

Welcome to Synodality

The diocese of Pembroke, like dioceses all over the world has just launched a “synodal” process. If successful, this initiative of Pope Francis could be one of the most important reforms in the history of the Catholic Church, equal to the renewal brought about by the Vatican II Council in the 1960s. In October, 2021, in his opening address to bishops from all over the world gathered in Rome, Pope Francis invited all the faithful, men and women, religious and clergy to embark on a “vast consultation movement” that will reach its climax in 2023 and that asks, **“What are your dreams, hopes and vision for the future of the Church?”** He said, **“Enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty.”**



So, this is not a one-time ecclesia event like a Eucharistic Congress that will last for a few days and then we will go back to things as usual, but it is to be an ongoing consultative process, an authentic spiritual discernment to better recognize the paths for the Church of today and tomorrow. And it is not a parliament or an opinion poll where the majority decides about the paths forward. Throughout the opening ceremony Pope Francis referred several times to the importance of an openness for the Spirit to guide us. He recalled the words of one the Council theologians, Father Yves Congar, who once said, **“There is no need to create *another* Church, but to create a *different* Church.”**

And there may be many former church-going Catholics who will be anxious to participate in discussions of what a *different* church will be like. In his book *Beyond Belief*, Australian social researcher and author, Hugh MacKay offers that **“about two-thirds of us say we believe in God or some ‘higher power’, but fewer than one in ten Australians attend church weekly.”** He argues that while our attachment to a traditional idea of God may be waning, our desire for a life of meaning remains as strong as ever. In a 2018 survey by Vice Media, seven in ten members of Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) said they **“look for spirituality in their lives but say organized religion is not relevant to them.”** And, the Catholic Church in Germany is said to have lost a record number of members in 2019. Recently, Bishop Georg Batzing, of the German bishops’, said, **“Of course the declines are due to demographics, but they show that ... we no longer motivate a large number of people for Church life.”** And in 2011, PEW Research found that **“one quarter of American adults under 30 are unaffiliated describing their religion as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular.”** Derek Scally, author of *The Best Catholics in the World*, says its an interesting time to be talking about renewal in the Church when the largest group that was in the Catholic Church have walked away and want no part in it. A woman from Mayo waiting for the papal Mass in 2018 tells Derek, **“Practicing Catholics in Ireland are in a minority now.”**

Perhaps those Catholics who do not attend church regularly may not even be contacted or invited to partake. Ursula Halligan, a member of *We Are Church, Ireland*, an organization that is *working for change and renewal in the Catholic Church seeking shared decision making, equality for women, and a welcome for all* says that when her members sought to participate, they were told there was no room for them. She says there needs to be a greater sense of urgency, that women make up half the human race; they are not a minority group. And when the International Rainbow Group of Catholics applied, they were also disallowed a space for participation. Ursula says that calling such people “objectively disordered” and their love “intrinsicly evil” isn’t the way to go about a dialogue ‘bandaging wounds

and healing broken hearts with the balm of God.’ They are Catholics waiting to hear that wording in the official Catechism changed.

Bishop Brendan Leahy of Limerick points out that this will be a worldwide affair and hot-button issues in Western society may not have the same urgency in poorer countries that may be more focused on issues such as famine, war, and climate disasters. He says we are just in the beginning phase, and we need to ask, how do we get on with one another as a Church? How do we communicate with one another in the Church? And what is the best way to communicate with one another? It’s a process that will last over time, not a big event that happens and then it’s over, so it needs to have sure foundations and a ‘steady-as-we-go’ attitude.

It is not only the laity who wish to bring issues to the synod for consideration. At the recent AGM of the Association of Catholic Priests in Ireland, Fr. Tim Hazelwood said that if the Church is going to go down the route of synodality there must be openness and respect. Some priests have concerns that need to be tabled. They are all getting older, and the demands are increasing with fewer priest and the clustering of parishes. They are concerned that it will be difficult to reach the alienated, but it is important that this initiative succeed. Augustinian Kieran O’Mahoney said, **“The Church needs fixing”** and this project is **“a recovery of the vision of the Second Vatican Council and if it fails, the Church is in serious trouble. It has to work!”**

There are a few synodal processes that have already started. Peter McLoughlin, a lay leader in the Mayo Killala diocese reports that a very successful synodal process has taken place there. Germany started a process at the national level in 2019 and in the last few months there has been many German Church leaders lining up for audiences with the pope and Roman Curia officials. In Australia, planning for a Plenary Council began in 2018 by holding small, local gatherings. The preparations have been shaped by a strong role of lay people. Massimo Faggioli, a Church historian and professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University indicates, **“There is great anticipation about what happens to the recommendations from Germany and Australia once they get to Rome. A failure of these would be catastrophic.”**

Pope Francis wants to move the Church towards a closer conformity to Christ’s own way of modelling an authentic God-centered life, a model of simplicity, and concern for the poor, the refugee, for the environment, and the immorality of empire, of war and nuclear weapons. John Crowley in Tablet Magazine (Dec. 2019) notes, **“He has brought a pastoral approach to some of the most sensitive issues with which the Church is wrestling: the ordination of married men, LGBTQ relationships, ... and who is and who is not eligible to receive Holy Communion. His critics want Catechism clarity about what is right and what is wrong. They accuse the Pope of watering down the teachings of the Church, and even of heresy. But it may be that they are suffering a sense of loss and mourning the death of a church forged in a different time. Francis warns against a punctilious concern for the Church’s liturgy, doctrine and prestige”** which is another modern-day heresy. Francis explains Christians **“should be letting themselves be led by the Spirit in the way of love ... and seeking out the lost among the immense crowds that thirst for Christ.”**

For those interested in becoming involved in the local diocesan process, the diocesan website outlines the synod’s objectives and various procedures for meeting those objectives. Participants have access to the questions and the timeline is provided. Bishop Desrochers is hopeful that the initiative will help us to better discern the paths for our Church today and tomorrow.

About the author: John Madigan grew up on a farm along the Madawaska River in the Ottawa Valley and spent forty years in Ontario's education system as a teacher, school principal, and a school board administrator. He says that like so many others all over the world, new conditions and discoveries are forcing him to reassess his religious traditions and he is more comfortable pondering the questions than obsessing over the right answers.