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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Church Reform: Taking stock

June 2020

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One of the positive side effects of this sad time of Coronavirus/ Covid 19 is that those of us well enough to do so have time to take stock. We tidy our rooms, sort through papers, ask ourselves what is important in our lives. And we do so at a communal level too: does our world need to change direction (for example to take the challenge of climate change more seriously), does Ireland (for example to move to a single-tier health system), does the Catholic Church (so that it can become a more effective, humble and authentic herald of the Good News to our world)?

Pope Francis is already seven years into his project of reform of the Catholic Church. He characterises this reform in terms of a paradigm shift towards a synodal church¹ and announced to the Bishops at their 2015 synod in Rome that ‘... it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium’. This synodality is to be expressed at all levels of the Church’s life – local, regional and universal – and is to involve not just the Pope and Bishops, but all the baptised, male and female.

There has already been considerable development along these lines – not least in the gradual creation of a more open culture of debate, discussion and discernment within the Church. The latest decision to list Francis himself simply as Bishop of Rome in the Vatican Yearbook (the *Annuario Pontificio*) and to refer to titles like ‘Vicar of Christ’ as ‘historic titles’ is just one more symbolic indication of the desire of Francis to demystify the papacy. This involves locating his office and papal primacy – as well as the Roman Curia – at the service of wider ecclesial and inter-ecclesial service and unity.

But has this cultural and symbolic shift from a centralised, monarchical church towards a more participative one in which, as Francis says, ‘what affects all should be discussed by all’ (*quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*) been complemented by

1 Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis – A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland?*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018/9

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the necessary juridical, institutional and structural elements in order to make the change effective?

Austen Ivereigh² draws attention to the 2018 formal document *Episcopalis Communio* (an Apostolic Constitution of Pope Francis with legal effect on the Synod of Bishops) which is one such attempt: it mandates consultation of all the faithful before any meeting of the Synod of Bishops and allows the proceedings of the Synod, subject to papal approval, to become part of the Church's teaching, its 'ordinary Magisterium' (art. 18, par 2). This means that the Synod of Bishops could now finally become, as Francis put it in this 2015 speech, 'an expression of episcopal collegiality within an entirely synodal church', as opposed to being what historian John O'Malley³ refers to as 'an instrument of papal primacy'. And, Ivereigh goes on to say, papal approval would be forthcoming if a consensus had emerged at the Synod, reflected in a vote of more than two-thirds on each paragraph of the final report.

This is surely progress in the direction of making the Synod of Bishops – one, albeit key, element in an 'entirely synodal church', a 'synodal church at all levels' – more dynamic and effective. However the Amazon Synod and its contested reception by the Pope (he didn't rule on married priests or female deacons) have dented confidence in some quarters, sharpening on-going issues and emerging questions. In particular what more precisely is the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality, and how can the 'sense of the faithful' be given effective voice within church teaching and governance?

AMAZON SYNOD

In October 2019 around 185 bishops and up to 80 lay auditors gathered for the Amazon Synod in Rome. The participants were from the region and from the Roman Curia. The Amazon region is vast and spans 9 different countries in South America, including Brazil, Venezuela, Columbia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru. There had been a consultation process leading up to the synod involving over 87,000 people.

The main recommendations of this non-binding synod had to do with ecological conversion and the rights of indigenous peoples.

On the way the Synod looked at some intra-church issues, including the possibility of a more inculturated liturgy for the region; the re-opening of the issue of female deacons and the designation of non-ordained men or women as leaders of local communities

2 Austen Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd, Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2019, 86-89

3 John W. O'Malley, *When Bishops Meet, An Essay Comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II*, Harvard University Press, 2019, 80

through a ritual act with a fixed term mandate presided over by the bishop; and a recommendation that married deacons be ordained as priests, a reversal of the model of celibate priesthood dominant in the Latin Church for the last 1000 years. This whole topic on ministry, in the context of Eucharist, was prefaced by the most interesting phrase in the Final Document that it is ‘urgent for the Church in the Amazon to promote and confer ministries for men and women in an *equitable* manner’ (n. 95)

The Pope said he would reflect on the recommendations of the Synod and issue his own conclusions in an Apostolic Exhortation. He committed himself at the time to reconvening the stalled Commission on the female diaconate with the inclusion of some new members.

PAPAL RESPONSE – APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION ‘*QUERIDA AMAZONIA*’, ‘BELOVED AMAZON’.

The Pope’s formal response to the Synod, dated Feb 2, was made public on February 12, 2020. Described by Massimo Faggioli⁴ as a ‘love letter’, a kind of St Valentine’s Day card to the region of the Amazon and its peoples, it is a powerful and lyrical defence of the region and its peoples against the predatory forces which seek to exploit it for profit only. In a series of four dreams Francis outlines his hopes for the region – *social* (the human rights of indigenous peoples and the implications for all of us of ecological depredation), *cultural* (respect for and dialogue between cultures, native and surrounding), *ecological* (the natural beauty of the area, the threat to bio-diversity, the mysticism of the indigenous people, often expressed by poetry) and *ecclesial* (a church and a holiness with an Amazonian face, native liturgies, a lay church with commissioned ministries of women and men). The text was enthusiastically received in Amazonian civil society.

However, Francis did not give a direct answer to the issues of married priests or women deacons. Indeed, this was the main focus of media in our part of the world. Even mainline media reported that Pope Francis had ‘dismissed’, ‘rejected’, ‘ruled out’, ‘done a U-turn on’ the ordination of married men and the diaconate for women. Many of us were, understandably, disappointed, while others rejoiced. What was going on here?

I think, first, it needs to be said that the media reports, taken at face value, are misleading. Although the Pope’s Apostolic Exhortation is somewhat ambivalent and even contested on these issues I think two of his close confidants (Cardinal Michael Czerny

4 Massimo Faggioli, Not on the Same Page?, *Commonweal*, February 16, 2020

and Antonio Spadaro of Civiltà Cattolica)⁵ have it right when they focus on nn. 2 and 3 of the document. There Francis makes it clear that his response is to be read as part of a *continuing* dialogue, listening, reception and discernment, and not as a definitive ruling. This means, as Czerny noted at the press conference introducing the document, that these particular issues of ordination ‘remain on the table’. In this sense, unlike *Amoris Laetitia*, with its famous footnote on the possible admission of divorced and remarried people to full communion, this document is unique in that it does not claim to offer a definitive response to the Bishops’ Final Document and in particular to the issues raised around ordination. Indeed it does not quote the Bishops’ Final Document at all, but instead recommends it, ‘officially presents it’, asks us all to read it, notes that it emanates from the ‘participation of many people who know better than myself or the Roma Curia the problems and issues of the Amazon region’.

There may be several reasons for this reluctance to offer a more definitive response on these issues. I would say, *first*, that it is very likely that for Francis the ecological thrust of the Synod and his response is more important than the intra-ecclesial aspects and he judged that media attention would always focus more on the latter than the former, so why feed that particular beast? In this he seems to be at one with civil society in the Amazon region which has expressed irritation at what they perceive as a Eurocentric and Western focus on the contested issues of ordination (of less importance for them).

Faggioli and others may *also* well be correct in supposing that (unlike in the case of the contested issue of the divorced in the Synod on the Family) Francis finds himself in some disagreement with the majority of the bishops on these particular issues. His instincts are to value clerical celibacy (even if, as Robert Mickens writes,⁶ Bishop Erwin Krautler, an Austrian-born missionary in Brazil, remains convinced that Francis is willing to approve the ordination of married priests, something the pope told him back in 2014). And he wants to find a different ‘non-clerical’ mode of leadership for women (which, ironically, many advocates for the promotion of women in the church endorse). Hence, despite his admission that Eucharistic provision is so vital for the life of the Church and everything must be done to urgently provide it, he can still reach for solutions like praying for more vocations, sending missionaries, forming more inculturated priests, and a widening and deepening of lay ministries.

This seeming impasse brings into focus the relationship and tension between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality in the project of a more synodal church: the bishops ought to have effective authority

5 Antonio Spadaro SJ, ‘*Querida Amazonia*’: Commentary on Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 12 February, 2020

6 Robert Mickens, Deciding not to decide –for now, *La Croix International*, February 13, 2020

‘*cum et sub Petro*’, but how understand this complex relationship further? While, as a regional synod albeit held in Rome and with curial participation, the Amazon Synod is not technically covered by *Episcopalis Communio* and so its intra-church recommendations have no legal binding, still they have *moral force*.

This leads one to suppose that Francis, in not immediately accepting them, is also very conscious of his role as Pope in maintaining *church unity* and of the likely domino effect of a ruling on these issues that could hardly be restricted to the Amazon only. He may prefer to wait on the upcoming deliberations of the German ‘binding synodal process’ on the same set of concerns (and others), and of the Australian Plenary Council, the upcoming Synod in Liverpool and take into account the findings of many Assemblies of local churches and dioceses (including Killala and others in Ireland) which have expressed views on these topics.

Austen Ivereigh⁷ and Spadaro have laid great store on a section in the document entitled *Expanding Horizons beyond Conflicts* (nn.104-105), in which Francis, characteristically,⁸ hopes to find a way of transcending two conflicting approaches, ‘better ways, perhaps not yet even imagined’: ‘Similarly, in this historical moment, the Amazon region challenges us to transcend limited perspectives and ‘pragmatic solutions’ mired in partial approaches, in order to seek paths of inculturation that are broader and bolder’ (n.105). These ‘better ways’ might reveal themselves in the discernment process as ‘a greater gift that God is offering’ (n.105). This reminds us that beyond the horizon of the secular media Francis is inviting us to consider not just reason, sociology, rights, organizational effectiveness, but, above all, *the will of God*.

However Francis is also far too astute not to recognize that the will of God is most often found through ordinary human means calmly evaluated in the light of theological opinion and the *sensus fidei fidelorum*, that the solutions he himself is proposing have already been tried and failed, and that the Holy Spirit may indeed be leading us (as Peter was led in Jn 21) in a direction he himself may *not* have preferred to go.

Francis, then, does not yet discern the peace and consensus required for radical change in these areas. Ivereigh and others note that the narrow votes in favour of change at the Synod issued from a fractious debate and fixed positions which remained entrenched, unlike the considerable movement which occurred in the Synod on the Family on the issue of the divorced and remarried. Such a lack

7 Austen Ivereigh, Pope Francis discerns ‘third way’ for the Amazon, *The Tablet*, 12 February, 2020

8 See Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Intellectual Journey*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017, especially chs 2, 3 and 6

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of movement is untypical of a communal discernment which has matured to the point of decision. But neither is he shutting down discussion – rather, the opposite – and his overall position may best be summed up by his injunction earlier in *Beloved Amazon*: ‘let us be fearless; let us not clip the wings of the Holy Spirit’ (n.69). This is confirmed by his recently announced (April 8th, 2020) decision to reconvene the Commission on the female diaconate, with new membership, doubtless in the hope that it may come up with more conclusive findings than the first, stalled Commission.

I want now to examine a recent ecumenical document which may throw more light on the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality, as well as the role of laity in a synodal church.

ARCIC III: WALKING TOGETHER ON THE WAY. LEARNING TO BE THE CHURCH- LOCAL, REGIONAL, UNIVERSAL

The third phase of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III) signed off on its first document in 2017 and published it in 2018 under the title *Walking Together on the Way*. It looks at ‘instruments of communion’ and chiefly synodality at local, regional and universal levels. It does so through the lens of ‘*receptive ecumenism*’ – a methodology and process ‘which involves being prepared both to discern what appears to be overlooked in one’s own tradition and to ask whether such things are better developed in the other tradition’ and to be open to learning through this (n. 18).

Through this process it became clear to the Anglican side, conscious of its own proclivity to insularity, provincialism and fragmentation, that it valued the Catholic achievements of universality and unity, rooted in the papal charism and felt it could learn from the Catholic stress on discernment which its own rather parliamentary procedures sometimes failed to allow. Equally, the Catholic side admired the Anglican respect for diversity and open debate, as well as the ways in which (through weighted majorities and other procedures suited to the kind of topic being discussed), the voice of the faithful was allowed deliberative rather than just consultative force. Similarly it felt, in the light of the learnings received, that the Synod of Bishops could be granted a deliberative role and that the authority of Episcopal Conferences needed fuller articulation. (nn.157-8).

When we drill down a little into these conclusions some important shared insights and nuances emerge. From a common reading of the New Testament and post-apostolic period there is agreement that episcopate, synodality and primacy are enduring and necessary,

gifts of God for the unity and mission of the Church (n.72). It was noted that the past tendency (now changing) in Roman Catholic theology to distinguish between the participation of the ordained in the three-fold office of Jesus Christ (as priest, prophet and king) as primarily ordered internally towards the Christian community, and that of the laity as primarily directed externally towards the world, led to the reality that lay participation in ecclesial governance has remained predominantly at the level of consultation and under the rubric of clerical discretion (nn.83; 94). It seems quite possible within Catholicism to give a more deliberative role to laity 'even while recognising the need to preserve the executive role of bishops within dioceses and parish priests within parishes' (n.94).

Along these same lines it is clear that while a more deliberative role for laity is common at all levels of Anglican life, nonetheless there are safe-guards built in to preserve the unique authority of the bishop – so, for example, at synods there are three 'houses' (of bishops, clergy and laity) and rules governing decision-making varies according to the nature of the resolution presented, with issues of doctrine and worship requiring more stringent levels of agreement in order to be approved – 'A significant change may require voting at two successive synods with significant majorities (two-thirds or three-quarters) and additional diocesan consultations and/or approval between the synods. A house of bishops has particular responsibility as no resolution may be enacted without its agreement. Voting separately by orders is in most cases required to ensure that episcopal oversight is protected' (n.112).

Finally, there is the suggestion that Roman Catholics might learn from Anglicans to live with more modest and provisional truth claims by its authorities and with testing and discernment by the *sensus fidelium* (148).

REFLECTIONS

There are several pertinent reflections on this stock-taking. *First*, with regard to the relationship between primacy and collegiality as newly focussed by the Amazon Synod, John O'Malley notes that while it is clear that in the Catholic Church governance is shared by the pope (the primatial pole) and the collective authority of the bishops, the practical implementation of this sharing 'will by definition always be untidy. Church governance, like the governance of every institution that is not a dictatorship, consists of lines that are sometimes blurred' (81). In this context O'Malley goes on to suggest that the question facing the Catholic Church today is not the theoretical question of who is in charge, but rather what 'are the appropriate instruments for making the collegial

(synodal) tradition of church governance practical and effective' (81).

Since the ultimate purpose is the discernment of God's will (and not some more simple counting of votes, the 'parliamentary procedures' of ARCIC III) then one can understand the reluctance of Francis to simply accept *tout court* the recommendations of a regional synod which were themselves deeply contested and which were also being addressed in other fora. On the other hand perhaps ARCIC III also has it right in recommending a more deliberative role for the Synod of Bishops and a fuller articulation of the authority of Episcopal Conferences. Ladislav Orsy,⁹ for one, had already proposed as much concerning Episcopal Conferences in his revised 2009 reflection on the 1998 *Motu Proprio Apostolos suos* of John-Paul II limiting their authority to *affective* and not effective collegiality. He proposes that '... the Holy See can and should retain ultimate supervisory authority over the conferences but more in the manner of a court of appeal (which is very traditional) than in the way of an ever-present director in various continents' (30). By offering a more deliberative status to the Synod of Bishops and indeed to Episcopal Conferences Francis would be building in positive foundations for a more shared ecclesial governance, coupled with a kind of mutual veto to avoid simple head-counting as a means of settling disputed issues and to preserve the value of discernment.

This leads us to the *second* issue raised by the Amazon Synod, the role of the laity in church teaching and governance. O'Malley again is interesting in noting how, without formal deliberative voice, the laity nonetheless succeeded in different ways in exerting considerable influence on the three major Councils of his study – Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II.¹⁰ Indeed it is worth noting that, somewhat ironically, it was a predominantly lay (French) initiative in the 19th century which led to the issues of papal infallibility and primacy being accorded such prominent treatment in *Pastor Aeternus* of Vatican I. And so if the 'lay voice' can be effectively heard through widespread consultation today then one can see how this would be a great help towards a more reliable discernment, even with bishops and pope still exercising pole position. This would, of course, be practically more realisable if lay people felt that *they* had a voice in the process of selecting bishops.

However in an age which values participation as of right and in which the share of the baptised in the 3-fold office of Jesus Christ (including governance) is more and more acknowledged, it would

9 Ladislav Orsy, *Receiving the Council*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009, 16-34

10 See O'Malley, *op cit*, 126-146

seem sensible to move in the direction that ARCIC III proposes and offer a more *deliberative role* to laity in the Catholic Church, with all the caveats around properly safeguarding the unique role of bishops. This more deliberative role – of both bishops and laity – is foreign to the Ignatian background of Francis which allows for widespread consultation but reserves executive power to the leader (‘superior’), but even in Jesuit circles decisions are increasingly arrived at in a more participative way and, in any case, Francis has by now moved far beyond the comfort zone of his Ignatian background.

Thirdly, I think it is worth re-emphasizing the value of the *sensus fidei fidelorum* in both church teaching and governance, not least as an antidote to the often unconscious clericalism which Francis himself often criticizes and has identified as an obstacle to the creation of a synodal church. It is the ‘sense of the faithful’ in regions like our own which is most sensitive to such neuralgic issues as the role of women in the Church, the unhelpful nature of some church teaching on sexuality, and the harsh treatment of people like Tony Flannery and others by a church process that is scarcely fit for purpose. All these matters amount to a real *credibility* crisis for the Church in ways that Francis himself, coming from a different cultural context, may not fully realise.

This, as Michele Dillon¹¹ among others points out, is precisely where the synodal process, with its focus on on-going open discussion and debate and the listening to all voices, shows its strength. Francis is human like us all and has his own strengths and weaknesses at a personal level. But it is precisely the value of the synodal process that (unlike the model of monarchy which immediately preceded it) it locates the office of pope within a more inclusive process in which the tastes and opinions of one man are not wholly decisive, in which new ideas which are at first rejected may be reintroduced, in which, in short, ‘the cat is out of the bag’, as Dillon pithily summarizes the on-going search for a truth that is not simply found by magisterial fiat or decree. This is now a process which has gained sufficient momentum within the Church to allow us to hope that it can endure *beyond* the time of this reforming papacy.

CONCLUSION

It is most interesting that Francis has chosen the topic of synodality for the next Synod of Bishops meeting in 2022. By that point the

11 Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism*, Oxford University Press, 2018, 163-166: ‘Thus, any lost opportunity, such as the silencing of women’s ordination, is not lost forever, it can be recovered’ (164).

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‘binding synodal process’ of the German Church may well be complete, the Australian Plenary Council will have met, the Synod in Liverpool will have concluded and many similar exercises elsewhere in the Catholic world will have taken place. The bishops will, in other words, have plenty of lived experience to draw on as they reflect on the issues which I have raised here, as well as on other issues which arise.

For the moment it is clear that while we may lack a precise road map, the sense of direction is becoming clearer, as we move towards what Orsy¹² has called ‘better balances without damaging vital forces’. The turmoil of Covid 19 and its social and physical distancing etiquette will, rightly, involve some logistical challenges as ‘we along the road together’. But the deeper sense of direction is clear in this transitional period – *from* a discretionary, consultative voice for both bishops and laity *to* something that is more mandatory and deliberative.

And all this, it bears emphasizing, not for the sake of organizational reform in itself, but so that the *conversion* which God is calling us to as Christians bearing good news for our world may be realised. This conversion, as Francis reflects in his musings on the Coronavirus crisis and what it is teaching us,¹³ means that we must ‘go down into the underground, and pass from the hyper-virtual, fleshless world to the suffering flesh of the poor’. And it is a conversion that must take institutional shape in a new paradigm of church, a synodal church suitable for our ‘change of era’.

12 Orsy, *op cit*, 12

13 Pope Francis in Interview with Austen Ivereigh, *The Tablet*, 11 April, 2020, 6-8 at 7

Different Questions. Faith and science are not mutually exclusive. They are not competitors. The reason is simple. Faith and science answer different questions. It is therefore not surprising that among great scientists you find both believers and non-believers. The inventor of the theory of the Big Bang, Georges Lemaître, was a learned professor and a Catholic priest.

– Nikolas Sintobin, SJ, *Did Jesus really exist?* 2020. (Dublin: Messenger Publications). p. 16.