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## Together on the Way

*– Pope Francis  
and Synodality*

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## – *Pope Francis and Synodality*

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Gerry O’Hanlon has named an important insight which is worthy of continuous ‘unpacking’ when he alerts us to the fact that Pope Francis is leading a quiet revolution in the Church by means of a synodal approach.<sup>1</sup> In fact I am convinced that Francis’ methodology can only be understood through the lens of synodality and he is inviting us into a deeper understanding of all that this implies. Francis has said ‘The path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church in the third millennium,’ and ‘Synodality, as a constitutive dimension of the Church, offers us the best interpretative framework for understanding her hierarchical ministry’.<sup>2</sup> Indeed I would argue that synodality is also the best interpretative framework for understanding Francis’ papacy. Furthermore, O’Hanlon presents us with a picture of a quiet revolution in the Church achieved through this approach, not in the short term but over time. Most encouragingly, he recognises, for Francis, this ecclesial reform is always in function of mission and has discernment of God’s will at its very core. In fact it is likely that we are being led to places that would not be Francis’ personal preference, being as O’Hanlon says ‘quite conservative doctrinally’ but I believe categories such as liberal/conservative or left/right are largely redundant within this approach. If we are truly synodal we are often asked to hand over control to God, laying our own personal preferences to one side and allowing ourselves be led in often surprising ways. In Santa Marta Francis said:

And the way the Church expresses its communion is through synodality, by meeting, listening, debating, praying and

- 1 Gerry O’Hanlon S.J., ‘Ireland and the Quiet Revolution’, in *The Furrow*, Vol. LXVIII, No. 5 (May 2017), 259 - 267.
- 2 Vatican City, 19 October 2015 (VIS) – On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, the Holy Father addressed the Synod Fathers in the Vatican’s Paul VI Hall.

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deciding. The Spirit is always the protagonist and the Lord asks us not to be afraid when the Spirit calls us. ... Let us ask the Lord for grace to understand how the Church can face the surprises of the Spirit, to be docile and to follow the path which Christ wants for us and for the whole Church.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of synodality is that sense of journey – of being on the road together - but the Greek word ‘hodos’ can also be understood by the more symbolically open ‘way’, we are all on the way and followers of the Way. This image of Church as a community travelling together along the same road is congruent with one of the most powerful images of Church from the Second Vatican Council, which speaks of the Church as a pilgrim people, exiles journeying in a foreign land (*LG* 6), but aware that the Lord walks with us so that we are led by the Spirit (*GS* II).

I had personal experience of this throughout our Synod process in Limerick. Many of the clichés that can seem glib or trite were indeed proved true – the path was indeed made by walking. As the process unfolded the diocesan Synod evolved, working itself out over time and not in a prescriptive overly managed or planned way. We learned to trust in the Spirit and cooperate and trust in the journey itself.

At the conclusion of the Synod on the Family in 2014 Pope Francis said:

I can happily say that – with a spirit of collegiality and of synodality – we have truly lived the experience of ‘Synod,’ a path of solidarity, a ‘journey together.’ And it has been ‘a journey’ – and like every journey there were moments of running fast, as if wanting to conquer time and reach the goal as soon as possible; other moments of fatigue, as if wanting to say ‘enough’; other moments of enthusiasm and ardour.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, at the presentation of the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, *Amoris Laetitia*, on 8 April 2016, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna, said that regardless of the marriage or family situation in which we find ourselves, ‘we are all journeying’.

Back in 2012 Mary McAleese expressed the need ‘to oxygenate’ the slow burn of collegiality. She described post-conciliar collegiality as ‘chaotic, with little evident direction in its

3 Pope Francis’ homily at Mass on Thursday 28 April 2016 at the Santa Marta chapel.

4 Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the conclusion of the Third Extraordinary general Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Synod Hall, Saturday, 18 October, 2014.

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development’ and bemoaned the lack of ‘a forum in the church for determining the views of the People of God.’<sup>5</sup> Since 2013 Francis has been providing the oxygen by means of symbolic action and the written word. It was evident early on that Francis was committed to a synodal approach. When Pope Francis announced his arrival on the central balcony of St Peter’s in March 2013 he did so as the Bishop of Rome, a Bishop among Bishops. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis invites us to exercise pastoral ministry in a missionary key which abandons the complacent attitude that says ‘We have always done it this way’ (EG 33) and instead seeks to foster a dynamic, open and missionary communion achieved by means of participation and dialogue, born out of a desire to listen to everyone with the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone (EG 31).

### SYNOD ON THE FAMILY

I believe that the synodal approach of Francis is most clearly evident in the Synod on the Family. The entire process bore the hallmarks of genuine synodality. In a sense the Synod on the Family could be described as a ‘test-case’ for the synodal way, particularly when we consider that it confronts us with difficult and complex issues, bringing us to those particular situations in family life where church teaching and pastoral application meet.

The two-part Synod process on the Synod on the Family in 2014 and 2015 presents us again with a very real sense of a journey characterised by discernment which allows room for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Francis himself referenced this when he said: ‘From Vatican Council II to the current Synod Assembly on the family, we have experienced in an increasingly intense way the beauty of “walking together”. ... We must continue on this road.’<sup>6</sup> Francis listened, discerned, took on board the recommendations and spoke of the consensus of the Synod fathers. He followed the documents of the 2014 and 2015 Synods from the approved summaries. The Synodal way demanded that he walk a sometimes very fine line between two extremes and those extremes were excluded in these summaries.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis reminded us that all the baptised are called to be ‘agents of evangelisation’:

5 See Mary McAleese, ‘Quo Vadis: Collegiality in the Code of Canon Law’, (Dublin: Columba Press, 2012) 153-161. The ‘slow burn’ relates to a quote from Ladislav Orsy in ‘Law for Life’ *The Jurist*, 67 (2007), 37. The relationship between collegiality and synodality is well articulated in O’Hanlon, ‘Ireland and the Quiet Revolution’, *The Furrow*, Vol. LXVIII, No. 5 (May 2017), 260.

6 Vatican City, 19 October 2015 (VIS) – On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, the Holy Father addressed the Synod Fathers in the Vatican’s Paul VI Hall.

all the baptised, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelisation, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelisation to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients (*EG* 120).

Francis developed this call to all Christians to be agents rather than passive recipients or clients, to be subjects rather than objects in the Synod on the Family:

It was this conviction that guided me in my wish that the People of God be consulted in the preparation of the dual Synod on the family. ... How would it be possible to speak of the family without speaking with families, listening to their joys and hopes, their sorrows and their troubles?<sup>7</sup>

It was thus that he organised a world-wide consultation during the Synod on the Family. In the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, he applies in real, practical terms the call to be evangelising agents:

The work of handing on the faith to children, in the sense of facilitating its expression and growth, helps the whole family in its evangelizing mission. It naturally begins to spread the faith to all around them, even outside of the family circle. Children who grew up in missionary families often become missionaries themselves (*AL* 289).

The family is thus an agent of pastoral activity through its explicit proclamation of the Gospel (*AL* 290).

If I could again refer to our experience of a Diocesan Synod in Limerick, it is to Bishop Brendan Leahy's credit that he enabled – indeed insisted on – an open and real listening take place, a listening in which nothing was off-limits or out of bounds, in which all voices could be expressed and heard. Within the formal structure that is a Synod this required courage and creativity. It also required honesty with delegates as the process moved towards the event itself:

It will be important as we move through the process to tell all the people and especially the synod delegates what the limits are. If things are off limits for discussion (women's ordination, clerical celibacy, the cathedra) we must say so up front and not raise unfounded hopes. People can deal with limits if

7 Ibid.

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we tell them the right way. They cannot deal with the promise of wide horizons and then the stifling of their most creative conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, we found creative ways that enabled us to stretch the boundaries of what is possible within the legal requirements of a valid Synod which were not censorial or restrictive. This is the synodal way of Francis, it allows for the *parresia* which he has called for, the courage to speak openly and plainly even if it is a contrarian view – on the final day of our Synod gathering in Limerick space was created to allow such open and frank discussion. The respectful manner in which delegates spoke and listened, on matters that were deeply felt, and with differing viewpoints deeply held, spoke volumes to the journey which all of us delegates had been on – a journey that had brought us to this place of *parresia*.

## LISTENING

At the heart of any Synod and synodal method is deep listening:

A Synodal Church is a Church who listens, aware that listening is more than hearing. It is a process of mutual listening in which each person has something to learn. The faithful, the Episcopal College, the bishop of Rome: each one listening to the others, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’<sup>9</sup>

Pope Francis is building on the call of Vatican II to listen to the ‘sense of the faithful’ recognising the Spirit speaking through God’s people:

the People of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith it labours to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs, and desires in which this People has a part along with others of our age (*GS II*).

In Limerick, we used a variety of listening methods in a lengthy Listening Process which heard from approximately 5,000 people. The fruits of this open listening were coded and subsequently thematised which in turn generated the 101 proposals brought to the Synod floor. The listening revealed that the most important issues in people’s lives centre on relationships – family, community

8 Rehrauer Ann F, ‘The Diocesan Synod’, CLSA Proceedings of the Forty-Ninth Annual Convention, 1987 Canon Law Society of America, Washington, DC., 14.

9 Vatican City, 19 October 2015 (VIS).

and young people. In choosing Family as the theme for his first Synod of Bishops and Young People as his second, Francis clearly demonstrates his sensitivity to what is truly important to people. The World meeting of Families in Dublin 2018 presents us with a huge opportunity to speak a message of hope and good news to that which is most precious to our community.

#### PROCESS OVER EVENT – TIME OVER SPACE

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis gave us the intriguing and complex phrase: Time is Greater than Space (EG 222-225). This reminds us that in a truly synodal experience, the process is more important than the programme, the journey is greater than the destination, the lead-in more critical than the event. It is too easy to plan an event, a quick-win, eye-catching moment which quickly withers away and leaves little impact. As we move towards WMOF2018 we would do well to heed Francis' warning to generate 'processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains, but do not enhance human fullness' (EG 224). The phrase reminds us also that there is often a gap or a space between where we might like to be (the ideal) and where we are at in reality but time is greater than that space too and it can be bridged over time, it is not about dominating spaces but about keeping an eye on the end-goal, 'the horizon which constantly opens before us' (EG 222). Francis also tells us that 'Realities are more Important than Ideas' (EG 231-233). and each of these somewhat obscure phrases ('Time is greater than space' and 'realities are more important than ideas') finds very practical expression in the grounded situations of family life in *Amoris Laetitia*.

In Limerick our experience taught us that the process itself is transformative as it provides an opportunity for genuine participation, consultation, and formation. It is a moment of evangelisation for a diocese as it embraces this time of prayerful discernment and catechesis. 'If the members of the diocese are properly engaged in a participatory process, (this can) also result in broad-based renewal.'<sup>10</sup>

#### DISCERNMENT

In a synodal process, discernment is essential and as a Jesuit Francis is very aware of the importance of this. Christian discernment is not about figuring out and choosing what I want but rather it is about discerning God's will for my life and thus involves attentive listening to the Spirit's guidance. Twenty times discernment was mentioned in *Evangelii Gaudium* and it is a hall-mark of Francis'

10 Cusack Barbara A., 'The Diocesan Synod: A Teachable Moment in the Life of the Local Church', in *The Jurist* 63 (2003), 73.

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synodal approach. In his letter to the Bishops of Buenos Aires on *Amoris Laetitia* Francis said: 'It simply entails accepting, accompanying, discerning, reinstating. Out of these four pastoral attitudes the least refined and practised is discernment; and I deem it urgent to include training in personal and community discernment in our Seminaries and Presbyteries.' It is fair to say that most of us have not received adequate training to develop skills of discernment. Such discernment involves conscience. A healthy informed conscience requires that we allow the conversation take place and remain open to where this may bring us. Yes, we need to teach but we also need to listen. Pope Francis reminds us that 'our role is to form conscience and not replace it' (AL 37). Conscience is related to what it is to be human and at the heart of what it is to be human is relationship. So this relational aspect in terms of conscience demands that we move out and engage and listen with the community but there is also an inner journey, the personal and private, that which is at the core of my being where God speaks. Conscience then is a dynamic process between the personal and the communal. Our role as a community engaged in pastoral discernment is not to condemn:

On the basis of these convictions, I consider very fitting what many Synod Fathers wanted to affirm: 'Under certain circumstances people find it very difficult to act differently. Therefore, while upholding a general rule, it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions or decisions is not the same in all cases. Pastoral discernment, while taking into account a person's properly formed conscience, must take responsibility for these situations. Even the consequences of actions taken are not necessarily the same in all cases' (AL 302).

The complexity of human life insists that we cannot be reductive and simplistic by applying rules to a person's actions without discerning the context and concrete situation of a person's life. So there is a pastoral discernment which must take place which does not reduce everything to a dualistic black and white.

### CONCLUSION

A number of Conferences of Bishops have engaged with the pastoral discernment called for in *Amoris Laetitia* by issuing guidelines e.g. the French Bishops Conference have discussed the Exhortation at a plenary session in November and at least one French diocese has issued guidelines. The Bishops of Buenos Aires have also issued guidelines for their pastors. Perhaps the Irish Episcopal Conference

have been wise in waiting for *Amoris Laetitia*, to ‘bed-in’, to be received and distilled over time. This too, is part of the synodal way. However, the document has, as a result of the synodal way of Francis, given us clear direction in terms of a pastoral response and application – in accordance with the spirit of the document as it were. *Amoris Laetitia* deals with the complexity of family life – and such complexity demands a response that is truly pastoral – pastoral in the sense that it is marked by tenderness, compassion and mercy; pastoral in the sense of healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling. Alongside his teaching on time being greater than space is Francis’ understanding of the law of gradualness (as opposed to the gradualness of law). We are journeying within a culture of mercy (AL 295). Within such a complexity there can be no pigeon-holing, there are no ‘no easy recipes’ (AL 298), it is not about new rules:

it is understandable that neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since ‘the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases’, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same (AL 300).

The synodal way is difficult – it is particularly difficult for those who want clarity and definite answers. In the entire process that has been the Synod on the Family, from its inception to the launch of *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis has invited us to walk with him on a journey, he has shown us that together we can find a new way.