



Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of a synodal Church in his speech marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican, October 17, 2015 (CNS photo/Paul Haring).

The most far-reaching event in the Catholic Church in my lifetime officially gets its start next month. It is Pope Francis’s boldest move yet, the historic shake-up that a Church brought low by sex-abuse scandals badly needs, and potentially the most transformative moment in Catholicism since the Second Vatican Council, which it seeks to embed permanently into the life of the Church. The two-year “synod on synodality,” launched in Rome on October 9 and in dioceses worldwide a week later, is set to mark Christianity forever.

Yet who knows it is even happening? A global process set to mobilize millions and transform the world’s oldest and largest institution has so far registered as no more than a blip on the Catholic radar. Bishops briefed by Rome’s synod secretariat back in May have been mostly quiet about it, hiding behind cautious communiqués buried on websites, awaiting details, fearful of unleashing forces and expectations beyond their command.

So we begin with a paradox. The path to the 2023 Synod in Rome, on the theme “For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission,” is designed to engage every diocese, every bishops’ conference, and every continental Church body. It will unleash the biggest popular consultation in history. It will require, as never before, the assembly of the People of God, in mass meetings at parishes and across dioceses around the world, who are being given “the ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received,” in the words of the Preparatory Document released last week.

Yet so far the disengagement has been almost total. (Has your parish priest mentioned anything? I thought so.) For pastoral leaders, as the synod secretariat’s *Vademecum* puts it, “this consultation process will evoke a range of feelings...from excitement and joy to anxiety, fear, uncertainty or even scepticism.” The anxiety is real. The Catholic Church is already a deeply polarized place. What if, when people speak boldly, it all falls apart?

Into this vacuum of hesitancy step militants of both sides, traditionalists and progressives, adding their hermeneutic of fear and suspicion. On the September 9 edition of Raymond Arroyo’s EWTN show, his acerbic guest, Damian Thompson, declared that synods were “a means of dismantling historic teachings,” a sure route to Protestantism. He was confident “the Holy Spirit won’t be present because the Holy Spirit has better things to do.” The following day a “lay-led” and “inclusive” Root and Branch Synod in England was addressed on September 10 by former Irish president and Church-reform campaigner Mary McAleese, who described the synod as an “absurd process” that was ultimately “pointless” because it failed to recognize “the full equality of all members as Church citizens.” Her proof was that, following the initial consultation and listening phase in the dioceses, the bishops alone would be responsible for taking the process of discernment forward.

Yet this is exactly what a Catholic synod is. Unlike synods in other traditions, the Roman version is consultative. Final responsibility for discernment and the decisions that flow from it lies with the bishops and ultimately the pope, who are assisted in their discernment by the body of believers. Or so the theory goes. In practice, before this pontificate any pre-synod consultation of the People of God was at best perfunctory, and the synods themselves were less exercises in discernment than confirmation of existing belief and practice. That has changed under Francis. Ever since his election, when he announced that he wanted to proceed “gently, but firmly and tenaciously” towards a synodal Church, Francis has been shaking awake this dormant Catholic institution. Synods in Rome (there have been four) are now pastoral, inductive, and dynamic; the discernment is genuine. Conversion happens, and change results, just as in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. But the People of God have so far mostly been passive spectators. That is what this synod sets out to change.

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The object of the next two years is not a one-off process but a permanent conversion, one that involves the transformation and extension *versus populum* of the existing synod institution revived by the Second Vatican Council. As the *Vademecum* released last week by the synod secretariat puts it: “While the Synod of Bishops has taken place up until now as gathering of bishops with and under the authority of the Pope, the Church increasingly realizes that synodality is the path for the entire People of God.” That means making pastoral decisions “that reflect the will of God as closely as possible, grounding them in the living voice of the People of God.” This is not, of course, to divinize the popular will, as the French Revolution claimed to do; the bishops remain the discerners-in-chief, the pope the one who decides. But there is now a genuine recognition that the discovery of the divine will—uncovering the presence of the Spirit of God and the bad spirit that seeks to thwart it—has to involve the whole body of the faithful, not just the bishops. Thus, “the purpose of this synod”—and indeed, the point of a synodal Church—“is to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church.” It is to make the People of God actors in the process of discernment, rather than passive onlookers.

Unsurprisingly, most Catholics have yet to grasp this challenge. A Church accustomed to a command-and-control model does not adapt easily to synodality, which may be “an essential dimension of the Church,” as Francis put it in his groundbreaking October 2015 speech, but is so far more like an unexercised muscle. To exercise it again suddenly is no small task; it will be effortful, painful, and initially it may seem hopeless. But it is what God asks of the Church in the third millennium, said Francis in the same 2015 speech. It was a conclusion he did not reach lightly, the fruit of a deep discernment over decades.

While the *Vademecum* offers a general account of the meaning of synodality and lists “good and fruitful practices” to enable it, the other document released last week, the Preparatory Document (PD), prepares the ground for the initial, diocesan phase of the process. Both documents are clear that what is at stake is *culture change*.

A synod is not called to defend or to change anything; it is called to enable an assembly that discerns what the Holy Spirit asks of the Church at this time in relation to the mission for which it exists: to evangelize. A synod is not a program, in other words, but a process; or rather, the program *is* the process, and never more than in *this* process, which is precisely about how the Church can become more synodal. Conservative and progressives can both struggle with this concept, because it is not tied firmly to any particular agenda. If a synod does not double down on tradition in the face of new threats, say the conservatives, or if it does not lead to long overdue reforms that advance equality, say the progressives, then the whole synod process is not to be taken seriously. For then it is either it is useless or dangerous.

Yet a meeting called to agree on a foreordained program is not a synod, whatever it calls itself. Synods are all about being attentive to whatever the Spirit is trying to say to the Church, not what people have decided ahead of time that the Spirit should be saying. A synod invites us to scrutinize the signs of the times by reading the movement of spirits in the *sensus fidelium*, in the body of the People of God gathered by the Church’s leaders. It is an ecclesial process of discernment of spirits, with a missionary objective—not just *for* the people but *with* the people, under the guidance of the bishops.

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The PD presents this, using Scripture, as the interconnectedness of Jesus, the crowd, and the apostles. Jesus, who takes the initiative, is constantly open to the people, recognizing them as interlocutors in ways that shock and scandalize. At the same time, he calls some to follow him, and entrusts them with special responsibility for helping others to encounter him. All three actors, says the PD, are essential: without Jesus (the Spirit) as the protagonist, the synod descends into a political game between the apostles and the crowd, a churchy parliament. Without the crowd, it becomes sectarian and self-referential, an exclusive, inward-looking sect. Without the apostles instructed by the Spirit, the crowd risks falling prey to myth and ideology. The PD adds that it is the role of a fourth actor, the *diabolos*, to try to separate these three actors. Without all three—the People of God, the Holy Spirit, and the bishops—it is not a real synod.

This is what is so hard. We have no model for this; and, as we look around us, in the pews and at our clergy, it seems unrealistic. A synod calls for attitudes and mindsets that seem almost the opposite of what we’re used to in our daily life and in our Church. The synod documents ask us to speak boldly and honestly (*with parrhesia*), and to create space for those who seldom speak to do the same. Yet the documents also ask us to be humble in listening, to be open to changing our minds in light of what we hear, and to accept that we don’t so much possess the truth as come to be possessed by it. We must let go of the myth of our self-sufficiency, give up prejudices and stereotypes, surrender our rigidity, and learn to recognize the Spirit moving where we least expect it. We must abandon, too, the lure of clericalism, to see that true power lies in service, that the voices of all the baptized must be heard. And while we must be bold in giving our views, we must resist the temptation of sterile polarization, for where two views are in opposition, a third may yet present itself, transcending both. To enter into synodality is to embrace an alchemy in which the Spirit acts as a *complexio oppositorum*, in which what is good and valid on all sides is preserved in a new vision.

While acknowledging that “the synodal process will naturally call for a renewal of structures at various levels of the Church in order to foster deeper communion, fuller participation, and more fruitful mission,” the *Vademecum* adds that this renewal flows from that of the members of the Body. This renewal can only come about by “doing” synodality: spending time in human encounter, in the company of our fellow faithful in parish meetings and “synodal consultation meetings,” but also informally: sharing a meal, walking together, and so on. This informal synodality—“renewing the Church,” as the *Vademecum* puts it, “through new experiences of fraternity with each other”—helps those intimidated by more formal meetings to open up, which is one of the core challenges. How to hear the Spirit speak through those who do not usually speak? How to avoid the process being hijacked by the articulate and educated? And then, as the PD notes, the Church must deal with the weight of its own clericalist inheritance, “with those forms of exercising authority on which the different types of abuse (power, economic, conscience, sexual) are grafted.” But it must also cope with the impact of a culture that swings between secularist intolerance of religion and fundamentalist religious intolerance.

All these attitudes can be transcended only by a synodal conversion. In the words of the PD, “The ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received, depends largely on the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute.” It means being “educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality”—a “conversion process” on which the mission of the Church now hangs.

From where we stand now, this looks like a fearsome challenge: in just five months, each “particular Church”—usually, a bishops’ conference—must organize a consultation of the whole people of God across its dioceses and religious communities that turns on one or two key questions: “A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our ‘journeying together?’” Each particular Church must synthesize its blizzard of answers into no more than ten pages. From these syntheses the synod secretariat in Rome will create the first “working document,” which will be pondered and worked on by bishops’ bodies at a continental or regional level before March 2023. The synthesis of their syntheses will then produce a second working document by June 2023, to be refined and finally voted on by a three-week synod of bishops in Rome in October of that year. Their final report will be given to the pope.

Too much, too soon? Of course. That is the point. The genius of the process is that it will starkly reveal just how little traveled is the road to the synodal Church of which Francis dreams, how anti-synodal is the culture of a command-and-control Church. And that is good, for no conversion happens without a first, chilly confrontation with the truth of who we are, followed by a realization of how much the Spirit’s help is required to get us to where we are called to be. If such humility and openness to grace should prove the synod’s main fruit, it will yield a rich harvest indeed.

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