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Donal Dorr

Synodality and
The Ordination of
Women

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I've just been reading a report in the *National Catholic Reporter* about how the process of synodality fits with the present understanding of authority in the canon law of the Catholic church. It tells us that a panel of six notable theologians and canonists discussed the nature of consultation and decision-making in a synodal church in Rome on 20 May 2022.¹

The canonists and theologians agreed that in Church law there is a distinction between *decision-making* and *decision-taking*. They agreed with the view of Cardinal Coccopalmerio, the retired president of the Vatican office which gives official interpretations of canon law, that *decision-making* is far more than just a matter of the Church authorities *consulting* those who are subject to their authority. He and they insist that in a truly synodal Church those in authority must ensure that the people who will be affected by the decision are fully involved in *making* the decision. This process of *making* the decision together must come before the *taking* of the final decision which is the responsibility of those in authority.

I do not have access to the details of how the canonists explained the difference between *making* a decision and *taking* it. But I venture to outline briefly how I understand the distinction. I think the *making* of the decision is a matter of discernment, both personal and communal. The key point about the *taking* of the decision is the issue of accountability. Somebody must take responsibility for the decision. As they say: 'The buck stops here.'

A REAL LIBERATION

The distinction between *making* a decision and *taking* the decision is a great help for those of us who are determined to commit

1 The consultation took place on the occasion of the presentation of an important new book by Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio. See <https://www.ncronline.org/news/theology/cardinals-theologians-discuss-decision-making-role-laity-church>.

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ourselves fully to implementing the call of Pope Francis to make our Church a truly synodal Church. It means that, before taking any important decision, Church leaders at all levels must engage fully and listen intently to the members of the Church and others, taking seriously their feelings, their concerns and their views, and sharing their own concerns and opinions. Above all, they must not listen selectively and edit out concerns and views of which they do not approve. Only in this way can the voice of the Holy Spirit be truly heard.

For those of us who do not have any official authority role in the Church, it means that we must engage fully in the synodal process, sharing openly our concerns, our insights, and the fruits of our own personal discernment on key issues. We must of course engage in gatherings in which we listen with openness to all the other participants, ready to let go of our own preconceived agendas, seeking to hear and accept the emergent voice of the Holy Spirit. But it also means that before and after these meetings – and indeed all through our everyday lives and work – we are called to engage in personal discernment, seeking to hear the voice of the Spirit.

I find the clear distinction between *making* a decision and *taking* a decision very liberating for myself personally. It means that I can say openly and without hesitation that I am strongly convinced that it is time for the sacrament of ordination to be open to women. In doing so, I am simply making my own small contribution towards the *making* of such an important decision. As a person who does not hold any official authoritative role in our Church, I am not in a position where I can *take* a decision to ordain any woman. But as a Christian I have not only a *right* but also a *duty* to share the fruits of my own discernment, while remaining open to changing my conviction if what emerges from the communal discernment on this topic is a view that differs from my own.

RECENT HISTORY

I think that the terms ‘communal discernment’ or ‘synodality’ were not widely applied to the discussions of the bishops during Vatican II. These debates and discussions were seen rather as an exercise of ‘collegiality’, that is, of the pope and the bishops working together. But there can be no doubt that during the Council there was a considerable amount of synodality in the communal discernment in which the bishops engaged during their behind-the-scenes dialogues with theologians, other scholars (including lay people), and representatives of other Churches and religions.

A quite similar process of communal discernment and even synodality took place during the 1971 Synod of Bishops. Its

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document on 'Justice in the Church' drew heavily on the work of a few key theologians and other scholars, including Barbara Ward Jackson. Regrettably, in the various Synods of Bishops which took place between that time and the coming of Pope Francis, the extent to which the bishops were allowed to discern together with theologians and other scholars was very severely restricted. During those forty years the popes and the Roman Curia exercised an ever-increasing degree of suppression of voices which did not conform to the Roman view on such controversial topics as women's ordination.

This began to change as soon as Pope Francis became pope. And the change of direction has become quite radical with his recent strong urging of the Christian people to become a truly synodal Church. In practice, this means that all Catholics – and especially those who have been pushed to the margins – are invited to exercise a true Christian freedom in seeking together to listen for, and to, the voice of the Spirit. It is against that background that I now express my belief that the present refusal of Church authorities to authorize the ordination of women is doing very serious damage to the Catholic Church and to society as a whole. And conversely, if the Church authorities do permit women to be ordained, this will be a major benefit for the Church and the wider society.

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

The theological debate over many years on this topic of the ordination of women has been very valuable, particularly because it has thrown considerable light on the inadequacy of the arguments that have been put forward against women's ordination. Few of the Church authorities would now rely on the argument that Jesus chose only men to be his first apostles. And they are now far less likely to rely on the argument that only men can represent Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. Furthermore, reliance on the argument that there is an unbroken tradition from the very beginning of not ordaining women has been seriously called in question by reputable scholars.

I am inclined to think that in actual practice perhaps the main reason why Pope Francis and others remain hesitant about even allowing women deacons, is their fear that such a decision would split the Church and cause a serious schism. If this is the case, I have to ask myself, who am I to question the judgment of Francis on the likelihood of such a split. Nevertheless, I venture to suggest that such a split in the Church has *already* occurred. What we have at present in our Church is a relatively small but very vocal, well-funded, and quite influential minority who are opposed to almost everything that Pope Francis stands for.

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We must hope and pray that the Church authorities and the Christian faithful as a whole will respond to the call of Pope Francis to engage fully in communal discernment of the voice of the Spirit through an on-going exercise of synodality. Suppose that as a result, it were to emerge that the Spirit is inviting the Church to allow women to be ordained. And if this led the pope and the great majority of the bishops to permit the ordination of women it is not at all clear that the group who are actively opposing Pope Francis would be greatly increased. And I suspect that the great majority of Catholics would heave a great sigh of relief and would rally around the pope with new fervour and commitment. So the result could be a *greater* degree of effective unity in the Catholic Church. Furthermore, this decision would be a major step in the urgent task of working for unity with other Christian Churches and communities – at least in the Western world, though perhaps not with the Eastern Churches.

I venture to suggest that we can even hope that the distinction between *making* a decision and *taking* a decision may also bring relief to some Church authorities, theologians, and on-the-ground Christians who are worried that the move towards a truly synodal Church could lead to great uncertainty and confusion in the Church. This may apply particularly to bishops who fear that the synodal process would undermine their authority and their responsibility and ability to take important decisions for the good of the Church. We must hope and pray that these bishops would instead find that the process of communal discernment would actually relieve them of much of the burden of decision-making and give them an experience of the freedom of the Spirit.

WILL IT HAPPEN?

It is quite likely that many theologians, after so many years of being closely monitored by Vatican officials, have come to passively conform, in their public statements and writings, to the official Vatican position on controversial issues. In some cases, this conformity has even been the price they have paid for holding on to their teaching positions in Catholic universities and colleges.

My own experience has been that in working with groups both in person and online I have been quite open about expressing my belief that there is no valid reason why women should not be ordained. But in my writings for publication, I have been far more cautious. I have had the feeling that I am ‘skating on thin ice’, aware that some Church authority in Rome or nearer home is monitoring everything that I and other theologians write; and, if we venture to challenge the official Vatican position, the people in

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the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are ready to impose on us the same penalties that they have imposed on quite a lot of theologians during the papacies of Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict.

I know that the silence or caution of so many theologians and priests, including myself, is a form of internalised oppression, caused by the threat of public censure by the Vatican authorities. It has left many Catholics including alienated women feeling unsupported. So I feel that the time has come for me and other theologians and priests to abandon undue caution and to speak our truth publicly about the ordination of women. I hope that many priests and theologians, far more qualified than I, will recognize that the call of Pope Francis for a synodal Church has opened for us a new spiritual freedom—and a duty for us to openly express our views as our contribution towards communal discernment.

On some issues this freedom may go so far as to leave room for respectful disagreement even with the views of Pope Francis himself. In his first great document as pope, Francis said: ‘It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it and to the present needs of evangelization’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 32). A little earlier in that document he said: ‘Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world’ (EG 16). Furthermore, in his dialogue with the leaders of the Conference of Religious Congregations of Women (UISG), the pope showed that he is willing to be challenged and to learn from such challenges.² On 22 May 2022, Bishop Bätzing, the chair of the German Bishops Conference took Francis at his word and challenged him on some key issues.³ I hope and pray that many other committed Christians, including priests and theologians, will offer a similar challenge on the crucial issue of the ordination of women.

2 Cf. Donal Dorr, *The Pope Francis Agenda*, Veritas 2018, p.121.

3 <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251345/german-catholic-bishops-leader-expresses-disappointment-in-pope-francis>