

SO WHAT DOES THAT STRANGE WORD 'SYNODALITY' REALLY INVOLVE?

KILTEGAN MISSIONARY DONAL DORR OFFERS SOME SUGGESTIONS.



Pope Francis at Campus Misericordiae, Poland, World Youth Day 2016
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Donal Dorr

Walking together... with Pope Francis

For centuries it has been generally accepted that the Catholic Church moves quite slowly because its leaders think in terms of centuries; this is in sharp contrast to most political leaders who seldom think seriously beyond the next general election. But there have been two major exceptions to this within my lifetime. The first was the Second Vatican Council which took place sixty years ago; it brought about major changes within a few years. The second exception is what has been taking place since 2013 when Pope Francis became pope. Ever since that time he has been working at breakneck speed to bring about really radical changes in our Church. Behind all his new initiatives he has had a clear vision of the kind of Church which he believes God wants. And in the past couple of years he has spelled out what is at the heart of his vision for the Church.

Francis is determined to break down the clericalism which is so much out of line with the life and teaching of Jesus, and which has done so much damage to vulnerable people and to the Church as a whole and its reputation in the world. He wants to change the situation where all the important decisions are made by people in the Vatican, and to a far lesser extent by local bishops, with little or no effective consultation with Christians 'on the ground'. Instead he has put forward a model of Church where all Christians will have a really effective 'say' in the running of the Church. He

wants every believer to take full responsibility for how we live out our Christian lives, and in this sense to have a full sense of 'ownership' of the Church – while of course being fully aware that it is Jesus who is the real 'owner' of the Church.

But how does Francis envisage this major change coming about? His answer to this question is that we should all commit ourselves to 'walking together'. And the name he has chosen to describe this process is "synodality". It is quite significant that he has not just made up this word; he has borrowed it from the Eastern Christian Churches. In doing so he is acknowledging

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Let Us Dream, The Path to a Better Future (p.85), Pope Francis

that we in the West – and especially in the Vatican – have much to learn from our Eastern sister-Churches. For centuries they have been seeking – and often succeeding – to walk in a respectful partnership with each other, where even the primary patriarch of Constantinople does not dominate the others.

The kind of partnership which Francis has in mind is not just one in which the bishops share decision-making with the pope. That kind of partnership is called ‘collegiality’ and it was proposed and adopted in the Vatican Council. Sadly, it was soon ‘watered down’ by the Vatican and never put into practice in the way the Council has intended. The vision of ‘synodality’ put forward by Francis is far more radical. It aims to give all Christians, including those who have been left on the margins or who have distanced themselves from Church practice, to have their voices heard – and taken seriously – by the official leaders in the Church. And it aims to apply this at every level of the Church, from the level of the family and the parish, right up to the Vatican.

HOW WILL THIS BE DONE?

The key feature of the process proposed by Pope Francis is the practice of ‘communal discernment’. He had already written about personal discernment in his document *Gaudete et Exultate* [GE] (*Rejoice and be Glad*) and elsewhere. In his book *Let Us Dream, The Path to a Better Future* which he wrote with the help of Austin Ivereigh, Francis expanded on this and also spelled out in considerable detail how to engage in communal discernment.

This kind of group discernment involves having lots of meetings, first of all at the local level and then working back up to the top level. Francis is very insistent that these gatherings should include people who in the past have been left out – young people, poor people, people who have a physical or mental disability, those who have felt excluded because they are divorced, those who have been in prison, members of the LGBT community, and of course people who have been abused. He wants all of their voices to be heard.

For Francis, communal discernment meetings must be quite different from the usual kind of discussions. In both personal and communal discernment we must go beyond our reasoning powers, because discernment ‘calls for more than common sense; it is in fact a gift of the Spirit’ (GE 166). What we are looking for is ‘a

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glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us’ (GE 170). So we must allow the Spirit to surprise us. As regards communal discernment, Francis says: ‘What characterizes a synodal path is the role of the Holy Spirit. We listen, we discuss in groups, but above all we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us.’ (Let Us Dream, p.85)

DEEP SHARING

It is clear that the pope wants the gatherings ‘on the ground’ in each parish, each diocese and each region to be very different from the usual kind of consultations and meetings which Church leaders have practised in the past. He insists that from the very beginning a prayerful atmosphere will be created – one that will evoke in the participants an openness to listening to each other. This will be a situation where people feel safe in sharing the deep feelings and longings which well up in them – particularly in response to what others have shared. Francis does not want people to be giving speeches which they have prepared beforehand.

The whole point of having this approach is to encourage a real ‘faith-sharing’ by all the participants. Francis believes that it is in this way that people are most likely to let go of their own prior agendas and really listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. ■

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