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Becoming a Synodal Church in Local Context: Conversation, Consultation and Dialogue

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1. CONVERSATION, CONSULTATION AND DIALOGUE

In this short reflection I will keep faith with the context assigned to me by the organisers of the symposium: the local church, by which, here, I mean the pastoral reality of life in the parish and diocese. I will begin by exploring what I mean by conversation. I will then say how I see consultation as different from conversation. Finally, in this section, I will propose an understanding of dialogue in terms of both of these. Please note, in holding unapologetically that honest conversation is integral to a synodal way of being church, I am not in any way proposing that our church be organized on a congregational model.¹

Against the background of the Tridentine reforms, Roman Catholic catechesis and pastoral practice inevitably became, and have remained for centuries, highly regulated. As we know, the centrality of the sacramental and liturgical life of the church to the consolidation of Catholic identity gave rise in the popular mind to a perception of the ordained as holding the keys of the kingdom to a degree determined by their rank. Apart from the hard facts of governance structures, there was and still is the subtlety of spiritual power, even if only as projected on to those in Holy Orders. Communication between clergy and laity is often, consciously or unconsciously, coloured by the reality of this situation.

Webster's dictionary defines *conversation* in general as 'oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas', and a

1 This is a form of Church governance in which final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making.

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conversation as ‘an instance of such an exchange’. Accordingly, in contemporary terms, ‘conversation’ can be used to describe practices of sharing experiences, information, views, or even hopes and dreams. The term conveys a sense of mutual, trusting, open-ended exploration. There is no suggestion here of a specific, ultimate purpose, planning or decision-making. Nevertheless, as we know, real conversations in which parties are present to one another on some kind of common ground can be highly generative.

Great conversations can happen spontaneously. In the absence of formal agreements, players learn to hold personal boundaries and to indicate the levels of confidentiality they need and expect from their companions. They will generally know where the conversation has, so to speak, taken the participants.

Then there are the conversations that are sought out deliberately. While still exploratory in nature, these may have a focus and boundaries that are mutually agreed.

Pastoral ministry is replete with conversations. For the reflective practitioner these can be truly ‘windows of wonder’. If, as we believe, it is in God that we live and move and have our being; if, as Christians living between Pentecost and Parousia, we bear in the world the creating, healing and sustaining presence of the Divine Three, then each encounter within our faith communities is potentially a sign and instrument of the kingdom, and equally so for all parties.

I realise that quality pastoral conversations require maturity in our understanding of person and role within the ordered communion of our church. However, I propose that mutually honest conversations which honour our basic equality as human beings, as well as our radical equality within the community of the baptised, are foundational to the Synodal Pathway. Without such conversation, including the mutual vulnerability which it implies, much experience of the joys as well as the challenges and struggles of life - and much of God’s action in people’s lives – will remain unspoken and unrecognised. I wonder if this is what Eamonn Conway is thinking about when he describes synodality as ‘trying to eavesdrop on God’s conversation with God’s people’.²

Here I want to instance what I have experienced time and again in pastoral conversation: the gap between the sense of God with which faithful members can be gifted and what church teaching tells them. Why did mothers – and fathers too – have to suffer for so long the pain of thinking that their unbaptised babies would be forever deprived of the joys of heaven, would never ‘see the face of God’, through absolutely no fault of their own? Why, indeed until they met a wise pastor, whose authority they trusted, who

2 Interview with Wendy Grace, www.iCatholic.ie, accessed 16/05/2022

confirmed what they knew in their bones? Why did it take until the middle of the 20th century for limbo to be ‘abolished’? I don’t need to elaborate on the practice of churching, but recall vividly several pastoral conversations in programmed house groups where mothers and grandmothers shared memories with horrified daughters. There is no rhetoric (or theology) which could meet that reality. And what pain is still being caused by doctrinaire positions which remain closed to the experience of intuitive faith, and the evidence of reason and science?

Brian Devlin, whistle-blower and author in the former Cardinal Keith O’Brien case has observed “We don’t have a healthy culture in the Catholic Church ... there is nowhere to have [honest, perhaps difficult] conversations. We have got an awful lot of growing up to do as an organisation, and as a Church.”³

Turning now to *consultation* in the pastoral context. Those of us who have worked with pastoral councils at parish and diocesan level down the years will know how poorly received the consultative status of councils can be. Canon Law calls for consultation that is more than a formality. Authentic consultation does not take place in a vacuum. It presupposes appropriate communication of available information, in two-way exchange. Thoroughly conducted, the process gives those consulted input and influence in decisions. Nevertheless, the ‘consultative status’ is easily perceived as keeping the laity in their place.

In this context, to present the synodal pathway always and only in terms of consultation would, I suggest, leave in place the assumed differentials of knowledge, wisdom, and insight as well as the actual decision-making authority and attendant responsibility which the term generally communicates. The insight and care which is needed to work through this block to participation is a pointer, I suggest, to the serious challenge we face in becoming a synodal church.

I now want to suggest that it is in the concept and practice of *dialogue* that we can find the nexus between consultation and conversation. By this I mean that true dialogue partakes of both the openness and generativity of conversation, and the clear and purposeful nature of consultation. Critical to true dialogue in all its rich possibility is, of course, transparency, whereby the intentions and understanding of all are made known at each stage of the process.

My espousal of dialogue as ‘the primary language of the faith community’ is based on Walter Kasper’s long-established

3 Sarah McDonald, “laity harbour ‘deep-rooted clericalism’” in *The Tablet*, 3 March 2022 <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/15086/many-laity-harbour-deep-rooted-clericalism-accessed-16/05/2022>

understanding of the three publics of the Church: the sense of the faithful, the ministry of theology, and the service of the magisterial authority which articulates in a compelling manner the fruits of dialogue between the three. I am wedded to Kasper's principle that no public may with legitimacy claim a monopoly of the Spirit. It is in dialogue that we work together towards ever greater uncovering of truth. It is through authentic dialogue that we can participate appropriately in discerning what the Spirit is saying to the Church in our time and place. And through dialogue we enable the transformative action of that Spirit.

Speaking in April of this year with participants in an International Conference on Moral Theology, Pope Francis said "The dialogical method invites us to overcome an abstract idea of truth, one removed from the lived experience of people, cultures, and religions."⁴ This point is made clearly by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*.⁵

On a field trip in the diocese of Talca, Chile, in 2001 I encountered first hand a diocese in the roll-out phase of a synodal process. Legendary Bishop Don Carlos Gonzales, imbued with the spirit of Vatican II, had by then drawn together the fruit of a four-year synodal process, distilled through the theological reflection of the planning Council of the diocese. I met that council and interrogated the members until they finally understood my burning question and provided an answer that matched what I was experiencing – the fruits of dialogue. Don Carlos had published a document entitled *The Call of the Spirit in the Voice of the Synod*. Everywhere I went on that field trip, at every level of the diocesan community from remote Christian Community, to parish, zone, and diocese, every officer, group, team and commission was working to the vision contained in that document. I remember remarking to my sister-guide; 'they can't all be making it up'! Sadly, as so often happens, sustainability has also been a challenge in Talca.

4 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-francis-moral-theology-conference-amoris-laetitia.html> Accessed 16/05/2022

5 Since "time is greater than space", I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For "cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle ... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied". *Amoris Laetitia* n.3, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf Accessed 16/05/2022

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There is one further aspect of dialogue in the local church which I must bring up here. That is the possibility that even in the local church context there may well be sources of new knowledge, for example in the fields of science, with which theologians, pastors and church personnel must engage in theological reflection if we are not to ghettoise ourselves in a perceived perfect past.

2. EXPERIENCES IN PASTORAL SETTINGS

I now want to share from experience what can happen when a genuine culture of dialogue is established. When priest(s) and other pastoral leaders sit down with people, even in formal settings, and enter with interest and openness into honest conversation and consultation, that is into dialogue, everyone can be surprised. I will recount briefly *two* examples.

Many years ago, I was a member of a pastoral leadership team in a newly-constituted parish. The area had expanded on the periphery of a large and well-established parish community. In response to ‘how do you dream about this parish now coming into being, as your parish?’ the primary concern was not: bring back the youth, welcome married priests, ordain women. No, the desire that was uppermost in open gatherings of hundreds of parishioners was ‘please, please, can this be a parish in which we are valued for who we are in ourselves, a community that is not based on a ‘Who’s Who’.

More recently, as already recounted in the recent publication *Maynooth College Reflects on Covid-19*,⁶ a deliberately-assembled pastoral focus group of diverse members from three church area communities in Dublin were also invited to dream dreams for the future of church life. Once again, the recurring desire reflected an immediate and pressing need: space, time and companions for conversation, opportunity to talk, to explore the questions of life, to air questions and diverse accounts of origin, meaning and purpose.

In a synodal church we will be valued for who we are in ourselves, and there will be a culture of conversation which nourishes real communion.

There is a religious sensibility that is evident in the abiding presence in people’s lives of what Thomas Luckmann calls ‘shrinking transcendence’ – wonder and awe at the mystery of new life, memorials for the dear departed, celebrations to mark milestones on life-journeys, outreach to others in need, concern for the planet and welcome for the stranger, desire for peace and

6 Anne Codd PBVM and Michael Hurley, ‘Becoming Church, a Parish Journey into, through and beyond the Pandemic’, in *Maynooth College Reflects on Covid-19: New Realities in Uncertain Times*, Jeremy Corley, Neil Xavier O’Donoghue and Salvador Ryan (Eds.), Dublin, Messenger Publications, 2021, Pp. 31-44

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generosity for the refugee. I think also of the appreciation that many have of our (very Christian) artistic heritage. In a synodal church this innate capacity for the spiritual will meet with welcome and understanding in wide-awake pastoral settings, and find expression and nurture in the church's liturgy.

This is the kind of church in which issues of equality and inclusion, ministries and governance, and ultimately mission can be raised, the truth be spoken in love, and the heart of the good news be the guiding light for a church that walks the way as one.

3. A REASON TO BE HOPEFUL

When Pope Francis decided to phase the Synod on Marriage and the Family into two sessions in order to engage the faithful in the gathering of experience and views, the *instrumentum laboris*, basically a questionnaire, was severely criticised. It was found to be inaccessible and heavily laden with 'church' thinking, Take-up of the invitation to participate was uneven to say the least.

The proceedings of the synodal sessions in Rome were tense, and at times intransigent. And yet, we got *Amoris Laetitia*, grounded and ground-breaking, inspiring as well as challenging.

In the view of Father Miguel Yáñez professor of moral theology at the Gregorian University '*Amoris Laetitia* is the first fruit of the synodal church both because it was the result of the consultation that took place with lay people before the synod and because every one of its proposals is rooted in what the synod voted by a two-thirds majority in 2015 ... With it, the Second Vatican Council came back to life.'⁷

In the service of the good news of the Gospel of love, *Amoris Laetitia* calls local church— as in church of a country or region - to take up its authority and responsibility. It is no wonder that it is still contentious, but like Vatican II it cannot be unwritten.

Interest and contribution to the Synod on Synodality is likewise varied. But the direction is set, and we each make our choice and take our attendant responsibility.

7 <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/05/06/pope-francis-amoris-laetitia-242942> Accessed 26/05/2022