

Inside the Synod:



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At the start of July, in preparation for what has become known as the “Synod on Synodality,” the general secretariat of the synod’s spirituality commission convened a meeting of the heads of religious orders in Rome.

In the big aula of the Jesuit Curia on the Borgo Santo Spirito were gathered the superiors general of the Jesuits, the Marists, the Claretians, the Eudists, and the Salesians, along with the master of the Dominicans, the vicar general of the Augustinians, the Benedictine abbot primate general, and so on, together with the presidents of the umbrella bodies of male and female religious across the Catholic world, whether contemplative, apostolic, or charismatic.

The point of the gathering? To share experiences from the many different traditions of synodality and collective discernment. Or, in simpler language, to find out how the different orders make decisions, elect leaders, and hear the Holy Spirit nudging them to change.

While in Rome for the October 9–10 launch of the synod, I heard about this gathering from a number of those who were involved, among them the woman who has become the synod’s face and voice. What the meeting showed, the French Xaverian Sr. Nathalie Becquart told me, was how each of the orders had developed different mechanisms of deliberating as a body and reach

ing consensus—whether classically, in the form of the “General Chapters” of monasteries and friaries, or as exercises in group discernment as developed, say, by the Jesuits. Many religious institutes had regular assemblies, others engaged in consultations prior to decision-making, while some combined consultative and deliberative practices. The diversity of methods and traditions was tremendous. Yet alongside the clear lines of authority and obedience in most religious orders were two elements they all seemed to have in common.

The first is that discernment and decision-making are the business of the whole body, not just of the few entrusted with governance. In his landmark October 2015 synod speech, Pope Francis quoted an ancient maxim: *Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet* (“what affects everyone should be discussed and approved by all”).

And because, as St. Benedict notes in his seventh-century rule, God sometimes speaks through the youngest in the community, enabling participation means paying special attention to the timid edges, to the unlikely places, to those outside.

The second is that this business of consultation and deliberation is not separate from the life of prayer but intrinsic to it. The habitus of community decision-making is attentive listening to others, straining for the whispers of the Spirit even in the mouths of people we resent or disagree with. It calls, therefore, for giving time to

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all, in equal measure, for speaking honestly and boldly but not hammering others with our views, for sitting in peaceful, open silence so that we can hear what words do not always say and can often conceal. Synodality requires us to understand that we do not possess the truth, but that sometimes, when we put aside our emotions and agendas, it possesses us, overflowing the narrow channels of our thinking.

In short, participation and prayerful listening are the hallmarks of these religious orders' *modus vivendi, operandi, et cogitandi*. This is synodality. It has been used for Church elections ever since the apostles asked God to reveal to their hearts who should take the place of Judas. It has been used to transcend problems and conflicts ever since the "Jewish question" threatened to blow apart the early Church. Chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles relates how, at the Council of Jerusalem, the people, the elders, and the Spirit were all engaged in discerning the new path for the Church, announced by St. Peter's in those famous words: "It has seemed to the Holy Spirit and to us."

Yet for reasons of history—the corruption of worldliness, the lure of power, the entanglement with empires—synodality was squeezed out of the Church, leaving its authority structures looking less like what we find in Acts and more like the absolute monarchies and corporate command-and-control structures of the modern world.

No one now needs to be told where that has gotten us. The morning of my meeting with the synod subsecretary, Sr. Nathalie, the newspapers were full of stories about the 2,500-page Jean-Marc Sauvé report commissioned by French bishops looking into clerical sexual abuse since 1950. The figures were astonishing, and the headlines and quotes carried the usual shock-and-shame adjectives, worn from repetition.

But I was struck by the timing of the report, just days before the opening of the synod, and the way it homed in on what it called the "excessive sacralization of the person of the priest," as if the sacralization of any person could ever be other than excessive.

Clericalism—the idolatry of clergy, the worship of the institution, the abuse of power—had again been laid bare, and it was not just a *trahison des clercs* this time but of laypeople too: endemic, cultural, systemic "deviations of authority," as Sauvé put it, that seemed to be built into the very structures of the Catholic Church.



Pope Francis celebrates a Mass to open the process that will lead to the world Synod of Bishops, October 10, 2021 (CNS Photo/Remo Cassilli, Reuters).

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Over Caffè Lungo opposite the synod offices at 34 Via della Conciliazione, Sr. Nathalie also seized on Sauvé's report. A "synodal conversion" meant, she said, we can no longer have a Church that permits the kind of culture of domination shamed in the report.

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“There is no need to create another Church,” said Pope Francis in the synod hall on October 9, quoting Yves Congar’s *True and False Reform in the Church*. The task was instead “to create a different Church,” the one reimagined by the Second Vatican Council’s *Lumen gentium*. A synodal Catholic Church is still a *communio hierarchica*, but authority is no longer exercised in a remote and authoritarian way. Leadership becomes “co”: a matter of collaboration, cooperation, and co-responsibility. (This comes easily to young people, says Sr. Nathalie, who has worked with them for years. She calls them “Generation Co.”) In a co-responsible Church the Spirit leads us all; the priest and the bishop are in the midst of the people of God, not hovering over them. It is the Church founded by Jesus Christ, but also reflecting him: no longer abusive, no longer clericalist, but synodal.

Historians will gaze back at 2021, see the accumulation of scandals and dysfunctions, and tell how a Jesuit pope—assisted by a dynamic Xaverian French missionary sister—set in motion a vast reform, centered on reawakening the dormant Catholic tradition of synodality. Pointing back to the monastically inspired eleventh-century Gregorian reform, or the Franciscan revolution of the thirteenth century, or the Jesuits at the Counter-Reformation, historians will see a new chapter in an old story, repeated so often throughout Church history, of the religious orders again coming to the rescue of a crisis-ridden diocesan Church.

So it is hardly surprising if your bishop and parish priest seem to be irritably going through the motions of this new synod process, trying their best to shrug it all off. It is, after all, how most of the secular Church first responded to the Gregorian Reform.

To my grateful surprise, I was invited into the synod hall itself on the morning of October 9, along with scarlet-capped curial cardinals, many fewer diocesan bishops (each continent has been asked to send a delegation of ten), and plenty of religious and laypeople, many of them young.

In our armrests were the microphones and earphones bishops at synods use to “speak boldly and listen carefully,” as Francis instructed them to do at the start of the family synod in October 2014.

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Despite an unusually heavy week, the pope was in cracking form. He reminded us that the synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll but an “ecclesial event whose protagonist is the Holy Spirit.” He doled out some conciliar ecclesiology: the three keywords of this synod—communion, participation, and mission—are intrinsic to the Church regenerated by Vatican II, the first two reflecting the life of the Trinity, the third reflecting the apostolic commitment to today’s world that flows therefrom.

But then Francis leaned into one of the keywords in particular. Without participation, he said, synodality risks remaining abstract and “talk about communion remains a devout wish.” Without “real involvement”—turning up, speaking, being heard, acting—synodality stays on paper. Participation, he said, is a matter not of form but of faith. What happens at baptism is the conferral of “the equal dignity of the children of God.”

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Baptism therefore demands that we take part in the life and mission of the Church, in all the diversity of its charisms and ministries.

Yet, fifty years after the Council, Francis knows that is not what happens. Despite some advances, “a certain resistance [*fatica*] remains,” he said, treading delicately. Recognizing “the frustration and impatience felt by many pastoral workers, members of diocesan and parish consultative bodies, and women, who frequently remain on the fringes,” he then added that the participation of all is an “essential ecclesial obligation.” I was struck by the wording: the obligation is on the Church to enable participation. The lack of participation of God’s people is the result not of their reluctance, timidity, or acedia, in other words, but of a Church that too often denies them agency.

Later in the speech, speaking of the graces of this worldwide synodal process, Francis returned to the point: now is the chance, he said, to advance “not just haphazardly but structurally” in the direction of a synodal Church, which he defined as “an open square where all can feel at home and participate.”

This critique was not taken up in the other speeches, which stressed the invitation to participate but passed over the ecclesial obstacles to doing so. “The entire people of God are being called, for the first time, to take part in a Synod of Bishops,” said Cristina Inogés Sanz, a Spanish theologian, “and included in the invitation are those to whom we did not know how to listen, who left without our noticing they were gone—they too are invited to make their voices heard, to send us their reflections, their concerns, their pain.”

The synod’s chair or general relator, the Luxembourg Jesuit Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, who is tasked with summarizing the responses, said the pages of the future working document were blank and he had no idea what he would be writing. It is “up to you to fill them,” he told us, stressing that “everyone can participate, especially the poorest, the voiceless, those on the periphery.”

But no one noted the how question Francis had gently raised: how the structures of the Church would need to change in order to facilitate the participation of the whole body.

Synodality and holiness were intertwined, that a synodal Church better reflects, as Francis had just told us, “God’s style, which is closeness, compassion, and tenderness.”

At mid-morning came the chance to model the synodal method, when we broke into pre-assigned small language groups of about twenty people each, made up of curial heads (there were three dicastery chiefs in my English group “E”), diocesan bishops, Rome-based religious, the odd ecumenical guest, and laypeople of various sorts. Our facilitator invited us to speak about how “journeying together” happened (or not) in our local Church, and our hopes and fears for the global synod process.

The method was interesting. After introductions, we reflected silently for five minutes, preparing our input. Each person spoke for a maximum of three minutes. Then came five more minutes of silent reflection. Then, after re-reading their notes, each person shared for a further two minutes whatever had enlightened or resonated with them. (The guidance we were given beforehand invited us to consider what the Spirit seemed to be calling us to, what paths were being opened, and to note “inner spiritual movements” of joy or sadness, anxiety or confidence, consolation or desolation.) Finally, there was a free-form time of about twenty minutes for “discerning and elaborating the synthesis,” which would be written up as a verbale to be sent to the synod secretariat.

It was striking that the senior Vatican people—cardinals and bishops—offered theological soundbites, while the religious and lay people spoke of experiences. The soundbites were good: Francis was giving the Church permission to be what *Lumen gentium* envisaged; synodality was the antidote to individualism and tribal division; we had now the chance to recover the original way of “being Church,” allowing decisions to bubble up from below.

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But the experiences were far more compelling, especially those of religious sisters who described the efforts of their orders to become more synodal in their way of governing and making decisions. It meant, they said, a shift in mindset and culture, accepting a greater degree of uncertainty and tension than many were comfortable with. Yet building prayer and listening into the processes had led to a heightened awareness of the margins, to more unity and joy, and to greater humility. They spoke of the temptation of worldliness, of lapsing into an authoritarian attempt to present an outward face of uniformity and efficiency, rather than accepting their conflicts and uncertainties and waiting on the Spirit for answers to emerge.

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As they spoke, it seemed obvious that synodality and holiness were intertwined, that a synodal Church better reflects, as Francis had just told us, “God’s style, which is closeness, compassion, and tenderness.” In my small group I saw no tongues of fire. But reviewing the experience afterwards, it felt authentic, as if this is how the Church should be: where cardinals, bishops, religious, and laypeople listen to each other as equals in “an open square where all can feel at home and participate.”

And then, almost at once, I felt sad at the thought of how far so many of our dioceses and parishes are from this culture, and how the Church’s many non-synodal structures would soon be deployed to resist it.

The following morning, in St. Peter’s—my first papal Mass in well over a year due to Covid—Francis officially opened the synod. It was gently joyful, expectant, but with no fanfare. The Gospel reading was about Jesus meeting a rich man on the road. Jesus, said Francis in his usual homily habit of picking out three words, encountered him, listened to him, and helped him discern what he must do. So, too, in this synod process: we need to be present to others, to listen with the heart and not judge. “Let us not soundproof our hearts; let us not be barricaded in our certainties,” he urged. Jesus was calling us, as he called the rich young man, “to empty ourselves, to free ourselves from all that is worldly, including our inward-looking and outworn pastoral models; and to ask ourselves what it is that God wants to say to us in this time.”

The day before, in his synod speech, Francis had mentioned the neglect of Adoration, and he mentioned it again now, in his homily, where he spoke of the importance of “devoting time to Adoration.” The repetition niggled at me. Why bring up this form of prayer so dear to him—he practices it every evening at 9 p.m. without fail—in relation to the synod? Then I realized: Adoration is the synodal prayer par excellence, because it is where we awaken to our agency. When we are present to Jesus, in communion with him in the Eucharist, we are known, recognized, and loved. We participate.

Sitting in on its commission meetings during the following days, I could not help being struck by the fragility of the synod’s infrastructure in comparison with the scale of its ambition. No secular organization would ever launch such a great enterprise with so few resources and with such little preparation. The tiny synod leadership team, recently bolstered by an experienced new communications director, Thierry Bonaventura, is superb, and they are supported by four commissions: spirituality, theology, methodology, and communications. But most commission members are meeting in person now for the first time, and the scale of what needs to be done seems absurd.

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In the commission we chew over the challenges, beginning with unfamiliar terminology. How to define synod when it is at the same time the standing institution in Rome and the process just launched? How to get across that this is a transformative process, a synodal conversion whose fruit is a change of culture, while at the same time communicating that it is an unconditioned process, open to the prompts of the Spirit?

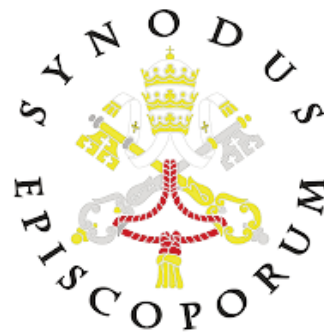
How to explain that, while anything can be discussed and raised, only bishops vote and the pope decides? How to deal with false expectations and misplaced fears? We work hard, draw up documents, bring in the Vatican film crews to do mock interviews with members of the methodology commission. But it seems amazing to be doing it all just days before the diocesan phase opens.

And yet, when at lunch the next day a veteran Vatican official tells me it is foolish for the pope to launch such an ambitious process during what he calls the “declining chapter” of the pontificate, I vigorously disagree. Francis has been building to this over the past eight years, I say, teaching us synodality in speeches and documents and the gatherings of bishops to wrestle with big topics such as family, young people, and the Amazon. He has decided to bring the people of God together now, to invite them into the synodal process as discerning subjects, because he has glimpsed a *kairos*, an opportune time. After more than a year of fearful self-isolation and closed churches, what better moment to assemble the faithful to listen to the Spirit? From a worldly point of view it looks impossible, I say, but who is in charge here? How did it look when St. John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council?

The next day, in a joint meeting of the commissions in the Jesuit Curia, tensions surface. The theologians—there are some big names here—worry that they have not been given a clear mandate to develop a theology of synodality. Some of the spirituality members are concerned that these meetings are themselves insufficiently synodal. How to develop a synodal habitus with such long, content-packed meetings? Such frustrations are part

of the synod experience, which is always, as a Jesuit puts it, a “race against time.”

Nowhere is that truer than in what will be the hugely complex task of distilling what has been said and experienced. The Latin Americans, who have been doing this since 1968, say that while it’s important to be creative in synthesizing, the main task is to be faithful to what you receive, to look for the “fine pearls” in the language of the people. What is needed, says one theologian, is *homo sinodalis*: people with a synodal heart, who facilitate rather than impose, who can spot the emergence of the “new thing” the Spirit is calling forth.



There are no illusions here. A PowerPoint slide lists the obstacles: the lack of interest and awareness, the paucity of information and skills, the infrastructural challenges of poor nations’ dioceses, the huge task of somehow coming together in parish groups yet at the same time reaching out to the wounded, the alienated, and the disaffected.

And yet this is not an anxious meeting. The interventions are good-humored and confident. There is joy here, a quiet faith that all will be well, that a synodal Church—tense, messy, humble, but an open square for all—is what God asks of Catholicism in the third millennium. There is confidence, too, that the people of God will, over time, hear the call to assemble. And when they do, that they will speak boldly and listen carefully, and that somehow, in spite of all the resistances and obstacles, not another but a different Church will come forth. *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus.*



NEEDLESS TO SAY, CHURCH ISN'T THE ONLY
PLACE WHERE THE HOLY HAPPENS.
SACRAMENTAL MOMENTS CAN OCCUR AT
ANY MOMENT, AT ANY PLACE, AND TO
ANYBODY. WATCHING SOMETHING GET
BORN. MAKING LOVE. A WALK ON THE BEACH.
SOMEBODY COMING TO SEE YOU WHEN
YOU'RE SICK. A MEAL WITH PEOPLE YOU LOVE.
LOOKING INTO A STRANGER'S EYES AND
FINDING OUT THEY ARE NOT A STRANGER'S.
IF WE WEREN'T BLIND AS BATS, WE MIGHT SEE
THAT LIFE ITSELF IS SACRAMENTAL.

Frederick Buechner
Wishful Thinking & Beyond Words

