

Synodality in Practice: Reflections

James McEvoy

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1. Synodality, Francis stresses, is *not simply another structure*—that would do little by itself. In *Laudato Si'* and in other places, he rejects “functionalism” and “the technocratic paradigm” in the church and in church reform. This insight has a corollary in the struggles of contemporary Western culture (as Faggioli notes [*ITQ*, p. 18]): one of the signs of this time is the deep distrust that people have of institutions, even democratic and ecclesial institutions. Only participation which engages people’s deepest self-understanding and concerns, and which does not alienate them, will overcome such distrust.
 - a. Francis’s “non-functionalist” approach entails not only the discerning spirit in which a synod must be conducted (discussed below), but also that at which the synod aims—the community of the faithful reaching out in mercy. In a 2013 interview, Francis says: “I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful, the closeness, the nearness.”
2. *Three phases of a synod/assembly*: a preparatory phase, consulting the People of God on the concerns of the synod/assembly; the celebratory phase—the meeting itself; and the implementation phase, through which the synod/assembly’s conclusions are accepted by the wider church. Each of these phases requires a participatory style—each is an act of discernment.
 - a. The preparatory/planning stage is crucial.
3. *Consultation at the grass roots*—both of individuals and of their associations. In his apostolic constitution of 2018 on Bishops Synods, *Episcopalis Communio*, Francis mandates consultation at the grass roots—“the priests, deacons and lay faithful of their Churches, both individually and in associations ... Above all, the contribution of the local Church’s participatory bodies, especially the Presbyteral Council and the Pastoral Council, can prove fundamental, and from here ‘a synodal Church can begin to emerge’.”
 - a. The task of the preparatory phase is ascertaining people’s concerns and, thus, gaining their commitment to the process. So, consult as many Catholics as possible, and engage their concerns through the whole synod process. The preparatory stage for the Plenary Council has been especially strong on this.
 - b. The key question in the preparatory process must focus on mission, expressing the sentiment: “How do we as church embody more authentically, in the Archdiocese of Adelaide, what we are called to be and to do?” The Plenary Council’s question did this well.

4. The *process of the synod is, itself, open*: “The road [Francis] intends to take is really open for him, there is no theoretical road map; the path is opened by walking.” (Spadaro 6) That is, it’s a lived, spiritual experience. So, the way in which the synod/assembly is conceptualized may need to change as the process unfolds.
5. Integral to the process of synodality is *discernment of the sense of faith* of the people of God—a real and open dialogue seeking to encounter God wherever God is found.
 - a. “A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing.’ It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit ... in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’.” (Francis, “Pope Calls for a Listening Church,” 2.)
 - b. Listening to the whole people of God is essential because it is primarily a *locus theologicus*—“a place where the revealing God can be heard speaking to the church today.” (Rush, 321)
 - c. This discernment of the presence of the Holy Spirit relates to the concrete lives of individuals and of the community, it is not “a discernment of ideas” (Spadaro).
 - d. Francis frequently urges synod participants to speak candidly: “it is necessary to say all that, in the Lord, one feels the need to say: without polite deference, without hesitation.” (Conclusion of 2014 Synod)
6. *Further entailments of discernment*:
 - a. Discernment is not dialectical or antagonistic parliamentary-style debate. In light of the Amazon synod, following which Francis did not advance the synod’s desire for married priests, he said: “an atmosphere occurs that ends up distorting, reducing and dividing the synodal hall into dialectical and antagonistic positions that do not help in any way the mission of the Church. [This is] because everyone entrenched in ‘his truth’ ends up becoming a prisoner of himself and his positions, projecting his own confusions and dissatisfactions into many situations. Thus, walking together becomes impossible.”
 - b. To state the previous point from the positive perspective: “The Synod is rather an *ecclesial expression*, i.e., the Church that journeys together to understand reality with the eyes of faith and with the heart of God; it is the Church who questions herself with regard to her fidelity to the *deposit of faith*, which does not represent for the Church a museum to view...but is a living spring from which the Church drinks.” (Opening, 2015 Bishops Synod)
 - c. So, the spirit in which proposals are made and discussions engaged is important.

- d. Also, key to this process is the participants' understanding that, as a diocese, we are a community journeying together and, therefore, can't remake the church from scratch, nor fulfill the "wish list" that every person brings. It requires an understanding of the communal life of the Archdiocese, and a recognition of the primacy of mission in the life of the church (i.e.: 1a above).
7. It also strikes me that, because the Archdiocesan assembly/synod will run alongside the Plenary Council 2020, but in a real sense follow on from the preparation for that Council, the process for the Archdiocesan assembly should somehow integrate: (a) what has been learned about synodal processes from the national experience; and (b) what has been arrived at through the preparatory process of the Plenary — i.e.: somehow take account of the preparatory documents, even though they probably won't determine the shape of the Archdiocesan assembly. After all, a great number of the people of the Archdiocese have been involved in the preparatory process for the Plenary Council.

Consulted:

- Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (London: CTS, 2013).
- Pope Francis, "Pope Calls for a Listening Church," Address at the Commemorative Ceremony for the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops (17.10.2015): 1–5.
- Massimo Faggioli, "From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis's 'Listening Primacy'," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, Online First (2020): 1–18.
- Massimo Faggioli, "Synod and Synodality in Pope Francis's Words," *The Way* (August 2020): 1–9 [manuscript copy].
- Walter Kasper, "People-of-God Ecclesiology Understood Concretely," *Pope Francis's Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (New York: Paulist, 2015), ch. 6.
- Ormond Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 299–325.
- Antonio Spadaro, "Francis's Government: What is the Driving Force of His Pontificate?" *La Civiltà Cattolica* 4, no. 9 (September 5, 2020): art. 9 [English edition].