

“Synodality”

“For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.”

Diocesan Consultation October 2021 – April 2022

1. Background to the 2023 Synod

(a) Since Pope Francis became pope – been three important synods – family life, young people, Amazon.

Along the way the Pope suggested that the processes and methods of the bishops’ synods - the wide-ranging discussion and exchange of views of different aspects of the Church’s mission were themselves an important subject for deeper reflection, and at least from 2015 onwards he started to make plans for a Synod on the subject of *synodality* and *the synodal process* itself. Eventually he announced that the next Synod of Bishops in Rome, in 2023, would take synodality as its subject-matter,

- and he also made it clear that he thought it was important that the whole church community should take part in a worldwide consultation exercise to form the materials that the bishops will finally deliberate on.

(b) I think that If the pope had settled on some other aspect of Christian faith – like our participation in the sacraments, or some aspect of the Church’s social teaching, it’s likely that a lot of people would have felt able to take part in a consultation relatively easily – because they would have drawn mainly on their own personal experience – their participation on the sacraments, or their experience in the world of work and the social and economic aspect of their lives –

But I think it’s true to say that the heading of synodality and the synodal process was a heading that left a lot of people scratching their heads, because it’s not clear at first glance even what the words ‘synodal’ and ‘synodality’ mean.

So to provide some sort of guidance, or some sort of map, to help people understand better what the subject means, he asked the International Theological Commission to draw up a document on Synodality and that was made public at the start of 2018 under the title

"Synodality in Life and Mission of the Church"

and then, more recently, two other important documents came out to guide the diocesan consultations throughout the world,

The Preparatory Document, and *the Handbook* – or *Vademecum*

- and it’s basically these three documents that I’ve used as the source of all the information that I’m going to try to put forward this evening.

~~~

The full title for the bishops' gathering in Rome in 2023 is

***For a synodal church; communion participation and mission***

And Pope Francis' aim, with his collaborators and organisers of the Synod, is to bring about fundamental changes and improvements in the Catholic Church's way of living and way of working

- our *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* – as the preparatory documents put it -

- and the reason we've got a series of meetings taking place across the whole of the diocese is that – as I said a minute ago – the Pope was very clear that he wanted as wide a discussion as possible to take place at grassroots level, as it were, throughout the whole church – and as broad a reflection as possible to take place on the subject of a more synodal way of doing things, before the bishops go to Rome in 2023 and to provide them, really with the agenda, or the content, of their meeting.

## **2. Synods and Synodality: a long history**

So – there are probably all sorts of ways of introducing this subject of synodality but maybe the easiest way is put it in a bit of an historical context –

~~~

For many centuries, and from quite early on in church history, the bishops, as successors of the apostles and chief pastors of each diocese, got into the habit of meeting together, usually in a relatively limited geographical area, to discuss various issues which arose at particular times in particular contexts, and to discuss, debate, deliberate, and reach decisions on how to deal with the issues –

It could be a doctrinal or moral issue or an issue of church discipline, and the purpose of meeting together as bishops was that although each individual bishop could resolve problems within his own diocese, coming together,

and arriving at a common agreement or consensus was seen as strengthening the unity of the Church in terms of shared Christian beliefs and moral principles and the Christian way of life, our Christian discipleship.

It would also be true to say that the synods of bishops that took place from early in in Church's history were characterized by certain important features –

There was an emphasis on open discussion, a kind of 'freedom of expression' allowed to each participant, so that they gave a completely honest presentation of their views and interpretations; there was a thoughtful listening by every participant to all views expressed, without immediately trying to argue against them in an adversarial and political way – as if the important thing was to defeat an opponent in debate –

- and underlying those methods wasn't some sort of commitment to what we would consider modern democratic forms of debate and discussion, but rather the sense that the important thing was to discern how God wanted the bishops to lead and guide the church community- -

- so the emphasis was on *praying together* as fellow Christians and fellow Christian leaders, it was on *prayerful reflection* and *discernment of God's will*, and *correctly interpreting what direction God wanted* the Church to move in,

And also there was great emphasis or a great commitment to maintaining a *spirit of Christian fraternal love and communion*, not just for the meetings of bishops but for the whole church community, that would be affected by the decisions that they took. They had a responsibility to foster the '*sensus fidei*' as it's called – *the unity of shared faith or common agreement* among all Christians about the essential contents of the faith – Christian beliefs, our ethical principles, our Christian way of life.

(Just mention in passing that it was in that context of fairly frequent councils and synods to grapple with issues and threats to the unity of the Church community that Augustine in early 5th century came out with his well-known expression about the *boundaries* or the *parameters* of belief, and the areas where the boundaries could be drawn more broadly, when he said that the Church had to be characterized by

'unity in essentials, in non-essentials, liberty, but in all things love').

And the reason why it's important to mention these *attitudes* and *dispositions* in connection with history of synods – rather than the *mechanics of procedures* of how the bishops ran their meetings – is that, fundamentally, what Pope Francis's goal in holding a synod on synodality is *to extend* that way of relating to each other and working together in Church's *internal* life and activity, and in its *mission* to preach the gospel message to those outside the Church –

beyond the relationships between bishops and how bishops' meetings are organized,

and into every area of church life, every level of church membership.

So: that's why the Pope and the various preparatory documents for the Synod frequently mention that the exercise we're being asked to take part in is an exercise in *spiritual* and *pastoral conversion*

Becoming a more synodal church means taking on a new set of attitudes about our membership of the Christian community, taking on a new way of relating to each other, taking on a new way of carrying out the Church's mission.

3. Journeying Together

That brief description of the history of synodal processes in the Church's history brings us onto our third heading,

because one very helpful and even necessary element in the process, and that is to get an idea of the *root meaning* of the word 'synod'. It's originally a Greek word which means *a group of people making a journey together, or walking together*. One part of the word means 'journey' and the second part means 'together'.

So when Pope Francis encourages us to become a more synodal Church, he's asking us to draw out this aspect of our shared Christian faith - that it's a *journey*, and it's a journey we make *in company with each other*.

In the case of the synods of bishops in the history of the Church it meant the coming together of the bishops to deal with a particular subject or issue or problem facing their diocesan communities,

and through the discussion, debate, exchange of views, they journeyed together towards their conclusion, journeyed together towards a consensus which was some kind of clarification or deepened understanding of some aspect of Christian faith, which they all shared and agreed with and then went out from their gathering to offer to the church communities that they were the pastoral leaders of.

But all the preparatory materials for the Synod in 2023 have been careful to highlight that this root meaning of ‘synod’ as a journeying together has a much broader application than just the synods of bishops.

~~~

The idea or concept of ‘*journeying together*’ has several layers of meaning to it, and it describes several aspects of the life of Christian faith.

The first level of meaning which the synodal documents mention is the *Scriptural* level – in the Gospels, Jesus’ missionary travels around Galilee, and from Galilee to Jerusalem - which is also his journey to Calvary – is paralleled by *the disciples’ journey* of deepening faith and deepening understanding.

As they travel together *geographically* they’re also travelling *spiritually*, on *the way of the Gospel*, or following on the way of Christ,

And of course for the disciples, that’s not a journey that ends with Jesus’ passion and death. It’s a journey that goes on after his Resurrection, after the event of Pentecost,

- so that the image of the disciples of Jesus making a journey together became a way of describing the journey of deepening faith and spiritual growth that every convert to Christianity embarks on from the day of their baptism.

Every individual Christian believer’s life is a *chronological* journey from birth to death – or rather from the re-birth of baptism to the moment of death and passing on into eternity and the fulness of God’s company (or otherwise!). Saint Paul talks about all Christians as being pilgrims or wayfarers, heading towards a final destination that doesn’t lie within this world, but beyond it, in the fulness of God’s company and friendship.

Every Christian believer’s life of faith is a journey also in the sense of progressing and advancing in our spiritual life in our relationship with God, our growth in closeness to God, our growth in Christian holiness.

Spiritual writers like Saint John of the Cross talk about this aspect of the Christian journey as an *ascent*, - the idea that growing closer and closer to God, progressing in our understanding and commitment to the Gospel is a constantly upward moving journey that lasts for the whole of our life on earth.

~~~

And then of course there’s the aspect of *journeying together*.

Our journey of faith takes place *alongside all our other fellow believers*, in the communion of the Church.

The Second Vatican Council described the Church *as the pilgrim people of God* - a community journeying along with each other, never just as individuals – and in particular it was referring to the 2,000 year journey that the Christian Church has made through the centuries, and continues to make.

~~~

So there are all these senses in which our Christian life and faith and discipleship can be described as a journey, and as a journey together, and - as Pope Francis has said - this is the essential meaning of ‘synodality’,

and it’s the aspect of our faith and mission that he wants us to bring out more fully -

His fundamental intention is that that ‘synodality’, or journeying together’ becomes a more prominent, and a more permanent, aspect of our way of relating to each other within the Church , sharing our faith with each other, and working together in the missionary and evangelizing activities that it’s our duty to God to engage in.

The way that the preparatory materials for the synod put it, the goal is for this quality of synodality to become a *constitutive feature* of the Church’s life – in other words, an essential and indispensable quality of every aspect of the Church’s activity.

#### **4. Listening and Speaking to each other; and listening to God.**

This leads onto the fourth heading: about the two sides of the synodal process, and a more synodal way of doing things,

which is, on the one side:

*listening* to other people’s views and contributions carefully and thoughtfully and generously and open-mindedly, always against a background of prayer, and always with an attitude of Christian love and charity, putting our own convictions in the background, so to speak -

- and on the other side, *speaking out honestly and forthrightly*, voicing our own views and interpretations and concerns boldly and even bluntly, but again with Christian love and care towards other people’s sensitivities.

The important thing here is that this exercise in *generous listening* and *bold speaking* isn’t just an exercise in creating rules for civilized people to have a polite and respectful discussion with each other –

The important principle is that any discussion among fellow-Christians has to have the dimension of *faith* to it, it has to have the dimension of *God’s* grace and *God’s* guidance-

So that, by way of this listening and speaking dialogue with each other, the voice we’re really trying to hear is *God’s* voice.

We're not looking for ways of winning an argument and imposing our own will on the rest of the Christian community. We're searching for *God's* will and *God's* direction of our activities.

And that's obvious if we look at the advice given to us in the preparatory documents - especially the *positive attitudes* and the *negative attitudes* that the Handbook puts forward as being necessary for a more synodal way of living and working.

~~~

In the list of *positive* attitudes that we're urged to adopt, for example, Number 2 goes like this is:

"Humility in listening must correspond to courage in speaking: Everyone has the right to be heard, just as everyone has the right to speak. Synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. It is not about engaging in a debate to convince others. Rather, it is welcoming what others say as a way by which the Holy Spirit can speak for the good of all"

And Number 5 says:

"Synods are an ecclesial exercise in discernment: Discernment is based on the conviction that God is at work in the world and we are called to listen to what the Spirit suggests to us."

~~

Then, on the other side, among the *negative* attitudes or pitfalls that we have to try to avoid, is Number 1:

"The temptation of wanting to lead ourselves, instead of being led by God. Synodality is not a corporate strategic exercise. Rather it is a spiritual process that is led by the Holy Spirit. We can be tempted to forget that we are pilgrims and servants on the path marked out for us by God. Our humble efforts of organization and coordination are at the service of God who guides us on our way. We are clay in the hands of the divine Potter"

So there are actually 15 interconnected positive attitudes, and 9 negative attitudes, that we're encouraged to learn, and that we're encouraged to commit ourselves to, *before* we start any dialogue or any exercise in spiritual discernment.

I've put all these recommendations in the booklet that's been handed-out, and they're all on pages 5, 6 & 7.

~~~~

Just in passing, I think something that's worth mentioning in connection with these lists of positive and negative attitudes is that, if we think about the way discussions and debates take place today in our political system, or among journalists and pundits and cultural commentators –

- especially in the areas of identity politics about race and gender and so on -

the attitudes at work are very often *the opposite* of these suggestions.

Debates can be very emotive and divisive, and it often seems as if there's a complete unwillingness to even listen to alternative opinions and there's a desire to silence, to defeat

and destroy anyone who's seen as an opponent, to deprive people of the ability to speak out candidly in the public forum;

- there often seems to be a lot of polarization, anger and vindictiveness -

And in that kind of atmosphere – in my opinion, anyway, *we've* got the opportunity - as Christians conducting our own debates according to these synodal principles - of giving a good example of how to dialogue with people and handle disagreements in a much more respectful and charitable way – the way of Christian love, in fact.

It would be a case of the Christian minority acting as the *leaven* in the community at large, *improving* the quality of our relationships with each other, and *removing* the elements of aggression and domination and an attitude of needing 'total victory' over our opponents from our public debates.

## 5. Communion, participation and mission.

Well, almost the last heading that we've got to look at - the 5<sup>th</sup> heading – is all to do with the official title of the Synod in 2023, - or its subtitle:

***Communion, Participation, and Mission.***

(This is on page 8 of the booklet.)

All the preparatory documents repeat that the whole intention, or the purpose, of the worldwide consultation - and the Synod itself - is for the Church community *to deepen the spirit of Christian communion, to increase the participation of Church members across the board of church activities and to revitalize or revive the Church's missionary effort* –

So maybe I could say something very quickly about the guidance that all the preparatory materials give on these three subjects.

~~~

(a) The first thing is: what, specifically, do Christians mean by communion or unity?

On the subject of *Communion* within the Church, or between fellow baptized Christians, the first thing the Handbook says is that Communion in the Christian sense is rooted in the communion of life that exists between *the three members of the Trinity*.

Connected with that, there's the communion that exists *between each individual believer and God and Christ*, which is something that intensifies, hopefully, as we make progress in our life of faith

And then, out of the grace of that communion *with God*, there's the communion that exists *among each other* as members of the Church –

- our shared faith and moral principles;

- our shared participation in the sacraments – especially the Eucharist

- our Christian love of neighbour, that we practice towards each other, and towards everyone that we have dealings with;

- and our shared Christian activities.

The documents even mention the idea from the Second Vatican Council, that the unity that exists among the baptized followers of Christ, on the basis of their faith,

is a sort of *image* or *sacrament* of the *basic unity and solidarity of the human race as a whole* – that fundamentally, as intended by God, we’re all brothers and sisters to each other, and this is something that the Christian community has a particular duty to foster within the Christian community, and a duty to draw attention to and always try to foster in the larger human family (to use that phrase).

~~~

(b) On the idea of *participation* the Handbook says:

*“Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and are called to serve one another through the gifts they have each received from the Holy Spirit. In a synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on making pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God’s will”.*

So the basic idea is that every believer is called by God, and by their identity as a follower of Christ, to some form of active discipleship,

- and it’s a beneficial and necessary thing for the Church, that all its members who feel called to be involved in the church’s *work* should also be involved in *decision-making at all levels*.

I think Pope Francis himself has made it very clear that one important goal of encouraging a more synodal church is a Church is that the bishops in particular will spend more time in *consulting* and *listening* to *all* church members, and then *share* or *spread out their pastoral responsibility* more widely in the diocesan church.

(c) So then finally, there’s the heading of *mission* – the Church’s main purpose or its reason for existing, that Jesus commissioned it to:

- to preach the gospel to all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The preparatory documents recognize that the Church is embedded across the world in hugely different social and cultural and political circumstances, and the suggestion is that different situations need different *responses*, different missionary *strategies and plans*,

- and that these should be formulated in a *synodal and collaborative way* –

Every diocesan church has to reaching conclusions about what exactly Christian evangelization should consist of in its particular circumstances, or context, what should be the *priorities*, and *how can we go about it* in the most effective way.

~~~

The very last thing to mention, which is the conclusion, really is:

Number 6.

The main question for consultation and the ten sub-divisions of the question.

This is on page 9 onwards in the booklet.

The main question for consultation is:

“A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?”

But it's not the purpose of this meeting to dive in and start looking at those questions tonight.

Basically, I'm hoping that every parish group here tonight will take away copies of the booklet, and organize maybe 2 further meetings at parish level (or more) to go through the 10 questions (5 questions per meeting) – which all deal with specific aspects of everything I've been talking about this evening, and then Paul & Catherine and Fr Vimal and myself with collect them in and collate them and summarise them, ready to be sent to the National Committee by April next year.

But maybe before we totally wind up tonight, we can talk through some of the practical details of how we can all proceed from this point forward.

- One last thing to mention: Pope Francis and the 3 preparatory documents highlight strongly the value of including in the consultation:
- Members of other Christian communities, members of other faith communities, and individuals who are in some way marginalized or at a distance from the Catholic faith & Catholic Church. Solution: efforts to invite and include at the parish level meetings. Not underestimating the difficulties of doing that.