

## The Synod on Synodality – Why We Should Care? ACCCR Virtual Convocation

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2 February 2023

The question before us tonight is whether we should care about the Synod on Synodality.

I answer that with another. Do we not sense the desire for a different Church, one that is more welcoming, inclusive and relevant to our daily lives and the lives of those we love and care for?

We all know the statistics. The majority of Catholics find conventional practice and worship unattractive, younger generations are generally disinterested in affiliation with the Church and current Church teachings on sexuality, marriage and ordained ministries are appearing to be out of touch with contemporary Australian life.

There is a deep disquiet brewing. A sense in the Catholic world that things are not in order. A misfit of an emerging consciousness with the conventional mindset of the institution.

To date, the synodal process is revealing that disquiet. Across the globe synodal meetings are consistently identifying how closed and rigid the Church appears. Surely that is the Spirit speaking.

Calls for a 'radical inclusion', a welcoming spirit and are being heard on every continent and in all cultures in which the Church has a presence.

And doesn't this make sense. Unless we open pathways for Catholics to feel they belong and that they can find in their Church acceptance,

moral wisdom and intelligent inquiry, then the inevitable decline of the institution will continue.

The developments in the sciences, cosmology and human nature give evidence of an expanding consciousness that calls on theology and Christian philosophy to respond accordingly. The degree to which the Church can come to terms with this emerging consciousness is the degree to which it will be able to address the social and personal flashpoints that have led to the decline of its relevance and effectiveness.

Of the many tensions the synodal process unearths the classic one concerning authentic Catholicism is never far from the surface.

This can be heard in debates over the reception of the Eucharist for divorced and remarried people, or when proposals to bless same sex civil unions are mentioned or whenever the reintroduction of the ordination of women for the diaconate is raised.

It is even more the case in matters of sex outside of marriage.

These tensions are speaking back to the Church in the synodal process. They are named in the working papers and they call for resolution.

I know some will say that unity is the marker of Catholicity. But it is precisely in how we hold that unity that we shape the very nature of our Church.

You can seek unity through assent to a common identity, with unchanging characteristics and beliefs. Or you can achieve unity across difference where the revelations of human experience are acknowledged as manifestations of Divine creation.

The latter is more akin to our fundamental belief, that God doesn't make junk!

So our challenge in this synodal process is to integrate modern understandings of human nature to bring a wholeness to our sense of being Church.

The normative approach to human nature we have adopted to date is too limited. It excludes and diminishes people. At worse it judges and alienates people. It sets unrealistic existential expectations on people and in turn labours them with the heft of guilt and worthlessness.

If God doesn't make junk we must not leave people believing that they are. Anything less would be a big fail for the Synod.

This has major ramifications for our Catholic beliefs and practices. It widens the tent of belonging. It recognises that God is beyond our imaginations and boundaries. It calls for a compassionate, radically inclusive and ever unfolding embrace of human life and an ever deepening understanding of the social structures that oppress or liberate people, the integral cosmology we inhabit and the Mystery we are called to live.

This is the spirit that underpins Pope Francis' call for the Synod on Synodality. He has implored our Church to be less focussed with itself and to be more missionary. He calls for a less doctrinaire and more pastoral church.

This spirit is being captured in the papers for the Synod. It is obviously gaining traction across the globe. So much so that the late Cardinal Pell was mounting a campaign of resistance.

It is a classic clash of the Church we wish to be.

And as always it comes down to the bishops. It will be how they manage their own and their collective anxieties that will lay heavily on the discernment of the pathway forward.

So where will be the episcopal voices to take us to beyond our fears?

Their tasks of discernment are complex. They are charged to uphold the Tradition, but also to listen to the revelation of human experience. They are to adopt a porous attitude not a bulwark disposition.

The Synod documents call for 'radical inclusion'. So just what could they reasonably consider?

In short it requires making the periphery of the Church the center.

For women this means addressing the cultural barriers, including clericalism, that discriminate and alienate their full participation. History demonstrates that women have had more essential roles in Church ministries, the diaconate included. Customs that have evolved which in turn diminish the dignity and rights of women must be immediately addressed.

For the LGBTI+ community the pastoral heart of the Church must come to the fore. The same applies to divorced and remarried Catholics. None of us have the right to cast stones. Neither do we have any moral obligation to judge.

Rather we are called to embrace everyone in love. As the theologians argue over access to the Eucharist the silence of Catholics for their brothers and sisters is deafening. Surely there is plenty of pastoral justification to include LGBTI+ and divorced and remarried Catholics in reception of the Eucharist as a tangible sign and sacrament of belonging. As Pope Francis says, 'the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a source of healing for us all.'

These two measures would be cameos of the paradigm shift a synodal Church can deliver. It would demonstrate a receptivity and openness to the cry of the poor and marginalised. Of course there will be those, like the Cardinal, who see danger signs. They will fear the loss of orthodoxy and episcopal authority.

Let's face it, what could you expect if you give the masses a voice, a say in Church administration, a role in ordained ministries, access to the Eucharist regardless of marriage status, a blessing on committed relationships same- sex or otherwise.

Well what you could reasonably expect is a more energised and engaged Church. One that has gone to the streets. That does act like a field hospital to bring healing not condemnation. A church vulnerable enough to open its doors and welcome the new.

Now, I'd pay to see that!