

# The Continuing Story of Synodality ... and the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council in October 1962

## The listening Church

“If the Church is not synodal,” Pope Francis has said, “it is not the Church.” And this month, the process that is reviving the spirit of Vatican II reaches a turning point / By CHRISTOPHER LAMB

**T**UESDAY 11 October 2022 marked 60 years since the opening of the Second Vatican Council, an event that reshaped the Catholic Church, giving it a deeper self-understanding and an outward-facing missionary focus. The anniversary comes as the Church is pushing ahead with an unprecedented synodal process, widely seen as one of the most significant fruits of the Council. Later this month, the synod embarks on the next phase of its journey with the publication of a document that will give a glimpse into the “sense of the faithful” in the early twenty-first century.

The synod has been the greatest consultation effort in human history, an extraordinary attempt to listen to the voices of the world’s 1.36 billion Catholics – nearly one in five of all living persons. It is the first phase of the synod “for a more synodal church,” which was opened by Pope Francis in October 2021. The new document marks a vital halfway stage in the preparations for the October 2023 synod gathering in Rome, which will be the climax of the two-year process.

Like the Second Vatican Council, this “synod on synodality” aims to leave the life of the Church permanently changed. Its underlying vision reflects that of the Council: that the Church, as the People of God, lay people in communion with the priests and bishops, seeks to listen to the Holy Spirit as it forges its mission to the world. This model of a more synodal Church – focusing on discernment, listening and on including ordinary believers in ministry and decision-making – might come to be seen as the lasting legacy of the Francis pontificate.

**THE LOCAL** phase of the synod saw an explosion of reports and material. Of the 114 bishops’ conferences, 112 submitted reports, as did religious orders, around 150 lay groups, and the separate dicasteries of the Roman Curia. There were also about 1,000 submissions from individuals and other groups. Although participation has been patchy across different countries and dioceses, it seems that roughly 8-10 per cent of massgoing Catholics engaged in the process. In the United States, 700,000 took part; in Spain it was around 200,000; in France, 150,000; in England and Wales, 30,000. While some have played down the numbers who have directly participated in the listening process, they are without any obvious precedent in a Catholic context.

Several themes have consistently emerged from the reports. In local churches across the globe, Catholics are calling for a more inclusive Church, for women to have more visible leadership roles, for a very different power



The Pope started the synodal process a year ago

dynamic between priests and laypeople, and for new ways to be found to connect with younger generations. They want to see the model of a more synodal Church put into action. Writing in *A Pocket Companion to Synodality: Voices from Africa*, Leonida Katunge, a Sister of St Joseph and advocate at the High Court of Kenya, put it this way: “The Church in Africa needs to discern through listening and creating space for the guidance of the Holy Spirit at all levels of the Church.”

Like the Council, the process has had to overcome apathy, and even active resistance, from some quarters. Cardinal Mario Grech, the leader of the synod office in Rome, told the Catholic Partnership Summit sponsored by Leadership Roundtable in Washington DC last month that he knew some bishops had “serious concerns” about where the synodal process will lead the Church. There is fear in the hierarchy that the synod could lead to conflict and for discipline – and even doctrine – to veer out of control. The German synodal pathway – which is calling for the ordination of women, a re-examination of sexual teaching and an overhaul of how power is exercised in the Church – has come under particularly heavy criticism.

The Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, who leads the Holy See’s Christian Unity office, recently made the explosive accusation that the German synod had twisted the teaching of Scripture just as the so-called “German Christians” had made accommodations with Nazi ideology in the 1930s. He later apologised, but it was a sign of how anxious and fearful some in Rome have become about the German Church. The synod process also looks

set to disappoint those Catholics impatient for swift changes on contested topics such as the ordination of women. Francis and the synod office seem determined that the synod adopt a slow, consensus-building approach, which does not allow well-organised groups to bulldoze through a pre-planned agenda.

**THAT DOESN’T** mean nothing will change. The synod has opened a space in which disputed questions are being addressed. In his address in Washington DC, Cardinal Grech singled out the question of communion for divorced and remarried couples and the blessing of same-sex couples. “These issues are not to be understood simply in terms of doctrine, but in terms of God’s ongoing encounter with human beings,” he said. “What has the Church to fear if these two groups within the faithful are given the opportunity to express their intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience? Might this be an opportunity for the Church to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through them also?”

To make sense of the mountain of material submitted to Rome from local churches, a diverse, global group of around 30 theologians, church workers and bishops were corralled for 10 days last month in what was described as a synod “boot camp” – a retreat house in Frascati, the region in Lazio famous for its white wine. Their job was to press the synod grapes and produce something drinkable. All the reports from the bishops’ conferences, religious congregations, Roman dicasteries etc. were read and considered. Their synthesis of what has been said at the local level will now be the guide for the “continental” phase of the synod. From January to March 2023, the discernment will continue through regional assemblies involving bishops, priests, deacons and religious and lay Catholics.

One of the Frascati “synthesisers”, Fr Vimal Tirimanna, a member of the synod’s theology commission who teaches at the Alphonsian Academy in Rome and at the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka in Kandy, Sri Lanka, tells me their document was not a “sociological analysis” but an attempt to listen to the Holy Spirit through the people. In Sri Lanka, he explains, participation varied between dioceses, with many Catholics not aware the process was taking place; but across Asia, bishops’ conferences had sent in reports where “genuine elements of the *sensus fidei* have been expressed.” The synod process, he says, offers a path to implementing the vision of Vatican II which is long overdue.

“For the past 60 years or so, we have, for the most part, paid only lip service to that

theology [of the Council],” Fr Tirimanna tells me. “Why? The necessary ecclesial structures were not there. It was new wine being put into old skins. But thanks to Pope Francis, an ecclesiological structure that would contain the conciliar ecclesiology is being provided in the form of synodality.”

The structure remains fragile. Those hostile to the synod – who, like those who opposed the Council, are a well-organised minority – question the legitimacy of the process, arguing that only a small percentage of Catholics took part in the process. “To those who say it is not representative, I would say: How do you know? What evidence do you have that what these people have been bringing to the table is not generally representative of what people think?” Austen Ivereigh, papal biographer and another member of the synthesis drafting team, said in a *Tablet* webinar on 28 September. “It is clearly the most remarkable consultation, which has involved huge numbers of people.”

Ivereigh explains that the synthesisers had sought to draw out the major themes that have come through from the local synod phase while also paying attention to “minority voices”. A “great love and passion for the Church” came through from reading the reports, he says. That passion also means calling for things to be done differently, and where this is most urgent is over the role of women.

“**THEY ARE** the ones who are the hands and feet of the Church, and they are saying that in the reports, but they also know that [women] are excluded most of the time from decisions and from leadership positions and their voice is not valued,” Christina Kheng, another member of the synthesis group, tells me. “For the vast majority of women, at least in Asia, it’s really about that, rather than any high-level changes of rules or doctrine. It’s just to have that basic respect, which they don’t feel they are currently having.”

Kheng, who is from Singapore and teaches at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila in the Philippines, says all sides of the Church should remain open to what is a movement of the Spirit. Those who fear the synod should try to trust the process, while others should be careful not to “put down those people who are fearful and not to label them.” The synod process looks forward, not backwards. It is not an exercise in recreating the Church of the past. But for Kheng it is also a return “to the roots of our faith tradition: to scripture, to the Gospels and to the way of Christ and it tries to bring that into dialogue with our current realities.”

What Francis has launched is a process which is both old and new. It is recovering the spirit of the early Church and implementing Vatican II, but it is also attempting things that have never been tried before, at least on this scale. Synodality “has to be injected into every nook and corner of ecclesial life,” as Fr Tirimanna says. It must be a “stepping stone” to a new way of being the Church. The last 12 months have seen the Church undertake an extraordinary listening and discernment process. But it still feels like things are only just at the beginning.

Sixty years ago this week the first, and most dramatic, session of the second Vatican Council opened / **By BASIL LOFTUS**

## ‘More sheepdog and less beachmaster, please’

**AT 7 A.M.** on a sunny 11 October 1962 I arrived at the Vatican Museum to help 25 English and Welsh bishops filter into what would be an hour-long procession, due to set off at 8.30 a.m. They made up 1 per cent of the 2,500 Council Fathers, virtually the entire episcopate of the universal Church, a sight never seen before or since. They would leave from there, in cope and mitre, walk down the Scala Regia, through the great Piazza and into the basilica of St Peter’s.

Like children on a school outing to an interactive museum, excitable prelates stopped to fiddle with precious African, Far Eastern, Latin American and above all Egyptian artefacts en route to the Sala Lapidaria. One priceless 5,500 year-old amphora only survived intact because I used to be a slip fielder. One bishop complained about being chivvied: “More sheepdog and less beachmaster, please, Basil.”

As more and more bishops poured into the gold and scarlet stage-setting of St Peter’s, the grandeur began to seem superficial, hollow. Baroque bouncers chased away invited guests and gatecrashers alike. The bishops were left with only walk-on parts in a bombastic performance of seigneurial splendour. “The whole Church was there, embedded in its pastors”, Yves Congar wrote in his diary, but “a style of celebration was employed that was so alien to reality”. The Mass, Congar noted, was sung entirely by the Sistine Choir. “The liturgical movement has not yet reached the Roman Curia,” he lamented. The bishops listened in silence to “elegant crooning by paid professionals.” I spotted the oldest of those voiceless puppet-bishops – Alfonso Carinci. Aged seven, he had served the Opening Mass at the first Vatican Council, in 1869; 93 years later, he did not have even that degree of participation in the liturgy.

**SATURDAY 13 OCTOBER**, the first working day, was crucial. The Roman Curia proposed its own agenda and its own candidates for membership of the 16 commissions which would prepare the drafts of the Council documents. My view of the dramatic outcome of the brief, but decisive and truly titanic, clash that followed was from a pavement cafe on the Via della Conciliazione. The bishops had been in St Peter’s for about an hour. Derek Worlock, Cardinal Godfrey’s secretary, sat with me, drinking coffee. With my back to St Peter’s, I was admiring his upmarket sunglasses when suddenly the steps of the basilica, reflected in them, turned purple – and it had nothing to do with the spectacles’

sophisticated polychromatic qualities. The bishops were coming out. They had revolted.

The French Cardinal Liénart had sought, and initially been refused, permission to speak. He carried on anyway, asking that more time be given for the bishops to get to know one another before any voting took place for membership of the commissions. Prolonged applause. The German Cardinal Frings seconded his proposal. The Curial heavyweights, Cardinal Tisserant (President) and Archbishop Felici (Secretary-General), grudgingly agreed to adjourn the meeting to allow national conferences to consult and submit lists of candidates, amalgamated if they wished, in time for Tuesday morning, to be voted on that evening. The personal theological advisor to Cardinal Frings, one Fr Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI), later wrote of the Liénart-Frings proposal: “The

fact that it met with lively ovation, despite the official prohibition against applause, indicated that a decision of great moment had been made. The Council had shown its resolve to act independently and autonomously, rather than be degraded to the status of mere executive organ of the preparatory commissions.”

Amassing countless speeding

finer, I hurried to and from every corner of Rome for three days, making friends with members of other hierarchies. Speaking to an Eastern European cardinal in Latin, I was stuck for one word when inviting him to the English College. “Cocktails,” his KGB-trained minder suggested.

**JUST BEFORE THE MIDNIGHT** deadline on Monday 15 October I got our bishops’ list of alternative members of the commissions – one of 34 – to Archbishop Felici’s flat, noting that his dressing gown was even more vivid than his daytime working clothes. Returning to the English College in the early hours, every entrance was barred and bolted. When my tuneless owl-like hooting under the bedroom window of one bishop eventually brought him down to let me in, I saw his dressing gown was even more outlandishly colourful and glittery than Felici’s. On my way inside I passed Derek, still working.

“Anything I can get you?” he asked. “Yes”, I said. “Lend me your sunglasses.”

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