

## RETREAT FOR PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF COPENHAGEN

### TALK 3 - LISTENING IN A SYNODAL CHURCH

From time to time I send out e-mails to a fairly large group of people, particularly when I discover texts or ideas that seem interesting, useful or helpful. In March last year, I told the people on my mailing list that the International Theological Commission had published a document on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. The document looked very interesting, useful and helpful, but there was one problem with it - it had been published only in Italian and Spanish.

In October 2017, Archbishop Malcolm McMahon OP of Liverpool had asked us to enter a three-year process leading up to a Diocesan Synod, to be celebrated in October 2020. The first phase was a year of prayer, particularly Holy Hours of prayer built around Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. The year culminated in September last year in a national Eucharistic Congress in Liverpool, entitled *Adoremus*. The period from October to December 2018 involved identifying and choosing Synod Members, a total of 500, whom the Archbishop commissioned in the Cathedral on Sunday 3 February this year. Last week the members were invited to attend one of three meetings, which involved further reflection and an explanation of what is expected of us between now and October 2020. We have been told that our chief tasks are listening, reflecting and discerning<sup>1</sup>.

The process is now in full swing. Of course, it did not just happen. The Archbishop asked two of our priests to organise it all and to construct the Synodal process. At one point last year one of these priests asked me if I would translate the document from the International Theological Commission. It turned out to be much longer than I originally thought; it includes 170 highly technical footnotes as well as the 121 paragraphs of the text. It took me most of summer 2018 to do it, but it was well worth all the effort. When it was ready, I submitted it to our Synod organisers, and warned them to be careful how they used it, because it was not an official text. I also sent it to Cardinal Luis Ladaria Ferrer, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and he passed it on to Father Serge-Thomas Bonino OP, the General Secretary of the International Theological Commission. After we made a few minor adjustments, my translation appeared on the Vatican web site as the official English version<sup>2</sup>.

What I learnt from translating that document convinced me that it could be useful to spend these days together here in Maribo thinking and praying about the ways we can all try to identify what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. Obviously, in a retreat our natural focus is how we, as individuals, can listen to the Holy Spirit. Another challenge, and a very different one, is for a community or a whole diocese to do that together. I am certain that our efforts to do it in our Synod in Liverpool will fail unless individual members spend a significant amount of time trying to discover what the Holy Spirit is saying to us even before we begin talking and, more importantly, before we decide on the propositions on which we shall vote in the celebratory phase of the Synod in October 2020.

At the *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* on 17th October, 2015, Pope Francis said, "It is precisely the path of synodality that God expects of the Church of the third millennium"<sup>3</sup>. The word *Synod* refers to the journey we make together (συν-ὁδος) as members of Christ's Body, the Church. A year and a half later, the Holy Father told the Italian Bishops:

to walk together is *the constitutive way* of the Church; *the figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; *the condition* for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time. The breath and pace of the Synod show what we are, and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions; only in this way can we truly renew our pastoral ministry and adapt it to the mission of the Church in today's world; only in thus way can we address the complexity of this time, thankful for the journey accomplished thus far, and determined to continue it with *parrhesia*<sup>4</sup>.

In that address to the Italian Bishops, Pope Francis spoke specifically of what the Holy Spirit was saying to the various Churches mentioned in the *Apocalypse*. It is a useful meditation in itself. He suggested that what we can learn from what the Spirit said to *the Church in Ephesus* is the need to rediscover "the love, the freshness and the enthusiasm of previous times"; he told the Bishops that he and they ought to "allow ourselves to be looked at by Jesus Christ". The message for *the Church of Smyrna* was not to give in to fatigue, solitude or worry about the future. Jesus is always capable of surprising us and reminding us we may not really know Him as well as we thought; if we really accepting this, "we do not have to fear the second death". The message for *the Church of Pergamum* is about the risk of compromising with values that do not fit our calling as followers of Christ; allowing the Spirit to wean us off the desire to be praised is the way to find the Truth which really can set us free. *The Church of Thyatira* was tempted to turn religion into a purely spiritual affair, ignoring the realities of the flesh, of day-to-day life, a way of turning away from the real needs of people around us. "Like *the Church of Sardis*, we can perhaps be seduced by external appearance and by opportunism, conditioned by the fashions and judgements of others. Christian difference, instead, speaks of the welcome of the Gospel with works, concrete obedience, lived faith; with resistance to the arrogant, the proud and the prevaricator; with friendship to the small and sharing with the needy. Let us be called into question by charity, let us cherish the wisdom of the poor, promoting their inclusion; and by mercy, we will again find ourselves participants in the book of life". The message for *the Church of Philadelphia* was an encouragement to persevere and be ready to "enter with courage through every door that the Lord opens before us..., to mingle in the city of men" and to "strive together for the common good of each and all". The message for *the Church of Laodicea* was one that some of us will recognise from various experiences in various parts of the world and various areas our own lives: lukewarm commitment, indecisiveness and ambiguity; these are "attitudes that receive the severest condemnation". Discipleship has a real and heavy cost, but it is worth the price "and leads us to live in the world without being lost in it"; we need to be bold enough to refuse to accept wickedness or immorality as normal or impossible to heal.

That is an example of what we call in English a 'red herring', when a speaker allows himself to be diverted from the main subject down a side track. Students I have taught have always enjoyed it when they have tricked me into following a 'red herring', so in recent years I have always said at the beginning of courses that a reasonable number of 'red herrings' would be allowed.

Pope Francis' words to the Italian Bishops about what the Holy Spirit had said to the Seven Churches of the Apocalypse do fit the theme of these days, but let us go back to the International Theological Commission's document. Early on, it refers to synodality as a "*constitutive element*" of the Church<sup>5</sup>, which means that synodality is essential to the Church or, in other words, without synodality, there is no Church or, indeed, that being synodal is part of the Church's nature. One problem is that 'synodality' is a new word; it is not in Scripture or the Tradition of the Church, or even the documents of the Second Vatican Council. So the members of the Commission explain in the introduction to the document how this new word fits into the ecclesiology of Vatican II. They distinguish between synodality and two other key words from the Council: *communion* and *collegiality*:

synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission<sup>6</sup>.

Collegiality shows the theological meaning of two things: firstly, the way Bishops exercise their ministry of service to the local Church entrusted to them; secondly, the communion between local Churches, which is guaranteed by the union of the College of Bishops with the Bishop of Rome. That means that:

An authentic manifestation of synodality naturally entails the exercise of the collegial ministry of the Bishops<sup>7</sup>.

If you ever read the document I think you will find it is more readable than many Vatican documents, firstly because the style is more straightforward, and secondly because it has a simple shape. After the introduction it has just four chapters:

- Chapter 1 gives all the background information on synodal procedures adopted in the Church: from Scripture, from the Fathers of the Church and from the later Tradition, mainly in the East but also in the West;
- Chapter 2 offers a theology of synodality, showing how it is a hidden but real element of the Second Vatican Council. It focuses on the Church as Communion, as People of God, as Missionary, and always as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic - a new word, but a reality rooted in our Tradition;
- Chapter 3 is about practicalities: "who is involved, the structures, the processes and the synodal events"<sup>8</sup>, moving from the local Church [e.g. the diocese of Copenhagen] to communion among Churches in a region [e.g. the Nordic Bishops' Conference] and on to the universal Church;

- Chapter 4 concentrates on spiritual conversion and how the spirituality of communion works through listening, dialogue and synodal discernment.

It is probably best to read Chapters 3 and 4 first, and then the more technical discussion in Chapters 1 and 2, although these chapters taught me a huge amount about assemblies in the early Church - particularly the Council of Jerusalem in chapter 15 of the *Acts of the Apostles* and in chapter 2 of Saint Paul's *Letter to the Galatians* - and the way the Fathers of the Church in the First Millennium understood Church meetings and councils. Things began to be done differently in the East and the West at the beginning of the Second Millennium. Eventually the Reformation brought synodal structures into most of the Reformed Churches; in England we are familiar with the way the Anglican Church deals with important issues through 'synodical government', which is organised locally, nationally and internationally. The document from the International Theological Commission says that the impulse to re-launch synodal practice in the Catholic Church came from Johann Adam Möhler, Blessed Antonio Rosmini and Blessed John Henry Newman. They each stressed the vital role of communion and the *sensus fidei fidelium*, and their essential link to the ministry of Bishops and of the Pope<sup>9</sup>.

It seems crucial to recognise that "the principle of synodality is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God.... The gift of the Spirit, which is one and the same in all who have been baptised, is manifested in many forms: the equal dignity of the baptised; the universal call to holiness; the participation of all the faithful in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Jesus Christ; the richness of hierarchical and charismatic gifts; the life and mission of each local Church"<sup>10</sup>. The inclusion of every member of the Church in a synodal process is embedded in the document. This may be hard for some of us to imagine - how can such things be organised? - or hard to accept - is it not best to leave such things to those in authority? In fact, though, the document does answer these questions, and repeatedly asks us to be confident that the Holy Spirit is with us, as Christ promised. The question for us in these days is to see if we can recognise through what or through whom the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

This paragraph from Chapter 1 may enlighten us. It quotes what one of the early Church Fathers said about the unity of the Catholic Church:

The characteristics of the true Church are: fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles and the celebration of the Eucharist under the guidance of the Bishop, the successor of the Apostles; the ordered exercise of ministries; the primacy of communion in mutual service to the praise and glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Cyprian of Carthage, who was the heir and interpreter of this tradition in the middle of the third century, formulates the episcopal and synodal principle that must rule its life and mission locally and at a universal level: while nothing should be done in the local Church without the Bishop - *nihil sine episcopo* - it is equally true that nothing should be done without your council (the Presbyters and Deacons) - *nihil sine consilio vestro* - or without the consent of the people - *et sine consensu plebis* - always holding firm to

the rule according to which *episcopatus unus est cuius a singulis in solidum pars tenetur* (the episcopate is one, of which each member has an undivided share in it)<sup>11</sup>.

The International Theological Commission would like us to trust that the Holy Spirit speaks not only through the Holy Father and the traditional teaching of the Church, but also through our Bishops, through us, the ordained ministers of the Church, and through every other member of the Church, which means all the religious and every lay man and woman. The reason is that participation and co-responsibility extend to "all the faithful", who "are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit"<sup>12</sup>. An image the document takes from Pope Francis is the Church as an inverted pyramid, where the top is beneath the base, since "those who exercise authority are called 'ministers', because... they are the least of all"<sup>13</sup>. But the document also makes it clear that, when there is consultation in the Church, it is different from what happens outside the Church, for example in a democratic society, in two ways. When the faithful take part in a synodal assembly, they are "listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Church through the Word of God which reverberates in their situation, and interpreting the signs of the times with the eyes of faith"; the whole community "is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will"<sup>14</sup>. Secondly, though, there is a distinction between "*decision-making* through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation, and *decision-taking*, which is within the competence of the Bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity". Canon 127 §1 in the Code of Canon Law obliges Bishops who need to take important decisions to consult everyone present at such assemblies, and either to obtain the consent of an absolute majority or to seek the advice of all. I mention this to reassure anyone who might suspect that synodality could allow revolution to creep in through the back door. A clear message in the document is that collegiality for Bishops essentially implies that they are "gathered in unity *cum Petro et sub Petro*"<sup>15</sup>. At the same time there is a warning which spoke directly to me, and some of you may feel the same.

Pastoral conversion for the implementation of synodality means that some paradigms often still present in ecclesiastical culture need to be quashed, inasmuch as they express an understanding of the Church that has not been renewed by the ecclesiology of communion. These include: the concentration of responsibility for mission in the ministry of Pastors; insufficient appreciation of the consecrated life and charismatic gifts; rarely making use of the specific gifts and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise<sup>16</sup>.

At the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis said that "a synodal Church is a Church which listens.... The faithful People, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit"<sup>17</sup>. The International Theological Commission recognise that the kind of dialogue that will make a synod work demands "courage both in speaking and listening. It is not about engaging in

a debate where one speaker tries to get the better of others or counters their positions with brusque arguments, but about expressing whatever seems to have been suggested by the Holy Spirit as useful for communal discernment, at the same time being open to accepting whatever has been suggested by the same Spirit in other people's positions, 'for the general good' (1 *Corinthians* 12,7)"<sup>18</sup>. This, in its turn, demands humility, and the model in the document on *Synodality* is the Christological hymn from chapter 2 of *The Letter to the Philippians*<sup>19</sup>.

The goal of the synodal process is communal discernment of God's call in particular situations, something that

implies carefully and courageously listening to 'the groans' of the Spirit (cf. *Romans* 8,26) which emerge through the explicit or sometimes silent cry that goes up from the People of God: 'to listen to God, so that with Him we may hear the cry of His People; to listen to His People until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us'<sup>20</sup>.

Prayer, meditation, reflection and study give us space for effective discernment, and allow us to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. The key is believing that the Gospel sets us free from anything that might prevent us being open to the Spirit.

If you use a word-searching device, you will see that the word 'listen' (including 'listening') occurs 35 times in the English version of the International Theological Commission's document on *Synodality*. You have heard many of them in what I have been saying to you. The others relate mostly to listening to the Word of God, or Pastors listening to the faithful. My aim was to give you a reasonable idea of the central role listening has to play in the life of a genuinely synodal Church.

One thing in our relationship with God that I did not find in the document on *Synodality* is what the Scriptures tell us about *God listening to us*. Two examples spring to mind. The first is what happens when the Prophet Elijah feels the presence of God in the gentle breeze on Mount Horeb. His reaction is to cover his face and stand outside the cave. "A voice said to him, 'Why are you here, Elijah?'" (1 *Kings* 19,13). Then God listens to Elijah's tale of misery, caused by the people's lack of respect for the covenant, the holy places and the prophets. God listens to what Elijah has to say and then gives him his mission. This story is meant to persuade us that God is ready to listen to what troubles our hearts. The second example is even clearer: it is the prayer Hannah offered the Lord in the Temple, an action misinterpreted by Eli, the priest, who thought she was drunk (1 *Samuel* 1,9-23). As you know, Hannah was so delighted and grateful to have a son that she called him Samuel or שמואל [Sh'muel], which means 'God listened'.

In my work as a hospital chaplain I often meet people who cannot believe God listens to them, because they are convinced their prayers have not been answered. God's silence can be chillingly brutal, as it was described in Shusaku Endo's *Silence*. We cannot dismiss people who feel this way, but have simply to recognise their pain when they accuse God of not listening. That is simply how they feel, and I respect that. I believe God *does* listen; but I accept that as a blessing from God. I

also believe that listening to those people in their anger or grief helps me to see where God is in such terrible situations. It is surely one of the many ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

The document has a section on the Eucharist as a model for synodal life. I believe Pope Saint John Paul II's best document was *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, his encouragement to the Church to focus on the face of Jesus Christ in all it does in the Third Millennium. The document on *Synodality* quotes Saint John Paul II's insistence that the Church needs "to become the 'home and school of communion'", which involves a real "conversion of mind and heart and... disciplined training for welcoming and listening to one another"<sup>21</sup>. It stresses that the paradigm for reaching the *affectus synodalis*, or synodal mindset, is the celebration of the Eucharist, whose structure is set out in five parts as a pattern for any believer who wishes to be fit for synodal life in the Church<sup>22</sup>:

- The starting-point is always *the invocation of the Trinity*. This is a reminder that the Church is not a human organisation, but the new קהל אדני [qahal Adonai] or Assembly of God. We are gathered by the Father, and through the grace of the Spirit we become the sacrament of Christ.
- *Reconciliation* with God and our brothers and sisters, which begins with the *confessio peccati*, opens the way to communion. "Synodal events presume that we recognise our frailties and request forgiveness from each other".
- *Listening to the Word of God*: "We learn how to hear God's voice by meditating on Scripture, especially the Gospel, by celebrating the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, and by welcoming our brothers and sisters, especially the poor.... The dialogical structure of the Eucharistic liturgy is the paradigm of community discernment: before listening to each other, disciples must listen to the Word".
- *Communion*: what grows in the Eucharist is communion with God and between us, with our various "vocations which spring from baptism, confirmation, Holy Orders and from specific gifts of the Holy Spirit - to form a single Body from many members. The rich and free convergence of this plurality in unity is what is set in motion in synodal events".
- *Mission*: the Latin greeting *Ite, Missa est* is rarely translated properly: 'missa est' means 'there has been a sending' or 'you have your mission'. The communion we experience in the Eucharist gives us the courage and enthusiasm to share it with others. "Every synodal event prompts the Church to go outside the camp (*cf. Hebrews 13,13*) in order to bring Christ to people who are waiting to be saved by Him...: how can we truly be a synodal Church unless we live 'moving outwards' towards everyone in order to go together towards God?"

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The process is set out on the website <https://www.synod2020.co.uk>

<sup>2</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, March 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html)

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17th October 2015, 9: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html)

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Address at the Opening of the 70th General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference*, 22nd May 2017, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170522\\_70assemblea-cei.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/may/documents/papa-francesco_20170522_70assemblea-cei.html)

<sup>5</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Spadaro SJ, "The Synodal Church", a free article published by *La Civiltà Cattolica* on 26th October 2018 here: [https://laciviltacattolica.com/the-synodal-church/#\\_ftnref10](https://laciviltacattolica.com/the-synodal-church/#_ftnref10)

<sup>9</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, quoting from Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 39-42, 4 and 12b, and Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 15 May 2016, 12-18.

<sup>11</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, quoting Cyprian, *Epistula* 14,4 (CSEL III, 2, p. 512) and *De catholicæ ecclesiæ unitate* 5 (CSEL III, 1, p.214).

<sup>12</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, 67.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 110, quoting Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17th October 2015.

<sup>18</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> *Cf. ibid.*, 112.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, quoting Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17th October 2015.

<sup>21</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, 107, quoting John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2001, 43.

<sup>22</sup> The quotations in the following sections are all from *Synodality...*, 109.