

What is Synodality in The Church All About?

I'm going to try to do three things after a brief introduction to today's topic. First, to say something about the principles and purposes behind synodality. Second, to distinguish synods and synodality by using the analogy of weddings and marriage. Third, to name some challenges and concerns about synodality. There will be some repetition of key points.

The word: synod – syn: with/together; odos: the road/journey – we are on the journey (of faith, as pilgrims) together. Synod: an assembly, a meeting, a council. Not just episcopal collegiality (strengthened at Vat II) but now to include non-bishops, laity, including women having voting rights. Preparations for the October 2023 and October 2024 Synod on Synodality have involved the largest ever popular process of consultation in world history – despite all the limitations of participation. Consultations before synods are no longer optional extras. Recognition that each member of the Church has a unique and crucial role to play in its mission, and unique gifts given by the Holy Spirit in baptism for the service of God's kingdom. To fulfil their responsibilities as Christians, the People of God must be given voice, listened to, and be heard.

Synodality is both an old and a new way of being church: walking together as equals, listening prayerfully to the Holy Spirit and to each other's experience of trying to live Christianly. It is about seeking God's will for the kind of church God wants now, in our time and place. How can church members discern together what they have got right and what is good and therefore should be kept going – and how can they work out what they need to let go of – however valuable it was in the past - as being less fruitful or even counter-productive in today's context?

1. Principles and Purposes

Along with mercy, synodality has emerged as a salient theme for Pope Francis. There are six elements within Francis' teaching on synodality:

First, there is an emphasis on the People of God being on a journey.

Second, he highlights the significance of the theology of baptism.

Third, he gives more attention than has been the case hitherto to the *sensus fidei*, the experiential understanding of the faith actually held by the faithful.

Fourth, he constantly stresses that synodality requires an openness to the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, he recognizes the diversity of charisms or gifts available through God's abundant grace, given to serve the mission of the church; to draw upon these charisms or gifts calls for a much higher degree of participation, co-operation and an acceptance of co-responsibility within the church than we are used to.

Finally, Pope Francis calls for a 'culture of encounter'; this is closely associated with dialogue, fraternity, friendship, closeness and communion.

Underpinning his advocacy of synodality, there is Pope Francis' belief that ordinary believers are not simply passive recipients of divine truths handed down by superiors, but instead that

they are given the grace – through their response to God in faith – to be actively involved in discerning what God wants of them and then putting this into practice, as best they can. It is a call to be much more actively involved than they have been used to. It may seem like a call to a new way of being church, but really it is more like it was in the early years of the church.

Synodality is a pathway towards addressing five key tasks for the church: a renewed encounter with the living Christ; recovering the missionary mandate of Christ; reading the signs of the times; listening to the ‘sense of the faith’ and the life-experience of all the people of God; and working together humbly and cooperatively to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit – as we search for God’s will for our Church and the part we must play in attuning ourselves to God’s will and putting this into practice. *Baptism* makes us all co-responsible members of the church. Synodality is a corrective to an overemphasis on hierarchy. However, synodality does not dismantle the hierarchical feature of the church and should lead to better decisions which will be better received and have greater impact.

Two ancient principles are to be appropriated. The first is that what touches all should be examined and approved by all (rather than being handed down from on high without the people being consulted). The second is that whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient - a recognition that each person receives revelation and the teaching of the church in a unique way that is deeply influenced by their individual nature, experience and circumstances – and that decision-making in the church should take proper account of the diversity of perspectives and experiences prevalent in her midst. If the internal workings of the church do not display openness, transparency, inclusivity, dialogue, mutual respect and accountability, then it is much more difficult for the church to come across as credible or winsome in communicating faith to the world. The path of synodality can be considered an attempt to overcome dysfunctionality in our ecclesial culture and thus in our witness to the world.

An early statement by Pope Francis underlies his drive to install synodality as fundamental to the Church: “all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization.” Baptism rather than ordination is a key emphasis here. There are two assumptions in this statement by the Pope: first, that the main task of the Church is to evangelise, to share the Gospel; second, that baptism empowers and gives the baptized person a mandate and a duty to contribute to that sharing of the Gospel with the world. **Synodality is for the sake of mission**, to prepare us to share the Gospel. It is about conforming us to Christ, not to the world. Any internal changes within the Church that might emerge through synodality would be of value principally because they enable the Church to go outward more effectively as witness to Christ. The motivation for pushing for a synodal understanding in the Church is to unleash the energy of witnessing to the Gospel in our words and deeds through calling on the multiplicity of gifts that God has given God’s people. The kind of formation required by synodality - and which the process of being synodal itself provides - equips us to go to the frontiers, wherever the Gospel is needed but not yet being heard.

As has always been the case, the People of God are to be transformed, empowered & encouraged to become the Good News: to be formed, healed, converted, united and sent out

to a hurting and hungry world through an encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist & inspired & guided by Holy Spirit. Ultimately, synodality is for mission. It must have both horizontal communion (to be properly human and humane) and communion with God (in order not to be seduced by or reduced to current cultural norms promulgated by the principalities and powers of this world).

We might say that synodality involves a reconfiguration. All those religious convictions that we have been brought up with – these remain important. They are not replaced by some new doctrine we did not know before. But they have been assembled differently, with priority shifts that result in some teachings becoming more salient or prominent and others less so. In particular, baptism (and its implications), the Holy Spirit, life experience of the laity, listening for the sense of the faithful, and collective discernment of God’s will for the Church – all receive a higher priority in synodality than has been customary in our lifetimes. But the Trinity, belief in Jesus Christ as our Saviour, the place of scripture and the sacraments, the role of clergy and the hierarchy, the valuing of tradition – all remain central and indispensable.

The emphasis on synodality can be described as the third phase of implementing Vatican II (phase 1 - from 1965 – 85: optimism & experimentation; phase 2 - 1985 – 2013: dilution & rowing back). Perhaps we could describe phase 3 as the renewal, the unfolding and the expansion of Vatican II.

A synod is not a parliament or debating chamber between different parties in the Church. It is rather a spiritual process. Synods and synodality occur in the context of prayer, an examination of conscience, in the light of Scripture, seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit – these all should affect the listening, the dialogue, the learning from each other, the discernment and decision-making that takes place. True Christian discernment relies on a strong sense of communion among the faithful, but such communion is not just with those living now, but also with those who have gone before us, because God was present in their lives and can still teach us through them as well as through those around us now.

2. Synodality compared with marriage

In order to show that holding synods is not the same as synodality, let me use an analogy between marriage and weddings.

Becoming a synodal church involves much more than holding synods, just as a marriage involves much more than celebrating a wedding. A wedding, like a synod, is an event, something planned for. They both have a structure, rubrics, a fixed form of words and they mark decisions and commitments for future action. Both are (relatively) public occasions, with fixed dates, and announced starting and finishing points. In synods, as in a wedding, participants play a particular role. In a wedding this might be as observers, as family members, as ministers, as would-be husbands and wives, and sometimes other roles are played, such as bridesmaids or pages.

A great deal of emphasis and planning – and indeed a huge amount of money - is given to the day of the wedding – which is, of course, a milestone event for the couple at the heart of the ceremony as it is for close family members. Similarly, a great deal of planning is given and

usually a long lead-in period is allocated to a synod. This too can be a milestone event in the life of the church. But just as having a wedding does not guarantee that a couple will move into a way of living that is suitable for marriage, so too holding a synod does not guarantee that the church will become synodal in its way of living.

A marriage cannot properly be envisaged or imagined by the aspiring couple. They do not really know what they are letting themselves in for, regardless of the example of their own parents. Each marriage is different; and however closely they observe their parents' interactions, children are never on the inside of that relationship; they cannot experience it as it is felt, enjoyed and undergone by their mother and father. Marriage is a process, not an event. It is a journey of discovery as well as an ongoing and unending journey of mutual surrender.

There are no rules or scripts – though certain qualities are likely to be needed. There is no hiding place in a marriage; pretending won't cut it. Both partners find themselves, on every front imaginable - sexual, social, culinary, intellectual, moral, spiritual, political, physical, aesthetic – exposed, self-revealing, each hurting and healing the other. It is impossible to know where this journey will take you and how much it will change you (both willingly and reluctantly). Everything one assumed beforehand might be called into question.

A synodal church calls for something that is more like the momentous changes required in a marriage than it is like a wedding. The real work begins after the milestone event. There will be many obstacles to fulfilling the promises, many set-backs will arise, and many unforeseen problems will test the relationships that are desirable. Much patience will be needed as people develop at different speeds and with greatly varying levels of enthusiasm and commitment. But God's timetable is infinitely flexible; God's Spirit is constantly available; God's forgiveness is so willingly given; God's grace is always present, no matter how difficult the situation. Being synodal, like being married, is a seriously risky enterprise; we can't see very far ahead; it is not something we can control or manage smoothly; it involves much letting go if we are to be truly open to the richness of life promised us. Stepping out into the deep can be frightening, whether into marriage or into a synodal way of being. Just as trust, intimacy and mutual dependence in marriage pave the way to an encounter with ultimacy and true enrichment and transformation in life, so too trust, closeness, and mutual dependence – with God's help – will do the same on the synodal journey.

3. Challenges and Concerns

Synodality poses many challenges for church leaders and all the faithful. Here I mention five. The first relates to the quality and style of leadership in the church.

The second is the need to prioritise spirituality over structures (though not to neglect structural change).

The third challenge is to learn lessons from previous church attempts at consultation.

The fourth is to avoid falling into the trap of envisaging synodality as an event, rather than as an ongoing (and always unfinished) process.

The fifth challenge is how to manage disagreement and diversity.

A brief comment on that fifth challenge. We need to acknowledge that being synodal as a church is very likely going to mean experiencing more open disagreement and conflict, instead of disagreements and conflict being swept under the carpet, or airbrushed from the public face of our church – as if to be Catholic means we are unanimous. Real, mature relationships have to manage conflict, not suppress it; they have to grow through conflict as the relationship develops and deepens. Unanimity is not necessarily a sign of authenticity or vitality. The cultural change within the church called for by seeking to be synodal is so great that we will need much patience and perseverance. For many people it will seem confusing and uncomfortable in comparison with what they have been used to, and so open-ended (at least at the moment) that it might seem nebulous, perhaps even irrelevant – and – for some people, it might threaten developments that they feel are downright dangerous.

The synodal way offers a path towards better mutual understanding – provided that people from all ends of the spectrum (in terms of their interpretation of Catholicism) participate. It must be acknowledged that some people will rule themselves out from such engagement.

Some concerns

- (i) It would be a mistake to see the consultation that is integral to synodality as being a matter of counting votes, checking opinion polls, or facilitating debates between different parties in the church. Even the use of questionnaires might lead some to think truth can be identified in this way, or that sociology has taken the place of theology.
- (ii) How do we allow for fact that some people won't be able to engage with the dialogue and discernment processes entailed in synodality, for example, the very young, the very old and many of the simple faithful? This is not a term of abuse or condescending because simplicity of faith is a gift to the individual and to the Church as a whole - for God is a reality to be met in wordless devotion more than in restless enquiry; none of us can claim to understand God or God's ways with us.
- (iii) Another concern might be that in seeking to be as inclusive as possible, for example, asking the views of Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith, how do we weigh the contributions of people who don't seem to be living a life of prayer, receiving the sacraments, engaging with sacred scripture, following the moral teachings of the Church - in comparison with those who do practice their faith in these ways? Not listening to them might prevent us from learning some uncomfortable truths about some aspects of church life and practice which need to be reformed. But surely their sense of the faith (a truncated one, surely?) cannot be the yardstick that determines everything.
- (iv) And even among those who are clearly and fully living a life of faith, how weigh the different perspectives and roles among the People of God – where consensus is not achieved?

- (v) The importance of listening to the sense of faith in all the baptised raises the question of their formation. Clearly there is much more that needs to be done to equip God's people to be effective sharers in and witnesses to the Gospel.
- (vi) Holding together continuity and openness. There can be no blueprint guaranteeing that the church will achieve the proper balance that avoids both the power of the past stifling the church's growth, on the one hand, and the embrace of newness or change severing the church from its roots, on the other hand. Our forefathers and foremothers in faith did not have such a blueprint and neither do we. They had to trust themselves to the Holy Spirit as they did their best to be true to what they had received and at the same time to address the issues of their day as effectively as they could. Tradition is the record of how previous Christians have shown initiative in responding to the Gospel in their own contexts. This called for both fidelity and the risks of creativity. This is what living tradition has always been. We have to do the same.
- (vii) The tension between patience and progress on pressing issues.

Concluding comments

Pope Francis's programme for advancing synodality in the life of the church – at the moment very much a work in progress and one with no clear outcome - calls for a new pattern of relationships within the church, with a view to rendering the church more fit to witness to the Gospel in the world. Among other things, the synodal movement seeks to foster a closer engagement with the life experience of the faithful, much greater levels of participation and inclusivity, drawing on the insights and talents of all, and a more egalitarian climate of communication. Thus synodality implies a reorientation of church life and leadership and it requires a different emphasis in how the church faces the task of communicating faith and promoting spiritual learning.

Synodality is essentially a learning process in three senses. First, although it has ancient roots in the life of the early church, for people today it is new, unfamiliar, untested, and the subject of much anxiety, both from those who invest great hopes in it and among those who bitterly oppose it. Church members are learning how to engage in the synodal process, working it out as they go along. Second, its underlying intention is to discern God's will, to identify what kind of church God wants us to develop for our time and place; thus synodality is a mode of spiritual learning. Third, synodality puts great emphasis on learning from life-experience as the main medium of our encounter with God; thus listening to how people are experiencing the joys and the challenges of trying to live Christianly become more salient than has hitherto been the case in approaches to faith formation.

"We stand before you, Holy Spirit, as we gather in your name. Make yourself at home in our hearts. Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it. And may we be open to receive your guidance." I hope we can all say Amen to that prayer.

