



*The* FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Looking Back and  
Going Forward

January 2023

# Looking Back and Going Forward

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The church worldwide has been engaged with the process of synodality over the past few years. It is a major moment in the life of the Church. ‘Journeying together’ to discern the call of the Gospel for today is a joyful, challenging, exciting and uncertain journey. Maybe, even a little daunting. The Church has embarked on this journey with hope and with the conviction that it is a necessary journey if the Church is to be renewed and strengthened in its mission to proclaim and live the ‘good news’. Like all major moments in life it raises very important questions. How do we discern together? What is the methodology that best engages with the experiences of men and women of faith in different contexts and circumstances? What is the ‘*sensus fidei*’ and how can its richness be mined for the good of the whole faith family?

The level of engagement with and enthusiasm for the process has varied from community to community. We have witnessed communities united in prayerful reflection and discussion. We have witnessed too occasions of disagreement amongst church leaders as to who should be included in the process of listening. We have also witnessed discussion on whether some moral and pastoral issues are up for discussion. Red line issues have been clearly identified in the vast volume of commentary generated in the popular press and in religious and theological journals.<sup>1</sup> These include, but are not limited to, the ordination of women to the priesthood, the full acceptance of LGBTQ+ relationships and families, the admission of those in second unions to the Eucharist. All this has resulted in real polarization in some faith communities and frosty relationships between some church leaders, including Bishops.

Some have argued that Catholic teaching on the issues named is clear, settled and not open for revision or development. Others, have taken a different approach. This approach values human experience as a font of moral wisdom and proposes that some

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the September 2022 issue of *The Furrow* [Synodality in a Theological Key] for a range of articles and perspectives on the synodal journey.

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teachings of the church are open to further development and maturing. The history of the Church would support this claim. Teaching on usury, slavery, the nature of marriage, the role of women, the death penalty and, more recently, the adequacy of the just war theory [JWT] have all undergone dramatic development over the centuries. One can argue, credibly I think, that the full implications of the Gospel are only grasped over time and in light of human experience. The dignity of the human person, for example, has always been affirmed in the Christian family but the implications of that truth is only being fully appreciated now. Today we have a greater appreciation of the intrinsic dignity of each person, the importance of human freedom and the sacredness of conscience, than we had in earlier centuries.

## VATICAN II AND TODAY

Vatican II too can be described as a major moment in the life of the Church.<sup>2</sup> Indeed it has been described as ‘the most significant event in the history of Catholicism since the Protestant Reformation.’<sup>3</sup> The Council debates and documents ushered in significant changes that inspired and sustained renewal in the life of the Church. The developments that come most readily to mind are a new appreciation of the centrality of the Scriptures, a renewed liturgy and a lively sense of the Church as ‘the people of God’. The major moment that was Vatican II generated tensions and disagreements not unlike those we are witnessing now with regard to synodality. These tensions were, of course, evident in the theological discussions prior to the Council as well as during the Council. Some of the [bad] fruits of the clash of world views were; polarization, the exclusion of some voices and experiences, the silencing of theologians and efforts to shut down debate in the name of fidelity to the past. The debates about development, change, continuity and discontinuity that we are witnessing today were very evident during the Second Vatican Council. There is nothing new under the sun! What can we learn from this *past* experience that will enable us to more fruitfully engage with the synodal path *today*?

2 For a thorough and readable account of Vatican II see John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008. See also Gerald O’Collins, *The Second Vatican Council: Message and Meaning*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014 and Richard R. Gaillardetz, *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

3 Richard R. Gaillardetz, *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*, , UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020, xv.

Then, as now, some saw change as a threat to the living tradition of the Church – a rupture with the past. Others, viewed change in church teaching in terms of development or a fuller grasp of the truth, while maintaining the unity and continuity of the church in its living of the Good News of Jesus Christ. These debates were particularly lively during the writing and eventual approval of the Council documents on the liturgy and religious freedom. These debates are instructive, I think, as we grapple with the tensions and disagreements that have accompanied the shared faith and commitment that lies at the heart of the synodal journey. Is change possible in some areas of Church moral and pastoral teaching? Can such change be welcomed and celebrated while still maintaining unity and continuity with our two thousand year old living faith?

The theological discussion surrounding the issue of the nature and scope of religious freedom preceded the Council by two decades. Contributors like Cardinal Ottaviani were opposed to a right to religious freedom on several grounds. He maintained that everyone had an obligation [including the State] to promote truth and to prohibit or, if that was not possible without disturbing the peace of society, to limit error. This was known as the ‘rights of truth’ approach [error has no rights]. This framework or canvas lend itself to the very obvious question; What is truth? The answer – the Catholic Church and its teachings. Looking at the question through this lens had very obvious implications for the relationship between Church and State. Furthermore, Cardinal Ottaviani and others, believed that the denial of religious freedom as a human right was a consistent and non-negotiable aspect of church teaching. It was part ‘of the patrimony’ of the church as evidenced in the condemnation of religious freedom in the Syllabus of Errors [Pius IX] of 1864.<sup>4</sup> There the following propositions were *condemned*;

#15. Every person is free to embrace and to profess the religion he/she has judged by the light of reason to be true.

#77. In our day, it is no longer advisable that the Catholic religion should be considered the only religion of the state, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship.

If the Church changed its mind on this issue, it was argued, then it could change its mind on anything and everything. Cardinal Ottaviani’s episcopal motto ‘semper idem’ well summed up this approach.

Those who promoted religious freedom as a human right and the implications of this right for religious freedom in society and for the relationship between church and state did not deny

4 See for example Cardinal Ottaviani, ‘Church and State: Some present problems in light of the teaching of Pius XI’, *American Ecclesiastical Review* 128 [1953]: 321-334.

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the church's claim to be the true church. Nor did they deny the duty and right of all to seek and serve God. Rather, they argued that the right and duty to find religious truth is a fundamental demand of human dignity. The search for truth must however be carried out in a manner that accords with human dignity i.e. in freedom. People cannot be coerced into truth. It must be freely embraced. Furthermore, they highlighted that the tradition, from the earliest of times, understood that the act of faith is always a free response to God's invitation. Another dimension of their approach was to propose that the modern state differs fundamentally from the Church in terms of its origin, purpose and competence. The Church today asks nothing from the state other than the freedom to proclaim its message and mission.

One of the principal architects of the theological conversation prior to Vatican II was the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray<sup>5</sup>. His scholarly reflections of religious freedom and on the relationship between Church and State appeared over many years in *Theological Studies* and elsewhere. His critique of the existing corpus of Church teaching on these issues generated passionate theological debate and resulted in him being silenced by his Jesuit superiors at the behest of the Holy Office. Like most of the scholars whose works contributed to the rich theological and pastoral documents of Vatican II, Murray returned to the Scriptural and Patristic sources to expose the nature and importance of freedom in the search for and embracing of religious truth. He furthermore examined in detail the magisterial documents dealing with religious freedom and the church-state relationship. Here the insights of his fellow Jesuit Bernard Lonergan on historical consciousness were creatively engaged.

As a result of the work of Murray and others before the Council the Church's stance on religious freedom as outlined in *Dignitatis Humanae*<sup>6</sup> differs dramatically from the stance proclaimed in earlier church documents. It boldly proclaims that religious freedom is a fundamental right that flows from the very dignity of the human person. And that this can be established through reason and Revelation;

'The Council further declares that the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself.'<sup>7</sup>

5 For a concise account of John Courtney Murray's theological journey see; Barry Hudock, *Struggle, Condemnation, Vindication: John Courtney Murray's Journey towards Vatican II*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015.

6 For an informative look at the 5 schemas [drafts] of the document see David L. Schindler & Nicholas J Healy, *Freedom, Truth and Human Dignity: The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom*, Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015.

7 Declaration on Religious Freedom, #2.

## LOOKING BACK AND GOING FORWARD

Since Vatican II the Church's stance on religious freedom has become even richer and deeper. It is now proclaimed as the most important of rights since it facilitates our search for and relationship with God.

So change/development can and does happen! We can grow in our appreciation of the demands of the Gospel. We can move from a partial understanding of the implications of the Gospel and discover a 'depth dimension' that opens up new horizons. This has been achieved with regard to the dignity of the human person – though it is still a journey to be completed. An essential dimension in achieving this growth in understanding was listening to the voices and experiences of people regarding their understanding of human dignity and its implications for religious freedom.

### SYNODALITY

Can similar progress be achieved with regard to some of the disputed teachings of the Church – particularly in the area of human relationships and human sexuality – which have featured prominently in many of the synodal submissions at local and national level?

Do we need a paradigm shift in terms of understanding the nature and richness of human relationships whether heterosexual or LGBTQ+? The same kind of paradigm shift evident in the move from a 'rights of truth' approach to a 'rights of the person' approach? This must include an engagement with the *lived experience* of couples in order to uncover the true meaning and purpose of human love and sexuality. Does the traditional lens of magisterial teaching on sexuality adequately honour the richness and variety of authentic expressions of human love, companionship and family?<sup>8</sup>

Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* engaged with some of these red line or controversial issues. He identified several dimensions of the human condition that need further reflection and discernment; a greater appreciation of the reality of the law of *graduality* and the need for ongoing discernment; a greater appreciation of the *complexity* of people's lives – 'a need to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situation' [# 296] – and the implications of this for thinking that everything is 'black and white' [# 305]; a greater appreciation of the sacredness of *conscience* and the pastoral responsibility 'to form consciences,

8 For a creative and person centered approach to some of these issue see Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, New York: Continuum, 2006 and Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *Sexual Ethics: A Theological Introduction*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012.

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not to replace them' [#37] and, finally, but most centrally a keener appreciation of God's *mercy* – 'mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God's truth. For this reason, we should always consider inadequate any theological conception which in the end puts in doubt the omnipotence of God and, especially, his mercy [ # 311]'.

## CONCLUSION

Though slow and cumbersome the synodal path is a courageous step that strives to engage with the *sensus fidei* and the need for ongoing community discernment. It takes seriously human experience and the activity of the Holy Spirit in all the faithful. The disagreements and clashes it has generated need not be feared. They are indications of a *living* community grappling with the call of the Gospel in a complex and imperfect world and in complex and imperfect people. Past experience, especially Vatican II, should encourage us to be courageous and to remain committed to the synodal journey. It should also encourage us to return to the sources – especially Scripture, prayer, discernment and human experience – in the process of discerning the call of the Gospel.

**Going inwards to work outwards.** Often when people think of meditation and prayer they think of it as an escape from the world and responsibilities. For Ignatius the inner journey of confronting his demons and finding God led eventually to a great compassion for the poor and the suffering. There is a value in becoming aware and conscious of your 'inner world' of feelings and desires. It helps you to navigate the complexity of the objective 'outer world'. Your actions have significance; it is important what you do, and there is meaning and truth to be found. All is not relative or subjective. God normally is inviting us to take some concrete step of action to help others. The world needs you to be a responsible, active agent for change and justice.

– BRENDAN McMANUS, *Channelling the Inner Fire*, Dublin, Messenger Publications, 2022. p. 34.