

# **Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform** **Webinar: Evolving Catholicism and the Synod**

## **Francis Sullivan AO**

22 February 2024

In the moments available to me this evening I would like to give a reflection on where I sit with the Synod on Synodality.

I do so because many fine Catholic friends either have no interest in the Synod, have not even heard about it, or have little hope that it will amount to anything.

I think we all appreciate that the interest and confidence in the Church is at an all time low. The fact that a meeting in Rome, still heavily controlled by the Vatican, can somehow enliven the flagging fortunes of the Church is a bridge too far for the majority of my Catholic friends and the Catholic circles in which I move.

Yet, I have hope. Even more than hope, I see some tentative green shoots of change.

The Synod's Synthesis document is a sincere attempt to contain the many viewpoints of the delegates.

From many accounts this document, written in haste near the end of the session, incorporated around a thousand edits before going to print.

If nothing else, the document is the fruit of plenty of passion.

Clearly the Conversations in the Spirit that enabled participants to listen and understand each other worked.

That women and other lay people sat around tables with clerics and Vatican heavy weights also had an impact.

A question that I am still left with though comes from my experience with a similar process at the Plenary Council. That is, how free is the listening process when it is conducted within the institutional culture of prohibition.

In other words, do people feel constrained to raise some issue because they feel it is futile or worse that they feel poorly judged?

There is no doubt that some people, as with the Plenary Council, had one eye on orthodoxy and compliance to it and the other on those who dared to even hint at straying from that now labored path.

Whether there was an atmosphere that really did have all issues on the table, including long held Church teachings, only those in the room can tell.

What we do know from the contents of the Synthesis document is that it has been shrewdly crafted and in itself offers something for most, but not everyone.

Thankfully, the document does reflect the view that some areas of canon law need to be revisited in order for a more effective level of participation of the laity.

It even goes further to suggest a major rewrite of the Code of Canon Law is needed.

Many of the restrictions on the role of women and the full participation of lay people in the governance of the Church and in the sharing of otherwise ordained ministries are currently hampered by the Code.

This move to revise canon law should be encouraged and openly supported.

Pope Francis consistently emphasises that the mission of the Church is one of engagement in culture.

History demonstrates that Catholic practice is downstream of culture.

It is where the rubber hits the road for ordinary, decent living Catholics.

It is the place where we live our incarnational reality. This place is where we seek goodness, truth and grapple with uncertainty, confusion and suffering.

As Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff puts it, this is the place where we strive to keep the dream of Jesus alive.<sup>1</sup>

In more technical terms it is where the Kingdom of God plays out. As Boff says,

‘The Kingdom becomes present always and wherever people live in love, solidarity, forgiveness, mercy and a humble acceptance of God.’<sup>2</sup>

Our call is to live those values in our time and place.

---

<sup>1</sup> Boff, L. ‘Thoughts and Dreams of an Old Theologian’, trans. Francis McDonagh, Orbis Books, 2022, p.59.

<sup>2</sup> Boff, p.60.

To live them with confidence in our own agency and sense of what is right and just.

And this is place has the smell of the sheep in Pope Francis eyes. This place is where the Church needs to be. Away from abstractions and absolutes founded in times well past and knee deep in pastoral pathways that lead to human flourishing in the here and now.

Our times are calling for the strident church positions to be quietly shelved in order to accommodate the pastoral needs of Catholic communities.

Two of the major flashpoints are the equality of women and gender issues.

These are 'shake your head' nonsensical to younger generations that en mass have deserted the Church.

This is where our Church needs to see movement in the Synod.

From the public comments of those involved in drawing up the Synod's working documents, these two flashpoint issues were consistently raised across all continents and within bishops conferences and religious leaders forums.

So is this the Spirit speaking to the Church? I hope so!

If the Synod on Synodality fails to take these issues forward then it is very hard not to see this as a slap in the face for we in the West.

The Synod is an opportunity to thrash out specific features of Catholic practice. In a sense it is a litmus test of the flexibility and durability of the church.

As it stands, the Synod is both pertinent and remote to the lives of Catholics.

It is questionable these days as to what degree local bishops have any credibility in the eyes of Catholics.

For too long the Church has stonewalled on issues regarding the equality of women and of same sex relationships. The decline in participation numbers reflects the loss of patience by the Catholic community.

The practice of the Catholic faith is local, culturally sensitive and constrained by the limitations of human imagination and endeavor.

It is where Catholicism happens.

For the purists this cannot lead to 'anything goes' because Catholicism has universality as a feature.

However, universality can never be translated to mean uniformity. Yet without avenues through which real dialogue on difficult issues can be held, uniformity becomes the rule.

We need forums for the people impacted by the Church's positions to be around the table with those charged to hold the line.

There has always been the competency for the church to govern itself locally. This is called subsidiarity and Pope Francis keeps encouraging our bishops to act accordingly.

The Synthesis document suggests stronger devolution of governance to bolster the cultural change synodality is to bring to the Church.

However, the fact that many of our bishops have been raised in anything but a locally empowered church means that they may well need a helpful nudge from the laity to get with the program.

It follows then that a local expression of Catholicism, discerned within the structure of subsidiarity, will be an engagement with culture, a dialogue of values, in a common purpose of equal dignity and prosperity for all as the breast plate of human decency.

It is the eternal quest.

To a limited degree the Synod's working principle of 'unity in diversity' is a nod in this direction.

The historical strength of the Church has been its capacity to hold the center whilst the tensions from the extremes play out.

The authors of the Synod's synthesis document have pitched the controversial issues to the middle ground, often muted in their language to avoid being provocative.

This can test the patience of those seeking more direct reforms, but at least it keeps some issues 'live' with the potential for them to be amplified in future meetings.

I speak here specifically of the full participation of women, particularly in the diaconate, and the formal recognition and rights of the LGBTQI+ community.

In the words of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, these issues, along with others have as much right to join 'voices in the Catholic chorus of our time and culture' as any other.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, C 'Dilemmas and Connections', Belknap Press, 2011, p.169.

The fact that they remain in play is a sign of their legitimacy. The fact that the authors have had to grapple with the language to accommodate them likewise gives credence to the significance of these issues for the final determinations of the Synod.

In other words these issues are not going away anytime soon.

That said, it is still hard to swallow.

Not only is the language muted in reference to the LGBTQI+ community, the synthesis document, makes no explicit mention of the LGBTQI+ community. There is no description of their experiences of exclusion, marginalization, discrimination and even violence in the Church. To all intents and purposes, the lives of those specifically named at times by Pope Francis as needing a merciful embrace, are not afforded equality of treatment with other Catholics. If you didn't pick up the nuance in the language the document would appear to have disregarded all together.

This is hurtful and belittling. It also is asking a lot for LGBTQI+ Catholics to take the Synod on trust.

Even our own Plenary Council was shy of delivering in its decrees any explicit naming the LGBTQI+ community.

If nothing else, our culture and implicit biases must be more openly examined if we are to really become inclusive and compassionate for all.

Setting aside the cultural and historical biases that has shaped Church doctrine in this area, our faith and integrity as a church compels us towards inclusion, compassion, dignity and respect.

Therefore, in this interim phase of the Synod, it is even more vital that the voices of those marginalized in and by our Church must remain front and center.

As Australian priest and theologian, Richard Lennan, puts it,

“ The Spirit who, like the wind, blows where it chooses (Jn 3:8), can give ‘voice’ to those who name for the ecclesial community what damages the church’s communal mission and life, as well as what may enhance their integrity.”

He goes on to say that:

“ practices and policies in the Church likely to ‘silence, in-visibilise and demonise members of the ecclesial community whether on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, social status or

any other criteria alien to the gospel, are likely to be in opposition to all that the grace of the Spirit embraces.”<sup>4</sup>

Lennan stresses that the voices from the margins can stir the community of faith to reassess and become better aligned with the Spirit. In other words, they can deliver change.

The synthesis document leaves the door for change open. It has not silenced the voices, but its accommodations to date are tentative.

The degree to which the final Synod document is more bold and direct is to be seen. As I said earlier, the groundwork is there, now it comes down to a coalition of the willing.

Let me take the time remaining to highlight some areas of the Synthesis document that hold promise for effective reform.

1. As I said previously, a discerning reader can find many avenues in which to emphasise the areas of exclusion for remarried Catholics and members of the LGBTQI+ community.

The document specifically mentions attention be given to **exclusion** in ecclesial services, liturgical, sacramental to name just two. This clearly goes to issues of reception of the eucharist and formal blessing of civil unions.

2. Even though the issue of **women in the diaconate** has been referred for further enquiry, the document encourages deeper examination of the issue. To me this signals an openness in the Assembly to bring on reform, not to resist it. You would have expected a more limited brief if the disposition was negative.
3. On the issue of the full **participation of the laity in governance** structures the document is very specific. Synodality obliges a mutual, co-responsible, participation of lay and clerical persons in decision making processes. This will mean that canon law needs to be changed. But the attitude in the document does not find change to the Church’s law something to be resisted.
4. **Accountability of the performance of bishops and the clergy generally** is also on the table. This type of transparency is crucial if the trust of the community, both Catholic and beyond, is going to be restored.
5. It was pleasing to see that the issue of **clerical sex abuse** was not only mentioned but recognized to be an unfinished project. Unless the cultural factors that led to and concealed the scandal are confronted, we are doomed for another scandal to arise.
6. A last we have the suggestion of **obligatory requirements for pastoral councils**. Maybe the new model of synodality can characterize local, diocesan and national bodies.

---

<sup>4</sup> Lennan,R. ‘Tilling the Church: Theology for an Unfinished Project’, Liturgical Press, 2022, p.19.

In that light it would be positive gesture for the ACBC to establish Synodal Councils in each state and territory to assist with the implementation of the Plenary Council decrees and the final directions Pope Francis makes out of this Synod. Let us hope that the lay involvement can be selected through a democratic and widely representative process. As opposed to the usual process where bishops hand pick 'friendlies' and 'company men'; as some may well say of which I was one!

The synodal process has already been a long and at times confusing. It has asked of us a willingness to step up, listen and speak. Many in the Catholic community have spoken.

Reform groups have particularly sought to raise the voices of the margins of the Church.

Voices that echo because of the chasm in which they sound.

Voices that are both mystical and threatening.

They call for attention and enquiry. They are a lure for discovery with the promise of an emergent Catholicity.

These voices are part of our incarnational reality. They are the expression of grace and become part of the whole when listened to.

Yes there is a space between the voices and the current configuration of the Church. But as Rowan Williams says, in this space we encounter God.

In conclusion, the church's focus on structures, doctrine, ritual and practice must not obscure the deeper things these elements are designed to hold and express.

That is, the way of Jesus, the presence to us all and all humanity – in, with and through the reality of our lives, of a God who is love.

And that energy of love sees all, holds all and heals all.

For the Church to represent anything contrary to this is a travesty of it, and of our call and responsibility.

The synod on synodality is the opportunity to let go and reimagine a truly authentic response to the Gospel.

However, at the local level, within our lived experiences and cultural understandings of justice, dignity and the respect for all creation, the practice of Catholicism can be more relevant, inclusive and life giving.

May I posture some approaches that could engender aspects of the reform agenda that ACCCR has been advocating.

1. Within your local parish, prayer group, faith community or informal support group, start to affirm practices that legitimately democratize decision making, especially with the inclusion of women in governance roles, not just executive management positions.

A significant step would be for dioceses to begin trials where women are participants in the Council of consultors to bishops.

2. Encourage open minded priests to 'task shift' in some of their ministry duties. Seek to side step the 'knot picking' of canonical fine points that only results in some ministry outreach being foregone in the interests of ideology.

For example, explore developing an expansion in hospital and home health care chaplaincy run by lay people.

3. Prudently support those priests who are venturing into the blessing of same sex couples, the baptizing of their children and the involvement of same sex families in the mainstream life of the Church.
4. Become more overtly supportive of the cherished contributions from remarried Catholics and their blended families.
5. Insist on pastoral planning councils based on synodality and nurtured by a practice of 'contemplation and action'.
6. Deliberately shun any attempts at Catholic identity politics that alienates and divides the community so that the promotion of a common humanity dedicated to universal well being and planetary survival become hallmarks of the Church's mission.
7. Stay resolute to finding creative solutions to indigenous disinheritance and disadvantage.



8. Make the resolution of the refugee scandal a performance indicator of the effectiveness of the Christian voice.

On the broader national level it is time for the bishops to instigate a genuine Synodal Council where clerics, religious and lay people sit together to address issues in the life of the Church.

look into that space is to see God. These are but practical response from voices at the margins of the Church. Voices that echo because of the chasm in which they sound. Voices that are both mystical and threatening. They call for attention, enquiry. They are a lure for discovery with the promise of completeness.

And it is that completeness that leads to wholeness which is the very heart of Catholicism.

These voices are part of our incarnational reality. They are grace expressed and become complete when listened to.

As they reverberate through our church we face a choice. To remain half hearted is not making room for God.

Yes there is a space between the voices and the current configuration of the Church. As Rowan Williams says, to

Our ever present task, Synod or not, is to journey towards a more complete expression of Catholicism, where voices are no longer marginalized but synchronized in the chorus of our church.