



Walking Together in Communion, Participation and Mission
Reflections on the Synod on Synodality, October 2023
Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

I recently returned from the month-long first assembly of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held in the Vatican from 4th to 29th October at the behest of Pope Francis. The Synod is a representative episcopal body established by St Paul VI following the Second Vatican Council to assist the pope in better governing the universal Church.

One of the things I most valued about this Synod was the way it expressed the richness and universality of the Catholic Church. There were Catholic leaders from every region of the world, including both Latin Rite and Eastern Catholics. There were also fraternal delegates of other Christian churches.

I participated as an elected member of the Synod's Governing Council, along with four other Australian bishops, five other Australian members (three women, a priest and a layman), and four Australian facilitators and *periti* (experts). This meant Australians "punched well above their weight": there were in fact ten times as many of us at the Synod than our Catholic numbers would suggest!



What is 'Synodality'?

Historically, synods in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have been meetings of bishops exercising *episcopal* collegiality and magisterium. Sometimes there were non-bishops in attendance, representing the pope or patriarchs, emperor or civil authorities, religious orders or theologians; though they did not vote, these "observers" could exercise considerable influence. For the recent assembly, however, the Holy Father invited around 450 participants, 363 of whom were voting members, and just over a quarter of these were non-bishops—clergy, religious, and lay men and women.

Since the Second Vatican Council, international synods have normally focused on aspects of the Church's

mission, on word and sacrament, or on various vocations. But this time around it was about the style and internal life of the Church. As the Holy Father acknowledged, the topic of synodality was unlikely to excite much interest in itself and might sound too self-referential—like a Hollywood movie about making Hollywood movies. Yet if synodality informs our communion, participation and mission, then it will speak to many other issues.

The language of 'synodality' is unfamiliar to most people. Its Greek roots mean *journeying together*. Pope Francis has described synodality as "an expression of the Church's nature, form, style and mission" and a place where "all can feel at home and participate." Rather than a new Church doctrine or polity, it is an ecclesial sensibility: a willingness to listen, dialogue, share, so all the faithful might assume their co-responsibility for the mission. It requires a prayerful and humble openness to the Holy Spirit being the principal protagonist.

This makes it very different to a political process in which the popular vote wins. Pope Francis insists a synod is "not a parliament or an opinion poll", nor "a convention or parlour", "nor a senate where people make deals and reach a consensus". Nor is it just about going through the bureaucratic motions of consultation and reporting. Rather it is a "spiritual event," a process of hearing the Holy Spirit speaking to the churches, through humble listening and prayerful discernment. Used as a weapon for forcing change of Church teaching or order, synodality would cease to be a true *journeying with* each other and with God.



Synodality in Practice

The October 2023 gathering was part of a multi-staged process with local, national, continental and universal phases. In each phase there was listening, synthesis and discernment. In 2021 individuals, parishes, convents and agencies from around our Archdiocese generously contributed submissions or participated in hearings. The

fruits of these, as from the consultations for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, were collated into an *Archdiocesan Report*. Such contributions from around the country and the world then informed the national and continental documents and assemblies, and ultimately an *Instrumentum Laboris* or working document.

That *Instrumentum Laboris* was the driving text for last month's Synod. Most of the time was divided between the three themes of *communion* (what it means to be bound as *one* in our relationship with Christ and each another as Catholics), *participation* (what it means for all Catholics to fulfil their respective roles), and *mission* (what Christ commissioned the whole Church to do). We spent roughly a week discussing some aspect of each in table groups or *circoli minori* of twelve persons.

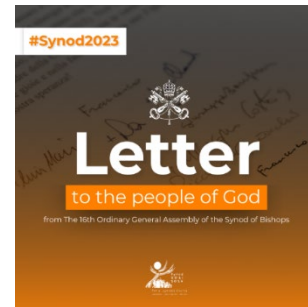
The members of each table group spoke the same language—more or less—and were assisted by an external facilitator. A secretary was appointed from among their number and a rapporteur elected. We gathered at round tables rather than the tiered seating of previous synods. Instead of facing those performing on stage or listening to people seated where we couldn't see them, we faced, heard and, by the end of the month, knew each other. I now count several bishops and lay leaders from around the world as new friends, and that is another thing I will treasure from this synod.

Matters were discussed in the table groups through a process first developed several decades ago by Jesuits in Canada and known as 'Conversations in the Spirit'. This method of communal discernment begins with Scripture and prayer, inviting the participants to sit for a while in silence and then share their interior movements, especially their feelings, with no-one contesting what they are saying. In the second round the members reflect back what they have heard in the group and what resonated with them. Only in the third round, when (time permitting) the group considers convergences and actions, divergences and questions, will there be some contest of ideas.

Thus, the emphasis of the method is on listening to and understanding each other before solving any 'issues'. That can be hard in a noisy world or one where people are divided into ideological camps. But it can be therapeutic. It can pour oil on troubled waters, getting people to stop, listen and understand before judging or arguing. Fr Anthony Lusvardi SJ of the Gregorian University recently explained that while the method helps turn down the temperature on controversial questions—at the Synod, 'hot button' issues like women's ordination, "gay rights", communion for the divorced and remarried, and celibacy—it doesn't deliver theological clarity. "It's not well-suited for careful or complex theological or practical reasoning," he explained. "Doing that requires thinking that is critical, that weighs the pros and

cons of what people say. It also requires a degree of objectivity that this method is not well-suited to provide. Sound theology needs always to ask the question, 'That may sound good, but is it true?'"

Indeed St Ignatius of Loyola was "very clear that not everything is the proper object of discernment. If something is a sin, you do not discern whether to do it or not. If you have made a commitment, you do not discern whether to be faithful to it or not. You only discern between things that are good. If whatever occurs to you in prayer contradicts what has been revealed by Jesus Christ, then it is not the work of the Holy Spirit."



Weighing the opinions

The *Adsumus* prayer from the Second Vatican Council, that we prayed each day at the Synod, invokes the guidance, teaching and unity afforded by the Holy Spirit (*Jn* 14:26). I found the following lines of the prayer particularly instructive: "Let us find in You our unity, so that we may journey together to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right." Deep listening to each other, expressing feelings, resonating in table groups, will not always help us find what is true and right. As one eminent theologian said to me: of the many synods he had attended, this one was the humanly best but theologically thinnest.

Another challenging aspect of "Conversations in the Spirit" is deciding what weight to give the various opinions aired by those at the table. Some opinions may have some passionate supporters but not be the common view in the group; others might have overwhelming support: there was really no way of knowing from the two page reports from the 35 table groups. Some views may be half-baked, in need of nuance, or plain contrary to the apostolic tradition and the Church's magisterium. Others might be genuinely prophetic, creative adaptations of the tradition, or helpful re-formulations and actions. But the method used in this first assembly didn't really help to clarify which are which. A different method will surely be required next time around.

By the end of a month of meeting day after day from 8:45a.m. to 7:30p.m., as well as various evening events, and with only Sundays off, we were all exhausted. The Synod had already published a short *Letter to the People of God*; now it had to settle its long *Synthesis Report*. (Both can be found online.) A small team of writers synthesised hundreds of pages of table reports in a draft.

The Synod members then proposed more than a thousand *modi* (corrections). These were assessed and incorporated (or not) overnight. A new draft came only a few hours before the final vote and only in Italian. In a marathon session, it was read out and simultaneously translated. No explanation was given for why some amendments had been accepted and others not. No further amendment was possible. Electronic voting followed and all paragraphs of the document were passed overwhelmingly. But sorting through all the opinions in the *Synthesis Report* and determining which should be taken forward (and how) will be a task for the organisers of and participants in next year's second session, and ultimately for the Holy Father.



Hot-button Issues

The Synod's *Synthesis Report* will not satisfy everyone. Media attention was predictably focused on 'hot-button' issues around sex and power. To be sure, Synod members expressed a range of views about some of these matters, even if there was no room for serious debate. Only about two thirds of the synod members got to make *interventions* (or short speeches) on the floor and some of these were very personal and emotional. Some expressed strong convictions on how the Church should navigate these sensitive topics. There was tension in the air at the Synod, as at our Plenary Council in Australia, if less overtly so. But while we did not always agree, the synod process did help us to 'journey together' respectfully.

There were helpful reminders that more was at stake in our Church and world than the issues of the moment or our longer-term obsessions. There was a short retreat before the Synod, pauses for reflection throughout the sessions, prayers with the Pope and Masses celebrated together—all pointing us to our higher purpose. We were all too aware of wars in the Holy Land, Ukraine, Myanmar and elsewhere. In St Peter's Basilica we prayed for peace. In the Square we prayed for refugees and migrants. In the catacombs we prayed for the persecuted Church. Near Peter's tomb we recited the creed together. The hot-button issues seemed minor by comparison.

One of the greater concerns, the Pope reminded us, is the environment. During the first week of the Synod, the Holy Father issued *Laudate Deum*, his addendum to *Laudato Si'*. In both documents he challenges attitudes and behaviours that reduce our common home the earth

to our plaything, to exploit and damage at will, in service of our interests and ideologies. He recalls that the world is given into our hands as a sacred trust, to be revered and shared, developed and handed on intact to future generations. So, too, I would suggest, we must challenge attitudes to our common home the Church—refusing to treat it as our plaything, subservient to our interests and ideologies, to be remade at will. The Church, with her Gospel and mission, is the new creation, a spiritual ecosystem, given into our hands by the Lord Jesus as a sacred trust, to be revered and shared, developed and handed on intact to future generations. So the Pope and the Synod organisers repeatedly reminded us that it is not the Synod's job to change Church teaching or order.



Truth versus Love?

One topic of discussion throughout the Synod was the relationship between love and truth. The question holds a special place in my own ministry, as my episcopal motto is taken from St Paul, '*Speaking the truth in love*' (*Eph 4:15*). Love and truth, we know, find their perfection not in abstract philosophies or empirical studies, but in the concrete person of Jesus Christ. In Him love and truth meet. We know what it is to love when we know the One who is Truth.

Some people think love and truth inevitably conflict or that one must give way to the other depending on the circumstances. Rather than wagging a finger, the correct response to such perceived tension is the 'synodal' one of patient listening and showing people the face of Christ. That does not mean abandoning what has been revealed by God or refitting our faith and morality for the current fashions. The Synod demonstrated that we can listen to the experiences of others with genuine Christian charity and without compromising truth, accompanying those struggling to accept the Church's teaching or live it.

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus was always open to the other. He encountered every kind of person and invited them into the fullness of life (*Jn 10:10*). But this ever-more inclusive community of faith is also called to an ever-deeper conversion (*Mt 4:17*). Christ offers a kingdom not of this world and promises to abide in us if we cling to Him (*Jn 15:4-11*). Being *included* in His family the Church requires a response from us. Go, He says, you are forgiven. Your dignity is restored. You are loved from all eternity to all eternity. So go—and sin no

more (*Jn 8:11*). No more hypocrisy of paying lip-service only to God's law (*Mt 15:8*). God may invite all sorts into the wedding banquet, but He will notice if one fails to enter into the spirit of the celebration (*Mt 22:11-13*). We must recognise the reality of sin and its devastating effects, conscious of the need to seek God's boundless mercy and forgiveness. We must "take up [our] cross and follow" (*Mt 16:24-28*).



Discerning what the Holy Spirit is saying

Throughout the Synod, the role of the Holy Spirit was continually emphasised. Some have asked how we can be sure that we actually heard the Holy Spirit amidst all the verbiage. As Pope Francis warned, the Synod must not degenerate into a parliament of opinions or into a lobbying or consensus building exercise to 'reform the Church'. How, then, can we faithfully discern between competing voices?

Important in this regard is what is known as the *sensus fidei* or supernatural appreciation of faith. Some mistakenly believe that the *sensus fidei* is simply an opinion poll of Catholics or even the strong opinion of an individual. But in its Constitution on the Church, the Second Vatican Council taught that by 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." It is about receiving the faith, not deciding it. And that requires participation in the life of the Church, listening to the word of God, openness to reason, adherence to the magisterium, holiness (evident in humility, freedom and joy), and seeking to build up the Church.

Discerning what the Holy Spirit is saying requires a Christological ear. The Holy Spirit is Christ's Spirit (*Jn 15:26; 19:30; 20:22*), the Spirit of the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit only ever says things consistent with what Christ has said in the apostolic tradition: contrary views cannot be from the Holy Spirit, as this would imply rivalry between Him and Christ. What's more, doctrine develops organically: there cannot be development in contradiction, as though the Holy Spirit said one thing in the first century, another a millennium later, and something altogether different in our time. He is the Spirit of Truth (*Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13*), reminding us of everything that comes from Christ (*Jn 14:26*). And Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (*Heb 13:8*).

Discernment, then, is the task of listening for "the still, small voice of God" amidst all the words. His is the universal call to holiness. Christ and the saints are the magnets, attracting us to the really good life, calling all to continuous conversion. The Church even extends the space of her tent to "those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith", praying for them and hearing their voices in the tradition, and to those yet to come, passing on to them the riches of that tradition.



By their fruits ye shall know them (*Mt 7:16*)

Providentially, during last month's Synod the liturgical calendar invited those of us of Latin Rite to celebrate Our Lady of the Rosary, the apostles Simon and Jude, and Luke the evangelist; the bishop Ignatius of Antioch, the layman Edward the Confessor, the religious founders Bruno and Francis, and the missionary martyrs John de Brébeuf and companions; Thérèse, the little flower, and her spiritual mother and fellow Church doctor Teresa of Avila; popes John the Good and John Paul the Great; and the mystics Margaret Mary and Faustina. So, we were accompanied by a great cloud of witnesses at the Synod, reminding us what the Church is for: to call sinners to salvation and all to healing and holiness in Christ, to support each one in living their personal vocations, and to unite us with and as the communion of saints. So one useful criterion for judging every Synod proposal is: *Is it likely, by God's grace, to generate more apostles and pastors, evangelists and missionaries, religious and teachers, martyrs and mystics, holy men and women, such as our Church and world so sorely need?*

The Synod on Synodality will come to its completion in October next year and so as a process, we still have some way to go. More work needs to be done to ensure a genuinely Catholic understanding of synodality, inclusion and discernment. Eschewing bureaucratic and political models, synodality can be a rich expression of the inherent unity of all members of the Church (*communion*), can catalyse the important responsibilities of all the baptised (*participation*), and can renew the divine mandate to make disciples of all nations (*mission*). I thank everyone of you in our Archdiocese for your contributions as clergy, religious, or lay faithful. I ask for your prayers for the Synod going forward, that we may be one in the faith of our ancestors, in the hope the Spirit gives, and in the love of the Father and the Son that creates and redeems us.