



Archdiocese of Southwark

Some Reflections in Light of the Synod on Synodality

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

Introduction

I returned this week from Rome having represented, along with others, the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in the month-long Synod on Synodality. The Synod was convened by our Holy Father, Pope Francis, and was held in the Vatican from 4 to 29 October. As we have come to appreciate, the word synod means 'journeying forward on the way together,' the Way who is the Lord Jesus himself, our Truth and our Life. (cf. Jn 14:6) It was a remarkable experience of encounter within the Universal Church, both engaging and exhausting; and this is just part one.

The Synod took place against a tragic backdrop of war. We could not forget Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, Sudan, and Syria, along with many other countries blighted by bloodshed. We heard first-hand from delegates about the devastating impact of war on their peoples and homelands. Neither could we fail to remember those who have suffered sexual abuse in the Church, as children or adults. We need our Church to be vigilant in protecting the vulnerable, to take effective action, and manifest transparent accountability. On one particular evening, we gathered with Pope Francis in St Peter's Square around the 'Angels Unawares' sculpture to pray for migrants and refugees. We were urged too not to ignore the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. The concerns of suffering people in our suffering world were present throughout in our prayers and hearts.

Beginning with a three-day retreat, the Synod was a truly global event, with representation from every continent: from both the Latin Rite Catholic Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches, with a broad range of ecumenical delegates, and with facilitators, and advisers. The Synod on Synodality was unlike previous Synods of Bishops. It had around 450 participants. Over 350 of these were voting members, 120

of whom were chosen specially by Pope Francis. Of these, the majority were bishops (many elected by their Episcopal Conference) and just over a quarter were lay people and male and female religious. As bishops, clergy, laity, and consecrated men and women, we gathered each day, joined at various points by our Holy Father. [Adsumus, Sancte Spiritus](#) we prayed, over and over again – ‘*We stand before You, Holy Spirit... Teach us the way we must go...*’

We reflected on the three foundational themes around which the Synod is orientated: first, what it means to be bound as one in our relationship with Christ and one another in our Catholic faith (*communion*); second, what it means for all the members of the Church to fulfil their respective roles (*participation*); and third, what it means to co-operate in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ through words and actions (*mission*).

The synodal process was launched locally in 2021. Every parish in our Archdiocese was encouraged to participate. The feedback from our grassroots reflection was collated into our [diocesan synthesis](#). This, in turn, fed into the [national](#) and then [continental](#) documents that shaped the working document for the Synod called the [Instrumentum Laboris](#). This was the basis for our ‘conversations in the Spirit’ in Rome. We listened and shared with each other in language groups around tables of 12 people. Across the five modules, I was seated, at different times, with people from Nigeria, the Philippines, the USA, Russia, Ireland, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Lesotho, India, Syria, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and Malawi. Hearing different cultural and ecclesial experiences from across our worldwide Church was, for me, the most enriching and stimulating part of the Synod.

This synodal gathering is part one of a two-staged process, to be completed with another assembly in October 2024. A [Letter to the People of God](#) from the Synod and the Synod’s interim [Synthesis Report](#) can be found online and express more about what took place. What follows here are some personal reflections, in light of the Synod, which strike me as significant.

Background Information

The preparatory synodal process in our Archdiocese brought forth from the participants a deep love for the Lord Jesus and for his Church. There was energy and enthusiasm for collaboration in the evangelising mission entrusted to us by Christ. We want our parish communities to grow and to be more welcoming and compassionate. We desire to work together as clergy, laity, and religious, harnessing

the gifts and talents of everyone to communicate the loving mercy of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and to put his Gospel into practice.

The tone was set for diocesan sharing by pondering prayerfully the word of God through communal *Lectio Divina*. First, and foremost, we are called to listen faithfully to the Lord, to be open to continuing conversion to him in mind and heart. This fashions us interiorly to listen to each other attentively, sensitively, and generously. Indeed, the desire to be formed, spiritually and catechetically, in both mind and heart, was a central theme in our diocesan synthesis.

The fruit of our parish and diocesan reflections focused on how we fulfil the Church's missionary mandate together: making our parishes and communities more hospitable; evangelising and catechising people more effectively in the faith; prioritising ministry to young people, to people who are lapsed from their faith, to people who live in poverty, and to people who are marginalised for whatever reason.

Some particular issues surfaced about how we include people who feel unwelcome in the Church because of their personal circumstances. This requires a fundamentally caring response, always respectful and kind, and centred on the dignity of each person created in the image and likeness of God. The art and spirituality of pastoral accompaniment is something we - clergy, religious and laity - need to develop and embody in our communities. Overwhelmingly, our diocesan synodal process showed that people are passionate about celebrating and living their faith in the service of others.

Only a small number of Catholics in England and Wales responded to the local synodal process. The figure globally is estimated at less than one percent. This means we need to contextualise the implications of the contributions received. Importantly, we need to encourage greater participation moving forward.

Overall, it strikes me that, at heart, the synodal process reveals the desire for serious attitudinal change within the Church: How can we become more effective in encouraging and inviting as many people as possible to share with us the journey of discipleship and service in friendship with Christ?

Listening and Speaking: the Truth in Love

Christ and his Gospel of salvation is central to our synodal process. He is our loving and merciful Saviour. He is the supreme example and model for our approach to

Christian life, ministry, and mission. It is in Christ, in his very person, that love and truth meet. It is from his heart that we receive the outpouring of God's favour. From the Father and the Son we receive the Holy Spirit, who '*guides us into all truth.*' (cf. Jn 16:13)

Considering the relationship between love and truth, '*speaking the truth in love*' as St Paul puts it (cf. Eph 4:15), the Church sources her expertise in humanity '*in the mystery of the incarnate Word*' in whom '*the mystery of the human person takes on light.*' (cf. GS 22) This is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council's [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World](#), known as *Gaudium et Spes*. In Christ, by revelation of the Father's love, the human person is revealed to him or herself and their supreme calling is made clear. (cf. GS 22)

Sometimes there can be real or perceived tensions in how we experience the relationship between truth and love. St Paul expressed his own frustration about trying to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. (cf. Rom 7:19) In God, love and truth are not disconnected or in opposition, but held as one. They are united in how God has spoken to the world and revealed, through Jesus Christ, the truth about the human person. Resisting the temptation to pitch love and truth against each other, we are called to share the loving-truthfulness of our faith, always with eyes and hearts of mercy.

During the Synod there was sincere sharing of human experiences, sometimes charged with emotion and highlighting the perceived tension between truth and love. We focus, rightly, on listening to, and welcoming, people who are more distanced from the Church and life of faith, or who struggle to accept or live according to the Church's teaching. It takes patient openness to receive people's experience.

Discerning human experience helps us to better understand ourselves, others, and our world, not least in glimpsing the hand of God at work, often retrospectively. Accompanying people through their experience can help them make sense of their life, find belonging in the Church, and encounter the Lord Jesus more deeply and personally.

There is a caution in setting human experience against divine revelation, received through Scripture and Tradition, as if it were somehow corrective of a now outdated deposit of faith. Our Catholic faith is not our own creation. It is revealed to us by God. Neither can it be determined by the spirit of the age. Our faith is a gift that

comes through the Church in the Apostolic Tradition. We understand who we are, and who we are called to be, in the light of Christ's call to discipleship. The Gospel demonstrates the virtues and qualities we need to rediscover continually in faithfulness to what the Lord Jesus asks of us. Every human being who accepts Christ's invitation to repent and believe in the Gospel (cf. Mk 1:14-15) faces his or her own weakness. We depend on God's help, on his grace, to heal, transform, and raise us up. If we empty the Gospel of its challenge, adapting it to our own way of thinking, then we also empty the Gospel of its power to save.

In his earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus was completely open to the other. He set no limits to whom he encountered, and neither should we. He spent 'quality time' with outcasts and sinners, those whom others ignored or rejected because of their perceived inferiority or sinfulness. Such openness to others, without prejudice, is an essential Christian disposition which the Church is called to practice generously.

Likewise, the Lord listened to the stories of those he met, even when, as in the journey to Emmaus, he already knew what was on their minds and hearts. Can we ask with compassion '*what things*' are happening in people's lives? (cf. Lk 24:19) Being prepared to hear others' stories helps us better understand their situation, glimpse their dreams, and tend their wounds.

To those he met, the Lord Jesus gave a word of life, a call, a teaching, an instruction, an act of healing, or the grace of forgiveness. He never remained passive. He offered a way forward. Not everyone could accept this. The rich young man (cf. Mk 10:17-22) went away sorrowful because he was unable or unwilling to respond to the command of Jesus. To others, like Zacchaeus (cf. Lk 19:1-10), the encounter with the loving truth of Christ transformed their lives. Loving accompaniment, directed by the truth to freedom, always takes Christ as its model.

The Gospel is inclusive because the invitation to follow Christ is extended to everyone without exception. We have been created with the gift of freedom so that we can respond genuinely in love. We can choose to accept the Lord's invitation, and so find our joy in him, or we can reject his invitation and go away sad. Christ never rejects us, but neither does he force into discipleship, or hide from us what this entails. The Church's mission, shared by the whole People of God, is to support and encourage people in saying 'yes' to Christ.

There is divergence for some in understanding or accepting what binds us in faith and how we interpret the truth authentically. The synodal process has created a

climate of expectation. Some people look for radical change in the Church's teaching on specific issues. Others want a more participatory approach to ecclesial ministry. As we discern what this means, we cannot dislocate truth from love or love from truth. The Lord Jesus meets us where we are, but loves us too much to leave us there.

The Appreciation of the Sense of Faith

At the opening Mass for the Synod, Pope Francis addressed the participants: *'Here we do not need a purely natural vision, made up of human strategies, political calculations or ideological battles. If the Synod allows this to happen, the "other one" will open the door to it. This we do not need. We are not here to carry out a parliamentary meeting or a plan of reformation. The Synod, dear brothers and sisters, is not a parliament. The Holy Spirit is the protagonist. We are not here to form a parliament but to walk together with the gaze of Jesus, who blesses the Father and welcomes those who are weary and oppressed.'* (4 October 2023) These compelling words framed the nature and purpose of our gathering. It was, and remains, an exercise of listening to the Holy Spirit. But a question arises: How do we discern what the Holy Spirit is saying? This requires an understanding of the supernatural sense of faith, the *sensus fidei*. So, what does this mean?

Some, mistakenly, believe the *sensus fidei* is akin to a parliament, exactly what Pope Francis spoke against. Discernment is not a referendum on Church teaching. It is not a ballot where individuals vote according to what they believe the Holy Spirit is saying personally to them. All the baptised and confirmed, anointed by the Holy Spirit, do indeed have a role in understanding and communicating the truths of faith revealed by God. How, then, does this work?

In *Lumen Gentium*, the [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church](#), the Second Vatican Council taught that by the *'appreciation of the faith'* (the *sensus fidei*) *'aroused and sustained by the Spirit of Truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (the magisterium) ...receives...the faith once delivered to the saints.'* (cf. LG 12; CCC 93) Note the significance here. The *sensus fidei* concerns how the whole body of the faithful People of God *receives* the faith that has been revealed, not how it determines what that faith should be. This is a very important distinction.

Vatican II continued: *'The People unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgement, and applies it more fully in daily life.'* (cf. LG 12; CCC 93) Again, we see what is at stake: *adhering* to the faith, holding fast to it; *penetrating* the faith, probing what it means; and *applying* the faith to how we live. In this way, we can understand what the Council says about the *'whole body of the faithful'* not falling into error, precisely because we remain faithful to what we have received: *'This*

characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of faith (sensus fidei) on the part of the whole people, when 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful,' they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals.' (cf. LG 12; CCC 92)

To be clear, the *sensus fidei* is not a mechanism for deciding the Church's faith. Rather, it describes how the Catholic faith, which has been handed on to members of the Body of Christ down the ages, is received, understood, and lived by God's holy people. It operates through the faithful who are 'full of faith,' who form part of the living tradition and communion of the Church's life, united with all those who have gone before us in faith.

In understanding the *sensus fidei*, we cannot separate the Holy Spirit from Christ. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to make Christ's work and teaching present, fresh, and active, not to make known a new revelation separate from Christ. The teaching of the Church does, indeed, develop over time. This happens by the unfolding of truth in fidelity to what went before. We can say the Holy Spirit is like the master of the house, spoken about by Christ, who brings out of his treasure - the deposit of faith - what is new and what is old. (cf. Mt 13:52; CCC 1117) There cannot be development in contradiction, as though the Holy Spirit would say one thing in the second century, something completely different in the sixteenth century, and, yet still, something completely different again in the twenty-first century. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, keeping us faithful to the fullness of revelation who is Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever. (cf. Heb 13:8)

During the synod, Pope Francis offered a beautiful illustration of this. *'When you want to know 'what' Holy Mother Church believes,'* he said, *'go to the Magisterium, because it is in charge of teaching it to you. But when you want to know 'how' the Church believes, go to the faithful people.'*

Co-responsibility in Mission – The Universal Priesthood and the Ordained Ministry

Our Christian witness and mission flourish when we maintain direct focus on Christ as Saviour, attentive to the Holy Spirit. We face great challenges from indifference and secularisation. In some instances, it is not simply the case that the faith is unknown. It is known – or a version of it – but it is ignored. The Catholic convert G. K. Chesterton commented *'the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.'* It takes courage to evangelise, to speak, preach, and practice the Gospel today. It remains, however, the responsibility of every disciple.

All vocation comes from the grace of baptism into Christ, through which we share his priestly, prophetic, and kingly dignity. This is expressed in different ways in the life of the Church. Those who share the universal priesthood through baptism, and those who share the ministerial priesthood through ordination, are all called to participate in the Church's mission according to their state of life and the variety of gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Co-responsibility in mission requires an authentic understanding of the ordained ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons, in relation to ministries exercised by the baptised lay faithful. Ordination is always for service, modelled on the example of the Lord Jesus. Respectful, spiritual, and effective relationships between clergy, laity, and religious, are not only mutually enriching, but vital in the work of introducing people to friendship with the Lord Jesus. Joyful and harmonious disciples attract people to Christ.

The relationship between the universal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood is sometimes misunderstood and expressed in terms of power in a worldly sense. The important question becomes who has power in the Church, rather than what does service mean in the Church. So the saying goes, the Church only has one Saviour and it is not you or me. In the same way, the Church only has one Head, and that is Jesus Christ. Whether we share Christ's priesthood through baptism, or by ordination, we are all servants of one Lord. By virtue of episcopal consecration, bishops, as successors of the apostles, make present Christ's headship in his Church. They must always exercise their authority in imitation of him who came to serve and named himself the Good Shepherd. Christ is the only truly powerful one in the Church, and his power was displayed in his self-offering on the Cross and by his glorious resurrection.

Those called to episcopacy, who exercise governance in service of the Church, must eschew power in any worldly sense. They are not masters of the faith, but its servants, entrusted with responsibility for ensuring the Church's fidelity to the truth who is Jesus Christ. We may have had negative experiences of how power has been wielded in the Church. This is not the mind of Christ Jesus, nor his will for his people. We need to reject any sense of the Church separated and divided between those who rule and those who are ruled. This sets people against their pastors and pastors against their people. Our only model is of mutual and reciprocal service, rooted in Christ who assumed the position of a servant and washed feet.

The different nature and co-operative orientation of ordained and lay ministries is sourced and rooted in the teaching of Vatican II. Properly understood and put into effect, the role of the laity in the Church's mission neither clericalises the laity, nor

laicises the clergy. The specific mission of the baptised to evangelise the secular world stems from the universal call to holiness. The Second Vatican Council's *Decree on the Laity*, and St John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *On Christ's Lay Faithful* offer clear guidance for us today.

The urgent need to effect Pope Francis' call for the entire People of God to be 'missionary disciples,' and for the Church to move outwards beyond herself, is self-evident. So many people today do not know Christ. Different parts of the Church are experiencing severely declining numbers of practising Catholics and strident proselytisation of Catholics by sects and atheistic ideologies. A key question, therefore, is how can speaking about co-responsibility for mission, between the ordained and lay faithful, be situated centrally within a refreshed vision for, and commitment to, the New Evangelisation?

A Final Word

At the Mass to conclude the first part of the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis said: *'In this "conversation of the Spirit," we have experienced the loving presence of the Lord and discovered the beauty of fraternity. We have listened to one another and above all, in the rich variety of our backgrounds and concerns, we have listened to the Holy Spirit. Today we do not see the full fruit of this process, but with farsightedness we look to the horizon opening up before us. The Lord will guide us and help us to be a more synodal and missionary Church, a Church that adores God and serves the women and men of our time, going forth to bring to everyone the consoling joy of the Gospel.'* (29 October 2023)

We continue to pray and discern what synodality means in practice in our Archdiocese as we seek to be missionary to our core in the service of Christ and our people. I thank everyone in our Archdiocese for their witness – my brother bishops, priests, and deacons; my sisters and brothers in consecrated life; and my brothers and sisters in discipleship of the Lord Jesus. We are one in faith, hope, and love, each of us with a unique part to play in loving Christ and serving him in others. May we share this responsibility passionately and joyfully in the harmony of the Holy Spirit.

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Memoria of St Charles Borromeo, 4 November 2023