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## Synodality, the *sensus fidei*, and doctrine

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As synodality gains traction within the Catholic Church, globally and in Ireland, we may anticipate tensions and questions around its connection with doctrine, in particular concerning contested, so-called 'hot button' issues. With regard to the latter, it is clear that several teachings to do with gender (for example, the ordination of women) and sex (for example, *Humanae Vitae* and contraception) have not been 'received' by the faithful, while others (for example on homosexuality and *in vitro* fertilization) are seemingly headed in the same direction. It can be said, then, that in general – while *Amoris Laetitia* stands out as a welcome exception in its pastoral tone – ecclesial discourse on sexuality and gender is unpersuasive. Does synodality offer an opportunity to revisit this situation and, in particular, to allow a closer relationship between the doctrinal and pastoral?

I have already indicated in a previous article here why this may not be so straight forward and yet still be possible.<sup>1</sup> Given the importance of the topic I want to offer some further reflections in the hope of providing some clarity on what is possible.

## REPRISE OF MAIN ARGUMENT

Let me begin with a reprise of the argument in my January 2022 article. For Pope Francis – as his classic formulation of synodality in his 50th Anniversary Address of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17, October, 2015) makes clear – the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God (*fideliium*) is at

1 O'Hanlon, 'Bishop, can Church teaching change'? – doctrinal change and the synodal pathway, *The Furrow*, 73, January 2022, 3-9. See also O'Hanlon, 'The Sense of Faith' and Some Contested Issues, in Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy and Mary McDaid, editors, *The Synodal Pathway, When Rhetoric Meets Reality*, Dublin: Columba, 2022, 101-111

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the heart of synodality. This *sensus fidei fidelium* was the subject of a study (SF) by the International Theological Commission published in 2014 (ITC). Here the authors make it clear that, while biblically based and well rooted in the patristic and scholastic tradition, the ‘sense of faith of the faithful’ came into its own as a theological trope with the rise of historical consciousness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Defined as a kind of spontaneous spiritual instinct or intuition of what is true, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, the Spirit who will lead us into ‘all the truth’ (Jn. 16: 13), allowing us to penetrate faith more fully ‘with right judgement’ and apply it ‘more fully in daily life’ (SF, 44). It is not, in the first instance, a reflective, conceptual expression. It is associated in particular with the name of John Henry Newman, and with the theme of doctrinal development. Newman could say of tradition that it ‘... manifests itself variously at various times: sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors, sometimes by the people, sometimes by liturgies, rites, ceremonies, and customs, by events, *disputes*, movements, and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history’ (SF, 39-my emphasis). He taught that we could discern genuine tradition through the ‘*pastorum et fidelium conspiratio*’ (the consensus of pastors and faithful).

Where there is not this consensus, where there is disharmony between a teaching or practice and the authentic Christian faith by which they live, individual believers ‘... react as a music lover does to false notes in the performance of a piece of music’ and ‘... may deny assent even to the teaching of legitimate pastors if they do not recognize in that teaching the voice of Christ, the Good Shepherd’ (SF, 62-3). While great patience is needed to discern this ‘sense of the faith’ for the whole church, it is important that the magisterium in particular takes the means to listen adequately to what is being expressed and try different ways to consult the faithful (synods are explicitly mentioned- SF, 74-77; 120-125). In cases ‘where the reception of magisterial teaching by the faithful is met with difficulty and resistance’ the magisterium should reflect on the teaching ‘that has been given and consider whether it needs clarification or reformulation’ (SF, 80). Later, the authors note that ‘...Problems arise when the majority of the faithful remain indifferent to doctrinal or moral decisions taken by the magisterium or when they positively reject them. This lack of reception may indicate a weakness or lack of faith on the part of the people of God, caused by an insufficiently critical embrace of contemporary culture. *But in some cases it may indicate that certain decisions have been taken by those in authority without due consideration of the experience and the sensus fidei of the faithful, or without*

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*sufficient consultation of the faithful by the magisterium*' (SF, 123-my emphasis).

I note here that while 'clarification' (SF, 80) may simply refer to a more idiomatic or culturally appropriate and compassionate translation of teaching (and so correspond to the pledge of the Irish Bishops, after their consultation for the Synod on the Family revealed widespread resistance to teaching on sexuality and gender among the Irish faithful, to communicate the same teaching better), the term 'reformulation' is open to a stronger interpretation. Indeed this latter meaning is suggested when, going on to examine the role of theologians and the *sensus fidelium*, the study goes on to stress the role of theology in helping the faithful to know with greater clarity and precision the authentic meaning of Scripture, the proper contents of Tradition, and '...in which areas a *revision of previous positions* is needed' (SF, 84 -my emphasis). The study, incidentally, makes it clear that all this pertains not just to matters of faith but also to the development of moral teaching (SF, 73).

Given this mainline presentation of orthodox church teaching on synodality, the 'sense of faith of the faithful' and doctrinal development, and given that we now have widespread indifference and also resistance to several areas of teaching on sexuality and gender, it seems clear that this lack of reception is problematic, not least because it can manifest itself for some as an obstacle to mission. How do we go about addressing it? Epistemologically, from what I have outlined above, and indeed historically (from the many examples given in SF and in my previous article, including issues like slavery, the headship of the male in marriage, access to communion for the divorced and remarried, and indeed, in Scripture itself, the ruling of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 about the Gentiles) it seems clear that synodality, with its focus on the 'sense of faith of the faithful', may lead directly or indirectly to doctrinal change. Furthermore it is clear that the debate leading to this change may arise out of disputes, and that the change in question may not easily be explained in terms of linear development, but may well have aspects of correction or revision. So, in principle, it seems to me that it is mistaken to categorically rule out any connection between synodality and doctrinal change.

However, not everything that is permissible ought to be pursued. This leads us to the question of practical judgement and wisdom in human affairs: are we not at risk of conflict and disunity if we dare to tackle issues which are so divisive?

### WHEN IS IT RIGHT TO CONFRONT CONTESTED ISSUES DIRECTLY?

The two-session Synod on the Family offers us two interesting and contrasting examples of the issue at hand. *First*, in an earlier draft

on homosexuality, it is reported that there was a significant change in tone and content from the traditional stance, as the authors seemed intent on listening carefully to the ‘sense of the faith’ in some parts of the world, and following the compassionate lead of Pope Francis. In the event there was a significant negative reaction to this draft from bishops in other parts of the world, so that the final text of the Synod offered little that was new. A practical, prudential judgement had been made – this topic was not yet ripe for the kind of discernment that would involve significant change and yet preserve ecclesial unity.

*Secondly*, by way of contrast, on the topic of the access to Eucharist of the divorced and remarried, there was sufficient movement to allow the Pope to judge that (in his famous footnote 351 in *Amoris Laetitia*) in certain circumstances, carefully discerned, Eucharistic participation may be appropriate. I note that this was a hotly contested issue both before and during the Synod, not least among German-speaking bishops who disagreed vehemently, in private and in public, about what should be done. In the event it seems to have been a theological conversation among these bishops (who included the likes of Cardinals Kasper, Muller and Schonborn), recalling the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, which resulted in their breakthrough to agreement, which was then signalled to the rest of the Assembly.

Reflecting on these two *contrasting* examples I think we can learn a great deal. While it is always correct to speak openly ‘in the Lord’ (*parrhesia*), it still may be premature in some cases to arrive at a conclusive judgement on certain contested issues. After all, the issue around the Gentiles had been brewing for a long time before it came to a head at the Council of Jerusalem: problems take time to mature sufficiently for resolution. However, as Irish-American sociologist of religion Michele Dillon has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> once one has opted for a synodal model of church with open dialogue at its core, then ‘... the cat is out of the bag’, the dialogue continues, and ‘any lost opportunities, such as the silencing of women’s ordination, is not lost forever; it can be recovered’.

#### HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?

The ‘sense of faith of the faithful’ is pointing to a feeling that there is something fundamentally awry with the Church’s current ‘take’ on sexuality and gender. On sexuality, one way of putting this theologically is described by Lawler and Salzman: ‘... The majority of Catholic ethicists are now agreed that decisions

2 Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism, Relevance and Renewal*, Oxford University Press, 2018, 164

of morality or immorality in sexual ethics should be based on *interpersonal relationship* and circumstances, not on *physical acts* like masturbation, kissing, premarital, marital, and extra-marital sexual intercourse, both heterosexual and homosexual'.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly while there are streams of feminist discourse (mainly emanating from Continental Europe) which are quite comfortable with the notion of male and female equality within diversity – and thus open to some version of a complementarity theory- Mary Ann Hinsdale, in company with many others, criticizes the dominant official Catholic version of this which, while allowing women leadership roles in secular life, posits their 'receptive' role within a theology of complementarity as rendering them unsuitable for the leadership required in ordained ministry.<sup>4</sup> And it is surely ironic that in this debate around the ordination of women the objections to women being understood as '*in persona Christi*' are maintained in the face of growing feminist study of the Eucharistic symbolism of the female body – God nourishes us through the body of his Son just as a mother feeds her child, aptly illustrating the 'Take and eat. This is my body ... This is my blood ... Given up for you' of Matthew 26, 26.<sup>5</sup> There are some – including not a few feminists- who maintain that what is required is a reformed clergy and not women priests – but why make this an 'either/or' choice, why not embrace the more Catholic 'both/and'. After all, unless there is very good reason, what feisty 12 year old girl in today's world is going to find attractive an institution that forbids women to occupy positions of ordained leadership?

The reliance of the magisterium on one strand of theological thinking on matters sexual and gender, in the midst of a rich pluralism and a majority of opinion which differs from this particular strand, is problematic, not least because it clashes with the 'sense of faith of the faithful'. It does suggest – as is happening in the matter of the female diaconate- that one approach for an often beleaguered magisterium – at both local and universal levels- is to commission a theological study (perhaps, at the universal level, by

- 3 Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, Pope Francis, Civil Unions, and Same-Sex Marriage: Theological Reflections, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 87, February 2022, 3-21 at 18. See a somewhat similar shift being advocated by Julio Martinez (from a deductive, universal to an inductive, historically conscious methodology in sexual and bio-medical ethics) in Suzanne Mulligan, Receiving *Amoris Laetitia*: Learning and Listening as a Global Church, *The Furrow*, 73, July/August, 2022, 387-394 at 389-390
- 4 Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM, A Feminist Reflection on Postconciliar Catholic Ecclesiology, in Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hannenber, editors, *A Church with Open Doors, Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015, 112-137
- 5 Maria Clara Luccchetti Bingemer, *Transforming the Church and Society from a Feminist Perspective*, Barcelona: Christianisme I Justícia, 2020, 21-24

the ITC) to examine the other possibilities opened up by the rich pluralism of theological thinking that is available. This move can only be authentic, however, if it is seen as a step towards a fresh discernment, and not as a tactic of avoidance and delay.

#### A NOTE ON DISCERNMENT

The examples above, in particular the one involving the German bishops, raises some interesting points around our current understanding of discernment. First, I think we are correct to focus just now in our synodal process on discernment as spiritual conversation. This allows us to be attentive to what others are saying and on what the Holy Spirit is saying, cultivating that interior freedom which contrasts with a more common spirit of debate and discussion which harbours a bias towards insisting that ‘I win’, that my argument prevails.

*However*, sometimes this is interpreted in an anti-intellectual way as meaning that we must leave aside our own deepest thoughts and convictions, that all debate and dispute, and especially all advocacy, is to be avoided, so that, in the much quoted phrase, we avoid a ‘parliamentary way’ of proceeding. Remember, Francis also said that what went on at the Amazon Synod on hot-button issues was like a ‘rich and necessary parliament’, that Thomas Aquinas did theology through the method of *Disputatio* and *Quaestio*: we need the *intellectual search for truth* as part of the discernment process, involving as it will conflict and practices of resistance and protest.

And so, as we go, we need to look out for how to integrate various elements: Gaillardetz speaks of Councils as involving debate, discussion, gossip, lobbying, saints and sinners, hopes and fears, optimists and pessimists – and all of this is part of discernment! Brian Grogan coined the phrase ‘noisy discernment’: yes, we need all the techniques of ‘spiritual conversation’, respectful listening, but we also need fora where we can debate with vigour and rigour, and not become too po- faced and pious around what we are about. This more incarnational mode of discernment was practised at Vatican II by meetings of the bishops with theologians at evening times or times of the year when the Council was in recess: we can do something similar in Ireland and globally this time around – discernment must include that search for truth in discussion and debate, as indeed the German speaking bishops showed at the Synod on the Family when their theological conflicts and debates yielded to a shared discernment which was, as I noted above, instrumental in providing the papal solution to the issue of the divorced and remarried. So, there are many phases to discernment

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and sometimes they become intertwined. Our current focus on the neglected skill of ‘spiritual conversation’ may blind us to the need for well-researched facts, arguments, even disputes, as we prepare ourselves for the ‘felt knowledge’ that is characteristic of the Spirit’s gift in discernment.

### A CAPITULATION TO THE FASHION OF THE DAY?

On the contested issues that I have mentioned one sometimes hears them being dismissed as ‘middle-class concerns of liberals in the First World’, part of N. America’s ‘culture wars’ which are better avoided. Besides, other Christian churches which have addressed such issues, it is said, have not proved notably more attractive to adherents.

Yes, we must resist a too facile compliance with and assimilation to the spirit of the age – not least in socio-economic matters! And our cultural discernment will be aware of this and seek to focus on what is true, and on how much truth matters to so many people caught up on the wrong side of this debate in their intimate lives – be they rich, poor or in-between. However, if it is possible to change and be faithful to our gospel mandate, it is difficult to deny that for so many ‘ordinary’ people the Church would then appear more attractive and less as a ‘culturally irrelevant minority’. This means a facilitation of mission, always a primary concern for a Church which is convinced that it bears good news to the nations, is called to be a ‘light for the world’.

It is of course a significant and very welcome step forward for someone like Pope Francis to come out with an attitude of ‘who am I to judge’: this has had enormous positive effects on various minority groups and individuals within them, it can be transformative. But compassion in the longer term, while always necessary and always preferable to judgementalism, is *not* sufficient: are we really saying that while we want to be compassionate towards people who practise ‘artificial’ birth control, are gay, experience a call to priesthood but can’t follow up because they are female, that, nonetheless, they are still ‘wrong’? This is where the pastoral and the doctrinal collide: as they did at the Council of Jerusalem, which did not shirk making a decision.

### CONFLICT

Pope Francis has been clear that conflict is not to be avoided.<sup>6</sup> It has to be confronted, endured, with tensions held open (but not suppressed) until some kind of insight comes. This insight is often

6 Pope Francis/Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020, 74-94



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not a simple resolution of the matter in question, an ‘either/or’ answer, but may come as a surprise, an ‘overflow’, a signature of God’s working in our lives and in our world. But it may also come as a more mundane fruit of years of debate and discussion, leading to a subtle change in society and ecclesial sensibility – see the issue around the headship of the male in marriage- like the gentle and timely falling of an apple from the tree.

### CONCLUSION

I have been offering some reflections on the connection between synodality, the ‘sense of faith’ and doctrine. At a time when secularization bites deeply, when the poor and excluded remain on the peripheries, when immigrants are often unwelcome, when war rages, when our earth groans, when victim and survivors of clerical and institutional abuse continue to suffer, it may seem that the ‘hot button’ issues of sexuality and gender are trivial by comparison. However, I have argued that they too are part of our ‘signs of the times’, they matter deeply to the persons concerned, and that as our church transforms to this new ‘social imaginary’ of synodality, the systematic inclusion of the ‘sense of faith of the faithful’ in our search for truth and life-giving teaching offers a wonderful opportunity which, despite the risks involved, we need to take. We need to do so not least because by avoiding these issues we alienate those who would otherwise engage with us on the more important questions just mentioned, and we further the image of a church as institution which lacks credibility.

**Grace.** At every moment of the Church’s history, therefore, decisions and choices within the ecclesial community affect, for good or ill, the church’s health. The thriving of the church’s communal life and the community’s faithfulness to its mission both depend on responses to grace rather than evolution.

– RICHARD LENNAN, *Tilling the Church: Theology for an Unfinished Agenda*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2022) xvii.