

Enlarging the Tent: A European Contribution

Report by the International Encounter on European synodality held at the Luxembourg School of Religion & Society, 15-17 January 2023.

Introduction

Our meeting of European synodal experts and practitioners took place between the drawing-up of the Document for the Continental Stage (“Enlarge the Space of Your Tent [Is 54:2]”) in Frascati in October 2022 and the European ecclesial assembly in Prague in February 2023. Its aim was to reflect on the former as a contribution to the latter, by gathering wisdom gleaned from more than 50 synodal processes in the dioceses and nations of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe in the past ten years.

We wanted to learn what the Spirit had been doing in synodal processes on our continent, to examine both what had enabled and what had impeded the transformations that these processes had produced, in order to highlight some ways in which synodal conversion can be promoted within the Roman Catholic Church. We did so in a spirit of humility, conscious that a two-day meeting could not offer anything close to an exhaustive treatment of the topic, but confident that these insights could be of service to local Churches seeking to advance further along this path.

Although we did not begin with a specific examination of the signs of the times, those present were aware of two major factors in the background of the synod on synodality. The first is a consciousness that rapid social and cultural change demands that, as so often in the Church’s history, the eternal new wine of Jesus Christ calls for fresh wineskins if the Gospel is to be proclaimed in our time and place. Followers of Christ are called to decipher God’s presence and action in the world in realities of faith, hope and love, and the Church’s mission is to help people do the same. Synodality, embraced with faith and patience, has the potential to let the Holy Spirit enlighten the People of God concerning the new structures and mindsets that this mission calls for. The second is an awareness of institutional dysfunction and failure in many dimensions that calls for humble openness to conversion and change.

The 47 participants from across Europe met in a prayerful and fraternal – brotherly and sisterly – atmosphere, as equals, and with an openness to one another’s experience and reflection. We used synodal methods of spiritual conversation and worked in English and in French.

What follows is a brief summary of some of the insights and fruits of our meeting.

1. Positive transformations

The starting point of this meeting were experiences, not theories, of synodality. We heard of many transformations, mostly in ways that were interior or discreet, that inspire us with hope

and expectation for the future. These included that people felt recognized because they have been listened to, which in turn produced a consciousness that they are active subjects and protagonists in the Church, co-responsible for its mission. Synodal experiences have allowed many people to have a direct experience of a more fraternal, diverse, and collaborative Church, one that is more missionary and engaged with the needs and dreams of our age.

We also heard of the joy and consolation of moving from discussion and debate to spiritual discernment, and we got a sense that the Spirit really is at work through the instinct of faith of ordinary people.

Finally, we heard many testimonies of a strong increase of energy and hope in the Church, a sense that new horizons and possibilities are opening through synodality. We are thankful for these transformations and for the signs that the Spirit is at work through them.

2. Good practices

We are thankful also for good practices and attitudes (*manières d'être*) that facilitated these transformations.

At the heart of these is the practice of spiritual conversation with its various elements: prayer, silence, facilitation to ensure structured and disciplined listening, equal participation, and so on. In-person meetings in small groups were considered especially important, allowing people to share concrete experiences rather than abstract views or general opinions, in an atmosphere that enables people to hear what the Spirit may be saying through those experiences.

Helpful attitudes and approaches were stressed: celebrating diversity and being ready to listen to outside or challenging voices; holding (*traverser*) in trust our tensions and disagreements (*désaccords*) without seeking to resolve them but to allow them to help us grow (*les faire fructifier pour nous faire grandir*). We heard of the importance of patience, trust and realistic expectations, and an attitude of humility, openness and discernment.

Two further points were stressed. One is the importance of formation in these processes, allowing people to understand the style and purpose of synodal processes and the *raison d'être* of these ancient methods.

The second was the vital importance of synodality being learned by doing (*la synodalité s'apprend en en faisant l'expérience*): those who have taken part are transformed by the experience, and lose their fear of it. Key to developing synodality in the Roman Catholic Church is reflection on that experience, learning always how to develop and adapt the methods to the context.

3. Obstacles

We also discussed obstacles and unhelpful mindsets. Synodal processes are sometimes reduced to a focus on structural and functional questions, with little prayer and little openness to what the Spirit may be prompting. Conversely, there is a risk that synodal processes do not translate into structural changes where these are needed.

We also heard that often there is a lack of conviction or support for synodal processes on the part of those in authority, and in some cases active resistance, which causes people to stay away. In other cases synodality is confused with mere sharing of opinions.

Unhelpful too are defeatism and scepticism, rooted often in a fear of change, the clinging to certain habits, the desire to take refuge in the past, and fear of outsiders. Paradoxically, perhaps, we heard of a stronger polarization taking place in response to the synod even while within it there was greater fraternity and communion.

We heard of the dangers of listening only to familiar voices. Self-exclusion, or exclusion by others, weakens synodality. While the expression of strong emotions is part of honest sharing, remaining stuck in those can be a problem. Other unhelpful mindsets are an impatience with the slow nature of the synodal processes, a focus on specific outcomes (and disappointment when they do not happen), as well as a rigid attitude (*immobilisme*).

4. Recommendations

Finally, we considered what concrete steps or actions could now be taken to facilitate the Roman Catholic Church's synodal conversion at every level.

Aware that the key challenge to the Roman Catholic Church in Europe is the distance between the institutional Church and people, as well as between various groups in the Church (*DCS 22-27*), we propose that there be a focus on developing platforms of encounter: synodal spaces where people's experiences are taken seriously and that allow for mutual listening and growing together in communion. By means of internal dialogue as well as ecumenical dialogue and indeed dialogue with all people of good will, the Roman Catholic Church can better understand God's revelation (cf. *Gaudium et Spes 44*). That will help us to better proclaim the Gospel in the language of the people of our time, as with Pentecost.

This calls for introducing synodal habits at every level of the Roman Catholic Church: parish, diocese, bishops' conference, region, etc. But it also depends on everyone in the Church seeing where they can immediately introduce spiritual conversation into the daily activities of their group, movement, charity, project or other kinds of initiative. By this means we put flesh on the theological truth that the Church is the People of God.

This grassroots synodal conversion calls also for better sharing of practices, tools and insights across church networks, and a genuine commitment to formation of bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful. It cannot be done without leadership that facilitates the process of

discernment and takes its result seriously. Moreover, it supposes an awareness of and reflection on where power lies and how it is exercised.

Finally, it is vital for people to see that synodal processes lead to concrete changes, and therefore can be trusted.

Conclusion

We left the meeting consoled by the synodal spirit of a Church “on the way” (*une église en marche*) that we experienced in these days and with a renewed commitment to helping to bring it about. We trust that these few reflections and insights contribute to the vital work in Prague, and the fruitfulness of the synod on synodality.

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