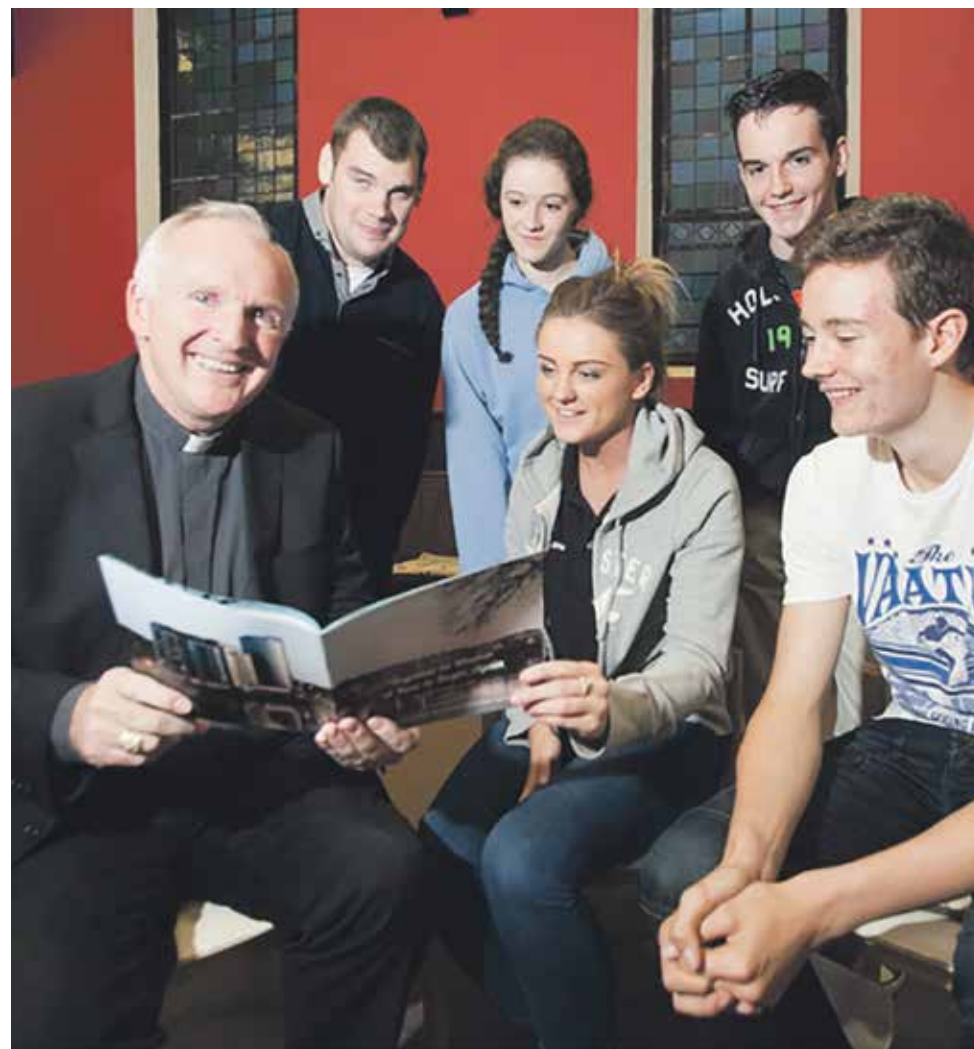
### “The Archdiocese will strive to support and foster such local gatherings and continued dialogue”

3. Creation of spaces for authentic dialogue:

There is a desire for transparency and the creation of spaces where everyone can speak freely. The creation of such spaces grounded in prayer and spirituality is a priority. The next stage in our diocesan synodal journey will focus on this desire for the creation of spaces for dialogue. The Archdiocese will strive to support and foster such local gatherings and continued dialogue.

4. Co-responsible and Synodal governance and leadership:

The Archdiocese of Armagh and its parishes have councils and commissions in place that are grounded in co-responsibility. However, more needs to be done to make these groups truly representative and authentically co-responsible. Communication needs



Bishop of Limerick Brendan Leahy pictured with young Catholics of the Diocese during the build-up to the 2016 Limerick Synod.

to be improved to provide a better flow of information and feedback between the Parish Pastoral Councils, the Pastoral Areas, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Bishops and others who assist in the governance of the diocese.

5. Young people, women, and the marginalised:

Young people feel that little has been done to make them feel part of the faith community, and women, though involved and committed in many ways, feel marginalised and have little say in the decisions that are made. The Archdiocese is called to affirm and champion the role of women, create spaces where young people feel welcome, and actively accompany those who are marginalised.

### Ongoing Work on Synodality

The priorities outlined above have been presented to the priests of the archdiocese at a meeting of the Council of Priests and at a Vicars Forane meeting during the early months of 2023 for discussion and comment. Priests were encouraged to discuss them with their Pastoral Councils and decide in the coming months what they might be able to achieve at a local level. The foundation for these priorities is already evident in most parishes but further work will need to be done in order to develop them and embed them as a regular part of parish life.

The priorities and calls to action listed above have

also been discussed at the first meeting of the Diocesan Pastoral Council's new term and will provide the basis of an agenda for their time in office. At diocesan level we are endeavouring to realign the existing structures, according to synodal principles and to enhance the role of the lay faithful in all decision making.

### “Priorities and calls to action regarding youth ministry are currently being circulated to clergy and parish pastoral councils”

Regarding youth ministry in the Archdiocese of Armagh a strong call for accompaniment and formation of young people emerged from synodal listening held at, local, national and universal level. Considering this call to action, the Archdiocese felt that this was such a significant area that it has already held two synodal gatherings centred on youth ministry. These took place in February and March 2023. The findings of these gatherings are being considered and discerned further by the Archdiocese. Priorities and calls to action regarding youth ministry are currently being circulated to clergy and parish pastoral councils.

There is a lot happening

but as is often the case in Church a small number of people at diocesan and parish level carry out the bulk of the work so sometimes the progress, while steady, can be slow. This is unlikely to change until people are more familiar and comfortable with the synodal method of dialogue and discernment. The Archdiocese of Armagh is therefore committed to developing long term practices and processes aimed at growing confidence, competence, and capacity for the task of developing a synodal Church.

### The Diocese of Limerick and engagement with the Universal Synod and the Irish Synodal Pathway.

#### Diocesan Phase

On 9th and 10th October 2021, Pope Francis launched the Universal Synod on Synodality. Thus began what was termed the 'diocesan phase' when every diocese engaged in listening and consultation, submitting their thoughts and findings by the end of May 2022 - feast of the Ascension. In Limerick, 38 parishes engaged with the Listening Process, group synodal conversations were also held at various locations, with a number of parish groups and a varied selection of other ecclesial and social groups - 29 such groups were inter-



Archbishop Eamon Martin speaks at the National Pre-Synodal Assembly meeting in Athlone.



Parishioners from the Diocese of Meath gather for a Continental Stage meeting.

viewed from a wide range of backgrounds - and 28 online submissions were received through the Diocesan website questionnaire alongside a number of individual submissions received. This data generated the data for analysis and discernment to create the Diocesan Synthesis.

### Limerick Diocesan Synod 2016

However, we also included the work from our own recent Diocesan Synod. In the two years leading up to 2016 a very significant listening process was conducted whereby all sixty parishes engaged in listening and discernment along with a further twenty-five other groups including educational facilities, migrants, members of the Travelling community, people with disabilities, youth ministry groups and social workers.

**“It is interesting to note congruence and divergence between what has emerged from the two processes”**

More than 4,000 people responded to questionnaires and a further 1,500 people participated in large gatherings and small group discussions. Emphasis was placed on trying to reach people on the margins and those who have lost connection with or become disenfranchised from the Church. Pope Francis has urged us to do likewise in this Universal Synod.

As stated, the Diocesan Synod of 2016 has yielded a

great deal of data which was further coded into twelve themes - six of which were brought forward to the Synod itself. This data and these themes were now integrated in to the listening which has been recently engaged in throughout the diocese as part of the Universal Synod. It is interesting to note congruence and divergence between what has emerged from the two processes.

### Finalising the Diocesan Synthesis

We have a 'synodal team' comprised of ten people - laity, clergy, religious. This group met to read through the various submissions and produced a draft of the Diocesan Synthesis. This draft was presented at a Pre-Synodal Meeting which was held in Rathkeale on May 28th 2022 and was essentially an opportunity to feed back to those who had engaged the summary to check for accuracy and whether it truly reflected that which had been named. Subsequently the draft was finalised and submitted at national level.

### Finalising the Irish Synthesis

In June 2022 at national level a group of readers and writers produced a draft from the 26 diocesan syntheses and a further 25 submissions. On the 18th June 2022 - Vigil of Corpus Christi - the National Pre-Synodal Meeting was held in Athlone. 160 delegates from all 26 dioceses and other groupings attended. In August 2022 - The Synthesis of the Consultation in Ireland for

the Diocesan Stage of the Universal Synod is finalised and sent to Rome.

### Finalising the Continental Document

A group of Readers and Writers sat for two weeks in Frascatti in Italy to review the syntheses of 112 different Episcopal Conferences throughout the world. They then created a synthesis of this in a wonderful document entitled 'Enlarge the Space of Your Tent - the Working Document for the Continental Stage'. This document (as part of the continuous 'feed-back loop') was sent back out to the local Churches.

### Limerick's Engagement with the Continental Document

The Diocesan Synodal Team has read across all three syntheses; the diocesan, the national and the Continental. In reading them they engaged with three questions:

- \*What resonates, what is new?
- \*What are the Challenges?
- \*What are the priorities and the calls to action - at diocesan level, at national level and at universal level?

Our response to these questions was two-fold. On the one-hand we submitted our diocesan response to the National Office whereby it formed part of the Irish Submission offered in Prague in February. On the other-hand we also wanted engage Pastoral Units and parishes to identify particu-

lar, concrete actions at local level. On 28th January 2023 in the Rathkeale House Hotel a diocesan gathering took place in which the synodal team presented its report and named issues that could be addressed at local and diocesan level. It was also agreed that this needs to be integrated with the Diocesan Pastoral Plan - Moving Forward Together In Hope - which was developed following the Diocesan Synod of 2016.

### “Parental Partnership in sacramental preparation Communication - using technology to promote the message”

Issues that were identified and which have been taken on at diocesan and parish level include:

- \*Be a listening, welcoming Church.
- \*Faith formation.
- \*Pastoral Care of the Family.
- \*Parental Partnership in sacramental preparation.
- \*Communication - using technology to promote the message.
- \*Liturgical renewal.
- \*Enlarge the space of your tent." Bring more people in; expand the tent; be missionary vis a vis youth and others.
- \*The role of women.
- \*Ministry to LGBTQI
- \*Foster encounter with the person of Jesus Christ through generating small Christian communities and

small faith communities based on the Word. We need to underline community dimension in the practice of faith. Also, spaces where people can come together and talk about faith - speaking out of a 'faith experienced' context.

\*Promote a synodal way of being at every level...keep ever-before us the question "Are we being truly synodal?"

\*Look creatively at our Church buildings.

There is ongoing work in the diocese around developing a model of leadership based on pastoral units (grouping of parishes); bereavement support and funeral liturgy teams; Pastoral Unit Councils; faith formation and catechesis; creative liturgies; responding to Laudato 'Si etc.

### Navan Parish - Diocese of Meath - Parish priest Fr Declan Hurley

Bishop Thomas Deenihan has asked every parish in the Diocese of Meath to constitute a parish pastoral assembly. So whereas before some parishes would've had parish councils, Bishop Deenihan was very anxious that every parish would establish a new form of parish council. So there was a fair bit of thought that went into what that would be. A name change was part of it. It's seen as being more representative of the parish community - something that's more concerned with pastoral and faith initiatives rather than parish management.

It's very much oriented

toward evangelisation and mission and that's probably the main distinction between this new model and the former model. As part of the process for constituting the new parish pastoral assembly, each parish is asked to conduct listening sessions and information sessions with parishioners. We took that to heart in Navan. We said that we want to consult parishioners and inform them about this new parish assembly. We thought that it would be helpful to do this in the context of the previous conversations of the previous Lent which were the synodal conversations of the Diocesan Phase of the Universal Synod.

**“As a result of these meetings, we'll be able to give the newly-constituted parish assembly a good roadmap to start with”**

We did this by harvesting the findings of the Synod in Lent 2022 and our steering committee prioritised three of them and then we held listening sessions around those three and how the new parish pastoral assembly might prioritise them when it's constituted.

It was also a way of discerning the type of people that we will invite and would be nominated for our parish assembly.

People are getting used to the words Synod and synodality. They're seeing it but the vast majority of people still

**“There was a real sense of a desire from those who attended to cry out for the Holy Spirit to touch our lives so that we then have the bravery to move forward and then to action what we talk about”**

don't understand. They might be aware of something going on at a universal level, they might be aware that there's a Synod coming up in Rome and that it affects all of us in some way and that all are invited to be part of it in some way. But for the vast majority of parishioners, it hasn't really landed with them yet.

However, I have to say that the meetings that we had at Lent this year gave parishioners who participated a great experience of what it can mean to be synodal. In our first meeting we looked at the Synod finding from last year that encompassed a sense of belonging and what this would mean. So we had a presentation on that and then we had a spiritual conversation – the model of conversation that the synodal process is really encouraging. It was lovely to see the people in the room – you had some of the priests of the parish sitting with people, knowing that they're being listened to.

**“We could invite people to come to open meetings to discuss what the Spirit is prompting us to do here”**

As a result of these meetings, we'll be able to give the newly-constituted parish assembly a good roadmap to start with.

Perhaps there is a sense amongst clergy and those who were more involved with the synodal conversations last year that things have plateaued a bit and that there's not much happening. What is very much coming from the steering committee is an encouragement just to be synodal. Based on what we did last year at diocesan level, based on what came out of the National Pre-Synodal Assembly last year, we don't have to wait for Rome to give us permission to begin acting because already there are the fruits of a synodal process which we can begin to action at parish level and at diocesan level.

Take faith formation, that's something that any parish can begin to do. We could invite people to come to open meetings to discuss what the Spirit is prompting us to do here.

So what's going on now is an encouragement – an

encouragement for people to be synodal. To begin to address things in parishes in a synodal way. I think that's what's happening. There's nothing glitzy about it – just perhaps a little change.

Just to give an example, before this I might've run with an idea but now I would do it in a much more consultative way where we can listen and chat. Of course, it's not about listening to my idea, it's about listening to the Spirit who leads, guides and prompts us. That's the big change here. Synodality is actually giving us a way to bring together views that are polarised – even at a parish level.

**Michelle Daly - Chairperson of the outgoing Parish Pastoral Council in Navan Parish**

It's been a really nice opportunity for all of us – even going back as far as the synodal conversations that we have had. We've really put into action what that synodal conversation was about. What I think we've done with regard to the pastoral assembly, we tried as much as possible to harvest the ideas of as many as we could and going forward that's what we're trying to do.

I know that I, as an individual, and many of the people that are involved in the parish, find the parish to be a real source of life for us in our way of living and really have a value for the parish in our own lives; getting together and chatting about where we feel the parish could go and what potentials are there.

There are so many people in our parish who have a hunger to develop the parish and to develop themselves within that parish and I think what this process has allowed for us is the opportunity to get involved, have their voices heard and formulate a vision for what the parish could be, whether that be in their own mind or together in a group. In expressing all of that, it really encourages everybody. When you talk about what the parish means to you and what's going on and what could go on, it kind of gives you a bit of impetus for enthusiasm and you think that you have your own role to play in conjunction with the clergy. You don't just

sit back and get everything served to you, it's about being aware of our giftedness that comes from the sacrament of baptism and knowing what we can offer and do.

I think that's something that both the Synodal Pathway and definitely the move to the assembly as opposed the parish council have fostered. I think the call seems to be – I could be wrong – but I think the call is urging us to get up off of our bums and do something with the idea of evangelisation and mission.

**“There's a sense among the people that they want to understand their faith so that they can become missionary but in an authentic sense where their faith is really owned by them”**

With the three point plan we had, there was a real case of knowing that these are three areas that we could look at that would give people that impetus to realise that the time is done for sitting around and we really have something to give; but there are loads of challenges with that. But it is an opportunity to see what's possible and to do it together.

The culture has changed so much. There's a sense among the people that they want to understand their faith so that they can become missionary but in an authentic sense where their faith is really owned by them. I think in one way, that's where the change in culture has done us a service because all of the people who attended our meetings were happy to stand up and say that they probably don't understand their faith enough.

In the past that was okay; but it isn't okay anymore. There was a real sense of a desire from those who attended to cry out for the Holy Spirit to touch our lives so that we then have the bravery to move forward and then to action what we talk about.



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**Dr. Eugene Duffy**

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**Prof. Massimo Faggioli**

Professor of Historical Theology Villanova University USA. He is also a columnist for *La Croix International*, and contributing writer to *Commonweal*.

**Prof. Myriam Wijlens**

Professor of Canon Law Erfurt Germany. She is a member of The Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, an advisor to ARCIC III and a Co-Moderator of the Peter and Paul Seminar.

**Prof. Eamonn Conway**

Is a priest of Tuam archdiocese and Professor of Integral Human Development in the School of Philosophy & Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia.

**Mr. Christopher Lamb**

Is a British journalist who is the Rome correspondent for *The Tablet*. He is a contributor to the Vatican Insider page of *La Stampa* and a regular commentator for the BBC on Vatican and religious affairs.

**Dr Gemma Simmonds CJ**

Is a sister of the Congregation of Jesus, director of the Religious Life Institute and senior lecturer in pastoral theology at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge. She teaches Christian spirituality at the Cambridge Theological Federation.

**Prof. Maria Cimperman RSCJ**

Is the Associate Professor of Catholic Theological Ethics. Founding Director, Center for the Study of Consecrated Life (2014-2022) and Associate Professor of Consecrated Life Catholic Theological Union (Chicago, USA).

**Prof. Vimal Tirimanna CSsr**

Is Professor of Moral Theology at the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka, Kandy, Sri Lanka and the Pontifical Alphonsian Academy, Rome.

To book a place email Deirdre at  
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# Vatican announces laypeople, including women, will vote in Synod on Synodality assembly

## Hannah Brockhaus



The Vatican announced last week that there will be laypeople participating as voting members in the Synod on Synodality's October assembly, a break with past custom, which allowed laypeople to participate without the right to vote. Pope Francis will also approve every member in advance.

The general assembly of the Synod on Synodality will take place in two sessions, in October 2023 and October 2024. After the vote on a final document for the assembly, the Pope alone decides whether to take any actions based on the recommendations in the final text or whether to adopt it as an official Church document.

The leadership of the Synod released information in an FAQ sheet April 26 about who will attend the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October and how they will be chosen.

### Change

The biggest change announced Wednesday was the removal of the "auditor" role. In past synods, auditors included priests, religious, and laypeople, who did not have the right to vote in synod deliberations.

Now, these 70 members, who may be priests, consecrated women, deacons, and laypeople, will be able to vote. They will be chosen by the Pope from among a list of 140 people selected by the leadership of this year's continental Synod meetings.

According to the Synod leadership, it is requested that "50% of [the selected people] be women and that the presence of young people also be emphasized".

"In selecting them, account is taken not only of their general culture and prudence but also of their knowledge, both theoretical and practical, as well as their participation in various capacities in the Synod process," the FAQ sheet says.

A second change states that five women religious and five men religious will be elected to represent their institutes of consecrated life rather than 10 religious priests as in the past.

The last modification is that Pope Francis will personally choose the representatives of the Vatican dicasteries who participate in the assembly.

"It's a change, but it's not a revolution," Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, relator general of the Synod on Synodality, told journalists during a meeting to explain the changes April 26. "Change is normal in life, in history," he added.

Approximately 21% of the total participation, expected to be 370 people, will be non-bishops, Hollerich explained.

Cardinal Mario Grech, the secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, said the non-bishop participants — among them priests, religious, deacons, and laypeople — "are witnesses of the memory of the process, of the itinerary, of the discernment that began two years ago."

**“It will remain a synod of bishops,” he said, ‘but it enriches all of the Church’ to have the participation of others”**

Grech told *CNA* after the meeting that the synod of bishops has asked the presidents of the continental assemblies, which took place this spring, and the leadership of the Eastern Catholic Churches, to each submit a list of 20 people, 10 men and 10 women. From these lists, Pope Francis will choose 10 members.

He said the decision to include laypeople as full members does not "undermine" the nature of the Synod as a meeting of bishops. "It will remain a synod of bishops," he said, "but it enriches all of the Church" to have the participation of others.

The process for electing the bishops to represent the various countries will remain the same, with one small addition, Hollerich said. Previously, countries too small to have a bishops' conference did not have a representa-



Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, relator general of the Synod of Bishops, and Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod, pose for a photo in the Vatican press office April 26, 2023, after speaking to reporters about Pope Francis' decision to have women and laymen as voting members of the Synod.

tive at the Synod, he said. Now they will each send one bishop.

### Conferences

The other bishops will be elected by their bishops' conferences. The number of bishop representatives for each country is determined based on the size of the bishops' conference. Pope Francis must also ratify the elections of bishops as members of the Synod assembly.

There will also be participants with a nonvoting

capacity, who are experts, facilitators, and fraternal delegates from non-Catholic faiths.

The norms regulating synods of bishops were updated by Pope Francis in 2018 in the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio*.

According to the FAQ sheet from the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, the norms continue to be based on *Episcopalis Communio* "with some modifications and new features to the composition of the assembly and the kinds

of participants".

The document called the changes "warranted within the context of the synodal process."

### Visible principle

"This synodal process, initiated by the Holy Father, the 'visible principle and foundation of unity' of the whole Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 23), was possible because each bishop opened, accompanied, and concluded the phase of consultation of the People of God," the FAQ sheet

said.

"In this way," it continued, "the synodal process was at the same time an act of the entire People of God and of its pastors, as 'the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches, fashioned after the model of the universal Church, in and from which churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church' (LG, 23)".

"It is in this perspective that one must understand the Holy Father's decision to maintain the specifically episcopal nature of the assembly convened in Rome, while at the same time not limiting its composition to bishops alone by admitting a certain number of non-bishops as full members," it said.

**“This synodal process, initiated by the Holy Father, the ‘visible principle and foundation of unity’ of the whole Church, was possible because each bishop opened, accompanied, and concluded the phase of consultation of the People of God”**

**i** Originally reported by Catholic News Agency.

# The Pope's firm 'no' on women's ordination... and why we need realism in the debate

**Michael Kelly**



The Catholic teaching on a male-only priesthood is not a matter of theological speculation but of the Church's reliance on Apostolic tradition, writes **Michael Kelly**

**T**he Continental Phase of the synodal process has concluded, and the Vatican has been clear that much of what came up in the various reports falls to local parishes and dioceses to implement.

**Hierarchical Church**

One of the dangers, of course, in a hierarchical Church is that one is always looking up for direction rather than discerning and looking around and realising what God is saying in and through the People of God.

At least in some of the reports, many people seem to have felt that their local parish is not welcoming enough to people they describe as being on the margins. I would respectfully suggest that there is very little that Pope Francis can do about that.

In fact, I'll go further – there is nothing he can do about that, absolutely nothing. If the local people cannot come together and work out how to make their parish more welcoming, then they might as well just lock the doors of the church and get on with something else.

**“We need look no further than the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) for inspiration”**

The Vatican's synod office in passing the ball back to parishes and dioceses has also made it clear that there are many things in the Church that fall to the universal Magisterium and are not the subject of local discussions which give the wrongful impression that everything is up for debate.

This false idea will do nothing to renew and reform the Church, but only raise unrealistic hopes and leave people

more disappointed.

The simple fact is that the Catholic Church does not believe itself to possess the authority to ordain women, and no amount of desire from some sections or focus groups to change that doctrine will change the identity - that fundamental reality.

Perhaps it is useful to set out the meaning of the terms we use rather than assuming that everyone is versed in Church jargon. We need look no further than the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) for inspiration.

When we talk about the Magisterium, we mean the living teaching office of the Church. It is the Magisterium that has the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God as found in Scripture and in Tradition.

Vatican II (*Dei Verbum*) insists that this teaching office “is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ” and that it “is not above the Word of God”.

**Divine wellspring**

According to Vatican II, both Scripture and Tradition flow from “the same divine wellspring” and unite to form a single reality and, the council teaches, they tend towards “the same end”.

To put it simply, Sacred Scripture is the Word of God as written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Sacred Tradition “takes the Word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity”.

Scripture and Tradition, which “are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence” constitute “a single deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church”.

So, from a theological point of view, Scripture, the doctrinal tradition, and the sacramental practice of

the Church down through the centuries provide the sources for Catholic theology in discerning God's will with regard to the priesthood.

But they can only be understood as a single theological lens and by any measure, that lens does not point in the direction of the Church suddenly denying its own inner reality and deciding to ordain women.

**“How many others have gone looking and found the Church in the presence of its minister either unwilling or unable to answer?”**

The matter is, as Pope Francis has been at pains to point out, settled with St John Paul II insisting in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in 1994 that “the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful”.

But how do we square this with the very real perception that it is the Church's failure to ordain women to the priesthood that is at the heart of the alienation undoubtedly felt by many women?

I think there has been a failure of the Church to teach what it teaches. There has also been a failure of theology in the public square. The Synod consultation phase found that many Catholic teachings were poorly followed, poorly understood or both.

How many people, I wonder, firm in their rejection of the Church's teaching on the priesthood have taken the time to immerse themselves in that teaching? How many others have gone looking and found the Church in the presence of its minister either unwilling or unable to answer?

**Present**

No-one should fear questions around the ordination of women (or anything else) in the context of our present synodal journey. But people must be willing to engage with these questions and answer them and people must be willing to see things from a different perspective.

Otherwise, we simply end up with the pre-defined answers to our own narrow questions rather than coming to a deeper understanding of the faith –



Newly ordained priests stand as Pope Francis celebrates an ordination Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.

one which sees ministry as service rather than power.

Lastly, we must be careful of falling in to the trap of being what Pope Francis has called a ‘self-referential

Church' always obsessed with its own structures, committees and the exercise of power. Such traps are the heart of clericalism and do nothing to make the


Church missionary and one that goes out rather than huddles together in sacristies.

**i** Michael Kelly is Editor of The Irish Catholic newspaper.


**HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

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KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:



**MARY MCALEESE**



**JOAN CHITTISTER**

**“We need you for The Discipleship of Equals 8-14 Oct 2023 - we're**

# “There is no going back” – US Conference of Catholic Bishops publishes revealing Continental Stage report

In early April, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops released its final Continental Stage report. This report will form part of the total submission used as tools to illuminate the spirit of the faithful and guide bishops during the respective 2023 and 2024 Synods of Bishops. Does the report signify a maturing Church or do well-established grudges continue to plague the Church in North America? *The Synodal Times* reports on the state of the most polarised Church in the West.



Pope Francis meets with the leadership of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican April 17, 2023. From left: Fr Michael JK Fuller, USCCB general secretary; Archbishop Timothy P Broglio of head of the US Archdiocese for the Military Services, president; Pope Francis; Archbishop William E Lori of Baltimore, vice president; and Fr Paul Hartmann, associate general secretary.

**T**ime and time again, the invitation from the Holy Father to the People of God to participate in the 2021-2024 Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation & Mission elicited a range of responses. Profound joy and enthusiasm were experienced by many, while resistance, suspicion, and anxiety were aroused in some.

**“The experience of being able to share and express both disappointments and blessings was seen as a real fruit of the synodal process”**

In the Continental Stage, the delegates accepted the invitation; they came, and they saw. As one delegate remarked, “The Holy Spirit is at work! This is only the beginning; we don’t know where the Holy Spirit is taking us. We are coming to a deeper understanding of what it means to be Catholic”.

The experience of the Synod demonstrated that many Catholics in North America are committed to the communal discernment necessary to discover where the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church in the present moment.

There was great gratitude for being together with other Catholics,

who come from different parts of the continent, who are lay, religious, and clergy, each with their own ideas and views, yet all part of the one Church. As one group mentioned, “The synodal process gives us life and also gives life to the Church; we are grateful for that gift”.

The overwhelming sentiment from those who participated in the local, national, and now continental stages was an optimistic hope and uplifting joy at being able to participate and contribute. As one group noted, “The word that kept coming up in our group was joy – to share, to listen, and to be together”.

The experience of being able to share and express both disappointments and blessings was seen as a real fruit of the synodal process. “People would start with pains and resentments, but at the end of the process the Holy Spirit had opened people up”.

## The virtual Continental Assemblies

The Continental Stage in North America consisted of twelve virtual assemblies (sessions): seven in English, three in Spanish, and two in French. Attending these assemblies were 931 delegates, with an almost equal split among delegates between women and men (50.2% / 49.8%, respectively). The 931 delegates ranged from a variety of vocations, with 391 lay women, 235

lay men, 76 deacons, 148 priests (diocesan and religious), 77 women religious, and 4 non-ordained men religious. There also were 146 bishops who participated in one or more of the virtual assemblies.

**“The conversations at the Continental Stage focused on the intense need for the Church to become even more synodal”**

Almost 90% of the dioceses and eparchies in the United States and Canada (236/267) were represented in the assemblies. As one group reported, “There was a lot of participation and diversity, yet there was still lots of convergence. The Spirit is at work”.

What follows is based on what was heard at the virtual assemblies. The North American Synod Team was composed of laity, priests, religious, and bishops from both Canada and the United States, who met together to reflect on what was shared and to discern not a plan or a project, but simply what has arisen from this journey so far.

In order to further ensure that the Final Document was faithful to what was shared during the Continental Assembly and to foster co-responsible discernment, the Synod Team

invited comments and reflections on a draft of this document from 25 delegates from Canada and 25 delegates from the United States. The document was subsequently revised in light of their contributions. Bishops designated by each episcopal conference validated and approved the Final Document.

This report from the Continental Stage is North America’s contribution to the larger, global discussion and discernment stage of the 2021-2024 Synod. The North American participants felt that the DCS reflected much of what the participants expressed during the diocesan and national stages of the Synod.

The conversations at the Continental Stage focused on the intense need for the Church to become even more synodal. In summary, what was shared and what was heard at the Continental Stage was that by our common baptism, we are each called by God and gifted by God with dignity. This common baptism places us in communion with Christ and one another.

The synodal journey thus far has made us more conscious of where the stresses on our communion lie. But it also has revealed that, as one delegate described it, “the more we become missionary disciples the more we will address these challenges”.

Our baptismal dignity is inseparable from our baptismal respon-

sibility, which sends us forth on mission. “Many times, we focus on the negative and forget the joy; the Spirit we experience in our core is to be a missionary”.

## Called and gifted through Baptism

Expressed over and over in the Continental Assembly of North America was the need to grow into a more synodal Church, starting with the recognition of the dignity of all the baptized. “Walking together and expanding the tent envelops everyone. All the baptized have a right to be there”.

Every human person possesses the dignity that comes from being created in the image of God. Through baptism, Christians share in an exalted dignity and vocation to holiness, with no inequality based on race, nationality, social condition, or sex, because we are one in Christ.

In the Continental Stage in North America, the joy of the participants was based in large part on their baptismal dignity being acknowledged through the synodal path. This awakened a desire for a greater recognition of, and opportunities for, co-responsibility within the Church and her mission. “One of the challenges was the need to keep discovering and keep seeing what our baptismal call is inviting us to do”.

At the same time, many of the conversations, like those held dur-



ing the diocesan and national stages, referenced times when the Church's members failed to recognise this shared dignity. These failures place stress on our communion with one another. "Responding to Christ's message requires that we talk the talk and walk the walk. We all must respond to our universal call to holiness".

### Co-responsibility

Our personal call to holiness arises from our baptismal dignity. We are called to a particular state of life and simultaneously to share in the mission of the Church. The call to holiness includes and endures for all the baptised, no matter their state in life. "We should release the gifts of everyone".

As several delegates in the North American Continental Stage explained, this universal call to holiness is lived out in particular ways of service to the wider mission of the Church. "We cannot always be all things to all people; some people have certain charisms and we need to divvy up the work".

### The responsibility of ministry is not just for priests, but for each baptized person

Frequently in the Continental Assembly, there was the desire for greater co-responsibility among the laity and the clergy, including bishops. "We need to ground ourselves in the equal dignity of baptism. This is an entry point for co-responsibility". An emphasis on our shared baptismal dignity allows us to see in each other a co-labourer who can be formed, equipped, and encouraged for mission.

"We are called to act co-responsibly in a synodal fashion, not to wait until we know how to do everything perfectly, but to walk together as imperfect people". When Church structures and practices are dynamic and able to move with the Holy Spirit, everyone is able to "use their gifts in service of the Church and of each other".

For many delegates, the experience of the synodal path was one that reignited their call to discipleship. "Through the synodal process the Church is being lived out right now in front of us and we are experiencing it! We are excited about this. The Holy Spirit is moving in this process and giving us a common spirit of mission worldwide!".

This co-responsible Church will challenge each of us and necessitate greater collaboration and communication among all the people of God. "We must . . . reach out to everyone from every walk of life. The responsibility of ministry is not just for priests, but for each baptized person. This is a real space where we can allow women and some of the more marginalized folks in the Church to really take up leadership roles"

### Women

There can be no true co-responsibility in the Church without fully honouring the inherent dignity of women. The continental delegates recognised the crucial work women do to keep the Church "alive and healthy". Nonetheless, delegates also named women as a marginalised group in the Church. "We have come a long way, but we deplore the fact that women cannot invest

themselves fully".

While clarity is still needed around exactly what a fully co-responsible Church looks like, delegates proposed the examination of a variety of aspects of Church life, including decision-making roles, leadership, and ordination.

Central in the discernment of these questions is the faithful acknowledgment of women's baptismal dignity. A frequently heard call was that "more space needs to be opened for them, especially at decision-making tables". The Church in North America was encouraged to "recognise, discern, and promote the role of women . . . so that they may have a greater presence in the Church".

### Youth/young people

Authentic acknowledgment and respect for the gifts and talents of young people is another vital aspect of a co-responsible Church in North America. "We are often perceived as the future, but we are also the 'now' of the Church".

Many delegates lamented the absence of young people both in their parishes as well as in the Continental Assembly. "We are concerned that young people are not at the table and we wonder how they are going to be represented in Rome. Not only people who work with young people but the young people themselves. They know their reality the best".

Empowering young people to more fully live out their baptismal dignity requires that we confront tensions within our communion as the Body of Christ. The "gifts of young people are not always fully appreciated by older generations. We should appreciate the creativity and the ingenuity of young people".

### Formation

The people of God participating in the Continental Stage in North America expressed a great longing for formation as the key to living out both their baptismal dignity and their duty in a co-responsible Church. Especially as a response to ongoing challenges – as well as the desire to further engage in the practice of synodality – formation arose as a fundamental requirement.

"The answer to that question that surfaced was the need for formation – formation for synodality, for listening deeply; formation for stretching as is alluded to in widening the tent". Delegates expressed the desire for the Church to further "develop formation in order to know our faith better".

There also was a special concern to better accompany youth throughout their formation process, fostering a bold curiosity about the Christian faith. "Children who go through religious education come out wondering if there is even a God. Are they afraid to ask questions? If they are afraid to ask questions, they may be stunted in their ability to grow in their faith".

This desire was intimately linked to the dignity of our baptism and the responsibility it entails. "In sharing our faith, we – who are in the pews – we have to not only be able to share our faith but to understand it".

Delegates expressed a desire for formation that is life-long and offered to all members of the communion of the baptised, whatever their vocation. This includes not

## "In the Continental Assembly, as in our national reports, there was a deep desire for greater inclusivity and welcome within the Church"

only formation in the fundamental teachings of our faith, but also formation for synodality, co-responsibility, welcoming, and going out to the peripheries. "A deeper formation allows us to present the beauty of our faith, rather than a list of rules. To go deeper and underneath it and be formed in a way that allows us to present the hows and whys".

### Jesus is the centre-pole of the tent that we must never lose sight of in what we do"

Delegates were insistent that deeper formation is central to our ability to live out our baptismal dignity and strengthen communion with Christ and each other. "How do we go about becoming a people that have a disposition of listening, of being synodal, of putting listening first?".

### Communion with Christ and one another

During the Continental Assembly, the North American Synod Team heard over and over again of the need within the synodal process to maintain the centrality of Christ, with whom we are all united by baptism. "Jesus Christ [is] at the center of the tent" .... "The Eucharist is the center of our lives" ... "The center of our faith is the person of Jesus Christ" ..... "Jesus is the centre-pole of the tent that we must never lose sight of in what we do".

Through baptism we are made members of the body of Christ

and are drawn into communion with one another. Yet the synodal process of discernment in North America has revealed that the Church, like the larger society, is experiencing polarisation and a strong pull towards fragmentation.

This was a major theme throughout the diocesan, national, and continental stages of the Synod. As one delegate commented, "The call to communion is something we need to make present in us and in our communities".

There was a recognition that we cannot fully live out our baptismal dignity and responsibility without addressing the areas where our communion with one another, and thereby our communion with Christ, is stressed almost to the breaking point.

### Trust and credibility

A significant threat to communion within the Church is a lack of trust, especially between the bishops and the laity, but also between the clergy in general and the lay faithful. One of the major areas of tension in North America is the clergy sexual abuse crisis and its effects, which have created a loss of trust that cannot be overstated.

Many people continue to carry the wounds of abuse and many others have lost their trust in the clergy and in the Church's institutions. To this reality, one must add that the historical wrongs found in the residential/ boarding schools for Indigenous people, which also included abuse of all kinds.

This only compounds the woundedness of the Church and the lack of

trust in its leaders. "The sexual abuse crisis and the residential schools are so much a part of the reality of the Church; we have to be able to engage those questions and face those situations".

Although it was acknowledged that Church leaders have done much to promote healing and prevent future abuses, it is apparent that more needs to be done to rebuild trust. As one delegate commented, "There are different levels and degrees of engagement within the Church as an institution, but it has to start with healing and trust-building".

Many of the listening sessions of the Synod called for a cultural change in the Church with a view to greater transparency, accountability, and co-responsibility. "Synodality," it was seen by many, was "a beautiful way to build trust through dialogue".

### Greater inclusivity

In the Continental Assembly, as in our national reports, there was a deep desire for greater inclusivity and welcome within the Church. In fact, one of the major factors that was seen as breaking down communion was the experience of many that certain people or groups feel unwelcome in the Church.

The groups named during the Continental Stage included women, young people, immigrants, racial or linguistic minorities, LGBTQ+ persons, people who are divorced and remarried without an annulment, and those with varying degrees of physical or mental abilities.

While the reasons for experiencing the Church as inhospitable may



Pictures of an explosion at the US Capitol in Washington after supporters of President Donald Trump breach the building January 6, 2021.

vary, what is common is the Church's need to authentically honour the baptismal dignity of everyone. As one participant explained, "we think we are welcoming, but we know that there are people who feel 'outside' the Church".

Another suggested that this is because "we get caught up in the minutiae of evaluating the worth of people on the margins" ... There is a need to differentiate between the importance of teaching and the need to welcome those into the Church, especially as it relates to our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters".

### “The listening sessions also produced ample examples of the longing to incorporate young people more fully in the life of the Church”

Some participants in the synodal process reported on the profound sense of suffering of those prevented from receiving the Eucharist. While there are a variety of reasons for this reality, perhaps preeminent among them is Catholics who are divorced and remarried without an annulment, and others whose objective situation in life contradicts the beliefs and teachings of the Church.

Additionally, some delegates spoke of those wounded by the limitations placed on the pre-conciliar Latin rite. Unfortunately, liturgy is not always experienced as unifying. "We could find our unity in common prayer, but liturgy is one of the things that is divisive in the Church and we must break through that".

The listening sessions also produced ample examples of the longing to incorporate young people more fully in the life of the Church. As one group stated simply, the youth "are indispensable". Practically all of the synodal consultations shared a deep ache in the wake of the departure of young people and viewed this as integrally connected to becoming a more inclusive Church. One group noted that there is a "generational divide in communities – tension between younger and older members of the Church. This is something to pay attention to". The desire to be a more inclusive Church resonated throughout all the virtual assemblies. One delegate said, "The Church must know how to be the family of God, to be open and receptive".

### Listening

Alongside the desire to be a more inclusive and welcoming Church was the need to understand how to be more hospitable, while maintaining and being true to Church teaching. "There is tension between welcoming and formation in Church teaching. We need to keep in mind that Church teaching comes from the gospel – work must be done in that kind of hospitality".

A key to solving this problem was seen in the ability to listen. One delegate reminds us that "listening doesn't always mean you get the answer you are looking for", while another pointed out that listening helps us understand the perspectives of others and thereby welcome them. Another proposed that we "need to be inclusive and to love

people enough to meet them where they are, but to love them enough not to leave them there".

A frequent theme heard during the assemblies was that "tension is a part of life and will never be completely resolved. We must keep listening, but tension will always be part of our life. We need to be okay with that and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us through that". The delegates reported that the Synod was an experience of both being heard and of listening. It is important that "people have a chance to speak but also to be heard and validated, recognised".

### Formation in synodality

In the virtual assemblies there was discussion about the stress placed on our communion within the Church. There was a consensus that more formation in synodality is needed. "We need formation on how to listen and accompany; resources that will help us grow as people".

The majority of the delegates agreed that in order to become a more listening Church, one that bolsters communion, more formation in how to be a synodal Church is crucial. "How do we continue training ourselves, converting ourselves and others, to this synodal way?" was a frequent question.

Synodality is a great source of hope for renewing and strengthening communion. The hope is that by becoming more synodal, the Church, as one delegate described, would create "safe places where people can ask their real questions about Church teaching without judgment or punishment".

In describing the experience of the Synod, one delegate said, "The most beautiful thing about this was that from every stage of listening, people responded in an extraordinary way. People felt listened to very well. We believe that the concept of synodality is a concept that must continue, that must become a way of life. We thank God for these fruits".

Such formation not only would aid the development of deeper bonds of communion within the Church, but also would be a stimulus for evangelization and mission. As was discussed in one of the assemblies, "We want our faithful to know that they are needed and wanted ... Listening is the first part of evangelisation; we are accompanying folks, meeting them where they are".

### Sent forth on mission

Throughout the Continental Stage in North America, delegates recognized the duty of the communion of the baptized to go out on mission to the peripheries to proclaim the Gospel and care for those who are wounded and downtrodden.

"How beautiful the Church got to be by the wounded and the hurt! When the Church reaches out in times of disaster, that is a reminder that the Church is a place of compassion and care. Caring for people is a good way to welcome them in".

Many recognised that the Church is at its best when walking alongside those forced to the margins of our society. It was recognized that for the Church to be truly missionary – to go out to the peripheries and to evangelize – what is needed is holistic formation in our baptismal dignity and calling, in co-responsibility, and in synodality.

It also was recognised that in

US President Joe Biden tours the Knock Shrine in County Mayo, Ireland, with rector of the Basilica, Fr Richard Gibbons, April 14, 2023.



order to proclaim Christ effectively and clearly, the Church must be united. "We must find the balance to proclaim Christ to others and be united as a Church rather than being fragmented into separate groups".

### “How can we give the truth with compassion and get rid of the fear that parishioners have to go out and evangelise?”

With God's grace, this, in turn, will make for a stronger communion, allowing the Church to be a credible witness to Christ and a Church *en salida* (Spanish) or *en sortie* (French), i.e., a Church that "goes forth". As one participant noted, "We want to respect everyone's inherent dignity and meet people where they are. We want to do all this while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church".

Delegates expressed the desire

to "nurture the joy of discipleship" by accompanying those who experience alienation in our society. "We are called to accompany marginalized people. How can we give the truth with compassion and get rid of the fear that parishioners have to go out and evangelise?".

For some, this means living even more deeply the truth of the Gospel. "These people have not left the Church, but the Church has left them. How do we go out and minister to them and exude that joy?".

The North American Synod Team heard repeatedly that central to this mission of accompaniment is Jesus Christ. "This whole process of synodality must all be centred around Jesus Christ. It is Christ we are trying to live out in all our listening, accompanying, worship, participation".

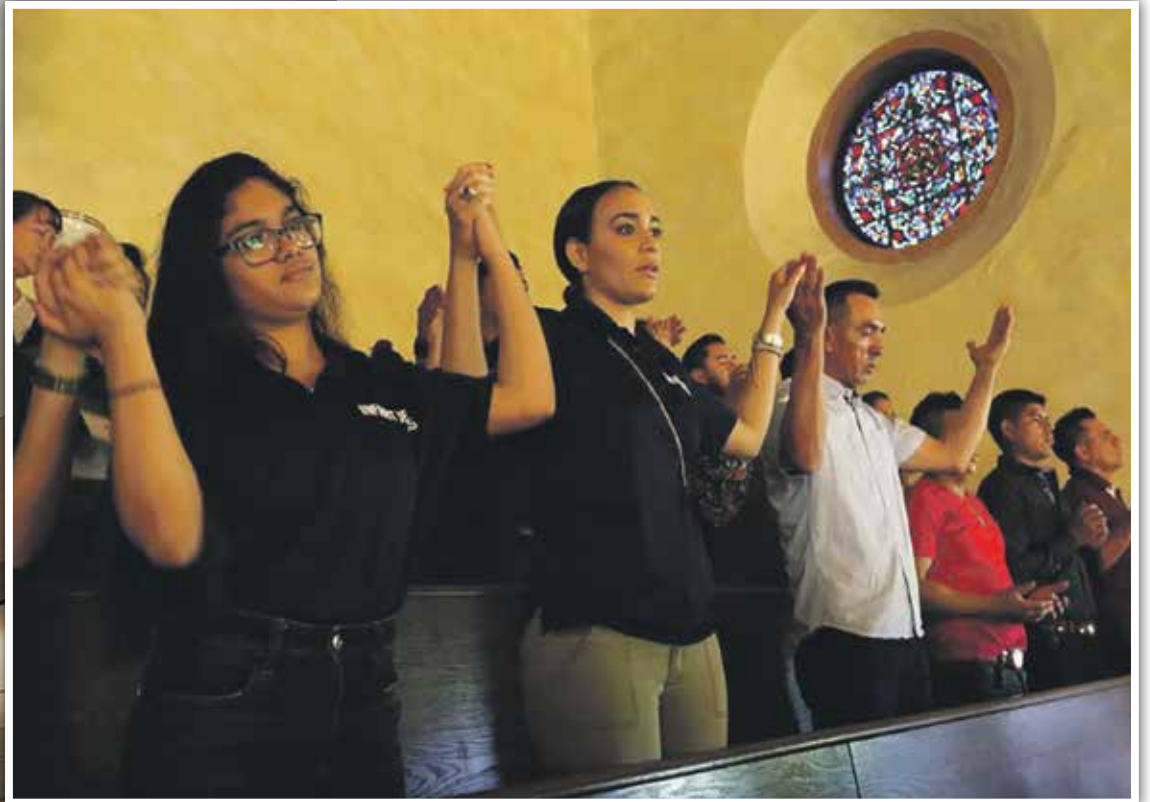
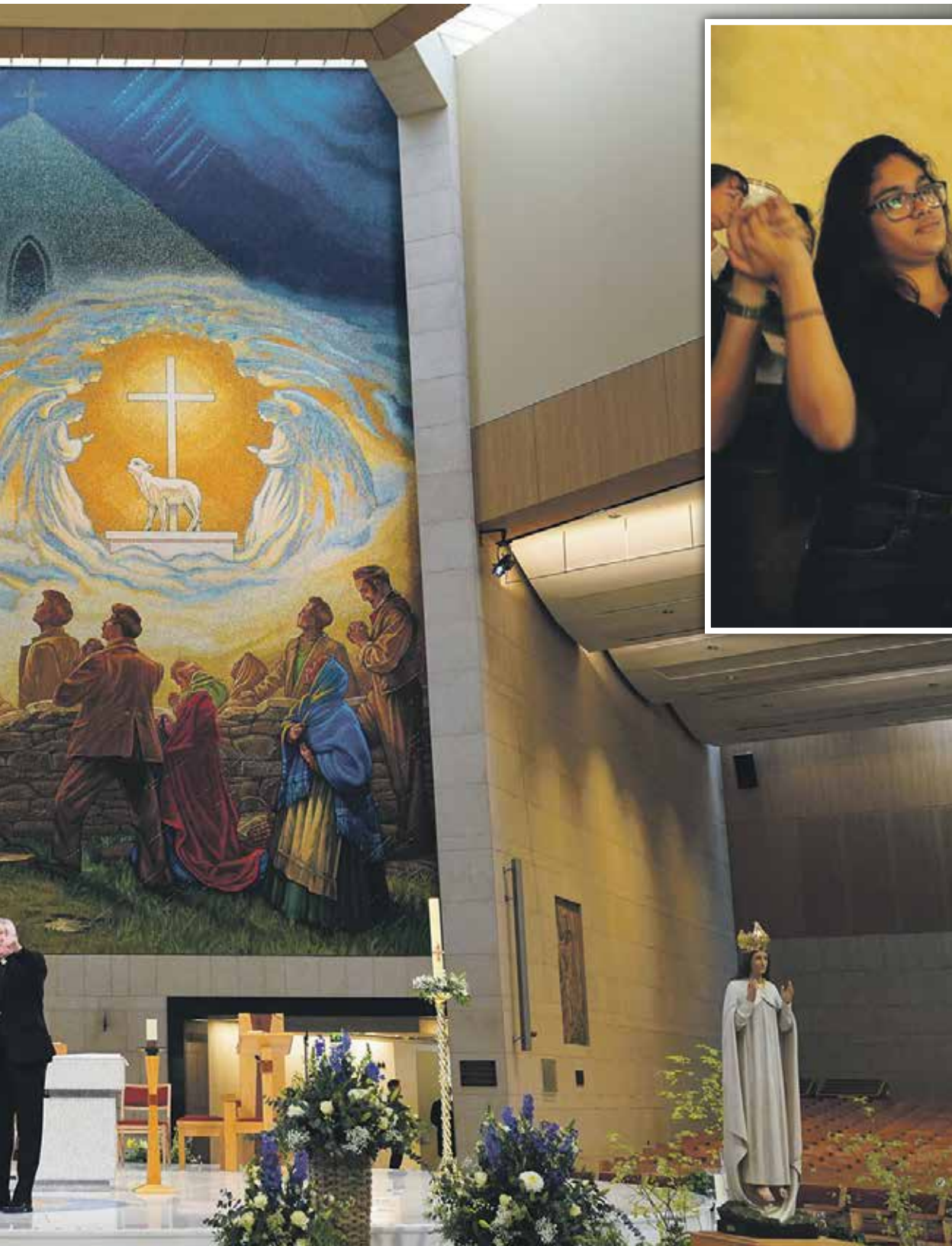
### Moving out of the tent

For many delegates, being a Church on mission is the natural outgrowth of synodality and co-responsibility. "There is hope in trusting the Holy Spirit as we apply synodality to

the local community. We are being called to have that missionary mindset to see the love of Christ and then go out and walk in friendship with those who are feeling marginalized and accompany them. . . What do co-responsibility and synodality look like in our lives to bring people to Christ?".

### “For the Church in North America, synodality is inseparable from becoming a Church sent forth on mission”

It was precisely the experience of synodality that, for many, renewed this call to discipleship and evangelisation. "All people are called to mission and have something important to contribute to the life of the Church and the world. This is our opportunity to go out and share with others". It also was expressed that moving forward, the Church in North Amer-



Latino Catholics recite the Lord's Prayer during Mass at the Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, New York.

## “The response of the Holy Spirit was to gather the Church together in one place and give them the ability to hear and understand the Gospel message”

it, we need to “recognise the importance of faith formation for our ability to be a missionary Church. We have to be adequately formed in our faith to bring it to others”.

There also was a desire among delegates to understand more deeply the social mission of the Church. “There is a need for formation at all levels (clergy, laity, etc.). We need to be formed to understand our Catholic social teaching, to be leaders, and to be evangelisers”.

This formation in evangelization and Catholic Social Teaching is crucial to walking the synodal path. “We must embrace a missionary mindset and reach out to everyone from every walk of life. The responsibility of ministry is not just for priests, but for each baptised person”.

The duty to know and live the teachings of our Catholic faith, including the Church's social teaching, flows from our baptism, but it is not always easy and requires intentional formation. “This isn't so much about the what as about the how”.

### Conclusion

At the very beginning of the Church, at the time of Pentecost, there was confusion and fear and yet expectation and hope as well. This is true of every age, including our current time. The response of the Holy Spirit was to gather the Church together in one place and give them the ability to hear and understand the Gospel message.

As the Church in North America continues to journey on the synodal path, we must imitate Mary, who was present at the first Pentecost and continually said “yes” to the

invitation to contribute to the building up of the Kingdom of God. “We want to be like Mary”.

The gift of being gathered together in the Holy Spirit was experienced again by the Church in Canada and the United States during the Continental Stage. There was great gratitude for being in one place, that is, being (virtually) together with other Catholics, who come from different parts of Canada and the United States, who are lay, religious, and clergy, each with their own ideas and views, yet all part of the one Church.

## “The synodal process has not been perfect, but it has been good”

“I am thankful for the time and effort taken to facilitate this process. It gives me hope that we can move forward to healing and rebuilding trust with the Church and among our brothers and sisters”.

The gift of being together in one place and listening to each other is perhaps the best lesson learned during the Continental Stage in North America. As one participant said, “People enjoyed sharing, rather than just being talked to – there is no going back”. The benefits of being intentionally synodal was a common theme. As was mentioned by a bishops' group, “The synodal process has not been perfect, but it has been good”.

ica needs to “engage synodality as a missionary movement. Synodality leads to an encounter with the Lord and with truth”.

For the Church in North America, synodality is inseparable from becoming a Church sent forth on mission. A delegate spoke of “the importance of authentically listening to each other and to reaching out to the peripheries, expanding our tent and embracing the reality that there is a place for everyone in this Church and that Jesus wants everyone to know him and receive his love”.

### A Church in the world

Throughout the Continental Stage in North America, the tensions present within a Church sent out on mission in the world were apparent. “Consumerism and secularism have provided answers to questions we didn't know we were asking in ways that feel fulfilling but that really aren't. This false fulfilment will collapse and crumble, but the Church offers true fulfilment that will last. Eco-

nomical/political upheaval are doing great damage, but as we all come – broken and sinful – to the Church, everyone must feel welcomed and at home”.

## “Navigating this tension is an important task for mission and evangelisation in North America today”

For some delegates, this tension created feelings of fear and discomfort. “There are tensions between letting the popular culture enter into the life of the parish. There is a tsunami of culture threatening to overwhelm us”.

For others, this tension was understood as an opportunity to collaborate with other people of faith. “We don't live in Christendom anymore! We need to recognise that so that we can move forward. This should involve partnering with others. What does ecumenism look like right now? How can we work with

people of other faiths?”.

Delegates from the Continental Stage in North America are ready to embark on mission, while tending to inevitable discomfort. “Tension is conversion; it leads us to the openness of listening to the other, welcoming the marginalised, not rejecting those who come in the tent and receiving them. It creates tension; to want to receive people brings up the question of those who feel distant. How can we have this gift of helping them to approach without fear about their process of conversion to the teachings of the Church? We need to look for ways to help them”. Navigating this tension is an important task for mission and evangelisation in North America today.

### Formation for mission and Catholic social teaching

Proper formation is the key to embracing our baptismal call to go out on mission. As one delegate put

# Latin American Continental Synod highlights Nicaragua crisis



Rolando José Álvarez of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, is pictured in a screenshot from video at his residence in Matagalpa as riot police block the door. The bishop said the police were preventing him, six priests and six laypeople from leaving the local diocesan offices.

## Lucien Chauvin



Latin America wrapped up the Church's Continental Synod process in early March after nearly one month of meetings that brought together representatives from around the world's most Catholic region.

**“The continental phase of the synod has traveled across the globe with sessions in Europe, Oceania, North America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East in February and March”**

Unlike other continents, each of which held only one assembly, Latin America split the process in four. Mexico and Central America held the first meeting in mid-February in El Salvador. The Caribbean countries followed, meeting in the Dominican Republic; countries from Andean region gathered in Ecuador, and, finally, the countries in the Southern Cone, including Uruguay, Argentina,

and Chile, had the final meeting. Held in Brasilia, the Brazilian capital, it concluded March 10.

“We were the fourth leg of the regional table. The conclusions of each zone will now be synthesized into one document and sent to Rome as an instrument for the October synod,” Father Matias Taricco, deputy executive secretary of the Argentine bishops' conference, told OSV News.

### Phase

The Continental Phase of the Synod has travelled across the globe with sessions in Europe, Oceania, North America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East in February and March.

While each Latin American subregion focused on the general theme of the Continental Synod Phase – “enlarge the space of your tent” (Is 54:2) – they looked at distinct issues that are shaping the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean and which were raised during the listening phase of the Synod process.

The crisis in Nicaragua was front and center at the Mexico and Central America meeting, which began at the Cathedral in San Salvador, El Salvador. It is where the remains of St. Oscar Romero, the martyred

archbishop of San Salvador, are interred.

The archbishop was killed in 1980 because he criticized El Salvador's military government. Parallels were drawn to Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, a critic of the Nicaraguan government who was sentenced to 26 years in prison Feb. 10.

Bishop Álvarez refused to leave Nicaragua in a mass deportation ordered by President Daniel Ortega's regime in early February prior to his sentence. He has since been moved to a maximum security prison and has no contact with the outside world.

**“Calling the dictatorship ‘rude’ the pope called Ortega ‘unbalanced’”**

On March 13, the Nicaraguan government asked the Holy See to close their respective diplomatic missions. “This is not a break in relations, as has been reported by media outlets,” Vatican News reported.

Pope Francis was asked about the situation in Nicaragua speaking to a Spanish-language media outlet Infoabe; the interview was published March 10. Responding to the questions about Bishop Álvarez, Pope Francis said that “we have a bishop in prison, a very serious and capable man, who wanted to give his testimony

and did not accept exile”. The Pope added “it is something from outside of what we are living, as if it were a communist dictatorship in 1917 or a Hitlerian one in 1935”.

Calling the dictatorship “rude” the Pope called Ortega “unbalanced”.

Archbishop Miguel Cabrejos of Trujillo, Peru, president of the Latin American bishops' council (CELAM), published an open letter prior to the subregional synod supporting Bishop Álvarez and others detained in Nicaragua.

### Solidarity

Writing in the name of CELAM, Archbishop Cabrejos said Feb. 11 that in such trying times, “I offer my solidarity, proximity and prayers with and for the people of God and their pastors”.

The meeting in the Caribbean focused on Afro-Caribbean populations and the role of women and young people in the Church, while the Andean region – Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela – put a spotlight on Indigenous people and the environment, two themes that have been stressed by Pope Francis throughout his papacy, particularly in visits to these countries.

The final meeting in Brazil, which included Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, looked at the themes of women (the meeting coincided with International Women's Day on March 8) and how Pope Francis has changed the

Church. The Church commemorated the 10th anniversary of Francis' election on March 13.

Uruguayan Sister Rosina Thevenet, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, said the meeting stressed the need to listen to the Pope's call that the Church cannot stand still.

**“Father Taricco said that a synodal church needs to consider new ministries, new forms of service and authority”**

“We discussed what ‘expanding the tent’ means. It is a change in mentality, in co-responsibility and participation of the people of God. It means transparency in the Church, not only in terms of economics, but the whole Church, from daily activities in a parish all the way to the top,” Thevenet told OSV News.

“I would say that we are in a kairos moment. It is a time to listen, but also for dialogue and discernment,” said Thevenet, one of 19 people in the Uruguay delegation to attend the assembly.

Blanca Palacios, a laywoman who heads the pastoral commission in the Paraguayan bishops' conference, said her takeaway from the Synod process has been the impact of the spiritual conversation that Pope Francis has stressed. “The spiritual conversation means a

Church that is more participatory. A Church that walks together and makes decisions based on active listening,” she said.

Palacios, one of 14 representatives from Paraguay who attended the meeting, said the spiritual conversation is a way to address common themes, including clericalism in the Church.

“The Synod will have to address clericalism and hierarchy if we want a Church that reflects the people of God from Vatican II,” she said.

Father Taricco, one of more than 40 representatives in the Argentine delegation, said his country's contribution was about the concept of a synodal Church.

He said that since the first “listening phase” of the Synod, Argentina has stressed the need to review the Church's institutional management and rethink governance. “We believe in new forms of management that are not unipersonal, but collective and participatory,” he said.

Father Taricco said that a synodal Church needs to consider new ministries, new forms of service and authority. “This means talking about the place of women, the role of the LGBTQ+ community and how we receive others, expanding the tent to those who have left the Church,” he said. “It is about God's promise”.

**i** Originally published by UCA News.

# Synodality is ‘radically inclusive’, says Vatican committee member Sr Filo Hirota

## Christopher White



Pope Francis greets the crowd before celebrating Mass in Tokyo Dome in Tokyo.

**W**hen Pope Francis met in March with members of a newly formed commission tasked with organizing the upcoming Synod meetings in Rome, he seemed a bit surprised to see women when he entered the room.

Mercedarian Sr Shizue “Filo” Hirota said Francis exclaimed, “Donne!” — Italian for “Women!” — upon seeing her and another official from the Vatican’s Synod office.

“He was happy, but he sounded like he hadn’t expected to see us,” Hirota told *Global Sisters Report* in an April 4 interview.

Hirota, who hails from Tokyo, is the only woman and only nonordained member of the seven-person committee, which was announced March 15. But despite being in the minority, she is unimpressed.

**“The Synod is participatory, collegial, grounded in and energized by the creative spirit of God, affirming the nonviolent impulse of listening dialogue and working through differences”**

“The Pope has said it is not going to be just a Synod of Bishops, it’s going to be a Synod of the people of God,” Hirota said. “But as a structure, the Church is hierarchical, episcopal. I cannot represent all of the cries of the excluded, but perhaps I am there as a reminder.”

For nearly two years, the Catholic Church has been engaged in a three-phase consultation process with Catholics around the globe that will culminate in two high-stakes meetings in October 2023 and October 2024 in Rome.

In the first phase, dioceses from around the world held listening sessions with Catholics and non-Catholics alike on a range of sensitive topics, culminating in

a 45-page document that is a comprehensive and candid expression of the Catholic Church’s relationship with the modern world.

The document formed the basis for meetings on every continent ahead of the upcoming Rome meetings, which Hirota is now tasked with helping to organize.

Hirota, however, is no stranger to managing and mobilizing large groups of Catholics from diverse backgrounds and opinions.

A former executive coordinator of the Mercedarian Missionaries of Berriz, board member of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) and executive committee member of Pax Christi International, she has also served in the Philippines, Mexico and Nicaragua, giving her a front-row seat to how the Church operates at both the peripheries and at its center.

Synodality, she said, is a “radically inclusive call not to leave anybody behind”.

Specifically, as a member of the executive committee of Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, Hirota said she believes the Synod “is a journey toward evangelical nonviolence”.

“The world suffers from violence at all levels of human and environmental lives,” she said. “The Synod is participatory, collegial, grounded in and energized by the creative spirit of God, affirming the nonviolent impulse of listening dialogue and working through differences.”

“From this perspective, the Synod can be understood as a global, nonviolent practice to foster a more nonviolent Church and world,” she added.

### Impressed

Hirota said she was “very impressed” with the summary document, “Enlarge the space of your tent,” which distilled the themes from the global listening sessions, including a greater emphasis on nonviolence and peacemaking.

The document raised concerns often considered taboo in Church life — such as LGBTQ relationships and women’s ordination — and Hirota recalled thinking, “Wow. Wow. It’s really honest”.

More specifically, she thought:

“It really is the Holy Spirit at work”.

In the coming months, the group will help oversee the drafting of the Synod’s working document, known as the *instrumentum laboris*, that will help guide the monthlong discussions in October. The committee will also be involved with other planning matters, like the retreat that will take place ahead of the Synod, and even practical matters, like how the more than 300 participants will be seated during the Synod. (There was hope that they might sit at round tables rather than in traditional stadium-style seating in the Vatican’s Synod hall.)

**“Jesus Christ was human! Why is it a rare compliment in the Catholic Church for someone to be normal and human? We have to go back to that, recover our humanity,” she said**

Hirota said she hopes that in both the planning process and during the actual October Synod meetings, everyone involved will

embrace what UISG identified in its triennial plenary in May 2022: the importance of vulnerability in the synodal process.

She said she also believes that the Church must become more comfortable with “open-ended questions” and that being “able to live with questions unanswered and problems unsolved but still feeling peace” is an essential part of synodality, or walking together with the whole Church.

In an interview with the *Argentine daily La Nación* last month, Francis promised that everyone participating in the Synod — both men and women — will have the right to vote, marking a historic first.

Hirota recalled the Synod of Bishops on the family in 2015, where for the first time, a religious brother — a nonordained participant — was granted the right to vote. The appointment of Xavière Sr. Nathalie Becquart as undersecretary of the Vatican’s Synod office also led to headlines noting she would be the first woman granted the right to vote.

### Grateful

While Hirota is grateful for these developments, she also is amused that in 2022, such things manage to cause headlines.

“We are journeying to be normal,” she said of the Catholic Church.

Hirota said it’s not uncommon to hear someone praise a priest or a bishop by saying they are “normal” or “human”.

“Jesus Christ was human! Why is it a rare compliment in the Catholic Church for someone to be normal and human? We have to go back to that, recover our humanity,” she said.

Hirota told *GSR* that she is

aware that the Synod process has its naysayers, which she said is often rooted in a broader criticism of Francis. Even so, she said it is incumbent upon the Synod organizers to listen to the detractors’ concerns or fears.

**“Bishops who will be there have a big responsibility to be conscious of the fact that they are not there just as bishops, but they’re representing millions of people”**

“The only way to approach this is to be close to these people,” she said.

She said her priority over the next six months as one of the Synod’s organizers is to ensure that the Synod is, first and foremost, a “prayerful, contemplative, reflective and dialogical space”.

And once the Synod members arrive in Rome, she said, it will also be important for them to remember that they are not simply there to represent themselves.

“Bishops who will be there have a big responsibility to be conscious of the fact that they are not there just as bishops, but they’re representing millions of people,” Hirota said. “They have to keep this attitude of listening, respecting and remembering all of the time.”

“This is about rethinking the structure, spirituality and our ways of being Church,” she continued. “It’s about asking how the Church of Jesus should be today.”

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**“Being ‘able to live with questions unanswered and problems unsolved but still feeling peace’ is an essential part of synodality, or walking together with the whole Church”**

# What should be done with Fr Rupnik's art?



Caregivers push the sick and disabled past Fr Marko Rupnik's mosaics at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in southwestern France.

## Ruadhán Jones



The art created by alleged abuser Fr Marco Rupnik adorns many churches and is a cause of controversy, writes **Ruadhán Jones**

**T**he sorry tale of the alleged systematic abuse perpetrated by Slovenian Jesuit Fr Marco Rupnik is a familiar story for the Church. Only a few months after an extensive report on Jean Vanier was released, Rupnik stands accused of using spiritual means for perverse ends.

A number of nuns came forward last year, alleging that the prominent Jesuit used his position of authority in the Loyola community he founded to sexually, psycho-

logically and spiritually abuse them. He was also briefly excommunicated in 2020, for attempting to sacramentally absolve a woman after a sexual encounter with her, a major crime in the Church's canon law. Since then, the Society of Jesus have received further complaints of abuse spanning decades.

As with Vanier, the founder of charity L'Arche, Fr Rupnik's private perversion was combined with public prominence and a reputation for spiritual insight. Fr Rupnik founded

his own community of nuns in Slovenia, but really came to fame as an artist, founding an artistic centre in Rome.

Many of his paintings and mosaics now adorn the walls of churches, Catholic universities and Vatican establishments – including the Irish College in Rome and the basilica in Lourdes. He was permitted to design the logo for the Vatican-sponsored 2022 World Meeting of Families even after his excommunication and two of Rupnik's icons have been used as spiritual resources for the present Universal Synod 2023-24. These have since been removed quietly.

### Allegations

Now that these allegations have emerged, the question has arisen – what to do with his art? Already calls have emerged for Fr Rupnik's creations to be stripped from churches and Catholic institutions. As this paper goes to print, bishops in France are organising a committee that will include abuse survivors and victims to discuss whether to remove the

alleged abuser's artworks from the holy site. For a site so closely associated with healing, for many victims, seeing his work there is a painful reminder of deep wounds.

**“As a survivor of clerical abuse, it would not be possible for her to pray in a chapel designed by Rupnik”**

For Gina Barthel, a clerical abuse survivor from Minnesota, US, “his artwork should be removed, as a testimony to the entire Church, and as a witness, that there are consequences to perpetrating abuse”.

“There is a difference between clergy who have been accused and clergy who have been found guilty. And he is accused of some really terrible things, but he has also already been found guilty of a serious and disturbing canonical crime. So it should come down,” she told *The Pillar*.

### Survivor

She added that, as a survivor of clerical abuse, it would not be possible for her to pray in a chapel designed by Rupnik. “I think the most virtuous path would be to take it down,” Ms Barthel said. “If that's not possible in a particular circumstance for some reason, you should make a statement about that, and make a donation on behalf of victims. I

guess that would be the next best, but that would sadden my heart.”

However, the Slovenian bishops have pushed back against removing Rupnik's art. In a statement from December 22, 2022, they said “The news about the abuses committed by Fr Rupnik have shocked the Slovenian and global public.

“We have known Fr Rupnik as an outstanding artist and insightful spiritual leader who has marked many personal lives and communities and created many works of art and spiritual literature.” They say they “understand that many of you are hurt by this news and that you are wondering whether or not it should all be thrown away.”

**“His artwork should be removed, as a testimony to the entire Church, and as a witness, that there are consequences to perpetrating abuse”**

“We beg you,” they say, “with this tragic realisation in mind, to distinguish his unacceptable and reprehensible actions from his extraordinary spiritual and artistic accomplishments in mosaics and other areas.”

Already the debate has begun, with other voices adding their two cents' worth. The *National Catholic Register*, *OSV News*, *Pillar Catholic* and others have been debating in columns and articles the pros and cons to removing Fr Rupnik's art. The two main positions emerging are those in favour of removing Rupnik's art due to the moral and psychological harm it causes, and those who favour keeping it due to its artistic merit, while making clear the sins of its creator.

As almost all these columns make clear, this is not a new conundrum for the Church or for wider society. Some Church artists have been saints, but many others are deeply flawed sinners. We don't have to look too far back for examples. Eric Gill is a case in point; his relief sculptures still stand in Westminster Cathedral and numerous other public buildings around the UK. But as became clear after he died, he committed terrible acts of abuse.

**“Rupnik's case is complicated further because he has become the effective “image-maker” of the Church in his time”**

Though not on the same scale, Catholic novelist Graham Greene wrote some of the best works of fiction of the 20th Century while being an adulterer. Caravaggio, whose famous painting *Taking of Christ* is housed in Ireland's National Gallery, killed a man. Raphael and Michelangelo were great Church artists, whose works adorn the Vatican, but neither of them saints.

Their works of art have, so far, outlasted their reputations as fallen men who led, in some cases, terrible lives. What we have been left with is the beauty of their creations, a beauty which gives evidence of the silver fountain from which all beauty, truth and goodness springs – God.

If it is possible for their works to outlast their reputations, could it be that Rupnik's art will outlast his? That certainly could be the case, as already many will gaze on his mosaics in contemplation of God without any sense of the human creator. We need only look to the Bible to know that God made use of sinful men to effect his plan of salvation.

However, Rupnik's case is complicated further because he has become the effective “image-maker” of the

**“This is not a new conundrum for the Church or for wider society. Some Church artists have been saints, but many others are deeply flawed sinners. We don't have to look too far back for examples.”**

Church in his time, as artists Andrew and Gwyneth Thompson-Briggs point out in the *National Catholic Register*.

Even here the situation is not unprecedented. The 17th Century painter Gianlorenzo Bernini was effectively the Church's official artist in his time. He too became embroiled in scandal after he attempted to kill his brother for taking up with his own mistress and had her face marred with a razorblade. The case died down – with the help of the Pope – and now his art charms and beguiles us.

### Heinous

But as the contemporary artist Gwyneth Thompson Briggs points out, Rupnik is not accused of a crime of passion. He stands accused of something much more heinous – taking advantage of his position as a priest and a man of influence to systematically abuse a number of men and women. Does the reprehensible nature of his crimes require a sterner sentence, especially at a time when the Church is grappling with the revelations of abuse? Perhaps this

is so and it's certainly the argument eloquently expressed by Ms Barthel.

**“Should the innocent admirers of his work no longer appreciate the beauty in them? Or can it be that they can see the beauty and know the awful truth?”**

The difficulty with removing Rupnik's works entirely is that, once created and offered up to the audience, they are no longer simply his. He has divested himself of the ideas, offering them up for the consideration of others. If there is something sinister in the art itself, something that would harm the viewer, then it would make for a strong argument for destroying or removing his creations.

But if that isn't the case, should the innocent admirers of his work no longer appreciate the beauty in them? Or can it be that they can see the

beauty and know the awful truth? A stern sentence for his art doesn't necessarily mean that there is only one option. Perhaps, as the editor of *OSV News* Fr Patrick Briscoe suggests, his art could be strategically defaced, a reminder of Rupnik's crimes. Other suggestions offered by Fr Briscoe are that where his art is displayed, a biography and explanation should be included, or the profits associated with his art should be donated to charities for victims of abuse.

### Arguments

While most arguments have revolved around the artistic merit versus psychological and moral harm, Fr Briscoe's hints at a third position. This position sees a danger in removing the works of a sinner, even one accused of terrible crimes like Fr Rupnik. The danger is that by removing the paintings or mosaics, we are erasing a powerful reminder of the rot which has so afflicted the Church and the victims, in this case sexual abuse.

It is akin to the conundrum felt by Americans when it comes to removing statues of Confederates from public places.

The act of removing them is a ritual, intended to demonstrate that the racism for which they stood is no longer acceptable. It can be a powerful gesture; but also one quickly forgotten. You remove them once and they are gone from the public eye. You run the risk of forgetting them.

**“Fr Rupnik's art could serve as just such a reminder. In a way, I think it would be a Christian response to the problem of his evil”**

Whereas if you kept the statues in place, you ensure that the public is always aware of the dark side of the American story without belabouring the point.

Fr Rupnik's art could serve a similar function. By keeping it at the heart of our churches, we can place before the casual Massgoer a terrible part of our Church's past. It is hard to keep these heinous acts in mind for the average man or woman as they were so awful, and it is

hard to address them regularly as a priest without seeming to belabour an innocent majority.

Fr Rupnik's art could serve as just such a reminder. In a way, I think it would be a Christian response to the problem of his evil. As the Gospels show in particular, God has taken sin into account in the plan of salvation. It was Judas Iscariot's betrayal that enables our salvation and every year the Passion is recounted in Churches across the world with Judas at its centre.

### Scourge

If what is alleged about Fr Rupnik is true, then his betrayal, his sins, strike right at the heart of the Church, another example of the scourge of abuse in the midst of what is meant to be a holy institution. We can no more remove the sin from the Church's past than we could erase the damage it has done to the survivors and victims.

Instead, we could keep it before our eyes in a manner that is not self-flagellating, but honest and sincere. We can pray for forgiveness as we meditate on the artwork of an alleged perpetrator; we can pray for healing for the victims. Perhaps we can, in other words, recover good from the evil acts Fr Rupnik stands accused of.

Regardless, as French Bishop Jean-Marc Micas said in a statement regarding Lourdes, the anguish of abuse victims “is great before the mosaics of Fr Rupnik in this very place: We cannot ignore it”.

**i** Ruadhán Jones is a journalist for The Irish Catholic



Pope Francis greets Jesuit Father Marko Rupnik during a private audience at the Vatican in this January 3, 2022.

# The Local Church



Plenary Council members in Sydney signal their assent to a procedural vote July 5, 2022, during the Second Assembly in St Mary's Cathedral College Hall.

## Rafael Luciani



**P**ope Francis explains that “a synodal Church is a Church that listens.” The implications of such an act of listening go beyond a personal conversion because the listening shapes the relations among ecclesial subjects and reconfigures the Church organisation and structures.

The act of listening to the people and their cultures enables a process of reconfiguration of the theological-cultural model of the ecclesial organisation. Francis explains that the people of God must be listened to, in their particular place and time, in order to know “what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev 2:7); by listening to the people, each Church can find ways of proceeding that

respond to the particular locality where ecclesial life and mission evolves.

This is what the Synod for the Pan-Amazon Region claimed when it said that “[the Church] reconfigures her own identity through listening and dialoguing with the people, realities and stories of a [socio-cultural] territory” (*Querida Amazonia* 66).

As Vatican II insisted, listening should lead to discerning “in what way the customs, meaning of life and social order can be reconciled with the customs manifested by divine revelation” (*Ad Gentes* 22). Therefore, the Church listens not simply to acquire more information, but to discern her mission and reach “a deeper accommodation in the whole sphere of Christian life”

(*Ad Gentes* 22).

Adopting this ecclesiological perspective, the International Theological Commission states that “the first level on which synodality is exercised is the Local Church,” precisely because “the historical, linguistic, and cultural links that mold interpersonal communication in the local Church and describe its particular features facilitate the adoption of a synodal style”.

### Discipline

Consequently, a synodal way of proceeding implies that all local churches are called to develop “their own discipline, their own liturgical usage, and their own theological and spiritual heritage” (LG 23). It is, therefore, important to understand that synodality is the most appropriate way for the genesis of the processes of identity and theological-cultural reconfiguration of the Church under the model of the Church as *Church of Churches* presided over by the Bishop of the Church of Rome and in communion with all of them, thus fulfilling the Catholicity of local churches.

Inspired in this ecclesiology,

the Church has been summoned to a new Synod whose motto is For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission. This new synodal path, lasting two years (from 2021 to 2023), will engage the entire Church in the task of discerning a new ecclesial model for the third millennium.

Deepening the *aggiornamento* process initiated by Vatican II, the Synod wants to respond to the epochal ecclesial changes we are now experiencing. This may be the most important ecclesiological event in the current phase of reception of the Second Vatican Council.

**“Through synodality, Francis is seeking to complete the unfinished reception of the Council regarding the priority of the local churches”**

It will involve approximately 114 Episcopal Conferences of the Latin Rite, the Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs, six patriarchal Synods of the Eastern Churches, four major Archiepiscopal Synods,

and five International Episcopal Councils.

Deepening the ecclesiology of the people of God in the light of a model of Church of Churches, this new phase is recovering the Council’s ecclesiology of the local churches and making it the normative starting point for a synodal Church. Through synodality, Francis is seeking to complete the unfinished reception of the Council regarding the priority of the local churches.

### The eclipse of the ecclesiology of local churches

After Paul VI, there was a progressive deflation of the value of local cultures as normative for reinterpreting tradition, doing theology, and transmitting faith. In defining the local Church, the formal element became weightier than the real one, so that a theological-cultural homogenization of ecclesial forms took place throughout the world.

The local reality no longer played a key role in configuring the actual concrete forms of specific ecclesial entities. Primacy was



conceded instead to the formal elements, that is, to the individual bishops, who were considered “the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches”, and to the celebration of the Eucharist as “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” (LG 11).

From the 80s, centralism started to prevail in ecclesial governance and doctrinal development. This ecclesiological orientation was promoted through new documents of the magisterium, such as the apostolic constitution *Pastor Bonus* and the *motu proprio Apostolos Suos*, among others.

*Pastor Bonus* granted greater power to papal primacy and relativised the authority of the Episcopal Conferences. Meanwhile, the Curia began to produce its own theology. *Apostolos Suos* limited the teaching function of the bishops to following the universal Magisterium as officially interpreted by the Holy See (AS 21).

To these documents we can add the Instruction of Diocesan Synods, *De Synodis Dioecesis Agendis*, which dealt a severe blow to the ecclesiology of local churches by prohibiting diocesan synods from pronouncing on any subject “that does not agree with the Church’s perpetual doctrine or the papal magisterium” (IDS, IV, no. 4).

### The Extraordinary Synod

The Extraordinary Synod of 1985—the Twentieth Anniversary of the Conclusion of the Second Vatican Council—represented an inflection point that discounted the ecclesiology of the people of God and assumed the model of hierarchical communion as central to the interpretation and implementation of the conciliar event.

Avery Dulles wrote that “the question before the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 was not - as some commentators imagined - whether to affirm or reject Vatican II, but rather how to interpret it”; its intention was that, “guided by a hermeneutics of unity, the ecclesiology of the future may be able to correct some of the imbalances of the past two decades”.

Dulles also pointed out the correlation that existed between this ecclesiological shift and the views of the then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger. In the following years, consequently, a redefinition of identities and a reconfiguration of relationships among all ecclesial subjects in the Church were implemented through a series of synods that considered the laity (1987), priests (1990), religious life (1994), and bishops (2001). The fruits of the synods were gathered in the post-synodal exhortations *Christifideles Laici* (1988), *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), *Vita Consecrata* (1996), and *Pastores Gregis* (2003).

The way the faithful relate to one another in the Church was reconfigured to conform to the model of the Church as hierarchical communion. According to the resulting notion of co-responsibility, priests, laypeople, and religious interacted with the episcopate only in terms of auxiliary, vertical relations.

The notion of co-responsibility was no longer understood as an essential and reciprocal relationship that completes ecclesial identities in their interactions, as

Cardinal Suenens had sustained in his interpretation of the Council. Theology, itself, became less autonomous and was subordinated to the magisterium, while formation in the faith was focused on the Catechism. Consequently, the teaching and the transmission of the faith was subjected to a process of homogenization.

The 1992 document *Communio Notio* distanced itself even further from the spirit and the letter of the Council by declaring that the universal Church is an ontological, pre-existing reality, thus universalising the identity of ecclesial life, and reinforcing institutional homogenisation according to the Roman theological-cultural pattern.

### “The concept of the particular Church would adapt better to the diverse regional realisations of the Church that express its cultural pluralism”

Walter Kasper confronted this position of Joseph Ratzinger by warning that it negated the ecclesiology of communion among local churches, reinforced the centralism of the Roman Curia, and eroded the value of the episcopal conferences as intermediate instances.

While Ratzinger’s aim may have been to safeguard the *communio ecclesiae*, he ended up favoring the *communio hierarchica* and relativising the sense of *communio ecclesiarum*, with all the newness that this concept brought to the ecclesiology of the Vatican as compared to

that of Vatican I.

To resolve this argument, authors like Salvador Pié-Ninot use the term Catholicity to refer to “the whole or the entire rather than to the totality”, with latter term describing what is universal. As Rahner says, “The local Church makes the entire Church tangible”.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod for the Amazon explained the matter clearly: “To be Church is to be the people of God, incarnated in the peoples of the earth and their cultures. The universality or catholicity of the Church is therefore enriched by the beauty of these multifaceted manifestations of the particular Churches and their cultures” (IL 12), all of which make up the *communio ecclesiarum*. Consequently, “the concept of the particular Church would adapt better to the diverse regional realisations of the Church that express its cultural pluralism”.

### Recovering the “Catholicity” of local churches

Synodality deepens and expands the Second Vatican Council’s ecclesiology of the local Church and its relations with the Catholicity of the whole Church. An example of this is how the Synod on Synodality has been conceived: it is not to be understood as merely an isolated event but has become a two-year process that begins with a diocesan phase exercising the first level of synodality, that of the local churches.

As Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, has stated,

“Considering that the local churches, in which and from which

the one and only Catholic Church exists, contribute effectively to the good of the entire mystical body, which is also the body of the churches (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 23), the fullness of the synodal process can truly exist only if the local churches are involved in that process. For a genuine participation of the local churches in this process, there must also be the involvement of other ecclesial bodies, such as the Synods of the Eastern Catholic Churches, the Councils and Assemblies of the Churches *sui iuris*, and the Episcopal Conferences with their own national, regional, and continental entities”.

### “In addition to affirming that the catholicity of the entire Church is nourished by the richness of the different local Churches, Vatican II affirms the Catholicity of the diocesan Church itself”

This is a clear reception of *Lumen Gentium*, which recognises that “in and from [the local] Churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church” and that “this variety of local Churches with one common aspiration is splendid evidence of the Catholicity of the undivided Church” (LG 23).

Catholicity, therefore, refers to the fullness that characterises the local churches and to the communion that exists among them in virtue of their relation to the Church of Rome and its bishop, the pope. This is how *subsistit in*, the famous phrase in *Lumen Gentium* 8, is

to be understood: the Church of Christ - not the Universal Church - subsists in the Roman Catholic Church.

Gérard Philips, the principal redactor of *Lumen Gentium*, recognised the centrality of this ecclesiology, according to which the local Church, while not the whole Church, is a complete Church, and he knew the many repercussions it would have on theological and ecclesial issues.

Legrand also recognised “what is new about Vatican II: in addition to affirming that the Catholicity of the entire Church is nourished by the richness of the different local Churches, Vatican II affirms the catholicity of the diocesan Church itself”.

### Challenge

The great challenge still facing the post-conciliar Church is in becoming a worldwide Church. For that to happen, argues Rahner, cultural differences must become configuring factors of the local churches’ Catholicity. For this reason, the universal Church exists only in concrete communities that are incarnated in and through their own socio-cultural forms.

In the ecclesial model of the New Testament, Brighenti explains that:

The Churches being born do not exist as “Churches of”, that is, as specific instances of a universal Church that supposedly precedes them. Rather they are “Churches in” the same unique Church, which is whole (entire) in each local Church. The local Church is configured not as a branch or a copy of a supposed mother Church, but as a different Church, universal in its particularities, with its own culturally unique features.



Chuck Clark of Knights of Columbus Council 10641 at St. Alphonsus Church in Covington, Tennessee (right), makes a point during a small group discussion at the Catholic Pastoral Center in Nashville March 18, 2022, during a Knights’ evangelisation training program.

Jerusalem, Corinth, Antioch, and Macedonia were all born as local Catholic Churches in different socio-cultural places that gave them a special identity and physiognomy. In other words, the local Church becomes real in the cultural forms in which it exists. Or as Paul VI said, “A Church spread throughout the world would become an abstraction if it did not take on body and life precisely through the individual churches” (EN 62) with all their theological, liturgical, spiritual, pastoral, and canonical particularities (LG 23, UR 4, AG 19).

The call to recover the centrality of the ecclesiology of local churches is perhaps one of the most important contributions of the current phase in the reception of the Council. It is shaping the way in which the institution of the Synod of Bishops is understood and functions as a “dynamic point of convergence” of all local churches. But most importantly, it is providing a new hermeneutical framework for understanding the ecclesiological shift that synodality represents today. It opens a path toward a “more complete definition of the Church” that integrates and interconnects *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*, conceiving ecclesiology as a “permanent process of ecclesiogenesis”.

### Ecclesiology as ecclesiogenesis

To implement the first level of the exercise of synodality, we must move beyond fragmentary interpre-

## “The call to recover the centrality of the ecclesiology of local churches is perhaps one of the most important contributions of the current phase in the reception of the Council”

tations of *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*. If we are to follow a synodal way of proceeding, then ecclesiology must always be ecclesiogenesis.

This involves recovering “the perception of Vatican II according to which ‘the sociocultural particularity of a region’ (AG 22) is part of a local Church’s theological definition” and thus configures the local Church’s identity and form in accord with its place and time. This is what we have called a Church of Churches.

“The *Ad Gentes* decree is probably the one that best shows how the universality of the mission demands that believers take human cultures into account and so establish particular churches”

The third chapter of *Ad Gentes* provides a more appropriate hermeneutical framework for ecclesial reconfiguration because

it relates the birth of particular churches to their socio-cultural areas; in this way, it helps them to develop ecclesial traditions that are not only their own but also contribute to strengthening communion with other churches (AG 22). It is in those churches and in their communion that the Catholicity of the entire Church is realised.

For this reason, the *Ad Gentes* decree is probably the one that best shows how the universality of the mission demands that believers take human cultures into account and so establish particular churches. Since the Church is Catholic, it must become particular in the cultures it encounters... to the point that the local churches will be truly Catholic only at the end of a process of inculturation.

### Inculturation

The ecclesiology of local churches, therefore, presupposes an inculturation that is in tune with *Ad Gentes*, which focuses on the evangelical witness (AG 24) found in communities gathered around the Word (no. 15) and engaged in dialogue with the local reality (nos. 6,

11). From such communities must emerge new expressions of ministry that respond to each theological-cultural reality (nos. 15, 19). *Ad Gentes* is very clear on this last point, advising that

“The Council recognised that, since culture refers to the “various styles of common life”, the Church must “adapt the revealed word” to the many diverse ways of life of the peoples”

“It is not enough that the Christian people be present and be organised in a given nation, nor is it enough to carry out an apostolate by way of example....In order to plant the Church and to make the Christian community grow, various ministries are needed, which are raised up by divine calling from the midst of the faithful congregation, and are to be carefully fostered and

tended to by all”. (no. 15)

By interpreting LG and AG in a manner that is more comprehensive and process oriented, we can now identify more clearly the incredible newness of the shift brought about by the ecclesiology of Vatican II: it recognised contextual reality as normative for reconfiguring the Church’s identity and theological-cultural self-understanding, as well as for guiding its mission in the world.

*Gaudium et Spes* clarifies the implications of this shift when it states that the Church “has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of different peoples and has tried to clarify it with their wisdom too” (GS 44).

### Inseparable

Thus, the “cultures or lifestyles” of the peoples are inseparable from their ecclesial forms and their Christian way of life. In other words, the Council recognised that, since culture refers to the “various styles of common life” (no. 53), the Church must “adapt the revealed word” to the many diverse ways of life of the peoples. Such adaptation is necessary because “revelation is completely historical and therefore subject to constant reinterpretation, according to the situation of those to whom it is transmitted”.

In this synodal way, the Church “constantly reshapes her identity through listening and through dialogue with the people, the realities, and the history of the lands in which she finds herself” (QA 66),



Plenary Council members from the Diocese of Townsville, Australia, gather for small-group sessions online Oct. 4, 2021.

discerning “how their customs, their views on life, and their social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation” (no. 22).

### “The Gregorian Reforms and the Council of Trent produced a shift toward theological-cultural homogenisation and centralisation of the institutional Church”

Such a process leads to “a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life” (no. 22), which means that “in each major socio-cultural area, such theological speculation should be encouraged, in the light of the universal Church’s tradition, as may submit to a new scrutiny the words and deeds which God has revealed,

and which have been set down in Sacred Scripture and explained by the Fathers and by the magisterium” (no. 22).

This is the core of what is called the principle of pastorality, which requires the Church to perform an act of reinterpretation of Christianity for each culture in the light of the Word and tradition, and to engage in a process of theological-cultural reconfiguration of its own forms and institutions (QA 68).

The interpretation of doctrine (traditum) has always been linked to the mode of its reception (*receptio*) according to the logic “*quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*” (see *Summa Theologiae* I, q.75, a.5). Thus, ecclesiality is born of ecclesiogenesis.

#### Lived context

The lived context of the community is thematised and structured at this first level of synodality. “By this manner of acting...Chris-

tian life will be accommodated to the genius and the dispositions of each culture, so that particular traditions, together with the peculiar patrimony of each family of nations, illuminated by the light of the Gospel, can be taken up into Catholic unity” (AG 22).

### “Pope Francis, in line with the Second Vatican Council, is now urging us to recover the path of synodality as an essential constituent dimension of the Church of the third millennium”

This was the approach that, from the third century, inspired diocesan and provincial synods that dealt with issues of discipline, liturgy, and doctrine. The Gregorian Reforms and the Coun-

cil of Trent produced a shift toward theological-cultural homogenisation and centralisation of the institutional Church, with the consequent loss of the synodal praxis and consciousness of the diocesan churches.

#### Ecclesial practice

Pope Francis, in line with the Second Vatican Council, is now urging us to recover the path of synodality as an essential constituent dimension of the Church of the third millennium. We should especially consider the ecclesial practice of the first millennium, when “local Churches are communitarian subjects that make the one people of God real in a novel way in different cultural contexts, and they share their gifts in a reciprocal exchange in order to promote ‘bonds of close communion’”.

In short, to recover the exercise of synodality at this level is to affirm that “the variety of local Churches - with their own ecclesi-

astical disciplines, liturgical rites, theological heritage, spiritual gifts, and canonical norms ‘is splendid evidence of the Catholicity of the undivided Church’”.

### “The Church ‘constantly reshapes her identity through listening and through dialogue with the people, the realities, and the history of the lands in which she finds herself’”

A synodal ecclesiology acknowledges that Catholicity is realised in the model of a Church of Churches because “the synodal dimension of the Church implies communion in the living faith of the various local Churches with each other and with the Church of Rome”.

# Interfaith Synodality

## Fr Patrick McInerney



Fr Patrick McInerney is the Director of the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations in Australia. He explains why interfaith Synodality needs to be put into practice.

Ever since his election, Pope Francis has been promoting synodality as the path “which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”. The word synodality comes from the Greek preposition *συν* (*syn* = with) and the noun *ὁδός* (*odos* = path). It means following a path together, walking together.

A synodal Church is laity, priests and bishops journeying together, listening to and learning from each other in mutuality and equality, based on a common baptism. However, if the Church is truly synodal, its members must also journey together with believers from other religions – with Buddhists, Baha’is, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs – and other worldviews.

They must listen to and learn from them, showing the exact same respect they show their fellow Christians, for they are equally God’s beloved created, “in the

lim relations are especially important with Christianity and Islam as the world’s two largest religions, and Muslims set to outnumber Christians before the end of the century.

“There is no alternative: we either build the future together or there will not be a future,” Pope Francis said in Abu Dhabi on 4th February 2019. Some 84% of the world’s population identify with a religion. 33% of the world’s population are Christian. Interreligious dialogue is how the Christian 33% engage with the other 51% who are religious believers, just over half of the world’s population. It’s as simple – and as complicated – as that!

There are many reasons for dialogue. There is the very practical one, that we all share this one planet and

we need to get along. There are also common beliefs which unite us across some religions. For example, the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) all believe in the one God who is Creator, who speaks to us in scripture, and who is a merciful judge – but we each understand those divine blessings differently!

#### Reasons for dialogue

Ultimately, each religion must find in its own traditions reasons for dialogue that are convincing to its followers. As a Christian, for me, the most compelling reason for dialogue is the Holy Trinity. God is a community of infinite, eternal love between the Father and the Son which is the Spirit. God is dialogue! This love between the three Persons overflows in

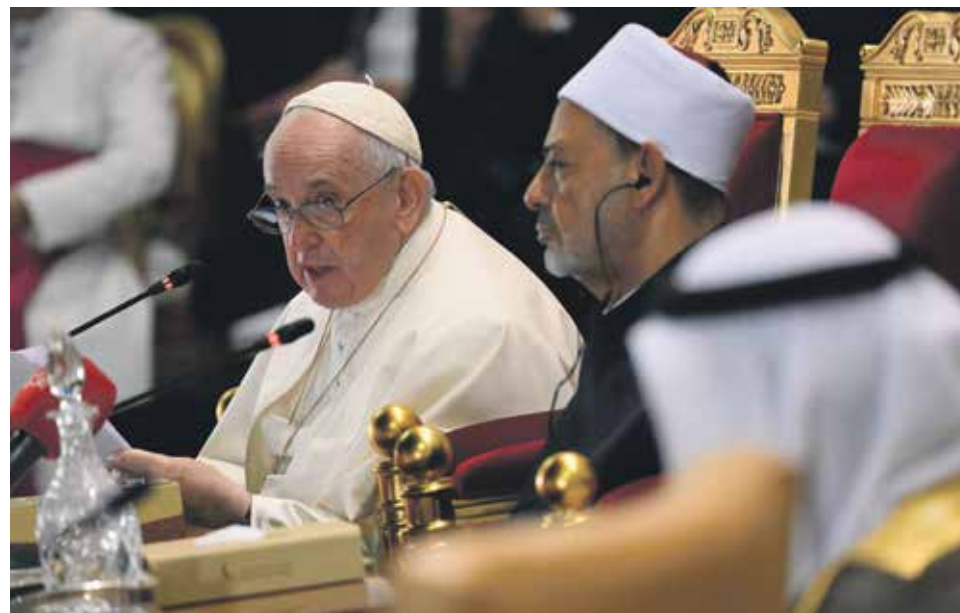
creation and redemption. We are made “in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26), that is, in the image and likeness of relations, of dialogue. We are made for dialogue with God, with each other, with all our sisters and brothers.

I cannot truly be a Christian if I do not reach out in love and service towards my sisters and brothers of other religions whom God also loved, created and redeemed through his Son. Interreligious dialogue is believers from different religions relating to each other. In recent decades, with waves of migrants seeking a better life, the relative ease of international travel, and refugees fleeing famine and conflict, believers from different religions are now living, working and playing side-by-side in cit-

ies and towns across Britain and Ireland. This mixing of people from different religions is unprecedented.

#### Religious proximity

In this new situation of religious diversity, or perhaps more accurately, of religious proximity, interreligious dialogue is simply following the Gospel command of “love your neighbour” (Mk 12:31). How we relate to believers from other religions, whether across the fence in our physical neighbourhood or online in our virtual neighbourhood, is interreligious dialogue. Whatever our faith, let us all be ‘synodal’. Let us journey with our neighbours and together serve those in need in our society, growing a just, fraternal, harmonious and resilient society.



Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt’s Al-Azhar mosque and university, attend a meeting with members of the Muslim Council of Elders in the courtyard of the mosque at Sakhir Palace in Awali, Bahrain, November 4, 2022.

Adapted from an article written for *Bridges*, a newsletter published by the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations.

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# Let's use our voices



Kathleen Nichols, a consecrated woman of Regnum Christi and conference host, sings in the first century synagogue unearthed in ancient Magdala, for Christian Vespers and Kabbalat Shabbat Prayers during the Annual Women's Encounter in Magdala in the Galilee, March 31, 2023.

own—need not stop the efficacy of God's Spirit. And joy is the foundational marker of Christian identity, isn't it? The psalm is bursting with joy, recounting the wondrous deeds God has done throughout salvation history. But we all know that a closer look at the psalms reveals that this joy is not a superficial emotion—there are some significant challenges in the life of faith, moments of fear and desolation.

**“I love the old Quaker hymn, ‘How Can I Keep from Singing?’ It so beautifully captures the reason for hope: No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging”**

Saint Paul certainly reminds us of that. The life of faith is not immune to suffering. Christ himself suffered. But the continued gift of the Spirit's presence allows us to stay grounded and give an account of our hope even amidst suffering and fear, because we are not alone in our trial. I love the old Quaker hymn, “How Can I Keep from Singing?” It so beautifully captures the reason for hope: No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging.

Since love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing? I had not yet learned that song in eighth grade, but despite my fears of entering a brand new school, I could not keep from singing.

So what does it mean to accept the Advocate, the Spirit of truth? We, too, are called to expand Jesus's mission as Philip did in Samaria. We're called to walk into new territories, brave challenging situations, and accompany those who may be different from us. But we do not do this alone: we have been given the gift of the Spirit who accompanies us and advocates for us in our mission. So how can our voices, then, be a gift for others?

The Spirit of truth demands that we stand in solidarity with those who are marginalized, persecuted, and forgotten and advocate on their behalf. The Spirit of truth demands bravery and boldness in the pursuit of justice. The Spirit of truth is very much alive in the margins of society, and in the messiness of our lives, demanding that no one be orphaned. So as a Church, let's use our voices and not stop singing.

**📖** This is an extract from the book, *Catholic Women Preach – Raising Voices, Renewing the Church*, a collection of homilies by women. Published by Orbis Books and reproduced with kind permission.

## Sarah Attwood Otto



**M**y family moved to Austin, Texas, the summer before I started eighth grade. On that first day of school as I walked through the front doors, I felt pretty isolated from the different cliques gathered around their lockers, and the overwhelming fear in my mind was whether I'd have someone to eat lunch with that day.

My only solace at that moment was singing, “Jesus loves me” over and over in my head as I walked down that hallway with trepidation. Somehow I knew, beneath all of my fears and insecurities, I was not alone.

Jesus loved me and walked with me down the corridor of my new school. I imagine the disciples felt similar fears and insecurities whenever Jesus mentioned his departure to them. He was their team captain! He was their teacher, their mentor, their friend. Without him, their mission would

not exist.

We hear of Jesus' promise to his disciples that his physical absence will be overcome by the never-ending presence of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth. I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you. You will not be alone as you enter new territories and encounter new situations.

### God was with me

God was with me on that first day of eighth grade. God was with me when I moved away from home

for college. God was with me when I walked away from a long-term relationship in grad school. God was with my husband and me as we moved across the country, far from family and friends, in the first year of our marriage. God was with me in the long and lonely hours of labouring and delivering my first child.

**“There was joy in that city, in the city of Samaria. Like Philip, we aid in the Spirit's bringing of joy to a particular city, or community, or person”**

Are there lonely journeys that come to your mind from your own life? Walking into the hospital room of your child who has cancer, leading a line of cars in a funeral procession for your spouse. In all of those moments,

God promised to be with us, and promises still: I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you.

And this promise is significant when we hear about Philip sharing the good news of Christ in the city of Samaria. This was a new phase in Christ's mission, moving the gospel beyond Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria. At other points in the gospel, the Samaritans had rejected Christ, so I can imagine Philip felt a bit uneasy as he set out on his travels.

### Accord

They were of one accord in paying attention to what Philip was saying and they accepted Christ. I love the line: And there was great joy in that city. I love the particularity of that. There was joy in that city, in the city of Samaria. Like Philip, we aid in the Spirit's bringing of joy to a particular city, or community, or person.

Philip's fears—as well as our

**“We all know that a closer look at the psalms reveals that this joy is not a superficial emotion—there are some significant challenges in the life of faith, moments of fear and desolation.”**

# Beyond clericalism - if synodality is not to become a clanging cymbal

## Penelope Middelboe



Pope Francis, in his December 2016 homily in the guest house Casa Santa Marta where he's lived since 2013, said 'the evil of clericalism is a really awful thing'. He lamented clergy who tell parishioners 'this should be done like this, like this, like this, and you - go away!' He is not alone. The Latin America Synodal Continental Document, one of only two submitted before Easter as intended, confirms that countries 'repeatedly denounced' clericalism, which the writers of the document 'understood as the expression of clerical authoritarianism and the distortion of ministerial service into an abuse of power'. It 'demands a new institutional model that counteracts the pyramidal model that facilitates clericalism'. The Asian Document 'hints at systemic causes' and 'points out the subculture of silence and impunity'.

### Power abuse

In wider society, power abuse takes many forms. Perhaps, in this context however, clericalism means those clergy who ignore, mislead, bully, restrict, frighten, silence, exclude, judge, damn - and, many years ago, burn at the stake.

At its root is an unspoken assumption that God himself can be limited and controlled by a hierarchy of ordained men. Can we also agree that sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults tops this list and that cover-up is equally bad?

95% of diocesan syntheses from England and Wales criticised the hierarchy for putting the protection of its reputation above the sufferings of the abused. Pope Francis has also been known to take to task those parishioners who shirk their responsibilities to challenge clericalism.

Clerical power abuse can come from a myriad of directions - from a co-seminarian, a spiritual director, a teacher, a parish priest, a religious superior, a bishop, or a legislative department in the Vatican. It can take many forms including racism, homophobia, and misogyny. There is no legal protection within the Church to protect

the rights of the abused whether lay or religious, and it is carried out 'in God's name'.

It's important to underline that getting rid of clericalism is not a uniquely Western concern. At a recent online Q&A, Philomena Mwaura, an eminent theologian at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, who was involved in the African Continental Assembly, told us that one of the key questions they had asked was 'how has clericalism contributed to the exclusion of the laity?'

**“Although there is huge support in favour of women's ordination, and in favour of married priests, Catholics, by and large, are not yet anti-clergy”**

She added 'the structure of the Church is characterised by clericalism all over the world. Without overhauling this structure how can they be made to work for the people of God?... It seems the Church in Africa is committed to addressing clericalism'. Mwaura was also one of the 35 people who drew up the Document for the Continental Stage in Frascati published 27 October 2022, which drew on all 112 national reports. Tellingly, the 'Frascati document' has a subtitle 'Beyond clericalism' and quotes many reports that 'signal the importance of ridding the Church of clericalism so that all its members, including priests and laity, can fulfil a common mission'.

It is, of course, also important to understand that all the people across the world who've spoken out against clericalism are not against having priests. Although there is huge support in favour of women's ordination, and in favour of married priests, Catholics, by and large, are not yet anti-clergy. They are however, wanting change, and they are increasingly sceptical that the hierarchy can reform itself.

History shows that the hier-



Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J Pérez joins college students, other young adults and ministry leaders during a synodal listening session at La Salle University, Philadelphia, US.

archy has been unable to tackle clerical sexual abuse. In the recent documentary interview with young people, *The Pope Answers*, filmed last year, a young man asks 'what about pederasty in the Church?' The young man was a victim himself as a child, and failed to receive justice after a sentence of eleven years for the abuser was reduced to two and he was allowed to continue as a teacher.

### Frustration

It is when the Pope says that he will review this particular case, that another young man expresses his frustration at the inadequacy of the Church's policy of zero tolerance. 'This is not justice,' he protests. 'I mean, he had to come here so you would say that the issue would be solved.' Hans Zöllner, a German Jesuit who has served on the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors since it was first established in Rome by Pope Francis in 2014, said in his resignation letter of 29 March 2023 'I have grown increasingly concerned with how the commission has gone about achieving [its] goal, particularly in the areas of responsibility, compliance, accountability and transparency.'

So if even the important work initiated by the Pope himself is failing, how likely are the bishops and the Curia to undertake a general overhaul of their structures in order to end the exclusion of the laity, as demanded for example by the Church in Africa? Will the bishops agree that individual countries

can unilaterally introduce changes at their own speed, as the German bishops are requesting?

**“If the word synodal is not to become a clanging cymbal the institutional hierarchy must make moves in October to rid itself of clericalism”**

After all, for almost all of the Church's history - until the middle of the nineteenth century in fact - almost all national churches chose their own bishops, used their own liturgies and formulated their own structures of discipline.

Pope Francis has successfully shown us the beauty of synodality, and at the same time shown us that clericalism is its opposite. If the word synodal is not to become a clanging cymbal, the institutional hierarchy must make moves in October to rid itself of clericalism.

If that were to happen, what would the Church look like? This is the focus of a lay-led event, *The Discipleship of Equals*, to be held in October 2023, whilst the bishops are meeting in Rome. The event is being hosted by the Companions of Spirit Unbounded - a new global network of Catholic and other Christian groups that actively embraces diversity and actively works to include groups marginalized by the hierarchical Church.

At the week-long conference 8-14 October (both online and with 'in person' speakers in Rome and Bristol, England on Friday 13 and Saturday 14) we will ask international theologians, canon lawyers, spiritual leaders and activists to envisage a new Church; in fact to define an emerging Church that is learning to

rid itself of clerical domination.

### Emerge

We cannot say, at this stage, what might emerge, but having carried out numerous consultations we can envisage speakers articulating diverse cultural views on embracing people we see as 'other', on sharing authority, on tackling human rights abuses and the legacies of colonisation, and on building small Christian communities. And they will do all of this and more while intent on hearing the cry of the abused and of the earth.

We will work with clergy, female and female religious and any bishops who will put their heads above the parapet. If we get this right, we will give powerful backing to Pope Francis. And in this way, with the help of the Spirit, we can all unlearn and eradicate all attitudes of dependence, submission and silence within communities, Churches and society.

*Penelope Middelboe is a member of a lay-led forum for reform, Root & Branch, which initiated Spirit Unbounded as global outreach, in the belief that we're stronger together. The Discipleship of Equals event will be funded from donations and accessible ticket sales. More Companions welcome.*

<https://www.rootandbranch-synod.org/>

<https://spiritunbounded.org/>

*Spirit Unbounded will be hosting an online discussion on 'Human Rights in the Catholic Church' featuring keynote speakers Mary McAleese and Sr Joan Chittister. The event will coincide with the 2023 Synod of Bishops in Rome this October. This lay-led response to the Synod, entitled 'Discipleship of Equals' will take place between October 8-14 and it is anticipated, annually thereafter, in an agreed global setting.*

**“95% of diocesan syntheses from England and Wales criticised the hierarchy for putting the protection of its reputation above the sufferings of the abused”**

# The power we possess: The relationship between the local Church, the Synodal Process and binding past and present wounds



Pope Francis celebrates a Mass to open the listening process that leads up to the assembly of the world Synod of Bishops in 2023, in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.

## THE LAST WORD WITH Fr Eamonn Conway



The Church in Europe has yet to be stirred from its fatalistic slumber, but there is still a way that it can recapture the will of the people and that's by not discounting the role of the local Church in synodal decision-making, writes Fr Eamonn Conway.

All three consultation phases of the Synod of Bishops 2021-2024, local, national, and continental, have concluded for now. Preparations are underway for the General Assembly in Rome Oct 4 to Oct 29, 2023. Until Pope Francis reformed the synodal process, the General Assembly was more or less all there was to it. Now, the Assembly is only one, albeit key, moment within it. Even that has seen radical change with the announcement on April 17 that at least 70 people other than bishops will have full participation and voting rights this coming October. Of these, half must be women and there should

also be representation of young people. Most participants, however, will still be bishops, and the entire process remains ultimately advisory to the Pope.

### Ireland's declining influence

Given our small Catholic population and our diminished influence internationally, the Church in Ireland can expect limited participation. In fact, Europe's presence will be eclipsed by that of the Global South. According to the last Vatican census (2021), globally, the Catholic population is

steadily increasing, by 15 million alone in the most recent year for which we have figures (2018/2019). Meanwhile, Europe's Catholic population is consistently in decline. In 1910, 65% of all Catholics lived in Europe. A hundred years later this percentage had dropped to 24%. In 2018/2019 alone, Europe's Catholic population declined by 300,000.

Pope Benedict XVI believed that Europe would always have a decisive role to play in global Catholicism. On the other hand, in the charter for his pontificate, *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), Pope Francis said that in seeking to establish or renew the Church, other continents cannot be required to "imitate modes of expression that European nations developed at a particular moment of their history" (n. 118). It has been suggested that Europe now belongs to an "axis of irrelevance" where the world Church is concerned, the recognition of which it should embrace with an appropriate humility. That said, synods are not exercises in democracy but in discernment; the Holy Spirit often speaks through those whose voices are least dominant.

### Synodal changes take time

Councils and synods can have a major impact on the life of the Church, but it takes time. The present emphasis on synodality represents a new phase in the reception of

the Second Vatican Council that took place 60 years ago. Though synods can produce surprises, we need to acknowledge that the forthcoming General Assembly is focused on revitalising communion, participation, and mission through inculcating a synodal style into the day-to-day life of the Church. We will have a better sense of the agenda when we see the Working Document for the Assembly in the coming days (the *Instrumentum laboris*), but it is unlikely to propose changes to Church discipline or development of doctrine. These issues are more likely to surface indirectly.

**“What matters most immediately to the Catholic Church in Ireland is not what takes place in Rome in the coming months. It is what the Church undertakes here and now for itself”**

Synod 2021-2024 will not conclude, as originally planned, with the October 2023 General Assembly but rather at the end of a second General Assembly in October 2024, thus allowing a year in between for further deliberation and discernment, locally and globally. Pope Francis did something like this before when he

held two synods on marriage and the family back-to-back in 2014 and 2015, the intervening period provoking much lively debate and discussion. In taking this approach, Francis is replicating the process of Vatican II, which also consisted of separate assemblies.

### A 'sound decentralisation'

At the beginning of his pontificate ten years ago, Francis called for a 'sound decentralisation' (*Evangelii gaudium*, n. 16), urging episcopal conferences to take responsibility for the mission of the Church in their own situations and circumstances (n.30, n. 33). Concluding the consultation phase of Synod 2021-24 last March, the Office of the Synod of Bishops asked local communities to rise "to the challenge of putting synodal reforms into practice in the daily routine of their ecclesial action, in the knowledge that much of what has been discussed and identified so far at the local level does not require the discernment of the universal Church nor the intervention of the Magisterium of Peter".

For several reasons then, what matters most immediately to the Catholic Church in Ireland is not what takes place in Rome in the coming months. It is what the Church undertakes here and now for itself. There are many worthwhile processes of renewal under-

way, whether in response to Pope Francis' global call to synodality, or out of urgent pastoral necessity, or both. These need to focus upon what can be achieved within existing provisions without awaiting changes from Rome.

### Supporting marriage and the family

To give one example: pastoral support for marriage and the family. During the Easter ceremonies this year, I noticed parents and grandparents, who had succeeded in persuading their children and grandchildren to accompany them to church, explaining patiently to them the various rituals and symbols and their significance. Families who are trying to hand on the Faith need urgent support, and this, not primarily in terms of marriage counselling, in which assistance is available from secular bodies, but specifically in nurturing their own faith and that of their family. Several chapters of the exhortation that followed the Synods of 2014 and 2015, *The Joy of Love*, are dedicated to this topic. Eight years on, we need to ask if we have taken sufficient steps to implement the strategies these synods proposed, including recommendations for people in second unions and same-sex relationships. What is preventing us from doing so? Who needs to step up, or, perhaps, step out of the way, so that this can happen?

### Three wounds inflicted by our culture

Several of the submissions to the synodal process from different parts of the world faced fully the fact that the wounds inflicted by the Church remain a barrier to the Church's mission and need to be addressed comprehensively. The synodal process also needs to reckon, however, with the ways contemporary culture can also inflict wounds. These, too, are a barrier to the Church's mission and must be tended to. The Church needs to discern carefully what it has to learn from contemporary culture as well, but that is another discussion.

Michael Paul Gallagher SJ was one of the first to alert us to the non-neutrality of culture; how it predisposes us to interpret and respond to our lived reality in particular ways. He identified three particular wounds our culture inflicts, and which must be addressed, he argued, before people can hear the Word of God. The first of these is the collapse of collective memory. Many people are no longer anchored in a tradition, a shared body of meaning, that has been handed on to them. The symbols and narratives of the Catholic faith have become like a foreign or lost language for them. Without roots in a received and shared body of meaning, people are disposed to construct their sense of self and of what is of value to them in a 'pick and mix' manner, like consumers.

The second wound Gallagher iden-



A delegate carries a bowl of incense during a prayer walk at a pre-synodal assembly in the sixth-century monastic site of Clonmacnoise in Ireland June 18, 2022.

tifies is that our culture disposes us to opt for a superficial sense of belongingness without commitment over genuine companionship and communities of support. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes the widespread unravelling in society of "the close bonds of belonging that allow psychological wounds to heal...". People today are disposed not only to be shy when it comes to making commitment, but suspicious of it, and sluggish when it comes to the self-giving that building community requires. In the *Joy of Love*, Pope Francis identifies the fear of commitment as one of the most grievous wounds afflicting contemporary culture.

Half-believing, Gallagher says, goes hand in hand with this sense of half-belonging, and this brings with it a spiritual loneliness: "In the spiritual

isolation often induced by today's culture, to retrieve a quality of prayerful receiving of God's word has to go hand in hand with liberating an energy of Christian service and self-giving".

**“The constant message”, Gallagher says, “is that your autonomous self-fulfillment is the key to happiness”**

The third wound, Gallagher discerns, afflicts the “religious imagination”, an expression he borrows from St John Henry Newman. By this he means the way we perceive and understand both ourselves, God,

and the world. He quotes T.S. Eliot: “The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did”. The prevailing culture captures our sensibility; how we encounter and respond to God at the affective level. It shakes and can even shatter our confidence in the intuition of religious belief. It overwhelms our innate, God-given desire for God with “small and ego-centred goals”. “The constant message”, Gallagher says, “is that your autonomous self-fulfillment is the key to happiness”.

Our world has become more precarious since Michael Paul Gallagher provided his cultural analysis. The wellbeing and mental health crisis pandemic, especially in Western countries, is evidence of this. “Christ shows himself to us in the wounds of our world”, Tomáš Hálik told the European synodal assembly in Prague. The fact that so many people are asking the Church “to enlarge the space of your tent” (Is 54:2) means that, despite the crimes and sins of some within the Church, many people still look to it to help them encounter the

healing power of Christ.

### Deeper listening and ongoing consultation

Even though the consultation phase of Synod 2021-24 has concluded, listening and discernment with and among the People of God must become a permanent feature of Church life if inculcating a synodal style into the daily life of the Church, which is the goal of the Synod, is to be realised. Proper discernment requires listening not only to the words spoken, but also with ‘the ear of the heart’, as St Benedict says, to the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” that underlie them (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1). An analysis of the wounds inflicted by culture and how they impact on discerning what the Holy Spirit is asking of the Church in the twenty-first century is an important part of that listening and discernment.

**i** Father Eamonn Conway is a priest of the Tuam archdiocese and Professor of Integral Human Development in the School of Philosophy & Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia.

**“The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did”**

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