



Approaches to the Synodal Pathway

As you know — it's not a novelty — a synodal process is about to begin, a journey in which the whole Church is engaged around the theme: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission," three pillars. Three phases are foreseen, which will take place between October 2021 and October 2023. This itinerary was thought out as dynamism of mutual listening. I want to stress this: a dynamism of mutual listening carried out at all levels of the Church, involving all the People of God. The Cardinal Vicar and the Auxiliary Bishops must listen to one another, the priests must listen to one another, the Religious must listen to one another, the laity must listen to one another and then, all inter-listening to one another; to listen to one another; to talk to one another and to listen to one another. It's not about gathering opinions, no. This is not a survey, but about listening to the Holy Spirit...

Pope Francis, *Address to the Faithful of Rome*, 18th September 2021

The Holy Father has called for the Synodal Process to begin in the Dioceses of the world on 17th October 2021. The address he gave to the faithful of Rome highlights the importance of 'mutual listening' and that this will be at the heart of the synodal process throughout the Church and beyond the boundaries of the Church.

In his meeting with the Council of Cardinals on 22nd September, Pope Francis continued his reflection on the process by saying that the Synodal process is not about a specific theme, but "a way of living the Church marked at all levels by mutual listening and a pastoral attitude, particularly in the face of the temptations of clericalism and rigidity." In response to the Holy Father's reflection, the Cardinals present added that there needed to be a clear overcoming of "sectarianism and partisan interests."

As the Church in England and Wales begins its own process of listening, reflection and discernment, these themes will be important to the approach taken in our dioceses and communities to the whole question of "what is this Synod?"

Journeying Together...

The basis of the lived synodality which the Holy Father envisages, is that of the Church as the pilgrim People of God journeying together. The image of the people of Israel in their Exodus is the foundational basis of this image (see *Lumen Gentium*, 9) and how, by travelling together and being schooled by God and entering into a covenant with him, the people "were made holy unto himself."

The parallel with the Church is clear; the People of God journey together on their pilgrimage of faith in the "more perfect covenant ratified by Christ" and, in addition, they journey with all humanity as a common family. This was expressed in a profound way by the Holy Father in his *Statio Orbis* address on 27th March 2020 when he stood alone in St Peter's Square. He said:

We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying "We are

perishing” (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

Pope Francis, *Statio Orbis Homily*, 27th March 2020

Thus, the synodal process is, by necessity, both a conversation within the Church and one that goes beyond its borders in a fruitful engagement with those who are baptised into other Christian denominations, and with other world faiths and those who profess no faith at all. This reflects the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* which noted that through the incarnation, Christ has united himself with every human person by virtue of his humanity, and by analogy, so has the Church that is his Mystical Body here on earth (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

Approaching the Process

It may seem daunting to try and have a fulsome conversation throughout all of the dioceses of the worldwide Church within the short timeframe offered by the process, that is, from mid-October 2021 to the end of February 2022. However, if the Church is to embrace the challenge set before us by the Holy Father, this must be our aim. The synodal process is not about an end goal in 2023 with a gathering of bishops in Rome, but about a new way of acting, of being the Church at every level where mutual listening is the cornerstone. It is about the Church gathering together people and their pastors for a common journey; it is about approaching with confidence other Christians and those of other faiths, and those of no faith, so their voice can be heard too on that journey.

Above all, it is to be a spiritual action of the Church. The Synod Office in Rome has adapted the prayer *Adsumus* which was used at the beginning of every session of the Second Vatican Council to invoke the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to their work. This invocation calls on the Holy Spirit to enlighten the minds of those participating and to “see” where the action of the Spirit is, so that all may be aware of the fruits of that action.

*We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
as we gather together in Your name.
With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.
We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.
Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth
and what is right.
All this we ask of You,
who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever. Amen.*

The synod process can only be authentic if it is rooted in prayer, in the revelation of the Scriptures and in the liturgical life of the Church. Prayer is how we open ourselves to the inspiration of God and is the light which illumines the pathway on our pilgrim journey. The synodal conversations must promote a deeper understanding of the 'journeying together' which the Pope sees as 'the way' for the Church's pilgrimage of faith. At the heart of the conversations, starting in prayer and ending in prayer, is the fundamental question posed by the Synod Office:

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?"

It is helpful to frame the synodal discussions in three phases which allows for the influence of the Spirit to enlighten the discussions. The three phases can be thought of as:

1. Recall our experiences...

Where do we find ourselves now? The world has come through a profound period with the covid-19 pandemic. The experiences of isolation, of sickness and death, of not being able to grieve as one would have contributed to the anxiety of life. On the other hand, there has been an outpouring of a generosity of spirit, of gratitude and care, of innovation and creativity. What strengths and weaknesses have emerged during this period in your lives and in your communities? What has been the experience of the touch of God in these times? What challenges and vulnerabilities have been exposed in our lives, both individually and ecclesially, which need to be addressed?

2. Re-read those experiences in greater depth open to the inspiration of the Spirit...

Look at these experiences in greater depth relating them to the Synod themes of communion, participation and mission.

3. Gather the fruits to share...

The third part of the process will be to gather the fruits of the discussion considering what needs to change to make the Church more missionary going forward. What has the last 2 years taught us about journeying together as Church?

In reflecting on these three phases, all who participate in the process should speak with *parrhesia*. This word, which is used often by the Holy Father, draws on that inspiration of the Holy Spirit to speak with candour, directness and sincerity. Speaking with *parrhesia* though, must also be tempered with freedom, truth and charity. In other words, speaking with *parrhesia* necessarily requires the virtue of *prudence*; this enables us to see, in any given moment of life, what is virtuous and what is not, and how to embrace what is good and avoid what is evil.

This moment of speaking with *parrhesia* and *prudence* requires the art of discernment. A useful image of discernment is when we stand in brilliant sunlight. When we face the sun, we are illumined by its rays and the shadows are cast behind us; we feel its warmth and are drawn towards it as a source of good. When we speak through our experiences resulting from our prayerful reflection of the issues in our hearts, we can genuinely speak with *parrhesia* and *prudence*. However, when we face away from the sun, we look into the shadows which are cast in front of us and the path ahead is not illumined. We walk away from the source of light; this is not speaking with *parrhesia* and *prudence*. The process of discernment, which is necessary for this synodal process, requires us to be open to

the Spirit's illumination which will always draw us into the heart of God, the source of light for the world.

The Holy Father speaks eloquently of this in his book *Let us Dream*:

When we face choices and contradictions, asking what God's will is opens us up to unexpected possibilities. I describe these new possibilities as "overflow," because they often burst the banks of our thinking. Overflow happens when we humbly set before God the challenge that we face and ask for help. We call this "discernment of spirits" because it involves learning what is of God and what is seeking to frustrate his will.

To enter into discernment is to resist the urge to seek the apparent relief of an immediate decision, and instead be willing to hold different options before the Lord, waiting on that overflow. You consider reasons for and against, knowing Jesus is with you and for you. You feel inside yourself the gentle pull of the spirit and its opposite. And over time in prayer and patience, in dialogue with others, you reach a solution which is not a compromise but is something else together.

Pope Francis "Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future" page 21

Ten Nuclei

To focus the reflection that takes place in the local churches, the Synod Office has proposed ten nuclei to explore. These articulate the themes of the lived synodality of the Church; they are not prescriptive but aids to the discussion. Each of them can be embraced in the three phases spoken of above to give a context for reflection, however no one group should feel the need to address all of the questions. Some reflection questions are offered...

I. The Journeying Companions

Look at who forms the community which is journeying together? Who are on the peripheries who we need to reach out to? Who do we know who no longer walk with us, who used to and now we don't see? How do we engage with the covid curious? What is our welcome like?

II. Listening

Do we listen to each other? How do we best do this – people to people, clergy to clergy, bishops to bishops and each to each other? How do we make our listening "a listening of the heart" not just of the issues and subjects at hand? How do we listen to the signs of the times outside the Church and respond to them?

III. Speaking Out

What is the communication like in our group/parish/diocese? Do we have the freedom, truth and charity to speak with parrhesia and prudence? What defines our speaking – when we speak, what to say, how to say it? How am I living out my prophetic vocation given at baptism?

IV. Celebrating

Does the liturgy of the Church inspire a deeper encounter with the risen Lord? How does my prayer – both individually and in community – affect my discernment of my participation in the mission of the Church? Is the Eucharist the centre of my, and my community's life? What flows from the Sunday (or daily) Eucharist out of the Church into the world from our communities? What do I give thanks to God for in prayer? What do I seek from him?

V. Co-responsibility in the Mission

Who do I understand the mission of the Church both in my own life and participation, and in the local church and the universal church? How is what we are doing relate to the Great Commission of Jesus (Matt 28:18-20)? What formation do I need to be more committed to the mission of the Church? what impact is our local community making in the area – do we make a difference?

VI. Dialogue in Church and Society

How do we understand dialogue in and outside of the Church? Do we see dialogue as a unique contribution that the Church can make to the world? How do we address the challenges that dialogue brings about? How do we begin to dialogue with others?

VII. With the other Christian Denominations

What is our relationship with the other denominations like? Do we listen to each other as we journey on our pilgrim way? What enriches us from the other traditions? What do we offer them from ours?

VIII. Authority and Participation

How is authority exercised in our communities? What are the organs of co-responsibility that allows for the expression of our baptismal consecration as priest, prophet and king? How do the lay faithful collaborate effectively in the life of the local church? What are the fruits of this collaboration, and what are the obstacles and challenges?

IX. Discerning and Deciding

How do we discern together the direction in which the Holy Spirit is leading us? Is there freedom to exercise our particular ministry in the Church and participate in this common work of discernment and decision making? Is my local community accountable and transparent in decision making? What can help improve this? Do I support the Bishops and the Priests in arriving at their decisions?

X. Forming ourselves in Synodality

What additional formation do I need to be a missionary disciple? Is the local community effective in catechising and passing on the faith? What tools are necessary for the Church to be truly synodal, listening and journeying together? How do we continue the listening and dialogue beyond this process so that the Church have a “lived synodality” as the Holy Father asks?

Reporting Back

Each diocese, including all entities within it, have the right to speak on the issues that arise in the synodal discussions. These should be fed back to the diocesan Synod team in each of the dioceses. That team will gather together the responses and prayerfully, with their bishop, review and collate what has been said to assist with the submission of a final diocesan response to the Bishops' Conference.

The same process will occur at the Conference level. The two bishop delegates elected by the Conference for the Synod will perform the same task with the Conference Team and create the National Synthesis. This will reflect the lived experience of the participants at the local level, both positive and negative and the process will prayerfully discern how to reflect the national picture.

The diocesan reports which are submitted to the Bishops' Conference should reflect the following points which have been developed by the Synod Office in Rome. Again, these points offer a framework for reporting, they are not strict guidelines for answers to specific questions:

1. Process

Describe the methodology of approach in the diocese. How was engagement promoted and what were the questions that were posed? What was the estimated number of people engaged in the process as a proportion of the Catholic population?

2. Experience

Summarise the joys and the challenges of the synodal experience? Were there any issues (positive or negative) that came to the fore and were of note? What was the experience of listening and discerning? Was there a deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit at work in the local church?

3. Feedback

What was particularly significant, surprising, or unexpected? What new perspectives emerged from the process? Which points of view seem to have strong repeated resonance? Which points of view were mentioned less but are interesting and noteworthy?

4. Assessment

What has the discernment process led to in terms of the lived reality of synodality in the communities? What formation is needed to help people embrace this new way of "being Church"? What areas of the Church need healing and conversion, looking especially at spiritual life, culture, attitudes, structures, pastoral practices, relationships, and missionary outreach?

5. Future Growth

What practical steps do the communities within local Church ask for to see the mission grow, both in their immediate place and across the diocese? How can the structures of the local Church be developed to embrace the challenges of this desired "lived synodality"? What is needed to support the national development and indeed, the universal Church to live the synodal way that the Pope is calling for?

The Synod Office suggests that each Diocese should send a report of no more than 10 pages. This can have supplementary material to illuminate the synthesis that has been produced locally. The main focus of the National Synthesis is to draw the common threads together in each of the five areas above so that a picture can emerge of the Church in England and Wales.

The methodology for creating the national Synthesis, along with the identification of who has provided this, and the final report will be published so that all are aware of the work that has been done in the dioceses of England and Wales. It is strongly encouraged that all dioceses publish their submissions as part of their work as well.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas

4th October 2021

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