

Last weekend Bernardette Campbell, one of the three 'synodal co-ordinators' in our two parishes (along with Donald Scott and Fr Jock), spoke at the end of all our Masses seeking to help us understand the Synodal Process a little better. This is what she said.

(After her words, you can read an update on what has been happening in recent days from Gerald O'Connell, the Vatican correspondent of 'America'.)

THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY - ROME - OCTOBER 2023

Why should I follow the progress of the Synod?

Like most of us here we want to keep abreast of world events and be informed. Often the news we receive is relentless in its reporting of suffering... Included in those world events is the reporting on our own Church. It too has had its share of suffering but right now there is some really good news that's going on that we would like to offer you a brief update. It's called the Synod; it's happening in Rome at the moment.... you may have heard about it...some of you will be watching its progress very carefully.

After extensive listening, and the recording and making of submissions from people at a local level - remember the questionnaires we filled in at Mass in January 2022, followed by the sharing and listening sessions that took place in the Parish House in Lent 2022 – these submissions were then transcribed at a Continental level.....this information was collated and forwarded to Pope Francis in Rome who then invited representatives of the Bishops of the world to the assembly - or Synod - which is taking place in Rome at the moment.

However, it wasn't just bishops who were invited. For the first time in a Synod lay people were proposed - including women - and then Pope Francis personally invited some people to ensure balance and to reflect a range of different voices.

Let me start by saying what the Synod is *not*:

It's not about resolving particular problems eg women's ordination though it is about inclusivity.

It's not about the majority or loudest 'winning' through debate.... though it is about everybody being heard.

It's not Vatican 3 though it is about the Pope trying to fully implement Vatican 2.

So, what is this Synod about exactly?

This Synod is a journey of listening and inclusion.

We have had 16 Synods of Bishops since 1965 as recommended in Vatican 2 but Pope Francis has transformed the process. It's Pope Francis' 4th synod and since he realised the final script was often written before the synod began, he has exercised leadership in how this particular Synod should be run.....it is more about discernment, which markedly distinguishes it from previous Synods.

It's the most open Synod we've ever had as what came out of past synods was often carefully controlled. Francis has asked the participants to be bold and say what is on their heart. We experienced the fruits of such an approach at a local level right here in the church hall and parish house.

Past synods were reduced to one topic. Francis wants a more complete picture of the Church – who are we?

This synod about HOW to listen and HOW to deal with our polarised Church. This is a Synod on how to exercise Synodality!

Pope Francis wants us to reflect on:

- Who are we as a Church in 21st cent?
- How are we to relate to each other?
- How are we to work with each other?
- How are we to exercise authority?

Underlying this is the premise that everybody has responsibility for our Church.

In the Synod Hall in Rome there are 35 tables with 12 around each table and the Pope sitting at one of the tables. Each table has a facilitator posing *reflective* questions rather than statement for discussions e.g., what has struck you most forcibly as an affirmation or as a tension in your local Church?

What distinguishes this synod from every other is the listening qualities of prayer and silence.

The overlaying question is 'What does a Synodal Church (a listening Church) mean for the Church in the 21 Century?' In other words what does it look like?

The process has been broken down to 5 modules:

- Communion - how do we relate to one another.
- Mission – what is the Church for?
- Responsibility - how do we exercise our responsibility in our different roles?
- Authority - how do we exercise authority in our different roles?
- A Synthesis of all of the above.

If this is a synod still made up mostly of Bishops, can we say we have a gender balance since women are still clearly in the minority? Probably not.... nevertheless, it does recognise the importance of including a bigger percentage of women in the discernment process. To put this in context we know that e.g., only 1 per cent of US Catholics responded at a local level - but despite this statistic this Synod remains the most unique – and the broadest - consultation in the history of our church.

Pope Francis, as a Jesuit, has offered his Ignatian group discernment skills and this has ensured that this Synod is not a debate or a parliament full of noisy arguments. While we live in a polarised world - and an increasingly polarised Church - with everybody trying to impose views on another, synodality is about praying and listening, stepping back and reflecting. And it's not just about listening to each other but also discerning where the Spirit may be at work in people, and the way forward.

Synodality is about defusing polarisation...

This is listening at a much deeper level - it asks, 'Who are we?' 'What kind of Church are we passing on to the next generation?'

How will we know if the Synod is a success?

The litmus test will be about conversion or transformation not just in the varied - polarised - views of the Synod members, but also in the conversion and transformation of their hearts.

Overcoming tensions is the first level.

Can we even *discuss* in a context of love?

Pope Francis is suggesting that if we can't agree on how to address a problem then the likelihood that we can agree on solutions is minimal.

No one is minimising the importance of the issues to be discussed but more important still is learning how to listen to each other and work together even when we have different perspectives.

The skills and attitude involved in coming to a new position from our own is about recognising our common humanity and the continued conversion that Jesus is calling us to. A new identity for us all within the Church.

And perhaps within all of our relationships...?

What happens next?

Pope Francis wants Synodality to be an everyday part of Church – and, we can assume, also in all our personal lives.

He understands this way of being takes time to embed and challenges the idea that the Synod will be over after the second session in October 2024. Rather he hopes Synodality is here to stay.

Synodality has huge implications for seminarians, parishes and Church organisations. It will take time to come to maturity.

Perhaps I can leave you by encouraging you to put yourself in the shoes of the delegates – and consider what it feels like to be so challenged?

.... whether we can put our own fixed views to one side?

.... whether we can move beyond tension to transformation in our own lives?

....and what other questions we are left with.?

Synod Diary: Will the synod change its members?

by Gerard O'Connell

After a heartrending testimony in the synod hall, Father Timothy Radcliffe said: "I hope it changed us."

As I write on Oct. 18, we are now halfway through the synod's first session, which several of its 365 members have described to me as "a marathon." It demands energy, concentration and the will to keep going to its conclusion on Oct. 29.

Some had to drop out of the marathon, including Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, who had to return to Jerusalem following the attack on Israel by Hamas and Israel's declaration of war. Likewise, the two bishops from mainland China departed from the synod early this week because of "pastoral needs" in their dioceses.

Each synod member can address the plenary assembly briefly, and I understand that already more than half of them have availed of that possibility in the first two weeks. Commenting on these public interventions, one member characterized them this way: Several gave in-depth interventions, while others sought to firmly reassert the church's teaching on doctrine, especially on moral questions, when they sensed this was being challenged in some way in their group.

But I learned that the speakers who had the greatest impact on the assembly were those who spoke "from experience." I was told that there was "a shocked silence"

when one member gave a heartrending testimony. Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., referred to that same testimony this morning when, seeking to remind the synod members that *“we are called to embrace a deeper sense of who we are as the improbable friends of the Lord, whose scandalous friendship reaches across every boundary,”* he said, *“Many of us wept when we heard of that young woman who committed suicide because she was bisexual and did not feel welcomed.”*

“I hope it changed us,” he added.

In my first synod diary, I reported that one speaker reminded the assembly, *“We discern experiences, not ideas.”* In fact, the synod itself is an original experience for the participants and a totally different one from previous synods. The Nigerian theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, S.J., put it this way at a press briefing: *“This is a privileged moment because we’re part of an experience and process of the church making and remaking itself. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience that calls on theologians to deepen the process and bring out something new in how we live.”*

Father Orobator is convinced that *“the process is more important than the outcome.”* He added, *“There has been no shortage of divergence and differences. The process has allowed these to exist. And it has allowed the conversation not to devolve into animosity.”*

Father Orobator explained that *“focusing on the mechanisms and frameworks of listening and dialogue—these are the things that will lead us to a new way of being, where people, no matter who they are, are able to be heard and contribute to our discernment.”* Looking ahead, he said: *“The work of the synod will begin when the gatherings here end. This will be tested in the years to come.”*

While the synod experience, and especially the methodology, was new for many participants, the Irish Loreto sister Patricia Murray, I.B.V.M., remarked at a briefing that *“as a member of a congregation, I feel we’ve been putting synodality into practice over 20 years.... It’s a joy to see it unfold in the universal church.”*

She rejoiced that *“this discernment journey is not just this month. I’m happy there are two stages because as things come up from different perspectives, we’re holding our unity in diversity. We’re allowing it all to nourish us through voices and differences of opinion. But we need to go deeper in the months ahead.”*

She said each synod member is *“called to do personal preparation before we engage. You’re asked to speak deeply about your voice. And you can feel your own position being broadened, widened because of the diversity of opinions, ecclesiologies, etc. Naming the tensions is important in this process. Time is a gift, and we have to use it together, but also the time between our synodal assemblies for further prayer, reflection and discernment.”*

The synod is now in the second half of the marathon. Only 12 more days to go. Then, as Father Orobator said, the work begins again.

Gerard O’Connell is America’s Vatican correspondent and author of The Election of Pope Francis: An Inside Story of the Conclave That Changed History. He has been covering the Vatican since 1985.