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# The FURROW

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Séamus Lillis

## Asking “What’s Possible?”: Synods and Community

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*This article addresses how the principles and practices of community development support the purposes of the Synod and vice versa.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Synod is significant because it has consulted the laity, the community of the faithful, world-wide for the first time in living memory. This unprecedented discourse or Synodality will persist and will feature in all future major events of the Catholic Church. After almost two thousand years of the Church’s existence, this Synodality initiative by Pope Francis will undoubtedly become a hallmark of his pontificate.

The Church is a community. Its core concerns are the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the implementation of His will on earth. Community in the Church is empowered by loving relationships of the faithful with one another and with God. Faith in the Mystical Body of Christ and in the Communion of Saints emphasise the communal nature of the Church.

A revealing insight into Pope Francis’s initiative in calling for a Synod of the People of God is captured in his address to bishops on October 9, 2021, where he emphasised the expected role of the Holy Spirit:

“I am certain the Spirit will guide us and give us the grace to move forward together, to listen to one another and to embark on a discernment of the times in which we are living, in solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity.”

This Synod calls the whole People of God, the ordained and the lay faithful, to engage collaboratively in this discernment.

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### COMMUNAL CONVERSATIONS

The Church and civil communities experience agreement and variance in their communal practices. The guiding principles and learning experiences of both are relevant resources towards future progress and improved performance.

Civic communities conduct intricate networks of purposeful conversations about matters that concern their members. Like civic communal organisations, the work of the Synod is predicated on consultative conversations about shared concerns with the laity. These Synodal conversations began in parishes and continued through their diocese and onwards to 112 bishops' conferences worldwide; they were completed in October 2022. This is being followed by meetings of continental assemblies early in 2023. The Synodal conversations involving the laity are arguably the most geographically extensive in history. Comparable widespread consultations in society have not occurred.

### DESIGNED AND EMERGENT STRUCTURES

The Church – a humanly and divinely founded community – has, like other organisations, both Designed and Emergent structures, not in detached domains of influence but in symbiotic collaboration (Capra<sup>1</sup>).

*Designed* structures are formal and more powerful. They are largely static and objective in nature; are observable and quantifiable and concentrate on outcomes. They, in contrast to organisations' processes, are often the State's primary focus, when it scrutinises voluntary organisations. Designed structures articulate organisations' legal and financial standing, together with their policies and regulations through which organisations bind their members to conform.

*Emergent* organizational structures arise from an informal networks of relationships that continually grow and respond to changing local contexts. These structures are dynamic, flexible and subjective. They deliver novelty and elasticity. Emergent structures deliver the unique and valued capacities of human organisations. Significantly Emergent structures generate the organisation's values such as compassion, persistence, creativity and caring. These values are shared by the Church and civic communities.

The Church's Designed structures are set out in canon law, in its parochial structures and diocesan sees, maintained by a

1 Fritjof Capra, *The Hidden Connections: Integrating the Biological, Cognitive, and Social Dimensions of Life into a Science of Sustainability*. New York: Doubleday, 2002 p. 121

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hierarchical leadership. The customs and traditions of the almost 2,000 year-old Church can also become onerous and controlling in themselves. The Church’s Emergent structures are found in the personal and communal relationships of the faithful with Jesus Christ and with one another as desired by the Lord (Jn 13:34). Through these relationships and both structures, the kingdom of God is being realised.

Emergent structures over time impact Designed structures. A *similar* impact can be anticipated to arise from the Synod on the Designed structures of the Church. The influences of Emergent structures, which are more focused on processes *rather* than outcomes, are not easily quantified and can remain unrecognized.

In human organisations there are tensions between Designed structures, which embody relationships of power, and Emergent structures, which represent the organization’s aliveness and creativity. Both structures combine to express an organisation’s uniqueness. Each structure may separately dominate, with problematic results. An organisation that drifts too far toward design becomes overly rigid and unable to adapt to changing conditions; arguably the state of the Church, pre-Vatican II. An organisation drifting too far toward emergence loses the ability to deliver its original mission. The removal of either structure leads to the predictable ineffectiveness of the organisations.

When Vatican II (1962-1965) was first announced by Pope John XXIII, it was in circumstances of a change – averse Curia. The leading participants were the world’s diocesan bishops, who in time delivered a remarkable legacy of spiritual renewal and a notable outreach to separated Christians and those of other faiths and none.

Some sixty years later, the Synod *complements* Vatican II. It seeks to engage with the universal ‘People of God’. In this it is mining a resource that has not been hitherto involved in purposeful conversation. In revisiting the findings of Vatican II, the Synod’s participants may well achieve a renewed appraisal of the deliberations of Vatican II.

## LEARNING FROM CIVIC COMMUNITIES

For success in civic community work, a phase of community building is essential. Assemblies, or gatherings of individuals, are not immediate communities. Having agreed to become a community, gatherings have yet to identify their intricate networks, start their purposeful conversations and engage with their concerns. This takes time and encouragement, which may have been minimal in the parochial conversations of the Synod.

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Margaret Wheatley,<sup>2</sup> renowned community worker, urges community participants to ask: *what's possible?* not *what's wrong?*' These two separate questions generate two dissimilar conversations.

The Irish Bishops' Conference's Report, *The National Synodal Synthesis*<sup>3</sup> (August 2022), recorded effective, wide-ranging conversations. The themes of this report suggest a series of responses to a question, more like Wheatley's *What's wrong?* rather than her challenge to address *What's possible?* Synodal participants spoke about Abuse and the Church, the Role of Women, LGBTQ, Sexuality and Relationships, all capturing reservations. Ecumenism, the Environment, Social Justice, the Church's Sacramental Life and Missionary Outreach were listed as being disregarded by participants in the report. When Pope Francis's Synod in Rome will have completed its deliberations, a Synod for the Irish church, to be known as *The Irish Synodal Pathway* will take place after 2024. This is not yet widely known at parish level. Hopefully this *second* opportunity will provide for community building and for a focus for the Irish laity to address the creative and life-giving question, *What's possible?* as it deliberates on the future of the Church in Ireland.

Would the Irish Synodal Report have been different had the participants, after some community building, accepted from the outset that they were a community, a privileged People of God that acknowledged a communal indebtedness to the Lord and responded purposefully to *What's possible?*

Experience of working in community development suggests that initial meetings of prospective communities tend to focus on dissatisfaction. This disposition is not unrelated to experiences of social media and is largely because participants, not yet knowing one another, have neither confidence nor experience in engaging in community processes. However, it is likely that as confidence and experience grow, the laity will move on to realise and implement its emerging role arising from its divinely conferred calling and begin to respond to *what's possible?*

When members share their motives for participating, their understandings are at one with the contribution of the Emergent structures of all communal organisations. This also holds true for the Church in its abilities to reach out to the margins and do good there effectively. Additionally these motivations express members' values, about having a personal conviction, a willingness to take

2 Margaret J Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope in the Future*. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publishers Inc, 2002.

3 The Irish National Synodal Synthesis - August 16th, 2022 - Association of Catholics in Ireland (acireland.ie)

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risks, about principles, a truth that members will aspire to live by and maintain.

Actively subverting the laity’s calling compromises the Church’s communal nature. Some, leaning towards Design structures – to the disadvantage of Emergent structures – are more enticed to focus on measurable, predictable outcomes, rather than the *personal* benefits hidden in communities’ processes and in the promising emancipation of the Church’s laity. When Design structures dominate – i.e. disavowing personal insights, talents and character, being always risk-averse, or declining to foster and value emergent insights – society and the Church are disadvantaged by an underperformance on a scale unlikely to be fully realised.

‘*Listening*’ in the Synod implies paying attention to participants. In community organisations, it means listening to discourse or purposeful conversations. For civic communities, *purposeful conversations* are the core, reliable and perceptible – albeit widely underappreciated – means of creating and maintaining communities. Without these conversations, instituting and sustaining communities are unachievable. Human organisations generate a shared system of understandings, explanations and values – a common context of meaning – that is continually created, shared and sustained by ongoing purposeful conversations. The Synod can confidently anticipate a similar effect among its members. The Synod is a very significant initiative on the part of Pope Francis, not just because it is unprecedented, but because the laity’s contribution is unlikely ever again to be denied or returned to its pre-Synod non-participatory state.

## COMMUNITIES LEARNING FROM THE CHURCH?

As emerging Synodal reports are being compiled, the practice of drafting and re-drafting is evident.<sup>4</sup> This reiteration brings improvement and elucidation, certainly not suppression nor censorship. Drafting and re-drafting are exercises in discernment and a clarification of the deliberative conversations. This fortifies the processes of the original parish-grounded purposeful conversations on which the impending Continental documents are founded, preparatory to their being returned “to the people of God for the second stage of the 2021 -2023 Synodal process.”<sup>5</sup> There will be even further deliberation because on 16 October, 2022, Pope Francis announced that the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will take place in two sessions: the *first*

4 *General Secretariat for the Synod*, News Release 03/10/2022 at ‘end of meeting to draft the Document for the Continental Stage...’

5 *Ibid* p.2.

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from 4th to 29th October 2023; the *second* in October 2024. This lengthening of the Synodal journey is meant to be an opportunity – as Pope Francis said:

“... to foster an understanding of Synodality as a *constitutive dimension* of the Church, and to help everyone to live it in a journey of brothers and sisters who bear witness to the joy of the Gospel”.

In this discerning process, the Synod *exceeds* the practices of civic communities. Civic communities do not adequately address the need to capture their ongoing experiential learning. Minutes of their meetings range from minimal records of their decisions, to lengthy verbatim accounts of members’ contributions. These are devoid of reflection, learning and wisdom and are defended as fulfilling legal requirements, i.e. keeping of minutes. Thus the opportunity to maintain a record of reflective learning is neglected; a rich learning resource is squandered. This is *not* the case in the planned delivery of the Synod’s findings, a model from which communities and other civic organisations might profitably learn. The Synod’s approach allows for reflection and enhancement of original drafts.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The laity can expect to have an impact, not *only* on the Emergent structures of the Church, but also – in time – on its Designed structures. A renewal of our relationship with God and with one-another is likely. This renaissance will stimulate a more widespread conviction with potentially a significant impact world-wide. No other universal organisation, such as the United Nations, has a comparable promise. It is also probable that the laity will always be consulted henceforth; snubbing the ‘People of God’ will not be viable.