

# Father James Martin SJ Reflects at the end of the recent Synod in Rome on the conversations he had during it

*A few days ago, as the Synod on Synodality was reaching its conclusion in Rome, I spoke with my American colleagues Zac Davis and Colleen Dulle for a joint recording for the “Jesuitical” and “Inside the Vatican” podcasts.*

Colleen asked, “Do you feel the Holy Spirit present?” What instantly sprang to mind was an experience I had that day—a day before the close of the synod—when the delegates at my table were joking around: teasing one another, making bets on how many people would be in the hall that afternoon and protesting that they could not eat another of the chocolates I had brought that day, as I had done occasionally for the past few days. “Enough is enough!” thundered one cardinal-elect, laughing.

I told Colleen and Zac how much all this moved me. One year ago, I knew only one person at my table in the Paul VI Audience Hall: a U.S. archbishop, and I did not know him well. But here we all were—people from Fiji, Indonesia, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, Serbia, the United States, Liberia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Tanzania—enjoying one another’s company. We were cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests and lay men and women. We had very different approaches to many pastoral issues.

And while our Masses, liturgies and daily prayers were central to our experience, our roundtable conversations important and our coffee break conversations invaluable, it was this “down time” talk at the table that most signalled the presence of the Holy Spirit to me. “Joy,” as the saying attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., goes— “is the most infallible sign of the Holy Spirit.”

## Synodality works

I was never a sceptic of synodality, as some Catholics were and still are. After all, I have always believed that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone, not just cardinals, bishops and priests, and that everyone’s voice matters. Plus, how could you be against a process that is rooted in the New Testament (the Council of Jerusalem was a synod), is present throughout church history (as in the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon), was revived by the Second Vatican Council and has been used frequently by popes like St. John Paul II? I can, however, understand some of the concerns raised about the synod. If everything is up for discernment, what’s the point of tradition, not to mention dogma and doctrine?

But everything wasn’t up for discernment. None of us wanted to change a word in the Creed, to take the most basic example. Pope Francis’ invitation to us was to ask what the Holy Spirit might be saying to the people of God about all sorts of matters—which were raised in local parishes, dioceses, bishops’ conferences and “continental assemblies”—and which formed the basis for our working documents. It was not until this second year, however, that I saw how effective the process was. Last year, Cardinal-elect Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., started our retreat by quoting St. John Paul II: “Affective collegiality precedes effective collegiality.” In other words, it is easier to speak about difficult topics with friends than with strangers.

This year, the conversations were indeed easier. We knew each other, so we could not only speak more easily but also challenge each other more comfortably. One lay woman from Southeast Asia said to me: “Last year I was so worried about speaking to a bishop! Now I’m more relaxed about it. I know he’s a human being like me.” This openness, as well as the playfulness and joy I described, was not simply because we were approaching the end of the synod (though many of us, exhausted after a month of intense work, were relieved). It was, to my mind, a work of the Holy Spirit, who brings people together. In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul asks us to strive to “maintain the unity of the Spirit which is the bond of peace” (4:2). That spirit of unity seemed to draw all of us disparate Catholics together.

So I had a bit of a conversion during the synod: I am not only open to synodality, but I believe it is a powerful way to foster unity and encourage discernment in parishes, dioceses, bishops’ conferences and all sorts of Catholic groups.

## Change is slow in a universal church

Another conversion I experienced concerned the universal church. I am sure everyone reading this is aware that the church in Nairobi is different from the church in New York. But until I spent two solid months, day in and day out, listening to Catholics from around the world, I could not fathom how different, and how difficult it is to recommend something that would be helpful or even doable in every setting.

One example was a simple sentence that appeared in one of our documents, which highlighted the Sunday Mass as the centre of parish life. Sounds obvious, right? It was—until one person at our table from Oceania pointed out that in her country, priests are sometimes 500 miles away from their parishes, and so parishioners may have only Mass once a month. That made that statement about the Sunday Mass less “obvious.”

Over the past two years, every delegate has had the chance to see these profound differences among cultures, practices and pastoral approaches around the world. (It also made us all feel sympathy for the pope who governs worldwide church.) We were able to see the true, beautiful, confusing, mysterious and often overwhelming “catholicity” of the church. It also made me understand why things take so long to change. Here is one example: I went into the synod thinking a good deal about L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics because of my ministry to this community. But I also saw how tremendously different the reception is for that issue worldwide. I knew this going in, but seeing it firsthand and meeting with other delegates helped me understand it on a deeper level.

This helped me to see why “slow and steady” is probably the more realistic approach to change in the church. I even found myself using terms other than “L.G.B.T.Q.” because I knew the acronym still raised hackles among a few of the delegates. After a plenary intervention on the topic, where I talked about reaching out to people with different “sexual orientations,” one archbishop said with a smile, “Father James, have you learned diplomacy in the past year?” I said, “No, but I think I understand the church a little better.”

This was something of a conversion for me, someone who likes things to move quickly. Many of us want things to progress rapidly in the church, and sometimes they do, but because of that “catholicity,” more often change takes time. I have a greater appreciation for Pope Francis’ strong desire for unity, even as he encourages the church to move forward along the synodal path.

And, as Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., the relator general of the synod, said, change takes time—because the Holy Spirit needs time. Why? Because the Holy Spirit has to convert our hearts. “That normally takes time because we put up resistance,” he said. So while Catholics may not see change immediately, in time they will see a church “where they count, where they are important, where their talents, their gifts, their life experiences, are important because they belong to the people of the baptized.”

In the end, I realized that synodality works. It helps the church to listen to everyone, trusting that the Holy Spirit has something to say through them, and it helps the church to discern better. It is, as we synod delegates wrote in our final document, a “path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary, so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the life of Christ.”

The big question is how to bring that spirit of openness, trust, confidence, patience and even playfulness into parishes and dioceses around the world. For me, the key is trust in the process; trust in the other person’s goodness, no matter how different they may seem and trust in the Holy Spirit’s desire for unity. The other key is patience in the Spirit’s work, which in this universal church, takes time.

On the final day of the synod, Pope Francis asked each of us to be ambassadors for synodality, but I hope that synodality itself, which asks us to become a more listening, inviting and welcoming church, will itself help to convert people. If you step onto this path, maybe you will have a little conversion, too—and experience some of the radiant joy that we felt in the synod.