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Brian Grogan

## Synodal Spirituality: Poised Expectancy

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## INTRODUCTION

What goes on in a formal synodal meeting, where important decisions are made, I do not know: but the *Vademecum* Document for the October 2023 Roman Synod offers rich possibilities; many of these are drawn from the Ignatian process of decision-making – not surprising since pope Francis is a Jesuit. Since we are all called to become synodal people, an outline of these possibilities may be helpful, so that we can have a sense of how to go about this major change in our manner of being Christian.

What is offered here reflects what I have learnt over the years in parallel decision-making meetings of religious and lay persons of the Ignatian tradition. Their dynamic is thus based in the history of the Jesuit Order, which emerged from an extended discernment in 1539, the issue being whether or not a very diverse group of men, all committed to the service of the Church, should form a religious order. In turn the dynamic of that discernment originates in the *Spiritual Exercises* which Ignatius of Loyola composed from 1522 onward as the fruit of his personal efforts to find God's will in his life.

In *Making Good Decisions* (Veritas, Dublin, 2015, 209-212) I include the details of the discernment process used by the first Jesuits almost five centuries ago, together with examples of corporate decisions in which I had a facilitating role. One was with a parish whose members wanted, as they put it, 'to let the Holy Spirit take charge' in the forming of a new parish pastoral council. Another was where a congregation was discerning whether or not to set up a community among the poor. A third was with a parish which was divided on the best use of their finances, and a fourth was with a congregation which wished to trim its sails in view of declining numbers.

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## FOCUS

The focus of *Part One* of this current article is on the spirituality underpinning corporate or communal discernment, and within that dynamic the emphasis is on *inner freedom*. *Part Two* provides a tool-kit for situations in which a group wants to find God's will. It may also help a secular group which wants to make its best possible choice: think of an ethically-minded firm which is made aware that it has been acting unjustly and wishes to make amends. What Christian discernment adds to the voice of conscience is the divine viewpoint which is emphasised here. Our ultimate question as Christians must be: 'Which choice pleases God?'

Discerning operates on various levels: synodal preparations began with posters outside churches urging people to come in and have their say: the culmination of the process will be the October 2023 Roman Synod, which, I hope, will use all available strategies to help the participants grow in inner freedom as they address their agenda. In between are the myriad encounters, casual or arranged, out of which our human decisions are made, with more or less reference to God. These could include a neighbourhood, parish, school or local synodal gathering, a Parish Pastoral Council, a protest against some perceived injustice, an ageing parent's effort to do what would be best in making a will, or the call to adapt to a simpler life-style. The list is endless. It takes only two persons to make a mini-synod, as occurred on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35) and Jesus makes clear that he wishes to be included even in small gatherings: 'Where two or three are gathered, I am there among them' (Mt 18:20).

Here I address what might help a formal synod to proceed well, but since we are all called to synodality, you might spend a few moments reflecting on your own decision-making processes to see what you might learn in order to contribute better as the synodal pathway unfolds in the years ahead. The scriptural texts offered can help you to base your efforts on the solid foundation of the Word of God.

## PART ONE: CREATING POISED EXPECTANCY

A welcoming address by the Convenor of a synodal group might include some of the following points, with the convenor eliciting contributions from the assembly, thus mirroring the synodality which is sought for.

- 'We are gathered together to work with God for the good of the Church. But we hope that the outcomes of our labours will also be for the good of the world. Pope Francis believes that through

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synodality we can reveal to secular gatherings how diversity can bring us forward together rather than fragment us, as it so often does.

- Let us begin with a profile of the group: how we see ourselves; how God sees us; how others see us.
- We next note the global and national context of our meeting, and how other groups are addressing the challenges of our time. What is distinctive about us?
- Our initial ideas re the meaning of ‘synod’ will vary widely, but expansions of horizons will occur if we are open. Ours is a learning process: we bring what we can to God and pray that God may teach us and guide our choices. Jesus sums up his life in the sentence: ‘I always do what is pleasing to my Father’ (see Jn 8:29). That is to be our desire too.
- We are a diverse group with conflicting and principled views on many things, including God, Church, theology, world, Kingdom of God, and of course on the issue before us now; but we trust that God will lead us to consensus.
- As C G Jung says: ‘Bidden or unbidden, God is present’. While we can easily lose our focus on God, we will be facilitated to meet God directly. Our central dialogue partner is divine!
- The primary image for a Synod is Trinitarian. The three divine Persons act in harmony in forming and implementing decisions for the good of the world. They will help us to form right relationships with one another, and will attend all our meetings and encounters, because we shape the world they love by the decisions we make now. Their endless request to us is: ‘Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches!’ (Rev 2:11).
- So [perhaps using the Roublev icon] we can sit at their table, listening to them and their plans for the world’s good; listening also to one another, and to the scriptures, the Church, the signs of the times, the poor, the cry of creation, and to our own hearts. Like Mary we are to ponder what we hear and bring forth fruit in patience. By searching together for the truth in love, we become synodal, as God is. Perhaps we will come to see our way forward only ‘in a mirror, dimly’ (1Co 13:12) but that will be enough.

## FACILITATION

The *first* role of the facilitator is to be an enabler of the Spirit: s/he tries to keep God always before the eyes of the participants. Brief inputs, creative liturgies and rituals, ongoing times for reflection will help to develop the poised expectancy of a group intent on finding God. The *second* role is to weld cautious and perhaps divided individuals into a cohesive team by using best social skills

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and conflict management. With large groups it can help to have two facilitators collaborating, while liaising also with the Organising Team.

### SPIRITUALITY

A synod is not a parliament, nor a business meeting, nor does it decide simply by majority vote. God walks with us, makes our steps firm, holds us by the hand (see Ps 37:23-24 etc) and shows us the route we should take (Dt 1:33). The themes that follow – gratitude, joy, prayer, inner freedom, bias, conversion – highlight this action of God, and refocus the group when it gets diverted. The themes offered here can be used singly as short ‘refreshers’ or ‘re-orientations’ especially when group energy is waning and signs of restlessness appear. There are no boring meetings when a group is intent on finding God, but corporate discernment, as it deepens, is not a straight line but a *spiral* with highs and lows; ongoing adjustment is needed for the group to move forward through phases of confusion and discouragement.

### GRATITUDE

It is good to begin with gratitude to God for the good done by the group up to this point: this generates hope and enthusiasm and an initial sense of common purpose. A history line can help: it notes instances of when the group was at its best, and includes the date when each person joined in. The expression of gratitude by each for being a member of the group, despite all its demands, leads to mutual acceptance and fellowship.

How God sees the group is central, and inspires gratitude. ‘I have loved you...’ (Jer 31:3); ‘My plans for you are peace... when you seek me you shall find me...’ (Jer29:11). Promises are the language of love, and God is faithful.

### JOY

Joy is not often mentioned in corporate discernment; but since as St Thomas Aquinas affirms, God is sheer joy, the presence of joy is a sign of the Spirit’s closeness. Joy is emphasised especially by Luke: so in regard to Mary and Elizabeth, the shepherds and the angels, the Prodigal Father, etc. The disciples return to Jerusalem after the Ascension with great joy (see Lk 24:52).

The joy of common purpose should become evident over the days. ‘How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity’ (Ps 133, but avoid the sexist language!). Humour helps.

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However, negative attitudes and feelings need to be acknowledged, at least generically, with sensitive honesty. There may be abiding hurts between members which call for mutual forgiveness. 'Be reconciled first...' (Mt 5:23-24). A simple ritual of reconciliation can bring the joyful awareness that each is a beloved sinner, inadequate but forgiven and invited to table fellowship with Jesus and the others present: this ritual might take the form of an imaginative contemplation of Lk 15:1-2.

## PRAYER

There is always more to be said at meetings, but synodal spirituality goes the further step by asking: 'What is *GOD* trying to get across to us?' This requires that personal prayer, silence and reflection be built into the daily schedule. It helps if early on the group agrees on the balance between discussion, private reflection, prayer and liturgy.

Prayer is an I-Thou encounter, a face to face affair, an attentive listening for 'the sound of sheer silence' (1Kg 19:12). We need to become comfortable in sitting at the table of the Trinity or Jesus' table for extended periods. There our conversion goes on silently, so that as the three divine Persons make their wise and loving choices – as in deciding on the Incarnation, we too may make wise and loving choices on the issues at hand: 'the love that shapes our choices must descend from above' (see Ignatius: *Spiritual Exercises* 184).

We can ask: 'What is the most beautiful thing we can do?' In creating the tabernacle in the desert, only the best would do! (See Ex 25-28).

A contemplative quality begins to emerge as the group, in W Burghardt's phrase, takes 'a long loving look at the real'. Having discussed the topic from every angle we come to waiting mode. We wait with Elijah (1 Kg 19:11-13). 'I have waited for the Lord' (Psalm 40).

We pray for the Spirit's inspiration. *Veni, sancte Spiritus!* 'The Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words' (Rm 8:26), but we are to become ever more alert to the Spirit's promptings, and respond with 'Thy will be done!'

We allow God to be the God of Surprises. 'My thoughts are not yours...' (Is 55:8-10); 'I am doing a new thing'... (Is 43:19). We learn to think outside the box, as we grapple with divine imagination. 'How inscrutable are God's ways!' (Rm 11:33).

Inner confusion may come to light. 'I want this, but also its opposite!' Discernment may be needed to discover whether the Spirit of God or the spirit of desolation is leading us

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We ask for discerning hearts as the young Solomon did (1Kg 3:9ff). As persons truly in love we want to be led by the desires of the beloved, who is divine. ‘The Lord was not in the wind or the earthquake but in the sound of sheer silence’ (see 1 Kg 19:12). In the silence of the heart God will be found: ‘Shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and who will reward you’ (Mt 6:6). To do this is an act of pure faith, over-riding human willpower and determination.

Intercession for the group is a primary task of the facilitator(s): outsiders can also be engaged for this mode of prayer. As W Wink observes: ‘History belongs to the intercessors ... It is God’s power, not ours, that answers to the world’s needs’.

### INNER FREEDOM

It is around inner freedom that synodality stands or falls, and so it requires more explicit attention than is often given to it. There will be a spectrum of freedom in the group: each can ask: ‘How free am I?’ The group can then be asked corporately: ‘When were you at your freest?’ It is good to celebrate such events: some will have been noted in the history line above.

Now ask: ‘What does inner freedom feel like for you? Do you try to live by the Spirit?’ (see Gal 5:16) ‘The wind blows where it chooses ... So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit’ (Jn 3:8). But since the wind has no fixed position, let’s imagine each member of the group becoming as free as the wind! What feeling does that image generate?

We need to search our hearts for *blocks* to inner freedom:

- ‘What stifles my/our freedom to do what God wants? What elephants lurk in my/our kitchen?’ ‘Does the Spirit find me hard going?’
- Acknowledge that ‘the heart is devious above all else: it is perverse – who can understand it?’ (Jer 17:9). ‘Out of the heart come evil intentions ...’ (Mt 15:18-19). Am I immune from this?
- ‘Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man.’
- Individual, group and general bias are operative in every group: they emerge as blind spots, non-negotiables, defences, filters against vulnerability, unwanted and ignored insights, the infection caused by the prevailing secular and religious culture. The list is endless. Where am I?

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- What is the capacity of the group for self-displacement? Can we go beyond personal preferences and private agendas?
- Are decisions often made from fear – of loss of control, for example, rather than from divine prompting? What of K Rahner's theology of risk?
- Misuse of power: ruling by threat, by inequality; by domination. Hungry sheep are not fed (see Ez 33; Jn 21). Does fear of making mistakes prevent us from choosing the good? 'To the extent that the Churches attempted to dominate and control, they undermined the Christian faith'.
- Structural Clericalism: Unless this is demolished there cannot be full synodality.
- Where in the Church are the important decisions made? 'Nothing about us without us' – does this level of inclusion operate? Servant leadership? How deeply do we believe that the Spirit is working within the People of God and wants to be heard? Who controls the process of discernment: God, the Spirit, the group – or myself?

## CONVERSIONS OF HEART

A self-correcting process of learning develops as the group works along: dogmatic positions are abandoned, and this brings a softening of hearts. The group can share these experiences of grace at work, whether they be Damascus-style or in more subtle 'Aha!' moments.

*Conversion to Others:* Respect and openness towards the other participants grows. The command to love one another deepens: 'Love one another as I have loved you' (Jn 15:12).

*Conversion to the Father:* God becomes the important One. Trust in God emerges: 'I know the plans' (Jer 29:11); 'I have loved you ...' (Jer 31:3); 'Do not fear: I will help you' (Is 41:14); 'What are human beings ...?' (Ps 8:4); 'My thoughts are higher ...' (Is 55:8-10).

*Conversion to the Son:* 'Do you love me?' (Jn 21:15-17). Openness to kenosis if decisions entail suffering? (see Ph 2:5-11). 'Do as I Have done to you' (Jn 13:15). 'I came, not to be served, but to serve' (Mk 10:45).

*Conversion to the Spirit:* What is the Spirit saying to the churches and to the group? (see Rv 2:29 etc); 'No Holy Spirit, no Synod!' (Pope Francis). Could the Spirit wish to speak through *you*?

As these conversions inch forward, inner growth and a deeper sense of community occur, even if no great decisions are made. A communal discernment is like a retreat, in that the central intention is to meet God.



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### PART TWO: THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

#### PRELIMINARIES

*Group Formation:* If choice is allowed, choose only those who can imagine alternatives to the *status quo*: discernment means openness to change if God so desires. Balanced representation and inclusion.

*Gelling:* the group shifts from individual to communal with the help of ice-breakers, social events, informal dress-code, seating arrangements etc..

*Location and duration* of the gathering must allow for hearing difficulties and stamina.

*Topic(s) for discernment:* Issues must be clear and unambiguous so far as possible: this requires preliminary work, assembling of data etc.

*Guidelines for engagement:* Members should speak from conviction and experience, and contribute tentatively, not dogmatically. Each must try to put a good interpretation on what others say, and hope for the same in return.

*In-depth listening:* Brief listening exercises help. Cardiac listening shows respect. ‘The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing’ (Pascal). Not listening to others means not listening to God. Only through listening attitudes does the assembly mellow as a safe and creative forum, in which members humbly share what seems to be coming from the good Spirit. Oratory, persuasion, negative silences and threats have no place.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

*Commitment:* Agree on full participation – this means parking private agendas, business and golf: empty the diary!

*Consensus:* Agree on what constitutes consensus and whether decisions have to be ratified by a higher authority.

#### PRESENTATION OF THE ISSUE FOR DISCERNMENT

All relevant data must be to hand: nothing hidden, no undisclosed agenda. Questions can be raised for clarification.

#### DISCUSSION AND PRAYER

- Initial airing of views. ‘Let your words give grace’ (Ep 4:29) – *Parrhesia* – courageous speech.
- Who will speak for those affected but not represented? ‘The

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Lord hears the cry of the poor' (Ps 34). But who else in the group does? What effect will the proposals have on the poor and on the earth?

- Private prayer follows on the initial airing of the topic.
- Next, in small groups the fruits of this prayer are shared, ideally from the heart rather than from the head. (See *Vademecum* Appendix B 8 on Spiritual Conversation). Round *One* asks: What came to each in personal prayer. Round *Two* asks: what struck each member in the contributions of the others. No interventions; instead, silent pauses between speakers. This may be called 'spiritual conversation': the emphasis is on what emerges from one's dialogue with God, not from one's homespun thoughts and convictions. Silent pauses gradually become richer.
- Small group summaries are presented to the plenary group.
- Further silent reflection.
- Pro & Con: Moving beyond acknowledged personal preferences, all participants combine to collate the arguments 'FOR' and then 'AGAINST' the proposal. This is a liberating exercise which helps to bond the group and develop unity of purpose in the search for God's will.
- Consolation: The group is asked to search for personal experience of some of the gifts of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Gal 5:22). Consolation brings conviction, energy, freedom of spirit, a sense that the decision is consonant with gospel values. Comments are made such as the following: 'I was against this at the start, but now I feel we are being truly authentic: this seems the wisest and most loving choice'. 'I am willing to go this way, even if it brings suffering'.

Graced Conflict: Conflict is to be expected. See Jesus in conflict with Pharisees, disciples, etc. '... Not peace but the sword' (Mt 10:34-36).

The following nugget of wisdom was forged in the conflicts of Reformation times, and its distinctions can carry a group a long way: In necessary matters, unity; in doubtful/disputed matters, freedom; in all matters, charity. (*In necessariis unitas; in dubiis libertas; in omnibus caritas*).

## EMERGENCE OF THE DECISION

*The Uncertainty Principle*: Members are asked to maintain openness to the movements of the Spirit until the last moment. 'Don't worry what to say' (Mt 10:19).

Secret voting, to preserve inner freedom.

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*Consensus:* Reminder of agreement on what constitutes consensus. Consensus is not certitude: the decision is an act of trust that God wants to lead the group in one direction rather than another.

*Unanimity?* Recognition of the minority's difficulties may allow an agreed modification of the decision to be made: thus unanimity emerges.

*Celebration:* The group can say, 'We have met God!' 'It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Ac 15:28). Alleluia!

*Confirmation* by higher authority may be required.

*Implementation:* Who, what, how, and when.

Note: A final session to harvest the fruits of the experience will reveal growth in the sense of community and deepening respect for the others. The sense of growth in relationship with God also emerges: 'We are in tune, at least for now, with the divine ordering of the world. Our self-profile is enriched: we *are* as of now a synodal Church!'

**Institution and Charism.** Underlying the widespread friction of the post-Vatican II years was the challenge to combine fidelity to the deposit of revelation with respect for change and development. Herein lies the tension between institution and charism. If that tension is to be life giving, then respect for tradition must be combined with openness to new experiences. Leadership must interpret well the calls of God as proposed by prophetic voices. The impetus to change comes from the Holy Spirit, who is working constantly to renew the face of the earth and gives to particular persons gifts or charisms, which are to be integrated into the life of the Church for its continued growth. Diversity must not bring division, and uniformity must not quench the Spirit.

– BRIAN GROGAN, S.J., *Pedro Arrupe: A Heart Larger than the World*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2022) p. 89.