

Father James Martin SJ: What happened at the Synod on Synodality.



“We preach the gospel of friendships that reach across boundaries,” said Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., during the retreat he led for members of the Synod of Bishops outside of Rome, a few days before our deliberations began. This image informed and illuminated my experience of the XVIth General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which concluded this weekend:

So, the foundation of all we shall do in this synod should be the friendships we create. It does not look like much. It will not make headlines in the media. “They came all that way to Rome to make friends. What a waste!” But it is by friendship that we will make the transition from “I” to “We.”

To my mind, that was the most important thing that occurred at the synod: Friendships were built across boundaries, within the boundary of our love for Christ, whose love knows no boundaries. But I would like to answer the questions that many Catholics have about the synod: What really happened? What did you do? And, crucially, what was the point?

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We began with a retreat at the Fraterna Domus retreat centre, led by Father Radcliffe, the former master general of the Dominicans, and Mother Maria Ignazia Angelina, an Italian Benedictine sister. Unlike most retreats, it included not only prayer and presentations, but also an introduction to the main way of participating in the synod, called “Conversations in the Spirit.”

These conversations, more than anything else, were the main contribution of the synod to the church. It took me a while to understand that the Synod on Synodality was less about issues, even important ones, and more about how we discussed those issues. Thus, the most powerful message of the synod was the image of 350 delegates sitting at round tables, talking to one another and, more important, listening to one another.

WHAT ARE CONVERSATIONS IN THE SPIRIT?

But what did we do? What made this method different from sitting around and talking? Let me describe it to help individuals, parishes and dioceses who would like to try to use it as a tool. The first step was prayer. Everything we did was grounded in that, and we frequently paused to reflect. Each module (or section of the synod) also began with a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica. We also found it helpful to ask everyone what name they wanted to be called at the tables. This may be less urgent in a parish setting, but it was important here, with so many Eminences and Excellencies, as well as Professors and Fathers. Usually they said, "Call me Jim." "Call me Chito." "Call me Cynthia."

Next, everyone went around the table and for three minutes (strictly timed) shared their response to the question at hand. Our questions came from the working document, or *Instrumentum Laboris* for example, "How can a synodal church make credible the promise that 'love and truth will meet'?" No one could interrupt and everyone had to listen. That meant that the cardinal-archbishop of an ancient archdiocese listened to a 19-year-old college student from Wyoming, USA. Or the patriarch or primate of a country listened to a woman theology professor. No interruptions, responses or talkbacks at this stage.

In the second round, after more prayer, we shared what we had heard, what moved us and what resonances we felt in the discussion. Where was the Spirit moving? Again, no interruptions. I was at tables where the facilitator (it helps to have them) would say, "Cardinal, she hasn't finished yet." Finally, the third session was a freer discussion, where we could answer questions, share experiences and challenge one another.

The genius of this method lies in its ability to convey the complex reality of our discussions honestly. A secretary would write up the convergences, divergences, tensions and questions. Then a reporter ("rapporteur") would present the table's discussion to the plenary session. In this way, there was no need to force a false consensus when there wasn't one; rather, any differences and tensions were honestly communicated. I found this refreshing. This method meant that everyone was listened to, everyone got a chance, and an honest summary was offered for further reflection.

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We also had the chance for "interventions" (speeches) at the plenary level. In other words, beyond the contributions by the tables as a group, individuals could address the entire synod, including the pope, who was often present. For the most part, these were fascinating, as you heard about issues affecting churches from around the world. What did I know about Catholics living as a persecuted minority in some countries? At the beginning of the synod not much, now much more.

Of course there was the danger of people "banging on," as one English member said, repeating what had just been said. As one cardinal said to me, puckishly, "Jim, you have to remember the approach: It may already have been said, but not by me!" But it was radically equal: Every member could speak, and priority was given to those who had not yet spoken.

As we sat in the great Paul VI Aula (much more fun to say it in Italian: "Aula Paolo Sesto") and saw everyone discussing things on an equal footing, with even the pope at a round table, I realized that the message of the synod is this method, which could help the church immeasurably in a time of great polarization.

THE L.G.B.T.Q. QUESTION AT THE SYNOD

I heard often in Rome that the synod should not be dominated by issues pushed by the media, with the media usually described in negative terms. In response, I said not only that the main way that Catholics find out about the church is through the media (so it would be helpful to work with them) but also that there is a reason that the media covers these topics: People are interested in them.

One of these issues was L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics, particularly since this community was explicitly mentioned in the *Instrumentum Laboris* twice. It was also mentioned in half of the reports submitted by episcopal conferences from around the world. Many hoped that the synod would find ways to speak explicitly about reaching out to this community in new ways. Also there were unreasonably high expectations that the synod would, for example, somehow ratify the blessings of same-sex unions.

But that second option was never going to happen on that or any other issue; the synod is consultative, not deliberative. The synod does not have the power to change any church practice; it can only suggest.

Still, the lack of any mention of the term “L.G.B.T.Q.” in the final synthesis, called “*A Synodal Church on Mission*,” was, for many people, including myself, a disappointment. But after a month in the Aula it was not a surprise. Here’s why:

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While I can’t share the content of the table discussions or the interventions, I can say that we had frequent discussions of the topic at many tables (not only mine, but several others) and that there were several relevant interventions during the plenary sessions. The approaches fell along two lines: First, there were people, like myself, who shared stories of L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics struggling to find their place in their own church, along with calls for the church to reach out more to this community. On the other hand, many delegates objected even to using the term “L.G.B.T.Q.,” seeing it more reflective of an “ideology” foisted upon countries by the West or a form of “neo-colonialism,” and focusing more on homosexual acts as “intrinsically evil.”

From my point of view, I wish that the synthesis was more reflective of the rich conversation around the topic and admitted our divergences, as was done in other controversial areas.

Because of the fierce opposition the topic faced, the synthesis instead spoke of “sexuality and identity.” Yet, critically, it asks the church to hear the desire of L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics (along with other groups) to be “heard and accompanied” and to make the church a place where they can “feel safe, be heard and respected, without being judged,” after being “hurt and neglected” (15f). Crucially, the synod says,

Sometimes the anthropological categories we have developed are not able to grasp the complexity of the elements emerging from experience or knowledge in the sciences and require greater precision and further study (15g).

It is important, we synod members say, “to take the time required for this reflection and to invest our best energies in it, without giving into simplistic judgments that hurt individuals and the Body of the Church.”

To some L.G.B.T.Q. people and their families, this may seem like weak tea. And many, like me, wanted a fuller description of the conversations around this issue included in the synthesis. But the text is an open door to further conversation by the synod in our next session and the church. One experience that I did not expect was to have so many cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, religious men and women and lay leaders share their stories about their own L.G.B.T.Q. ministry (or talk about L.G.B.T.Q. family members) and, very often, ask for advice on this ministry. And when the L.G.B.T.Q. term was dropped from the final report, many shared their support and they said, “Corraggio!”

FRIENDSHIPS

Throughout the synod I kept remembering Timothy Radcliffe’s comments about friendship: People will say, “What a waste!”

Yet friendships were the key to the synod. Of course, it’s easy to be friendly with people on the same wavelength. At my tables, there was a great deal of laughter, support and genuine concern for one another. And the occasional eye roll when someone took six minutes for a three-minute plenary intervention. (Eventually they began shutting down the microphones after three minutes.) And without breaking confidences, I can say that Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the archbishop of New York, is a fun person to sit next to. There were also good-natured rivalries. On the final day of the synod, two of my table mates, whose countries were competing in the rugby World Cup that night, said that synodal friendship ended on the rugby pitch.

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After what I would call some severe interventions on L.G.B.T.Q. issues, I spoke with several delegates one-on-one, during our coffee breaks. By the end of our discussions, there wasn’t much common ground, but there was friendship and respect, and we greeted each other from then on. At one point, I met Cardinal Gerhard Müller, whose approach to L.G.B.T.Q. issues is quite different from mine. I was able to tell him sincerely that I admired his work with the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, and later that day we exchanged books and had our photo taken together.

Will this change the church? Perhaps not, but it’s a start, and it’s perhaps something good in a polarized world. Father Radcliffe said that without friendship we shall achieve nothing. Then he quoted a beautiful line from St. John Paul II: “Affective collegiality precedes effective collegiality.”

NOW WHAT?

This was only the first session of the synod. Moreover, our synthesis is what one member of the synod office called a “martyr document,” which means it will only last for 11 months and then die, to be replaced by a new one and then, perhaps, an exhortation from the pope.

In the coming months, we hope that Catholic parishes and dioceses experiment with conversations in the Spirit, that the faithful provide feedback to synod members and to pastors and bishops’ conferences in any way that they can, that any of the recommendations contained in the synthesis that make sense to church leaders are explored (in other words, if there are good ideas that can be instituted, why wait?), and that people pray for us.