

Going Down the Synodal Path



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Roots and Branches.*

(www.rootsandbranchessynod.org)

Moderator: I'm delighted to introduce Thomas O'Loughlin. He's a man who has dedicated his life so far—he's very young—to exploring how Christianity's past, especially from the early centuries for today and how it offers us alternative futures. So, that's a perfect guest for Root and Branch.

Now, when I asked Tom what I could say about him, he emailed, "There's little to say except that I tried to explore theological questions in writing." Well, I suppose that's one way of describing Professor Thomas O'Loughlin's impressive body of academic and pastoral work. Fifteen academic books, his latest called *Eating Together: Becoming One, Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians*. Also, nine pastoral books. His latest, *Washing Feet: Imitating the Example of Jesus in the Liturgy Today*. And about 400 articles, with the common themes of love, the Eucharist, discipleship, invisibility of women, Celtic and medieval theology. And he's also hot on actions.

Now, Tom is very learned and extremely distinguished. His title is Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology in the University of Nottingham. He took voluntary redundancy last year to save the university some money and to devote himself to other things. But he says that historical theology is not the history of theology, nor is it church history, nor intellectual history, nor even the history of ideas. It's the endeavor to do theology using the experience of the way Christians lived and believed over the centuries to help us make sense of our faith today.

He's a polymath. He was a contributor to the development of a community training project for HIV-AIDS sufferers in Kenya from 2002 to 2009. He still provides training for clergy of several Christian denominations.

He's a broadcaster, a prolific reviewer for 48 articles—yes, I counted them—and a reader for 22 publishers, including both Cambridge and Oxford University Press. He gave the St. Patrick Lecture at the Irish Seminary Maynooth last year, and has organized conferences in Maynooth, London, Nottingham, and Iona. And I feel, Tom, we should pick your brains for the Root and Branch synod in September.

But for now, without more ado, I'll hand over to Thomas O'Loughlin. Tom, it's an absolute pleasure.

Thomas O'Loughlin: Thank you very much, Penelope. The problem, of course, in an introduction like that, is that everything that happens now is going downhill. First of all, it's delightful to be with you today, and it's delightful to know the questions that are animating your presence here.

I had a chat with three or four members of Root and Branch a couple weeks ago, and I think this idea of going down a synodal path is a wonderful idea and one that is crucial not just to the renewal of the Church, but need to the survival of Christianity today.

A Critical Step for Renewal of the Church

One of the issues about the word ‘synodality’ is that it has come out of nowhere in Catholic discourse. Ten years ago, if you had used the word ‘synodality,’ people would say, “Oh, yeah, it’s Anglican idea, isn’t it?” Or, if they didn’t know Anglicanism, they’d say, “Yeah, it’s a very Eastern Orthodox idea, isn’t it?”

Synodality has not been a major theme in Western Christianity since 1415. That was the last time we took it seriously and it ended in the burning of theologians. Indeed, probably the outstanding theologian of the early-15th century, Jan Hus, died because the idea of synodality was threatening equally to the papacy and to the empire.

So, it’s 700 years since we’ve been playing with this idea, and what I want to do today is not even try to define it because it’s too complex to define, but just to see how radically different synodality is to the way most of us were brought up to think.

Now, one of the questions that only arises when we’re speaking to a group of Catholics, and particularly Roman Catholics, Western Catholics, is that we have running in our heads two different pictures of the Church, and we’re never quite sure which one should be dominant. Now, that doesn’t affect the Eastern churches and it certainly doesn’t affect the churches of the Reformation.

If, for example, you speak to a group of Welsh Presbyterians, they’re very much aware that they belong to one church, and just down the road there’s the Welsh Independents, and just down the road there’s another group, and just down the road there’s another group again, and indeed, they will actually be aware of the fact that they will often move between those groups. But Catholics have a choice between thinking of the Church from the ground up, or from the top down.

Now, most Catholics, when they hear the phrase ‘the Catholic Church,’ think top-down. You think Pope Francis; you’re part of a big, universal organization. It’s a world church.

There was a little article La Croix, International last week [which said] statistics show the Catholic Church grew by so many million people. Interestingly, it didn’t say a particular community grew or a particular church grew or we planted new churches. It was just “one sack, one sample,” just as a census will tell you how many people are in a state.

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So, we tend to think of the Church as a supranational, single entity and then we work downwards within that. And your local parish is, as it were, the local branch. So, I bank with Lloyds. Lloyds is a single entity and I know that wherever I plug in my card, my money will come out from a Lloyds bank. But there’s a local branch nearby, and that’s just merely where I connect. It’s merely my local interface with the big entity called Lloyds Bank.

Now, where did the idea of the world church come from? Well, certainly in the earliest centuries, there is a sense that there is an oikoumene. There is the oikoumene that is the empire, and then there is the oikoumene that is the links between all the churches. So, all our early documents talk about networks. They are almost like sinews.

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So, for instance, let's take the word 'apostle.' An apostle is someone who is a sinew stretching from one church to another. Now, let's leave aside this whole question about how many there were. There were thousands of them. Indeed, Paul at the end of Letters of Romans talks about Junia, a woman, whom he considers the first among the apostles. We know of the names of some men apostles, we know the names of some female apostles, and we know husband-and-wife teams of apostles, Priscilla and Aquila. And they form the links.



An apostle is someone sent away from one church to be the representative of another. Curiously, when we think of the word 'apostle,' we think of it in terms of a pyramid structure. There's Jesus, the twelve, and then the bishops, and so on down the line. And so, we Catholics will emphasize, for instance, to an extent that most churches just don't emphasize, this idea of apostolic succession. Are you plugged into the mains that run all the way back? And they run to one particular point.

The immediate aspect of emphasizing the universality of the Church is that you emphasize that it has an interchangeable ministry. So, at the center of the notion of a 'priestly character' is the idea that they're operatives in one church. You can interchange them. You can pull someone out of one place and put them into another. It's very deep in our psyche. We used to justify the fact that all popes were Italian on the basis—this was in the 1970s; I remember a man who taught ecclesiology: "Well, the reason the Pope always has to be Italian is that, of course, he's primarily the bishop of Rome. It's fitting that since Rome is an Italian city, it should have an Italian." But the idea is that you could pull popes from anywhere, and historically we have.

I have heard bishops saying, in all seriousness, "Thank God for India. They can supply us with all our priests." I've heard bishops in Australia say, "Thank God for Vietnam" or "Thank God for the Philippines. They can supply us." And so we've moved people around, and this was seen as an incredibly good thing because it strengthened the notion that wherever you were you went into the building, and it was merely a representative of one church. So, oneness was singularity. Not unity; singularity.

We prayed at the beginning for the ordination of women. Hmm...interesting word. We didn't say that they would be able to take place in all the ministry of the Church but that they would be able to be ordained. Why do we use a term from the Roman Empire to describe ministry? The Roman Empire relied on an incredibly efficient universal civil service. They were known as the *Ordo*.

They weren't terribly well paid, they weren't great landowners, but they kept the show on the road because they could be moved. And we have instances—you could be on the northern reaches of Britain freezing one year, and you could be out in the deserts in Mesopotamia the next year, and they were interchangeable.

A Critical Step for Renewal of the Church

The *Ordo* was answerable to itself and the *Ordo* had many privileges. For instance, it had access to a free post office. Imperial mail was open to anyone who was a member of the *Ordo*. So, it didn't matter whether you were sending in the tax returns from Cumbria up to Rome or you were sending a message to your brother, who was also in the *Ordo* but operating at the first cataract on the Nile at Syene on the southern limits of the empire. You could send a message. And many of the letters have survived.

Most of the priests, male and women (*sacerdos* is an epicene word) of the imperial cult temples—so, not local temples but temples of Mars, temples of Vesta, and, of course, ultimately temples of Jupiter—those priests, known by such titles as pontifices or flamines, were considered to be equal to the *Ordo* even they weren't technically civil servants. They wore the same uniform as the *Ordo*, a purple-edged, long, ankle-length gown. And, they got some of the privileges of the *Ordo*. So, for instance, if you were a flamen of the cult of Jupiter, you could use the imperial postage.

By 306, ministers in the Church were ceasing to call themselves ‘presbyters’ and beginning to call themselves *sacerdotes*. In fact, most Latin theologians do not see a problem referring to a bishop as a *sacerdos* and to a presbyter as a *sacerdos*. But why did they choose this word? The Letter to the Hebrews says there's only one *sacerdos* in Christianity, one hero, and it's Jesus.

And the one thing the Letter to the Hebrews is very clear on is this: his priesthood is so unique it cannot be shared with anyone. But all the baptized gave a share in him. Well, why did we start using the phrase ‘*sacerdos*’? Because in 306, a group of clergy in Spain decided that one of the things they wanted was to be considered equivalent in rank to the *ordo*.

Now, obviously, free postage, reduced travel expenses, all that—who could blame them? But the price they paid for that was that they ceased to see themselves as primarily members of,

and servants to, local communities; but as part of an international organization designed to deliver a specific service.

So, when we use the word ‘ordination,’ let's remember it's not a healthy word. Being a minister, *diakonia*, is a healthy word.

And if we start thinking in terms of the whole church, then the next thing we do is we get a map and divide up into areas and we then say, “Well, how many people have we fitted to that area?”

Well, finding bishops is never a problem. There are plenty of people with greasy hands who want to climb the pole. I've known little boys of 17 and 18 in seminaries and they were already thinking of what they would look like in a mitre.



Well, what it means is that you then divide the world into dioceses and then you divide the dioceses into parishes and then you pop in the people. Their connection with the local community is that they are providing a service. They, quite literally, are like the local bank manager. Local bank manager isn't too worried about me. His primary obligation is to, for instance, Lloyds Bank and his only relationship to me is, in representing Lloyds Bank, he presents me with a service that he knows I want or am expected to want.

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So, vocations become a matter of logistics, and in fact, we have now got the bizarre situation in the Catholic Church that we think there can be a shortage of vocations. Because a shortage of volunteers to work in the *sacraordo*, the sacred order, equals the inability of the Holy Spirit to inspire people.

Now, that is a vision that is so deeply within us, we hear someone saying, “Well, I’m a Catholic.” They don’t say, “I’m a member of this community.” They usually designate themselves first and foremost in terms of the worldwide vision.

Now let’s actually look at the way human beings operate, because if we’re going to talk about synodality, we’re actually going to say that one doesn’t start at the universal; one starts at the local and then the local meets the next local, and that’s where the two roads come together. So, synodality presupposes that I’m in one group, you’re in another, and these two groups are going to interface in some way.

So, the moment we start talking about synodality, we have to move out of the top-down universalist model. And I must say, at the moment, I’m very fearful when I hear—I hear the bishops in Australia are having a synod; I hear the bishops in Ireland are having a synod; the Pope is talking about synodality; there’s going to be a synod on synodality, but it’s going to be a synod on synodality with representatives of all the different branches. I’m not sure they realize that if synodality means anything, they have to start abandoning the top-down model.

And it could be that after a couple of years of talking of synodality, this will just fizzle out as the greatest waste of time that we have engaged in, because I know several bishops who are dropping the word ‘synodality’ into everything they’re writing, yet I know they haven’t thought it through for one second—because it’s not part of their world. They’re universalists. Their logic is totally Rome directed. “I’m Rome’s man here.”

I know one guy who is actually, in the same letter which I read just a few weeks ago, describing himself as the Pope’s representative, using the language of ‘the actual pastoral government,’ the jargon of the law books, yet he’s talking about promoting synodality. This is quite literally like turkeys talking about how they’re looking forward to Christmas.



And I think we have to try and grasp how different the synodal model is. Where do you start to try and grasp the synodal model? The usual place that Christians start is with New Testament communities or with the community of the Jerusalem or something like that. That’s actually not a very useful place to start because we know so little about the mechanisms of those. It’s far better to start by starting with the anthropologists and looking at how human beings come together.

Now, the place I suggest you start is with a professor of evolutionary anthropology at Oxford called Professor Robin Dunbar. And Dunbar has put forward a piece of research that looks at the structure and size of the differing brains of the primates. So, he begins with animals like baboons; then he moves up to the gorillas; then he moves to the chimpanzees, the bonobos, and finally, humans.

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The strange thing is, the size of the group that we can interact with is tied to brain size. Don't ask me to go in and prove the math. I read his papers and I see the math, and when I see three root signs multiplying one another, the shivers come down. But the reality is this: You can actually relate to about 150 people. Now, 150 people is actually a maximum. Many people can't relate to that. Then you come down and you realize that 80% of your time is spent relating to an even smaller group—usually less than a dozen.

So, think about husbands, wives, partners, children, maybe grandchildren, and think of how much time you spend in the service of that group, and the answer is that about 80% is spent on an immediate group of between five and ten people.

Now, there are some people who can relate to far more, but there's almost no one who can relate to more than 150. So, what we actually find ourselves in—and I'm looking at 25 different faces on the screen now and I know I could extend that to four screens—each of you is at the center of about 150 people and you're also at the center of a cluster.

And so we're constantly clustering, and there are intense places of overlap. Some of these are called the local football club. The local group that does this, partly it's your extended family, partly it's the locality. But it's also the group in which we witness to God through Jesus Christ. So, to think of a church that is more than 150 people is to affectively talk human nonsense. A church of more than 150 people just doesn't work. It will break into smaller sections.

It's these real groupings that form the bedrock of the Church. It's within that grouping that we can engage in the most primitive human activity, which is eating together. We're meal-sharing animals and so we eat together. And when we gather to eat together, the appropriate thing is to thank God. So, we don't gather for Mass, we gather to eat, and then gathering to eat, we become eucharistic.

We're emerging from the lockdown, and I know that one of the questions that has been asked in many dioceses is how do we get people back to Mass. That's a back-to-front question. How many—and I'm only going to speak to the people in England for a moment—how many of you were delighted yesterday to know you could just go back out and meet people? Now, I know we can only meet outdoors and we can only meet in small groups, but we're delighted to actually get back and meet people. There are people actually delighted just to get the shops open again.

Human beings are naturally gregarious. We love meeting up with one another, we love eating together, we love drinking together. And one of the things that I'll try to do if I remember—I'm going to make a note of it now—I'm going to send you an article by Dunbar on why we love to drink together.

There was a guy so desperate to get out and have a pint, he was shown on the television last night drinking a pint and snow falling on him at Oxford. Now, for many people, that's crazy. But as a Christian, I'm delighted. Hey, it shows the divine programming is still operative.

So, we shouldn't be worried how we get people back to Mass. I know in one diocese this is being discussed in the next couple of days. What you do is you say, how can people gather? Do we help them be eucharistic together?

Now I'm starting on the ground and I'm building up. So, in that case, one of the things you need to help them to be eucharistic is, there are some people who naturally have the gift of being able to organize other human beings, but when they get together, they all row together and they don't fight with one another and they don't just sit in their corner. They actually start sharing and building together and working together.

It's identifying those people who've been skilled by the Holy Spirit in their humanity that they will now have this trans-finalized so that it's helping their brothers and sisters grow in grace.

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And identifying those people, that's what identifying vocation is, not praying that we get more people going into seminaries or more youngsters running around in collars, whether the youngsters are boys or girls.

So, what, then, does that do to our vision? Well, if we think of the Church really as beginning in real communities, and there's always been less than 150 people, where we're actually trying to find the skills within the community that can be actualized and named within the network of communities, within the synodal network, that will be the equivalent of the laying-on of hands. Notice I'm avoiding that word 'ordination.' The way we recognize one another's skills is through the laying-on of hands.

And then that is built outwards so that we don't talk about one church but we talk about how all the churches form a unity. We're not a singularity with branches; we're real churches who are coming into unity together because we synodally move together. We are part of this larger vision of the kingdom which allows real communities to build the kingdom of God. And in the language of Luke, for that set of kingdom-building activities, is to move out from Jerusalem, to all Judea, out to the ends of the earth. We could rephrase it from individual communities which network and come into unity, and then it spreads outwards.

So, when we hear the word 'catholic'—if I were very technical, I'd say, write down every word that comes into your head when you hear 'catholic'—Western Christians and particularly Roman Catholics usually write 'universal.' Catholic equals universal! So, how is this word different from the word 'ecumenical'? "Oh, yeah, that means universal as well. The word 'catholic' means universal, but it also has another meaning. It means integrity. So, we don't become Catholic because we're all one; we become Catholic because each of these communities has its own integrity. It is the genuine integrity of being a church. And then forming into unity, the whole group has a certain integrity in its witness to Jesus Christ.

So, if synodality really takes off, it is going to be the largest change in the Western Church since the beginning of the 4th century. I hope and pray it does. But such revolutions are going to be difficult—the level of psychological resistance just can't be underestimated.

Again, I was looking at either the *Tablet* or some magazine in the last week or so, and I was looking at the number of bishops around the world who are beginning to get cold feet. Think of your own parish. Is it really a community or is it an administrative division? Your parish priest, does he like the idea that he is the religious expert? For instance, he's not entitled to wear purple. We've reserved that for the real members of the order, the bishops and the *monsignori*. Does he like to think of himself, though, as the man apart? He may say, "Oh, well, of course, the priesthood is distinct - and give all sorts of theological, beautiful reasons about 'I am among you as one who serves.' You can dress it all up.

But if synodality really takes root in the Catholic Church, it's going to change everything. And I'm not sure how many people at the moment prattling about it have really realized that it's a movement. You start with a real community, which becomes a real church, which then meets another church and recognizes that they are then members not of a universal organization, but of the Christ. And I hope having run over my time and having run down the lines dropping hand grenades to the left and right of me with aplomb that I've left you with some interesting questions.

Moderator: Thank you very much, Tom. Yep, the hand grenades are very useful, very helpful. What we began as was a small community. But I think what we're trying to you—and we're listening to you and we will take in everything you have said about trying to start our synod in Bristol—is that we are a small community meeting another community. We've got people from Canada, from America, from Poland, and that's exactly what you're advising us to do, is to be small within ourselves and to have our own integrity and then to meet with and support each other.

Root and Branch Synod

We are a group of Catholics, some of whom are ordained, brought together by our love of Christ's Church and our anxiety about its future.

Still inspired by the Second Vatican Council, we want to contribute fully to the life of our Church so that we may be a more effective sign of the Kingdom of God.

To do this, we believe that an atmosphere of openness and dialogue both with each other and with our church leadership needs developing. Accordingly, we aim to supply channels of free and frank communication. We desire to help create a climate of trust and respect for all where this dialogue may be fostered.

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*Help us work out what actions we can ask of ourselves and of the hierarchy.
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