



The Synodal Process

Introduction

The title of the 2023 Synod of Bishops is “*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission.*” For the first time, the Synod Office in Rome has produced a comprehensive process which encompasses the stated aim of the Holy Father that the Church in today’s world should have a vision of missionary communion orientated to evangelisation.¹ The process begins in the Particular (or Local) Church and then moves to the level of the Bishops’ Conference. From there, discernment takes place in the Regional Area – for England and Wales, it would be steered by the European Council of Bishops’ Conferences (CCEE) – before moving to the Universal Church with the final Synod Gathering of Bishops in 2023, *sub et cum Petro*.

Origins

The process reflects the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. In this Council Document, the universality of the People of God is affirmed (LG§12) and by their anointing in the Holy Spirit, the universal body is “incapable of being at fault in belief.” A presupposition for this important statement is a formation of the people in a lived experience of faith, foreshadowed in the Old Testament especially in the Exodus, from which the life of the Gospel is lived by those united to Christ in his new covenant (LG§9).

The sacrament of Baptism offers entry into the life of faith and love. The Eucharistic liturgy is the pre-eminent place that the Christian community gathers to celebrate this faith and love. So, the People of God celebrate this life of faith and love in the context of the Scriptures and the Eucharist. Thereby their faith in the Word of God and in the Tradition of the Church, through the Scriptures and the teaching office of the Church, is affirmed and nurtured. Faith is nourished through the hearing of the Word and the sharing of the Body of the Lord. Through these actions, the members of the Church enter into communion with him and all each other.

The importance of the Bishop

From this universal people, the bishops are chosen and consecrated and have an attention to the whole flock but, in particular, to the Church to which they have been appointed (LG§23). Their ministry is one of “pastors, masters of teaching, priests of sacred worship, ministers of government.” Theirs is the charism of discernment as they are the “authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses to the faith of the whole Church.”² Therefore, the bishops have a key role in listening to the people of God in their particular Church, and under the power of the Holy Spirit, to hear and discern what is being said of that Church. “In virtue of this catholicity, each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the entire church, so the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to achieve fullness in unity.” (LG §13). Each local Church is a fundamental part of the Universal Church, so what happens in each local Church contributes to the whole. It is the first link in the communion of faith shared with the other churches and cemented in the unity of the local Church around the bishop. The diversity of the local Churches and their context brings different gifts to the whole, which contribute to it. This is key to understanding this synodal pathway.

¹ This is echoed in *Evangelii Gaudium* §23

² Address of His Holiness Pope Francis “Celebration Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops” 17 October 2015

All-Many-One

The synod process is one of “journeying together” towards Christ, the *Way, the Truth and the Life* who calls his people into a unity of purpose and mutual listening between people and pastors. This journeying arrives at the Synod of Bishops gathering itself, which is presided over by the Bishop of Rome, who is called to speak as “pastor and teacher of all Christians” as the supreme witness to the *fides totius Ecclesiae*.³ The bishops are linked to the Bishop of Rome through the bond of episcopal communion and at the same time, are subject to him as head of the College of Bishops.

The process therefore can be considered as an exercise of listening *all-many-one*; that is, the voice of the people of God in the particular church (all), must be heard, listened to and discerned by their bishops as the authentic pastors (many), who then gather with the Successor of Peter (one) who acts as a point of unity for the Universal Church. The ultimate discernment is for the Pope who will offer a Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation based on what is presented to him throughout the process of mutual listening, in which the fruits of this discernment are published in a manner that reflects the life of the Church as always changing within its own context in the world, yet ever faithful to that which it has received.

Questions and Answers

1. *What does “Synodality” mean?*

Synodality comes from a Greek word meaning the “walking together” (syn-) on a “particular way” (-hodos) The “particular way” has been defined by the Synod of Bishops in its process for the Synod 2023. This can be seen in the infographic attached to this document.

2. *If the process is already defined, how do we “walk together?”*

Every member of the Church has the right to speak, and the obligation to allow those charged with the work of discernment the freedom to do so. Pope Francis in his book *Let us Dream* says “we need a respectful, mutual listening, free of ideology and predetermined agendas”⁴ This is at the heart of the process. Each diocese will form its own means of running this listening process so that it reaches as broad a scope of people as possible.

3. *Is this just for parishes and dioceses?*

No, it involves everyone. Schools, young people, hospital chaplaincies, university chaplaincies, prison chaplaincies, the religious and consecrated communities, the societies of apostolic life, those with a distinctive charism in the church all have a voice that speaks into the conversation. Catholic organisations and charities also have a role to play in this work. Echoing the experience of the Second Vatican Council, Ecumenical and Interreligious engagement is also encouraged, and this is best facilitated at the local level. This is an important voice from outside the Church that offers an insight into the collaboration for the good of all.

4. *Can we talk about any topic?*

Pope Francis says “what is under discussion at synodal gatherings are not the traditional truths of Christian doctrine. The Synod is concerned mainly with how teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our time.”⁵ Therefore all topics can be raised but it is important to realise that not all will form part of the ongoing discussion.

³ ibid

⁴ Pope Francis, *Let us Dream: the Path to a Better Future*, Simon and Schuster, London, 2020, page 93

⁵ ibid page 84-85

5. *Will this make the Church more democratic, like other churches?*

The Synodal Process is not about a democratic debate. It is place of respectful mutual listening and experiencing the call of the Holy Spirit to move in new ways. Again the Pope is clear on this: “Another temptation that so often confuses people is treating the Synod as a kind of parliament underpinned by a ‘political battle’ in which in order to govern one side must defeat the other...this goes against the spirit of the synod as a protected space of community discernment.”⁶ What it will do is embed at all levels of the Church a new way of listening and hearing, of discernment and action which remains faithful to the truths received but expresses them in the context of a particular time.

6. *How does this discernment take place?*

The whole Synodal Process is a prayerful process, rooted in the encounter with Jesus in the prayerful reading of the Sacred Scriptures and through the liturgical life of the Church and inspired by an openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Listening to each other is very important. Pope Francis says of the Synod of Bishops gathering itself: “we listen, we discuss in groups but above all we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us.”⁷ This discernment is not an activity done in isolation. Mutual listening and reflection are vital, as what is proposed grows from the unity and conviction that comes from the lived practice of faith within the community.

The process of spiritual discernment is incumbent on everyone’s part; truly being open to the Spirit and seeing where the local Church is being led in its own context, with the bishops listening carefully to the views of the faithful, and the faithful respecting the authentic role of the bishop as one who governs the local Church and promotes communion.⁸ Discernment is always orientated towards the mission of the universal Church which continually moves towards Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life who calls his people into a unity of purpose.

7. *What is the role of the Bishops’ Conference?*

The role of the Bishops’ Conference in this process is twofold. First, its Secretariat will act as an administrative point of contact for the dioceses to liaise with for the production of the documentation for the bishops, as a whole, to consider. However, and more importantly, the bishops acting together, effect a common discernment of the points raised in the particular Churches for the whole of the territory.⁹ The bishops, whilst remaining the authentic pastors of their particular Churches and speaking on behalf of them, also work collectively to summarise the “links of culture, tradition and common history, as well as the interconnection of social relations among citizens of the same nation.”¹⁰ It is for this reason that this part of the Diocesan Phase of the Synodal pathway has great importance.

8. *Is this the best time to do this, after all we have experienced in the past 15 months?*

Pope Francis has called this moment in human history as “a time of reckoning.”¹¹ The Synodal Process is for the whole Church not just in England and Wales and the themes from the title of the Synod can help in understanding why now is the right time to consider this:

⁶ *ibid* page 86

⁷ *ibid* page 85

⁸ Pope St John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Gregis*, 16 October 2003 §44

⁹ Pope St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Apostolos Suos*, 21 May 1998 §13

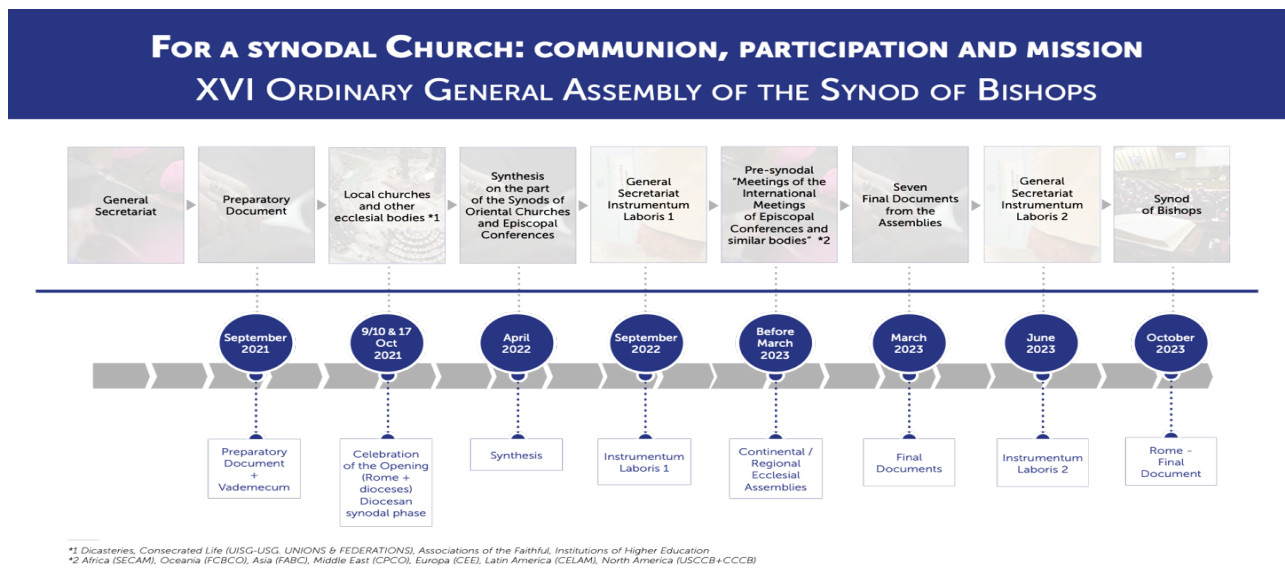
¹⁰ *Apostolos Suos*, §16

¹¹ *Let us dream*, Prologue, pages 1-7

- a. *Communion* – bringing the people together as communities in the local Church begins this prayerful insight into the ways of the Holy Spirit. When the Church gathers for the Eucharist, and what flows from it, is when the necessary self-understanding of the mission of the Church is best understood. Thus the dialogue at this level is rooted in the life of the ecclesial communities and parishes.
- b. *Participation* – the reflections that the local Churches and communities are undertaking regarding the past 15 months of pandemic form the context of how the Church in England and Wales looks forward, not backwards, to revitalising its mission of bringing the Good News to all. The gentle call of invitation to the full practice of Catholic life, with the Eucharist at the centre of all the Church does, is an integral part of the “walking together.”
- c. *Mission* – understanding the local situation will feed necessarily into an overview of the mission in the whole diocese. Like the tesserae of a mosaic, the picture is built up of the needs for renewal so that mission to all people is firmly rooted in the life of the local community who gather, by gentle invitation by the Lord, to worship him, to be sanctified by him and to exercise both an individual and collective prophetic voice.

The Synodal Process is a pilgrimage of the whole People of God in discerning the way the Church needs to be in its localities and worldwide at this moment in time. Anyone who has been on a pilgrimage knows that the journey there is not just travelling, but an integral part of the whole. The Synod in 2023 will be an important moment in the pilgrimage but not an end point. All who commit this process to prayer, open their hearts to the Holy Spirit and speak with confidence and engage in mutual listening will assist the Church like a pilgrim “...[to go] out from herself, open(s) herself to a new horizon, and when she comes home, she is no longer the same, so her home won’t be the same.”¹²

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas
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¹² ibid, Epilogue, page 135