

Synod on Synodality: Why we should care 2 February 2023

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I am speaking from the lands of the Cammeraygal people on Sydney's north shore. I would like to acknowledge that when it comes to synodality, there is so much that we could learn from First Nations peoples.

I am here to offer a grassroots perspective on the Synod, as someone who was deeply engaged with the Plenary Council, and who has now transferred that engagement to the global Synod on Synodality.

Two months before this Synod officially began in October 2021, WATAC had run a Zoom forum on Synodality with Dr Elissa Roper and many had listened to Sr Nathalie Becquart when she spoke for the Australian Cardijn Institute Webinar. So reform minded groups were well and truly networking with one another, learning as much as we could, sharing information and building community.

The Synod documents were excellent and our Australian Bishops did a good job of putting them all on their website, but more or less left it at that. The deadline was prohibitive! Barely two months to make a submission that required a substantial amount of reading, organising a group of willing participants and then skillfully facilitating a spiritual conversation, writing up the collective discernment and finally submitting it. I was a seasoned facilitator by now, and I just could not do it.

The Vatican handbook made it clear that Diocesan bishops were expected to lead in this process and to make it as inclusive of as wide a range of people as possible, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized. They were expected to initiate a wide program of synodal discernment. I don't think they did.

Sr Nathalie had said that submissions could be made directly to the Vatican, without going through Diocesan channels, and I know that there were at least some reform minded groups who chose to do so. Certainly, this seemed like a good way of ensuring that our voices were heard. And yet, it is also a kind of cheating, isn't it, if our discernment is only and always done in a group of the like-minded? But, then again, what choice did we have? The bishops, in the main, failed to lead and most of what real synodal discernment was done at this stage depended on lay leadership.

The Australian synthesis document produced by our bishops (August 2022) was little more than a disappointing catalogue of pressing issues (but with little sense of priorities and no sense of the crisis that we find ourselves in), so when the Document for the Continental Stage appeared a few months later, it was like an invigorating breath of fresh air. The very title, *Enlarge the Space of your Tent*, was a hopeful sign.

The People of God were invited to prayerfully study this document and discern answers to a number of questions. Our bishops put out a media release, helpfully put all the relevant information up on their website, then left it up to the National Centre for Pastoral Research and the laity to do the rest. In spite of prohibitive time pressures once again, we are told that almost 80 groups, with a total of about 750 people, took up the invitation. I participated in one such group and facilitated two others.

So where are we now and where to next? Personally, this work still energises me. I am drawn by the vision of Pope Francis for a listening church and a compassionate church. In the Synod handbook we are told that the purpose of our journeying together is nothing less than "to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission." WHAT A WONDERFUL VISION.

But we need more than vision to sustain us! The energy comes from the processes of synodality itself, which is why the practice is so important.

An extraordinary thing happened at the second assembly of the Plenary Council in July last year. We saw with our own eyes how synodality can and does work. Participants reported deep and respectful listening, the value of the spiritual conversation method, and the movement of the Holy Spirit. They spoke hopefully of a new way of being church. Onlookers like myself saw people sitting as equals at round tables, heard the stories, and rejoiced at some of the outcomes. With enough will and humility, capable leaders and good structures, synodality can become a reality.

But right now, I feel so much resistance to change - in the reluctance of my Bishop to be a leader of synodality, in the indifference of the priests in my parish, and in the lack of interest in my fellow parishioners.

I know there are many good things happening in spaces far removed from parishes. I am connected to both local and global networks full of faith-filled, committed and inspiring individuals. These are what keep me going. But if I am asked, what next, there is only one answer. We have to go back to our grassroots, even if, and especially if, nothing much is happening there. We, who have reluctantly become leaders, through sheer dint of just always turning up, have work to do.

Each one of us is responsible for this work, according to our gifts. As I see it, it is a matter of bringing people together to learn and experience what it means to be a synodal church. If synodality is a matter of process and practice, then we have to make it happen. In a parish context, we can use what exists to introduce deep listening, dialogue and discernment practices of synodality. That might be a Lenten group or a parish pastoral council. Or we can invite people to come together and learn about synodality – there is already a growing body of easily accessible resources. Or we can create something new, like a Laudato Si' group or a Bible study group, and embed synodal practices within them.

Few might come, but even with a few it is worth it. It is slow, patient work, I know, and it can often feel fruitless. But I do believe it is the challenge of the present time.

And if the parish is out of the question, do it somewhere else.

My dear friends, it is time to build a people's movement.

Reflecting on our work at the grassroots, I also believe we need to have compassion for our priests. They are as much victims of the system as we are. How can we engage them without their feeling threatened? Again, not easy – especially as many of them come from cultures unfamiliar to us.

Why does the Synod matter? Well, it's one of those forks in the road, isn't it, where we have a choice to make a difference, to dream of a different way of being church and to make it happen. It's simply the future of the church at stake.

