

Liverpool: The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis- A Synodal Catholic Church

My warm thanks to Fr Stephen Pritchard for the invitation to be here with you this evening. I could see from the start that Stephen was a wise man: in our first phone contact he very adroitly side-stepped my question about whether he supported Liverpool or Everton!

You are mid-way through a three-year process towards the 2020 Synod. I have been asked to talk about what I have termed the 'quiet revolution' of Pope Francis in proposing a 'synodal' model of the Catholic Church world-wide. Before I describe this model and offer some of its Scriptural and historical roots, I think it might be important to name our context so as to appreciate why Francis thinks a synodal model to be appropriate. But first let me start at the centre: our faith in Jesus Christ and the mission which flows from it.

I: Encounter and mission

1. Encounter with Jesus Christ and mission

It all starts with some kind of encounter, in faith, with Jesus Christ. Remember Jesus and the Rich Young Man: 'Jesus looked at him steadily, and loved him'.

We all, hopefully, have had some experience of this gaze of love. We speak of 'love at first sight', falling in love. And then, later, there is the development of a relationship, through thick and thin, capable of bearing suffering and disappointment, and all the time, if we are blessed, living in joy.

Grainne Doherty (*Joy of Love, A Family Perspective*, Dublin: Veritas, 2018, 48ff) remembers how as a young woman waitressing as a student she would see couples gazing into one another eye's, and thought this was the height of love, to which her own mother and father were strangers. But later, in her father's final illness, when he was so disturbed and anxious, and as the family gathered around trying in vain to soothe him, she noticed a pattern: when her mother came into the room, without words, her father became calm.

Can you touch into your own experience of God, your encounter? Dig down into your experience of love: the amazement that comes from real encounter, the 'why me' moments, the 'I do not deserve this' moments, the joy – this is what is at the heart of the faith of Mary Magdala, Peter, our own – can we recover our sense of this, grow in it? To develop and nurture an interior life of the Spirit, our relationship of faith – that is key.

Pope Francis speaks eloquently in this vein- the joy of the gospel, the joy of love, rejoice and be glad, and always shot through with mercy and tenderness, the need for on-going conversion so that this love can deepen in me. He goes so far as to say: '...the privileged place of the encounter is the caress of the mercy of Jesus Christ towards my sin' (Borghesi, 279). He prefers to stress the dynamic noun 'encounter' rather than the more abstract notion of 'relationship'. Pope Benedict spoke of the passion of God for us, eros, linking agape with the erotic, after the *Canticle of Canticles*.

Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of the true, the good and the beautiful as going together, with beauty (glory, love) as the centre. Too often perhaps we see Catholicism in terms of doctrine or ethics: no, while these are important, what is central is God's own self, that encounter, all else comes from that. As Pope Benedict put it in *Deus Caritas Est* (1), in a phrase to which Francis often

returns: 'Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction'.

And, this love is not just for me, but for us – the People of God, the Church (the ekklesia), as sign for all people. And it is accompanied by the gift of the Holy Spirit, love personified within the love-life of God, sent to us to lead us more fully into the truth, our help in communal discernment. Ignatius: 'every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false' (Sp Ex 22) – the grace of freedom to listen and hear, as well as speak.

Again, try to tap into your own experience: a pull? a haunting? a doubting? a source of meaning? A desire to reconnect?

Love wants to shout out, to share the good news. And so there is a certain logic flowing from encounter: Jesus loves Peter, Mary Magdalene, whomsoever – he calls them to be with him – they follow (are disciples) and they understand they have a mission, a task to announce the Good News which Jesus brings. As Pope Francis says: 'Mission is born precisely from the divine allure, by this amazement born of encounter' (Ivreeigh, 21).

That good News is contained above all in the Sermon on the Mount and Mt 25: to seek for justice and peace, to care for the poor and the earth, and to tell all that God is love, loves each of us. Francis dreams of a 'poor church for the poor'. And so, it has implications for our world, the church (the gathering of those who believe in Jesus) is called to be a 'light for the world' and each of us is called to play our role in this, according to our talents.

Again, Francis is radical on this: 'The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence (1). He gives examples of this suited to ordinary life, of a holiness which grows through small gestures 'Here is an example: a woman goes shopping, she meets a neighbour and they begin to speak, and the gossip starts. But she says in her heart: 'No, I will not speak badly of anyone'. This is a step forward in holiness. Later, at home, one of her children wants to talk to her about his hopes and dreams, and even though she is tired, she sits down and listens with patience and love. That is another sacrifice that brings holiness. Later she experiences some anxiety, but recalling the love of the Virgin Mary, she takes her Rosary and prays with faith. Yes another path of holiness. Later still, she goes out onto the street, encounter a poor person and stops to say a kind word to him. One more step'.

And so the mission has truth and ethical content, but it is not primarily doctrinal or ethical: rather, again, it is an encounter with a person, who promises salvation, liberation, fullness of life – Good News! And yet, given our context, the Church and our faith in it often does not seem like Good News: there is often an air of defeatism and demoralisation, rather than mission and joy. How can this change? One way is precisely what Archbishop McMahon has done – to call a synod. Addressing the Limerick Synod in the preparatory phase the Dominican Paul Philibert said that a synod is a way of spiritually re-founding a diocese, that we are all called to be agents and not just clients of the church's mission, full-time and not just part-time Christians through our baptismal calling, so that in our families, our work, our struggles with unemployment and poverty, our questions and doubts about faith and the church, we live our vocation to nothing less than holiness (LG, n 40), each of us.

Let us turn now more directly to the context in which we find ourselves, and ask ourselves what kind of church is best suited to address this context in a way which promotes our faith in Jesus Christ and our mission to bring Good News to our world.

II: Context

You may be familiar with the findings of the recently published (Tablet, 27 July, 2019) British Social Attitudes survey which found that the number of people identifying as Christians in Britain had declined from 66% in 1983 to 38% in 2019. Anglicans fell from 40 to 22%, Catholics from 10 to 7%.

You will know that in the Liverpool diocese (Tablet, 13 April, 2019) mass attendance has declined from more than a quarter of a million 50 years ago to 41,000 today. Churches are closing, of the 133 active diocesan priests only 25 are aged under 50, and there has been an expansion of lay ministry. Archbishop McMahon is clear that the Church's authority has been diminished by the scandal of clerical child sexual abuse and its mishandling. He is also clear that the Church needs to be with the poor, and affirms the positive value of the diocesan pastoral formation programme, the justice and peace commission and the work done in schools to teach young people about the faith. I would that it is also the case that many Catholics have not 'received' aspects of Church teaching on sexuality and gender, in particular the role of women in the Church. All this represents a significant obstacle to trust and credibility, especially among young people. You will have come across echoes of all this in your marvellous pre-synodal consultative phase.

Side by side with all this, you will know that in civil society, at home and abroad, these are disturbing, divisive and often confusing times. At home you have the turmoil around Brexit, accompanied by the coarsening of public debate and discourse which is so often exclusively polemical and devoid of much ability to listen to and hear opposing arguments. Valid criticism of the EU, for example, is often dismissed in a rush to a partisanship fostered by social media which, on the other side, dismisses any expert analysis and criticism of Brexit as 'project fear' or 'fake news' in a society which is often described as 'post-truth'. You can see too the depths of division in Trump's American, the authoritarianism and populism so evident in Turkey, Hungary, and Italy, not to mention further afield. Pope Francis has expressed concern about the kind of rhetoric accompanying these trends, likening them to what was heard in pre WW 2 times.

What, at a deeper level is going on here?

British theologian Michael Kirwin¹ speaks critically of a postmodern culture which is allergic to grand explanations (narratives) and so is prey to fragmentation; resists claims to even well-grounded authority; and has pessimism, even cynicism, with regard to shared visions for our communities. An affirmative approach to our culture's honouring of human dignity can easily topple over into an immured autonomy, a 'buffered' and defended self which has little time for the common good, not to mention a deafness to transcendence.

¹ Michael Kirwin, Swearing, Blaspheming, Wounding, Killing, Going to Hell...The World, as Seen and Heard by Ignatius, *The Way*, 57, October 2018, 77-89

A default suspicion and rejection of tradition and authority can place intolerable burdens on personal choice and identity, leading to widespread personal fragility and insecurity. An uncritical openness to alternative voices can easily collapse into a radical relativism and even fascism, a tribalism, stunted nationalism and populism which tend towards the breakdown of shared values and norms of truth, and the collapse of the post-war political liberal world order and multi-lateralism, as we have seen in the scorning of experts and the emergence of fake news in the contexts of the Trump presidency and Brexit.

There are resonances of this in the analysis of Uruguayan intellectual Alberto Methol Ferre, who greatly influenced Jorge Bergoglio. Ferre notes how with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and Marxism there has developed an untrammelled neo-liberal model of capitalism which thrives on an entirely autonomous, competitive notion of the individual, a kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest, a breeding ground for inequality and ecological degradation that has led to an atheism and secularism of libertine, hedonistic individualism. In this context the reaction of the church can be three-fold: a kind of uncritical acceptance of the Enlightenment and secularism, a naive acceptance of the secular and a tendency towards ecclesial invisibility; an entirely reactionary turn which quickly becomes nostalgic and self-referential (now often referred to as the 'Benedict option'); or an inculturated, engaged dialogue with our world, discerning truth and error in the light of our encounter with Jesus Christ.

For this engagement to happen we need a deeper understanding of the register, the key, the idiom of contemporary culture so as to enable us as Church to become a relevant and constructive dialogue partner, however critical at times. Irish theologian Michael Conway has some interesting observations in this context.

His analysis is that as part of the characteristic of contemporary culture, it has become clear that the search for faith is conducted now not so much at the level of reason and argument, but rather on the cultural wavelength of feeling, desire and imagination (hence the centrality of image), with attitudes and assumptions often unconsciously adopted and transmitted digitally through social media. The idiom of narrative, story-telling brimful of personal and communal experience is likely to communicate more effectively than apologetics couched in abstract metaphysical propositions, however cogent (see recent referenda). A deferential experience of authority has given way to the authority of experience. Tom Inglis and Conway note how the demise of the institutional power of the Church is part of the decline of social hierarchies, in particular patriarchy, with long-term processes of informalisation and individualisation now embedded.² Authenticity is deemed more important than formal office.

What is valued today, according to Conway, is an alternative order, a new 'social imaginary' (Charles Taylor), which is more egalitarian, with enormous appreciation for the human person and authenticity and which embodies that 'rejection of insignificance' (de Certeau), referring to the previous silencing of marginalized voices in our culture (women, the LGBT community, children). Equality, freedom (especially freedom of choice) are greatly valued. Conway argues that what is required for the Church in this new, evolving cultural matrix is a less top-down command-and-obey

² Inglis, op cit, 21. See also Thomas G. Casey, S.J., *Wisdom at the Crossroads*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018 for an expose of the thinking of Irish Jesuit Michael Paul Gallagher on the centrality of culture in understanding modern developments in Ireland and indeed Europe and developing countries in general.

type teaching and communication, and more open space interaction nourished by the gospel and common life which facilitates an adult taking of responsibility for our lives of faith. He concludes by saying of the Catholic Church in Ireland- but one can see how it has wider application: 'I think we can say that the once powerful, monolithic institution is being slowly disempowered and what remains will need to be re-shaped into a new, more culturally appropriate constellation'.³

Nonetheless, and in summary, sociologist of religion Michele Dillon writes hopefully of what she calls the emergence of 'Post secular Catholicism'.⁴ She argues that in many parts of the developed world there is a 'contrite modernity' which, while accepting secularisation as the settled reality, admits that there is a place for religion in the public square, not least in offering a corrective and alternative vision to contemporary problems. However, Dillon notes, this needs to be a form of religion which is open to dialogue and interpretative diversity, and not simply reliant on magisterial dictat or fiat and a traditionalist mind-set which admits of no development of doctrine. One is reminded of the aphorism of the distinguished Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan: 'Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name'.⁵

What shape of Church might remain true to its own identity and mission and yet best respond to this context, these cultural challenges? Pope Francis is clear and sanguine: 'A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf Is 11:12) in a world which – while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration – often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups' (50th anniversary address).

A brief word now on the Scriptural and historical basis of synodality, before looking more closely at the idea of Pope Francis and its relevance for us here in Liverpool.

III: Biblical, historical and ecumenical roots of synodality

The 2018 text of the International Theological Commission (Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church) is a convenient and authoritative source.

Jesus, led by the Spirit and icon of the Father and fulfilment of the Old Testament promise of God's presence in history, proclaims the Good News of the Kingdom of God and invites us as the baptised and as Church to walk together as the People of God of the new covenant. A particularly transparent instance of this occurs in Lk (24: 13-35) when we are told the story about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The Acts of the Apostles outlines some important moments along the path of the Apostolic church when the People of God is called as a community to discern the will of the risen Lord, in particular the discernment of the crucial question of the mission to the Gentiles (see Acts 10), culminating in what tradition has called 'the apostolic Council of Jerusalem' (Acts 15; Galatians 1, 1-10), synodal event which has been interpreted across the centuries as a paradigm for Synods celebrated by the Church (20). It is from here that the time-honoured phrase 'It has been decided by

³ Michael Conway, Faith-life, Church, and Institution, *The Furrow*, 68, September 2017, 461-474, at 474

⁴ Michelle Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, Oxford University Press, 2018

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in Humanities

the Holy Spirit and ourselves' is derived- an instance of communal discernment, crowned by its 'reception' in the community at Antioch, who receive it gladly (Acts 15, 30-31).

This scriptural notion of synodality unfolds through the centuries, and especially the first millennium, in many forms according to different historical contexts and in dialogue with the variety of cultures and social situations (24). Synods were called to address local issues, but always conscious of being an expression of communion with all the Churches, with the Church of Rome enjoying particular respect. The 325 the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea was the first institutional expression at the universal level of this path of synodality. Down through the years different forms of intermediate (between local and universal) synods developed. In local synods the whole community took part in principle, while at other synods and councils there could be civil authorities present. Gradually post Trent a gulf opened up between 'the hierarchical' vision of the Church to the point of seeing the Pope and Bishops as the *Ecclesia docens* and the rest of the People of God as the *Ecclesia Discens*, which reached its high point in Vatican I and afterwards and the balance of which was corrected, at least in principle, by Vatican II. Newman is cited (38) as one of the prophetic voices urging a relaunch of synodal practices in the Catholic Church, not least in his insistence on the intrinsic link between the *sensus fidei fidelium* and the teaching ministry of Bishops and the Pope. In an earlier ITC document on the Sense of the Faith (2014) his contention that it was the lay faithful who maintained orthodoxy post Nicea is cited, in the context of Bishops who tended towards semi-Arianism. Since Vatican II there have been various attempts to relaunch synodality in the context of a retrieval of the notion of church as communion, and the current project of Francis is clearly the most advanced.

The document notes the continuing presence of the synodal tradition in Protestantism (36) and Orthodoxy (115 ff). Of particular interest to us here in Liverpool is the 2018 ARCIC III document *Walking Together on the Way* in which Anglicans and Roman Catholics engage in a process of 'receptive ecumenism', learning from one another's strength and weaknesses in terms of what is called 'instruments of communion' at the local, regional and universal levels. Of interest here may be the Anglican admission that their own 'parliamentary procedures' in the practise of synodality can reduce synods to juridical and practical decision-making bodies, limiting the teaching role of bishops and inhibiting deeper conversations and discernment (116). And, on the Catholic side, the admission that we can learn from Anglicans about their culture of open and frank debate, not to mention the inclusion of laity in decision-making structures (and not just in consultation) at every level of Church life (157).

IV: Pope Francis and a Synodal Church

In a recent book I have tried to show how, as it happens, Pope Francis is proposing a synodal model of Church, rooted in a faith encounter with Jesus Christ and committed to his mission, as the appropriate institutional response to our changed world.⁶

Francis has directed the Catholic Church in an unambiguous way back to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, with its focus on the Church as the People of God and characterized by collegiality and conciliarity. He has expanded the notion of collegiality beyond that of episcopal participation by using the term 'synodality' to highlight the role of all the baptised in their

⁶ For more detail on what follows, see Gerry O'Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018

participation in the three-fold 'office' of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet (teacher) and king (ruler). This 'synodal turn' has the merit of retrieving ancient Christian truths (like collegiality itself and the 'sense of the faithful'- and, I note, Francis in particular gives a privileged place here to the voice of the poor and popular piety), as well as offering a more inclusive, participative and conversational space in which individuals and communities can negotiate their own identities with integrity today.

This 'inverted pyramid' model of Church, a revolutionary paradigm shift (for the Catholic Church) which values decentralisation and subsidiarity, consultation and open debate, dialogue internally and with our culture, a share of the faithful in church teaching and governance, is more attuned to the spirit of the age. It also retains, through its notion of 'communal discernment', the ability to distinguish critically between mere fad and whispers of the Spirit that are authentic. It retrieves a more ancient mode of teaching in which, like a three-legged stool, there is on-going conversation between bishops, theologians the sense of the faithful, all with their distinctive and irreplaceable roles.

The image that draws together much of what I said to date (about encounter, mission, the signs of our times), is that of Jesus walking the byways of Palestine with his male and female disciples, and, more particularly the scene of the two disciples (male/female?!) on the road to Emmaus. Think of this latter: sad/discussing (theology)/joined by stranger, Jesus/explains- the Word, Scripture, theology/seated at table, breaking of bread (liturgy, sacrament)/bursting to tell the others (mission), and did not our hearts burn within us (consolation). Think in this passage of the centrality of listening and freedom: Jesus asks them what they were talking about, he makes as if to go, does not force himself upon them, waits for an invitation, and disappears without giving instructions: a wonderful delicacy and sensitivity, respecting our humanity. See also the Council of Jerusalem – debate, decision, 'it seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit', received with joy....!

Francis wants a Church that is 'entirely synodal' at all levels. This will respect the fundamental equality of all the baptised and be critical of clericalism in all its forms. British Jesuit psychologist Brendan Callaghan⁷ has pointed out that the 'gains' for clergy that come with a dysfunctional clericalism include special status, power and a lack of accountability, with horrific consequences for the safety of children and others, as Pope Francis himself has increasingly noted in his identification of clericalism as a root cause of abuse of power, conscience and sexual abuse. Interestingly, Callaghan goes on to note the 'gains' for laity that accompany the acceptance of clericalism, including the avoidance of responsibility and a clearly defined role, as well the security and 'reflected glory' that derive from dependence on another.

It seems to me that clericalism is rarely a simple lust for power, is sometimes a sense of entitlement, and is often an over-developed, burdensome and mistaken sense of responsibility, as if the survival and reform of the church were dependent solely on the actions of priests and bishops.

For bishops and priests all this will require a certain humility; listen to what Francis says in EG 31 re bishops: 'he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hopes vibrant. At other times he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and – above all- allowing

⁷ Brendan Callaghan, 'On Scandal and scandals: the psychology of clerical paedophilia', *Studies*, 99, autumn 2010, 343-356, at 351

the flock to strike out on new paths. In his mission of fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion, he will have to encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in the Code of Canon Law, and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear. Yet the principal aim of these participatory processes would be not ecclesiastical organization but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone'. Bishops (and priests) are still the main leaders and teachers within the community, but there are being asked to do so now in a shared, listening mode.

This new model of Church will offer spaces for the sharing of faith, doubts and searchings for truth among its members, with outreach to alienated and fellow searchers at a time of deep secularisation. It will be conscious of the mission to announce and facilitate the coming of the Kingdom of God by its socio-economic, environmental critique and its privileging of the lens of the poor. It will respect the disquiet among the Catholic faithful caused by certain neuralgic teachings, in particular on sexuality and gender, and be a catalyst for sound doctrinal development. It will offer the promise of more accountable governance, with the involvement of laity, including, of course, women, thus providing a safer space to counteract the perennial threat of abuse.

In this new model, as Michele Dillon pithily observes (164), 'the cat is out of the bag' - Catholicism is returning to a tradition of respect for open debate and the 'voice of the faithful', present in its own patrimony, and suitable to address the post-secular culture of authenticity. In doing so, as parents do with children and then in the different world of teenagers and adolescences, the Church is learning a new language as it enters into a deeper relationship with all her members – a new language that is more culturally attuned (Dympna Mallon).

It will, in short, be a 'field-hospital' to those who suffer and are troubled, and a more attractive icon to all of the Jesus Christ who captivated his disciples with his authority, mercy and tenderness, and his intimacy with the one he called Abba. It will dare to propose nothing less than a call to holiness for all the baptised and to announce Good News to all the world. For all this to happen, as well as a change in attitude and culture, there will also need to be appropriate institutional and structural change, so that councils and synods become a common feature of ecclesial life at all levels – parochial, diocesan, regional and universal.

One thinks, in short, of what Francis himself wrote in EG 27: 'I dream of a missionary option, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation'. He is a strategic thinker, playing a long game: 'time is greater than space' – processes will yield more lasting results than quick political gains. And he is crystal clear that these processes must arise from a synodal church: 'It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the church in the third millennium'.

Conclusion:

Let's return to Liverpool! A synod is not a one-off event: it is rather a particular, privileged moment in what is an on-going way of being church.

Francis knows that as a concept synodality is easy enough to grasp: the challenge is in translating it into practice (50th anniversary address). This is what you are doing.

On the way many open and ongoing questions will open up – for you and for the whole church. How doctrine develops, the role of women, and how create the kind of church suitable for today's world with the possibility of a deliberative and not just consultative belonging of laity.

You could be daunted by all this. Well, today we celebrate the feats of Our Lady of the Rosary. In the first reading (Acts) we are told that after the Ascension of Jesus a group of his disciples, including Mary and several women, gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. This is synodal setting: and you remember that the 'upper room' after the death of Jesus was a site of fear ('for fear of the Jews'). And in the gospel we read of the Annunciation to Mary: do not be afraid...how can this come about...the Holy Spirit will come upon you...

You are in that space: but you have planned well, you have expert help and are in good hands, and, above all, in this space of communal discernment you can trust in the Lord. This is such an exciting time for your diocese – and for all the whole church. In so many ways we are at the foot of the Cross, and need to be there: but we are also conscious of the promise of the Resurrection, and we walk together in that hope.

Gerry O'Hanlon sj.