

VIEW FROM THE SYNOD

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HERE'S ONE way I've been thinking about the three-year journey that culminates in this month's assembly here in Rome. The Synod on Synodality is like a train we're on that has left the station and is gathering speed. The journey has a clear purpose but the destination is unclear. As for the train itself: *é un'opera in fieri*, as they say here. It is being built even as it clatters down the tracks, with the chief mechanic – Fr Giacomo Costa SJ, an expert in processes of ecclesial group discernment – appearing with grease and spanners to maintain and if necessary adjust the process. Despite the long, at times gruelling hours of patient multilingual listening, it has been remarkably peaceful, joyful, and uplifting so far – despite one big wobble over the handling of the “women's ministries” question.

But first: week one kicked off in the Paul VI Hall with two days of pre-assembly prayer and a second tranche of talks by Sr Maria Grazia Angelini OSB and Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP in the old theatre-style synod hall upstairs. Radcliffe, the assembly's Gandalf, has himself become something of an icon of synodality: untidy at times, but holy, joyful and inspiring. His four meditations on resurrection scenes in St John's gospel were sharp, funny, brave, honest, and had a fine grasp of our moment in the Christian story. They were regularly referenced, on and off the floor of the *aula*. And when Pope Francis announced that the 79-year-old Oxford friar would be one of 21 he will make cardinals on 8 December, there were whoops of delight from the *sinodali*.

THE TWO-DAY RETREAT was capped off with a powerful penitential service in St Peter's Basilica: gut-wrenching and heart-rending testimonies were followed by seven “requests for forgiveness”, written by the Pope himself, and read out by cardinals. The sins – abuses of power and conscience, weaponising doctrines, marginalising the poor, suffocating the plurality of voices, and so on – were a conscience-pricking list of offences against synodality. Because the Church is “essentially relational”, the Pope explained in his reflection, “only by healing the sicknesses in our relationships can we become a synodal Church”. One of those sicknesses, for which US curial cardinal Kevin Farrell asked forgiveness, was failing to recognise and defend the dignity of women; yet the women at the assembly were convinced

the Basilica ushers had shown them to seats not just behind clergy, but behind the *men*, including laymen like me. (Did I say *opera in fieri*?)

THE OPENING of the assembly proper, 2 October, began with an open-air inaugural Mass in impeccable weather. We were processed out from the Braccio di Constantino through a thronged St Peter's Square and up the long steps to the altar, the undrained leading a snaking line of mitres. Francis was in strong voice and form. This is not a parliamentary assembly, he reminded us, but a school for “listening in communion”, in which we learn to free ourselves from what blocks our listening to the Spirit, such as seeing our contributions as “points to defend at all cost or agendas to be imposed”. Among us, he said, were many “well-prepared people” with “brilliant insights”; but what most mattered were “open hearts, hearts in dialogue” and a capacity to “make ourselves small and to receive one another humbly”.

In the afternoon we made for the (new) synod hall, laid out wedding-banquet style. I'm not one of the 368 bishops and non-bishops sat at the round tables with facilitators, but among the 70-odd “experts” (a capacious appellation) supporting the process. But of course we're constantly intermingling, at the coffee breaks and liturgies and over meals. The timetable is still demanding (08:45 to 12:30, 16:00 to 19:30 most days), but the mood is “much more serene” than last year, as one African bishop told me. People know each other now, they get how things work, and see clearly that their task is to “remove the question mark from the question: how to be a synodal Church in mission?” as Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, the assembly's chair, deftly put it.

THAT IS the train we are building. Feeding into the implementation phase – and in many ways the synod's first concrete fruits – will be the findings of the 10 “study groups” created by the Pope last February to wrestle with issues arising from the synod and report findings to him next year. Group no. 5, considering “charisms and ministries”, with a particular brief to “give proper attention to the pressing issue of women's participation in the life and leadership of the Church”, has been entrusted to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. The female diaconate at this time being “an impossibility”, DDF prefect

Cardinal “Tucho” Fernández explained, his group will study the *praxis* of great female Catholic leaders over time (from Hildegard of Bingen through Joan of Arc to Dorothy Day and today's women church leaders) in order to learn how better to create new forms of ministry that exercise genuine authority but are not tied to ordination.

Tucho's speech bombed. Many have told me of their annoyance and desolation. The frustration, especially among women *sinodali*, is less the exclusion *a priori* of the female diaconate than what they see as an “unsynodal” process: the squirrelling away of the group's proceedings inside the DDF, to be worked on by unnamed official experts. (“Nothing is for us, if it is without us,” one woman here told me angrily). Alone among the study groups, no. 5 has ignored the specific instructions of the secretariat that their *modus procedendi* should be inclusive, transparent, and involve experts in different fields across the local Churches.

Yet – and the Jesuits especially here get what is going on – this is Francis' move, and he is doing it, ironically, to ensure that discernment happens. At each synod in this pontificate, discernment was threatened by a focus on a single celebrity issue that became politicised and polarised, fuelled by news reports and lobbies. Just as he did last year after the assembly, when Francis gave the LGBT issue to the DDF – hence *Fiducia Supplicans* opening up the possibility of blessing people in same-sex unions a month later – so he is doing this year with the female diaconate, allowing the bigger issues behind the question to be explored in peace.

Is this “unsynodal”? *Ça dépend*. The Synod of Bishops is not deliberative but consultative, and Francis has turned it into an instrument of ecclesial discernment to assist the Pope to make decisions. As its president he is the guarantor of the discernment; he must decide what best enables it. Whether he was *right* to do what he did in this case is, of course, debatable (though not on the floor of the *aula*). Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the synod, has meanwhile responded to the grumbings by arranging the afternoon of 18 October for the *sinodali* to share their views with the coordinators of the study groups. And there is talk of the Pope arranging a meeting with the women of the synod the following day. As Fr Costa says, smiling broadly, waving his spanners, *stiamo imparando* – we're learning. Just don't look down.