

Synodality and Parish Cells

I am delighted to have this opportunity to talk about something that is at the heart of what it means to be church. My theme is Synodality and the Parish Cell. Here, I am going to look at the meaning of synodality, its context and its significance for our churches today. Then afterwards during our workshop and discussion we can look together at the significance of synodality in terms of the Parish Cell – how its thinking may enrich us and what we in turn can offer it.

I begin with a prayer. It is *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*, which is the Latin for “We stand before You, Holy Spirit,” It invites us to embrace the synodal pathway towards the International Synod in 2023. I now pray it to invite the Holy Spirit to operate within all cell people that we may travel together in communion with one another and discern what God calls us as a people sent on mission.

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

These words were prayed at the beginning of every session of the Second Vatican Council. They were prayed at Councils, Synods and other Church gatherings for hundreds of years. This prayer was likely composed by the Spanish saint, Isidore of Seville, who lived from 560 to 636. It now reminds us of our deep and rich roots and of our felt need that together we be empowered by the Holy Spirit and be an influence in our world and church today. Need of our ancestors for the guidance of the Holy Spirit when they felt uncertain and weak.

The word synod has ancient roots. It comes from the Latin *synodus*, and the Greek *synodos*. It literally means coming together, assembly, meeting. *Also the conjunction of planets*. It comprises two words: *syn-* which means together or with, and *hodos* "a traveling, journeying; a path.

The practice of synodality equally has deep and ancient roots. It is the pattern and process that is built into all creation. When God created the world, he saw that it was good. He had a specific purpose and intention in mind. He built into all that exists the movement towards unity and towards the freedom of the children of God. This movement applies to all things of nature, of the human person and of spiritual realities in Christ. Synodality can then be described as discerning this movement of God.

At times it is felt as 'groaning'; at other times as joy and praise. St Paul graphically draws our attention to God's ultimate purpose for all things when he says: 'creation still retains the hope of being freed like us. From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free' (Romans 8:21-22). We live through the groaning of climate change, Pandemic, violence, weakening of churches and of faith, while being carried by the movement of God.

This for me is a fundamental meaning of synodality, namely, walking together with the people of our world discerning the built-in movement of God in all things, while all the while guided by his Spirit who 'comes to help us in our weaknesses' (Romans 8:26).

For me, the other great foundational meaning of synodality lies in understanding who God is.

God is not some monarchical, and perhaps somewhat lovely figure, who pulls the strings to guide the world, to assist one person, and to condemn another as his personal whim. His primary function is not to determine our final destiny with heaven or hell, while remaining aloof from the world and its affairs. Such images are alien to a true Christian understanding.

Rather God is love - and not simply someone who loves. God is the community of infinite loving - of the Trinity - of three persons infinitely giving to, and receiving from, one another. Such dynamic and creative loving overflows and lives in all that is. We are invited into sharing this loving with God and with one another. It makes a real and inherent difference. We become family. We are to love others as brothers and sisters with the intimacy of God's own loving. In this way we reveal to the world who God is. Indeed herein lies our primary method of evangelization. "I give you a new commandment; love one another just as I have loved you; you also must love one another. By this love you have for one another everyone will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:34/5).

It is for this reason why Pope Francis speaks so often of the church as synodal by nature. He says:

Firstly: Synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself. If we understand, as Saint John Chrysostom says, that “Church and Synod are synonymous”,⁽¹⁹⁾ inasmuch as the Church is nothing other than the “journeying together” of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord, then we understand too that, within the Church, no one can be “raised up” higher than others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person “lower” himself or herself, so as to serve our brothers and sisters along the way (17 October 2012 address)

Secondly: 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 evangelizing mission.”¹

Finally, for Pope Francis: “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”²

Why is this coming to the fore today as urgent and necessary for the church as people of faith?

One: It is the work of God’s Spirit who continues to be active in our world: In the words of Pope Francis: The Holy Spirit constantly breathes new life into our world, into our hearts, into our families, into our homes, and parishes. Each new day in the life our families and each new generation, brings the promise of a new Pentecost, a domestic Pentecost, a fresh outpouring of the Spirit, the Paraclete, whom Jesus sends as our Advocate, our Consoler and indeed our Encourager. How much our world needs this encouragement that is God’s gift and promise. (Pope Francis: World Meeting of Families in Phoenix Park Dublin 2018)

Two, church leadership takes the ecclesiology of Vatican II and develops its relevance for today’s. Having stated that a synodal Church is a prophetic sign, it claims that ‘practicing synodality is today for the Church the most evident way to be (in terms of Vatican II “the universal sacrament of salvation” (LG, no. 48), “a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race”’ (LG, no. 1). Preparatory Document, 15

¹ ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018), no. 3.

² Pope Francis, *Address for the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015).

Three: we live with new realities and during times of change when the influence of faith for church people and within our culture has waned. When we look at the history of our churches in each of our countries, perhaps we can easily identify a number of different forms that were adopted by the church and by people of faith. We may likely see times of great fervour and flourishing, decline and followed again by the need for a new revival.³ I can recognise diverse forms in the history of our Irish Church. We had times of flourishing, as seen in our monasteries, our great numbers of missionaries throughout the world, our post-Emancipation church; as well as of times of decline, as seen in our Anglo- Norman period; and during the reformation and penal times. And today the church displays signs of death or dying in many western countries. This invites a radical renewal, which through the creativity of the Spirit brings people of faith to journey together in mission. Today, the archdiocese of Dublin has 200 parishes, while it has 2 students currently studying for the priesthood. From this one example, we clearly see that for its survival and renewal a different form of church lies ahead.

Four: all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients".(EG 9)

Five: It is a movement from episcopal Collegiality to Ecclesial Synodality. It is the antidote to decisions being made by small groups of people who are not transparent and unaccountable e.g. google medicine. It is now the challenge to extend synodality to all levels of church life and to invite all to participate. It is Francis' idea of an inverted pyramid.

NB 3 The official logo of the synodal path gives us a good image of what sodality means:

You will see a large colourful tree at the centre of the official logo of the synodal path. It is filled with light, which shines out with many colours. It expresses the cross of Christ as the source life, light and hope. It carries the Eucharist, which shining like the sun, attracts us and gives us light. The branches, opening out like wings, suggest the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The people are moving forward. They are "walking together". They move from the tree from which they draw life. They do so with joy as suggested by the bright colours. There are 15 different silhouetted figures, which depicts the diverse ages, colours, origins and backgrounds of the human family.

³ In Ireland we see a number of distinct phases. We had the church based around our monasteries. Then followed the Anglo-Norman church; The reformation and Penal Church; Post Emancipation church and the church of today.

Interestingly, they are led forth by children and young people for ‘it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs’, and then women and men, elderly and youth, lay and religious, couples and single. Interestingly too is that the religious, the bishop and nun walk with and among the people, rather than out in front.

At the bottom of the logo is the slogan ‘For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission’, which is presented as giving direction to the walking together.

Necessary Guidelines:

In imagining a new future for the church and her institutions, three guidelines and realities are necessary:

1. decisions to initiate and make real processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute.
2. Guidance of the Holy Spirit towards an authentic synodal mentality, entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process that is indispensable for the “continual reformation of which [the Church] always has need, in so far as she is a human institution” (UR, no. 6; cf. EG, no. 26).
3. The need for a pastoral and missionary conversion EG

So what can we expect:

The Preparatory Document, 27 states that “there are three levels on which synodality is articulated (or lived out) as a “constitutive dimension of the Church.”

- The first is at the level of its **style**. This refers to the ways people of the Church ordinarily interacts, lives and works as community. It is realized through “the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles”.
- The second is at the level of **ecclesial structures and processes**. This indicates the synodal nature of the Church as it is expressed and institutionalised at the local, regional, and universal levels and as guided by its theological and canonical understandings.

- The third is at the level of its **synodal processes and events** in which the Church is convoked by the competent authority.

In fact, if it is not embodied in structures and processes, the style of synodality easily degrades from the level of intentions and desires to that of rhetoric, while processes and events, if they are not animated by an adequate style, turn out to be empty formalities.

Challenges:

Pope Francis puts very succinctly the challenges of living out what it means to be a synodal people and church. He says: “what the Lord is asking of us is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice” (17 Oct 2015). It thus needs to be supported and guided by a number of attitudes and practices.

One: It calls for a faith culture. It operates within a climate of faith and seeks to discern what God wants of us as we reach out and encounter others. It asks where is my soul most alive? Where are we being led by the Spirit? What is God’s word saying to us in the scripture? The process is not about being a parliament or reaching consensus but rather is a spiritual discernment.

Two: It calls for inner freedom. This is the necessary detachment required to be open to others, to hear their stories, and not to take things said as personal, nor impose rather facile solutions.

Three: It means making available the information and facts necessary in understanding the real situation as well as the relevant theology and pastoral approaches.

Pope Francis in his homily when opening the Synodal Path (10 October 2021) highlighted three important practices, and saw them as lived out in the encounter of Jesus with the rich young man in the scriptures. They were: Encounter – Listen – Discern

The Gospel is full of **encounters** with Christ - encounters that uplift and bring healing. Pope Francis explained that Jesus did not hurry along, or keep looking at his watch to get the meeting over. He was always at the service of the person he was with, listening to what he or she had to say.

He urged that as we initiate this process, we too are called to **become experts in the art of encounter**, while taking time to encounter the Lord and one another

Time to look others in the eye and listen to what they have to say, to build rapport, to be sensitive to the questions of our sisters and brothers, to let ourselves be enriched by the variety of charisms, vocations and ministries. Every encounter calls for openness, courage and a willingness to let ourselves be challenged

The second verb is **listen**. Jesus simply listens for whatever amount of time it takes; he is not rushed. Most importantly, he is not afraid to listen to the rich young man with his heart and not just with his ears. Indeed, he encourages him tell his story, to speak freely about himself. Christ reminds him of the commandments, and the man starts to talk about his youth, to share his religious journey and his efforts to seek God. This happens whenever people feel that they are being heard, not judged; they feel free to recount their own experiences and their spiritual journey.

Are we good at listening? How good is the “hearing” of our heart? Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered, rejected or judged? Participating in a Synod means discovering with amazement that the Holy Spirit always surprises us, to suggest fresh paths and new ways of speaking. It is a slow and perhaps tiring exercise, this learning to listen to one another – bishops, priests, religious and laity, all the baptized. The Spirit asks us to listen to the questions, concerns and hopes of every Church, people and nation. And to listen to the challenges and changes that it sets before us.

Pope Francis advises: “Let us not soundproof our hearts; let us not remain barricaded in our certainties. So often our certainties can make us closed. Let us listen to one another”.

Finally, **discern**. Through dialogue, he helps the young man to discern. Jesus encourages that man to look within, in the light of the love that the Lord himself had shown by his gaze (cf. v. 21), and to discern in that light what his heart truly treasures. And in this way to discover that he cannot attain happiness by filling his life with more religious observances, but by emptying himself, selling whatever takes up space in his heart, in order to make room for God.

The Synod is a process of spiritual discernment, of ecclesial discernment, that unfolds in adoration, in prayer and in dialogue with the word of God. That word summons us to discernment and it brings light to that process. It guides the Synod, preventing it from becoming a Church convention, a study group or a political gathering, a parliament, but rather a grace-filled event, a process of healing guided by the Spirit. In these days, Jesus calls us to ask ourselves what

it is that God wants to say to us in this time. And the direction in which he wants to lead us.

Challenging Questions:

The Preparatory Document of the Synodal Pathway presents us with a series of challenging questions for a synodal people. I now name a number of them:

I. In your local Church, who are the ones “journeying together”? When we say: “our Church,” who is part of it? What persons or groups are left on the margins, expressly or in fact?

II. To whom does our particular Church “need to listen to”? What space is there for the voice of minorities, the discarded, and the excluded? Do we identify prejudices and stereotypes that hinder our listening?

III. How do we promote a free and authentic style of communication within the community and its organizations, without duplicity and opportunism?

IV. How do prayer and liturgical celebration inspire and direct our “journeying together”? Do we promote the active participation of all the Faithful in the liturgy and the exercise of the sanctifying function?

V. How is each Baptized person called to be a protagonist in mission? How does the community support its members committed to service in society?

VI. What are the places and modes of dialogue within our particular Church? How are divergences of vision, the conflicts, the difficulties addressed?

VII. What relations do we have with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations? What fruits have we drawn from this “journeying together”? What are the difficulties?

VIII. How is authority exercised within our particular Church? What are the practices of teamwork and co-responsibility? How are lay ministries and the assumption of responsibility by the Faithful promoted?

IX. By what procedures and methods do we discern together and make decisions? How can they be improved? How and with what tools do we promote transparency and accountability?

X. How do we form people, especially those who hold roles of responsibility within the Christian community, to make them more capable of “journeying together,” listening to one another and engaging in dialogue?

Parish Faith Cell Communities:

When it comes to Parish Cell communities, two strands of questions arise:

One: How does synodality fit us as we seek to follow the call of God to walk together in mission? What is its reality for us? Strengths? Weaknesses?

Two: What can we contribute to the thinking and reality of Synodality? In our parishes? and dioceses?

I make a few comments that I hope will bring focus upon some underpinning convictions that guide the cell experience, namely:

1. Firstly, Encounter with the Risen Lord as our good news – our liberty – our new sight. Together we take hold of our dignity and freedom in Christ.
2. Secondly, Evangelization: Sharing our resources and faith stories with other people. in a way that invites others to true freedom.
3. Thirdly, Parish Formation: We commit to the parish, as a community of community, becoming a centre of new life and evangelization where faith attracts.

Pope Francis, at the **International Meeting – 18 November 2019** drew attention to evangelization as our parish cell charism, which is exercised through our oikos and parish encounters. He says:

“Our parishes are invaded by many initiatives, where often, however, the life of the people is not deeply affected. You too are entrusted with the task of reviving, especially in this period, the life of our parish communities. ... It is urgent, therefore, that we recover the need for encounter so as to reach the people where they live and work. If we have encountered Christ in our lives, then we cannot keep Him only for ourselves. It is crucial that we share this experience with others as well; this is the main road of evangelisation. ... Do not forget: every time you meet someone, you play out a real story that can change a person’s life”.

As my conclusion I thank God that he blesses us and enriches us by adopting us as his family – as his body. We are then to use our gifts in the service of one another. We are to journey and walk with him and with one another, as equal pilgrims, whether female or male, young or old, clerical or lay, breaking down the walls that divide and cause pain. Every gesture of respect and understanding to overcome domination and injustice; every cup of cold water given in His name; every comforting and healing of the human heart; every prayer uttered; every

story listened to; is to live our mission, or rather his mission in us. It lives and reveals a synodal church.

I leave the final words with Pope Francis:

He sees that God invites us to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands, and inspire in young people ... a vision of the future filled with the joy of the Gospel.

We will now take 5 minutes break – to stretch limbs, etc. When we return we can have a good discussion on:

- A) How does synodality fit us? How do we live it?
- B) What can we contribute to the process?

Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, prepared by the International Theological Commission and published in 2018.

Preparatory Document of the Bishops

Vademecum: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.
Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality (07.09.2021)

Pope Francis: 17 September 2015 – 50 anniversary

Ibid 10 October 2021: Homily

Ibid 17 October 2021