



AUSTRALASIAN CATHOLIC COALITION FOR CHURCH REFORM

Webinar 22 February 2024

Evolving Catholicism and the Synod

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Good evening

Just to be clear, this is not an ACCCR statement but my personal views.

Introduction

Catholicism is at a crossroads. Most baptised Catholics have given up on the church organisation. They find the spirituality and theology on offer to be inadequate. Rules, practices and exclusions do not make sense. The credibility of bishops and clergy is at an all-time low. Many of my family, friends and colleagues wonder what I find in it and why I continue to be involved. I am not alone in this.

Catholicism is evolving. At this time in the West or Global North, it is in decline, rapidly diminishing in credibility, influence and relevance. Yesterday, I heard Austen Ivereigh, the Pope's biographer, describe the Synod as the most important event in the Catholic church since Vatican II. I have questions about that. This evening, I want to ask if this is so.

Spirituality is the word most commonly used to express our personal religious stance so I would like to clarify at the outset what I mean by spirituality. Spirituality sums up my living as an integrated biological, sensitive, thinking, deciding and loving human being. It is not just the thinking, reflective, deciding part. It is that but includes the bodily part too. It is the whole of who I am. It also includes the core meanings and values that I live by.

Change of era

In the mid-20th century, most people found their identity in belonging to groups or communities, including churches and other religious groups. Much of the success of Vatican II lay in its re-connecting with social and community experiences and values.

The change of era we are now experiencing was heralded by the science revolution. Rights of peoples to determine their own destiny led to decolonisation. The women's movement challenged many deep and long-held prejudices. Education has changed the fortunes and lifestyles of millions as has increased prosperity and economic conditions. Developments in technology and communications have accelerated the process. A movement of individuation which is not simple individualism, has led to a major shift of attention from the social to the personal in relation to how we live our lives. Carl Jung, Karl Rahner, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Gandhi were key figures in this shift. Philosophers call it the turn to the subject. The shift towards individuation with more focus on personal experience, values and relationships has changed the context of our spiritual lives.

Most Australian Catholics no longer look to the organisation for answers. The simple explanations of childhood continue to be trotted out. Critical thinking is not encouraged. Many now feel they are left to their own resources in developing a mature theology of life. Catholics increasingly look to one another or to more secular friends. The child sex abuse revelations accelerated the erosion of credibility of church leaders. There is much good theology about. It could provide a solid basis for a contemporary spirituality but accessing it is not always easy.

The 2021 census reported just under six million self-declared Catholics in Australia. It is generally accepted that only about 10% or 600,000 people have any engagement with the church. In other words, 90% or 5.4 million self-declared Catholics do not have any direct involvement. I think it would be fair to say that a significant proportion of the five million are good people with strong faith, deep-rooted spirituality and commitment to the values of Jesus. They are truly practicing Catholics even if Mass-attendance censuses do not count them. This means there are more practicing Catholics outside the organisation than within it.

Community and institution

Many Catholics now distinguish between A) the informal movement involving people of God and followers of Jesus and B) the institution or organisation. That is not to say that none of those with institutional roles are part of the self-guided free-flowing movement but organisational bias and maintenance of the institution often take precedence in their commitments. Likewise movement-oriented Catholics may adhere to very traditional norms in their personal lives. The matter is not clear-cut.

Clericalism is one symptom of the division. It is evident not only in the behaviour of individual priests but also in the easy manner in which bishops and other church people presume to tell everyone else how to contribute to consultations on the future of Catholicism and the topics they can discuss.

The distinction is also evident in the disparity between what the organisation teaches and what Catholics believe and practice. This discrepancy will not be resolved by logic, reason, Canon Law or an appeal to tradition but by paying attention to grown-up Catholics as they respond to the promptings of the Spirit towards authentic living. The inability of the organisation to keep pace with changing circumstances has left many of us disillusioned.

The Synod on Synodality

When the Synod was announced in 2021, it raised great hope and expectations among Catholics in Australia and around the world. We knew the church was in decline and saw it as an opportunity for reform and spiritual renewal. The theology underlying most preaching was out of step with our times. We longed for a Catholicism that would speak to the needs and opportunities of the 21st century.

However, basic Catholic teaching and doctrinal positions were excluded from the Synod agenda and the outcomes of the world-wide consultations were duly sanitised.

Since the first Synod Assembly last October, two important documents have been issued by the organisers.

The *Synthesis Report* is a listing of 115 matters on which there was Convergence, 75 Matters for Consideration and 81 Proposals for action, 273 in all. But they are largely concerned with organisational processes and issues rather than the spirituality of the people.

The Council of the Synod Secretariat issued *Towards October 2024*, a set of directives stating how further consultations should be conducted. The approach is top-down, synodality by decree. And the guiding question, "HOW can we be a synodal church in mission?" does not directly address the issues listed in the Synthesis Report.

It is worth noting that the Synod receives little promotion either at diocesan or parish levels. The vast majority of Catholics know nothing about it and are not interested in finding out. Why? Because they see it as irrelevant to their lives. The Synod and synodality for the people seem to be parting company. Many Church leaders appear to forget that the church is a voluntary organisation and that what is decided by them is not automatically taken up by others.

Opportunities

The present change of era, provides wonderful opportunities for taking Catholicism and Christianity forward. An educated laity with capacity for life-long education means we are better informed and better able to give direction and purpose to our lives than ever before.

It was never so easy to communicate widely. The internet allows access to information on a scale unimaginable 60 years ago. We know that we are able. We understand how the scriptures were compiled and doctrines developed in the contexts of their times, places and cultures. As we recognise a variety of inculturations in the past, we are alerted to the possibility and need for further inculturation in the present.

A fresh narrative for a new era.

We need a fresh narrative, new language, to express the revolutionary vision and message of Jesus in our day. This is so obvious that it should not need to be said.

This is not about compromising the truth and reality of Jesus, the love of God or the action of the Spirit in our lives. Much of our inherited narrative relies on metaphors and the worldviews of first century Palestine and Europe in the Middle Ages. But our environment and culture are characterised by science and its methods, an educated population, democratic ideals and wonderful technology. Even blind Freddie could see the problem.

Transition

We are in a period of transition. Both engaged and disengaged Catholics who are hanging on to core elements of their inherited spirituality are, for the most part, keenly aware of its shortcomings in relation to life in the 2020s. Their searching, questioning and questing, show commitment to the vision of Jesus and concern for future generations. Many of us experienced, and gratefully remember, the optimism and energy that flowed after Vatican II. Critiquing prevailing narratives and social and economic practices was a profound affirmation of our inherent worth, our spirituality and Gospel values.

We Catholics do not all hold the same beliefs, doctrines and moral positions, nor should we be expected to. Even the minority who still engage through liturgies, sacraments and other devotional exercises, use their own judgements on matters such as family planning, acceptance of LGBTIQ+ and repartnered people, sacramental reconciliation and cohabitation. When this is brought into the open and freely discussed, the variety of positions will be held positively. There will likely be tension but that is part of healthy debate and is not necessarily a negative. People reach spiritual authenticity when they are able to go beyond the 'parenting' and guidance of law and rules to thinking 'in the Spirit of Jesus'. Paul's *Letter to the Galatians* is relevant here.

The walking together of synodality means travelling with people who have different positions and a variety of perspectives on life. Otherwise we are just a domesticated parade of uniformity.

Contemporary Catholics

We Catholics are now finding our voices and expressing our desire for renewal and a mature spirituality. We are focusing more clearly than ever on heightening our awareness and appreciation of what we have inherited. Acting with the Spirit of Life in small groups and individually, we are using our God-given initiative to transform that inheritance and ourselves for the future.

We no longer think of ourselves as fallen people, as people distanced from the love of God who need to make a sacramental or ritual sacrifice in order to be restored to good favour. As the evidence demonstrates, we humans came to be what we are through a process of evolution. There is a basic goodness and a natural desire to know, to be more, to love and to be all we can be, in our evolutionary 'DNA'. We are a people working our way towards a more authentic world.

We are free people; our focus is on expanding our liberation, not on spending time and energy on seeking remission for our failings, though we readily acknowledge them. Let's remember what Jesus told various people: 'Your sins are forgiven,' and move on. He did not say, 'I forgive you,' but simply that they are already forgiven. God does not carry grudges.

The coincidence of major changes in the world we inhabit and the seismic shift in how we humans interact with it, has earthquake size consequences. The Synod on Synodality has relevant potential in this situation but it must be taken out of the cavernous Paul VI Hall to local meeting rooms and homes in Sydney and Melbourne, in Geraldton and Wagga Wagga and everywhere in between. And it must be synodality with teeth – people coming together to discern, draw up plans and make binding decisions. We have had enough window-dressing for the decisions of others. Involvement without decision taking is for children. It is not participation in any genuine sense.

Spirituality today is moving towards a much greater emphasis on personal responsibility and authenticity. Organisation is necessary but it has its place. It facilitates our growing from spiritual childhood and adolescence to being autonomous adults in community. The primary question has shifted from, 'What does the church teach?' to 'How am I to find my way?'

Being Christian is not just practice of a religion; it is someone you become.

This is not about whether Catholicism is a movement or an organisation. It is about people. We need organisation and structure in our lives but we also need the freedom to grow beyond the structures to flourish personally and spiritually. As children grow out of a need for parental strictures and guidance, we all must grow out of the childish or adolescent

spiritualities we grew up with and become responsible adults making our own decisions about how we live and relate to others, guided by the spirit or sense of the faith that evolves within us.

Experience based spirituality

Personal spirituality as well as good theology is rooted in and grows out of our day-to-day experiences, the prayers that spontaneously emerge from our hearts and the insights that grace moments of reflection. Scripture and tradition provide guidance and history but growth comes from experiential learning, the interactions of people with one another and supportive circles of relationships.

We can use our own experience as a starting point, asking questions about inherited practices, being creative with fresh ideas and possibilities and make our own judgements about what is real and true and relevant. Our awareness of the evolution of the universe and of humanity expands our understanding of the history of salvation. We can now recontextualise Bible history.

Pope Francis' *Motu Proprio, On Promoting Theology*, (November 2023) is most important in this context. He formally recognises what many Catholics long ago sensed and accepted. Tradition and scripture are best appreciated and understood in the real-life context of every day. The experience of human living is the ground on which we build a coherent integrated spirituality. Jesus could teach us a thing or two in this regard.

The Sense of the faith of the faithful

There is much to be learned from the sense of the faith of the faithful, that is, the instinct for what is real and worthwhile that emerges from experience and reflection. Ignatius of Loyola spoke of this at length in relation to discernment of feelings. My parents had what I now regard as a disastrous theology but they had a deep sense of core Christian values, of their relationships with God, Jesus, the action of the Spirit in their lives and commitment to others.

The history of the first settlements in Australia, the Amazon region today and penal times in Ireland show that Catholicism can survive extreme circumstances on the sense of faith of the faithful.

Conclusion

The question we began with has to be answered. What is the relevance of the Synod to the evolution of Catholicism. Features that we noted along the way include:

- The change of era in the world and in Catholicism;
- Catholics are rapidly disengaging from the church;

- Differentiating between Catholicism as a movement and the church organisation;
- The inability of the church organisation to keep pace with our times in its structures, practices, its intellectual coherence and its public credibility;
- The failure of the first Assembly of the Synod in October 2023 to touch the imagination and get the attention of Catholics;
- The emergence of educated, informed, critically-thinking, self-directing lay Catholics who are finding their voices and leading the push for renewal;
- The need for a fresh narrative and Synodality with teeth;
- The centrality of the lived experience of ordinary Catholics for genuine spirituality and the sense of faith of the faithful.

To sum up, the world is changing fast. To date, our church, either as organisation or as the community of the followers of Jesus, has not coped well. But the situation is not hopeless. As our understanding of the emerging socio-cultural environment grows, we have opportunities, as individuals and in discussion with family, friends and colleagues to develop a new enculturation of the Gospel.

Already under way in scattered tentative forms, individuals and groups are shaping the future for Catholicism. They are the creative thinkers and doers who make paths by walking them, just as Jesus did, relying on their interior resources and thinking outside the square. We are all in this together but the evidence so far shows that the Synod is not effective or likely to achieve its purpose. The church organisation, from top to bottom, must reform much of its practices and structures for this thing to work

I dream of a Catholic community with a meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling ethos that enables each of us to grow in love and care for one another. Its theology or rationale is imbued with awareness that the evolution of the universe and the natural world mediate a sense of awe and wonder at the scope of it all. We live in a world bigger than we know. Engaging with its further human and natural evolution through being authentic, caring and loving people is tremendously rewarding.

I dream of an organization that enables or empowers people, Catholics and others, to reach their full potential. This is about creating a new world and contributing to a new stage in the evolution of humanity.

I love being involved in this glorious adventure with all its energy and frustrations.

Thank you for your attention.